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Spring 1998

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WOMEN WRITING ABOUT FARM WOMEN

BECKY FABER

I spent the first sixteen years of my life on Iowa farms. We lived in rural Adair County, Iowa, in an area that was remote, quietly tucked about halfway between Des Moines and Omaha. All I knew was rural life. My parents were farmers, my grandparents were farmers, and most of my uncles and aunts were farmers. The farm determined many elements of my life. We raised much of our own food, butchered our own beef and pork, raised chickens for eggs and meat, milked cows and sold the cream, wore clothes that defined our tasks—such as overalls and chore boots—and socialized primarily with relatives and other farm families in the immediate area.

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I disliked that childhood. I found it confining and painful, contrary to the stereotype of farm life being the ideal childhood. I couldn't play with friends after school because I always had to go home to gather eggs, wash eggs, pack eggs, wash electric milkers, bring in the cows to be milked, and then help my mother in the house with domestic chores. The work was painful and hard, and I found at an early age that I was expected to work as much like an adult as possible. Carrying heavy buckets of sour milk to feed to hogs in the midst of July was hot, full of flies, and painful to my arms and shoulders. Lifting bales of hay and scooping corn made me ache all over. But this was farm life.

As soon as I could find a way to escape, I did. That means of escape was through books. I read as much as I could, starting in third or fourth grade with biographies, generally of famous women. I would read about Abigail Adams and Florence Nightingale and Amelia Earhart, letting the excitement of their lives fill me. As I approached junior high, I switched to romances—shallow, silly books that focused on being attractive for the right boy, the power of the first kiss, and true love. Somewhere

[GPQ 18 (Spring 1998): 113-26]

around the age of fourteen, I moved to “real” literature. And it was at this point that I turned away from American literature and toward English literature, reading *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and as much Shakespeare as I could make myself understand. Later I ventured to *Les Misérables*, shifting my reading tastes as far away from my own life as possible.

Many years later, when I began to teach literature to high school students in a small town in west-central Nebraska, I would tell them that literature reflects society. I used that concept to help them connect with the literature, to let them know that the ideas expressed came from real people who had had real experiences, who lived lives in some way like theirs. To some extent, this idea worked for me as teacher. But, at some point, it broke down for me as a reader when I began to explore where literature reflected the segment of society in which I had been raised.

If literature reflected society, then I should have been able to find books about farm women, an important segment of society from my childhood. I knew that women had stories to tell. My paternal grandmother talked about her life when her children were young—the hard work, losing a child, and even the breach with my grandfather when he insisted that my father drop out of school in the eighth grade and become their full-time hired man. I had likewise heard my mother talk about her mother’s garden, the process of canning vegetables during the Depression, the terror of being chased by a mean bull, and the excitement of going to town on Saturday night. I also had my own set of stories. However, I couldn’t recall ever reading a novel that reflected the experiences of the women in my family. This was not just a void of matrilineage. I had friends who were married to farmers but who worked outside the home; one of my sisters was married to a farmer. In a literary world that seemed to be expanding in terms of adding women’s literature, I still could not find the voices of my grandmother, my mother, my sister, my friends, or even myself.

In a recent interview, Jane Smiley noted that to her, “the promise of fiction is the promise that everyone gets to speak, that every voice is heard.”¹ To begin looking for those voices, I narrowed my search in two ways. First, I decided to explore novels written about farm women by women. I wanted to clarify the female voice as much as possible. Second, I decided to concentrate on the twentieth century. My grandmother was born at the end of the nineteenth century, so to explore three generations of farm women’s experience, I wanted to remain parallel to the stories that were important to me.

According to the culture, these voices were self-controlled. Women rarely spoke of their lives to anyone outside the family or immediate community. Part of being a *good* farmwife was enduring, being stoic and hardworking, believing that one’s lot in life was silently lived. Nonfiction accounts—letters, journals, and diaries—bear this out. Elizabeth Hampsten in *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* notes that “the literature of working class women is the literature of a class of women who have been silent, and it bears few resemblances either to public literature . . . or to the private writing of men or of upper class women. To reach it, one must read letters and diaries, for the thoughts of working women are recorded nowhere else.”² In Hampsten’s work with women’s personal writings, she comments that privacy was a large issue, explaining that letters were full of phrases such as “‘Read this only to yourself,’ ‘Don’t read aloud,’ ‘Keep these things to yourself,’ and sometimes requests for a separate, secret reply in addition to the main letter.”³ Linda Hasselstrom defines this in her essay “How I Became a Broken-In Writer” as “Show no pain. Our business is no one else’s. Introspection is a luxury, self-analysis is a sign of weakness or dementia.”⁴ And women’s lives were so full of work—daily work to be repeated at least six (and probably seven) days per week—that they had little time to record their lives. Hampsten explains that

the lives of women, so seldom being given to mobility or progress, have scarcely appeared in traditional history. Nor in the arts. Art is judged by how long it lasts, whereas the most common artistry of women is occasional and impermanent: food cooked, clothes sewn, letters written. These are consumed, worn out, thrown away, and they go out of style or out of date if kept too long. So it is understandable that the usual focus of history upon chronology and change should leave women out, for it is difficult to write about events that do not happen, or about conditions of living that hardly change. Women, by their own account, do all they can to keep stable the lives of others in their care; they work so hard to see that as little as possible "happens" that their writing obliges us to look deeper, to the very repetitive daily-ness that both literature and history have schooled us away from.⁵

