American Gothic: A Life of America's Most Famous Painting, by Steven Biel. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005. 215 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. $21.95 cloth.

American Gothic: The Biography of Grant Wood's American Masterpiece, by Thomas Hoving. New York: Chamberlain Bros., 2005. 165 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendix. $13.95 paper.

Reviewer Karal Ann Marling is professor of art history and American studies at the University of Minnesota. Her many publications include *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (1982 and 2000) and *Debutante: Rites and Regalia of American Debdom* (2004).

The year 2005 marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the most famous painting by Iowa's most famous painter, Grant Wood (1891–1942). Painted in 1930, Wood's *American Gothic* shows a balding man and a prim-faced woman standing in front of a carpenter-Gothic–style house in Eldon, Iowa. Although the press release for Biel's book describes the house unkindly as a "lackluster" tourist attraction, it is visited often enough to warrant a sign, a street name, a resident caretaker, and a listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The site was a bit more touristy a decade ago, perhaps, when Iowa-born comic Tom Arnold and his wife, Roseanne Barr, periodically descended on Eldon with the intention of building an enormous mansion in the vicinity. The location of the nascent estate was something of a secret, unless you happened to be a patron of the Big Food Diner (another Arnold enterprise), home of the famous Iowa "loose meat" sandwich. Before they mapped directions on the back of a paper napkin, the waitresses there always claimed that they had been sworn to secrecy about Tom's house—but you could see the Grant Wood house for free and it was just up the street, behind the parking lot! Now that the Big Food Diner and the Arnolds are gone, it might be a little harder to find American Gothic Street. But, despite two new books on the picture and its meaning, it is harder still to unravel the ultimate meaning of *American Gothic*.

Even the story of its genesis is not easy to tell. The problem is not a dearth of information; instead, it's the messy accretion of stories, memories, scholarly investigations, and local gossip over 75 years that foils any attempt at a coherent narrative. Simply stated, Grant Wood seems to have driven a teenaged art student home to Eldon from Cedar Rapids one August day in 1930, saw the house, and sketched it with the intention of using the facade in one of a series of paintings about Iowa house types and the people liable to live in them. After doing two studies of the place—one with and one without the dramatis personae—he coaxed his dentist and his sister into posing for the couple in the foreground. When he finished with them, the pair had the plain, long faces he often

associated with Iowans and with the "severely straight-laced [*sic*] characters" (Biel, 45) who belonged in the Eldon house, with its pointed Gothic window. Of course, it all might have happened differently.

What is undoubtedly true, however, is that from the day the painting won the Norman Wait Harris Bronze Medal at the Forty-third Art Institute of Chicago Annual of American Paintings and Sculpture in October 1930, it has never ceased to be a memorable icon, although no two decades and perhaps no two viewers have ever agreed on what the image is all about. And that is the thrust of Steven Biel's lively and insightful look at the dour-faced Iowa twosome and their cultural adventures. In the early 1930s, many Iowa farmers suspected that Wood was making fun of them in *American Gothic,* that he was a pictorial H. L. Mencken castigating a midwestern "booboisie." (He had, after all, lived in Paris briefly and even grew a beard there!) But by 1933, when *American Gothic* was exhibited in conjunction with the Chicago Century of Progress Fair, the painting had become a beloved national symbol, second only to Whistler's portrait of his mother in the affections of the public.

Today's critics are often frustrated by Wood's slippery ambivalence. A recent study of Wood's 1937 illustrations for a special edition of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (*Grant Wood's Main Street,* by Lea Rosson DeLong et al. [2004]) reopens the question of whether, like Lewis himself, Wood intended his work to satirize the narrow lives of the townsfolk of the agricultural Midwest. Was his Carol Kennicott, peering out her window with one button left undone on her proper housedress, the spiritual cousin of Nan Wood Graham, standing in front of a house in Eldon in a Sears rickrack apron as a tendril of her golden hair escapes the discipline of her plait to suggest a sensuality denied by the rest of the image? Oh my! Could there be *sex* in the heartland?

Biel cheerfully chronicles every possibility: Wood the satirist, the sentimentalist, the Iowa patriot. In doing so, he performs the remarkable service of making Wood and his picture *real.* Contrary to critical opinion, neither people nor paintings are all of a piece. They are gloriously complicated and usually contradictory. Steven Biel's *American Gothic* revels in the messiness of an icon that has served, with equal aplomb, as a corn flakes ad, numerous political cartoons, a scene in a Broadway musical, and a source of inspiration for the TV sitcom classic *Green Acres.* The author also traces a convincing connection between Wood's picture and the bitter 1942 Gordon Parks photograph of a black charwoman, posed with her mop and broom in front of the American flag—another *American Gothic* and a potent emblem of the civil rights movement.

If Biel's is an exuberant, thoughtful, and eye-opening book, Thomas Hoving's is a dud. The former director of the Metropolitan Museum makes fun of art historians (while misstating the facts they have provided) and writers on Wood in general. His book, he says, will finally tell us (the average guy) all about *American Gothic* through a kind of do-it-yourself connoisseurship "lite." The result is a redundant series of descriptions of the painting, occasionally hitched to a snatch of garbled scholarship. The footnote numbers don't always match the citations. The few illustrations are printed in a murky black on black. And to top it all off, the last half-dozen pages of the book—where the index should have been—carry a thumbnail biography of the author. For shame! Grant Wood deserved better. Fortunately, Steven Biels has provided a terrific antidote to Hoving's contemptuous nonsense.

William J. Spillman and the Birth of Agricultural Economics, by Laurie Winn Carlson. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005. 210 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. $39.95 cloth.

Reviewer Jon Lauck is senior advisor to U.S. Senator John Thune. He previously practiced law and was assistant professor of history at South Dakota State University. He is the author of *American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly* (2000).

Farm policy was a crucial arena for state building in the United States. Beginning with Lincoln, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) began expanding the bureaucratic and managerial functions of American government and embracing experts and technology. The "farm problem" was a major concern during the formative years of the American state in the early decades of the twentieth century, and policy experts and economists were critical to the debate. As late as the 1960s, John Kennedy was calling the farm issue the nation's most pressing domestic problem.

As the debates over the relationship between the government and farming played out in the early twentieth century, William Spillman was a central figure. After growing up on a farm in Missouri, Spillman matriculated at the University of Missouri and thereafter took a series of teaching posts. He then became involved in research positions at the USDA and became a promoter of efficient farms and a critic of certain farming practices such as the overuse of fertilizer. Laurie Winn Carlson's new book ably traces Spillman's career as a central figure in the debates about farm policy making.

Spillman's most important contribution to farm policy was to argue that the USDA and certain farmers had become too wedded to the ideals of efficiency, technology, and production. Spillman had long