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## Book Review: Black Earth and Ivory Tower: New American Essays from Farm and Classroom

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*Black Earth and Ivory Tower: New American Essays from Farm and Classroom.* Edited by Zachary Michael Jack. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005. xxv + 312 pp. Illustrations. \$59.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

What does agriculture have to do with the humanities? The integration of these seemingly antithetical worlds is essential for these agriculture-rooted authors who articulate their connection to rural life and labor they have maintained despite performing academic work. While several of the authors present their childhood experiences, they avoid nostalgia by exploring the forces that have made them return to the farm in their lives and research. There is a valorization of agricultural values coupled with the paradoxical recognition that the life of labor-intensive family farms is waning, the very trend that propelled many of these writers into off-farm careers. While several essays wrestle with sustainable agriculture, others reluctantly speculate that no effort can stop the disappearance of the family farm and the Wal-Martification of agriculture.

Within this collection are several well-recognized Plains writers. Ted Kooser discusses academia and agriculture as places where introverts can thrive. He relates his English

graduate school failure and muses about the proliferation of creative writing degrees, warning against the potential narrowness of academic creative writers and implying that a creative writer should do as he and Wallace Stevens did: get out of academia. Linda Hasselstrom points out that education privileges mental labor over physical labor, that bigger is better, that more efficient is better, and that labor-saving devices are better. She argues against these false dichotomies and offers that physical and mental labor are connected, arguing that people are less complete if they do one to the exclusion of the other. Mary Clearman Blew writes about being a bookish child on a floundering ranch and postulates about aspects of those earlier years that still stick with her as a memoirist, including her sense of humor and her practical attitude of just doing something. As a bonus, the essays and introductions mention numerous books that integrate agriculture and academia, thus providing extensive reading.

This book will be of special interest to those deeply connected with farms and ranches but who have migrated away for career reasons, as the text voices the conflicts and marginalization occurring when a rural-rooted person moves into a realm privileging alternative forms of knowledge and labor. It is a celebration of rural origins, rural lives, and academia, postulating that these worlds cannot only co-exist within one person's life, but can complement each other to produce a balanced academic with an appreciation and understanding for a broad spectrum of life.

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