

## *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer*

by Novella Carpenter

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Reviewed by:

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“I have a farm on a dead-end street in the ghetto” is the opening line and intriguing hook of Novella Carpenter’s captivating account of the trials and tribulations of her life as an urban farmer. Situated in a shady part of Oakland, *Farm City* takes readers on a rollercoaster ride. The story starts on a weed-strewn, abandoned lot, and proceeds through a tale of one woman striving to be closer to the source of her food in our packaged and processed society. Themes of discovery, responsibility, and trial-and-error throughout the book provide discussion points for first-year college students experiencing the same issues in their own right.

Novella, however, is no uneducated, illiterate “hippie” trying to get back to the land, which is how she describes her parents and their experience of living in the 1970s. She includes excerpts of poetry and references to Thoreau’s experiences at Walden that give away her intelligence. On top of mental acumen, Novella adds her own ironic, somewhat twisted sense of humor. In one section, she declines to kill garden-ruining slugs by drowning them in beer because “this seemed suspiciously close to buying the slugs a beer, which is more generous than I felt” (p. 52).

Novella and her boyfriend, Bill, are the type who intentionally add to their travel itinerary places they are told to avoid. They looked into Oakland because they were told “whatever you do, don’t go to Oakland” (p. 8). They stay away from San Francisco because it “is filled with successful, polished people,” while Oakland “is scruffy, loud, [and] unkempt” (p. 7). Moving onto a street with a homeless man who collects abandoned cars, a Buddhist temple, a Vietnamese family, and Lana, who runs her own speakeasy, they fit right in with an apartment filled with furniture and appliances found abandoned in the streets. Novella then finds herself next to a large abandoned lot that presents a golden opportunity: an urban garden.

Having previously experimented with urban farming in Seattle, Novella and Bill relish the chance to build the garden beyond a few fruits and vegetables and a beehive. The blissful feeling of bringing life miraculously out of something so dead and barren drives her to expand the scope of the farm—meat birds.

The box of young turkeys, chickens, geese, and ducks arrives from a nervous postal carrier, and Novella further develops her relationship with her Vietnamese neighbor, who remembers his farming years in Vietnam before helping the Americans in the war. After losing some of the birds to a possum and more to the junkyard dogs behind their lot, Novella must bring herself to complete the food-related task most removed from society: killing the birds. Much as young people attempt to avoid conflict rather than face it, Novella first attempts to find someone to serve as executioner; then, out of options, she must face the task alone. This proves to be a transformative experience, leaving Novella closer to her Thanksgiving meal since she has been responsible from just after the birth of the turkey all the way to the table.

With the addition of rabbits to the back deck, and eventually two pigs to the backyard, Novella expands into other realms of the unknown, which causes her to find and read the “Whole Earth Catalogue,” one of the publications likened to a Bible, according to her parents. Through all of this, Novella begins to feel more and more connected to her parents and their effort to become closer to the land. However, Novella does not want to end up like her parents, who divorced when she was

four, partly because her mother could not stand the isolation in the country. Novella wants to have the best of both worlds; growing Cream of Saskatchewan watermelon, lime trees, and raising pigs, while still having a social life and the city scene. This theme becomes another rich discussion opportunity for first-year college students, with the struggle between having the comforts of home and family and making a life of one's own.

The challenges of Novella's chosen path, much like that of a young college student, could easily lead to giving up, but leave the reader hoping for success. Pig-raising includes rituals like diving into dumpsters three times every week with Bill to find food for the fast-growing animals. Novella's humor surfaced again when she proudly stated that the pigs were once eating pellets, but "now they were eating Chinese, like good urban pigs" (p. 202).

On one of these outings, which also involve large buckets and headlamps, Novella is told she has to meet Chris, the head chef at a restaurant with particularly plentiful dumpsters. After her first meeting with Chris, her closing line is the eloquent, "You have great dumpsters. Keep it up" (p. 225), which is typical of Novella's unintentional humor. She ends up learning how to make *salumi*, the encompassing term for prepared meats like salami and prosciutto, from Chris.

The apprenticeship under Chris, contrasted with the experience with the rancher who thoughtlessly butchers one of her pigs, teaches Novella about the patience and delicate touch required in many of life's situations. Along with the oddball situations throughout this story, Chris also helps Novella learn about balancing between reliance on others for success and striking out alone to make the best of it, knowing there will be bumps along the way.