Mickey Pearlman in *American Women Writing Fiction* notes that "most American women do not write of open spaces and open roads, rife with potential and possibilities, or of successful escapes from multiple and various enemies. They write . . . of the usually imprisoning psychological and actual spaces of American women, of being trapped, submerged, overwhelmed."⁶ How different we would then think that women's farm novels would be from those written by men, where the open spaces, open roads, potential and possibilities and escapes would be at the very core of each book!

Verification of fiction through exploration of nonfiction shows us the origin of the idea for plot and character. Hampsten observes that "historians record and interpret, novelists imaginatively re-create, and diary writers show us what they meant. . . . Inaccuracy and boredom are true to much of life."⁷ That these novels are about women in a particular area may not be necessarily limited. Hampsten points out that "what women do all day long is much the same from one place to another," so it less important to know if the women in

farm novels are in Nebraska, Iowa, Colorado, or Kansas.⁸ What binds their experiences is the rural setting and the consistency of the work involved. And so, why would one want to write about such lives? What could these novels bring to a reader? And what can we find in these novels that runs parallel?

My beginning point in searching for women's farm novels was Roy Meyer's *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century*. His annotated bibliography gave me a sufficient start to trace writers and novels that enlarged my own independent research.

To provide a context for novels examining farm life at the beginning of the century, consider these facts. According to the Bureau of the Census, 37.5 percent of occupied Americans were engaged in agriculture in 1900.⁹ The number of people on farms in the United States in 1910 was thirty-two million; for full-owner farms, the ratio of debt to value was 27 percent.¹⁰ Farming was both common and potentially profitable at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Two of the best-known farm novels written by a woman in this century are Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. *O Pioneers!*, published in 1913, chronicles the life of Alexandra Bergson, who is described early in the novel as having an "Amazonian fierceness," a term that moves her out of the ordinary. And as the novel unfolds, Alexandra only becomes more extraordinary. It is she who saves the family farm, she who runs the business of farming rather than her brothers Oscar and Lou, she who works for family prosperity and unity. But if we think of farm women as the ones who run the house, we realize that Alexandra is not stereotypical; her father "had come to depend more and more upon her resourcefulness and good judgment."¹¹ In other words, Alexandra has a say in what happens in the farm; she is not silenced in this male community as is her mother, who is described as "a good housewife" who "had worthily striven to maintain some semblance of household order amid conditions that made order very difficult" and had kept "the family from

disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways." Mrs. Bergson is described as "a good mother," who "could still take some comfort in the world if she had bacon in the cave, glass jars on the shelves, and sheets in the press." (28-30).

But Alexandra is not concerned with these roles; she makes decisions about money and land, decisions far beyond those of ordinary farm women. Her commitment is to the land, and that commitment isolates her from her brothers, her mother, and other women. Throughout the book she establishes a pseudo-maternal relationship with her brother Emil, and only at the end of the book does Alexandra plan to marry. The housework is done by hired Swedish girls who cook and clean, work that Alexandra says "she could do herself, if it were necessary" (85), but in this Eden that Alexandra has created, such work is not necessary. Here is the isolation that permeates the novel. Alexandra has no community—the Swedish girls amuse her, Marie Shabata mystifies her, and Mrs. Lee captures her pity. Alexandra has no peer, and while she is very successful in running the farm, she does not play the traditional roles accorded women at that period. She is loving and generous to her niece Milly but distant from her shallow and silly sisters-in-law. As a reader, I find myself wondering where the "real" women are in this novel, the ones who live the life that most women in this section of Nebraska lived during the post-pioneer period, the women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I can't find them. I also cannot find a community of women; they are disjointed in their relationships. The novel says little about how women work or relate to each other. The work is overseen by Alexandra, using brain much more than brawn, and it is all for Emil, of whom Alexandra notes that "it was to have sons like Emil, and to give them a chance, that Father left the old country" (117).

