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Wild Mares: My Lesbian Back-to-the-Land Life by Dianna Hunter and The New Farm: Our Ten Years on the Front Lines of the Good Food Revolution by Brent Preston

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Wild Mares: My Lesbian Back-to-the-Land Life by **DIANNA HUNTER**
University of Minnesota Press, 2018
$18.95 USD

The New Farm: Our Ten Years on the Front Lines of the Good Food Revolution by **BRENT PRESTON**
Random House Canada, 2017 $32.00

Reviewed by **KRISTIN VAN TASSEL**

Dianna Hunter's *Wild Mares: My Lesbian Back-to-the-Land Life* and Brent Preston's *The New Farm: Our Ten Years on the Front Lines of the Good Food Revolution* are both memoirs about individuals trying to make it on small-scale, ecologically sustainable farms.

Hunter's memoir recounts a more distant past, in the 1970s and 1980s, as she discovers her sexual identity along with a deep yearning to lead a subsistence-based, rural life in close community with like-minded women. She spends the first decade drifting from one Minnesota lesbian farm commune to another, often living in her portable tipi and learning to work horses, while during the second decade she invests in a dairy and works as an independent female farmer. Hunter's romantic relationships with other women—the thrills as well as disappointments—dominate much of her story, though arguably the land and its animals prove to be her most faithful and abiding loves.

Preston's story belongs wholly to the twenty-first century, as he recounts the first seven years, beginning in 2007, of establishing and building a small organic farm, named The New Farm, northwest of Toronto. He and his wife, Gillian, both professionals who leave their lucrative urban jobs, create a partnership with the goal of creating a "real farm" that is a solvent business without off-farm supplemental income. They ultimately succeed—Preston's memoir explains why and how—though the journey to that point is a precarious one, and not at all certain until five years in.

Both Hunter and Preston view their farming lives as not merely personal efforts to live well and right, but, importantly, as political choices.

Hunter explains:

> In 1972, the back-to-the-land dream was in the air for lefties and hippies as well as for lezzies—and especially for lefty hippie lezzies like me. (64)

More specifically, she suggests:

> Living with women on the land felt like it could be everything I'd hoped—an antidote to patriarchy, the war machine, wasteful consumption, and the destruction of the Earth. (94)

For Preston, the farming life his family has undertaken "is testament to the power of the good food movement to radically change our food system from the ground up" (15). He argues North America's food system is "both a symbol and symptom" of its "staggering inequality," and, furthermore, that

> growing food causes environmental mayhem on a scale far beyond anything else we do—habitat destruction, deforestation, chemical contamination, mass extinction, eutrophication of lakes and rivers. (319)

Finally, Preston asserts, “the way we eat” currently is the most absolute cause of climate change.

These political motivations—the possibility that sustainable farming is substantive activism—perhaps explain the difficulties both Hunter and Preston are willing to undergo to pursue their agrarian visions. The financial challenges are enormous, and the physical demands of sustainable farming practices nearly break them.

Of her earlier days with other lesbian back-to-the-landers, Hunter confesses:

> We could see what needed to be done for the long haul, but we didn't have the money or energy to build the house or put up fences. I didn't know how to get from our hardscrabble reality to where I wanted us to be. (130)

She eventually lands a loan to buy a dairy, but at the height of the 1980s farming crisis, she defaults and loses the farm. This is the endpoint of her rural dream.

Preston's memoir concludes happily, but four-fifths of his tale leans hard against the possibility of profound financial and familial failure. While Preston states his thesis early and explicitly—“This book says that a new kind of farming is both possible and necessary, but this new kind of farming is also really fucking hard” (15)—his conclusion, a call for others to join him, to become full-time independent farmers, too, requires a tight turn. The verve and humor of his telling does not eliminate the sobering reality of what that choice will require of us.

Preston emphasizes further the critical role of the community in survival. His community support includes a wide swath of people—ranging from conventional farmer neighbours with long regional histories, to organic farmer networks, to urban chefs, to innovative start-up distributors, to consumers who span from wealthy foodies to food bank recipients.

Reading Preston alongside Hunter illuminates the extent to which Hunter was deeply isolated as a sole female farmer running her own dairy. She had neighbours who helped out when asked, but the business itself functioned within a market model that ensured the farm's failure.

Preston, moreover, credits fortunate timing for the ultimate success of his New Farm. His family's effort coincided exactly with the rise of the good food movement—there's now a receptivity to alternative farming which didn't exist in the 1980s. One might argue that Hunter's experience marks the death of the traditional agrarian model celebrated in North American mythology—the farmer who is democratically and materially independent—and her identity, as both female and lesbian, serves to reinforce the inflexibility of that mythology which ultimately ensured its failure.

Looming ecological catastrophe forces needed change. Preston and his wife have seized the opportunity and challenge. There are no good alternatives at this point. A radical revision of that earlier mythology/model is the only thing that might save us, which is not to suggest that farming will ever be straightforward or assured.

Both authors tell their stories with unguarded candor, offering honest assessments of their personal failures and growth. Stylistically, Preston's is the better read. The prologue, “Euthanasia for Dummies,” which begins with an unlikely

nod to *Anna Karenina*—"All happy chickens are alike; each unhappy chicken is unhappy in its own way" (1)—is gut-splittingly funny. Self-effacing zingers continue throughout. Regarding the tractor his neighbour borrowed on his behalf from a wealthy "weekender" without the weekender's knowledge, Preston explains, "Che would have approved" (58). Regarding the possible trauma his preschool children would experience when they learned he'd slaughtered the chickens they treated like playmates, Preston says, "We lied […] I told them not to be sad—chickens migrate. It's nature's way" (60).

Hunter's memoir is a careful history, a useful resource for readers specifically interested in the lesser-known voices of LBGTQ and female farmers. But I have already begun plying friends and acquaintances, however tenuous their interest in agriculture, with Preston's book. It's the only way we're going to choose the harder new farm food system Preston has shown us can be real, with storytelling as compelling as his.

KRISTIN VAN TASSEL teaches writing and American literature at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas. She writes essays and poetry about place, teaching, and travel. Her work has appeared in literary, academic, and travel publications, including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Journal of Ecocriticism, World Hum*, *ISLE, The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *About Place*, *Wraparound South*, and *Temenos*.