*Farm City* concludes with Novella working with a friend to jump start an urban farming program for other families in GhostTown, as her neighborhood is known. She is raising chickens in her backyard that will eventually go out to families who then harvest their own eggs, as well as building garden boxes that will turn into raised beds for her neighbors. In this sense, Novella has gone from being the student to being the teacher and advisor, and passing along her passion, knowledge, and experiences to assist the next generation of urban farmers.

As a reader for new students, this book has positive and negative factors that could affect the success of the program. On the positive side, the book offers many opportunities for rich discussion, could serve as the basis for a campus-wide environmental project, and could be tied into various types of courses across all years of students. On the other hand, the themes of the book have the potential to turn 18- and 19-year-olds off from completing the reading, and those themes may also be difficult to connect to the lives of a recent high school graduate.

The story provides opportunities ripe for discussion with new college students. One of the major themes is Novella's struggle to live in much the same way as her parents, while avoiding their social isolation. She wants the independence of a city social scene while still having her farm. This is especially relatable to college students living on campus and coming from out-of-state. These students, more so than those living at home, must bridge the gap between the values of home and family and those of an independent young adult in a college environment. During this experience, Novella consistently finds aspects of her mother's personality manifested in her actions and thoughts, and eventually becomes thankful for all that was instilled into her by her mother. Students may not see this right away in college, but they will come to face it more as the first semester progresses.

Another theme rich for discussion is that of taking risks and coping with potential failure. Novella consistently takes on new aspects of farming with only books to guide her. Though her risk is somewhat calculated, there is still the chance of financial and emotional failure. Two situations provide great examples for a discussion. The first is when she is faced with killing her meat birds for Thanksgiving dinner. Novella initially avoids the topic by reading about raising birds and then how to prepare them for the meal, skipping the section on killing. When she finally faces the situation,

Novella attempts to shirk responsibility and find another person to serve as executioner. She eventually finds someone to assist her, but Novella performs the act itself. The second situation that could promote discussion is Novella's work with Chris. Novella comes to realize the value of patience in waiting for her salumi creations, all the while knowing they could be failures. She has invested both of her pigs in this venture and could be left with nothing. Relating these situations to new college students, likely on their own for the first time, provides opportunities to discuss taking of responsibility for one's actions and decisions instead of avoiding conflict or risk. Students may also discuss the importance of making decisions only after researching potential outcomes and avenues.

*Farm City* also presents several opportunities for partnerships with departments and programs across campus. In first-year experience classes, this book may serve as a starting point for the discussions on learning about resources and opportunities on campus, teaching students responsibility, and encouraging an internal locus of control. Other first-year classes, such as American history courses discussing the Industrial Revolution through the present, can frame discussions around the impact of specialization in production and its effects on society. Introductory English or writing courses may potentially use this book for a paper around the themes mentioned above. Finally, partnering with an environmental studies department provides an opportunity to use this book as the inspiration for a campus-wide project. Projects could include campus gardens that grow food to be used in dining halls and a campus farmers' market that supports locally grown food and crafts.

*Farm City* could be particularly successful if used on urban campuses with a high population of students from urban areas. The themes around the more rural aspects of the book will expose urban/suburban students to ideas and situations not usually encountered while growing up in the city. Even on campuses with students from rural areas, this text provides the opportunity for these students to challenge their assumptions about what is considered farming and how "city-folk" can also contribute and impact food in society.

While *Farm City* provides overall positive opportunities for use on campus, there are negative aspects as well. Many students may be put off by some of the above-mentioned themes, like killing the meat birds, especially if coming from urban/suburban areas. Students may also not find connections to Novella and her story. Both of these issues may lead students to not finish the book, which will negate all of the rich opportunities for use on campus. However, if students do persist through the story, these connections to the text and uncomfortable themes can be explored during discussions. This would then lead to the same connections and outcomes that were not accomplished by students on their own.

Ethics courses may utilize this text for discussions around the ethics of food production in modern America. Environmental studies courses could also utilize *Farm City* for discussions surrounding the use of land in cities. Finally, learning communities built around any of the above topics, as well as underserved populations or serving urban populations could also benefit from this text. Overall, this book provides humorous stories while provoking students to discuss often uncomfortable situations and themes that may directly or indirectly relate to their lives and experiences.