What of the women? While as readers we can see the absolute power of Alexandra throughout the novel, we never believe that she is like us or that any ordinary woman could

achieve what she has. The novel ends with the loss of her brother and her dear friend Marie, her estrangement from her brothers, and her decision to marry Carl, whom she notes is "safe." The novel ends in silence and with no community of females to continue when Alexandra is gone. However, Julia Bader in "The 'Rooted' Landscape and the Woman Writer" notes that "the first wave of women regional writers rarely explores the experiences of motherhood; most of their heroines fail or refuse to marry and seem more intent on giving birth to themselves, placing themselves in more secure relationship to their mothers, their professions, their ideals."¹² And this is what Cather has done with Alexandra, who gives birth to herself and a nontraditional role throughout the novel.

Cather's next farm novel, *My Ántonia*, was published five years later, in 1918, four years after the Smith-Lever Bill was passed, providing federal money to educate farm people in agriculture and home economics. This time, Cather's central character, Ántonia Shimerda, "loved . . . to learn about cooking and house-keeping."¹³ However, her living conditions are abysmal, requiring great effort to survive. Mrs. Burden tells her, "You'll have a better house after while, Ántonia, and then you will forget these hard times" (75). But such hard times are not forgotten by any of the characters in the novel, for it is through these difficult times that Ántonia becomes defined as a character. Following her father's death she takes on the role of hired man on the farm, toiling ceaselessly in the fields with her brothers. When she moves to Black Hawk to work for the Harlings, she becomes domestic, finding advancement in life through her cooking, sewing, and cleaning skills.

Virtually everything we know about Ántonia comes through the eyes of Jim Burden, the narrator who has a limited vision of "his" Ántonia. Who Ántonia really is and what she wants as a woman come to the reader, if at all, through a male narrator. Jim Burden is established as being close to Ántonia since childhood, and he relates a number of

memorable situations. Yet when Jim saves Ántonia from being assaulted by Wick Cutter, he “never wanted to see her again” and “hated her almost as much as . . . Cutter” (250). At this point Cather not only isolates Jim from Ántonia, she also virtually removes Ántonia from the novel. Cather places here the concept of women’s sexual vulnerability, a theme carried out through the Cutter scene, the story of Lena Lingard that immediately follows, and Book IV, “The Pioneer Woman’s Story,” where “my Ántonia” becomes “poor Ántonia.” So it is here in the middle of the novel that Cather builds a sense of community for women, a community based on gender and the vulnerability that women in rural areas experience. On the one hand, we see Lena escape this situation, but in the next book we learn the story of what happens to the young Ántonia who is trapped and tricked.

The story of Antonia’s jilting and pregnancy is told through a female voice, the Widow Steavens, a local farm woman, who has provided the support that Ántonia has needed to move through this experience. The story is based around female work, following a supper of chicken and biscuits and detailing the sewing and planning of Ántonia’s dowry, then of Ántonia’s sexual ruin and pregnancy. The widow finishes her story noting that “‘Ántonia is a natural-born mother. I wish she could marry and raise a family, but I don’t know as there’s much chance now’” (318). As Mrs. Harling explains to Jim, Widow Steavens will be a reliable narrator because she witnessed much of Ántonia’s situation. As readers, we should wonder how much of the male narration has been reliable in terms of explaining this woman’s life to us.

We don’t hear Ántonia’s own story until the end of the novel in a section entitled “Cuzak’s Boys” (again, note the possession is male-directed) when Jim returns many years later to visit Ántonia. At this point Ántonia has developed a community, her family. She has married and has a houseful of children, living a fully domestic life. Now Ántonia finally gives voice to her story, telling Jim of

her family and about mutual friends. What makes the ending of this novel so striking is its difference from *O Pioneers!*. Not only does Ántonia speak for herself, but she also presents the reader with a more realistic family life and a sense of continuity. Daughters Anna and Martha are close to their mother, and Ántonia is already a grandmother. Contrary to the text that ends with a focus on Jim, who idealizes their “precious . . . incommunicable past” (372), the reader can see beyond those words to know that Ántonia’s story will continue through the generations that have been so carefully illustrated. Historically and sociologically, we know that the federal government will be funding home demonstration agents to help rural women like Ántonia and her daughters (and perhaps our grandmothers) to improve their lives.

Where does the farm novel go after Cather’s two works? Surprisingly, it stays in prominence through women writers in the 1920s and 1930s. The most prolific and popular woman writer of farm novels in the 1920s is Ruth Suckow, who wrote of people in her native Iowa. While she wrote a number of novels during this period, I will focus on *Country People*, written in 1924, which addresses a specific farm family and follows their movement from marriage during the pre-World War I era through their retirement.

