

Rural in America

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Overview

The books in this series offer both romantic and realistic views of rural life. Some writers believe that living on the land shapes a life of integrity, of oneness, with man and nature, while others see it is a life of bitter hardship not to be sentimentalized - one is always struggling to eke out a living. These six novels show what it is like to grow up and live in rural America.

Wendell Berry, one of America's foremost spokesmen for the value of rural life, writes in *The Memory of Old Jack* (1999) about a man who has committed his life to working the land on a farm in Kentucky. On one day in September 1952, Jack recalls the details of a life lived farming with mules and nurturing the land through hard work, of courting and marrying a woman who cannot return his love, and finally of facing his own death. The novel is a powerful evocation of a time, its way of life, and the integrity of one very human man.

John Grisham, the author of legal thrillers, writes a novel in a different mode with *A Painted House* (2001), set in rural Arkansas in 1952. Narrated by a young boy, the novel portrays farming without sentimentality as it depicts the tension between the itinerant Mexican workers and the white hill people of the Ozarks who pick cotton for the dirt-poor tenants. It is a novel about poverty and hard work, the joys of baseball, and the loss of innocence.

Kent Haruf's novel *Plainsong* (1999) celebrates the power of landscape, weather, and rural community. Set in a small town on the Colorado plains in 1952, it tells the story of eight people whose lives converge in grief and kindness. Using prose like the simple melody of plainsong, Haruf alternates the voices of the characters - a teacher, his sons, and his departing wife, two bachelor farmers, a pregnant girl and a female friend - to blend together in a song of praise.

Originally published in 1945, *The Egg and I*, Betty Macdonald's comic classic, describes her marriage and move to a small poultry farm on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington in the 40's. Unprepared for rural life with no running water and no electricity, a rustic house and neighbors, she relates the rigors of their lives with humor

as she and her husband raise a family and not only survive but succeed.

That Old Ace in the Hole (2002) by Annie Proulx tells the story of the Texas panhandle through the eyes of twenty-five year old Bob Dollar, who is secretly scouting to buy land for an industrial hog farming operation. In this place of extreme wind and weather, the family ranch is nearly extinct. As Bob Dollar meets the eccentric residents, the reader learns the anecdotes of their colorful lives and the forces that have shaped them.

Winter Wheat (1944) by Mildred Walker is the coming of age story of a young woman in Montana. Taking place in the course of a year and half, *Winter Wheat* begins in 1940 when Ellen starts college after the family has a profitable harvest. When she returns home with the man she loves, she views her parents and her previous life differently and critically. The novel examines the harsh life of dry-land wheat farming.

Winter Wheat

Six of us met at the Eppson Center to discuss Mildred Walker's *Winter Wheat*. In general, people tended not to care for it. One participant joked that she wanted to tally up the number of times Ellen commented on her parents. Others expressed similar sentiments about this segment of the story. There was also the feeling that so much of what happened wasn't believable that it made it hard to respond to the story; this included the fact that even though there was a phone at the ranch house two miles away, there wasn't one at the teacherage, and that Ellen wouldn't have been able to make it to the ranch house and back in that kind of blizzard.

We did, as usual, have a really good discussion that veered off into the personal. Someone wondered what the discussion between Anna and Ellen about Ellen starting to menstruate would have been like! This became paired with the idea of seeing one's parent as a person for the first time, and people shared their own experiences.

I never did get around to sharing any biographical information on the author; no interest was expressed, and the time never seemed right to introduce it. We wrapped up with talking about the series as a whole. As always, the last group was a bit sad because everyone always looks forward to these meetings.

We started the Rural in America series with eleven readers in attendance. This included one new reader and a past reader from Nebraska. We briefly, very briefly, talked about the previous series, *Living With Violence*. Again, the response was gladness to be done with it although not sorry to have read the books. The information is still relevant and commentators felt they understood current events better for having read the books.

