
Book Reviews

Romanticizing the collapse in farming

by Marcia Merry

A Gravestone Made of Wheat; and Other Stories,

by Will Weaver

Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989
205 pages, hardbound, \$16.95

Remembering

by Wendell Berry

Northpoint Press, San Francisco, 1988
124 pages, hardbound, \$14.95

Making Hay

by Verlyn Klinkenborg

Nick Lyons Books, New York, 1986
157 pages, hardbound, \$14.95

Harvest time is a special time to reflect on crop cycles and nature. It is also timely to review a few of the recent books about growing crops and rural life.

The best thing about *A Gravestone Made of Wheat*, a collection of 12 short stories, is that the author uses good English. This reviewer cannot say the same about any of the other recent issues, especially *Remembering*, the first novel in 14 years by the much-acclaimed Wendell Berry, literary guru of the small-is-beautiful, "alternative agriculture" movement.

The title story of *A Gravestone Made of Wheat*, opens in the home of a Minnesota farmer, grieving over the casket of his wife. The story ends when he and his sons take the casket with their tractor, and respectfully bury it on their farm in a wide open wheat field. The farmer does this after he was informed by county authorities that local health ordinances do not permit burials on unhallowed, unapproved sites. How-

ever, the story recounts how the farmer was also forced, in 1920 after World War I, to defy local authority, and take to wife his betrothed, without a marriage ceremony of any kind. The young woman was German, and local officials would not grant her the needed papers for a marriage license because, as a recent immigrant, she was suspect. Therefore, the grieving husband finds solace when he puts his good wife to rest under a "gravestone made of wheat."

The author, Will Weaver, can tell a good story. However, what seeps through is his viewpoint that all is arbitrary. Therefore, despair is always close at hand.

The most depressing example of this is "Dispersal," the account of one farmer buying a mowing machine at the foreclosure auction of his neighbor. The foreclosed farmer runs down the road after the departing mower. " 'This is not my fault,' he said, swinging his arm at the pick-ups, at the whole auction. '—It wasn't me.' " The farmer who scavenged the mower, ends the story, "What I most wanted to do was to get the mower home, park it in the machine shed, and close the door on it. Then I wanted to eat lunch, sweep up in the barn, feed silage, milk, eat supper, watch the weather report, and go to bed. Because once I had done those things, this day would be over."

Thus, Weaver is able to depict sorry scenes accurately. But, for what purpose?

Fortunately for the reader, Verlyn Klinkenborg, in his first book *Making Hay*, avoids even trying to achieve moving depictions. His observations and writing are silly. He says in his preface, "I was raised in a small town in Iowa. My dad was a farmboy, and my mom a farmgirl, though they grew up to be a teacher and a nurse. Most of my relatives on both sides of my family are or were farmers. Like farmers everywhere, and like the Big Hole's ranchers [in Montana], they have suffered as the agricultural debt crisis has worsened. *Making Hay* is not about that crisis, not about banks, politics, economics, or erosion. It is about what keeps men and women farming despite the hard times: work, animals, machines, and the land. My aunts, uncles, and cousins are among the numerous cautious farmers who, though hurt by low prices, have not, so far, been threatened with loss of their farms or way of life." Klinkenborg, with a Ph.D. in English literature from Princeton, and experience writing for *Esquire*, *Rod and Reel* and the *Washington Post*, then goes on to write 154 pages of romanticism about making hay in the Midwest and Montana. For example, "The silent wheelrake looks, to my imagination, as if it should make a 'snick snick snick' sound." Klinkenborg doesn't know what is happening to farmers anywhere, and probably wouldn't know it "if it hit him."

'Small is beautiful' propaganda

Wendell Berry's *Remembering* is a more serious matter. He has been promoted for years as the literary figure for the small farming movement. Since the 1950s, he has produced

poems, essays, stories, and novels attacking modern, industry-based agriculture, and extolling "traditional" farm methods, by which he means pre-mechanized methods, such as the horse and mule farming of the Amish. Berry's promoters make a plug for how he has lived simply on 75 acres in Henry County, Kentucky. Berry is on the board of the Land Stewardship Project, the Minnesota-based group that serves the interests of the international food cartels, by pushing the line on farmers that they should be happy to return to old, tried-and-true backbreaking farming, to keep their costs low, and help the environment.