Although the total farm population had decreased by nearly half a million between 1910 and 1920, this period was one of great growth nationally.¹⁴ For urban women, gas and oil stoves were available, washing machines were becoming more common, iceboxes had found their way to most homes, and the vacuum cleaner and electric iron were more commonplace. However, Margaret Gibbons Wilson, in *The American Woman in Transition: The Urban Influence, 1870-1920*, notes that

in contrast, the rural household of the early twentieth century still demanded a tremendous amount of women’s time. Few farms had iceboxes, gas or oil stoves, indoor baths

or toilets. The lack of electricity meant no vacuum cleaners, power washers, or self-heating irons. Most farm women still did their own laundry, using either a tub and washboard or a hand-cranked washer. Many still churned their own butter, canned fruits and vegetables, baked bread, tended the animals, and worked in the garden. The biggest change took place in the area of ready-made clothing, which had become more available to farm families after the turn of the century. However, the myriad of chores, generally unrelieved by modern conveniences, left the farm woman with little spare time or energy.¹⁵

Without time to tell her story, how does this story get told? And with such mundane elements filling one's life, why would a woman think that such a life was worth retelling? These questions continue to confront us as we look at the works of Ruth Suckow, who wrote eight such novels. She is described as the "fictional delineator of [a] way of life—the transitional era between the initial settlement and development of the midwestern frontier, and the creation and development of social concept and technological innovations."¹⁶

Country People incorporates the element of World War I and its impact on small communities and farm families. Suckow's examination of the American Dream in the hands of a farmer projects an aspect of the farmwife that was not covered in the previous novels—the idea that success means being able to move off the farm. What we actually see in this novel is two approaches to a farmwife's life: one aspect during her early years of marriage when she is working in tandem with her husband to build a strong farm; the second is what follows successful farming—moving to a new house in town, being widowed, and having to build a new life apart from everything one has known. This extension of a woman's life moves far beyond what Cather had written about, yet encapsulates an important aspect of a farmer's wife—how she continues to adapt after the

hardest of the hard work is done, when life supposedly becomes easier.

Suckow's main character is Emma Stille Kaetterhenry, described early in the novel as "not very large, but she looked like a good worker." Suckow notes that Emma "seemed to be able to get through with a lot of work. . . . She taught country school . . . , but she knew how to wait on threshers."¹⁷ Emma quit her teaching job to marry August Kaetterhenry, and because they could not afford hired help, Emma worked with him in the field. Suckow writes that August "had always seen his mother and his sister Lena out working with the men. He expected it of his 'woman.'" Much of Emma's life is defined by her husband as shown in this excerpt:

Emma soon found out that he was not the kind who would take her with him. His mother had never gone to town. He did all of the buying. . . . He had that thrifty, bull-headed Kaetterhenry streak in him that showed in his attitude toward the woman.

Emma settled down quickly into a young farm wife. She . . . got an air of timidity that was an accentuation of her old shyness. She was thin, with skin burned dark, and tired, hollow eyes. . . . August was close; he did not tell her things. He expected a good deal of her. But, still, as her sisters told her and as she knew, she had got a good man. (56-57)

After the first two of her five children were born, Emma stopped working in the field. However, "she still helped with the milking, took care of the chickens and geese and the milk and cream, and made butter" (58). And, like many women of her age, she took in her aging parents, providing full care for them in her own home. Suckow writes, "It all came on Emma. Grandpa helped a little, but there was more washing, more cooking and more cleaning. It seemed as if she lived more than ever in the kitchen" (77). Her mother suffered a stroke and was totally paralyzed. Emma took complete care of her for the next five years of her

life, living “between bedroom and kitchen,” noting later that “these were the hardest years of all” (81).

Like Cather’s *Ántonia*, Emma ages, but not gracefully as women of leisure can afford to do. Suckow writes “Emma looked older. Her hair was getting grey. She had always been slender, but she began to take on flesh now. . . . It make her look older instead of younger, dumpy and shapeless and middle-aged” (84). And here is where I can close my eyes and see my grandmother and so many farm women whom I have known. Time and hard work take a terrible toll on women. Emma’s illness takes them to Mayo Clinic for tests. On the train, removed from their element, August and Emma’s ruralness is strikingly portrayed:

They took the journey in the day coach and thriftily ate the lunch that Clara and Lottie had put up for them. . . . They looked like country people, August heavy and silent, his farmer’s red neck showing rough and creased above his collar in the back, in his heavy coat and overshoes and cap; Emma subdued and uncertain over the journey, looking with a kind of fearful curiosity at the other people in the train; a sickly woman with greyish hair and old-fashioned glasses, in a stiff, black velvet hat and an old black coat of some imitation fur with old-fashioned sleeves gathered slightly at the top, a black skirt that came down to her rubbers, black golf mittens. (119)

Such a description of “country people” is neither flattering nor glamorous. Extending her point of women’s unattractiveness, Suckow later describes one daughter as “aged and hollow-eyed, with dark skin” but whose “clothes were shabbier than her mother’s.” Another daughter “had . . . white skin, but somehow her things had a country look. She was getting fat and matronly and sloppy, with all those fat white babies of hers.” A daughter-in-law looked “young and fresh” on the farm, “but when she came to town, she seemed different, coarser, and she wore shabby, high black shoes

with her thin summer dresses” (152-53). Bear in mind that this novel was written in the same era as Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*, in which women’s appearance is the center of their identity.

