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Lentil Underground

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Book Review

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Lentil Underground, Liz Carlisle (New York: Avery Publishing 2015).

In *Lentil Underground*, Liz Carlisle expertly narrates the ambitious turn away from commodity grain production, and toward more economically and environmentally sustainable farming practices, by an eclectic group of Montana growers. The book puts readers in the passenger seat for a ride-along with the founders of Timeless Seeds, an unlikely organic lentil company sprouting up among fields of wheat in the Northern Great Plains. Beginning with four farmers chancing an unusual crop in 1987, Timeless gradually takes root as both a thriving wholesale enterprise and interdependent rural community. The book is powerfully candid in its complexities, highlighting the interrelated agro-ecological, social, and economic trade-offs that make agricultural transformation both immensely challenging and ripe with potential. Carlisle's work is refreshingly non-dogmatic, and provides a rich case study for thinking through socioecological change as it sneaks up through the cracks of Middle America's mainstream.

The subtitle “Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America,” unfortunately does the book a disservice by denying its distinctiveness. The farmers portrayed are pragmatic and adaptive entrepreneurs more than rebellious “renegades,” and this is one of the story's greatest strengths. This book demonstrates that alternative agricultural models need not be rapid totalizing rejections of the industrial status quo, but rather, ongoing rural survival strategies homegrown in the heartland. The pioneering work of these Montana growers does not reflect “the Future of Food in America.” At the outset, these farmers sold lentils as a cover crop to enhance soil fertility, with no intention of marketing it as food. And now as wholesalers, much of their edible product may be sold to Asian markets. Their struggle to create thriving soils and sustainable livelihoods speaks to the future of “farming” in America and the potential for changing landscapes of production rather than consumption. Carlisle's book stands out from existing food movements literature by showcasing more soft-spoken, multigenerational farming families

than impassioned ex-urban greenhorns, and by emphasizing the importance of revitalizing the land itself, as well as those who are nourished by it.

The *Lentil Underground* is an uncommon transformation of the author's dissertation work as a Ph.D. student in Geography at U.C. Berkeley into a highly accessible read for general audiences. It comes as no surprise that Liz Carlisle has worked with Michael Pollan, as her writing reflects the lively, journalistic style that won widespread readership for food system studies a decade prior. What the book lacks in critical engagement it makes up for in reach. Carlisle's compelling and often suspenseful storytelling leaves the reader, much like the farmers she describes, eager to discover what each next harvest might bring.

Part one sets the scene of Conrad, Montana as a portrait of late twentieth-century agricultural intensification, farm consolidation, and rural decline. Here policies encouraging fencerow-to-fencerow grain monocultures, chemical fertilizers, and heavy pesticide application have made farming increasingly untenable. Soil erosion and economic marginalization continue to fuel rural emigration. Conrad also sits downslope from Glacier National Park, and Carlisle aptly uses the vulnerability of both the purportedly pristine wilderness and its nearby deteriorating farmland to comment on the failure of "land-sparing" as a solution to environmental challenges (10–12). Against this backdrop we are introduced to the youthful David Oien, leaving university life in 1976 for a chance to transform his family's homestead into a model for energy independence. Through the frictions and failed starts of his early endeavors, Carlisle highlights the struggles between Oien's spirit of experimentation and the rigidity of academic and government institutions. The perpetual innovation of farmers, whether toward chemical inputs or organic alternatives, serves as a theme linking David Oien and his fellow legume enthusiasts with their parents' legacies of rapid technological change. Carlisle importantly positions all farmers not as mere recipients of agribusiness dogma, but as active, thoughtful decision makers regardless of their chosen strategies.

Part two charts Oien's growing infatuation with lentils, first as a cover crop and later as a marketable food product. As she describes the slow process of building support for this unusual crop, Carlisle skillfully attends to the deeply social dimensions of farming. She highlights the difficulty of becoming the black sheep among disinterested or apprehensive neighbors, defying peer expectations for "clean" (single-crop, weed-free) fields, and struggling with the previous generation's well-reasoned reluctance to rock an already unsteady boat. The section ends with a brief but poignant reflection on the critical role of supportive yet weary wives working both on and off the farm to keep their families going. Throughout Carlisle's text, the question of economic viability remains unresolved and largely obscured by the enchanting momentum of movement-building.

