

Book Review

Joyce Kinkead, Evelyn Funda and Lynne S. McNeill. *Farm: A Multimodal Reader*. Southlake, Texas: Fountainhead Press, 2014.

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In its introduction, *Farm: A Multimodal Reader* suggests that every person “is connected to agriculture in some way, through the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and the health products we use” (3). The central claim of the compilers of this reader, Joyce Kinkead, Evelyn I. Funda and Lynne S. McNeill, is that most people do not understand the deep influence of farming and agriculture on every facet of their lives. From first page to last, Kinkead, Funda, and McNeill have crafted a reader that, in addition to teaching students about the ubiquity of farming, engages with the complex social, economic, and cultural issues surrounding modern agriculture. Additionally, the reader provides students terminology and strategies for practicing skills of both genre and rhetorical analysis. *Farm* is a useful and intelligently organized text that orients students to the problem of disconnection from a key reality of their lives and offers them essential training in cultural and textual literacies.

Structurally, the reader is divided into five “sections,” including a fifth section that provides appendices of major project ideas, glossaries, a resource list, and a plagiarism agreement. The first two sections of the reader move along an historical trajectory, and both of the historical sections provide extensive context before moving into discussions of their collected

texts. The first section begins with the Sumerians and farming and includes selections on farming and agriculture from Hesiod, Virgil, and Middle Ages England. The second section, a more tightly-focused history of farming in the United States, excerpts texts influential to the development of American cultural attitudes toward farming. These include Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1783); Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Agriculture of Massachusetts" (1842); Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854); Willa Cather's *O, Pioneers!* (1913); and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The reader's authors also adopt a contextually-based framework for studying American farming in section four, which engages with contemporary issues in farming and agriculture through the works of writers such as Novella Carpenter and Michael Pollan. Through the selected texts in this fourth section, the reader confronts a variety of topics related to the modern-day "new Romanticism" of American farming: conservation, food culture, the "back to the land" movement, and agritourism. Additionally, Kinkead, Funda and McNeill recommend diverse material throughout sections one, two and four to augment their discussions of the development and current state of American farming, suggesting songs, dramatic films, and documentaries, among other multimedia texts.

Unlike the other three body sections of the reader, the third section of *Farm* does not engage in historically-based analysis, but rather, leads students in closer critical examinations of texts from a variety of genres. These genres range from recipes to farmer's market posters to cultural practices. In the chapters devoted to each genre, *Farm* teaches students the rudimentary elements of genre and rhetorical analysis, as well as key terminology associated with such studies. When, for example, students examine representations of farming in the poetry of writers John Clare and Joyce Kilmer, the reader offers a set of discussion questions and activities that

engage students with the generic and rhetorical features particular to poetry as a genre. The reader asks students to investigate poetry's formal features, poetic devices, its intertextuality, and the lines between poetry and prose. *Farm* encourages students to attend to the formal and rhetorical features of the various genres that shape the cultural images of farming, including poetry, children's literature and folklore.

Among the reader's strengths is its careful navigation of the line between bringing more attention to farming's place in American culture and lionizing it. The reader does not enact a glorification of contemporary agriculture or a call for a return to the halcyon days of family farms and the "noble farmer." Rather, *Farm* encourages students to take critical perspectives on both the ubiquity of agriculture and narratives nostalgic for the American farm of an idealized past. In order to emphasize alternate perspectives on depictions of farming in American history and contemporary culture, the reader brings in diverse voices on these representations through the writing of Tomás Rivera, Toni Morrison, and Willa Cather, among others. In addition to collecting various perspectives on farming, Kinkead, Funda and McNeill adopt critical attitudes toward dominant narratives that idealize American farming and its past by addressing its more controversial aspects both in historical and contemporary contexts. One chapter, "Farming in Hard Times," provides excerpts and discussion of complex topics such as slavery, tenant farming, sharecropping, the displacement of Native Americans, the relationship between farming and gender, the Dust Bowl, the urban/rural divide, the pay and treatment of migrant workers, and the growth of modern agribusiness. The text also includes discussion questions and in-class activities that ask students to take similarly critical stances on these topics, through activities such as research-based class debates and collaborative writing projects.

