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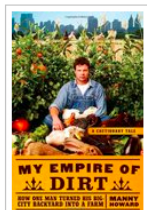
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JUNE/JULY/AUG 2010

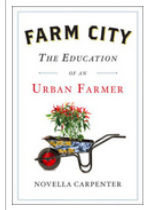
Growing Pains

In recent back-to-the-land memoirs, fresh food is just one reason to take up the plow.

MELANIE REHAK



In the 1980s, we had urban cowboys. Now, we have urban farmers. Where John Travolta in a cowboy hat and big belt buckle was once the emblem of a newly cityfied country boy, today trends lean in the other direction, with urbanites going back—partway, at least—to the land. Dressed in everything from Carhartt overalls to newly stylish Walmart Wellingtons, they're a generation that finds itself longing for a connection through blackberries of the earthy kind.



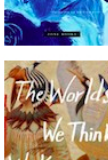
Some, like Manny Howard, whose *My Empire of Dirt: How One Man Turned His Big-City Backyard into a Farm* (Scribner, \$25) chronicles the six months he spent growing vegetables, attempting to raise animals, and sabotaging his marriage on an eight-hundred-square-foot plot in Brooklyn with the goal of feeding himself for a month, are journalists on a mission for both a good story and a newfound sense of self. As Howard writes, rather loftily, near the start of his tale, "On The Farm I will have clarity of purpose and an objective understanding of my progress. This might be true for the first time in my life. This prospect is exhilarating. On The Farm all the vagaries of my life will be stripped away. Finally, relief from all the unanswered, even the unanswerable, questions." But as any farmer will tell you, farming is actually the exact opposite. It's a livelihood based on uncertainty and unknowables that require a steady hand and personality, neither of which, to his chagrin, Howard possesses.

Howard's not the only urban farmer to learn this lesson the hard way (and then write about it—apparently the desire to farm comes coupled with a literary urge). There's also Novella Carpenter, the daughter of "hippie homesteader[s]," who can't live without take-out Chinese food and yet, when digging in manure to feed the garden she's sowing in a vacant lot behind her house in Oakland, California, feels "a prickle of almost religious ecstasy at the smell of horseshit." Carpenter's transformation of a forsaken, garbage-filled plot into a paradise of ducks, rabbits, fruit trees, vegetables, and honey is chronicled in *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer* (Penguin Paperback, \$16), which describes her constant grappling with forces out of her control, be they junkies, slugs—which she stabs in the night "like a low-stakes Lady MacBeth"—or duck-hungry packs of roving dogs.

And then there's the hilarious and delightful Josh Kilmer-Purcell, denizen of the night-turned-ad exec with a yen for the simple life, and author of *The Bucolic Plague: How Two Manhattanites Became Gentlemen Farmers* (Harper, \$25). His longing to be "beholden to things like weather and goat whims" compels him and his boyfriend to purchase a nineteenth-century mansion on sixty acres of farmland in upstate New York, basically on a whim. "I've always been too impetuous . . . and capricious," he writes. "That's why I used to wake up on the F line at 6 a.m. with stubble growing through my makeup, one high heel missing, and a chorus of tiny, empty Absolut bottles rolling across the subway car floor. . . . This time, I'd started a goat farm, practically overnight." Though neither of them quits his day job—or perhaps because of it—and in spite of their trusty caretaker, it doesn't take long before the two are so overwhelmed by the demands of the farm, the house, and their online goat-milk-soap business that they aren't speaking to each other.

Clearly, urban farming, like any farming, is not for the faint of spirit. In addition to weather (Howard and Kilmer-Purcell), mysteriously failed crops (Howard again) and pilfering neighbors (Carpenter, for obvious reasons), there's the fraught necessity of death. Witness the collective hand wringing, followed by scenes of blood, butchering, and, in Kilmer-Purcell's case, an injury I came to think of as a turkey-slaughter stigma. Here he is, wielding the ax after calming the Thanksgiving turkey he's raised with a healthy dose of Absolut vodka (clearly his alcoholic beverage of choice): "There were plenty of good reasons for me to consume a bird that had been healthily and happily raised on my own farm. But there didn't seem to be one logical reason for me to actually kill it myself." As for Howard, he ends up sparing his ducks because his young children think they're cute and settles for a halfhearted chicken harvest. Afterward, in the garage-cum-barn of his Brooklyn backyard, he notes, grimly: "It doesn't matter if I have any enthusiasm at all for the butchering. Rewarding or