When their son Carl is sufficiently settled to take over the family farm, August and Emma move to town. August arranges for a new house to be built, and a few years later he dies. As a widow in town, Emma has no idea how to live her life, “no idea how to make out a cheque,” leaving her “afraid of her cheque-book” (186). Like many women of her generation, she didn’t drive. She no longer had daily work to keep her occupied. Adjusting slowly, Emma came to know

leisure for the first time in her life. . . . She was doing what she pleased in ways that she had never done before. She had friends outside her home, elderly ladies like herself, with whom she spent pleasant, gossipy afternoons, as she hadn’t done while August was living. Her personality, smothered and silent for many years, was blossoming out, very faintly and timidly, but little, enough to shed a kind of light of content and freedom over this quiet end of life. She might be lonely later on, but she was not now. (202)

This is the way many farm women finished their lives—alone but with more freedom than they had ever experienced before.

Novels of farm life and farm women continued to expand in the 1930s, and expectedly, the Depression became the backdrop for many works. The *Ladies’ Home Journal* in October of 1932 noted that “When money is plenty this is a man’s world. When money is scarce it is a woman’s world. When all else seems to have failed, the woman’s instinct comes in.”¹⁸ This statement addresses the role of women in households where women’s work was integral to the function of the home, and farm life where women’s work—whether it be inside the home or outside—determined the success of a farming operation.

Dorothy Thomas, a Nebraska writer, explores one farm family during the Depression in her 1934 novel *The Home Place*. The main character, Phyllis Young, is a former schoolteacher who has married Ralph, the middle of three sons of a farm family. The setting is the home of Papa and Mamma Young, who have taken in their oldest son Tom, his wife Edna, and their two sons when Tom had to give up his farm for financial reasons. Ralph lost his farm, also, and has moved his wife, Phyllis, and their daughter, Betty, into the family home. Those nine characters also share the home with Papa Young's mother, Old Grandma. The book resounds with issues of lack of personal space (even for sleeping), lack of privacy, and division of chores among the women. Phyllis and Edna, who have little in common, maintain a strained relationship. Tom and Edna's two boys constantly tease their younger cousin Betty until she cries. Old Grandma is forgetful, mixing up members of several generations of the family and continually complaining about having to give up her bedroom to accommodate others. A quarter of the way through the book, the third son, Harvey, and his new wife, Cleo, make an unannounced move to the farm after Harvey loses his job in the city. Harvey joins his father in the farming operation, but Cleo, a spoiled, whining, lazy woman, refuses to become a contributing member of the household.

The primary setting of the book is a house too small to hold its inhabitants. Soon after the beginning of the novel, the reader realizes that Phyllis is pregnant, and one more body must fit into this overcrowded home. The goal of each family member is to have sufficient space and privacy, a goal virtually impossible given their financial hardships. Their only financial hope was that Harvey might be able to loan them some money because of his steady income from his city job, but when Harvey loses his job and returns to the farm, the entire family is without resources.

The men's work on the farm provides the capital for the family to continue, but the novel

focuses on the women's work in the house rather than on the farm labor. While the reader is aware that the men are doing heavy tasks, the novel pinpoints the women's work: cleaning, cooking, canning, washing, ironing, sewing, mending. Contrary to what Cather depicted—women sharing outside responsibilities—the Young women do not work outside with the men; Mamma Young does not believe this is right because "it takes the delicacy out of a girl," and "the house and the babies are enough . . . with the children and canning and all, for any woman."¹⁹

The majority of the housework is done by Tom's wife, Edna, and the novel repeatedly notes how heavy and continuous such work is. However, the reader learns that Edna would prefer to be outside working with the men, that her competent work in the house is just a substitute for where she would rather be. Further revealed is that Edna was Tom's second choice for a wife, that his first love was a beautiful young woman who was killed in the flu epidemic. Tom married Edna because she knew how to run a farm home and would be able to bear children well. In *Rural Sociology: The Family-Farm Institution*, Roy Holmes explains the qualifications for marriage among farm people: "Aside from the prospect of what is considered a good inheritance of land, it is primarily the physical that counts—physical energy and endurance."²⁰ Phyllis, wife of the middle son, Ralph, seems to be the only woman of her generation in the household who has married for love. Cleo's marriage to Harvey has been her attempt to better herself in the world. From *Making Do: How Women Survived the 30s*, Jeane Westin's collection of essays about women during the Depression, one woman explained the concept of marriage from a woman's viewpoint: "I believe marriage was much less difficult then for one reason. You really didn't have choices. You accepted what you had and you made the most of it rather than to think, ' . . . if I had something better, I'd such and so.' Because you knew you couldn't have it anyway. You knew you had just the best you could get."²¹

The women in the novel cannot make moves in their lives until their husbands prosper. Edna cannot return to any level of autonomy until Tom can once again have his own farm. Phyllis, who tries to make the best of the living situation in the crowded Young farm home, still wishes to have her own home for the privacy it would afford her with her husband. Cleo despairs of Harvey being solvent again, and she plots to leave him and return to the city where she will be able to find someone else to provide for her.