Part three recounts the scaling up of Timeless Seeds from a farmer-to-farmer business focused on soil-building cover crops to a restaurant and grocery wholesaler of gourmet legumes. The founders learn the hard way that diversity in business, as in farming, offers resilience critical to long-term success. Through the ups and downs of their first major contracts (including broken bags, unruly rocks, and capricious customers) the network becomes increasingly entrepreneurial. Carlisle draws attention to this sensitive period when founders are challenged to maintain their vision while entering the “murky, somewhat oxymoronic compromise zone known as ‘green business’” (96). Although the word oxymoronic hints at a deeper critique of the economic system, Carlisle does not take it any farther, and the founders’ satisfaction in providing employment to their community shines through as a laudable success of social entrepreneurship.

Part four illuminates an essential and understudied feature of agricultural sustainability: the social, economic, and biophysical challenges of transitioning away from chemically dependent systems of production: “First you had to change your mind. Then you had to change your farm. Then you had to change your business and the institutions that served it. And now that you were a weirdo, you either had to change your community or form a new one” (105). Framed by metaphors of “rehab,” and the challenge of going “cold turkey,” one grower’s journey from near collapse to rejuvenation through low-input legumes reads as an addict’s deeply personal and impassioned tale of recovery.

But the challenges of going against the grain reach far beyond the farm gate, and this is where Carlisle’s ability to illustrate the underlying tensions and outright absurdities of farmers’ struggles for change truly shines. Pulling a mechanical plow is more expensive (in fuel and time) than spraying pesticides. Farm Credit offices paradoxically refuse loans stating, “farming is a prohibited business” (153). Federally subsidized crop insurance encourages growers to pursue the same strategies that reduce soil quality and increase drought vulnerability. Meanwhile, farmers rebuilding soils with diverse non-commodity crops are left without a safety net. A government program designed to address soil erosion, the Conservation Reserve Program, makes it more appealing for farmers to take land out of production (and often leave altogether), than to encourage regenerative farming and rural revitalization.

Another incentive program designed to improve soils through “no-till” agriculture effectively “punish[es] organic producers for the one industrial practice they relied on without rewarding them for phasing out so many others” (187). Annual calculations of inputs and outputs characteristic of agricultural science and economics do not account for the long-term interdependence and multifunctionality of diversified crop rotations. Contrary to the dominant paradigm, “farming wasn’t an equation you could solve for one variable”

(187). Carlisle demonstrates the necessity for agricultural transformation to take on political agency. In particular she sheds light on the need to advocate for farmers in the grey areas not captured by purist rhetoric of organic versus conventional.

After moving through the emotional roller coaster of farming's myriad uncertainties, Carlisle rounds out the story of *Timeless Seeds* in part five by emphasizing resilience. In a year of devastating drought, the *Timeless* growers' fields stand strong. She attributes their success as much to improved soils as to a carefully cultivated sense of community. Beautifully stated, the company "was merely the humble crop of a complex social ecology" (242). Carlisle clarifies that the story of *Timeless Seeds* is "not a heroic one," but given the laudatory narrative it is hard to feel otherwise (247). She does not linger on concerns surrounding the limitations of high-value products, constraints of market-based sustainability, or self-exploitation among alternative growers. The book is descriptive rather than analytical, but such evocative storytelling should serve as an outstanding resource for furthering these conversations. Most importantly, Carlisle puts rural communities center stage in a conversation that has been dominated by the concerns of eaters and urbanites.

Lentil Underground vividly captures the material challenges, economic absurdities, social complexity, and potential dynamism of agriculture in America today. She expertly eschews easy answers or prescriptive solutions, embracing interdependency and rugged responsiveness at every turn. Carlisle shows us hope in the relentless creativity and messiness of grassroots change. Beyond the ecological resilience of lentils, organic methods, or diversified cropping, Carlisle emphasizes cooperation and community as the essential ingredients for a sustainable future. The most important lesson in resisting industrial agribusiness is, as one farmer succinctly states and Carlisle echoes, "you can't do it alone" (244).

Emily Reisman is a former Fulbright Scholar and current Ph.D. student in Environmental Studies at the University of California Santa Cruz. Her work focuses on the political ecology of agri-food systems. She is currently exploring the eco-social entanglements of the almond. E-mail: ereisman@ucsc.edu