



American Harvest God, Country, and Farming in the Heartland

By Marie Mutsuki Mockett
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Reviewed by Dana Jackson

Most of us relate to the books we read through our own experience, or we start a book that way. That's why I wanted to read *American Harvest*.

For more than half my life, June meant wheat harvest. It was a season and a cultural backdrop. Summer was divided into two parts: before harvest and after harvest. Grain elevators and a flour mill dominated the economy of Abilene, Kans., where I grew up. Uncles and cousins had wheat farms, and although my father worked in town, he related daily weather forecasts to how the wheat crop would be affected, from planting to harvest. In my early teens, I helped my sister on the farm during wheat harvest, making cookies and sandwiches to take to the field, watching the kids. When my hot and dusty brother-in-law said, "I've got to go to Lincoln for a part," I knew the old combine had broken down, which meant cutting was delayed, and he was anxious to finish before it rained.

Equipment failures and rain-delayed harvests still cause farmers anxiety. But most family farm machinery has been replaced by monstrous combines operated by custom wheat harvesting companies that follow ripening grain on farms from Texas through Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, all the way into Idaho. Small wheat farms still exist, but they likely produce organic wheat or a specialty variety.

The subject of wheat harvest drew me to this book, but I soon learned it's a travelogue and a memoir that covers more topics than wheat. The author, Marie Mutsuki Mockett, is the daughter of a Japanese mother and a father from Nebraska, and has inherited a share of the 7,000-acre family wheat farm in Nebraska. Since childhood, when she and her father drove from their home in California to Nebraska for harvest, she has known and admired Eric Wolgemuth, owner of the company harvesting their wheat. She accepts his invitation/challenge to spend a summer following the wheat harvest with

him and his wife Emily, their crew of four young men (sons and nephews), and one young woman, all from small farms around Lancaster, Pa.

Marie is 37-years-old, but she's "8-years-old in farming years," the harvest crew tells her, because age 10 is about when farm children start driving tractors, and she can't drive a tractor. She's lived on both U.S. coasts, but travels the nation's heartland as if in a foreign country, learning the process of wheat harvest, appreciating the natural landscape, experiencing local culture (rodeos and stock car races, wild hog hunts, Native American pow wows), and trying to understand the Christian religion as practiced by the crew and the churches she attends with them. She struggles with the concept of hell and the Book of Revelations, but is drawn to Eric's interpretation of Christianity, which is simply to show love as Jesus did.

Mockett did her research about the American food system before the trip, so interspersed throughout the narrative is background information about farming practices and soil. The author also reviews controversies over genetically manipulated crops and organic food. She is disappointed that most of the harvest crew members are reluctant to engage in discussions about these broad subjects.

Marie joins Eric and the crew where the harvest starts, in Texas, in time to see them unload combines, grain carts, and tractors from flatbed trailers pulled by semis all the way from Pennsylvania. The trailers for eating and sleeping are parked at central locations, and she describes how they drive the huge equipment slowly down back roads from one farm's ripe wheat fields to the next through Texas and then Oklahoma. To my disappointment, she doesn't write about the wheat harvest in Kansas, as she takes a two-week break for an academic commitment, then re-joins the crew briefly in Colorado before it moves on to harvest wheat on her family's land in Nebraska.

So much land in rural America is controlled by absentee farm owners like Marie, and I've wondered if they feel any connection to their land, if it means more than a source of income. The author's attachment to the Nebraska farm is through memories of family being together in Kimball, the little town where her grandmother lived in a large, stately house, and in the wooden bunkhouse inside a large steel Quonset hut, built on the farm for family members to stay

in during harvest after her grandmother's death. She's glad to visit this place of good memories, but she knows she can't live there. The population of Kimball has shrunk; businesses are closed on Main Street and the high school her father attended is boarded up. Marie contemplates selling her share of the farm. But then she would lose the connection to family history, and her six-year-old son Evan would not inherit the land. She retains ownership of the farm because of ties to her family, not ties to the land itself.

As farms get larger and towns smaller, people in rural areas lose economic and political power, and resent the cities where the power is transferred. The author explores the "divide" between city and country, urban people and rural people. She knows she looks different, that her Japanese facial features stand out in totally white rural communities, but ethnic origin is not what

separates the writer from the young Pennsylvanians she is traveling with, although they are not free from racial and gender bias. Mockett is college-educated, reads voraciously, and is a published writer with many friends in the arts. She has lived in New York City and San Francisco and in Japan with her mother's family, who own a Buddhist temple. The young crew members have little experience beyond the farm, but they feel superior to city residents because farmers have the knowledge and skills to produce food that city people lack. Most of the crew are uncomfortable around

Marie because she has "an uncharted world" in her head and learns by asking lots of questions and reading different perspectives in books, while they have been conditioned to understand the world through work on the farm and their religious faith. She is "city" and they are "country."

On its face, *American Harvest* is an account of the summer Marie Mutsuki Mockett spent with a wheat cutting crew. But truthfully, it's more about her interior journey than the physical journey, the path of which can be found in 12 pages of bibliographic notes.

Don't take this journey with her unless you are willing to follow the breadcrumbs through a wide range of topics and issues and emotions, "an uncharted world." □

Former Land Stewardship Project associate director Dana Jackson is the co-editor of The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems (Island Press).