Clearly Thomas's novel is not concerned with man's conquest of the soil. She has few landscape scenes. The outdoors represents a level of freedom that her female characters do not have. Their hope of social placement is marriage, and marriage means the work of running a household, rearing children, and keeping the family together. When women are outside, they are hanging clothes on the line, picking vegetables in the garden, pitting cherries, and tending the chickens. There are no romantic scenes of becoming one with nature as we have seen in *O Pioneers!* or *My Ántonia*. Women are not energized by their lives; instead they are fatigued, injured, impregnated, ignored, and quick to age.

The Home Place is difficult to read because of its realism. Thomas serves as a historian for the large number of women whose physical and financial lives were narrowly restricted. Annie Pike Greenwood, a farmwife whose family lost their farm to the Federal Land Bank, notes the harshness of rural women's lives:

The reason mentally deranged farm women are not in the insane asylum is because they are still on the farms. I do not write this to make you smile. The sanest women I know live on farms. But the life, in the end, gets a good many of them—that terrible forced labor, too much to do, and too little time to do it in, and no rest, and no money. So long as a woman can work, no matter how her mind may fail, she is still kept on the farm, a cog in the machine, growing crazier and crazier, until she dies of it, or until she sud-

denly kills her children and herself. More farm women then [sic] city women kill themselves and their children. You read of such cases so frequently that it seems strange to me if this explanation never occurred to you. No need for statistics to prove it.²²

Documenting these Depression-era lives mars any romantic image of the women in rural communities. The limited scope of these women's lives seems incomprehensible to us now as we live in a society of immediate and widespread communication. Marilyn Irvin Holt, in *Linoleum, Better Babies and The Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930*, quotes a rural woman who noted that "Many farm women don't get off their own premises more than a dozen times a year. The fathers get so accustomed to the mothers staying at home, they seem to forget that they might enjoy a little rest and recreation and really feel that she must stay at home. . . . And the mother gets so accustomed to it, she, too, seems to forget she is human."²³ The task of both the writer and reader of farm novels is to remember that such women *were* human. Such purpose is reminiscent of Tillie Olsen's observation that "The greatness of literature is not only in the great writers, the good writers; it is also in that which explains much and tells much."²⁴

In retrospect, one wonders how rural women could survive in such isolation and without support. What we have not seen in these novels is that women were beginning to develop support systems. A 1924 book on rural sociology asserted that the rural woman was beginning to "emancipat[e] herself," that "clubs and societies [were] already formed and forming." The writer warns that "a revolt is in the air against counsels of submission and fatalistic retreat. The twentieth century is to see a renaissance of farm life."²⁵ Contrary to that prediction, in the 1940s the farm novel as written by women seems to have disappeared, not surprisingly, given the impact of World War II.

However, Mildred Walker was writing about rural women during the 1940s and 1950s. Two of her novels, *Winter Wheat* (1944) and *The*

Curlew's Cry (1955), both involve female characters who leave the land—in each case, Montana—then return. Each woman has a strong spirit and a true appreciation of the land as well as the strength to survive in bleak isolation. Walker emphasizes what her female characters learn about their need for the land during periods when they are away from it; that need draws them back.

After the war, the country felt a backlash as women returned to traditional home tasks following their movement into more traditionally male-oriented tasks. Abby Werlock states that “feminist writers debate whether women were in fact increasingly isolated both from men and from other women, particularly during the years following World War II,” as psychiatrists tried to “‘prove’ that children would suffer dire effects if their mothers were not at home to tend to them twenty-four hours a day.”²⁶ Certainly women’s tasks changed during the war as women were even more involved in farming operations, but a marked conflict between women and farming had materialized following the Depression. A monograph entitled *Nebraska Women through the Years 1867-1967* explains that “it was often the mother who encouraged the children to leave the farm . . . , who hoped and prayed for something which she thought would be better for her children,” because she was so aware of “the common practice of putting everything back into the farm and spending relatively little to improve day-to-day living standards.”²⁷

Joan M. Jensen, in *Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women*, notes that “on family farms, a woman’s work was less capable of making the difference in survival after World War II.”²⁸ Such logic is clear, as costs of machinery and electricity marked a change in farming. Also, a two-tier system of farming seems to have emerged in some rural areas as farmers who did not go into the service were able to stay home and make profits that put them far ahead of those young farmers who returned after fighting in the war. I have not found factual documentation of such splits in communities, but I know that these feelings

exist in the oral history of farming communities.