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gamy. It doesn't matter if I have any enthusiasm at all for the eating, preparing or not, it's necessary—central to the months of preparation that have preceded this day. . . . All the same, I do wish the work were even vaguely enjoyable. It takes hours, and . . . I am somehow not prepared for the psychological toll." Carpenter, meanwhile, slaughters her own Thanksgiving turkey, Harold (paramour of Maude, naturally), only after enacting an American Indian tobacco-burning ritual that shows "the animal's spirit which way [is] up," offering him her thanks, and asking for his forgiveness.

All of which raises the question: Why should any of them bother in the first place? As Carpenter herself notes, "We meat-eating city dwellers don't have to kill something to survive. We merely go to the store with some cash in hand." The answer lies in the fact that each conflicted soul does the dirty work and comes to feel that rather than profane, the hard work and the killing are sacred. "As I stood there staring at my victim," Kilmer-Purcell writes of his revelation, "I realized that the biggest motivator for what I was about to do was honor. The simple truth was that these particular birds don't exist for any other reason than to be killed and eaten." Or, as Carpenter puts it in slightly more intimate terms, "Harold had had a good life, and now he would have a good death—quick and painless—at the hands of someone he knew, in a familiar place."

This desire to reconnect with cycles of life, growth, and death in all their messy glory, with authenticity in a form that feels increasingly scarce, is the primary motivation for the neo-back-to-the-land set, and it almost always comes combined with a set of distinctly contemporary concerns that strive to correct not only on a personal level but on a grander one as well, whether taking aim at the nation's overindustrialized work ethic or simply giving something back. For Kilmer-Purcell, who finds himself disgusted with his role as a hawk of useless products, "I could grow my own food, support a hard-hit local economy, and metaphorically raise my middle finger at the factory farm industry that was causing so many of our nation's ills."

Carpenter echoes this sentiment, regretting the less-than-ideal slaughter of her beloved pigs at someone else's hands: "In the end, I wanted to blame America. This is how we do everything: we rush around because time is money, even at the folksy slaughterhouse." In addition, she comes to realize that as much as farming is about her self-actualization, it is about far more than just that. By the time her farm is fully operational, she has established a policy of generosity toward the neighborhood people who help themselves to her food, has donated lettuce to a literacy program for kids, and has teamed up with another urban farmer, named Willow, to feed homemade pizza to neighborhood kids: "To be a farmer, Willow pointed out, was to share. Unlike a rural farm, a secret place where only a few lucky people may visit, an urban farm makes what seems impossible possible."

Earlier in the book, she encounters a man pulling carrots from her garden. "This place reminds me of my grandma," he tells her. Then, tearing up, "Everything's so growing." It's a moving, unexpectedly profound moment, one that may well sum up the whole urban-farming movement. As the world whirls faster and faster, in its wake has come the realization that along with being enlarged by globalism and technology, we're in some ways being stunted by them. People, like the plants in Carpenter's garden, need to expand and unfurl, and that may be the best reason to unplug, find a patch of dirt, and dig in. And though there are lots of reasons to be skeptical about the politics of local food, which can often be holier-than-thou, and which Howard, whether it's by temperament or because his farm is born of a magazine assignment rather than a true urge, never quite buys into, there are good reasons for paying at least some attention. Perhaps the most urgent—if also the most comedic—one comes in *The Bucolic Plague*. Eager to share the bounty of his first summer harvest, Kilmer-Purcell brings vegetables from his farm to his Manhattan ad agency and arranges them under a sign that reads FREE FARMERS MARKET. One of his young colleagues, on being told that what he's just sampled is a radish, exclaims: "Oh yeah! It is! I've never seen a whole one!"

Melanie Rehak is the author of *Eating for Beginners*, to be published in July by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

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