



Farming for Us All: Practical Agriculture and the Cultivation of Sustainability (Rural Studies)

Michael Mayerfeld Bell

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It is easy to feel overwhelmed and depressed by all the threats facing modern agriculture—threats to the environment, to the health and safety of our food, to the economic and cultural viability of farmers and rural communities. Hundreds of thousands of farmers leave their farms every year as the juggernaut of "big agriculture" plows across our rural landscape. But there are viable alternatives to big agriculture, as many farmers and others involved in agriculture, including consumers, are discovering. In *Farming for Us All* Michael Mayerfeld Bell offers crucial insight into the future of a viable sustainable agriculture movement in the United States.

Based on interviews and years of close interaction with over 60 Iowa farm families, Bell answers two critical questions concerning sustainable agriculture: why some farmers are becoming sustainable farmers and why, as yet, most are not. The first part of the book describes how the structure of agriculture—that nexus of markets, regulations, subsidies, and technology—has created a situation in which farmers are paid to undermine their own economic and social security, as well as the security of the land. The second part explores why, nevertheless, most Iowa farmers carry on with these destructive practices. Farming is a pressured endeavor, and farmers find themselves relying on recipes of knowledge to get them through the latest crisis, with little opportunity to explore some other way—even if they think what they know how to do isn't likely to work very well for them. You have to go with what you know.

And yet some farmers resist the tide of big agriculture. In the third part of the book, Bell examines Iowa's largest sustainable agriculture group, Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), and finds a new model of social relations at work. Members of PFI seek to create an agriculture that engages others—farmers, university researchers, government officials, and consumers alike—in a common conversation about what agriculture might look like, but without insisting that a common conversation requires a common vision. Instead, PFI members come to relish their differences as sources of learning and new ideas. Through dialogue, these PFI members seek to crossbreed knowledge, to create pragmatic knowledge that gets the crops to grow in ways that sustain families, communities, societies, economies, and environments. Herein lies the heart of the cultivation of practical agriculture, an agriculture that roots action in dialogue and dialogue in action, and thereby sustains them both. In an increasingly fractured and untrusting world, this is a cultivation worthy of all our interests.

Farming for Us All gives us the opportunity to explore the possibilities for social, environmental, and economic change that practical, dialogic agriculture presents. It therefore represents an important step forward in our search for a viable sustainable agriculture in the United States.

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