While I do not have an absolute set of reasons for the disappearance of the farm novel, what I do know is that the number of farms dropped dramatically during the postwar period. Across the United States, the total number of farms between 1940 and 1976 dropped from a little more than six million to less than three million. In Nebraska, the number fell from 123,000 to 68,000.²⁹ American life was becoming more urban. Additionally, the postwar attitude toward farming, coming from extension agents and the farm press, encouraged farm families to think of themselves as multi-generational firms as opposed to the previous attitude that farming was simple sustenance for the family group.³⁰ We see this style of life change from *farming* to *agribusiness*.

While farmers melded into roles as businessmen, farmwives developed auxiliary systems during the 1940s and 1950s. In 1948 the Nebraska Cow-Belles were formed with the purpose of “help[ing to] develop the social well-being of the women in the organization and state” and “to assist the Nebraska Stock Growers Association in its efforts to promote the welfare of the livestock business.” Their efforts were geared to making the state aware of the importance of the beef industry, including a project to bring Omaha children to visit farms. In 1955 the Nebraska Wheat Hearts organized “to promote the use of wheat products” and to sponsor the Nebraska State Wheat Queen Contest each year.³¹ The farmwife as helpmate was emerging from her isolation. Her role was changing. In 1950, 17 percent of farm women in the United States were working outside the home.³²

The shift in workplace also impacted men as farm prices grew. According to the US Census, in 1959, 23.7 percent of all farmers worked off their land at least 200 days.³³ Jensen reports that by the 1960s the price of land had escalated so high that new farmers were prohibited from taking on such heavy debt. By 1970 approximately 42 percent of American farm women were employed outside the

home.³⁴ The family farm lacked stability, being held together through government subsidies until the 1980s when the economic downturn brought many farmers to their knees. Farm life was diminishing; writers were focused elsewhere.

However, in the 1990s two widely selling novels about farm life written by women appeared. Written in the mid-1980s, Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Thousand Acres* was published in 1991. With this novel Smiley not only brought a farm woman's life to the forefront of a novel but to the attention of the country as well. Glenda Riley in *Prairie Voices: Iowa's Pioneering Women* has noted that "a significant omission in women's writings is the underside," that "such topics as spouse and child abuse, alcoholism, divorce, prostitution, rape, and murder are seldom mentioned. Yet police ledgers, divorce records, doctors' accounts, and other similar resources show them to be facts of life."³⁵ *A Thousand Acres* includes incest, physical abuse, emotional abuse, breast cancer, bankruptcy, divorce, betrayal, suicide, references to the Vietnam War, and isolation.

Smiley begins the novel by explaining the geography of her community. In doing so, we see that she has repeatedly used explorers' names—Zebulon Pike, Cabot (John and Sebastian, a cartographer/explorer), Ericson (Leif, son of Eric the Red), and Clark (William). Ginny, the main character, exists, then, in a land named for men—men who explored and claimed and documented. The women in this chapter are wives and daughters described in terms of their relationships with men. In the third chapter, Ginny relates how her great-grandfather bought and improved the land. The theme continues that the land belongs to the men, now extending to her father.

We soon realize that the male lineage stops because of the three daughters (two without children and one with two daughters), so the future of the family farm in the novel is a direct parallel to the future of the family farm in America. The movement of land from father to son is over. Ginny and her sisters will not be able to afford to inherit their father's

land, just as many American farmers could not afford to keep their land in the family. Inheritance taxes had been established before land values changed so drastically. One writer in the *Wisconsin Farmers Union News* observed in 1975 that "suggested legislative action to reduce inheritance taxes on farmland . . . should certainly be looked into. But a 70 percent increase in land values in three years can't be changed by any legislature. Right now, it appears there are an awful lot of Future Farmers of America with no farms in their future."³⁶

In stark contrast to *My Ántonia*, where the future is full of family, and hard work brings satisfaction and a level of prosperity that keeps a family going, *A Thousand Acres* represents hopelessness felt on the American farm. By the end of the novel, Ginny has lost every hope—she has not become pregnant, she is divorced, her lover has left her for her sister, her relationship with her father has ended, she is financially depleted, one sister has died and the other is estranged from her, and the farm is gone. The haunting scene of *Ántonia* with her children, husband, and productive farm is completely opposite to what Smiley leaves us with. For Ginny, her life on the farm falls apart, the tidiness of marked fields replaced by the chaos of human intervention.