Berry's latest novel is a pompous diatribe about the virtues of plain Amish farming versus high-debt, high-tech agriculture. The story line traces the alienation of a young man, Andy Catlett, who leaves his farm roots to be a reporter, then sees the light when visiting an Amish farm. However, he loses his hand in a cornpicker accident, he suffers terrible depression, but finds his way back to peace of mind with his family and a "sense of place" by returning to his Kentucky farm.

Berry's writing is as poor as his reasoning. In the opening chapter, Catlett is visiting in San Francisco, and is depressed. "In his dream a great causeway had been built across the creek valley where he lives, the heavy roadbed and its supports a materialized obliviousness to his house and barn that stood belittled nearby, as if great Distance itself had come to occupy that place. Bulldozers pushed and trampled the loosened, deformed, denuded earth, working it like dough toward some new shape entirely human-conceived."

Any serious farmer should be wary of romantic drivel like this, and even more wary of the motives of those who write it.

Crisis management can't win drug war

by Stuart Pettingell

Clear and Present Danger

by Tom Clancy

G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1989

656 pages, hardbound, \$21.95

In the absence of leadership, people revert to the little that they know and are trained to do when faced with a crisis. Usually this is not sufficient. So it is today, with the Bush administration, where statecraft has been replaced by "crisis management," and one bungled covert operation after another.

Tom Clancy's best-seller *Clear and Present Danger* is a fictional promotion of such a covert operations solution for the current drug plague which is destroying the United States and Western civilization: Invade Colombia with covert teams, shoot down some drug planes, wipe out some coca refineries, kill off some drug lords in hopes of starting a war between them, then get the hell out. Even Clancy admits that this will not stop the drug problem, but it will help, he insists.

In Clancy's scenario, we see what must be a very close representation of the secret fantasy life of every special operations field man. Smoothly run, successful operations, highly skilled and trained operatives who are virtually selflessly dedicated patriots, few or no leaks, and the politicians kept at bay.

Clear and Present Danger takes us through the political origins of a covert plan, into the planning stages, recruitment of personnel, special training and deployment. The operation is the covert insertion of troops into Colombia to monitor traffickers' airfields, while Air Force fighters intercept the planes and either escort them into a U.S. base for arrest, or shoot them down.

Things escalate when the narcos, "the Cartel," kill the U.S. FBI director in Colombia, in retaliation for the FBI's seizing of over \$600 million in Cartel bank accounts. The White House responds by redeploying the troops further up country to destroy coca refineries and personnel, and employing pinpoint bombing techniques to assassinate several leaders of the Cartel in their homes.

The issue of violating national sovereignty is never really discussed by Clancy. In fact the Colombian government is written out of the scenario. The military is inept and corrupt. The justice system is helpless and terrorized, and anyone can be bought by the Cartel. It is a fight between the Cartel and the intelligence community.

Likewise, the United States government is downplayed. Congress is, of course, kept in the dark, so there will be no meddling by politicians. The President and agency officials only set policy, leaving the planning and execution largely in the hands of the field operatives. The best, and most important decisions are always made by the field men. This is truly an agent's dreamland, where the REMFs (Rear Echelon Mother Fuckers) don't mess up the operation.

What seems to be of more concern than sovereignty is the difference between murder and sanctioned killings. All of Clancy's characters struggle with this "ethical dilemma." When a drug lord's house is bombed, killing four leaders of the Cartel, the White House gets upset when it finds out the drug lord's wife and children were killed also. The soldiers sent into Colombia worry about it. But, "Christ, these drugs are killing our kids back home," they rationalize. The Air Force pilot who shoots down drug pilots in the Caribbean laments, "What else can you do?" His mother had recently been killed by a crack cocaine addict.

At one point in the story, the planned operation "goes off