Much as it seeks to engage students in critical analysis of farming's place in history and culture, *Farm* also performs the important task of equipping students with the language and skills necessary for performing complex textual and rhetorical analysis on a variety of genres that they may not recognize as "texts." True to its title and introduction, *Farm* emphasizes multimodality and genre diversity. While Kinkead and Funda's backgrounds in American literature can often be felt in the abundance of fictional texts about farms and farming, *Farm* also asks students and instructors to take a more expansive view of what should be considered a "text" worthy of critical analysis. The reader features lengthy discussions of the nature of a text as well as artifacts that students might initially reject as for their lack of conventional textuality: folklore, visual art, recipes, oral traditions, and pop songs. The reader offers the instructor a wide-ranging collection of such unconventional texts, not only through the excerpts printed in the reader, but also through detailed lists and appendices of recommendations for further reading or viewing. While, then, the reader encourages students "to consider what farms, farming, and farmers [mean] to us as a culture" (xi), this emphasis on the diverse nature of texts, also makes it a useful collection for teaching the complexity of cultural and textual literacies to undergraduates.

In order to encourage students to practice these literacies, *Farm* includes an abundance of ideas for writing assignments and in-class and out-of-class activities. These assignments are outlined both in the body sections of the reader, where they are tied to a specific chapter or reading, as well as in its appendices. The recommended writing assignments include not only more traditional research papers, but also draw on writing practices and genres associated with creative writing, multimodal composition, and professional writing. Like the suggested writing assignments, the included activities encourage the instructor to think creatively about in-class

and out-of-class activities. These activities move students beyond discussion or lecture by requiring them to try new and different approaches to the material as they prepare for or participate in class. Activities ask students to perform out-of-class research, participate in collaboration with their classmates, and explore related texts. Many of the suggested activities also encourage students to think critically about the resonances of the texts and genres in their own lives, asking them to draw on their personal experiences, family histories, and their encounters with farming in popular culture. Not only, then, does the reader encourage students to think critically and creatively in the classroom, but it also asks them to begin to bring these capacities to bear in their interactions with representations of agriculture and farming that they may see outside of the classroom.

The reader, while focusing primarily on American literary and cultural texts, offers resources that would make it a comfortable fit for a variety of classroom contexts, not only classes in American literature and culture. Its emphasis on textual and visual analysis, multiple literacies, and its wealth of diverse writing assignments and collaborative activities, all paired with a central, critical, and interdisciplinary theme would make it appropriate for use in both composition studies and Writing across the Curriculum courses. The reader would be especially useful in a class of international students, as it offers an orientation to an essential aspect of American culture. Because the reader itself includes writing assignments and discussions of critical reading and analysis, but lacks explicit writing instruction, however, the text itself would likely need to be paired with supplementary materials in order to provide instruction on the fundamentals of composition, especially in a class of L2 students.

Supplementation may also be necessary for deeper engagement with some of the more complex themes associated with American farming in the reader. In some ways, the reader suffers from the difficulties of attempting to cover such a wide variety of material in such a limited space. *Farm* covers a large area of historical territory and includes references to a significant number of texts, but as it does so, it sometimes skims over key movements and history that made American farming what it is today. While Kinkead, Funda, and McNeill include sections on the experiences of groups of diverse racial, ethnic, economic, and gender backgrounds in farming and agriculture, sections on American slavery and sharecropping, the land disenfranchisement of Native Americans, and the exploitation of migrant workers lack depth. These chapters feel underdeveloped, especially when compared with the amount of space and number of supplemental sources offered on topics such as land grant colleges, the Dust Bowl, and extension homemaking. Given their resonances throughout contemporary farming life, especially with regards the issue of race and ethnicity in contemporary farming, these chapters would likely require supplementation beyond what is offered in this reader. Fortunately, Kinkead, Funda, and McNeill provide suggestions for beginning to gather supplemental material on these topics.

Due to its focus on multimodality, *Farm* is a text that flourishes in an electronic textbook format. Fountainhead Press, the publisher of this reader, participates in green initiatives. These initiatives include an emphasis on online and digital texts. The electronic textbook form works particularly well with the authors' aims of underlining the richness and complexity of media and genre. An electronic format makes accessing the collected videos, artwork, and Internet content referenced in the book less complicated and cumbersome. Since the reader draws heavily on the

flexibility of the e-book form, however, if an instructor elected to adopt only the print form for her classroom, the traditional print textbook form could be frustrating for students. While the authors provide written links to online content and QR codes for the YouTube videos they reference, many of the online sources are not completely reproduced on the page, requiring students to manually type the lengthy links included in the printed text into a browser window. When adopting this reader, then, instructors should consider taking on Fountainhead Press's own policy and adopt the electronic format over the printed textbook.