Smiley's novel is important in its documentation of the demise of the American farm and the transition of personal farming and a peer community into a more impersonal industry. The chaos in Ginny's life reflects the disintegration of American rural life. In a 1972 article, Jim Hightower wrote that "the day is gone when he [the American farmer] was in charge of rural America," explaining that the "USDA attempts to minimize the importance of corporate agriculture by pointing out that corporations account for only 1% of all farms and operate only 7% of the land in farms. But in the area where it counts—domination of the marketing process—it is clear that corporations are in charge of rural America."³⁷

The somber tone of *A Thousand Acres* continues in Jane Hamilton's 1994 novel, *A Map*

of the World. Like Smiley, Hamilton sets her novel in the context of contemporary American life, where women work outside the home, sexual abuse occurs, marriages are shaky, finances impact life choices, and not every woman finds it easy to be a mother. Small-town gossip and a lack of privacy drive a family off the farm, and as in Smiley's novel, there is no way to come back. Katherine Meyer and Linda M. Lobao, in "Engendering the Farm Crisis: Women's Political Response in the USA," explain that "because the farm household is a unit of production and consumption situated in a particular community context, women particularly confront hardship and change in all three arenas."³⁸

The honesty of Hamilton's narration tells us from the start that life is difficult for Alice, that parenting requires more skill than she has, and that she resents her husband's complete attachment to their farm for what it leaves her without. Early in the novel a friend's child accidentally drowns in their pond, and the first of many tragedies begins the destruction of their family unit. When Alice, a part-time school nurse, is accused of sexually abusing a young student, the novel breaks open into issues of privacy, parenting, marital fidelity, legal process, gossip, revenge, mental stability, physical abuse, financial deprivation, and individual survival.

A Map of the World is a painful novel to read, each page filled with situations that seem to build toward a number of lives being completely destroyed. The joy of working on the land is gone; childhood innocence is gone; the idea that one can rebuild a life is gone. The lives in the novel parallel the status of farm life in Middle America. What was once rural and individual is now more global, more expensive, and possibly corporate. The task of a farmwife was once to work at home, maintaining the stability of the house, the children, and the marriage. Now women must work away from home to help support the expenses of the farm, and rural children are as "latchkey" as their urban peers. Hamilton's novel points out that life is difficult enough,

but rural life may be too difficult for people to survive, both financially and emotionally. As the novel ends and the family has moved to the city, the main character, Alice, remarks that "we both knew we weren't going to be able to talk about the farm for a time; we couldn't talk about the future because we had no idea what or where it was."³⁹ Such a statement parallels the future of the family farm—while we know that it is a dying way of life, especially since the farm crisis of the 1980s, we don't know what the future of farming will be.

The farm novels of the early twentieth century would not have been concerned with any map other than that of the acres on which the farm stood; the small family farm was a world unto itself and women's lives were limited—at least the fiction shows us this. Helen Buss, in *Mapping Our Selves*, points out that "mapping is . . . a more useful metaphor than mirroring because it . . . does not lie to us in the way the mirror pretends to be the thing that it reflects. A map does not pretend to reflect the world." This approach makes Hamilton's title all the more intriguing. Buss explains that in most cultures having a history of written language, "societal and biological pressures have worked to leave women almost completely in charge of the earliest mappings a human child makes of the self and the world, and almost completely excluded from direct participation in the more power-based mappings of a culture."⁴⁰ Throughout the novel, Alice's attempts to define herself and her life as a farmer's wife place her "in the gap, the fissure, the slip, the lack, that exists between the dominant culture's representation of women . . . and women's perceptions of themselves."⁴¹ There is no map to help her; she struggles every step of the way.

In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun states that "Anonymity, we have long believed, is the proper condition of woman."⁴² That chilling thought prompted me to search for the literature that was the connection to my early life. What I have discovered is that the farm novel as written by women does have a

tradition, a tradition even larger than the one I have laid out here. Obvious are the works that are missing—Hope Williams Sykes' *Second Hoeing*, the novels of Bess Streeter Aldrich, Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio*, Mari Sandoz, Rose Wilder Lane, Martha Ostenso, Ellen Turngren, Susan Glaspell, Meridel Le Sueur, and, I suspect, some names that I have yet to uncover. There is literature to affirm my experience of life on the farm, as well as that of my grandmother, my mother, my sisters, and my friends.

As Virginia Woolf noted, literature is a common ground, and the farm novel as written by women invites a new set of readers to join that common ground. In exploring works by women, Tillie Olsen advises us that "there is a whole literature to be re-estimated, revalued. Some works will prove to be, like the lives of their human authors, mortal—speaking only to their time. Others now forgotten, obscured, ignored, will live again for us."⁴³ That the tradition exists is a beginning point; evaluating the power of that tradition will be the next step. Meyer and Labao assert that "farm women, more so than men, seem better able to connect the experiences and perceptions arising from the various dimensions of their lives to one another and to broader social structural problems."⁴⁴ It is imperative, then, that women as novelists continue to explore the lives of women's farm experiences.

NOTES

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