Ma Kettle was the immediate topic of discussion. So many characters contributed to the work that it was difficult

to discuss them in any sort of orderly manner. We seemed to flit from one amazing person to another, but then would come back around to the main ones, like Ma Kettle. Ma's kitchen, parlor and bedroom made an impact on us, especially as a place of contradictions - warmth and uncleanliness, formal and spotless, proper but homey. The two grannies were compared, wonderful, smart-mouthed Gammy and---DearGrandMother. One lady astutely commented that Gammy and Ma Kettle seemed kindred souls while DearGrandMother and Mrs. Hicks seemed to have much in common.

Interesting. Not too much was said regarding Bob, to my surprise. But then, this group is very rural and either of, or not far removed, from Betty's generation and lifestyle. Perhaps he seemed "normal" for the place and times. Stove, the pressure cooker, chickens, especially the chickens, elicited many stories and remembrances of fowl and working with them. Evidently, gathering eggs can be every bit as awful as Betty recounted. Geese, turkeys, roosters were in turn discussed for "character traits" and likability. Many remembered fondly the baby chicks arriving by mail in the spring and were certain that they still are shipped through the U.S. Mail.

I gave Betty's biographical information and background for the story. (written in the 40's, published post-war, events happening in the 20's, Bob as the former husband, Don as her 2nd husband). I named Betty's other books and gave a brief account of what they were about, which interested most. I read them a bit about the libel trial with the two Bishop families (Kettles and Hickers), told about the Egg and I Road, passed around photographs and maps, told about the movies of the story and the Ma & Pa Kettle series. Most remembered the movies (Ma and Pa) very well and were so surprised to find they were the same.

Common rural themes cropped up, especially in the context of women's lives: loneliness, always the loneliness, the weather (rain, rain and waaa, waaa, waaa we say), the intimidating landscape (Betty's mountains, our prairies), the importance of family, friends, books, READING. Several took turns reading favorite phrases or pointing out funny, quirky, moving people or events. This book was chock full of the stuff of the lives of the Pine Bluffs readers, and was very much a pleasure to read and discuss.

The group was up to ten attendees for Winter Wheat which is a bit over average for us. Eight constitutes a fairly constant group size. I elected to provide biographical information on the author late in the discussion in order to have the members talk about the themes, characters and events of the story without the contradiction of the author herself. We touched on the main themes that seem to recur in many of the books written about or taking place in the west: the absolute importance of family (Ellen's parents, Anna's Russian family, Ellen with her parents, Warren and son, Gill and parents); landscape as an integral shaper of character and temperament (grain reports, crops success/failure, weather, distances); isolation and the value of being resourceful for mental, emotional and physical survival (although we had mixed reviews on the prudence of

heading into such a blizzard and the unlikelihood of the entire two mile crawl for help); the value of hard work and perseverance; trust among neighbors, especially rural folks, versus prejudice and fear of "the other"; transition from farm to city/urban and back, or not as in Gill's case. Themes brought up special to Winter Wheat were secrets (Anna and Ben), or what we perceive to be secret and the assumptions we draw, usually erroneously; and war.

One member knew that the author of the quotes introducing sections of the book was a pilot who had been shot down.

After talking about the main points and characters, I provided background information on Mildred Walker. The aloof, intellectual, proper East coast transplant to Great Falls, Montana and back East again totally surprised everyone. The author writing about what she knew and had lived was so vivid in our minds that a sense of disbelief almost took over. Ellen was so real and her experiences so grounded in the western life. It was hard to recast the author as more like Gil's mother than Ellen. Somewhat surprisingly, no one seemed bothered that we didn't find out what became of Ellen, but it was felt that she had a positive outcome in life.

This series is so much fun for us as rural life is our experience. Many remember the war and the radio reports as well as the noon agricultural reports, growing crops including winter wheat, rural schools, blizzards, etc. And we all agreed that love manifests itself in very different forms for different people. Just don't assume you know or understand it, although Ellen is to be forgiven because she was at the point of life to learn such a thing.

