

Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest, collected and edited by Will Fellows. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. xxix, 316 pp. Illustrations, notes. \$27.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DEBORAH FINK, AMES, IOWA

Farm Boys is a good book, and it opens a new page in the study of the diversity and complexity of rural midwestern life. Much has been written on twentieth-century midwestern farm families, but this book is unique in its focus on the boyhood experiences of gay men who grew up on farms. Will Fellows, a gay man himself from a Wisconsin farm family, interviewed 75 gay men with midwestern farm backgrounds and selected and edited 37 of the transcripts into separate stories, which he presents as chapters. They range from moving and uplifting accounts, such as those of Cornelius Utz and Richard Kilmer, to chilling narratives of despair and violence, such as that of "Heinz Koenig." The spectrum covers all the wholesomeness and all the pathology that one might find in any random dip into rural family life.

Yet within the diversity of gay childhood experience emerge certain patterns that marked many of the boys as different from the majority. Most identified more intimately with the world of their mothers than with that of their fathers. They gravitated to garden work, canning, and baking, and in some cases needlework. Many found solace in strong bonds with farm animals; some were horrified at how their fathers treated animals. A number of the gay boys were bookish and preferred music or drama to sports. Virtually all came to feel isolated and freakish as they discovered how far from the norm of rural masculinity they were headed.

Fellows found his interview subjects through advertisements in urban gay newspapers, and this may account for the large percentage of men living in cities at the time of the study. Certainly gay life in urban areas is different from that in rural areas, where gays usually remain closeted. Yet most of these men shunned flamboyantly gay modes of behavior in favor of more conventional and unobtrusive lifestyles. Some adjustments seemed to be anomalies. One Nebraska man described himself as a conservative Republican gay; and he allowed the use of his real name in the book although he was not out to his parents. Nearly half of the men requested pseudonyms.

Most discussions of gender in rural midwestern history are about women; *Farm Boys* adds to the small body of gender studies on rural men's experiences. It opens questions about how the norms and values of European American masculinity have shaped, or been shaped by, midwestern farming. Although feminist scholars tend to believe that stereotypically women's activities are enculturated rather than innate,

in *Farm Boys* we see males with systematic preference for the culturally defined women's sphere even though they were consistently pushed in the opposite direction. These are fundamental gender issues that need to be fleshed out in further research.

Fellows succeeds admirably in bringing out hidden stories; his analysis, on the other hand, is perfunctory rather than inspiring. The chronological arrangement of the chapters suggests that there should be some historical progression, but this is unclear. There was, for example, no obvious trend toward greater self-acceptance in the later stories; and the use of pseudonyms was roughly uniform in all age groupings. What if the stories had been sorted according to class or level of education of the families? Was there any difference in experience from the prairie states to the historically more conservative plains states?

Fellows pushes the differentiation between German and Yankee farmers beyond its original formulation by Sonya Salamon, and even so it explains little. Labeling patterns of mindless intransigence and violence "German" may be more stereotypical than analytical. Furthermore, I would like to see more thoughtful digging into why rural areas—which in some ways are earthy and practical—are so hostile to gays, even though the book describes a great deal of homoerotic activity in the rural Midwest. Why should the culture of rural areas, of all places, deny the salience of sexuality?

But my quibbles with the book have mostly to do with how absorbing I find it and how many issues it raises. A sensitive and progressive educational system would place this book in high school libraries, where both straight and gay youth would read it. It will be unfortunate if *Farm Boys* gets relegated to the gay shelves, to be read only by "those people." It is about rural midwestern society, and descriptions of the rural Midwest will be poorer if they miss the world that this book uncovers.

Readings in American Health Care: Current Issues in Socio-Historical Perspectives, edited by William G. Rothstein. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995. xiv, 412 pp. Tables, graphs, notes, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

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Readings in American Health Care, edited by William Rothstein, consists of thirty-two essays that illuminate the historical background of many of the current difficulties of America's health care system. Except for a few original contributions by Rothstein, the readings are reprinted

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