



Meditations with Cows What I've Learned from Daisy, the Dairy Cow Who Changed My Life

By Shreve Stockton
272 pages
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Reviewed by Gina Johnson

Having two parents raised on dairy farms in south-central Wisconsin, I have fond, though brief, memories of interactions with dairy cows. Their size was intimidating to a 5-year-old, but their large, soulful eyes and gentle demeanors drew me in on visits to grandpa, Uncle Gerry, and their Jersey cows. Since my parents went on to non-farming careers and my grandparents moved from their farms to town when I was very young, I had limited time with these gentle creatures, but these memories, and the heritage they represent, drew me to Shreve Stockton's book, *Meditations with Cows*.

Stockton spent her early adulthood as a wanderer, living in multiple cities and crossing the country on a solo Vespa scooter trip. While on this excursion, she fell in love with Wyoming and determined to move there after satisfying her wanderlust. There, she found herself the caretaker of a menagerie of animals, small and large, including dairy and beef cows. In this book, she weaves in stories of ranching — breeding, feeding, birthing calves, helping mothers accept their calves or orphans of other cows, learning to milk, and dealing with untimely and expected deaths in the herd — with researched information about the American food system and her own, personal experiences finding solace with the animals in her care.

This mix of memoir and technical, informative writing takes the reader on a journey both emotional and factual. At times, her writing verges on romanticizing life on the land, but Stockton's interspersing of the realities of ranching into the storytelling make the reader aware of the hard truths related to this vocation.

As difficult as it can be, she loves what she does and has found a place in the universe. Stockton's place, it seems,

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is complementary to the mission of the Land Stewardship Project, as she writes, “How different our environment and our health might be if we could trace all our food to origins of love. How nourished our bodies, spirits, and planet could be if all our food was raised and made with love — grown by people empowered by fair wages and safe working conditions, from land honored by sustainable and regenerative practices, with animals respected and cared for throughout the entire course of their lives.”

The book covers close to 10 years of the author's life in Wyoming, beginning with a description of her arrival there and her purchase of Daisy, the dairy cow noted in the book's title. The reader follows bovine generations as Daisy ages and her offspring and *their* offspring are born and cared for by the author, mixing the bloodlines of the dairy cow with the beef cattle of the author's partner. Stockton shifts from hobby rancher and farmer to producer of grass-finished beef as she develops a direct-to-consumer business to improve the lives of her partner's cattle and share healthy food with consumers in Wyoming and its neighboring states. And Stockton does not hide the difficulties and stress involved in such an endeavor. In presenting some of the federal policies that make our food system unhealthy for the animals, the planet, and the people who produce and consume the food, she highlights ways in which our food system should be changed for the better.

Many of the statistics and technical information shared in this book will be familiar to regular readers of the *Land Stewardship Letter*, but Stockton's presentation of the information within the structure of her memoir made it meaningful in ways a policy brief cannot. Through her vulnerable writing, she brings the technicalities and policy implications to life and helps the reader understand how impactful these flawed policies are to individual animals, people, and communities. Current

agricultural incentives make it challenging for farmers and ranchers to change practices. Willing farmers and ranchers ready to learn new methods are one part of the equation necessary for meaningful change, but they must also have federal and state supports and incentives to make changes in ways that will not bankrupt them or put them at risk.

My parents moved away from their farming roots in Wisconsin to a new life in Minnesota and I, in turn, left my life in Minnesota for work in Colorado after graduate school. I, like Shreve Stockton, did at one point feel like a wanderer in search of roots.

She found hers with cows on a ranch and in mountain pastures. As she shares, “When you belong to a place, you are in a relationship with the land. Being in a relationship requires attention. It entails understanding what that land holds, what it gives, what it needs. Relationship with a place, with an ecosystem, is like any other relationship. Attention grows into familiarity. Familiarity grows into intimacy. Intimacy elicits a reflexive urge to care for, protect, and defend that place, and to protect everything else that belongs to that place.”

Learning from and living vicariously through Stockton's life with her cows allowed me to feel that sense of place and reinforced the importance of careful land stewardship. □

Gina Johnson first discovered the Land Stewardship Project when a copy of the Land Stewardship Letter appeared in her La Finca CSA weekly share in the early 2000s.

LSP History Out Loud

The Land Stewardship Project's *Ear to the Ground* podcast series now includes over 250 episodes and features the voices of farmers, scientists, organizers, local community members, and other folks talking passionately about everything from soil health and beginning farmer issues to fair policy and economic justice. You can find all the episodes at www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast.

We've recently launched a special “LSP History Out Loud” podcast page that features episodes focused on the historical roots of the Land Stewardship Project's work. Check it out at www.landstewardshipproject.org/about/lsphistoryoutloud. □