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Review of *A New Heartland: Women, Modernity, and the Agrarian Ideal in America* by Janet Galligani Casey

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BOOK REVIEW EDITOR’S NOTE:

A serious misprint in Pamela Riney-Kehrberg’s review of Janet Galligani Casey’s A New Heartland in Volume 32, No. 2, Spring 2012, prompts us to reprint the following corrected version in full.


In A New Heartland, Janet Galligani Casey tackles the difficult issue of how to judge modernity in early twentieth-century America by focusing on a group often thought to embody traditional and antimodern America, its rural women. The book is not about the realities of rural life. Instead, it is about the depiction and idea of rural life, and women’s place within these. Galligani Casey examines women’s place in the periodicals, literature, and photography of the time, doing a particularly good job of analyzing the leading farm women’s periodical of the day, The Farmer’s Wife. The book connects agrarian women with early twentieth-century debates about women’s place in ways not normally seen in either mainline women’s history, or even rural women’s history.

My primary criticism of the text is of the chapter on photography, which seems peculiarly out of place, since the author spends little time actually discussing the depiction of farm women in early twentieth-century photography. Instead, the chapter devolves into an analysis of the actual photographers, their concerns, and their techniques. The discussion is largely a history of Farm Security Administration photographers, which has been done rather thoroughly in other places by other authors. There is a great deal to be said about the way in which photographers, both formal and informal, “saw” their subjects, but little space is given to this particular issue.

A New Heartland is well written and engagingly illustrated. The cover photo (reappearing on page 47) of farm women modeling their economy dresses is worth a class discussion all by itself. By emphasizing image and interpretation over the realities of laundry, chickens, and gardens, the book introduces an interesting angle to the discussion of rural womanhood in the early years of the twentieth century. For those looking for Great Plains content, there is not a great deal to be found, although Galligani Casey does stray into the area with her discussion of Martha Ostenso’s Wild Geese (1925), a novel set in the Manitoba prairies. A New Heartland should be read with the purpose of understanding big-picture issues in the discussion of farm women’s place in a modernizing, twentieth-century America.

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