"We really like this book," was the resounding consensus from the eight readers who gathered at the Washakie County Library to discuss, *Winter Wheat*, the final book of our Rural in America series.

Some of the connections were friend-of-a-friend in scope. One member's sister knew Mildred Walker's daughter who wrote a bibliography the member hoped to read. But Mildred Walker's superb sense of place and her ability to capture the personality of her characters did the trick for the rest of us.

Interestingly, one member brought in an anthology, published in 1945, one year after the publication of *Winter Wheat*, that contained the first two chapters of Walker's novel. We speculated about the the rapid inclusion of the novel in an anthology, but last year's discussion leader pointed out that *Winter Wheat* was a favorite of home- sick service men fighting in Europe and the Pacific. This made perfect sense given the novel's deft portrayal of rural life, and its matter of fact reporting on Warren and Gil's involvement in the war effort. The scene of Ellen and her folks gathered around the radio must have transported them directly home be it Iowa, Montana, Kansas, or whichever state held the family farm.

No doubt, some of those young men, like Ellen and Leslie, had judged their parents based on what they saw

or thought they saw. And like Ellen, they had their thinking edited by hardship and loss. This theme resonated with the group since they had either misjudged their parents or had been misjudged by their own children.

From the merits of the novel we turned to general themes of rural life. We generated a list that included: isolation, family, resourcefulness, hard work, and a consistent trust of rural folk that, "things will turn out okay." We also decided that in most of the novels there was a kind of spirituality that existed even in the absence of organized worship: perhaps fostered by the relationship with the land or their community.

We briefly discussed how modern rural life differed from that depicted in the novels and concluded that isolation has clearly decreased. Telephones, television, computers, expanded ownership of cars, and improved road networks have all eroded the isolation and perhaps the closeness of rural families. Rural families run to town one or more times a day, they may travel over 100 miles a couple of times a week. The kids may participate in band, sports, or civic projects all pursuits alien to a more travel-restricted age. All this activity creates space between family members and alters the rural world but so far Rural in America continues to exist.

What remains of rural life? The relationship, or at least familiarity, with the land, a sense of belonging in a place, shared hardships, and from these a sense of community. Thanks for listening.

James Mims, Worland

I began with biographical information about Mildred Walker, concentrating on her daughter's book. The group was intrigued by the mother-daughter relationship and several readers want to read Hugo's biography. Much of our discussion was on the nature of love and relationships. We commented that Ben and Anna's marriage was the only intact marriage in the series! Several readers found incidents in the book unrealistic; in the 40's no one would compromise a reputation as Ellen did by letting Warren into the teacherage. Some also questioned Ellen's going out of state to college. But nothing detracted from the overall beauty of the book's landscape, sense of place, and finely drawn picture of rural life. And everyone loved the portrait of Anna - direct, honest, funny, hardworking, and yes, loving. We were blessed with individuals in the group who farmed wheat and who were young adults during the era of the 40's and could therefore relate to the war and its impact, rural schools, new electricity, and radio. At the end of the discussion I suggested we should be grateful to the University of Nebraska for republishing Walker's books. Then we looked to a new series for next year and reminded ourselves of the other books in the rural series and what they told us about rural life, romantic and realistic.

Barbara Gose, Lander

13 people met at the Pinedale library to discuss Mildred Walker's "Winter Wheat". Everyone enjoyed the book because it was a story they could all relate to quite easily. In fact so easily that some time was spent listening to stories of ladies who had taught in Sublette County in one room schools, sometimes with as few as 3 children off one ranch.

Thought the story is about coming of age the idea of our perception of things was very well told. Most all the participants talked about not only the idea of misconceiving words or events in the story but also with similar experiences in their own lives. It seems to be human nature to want to fill in the gaps in over heard conversations or only partially seen events. So much so, that many of the people wanted the author to continue the story so they could know what happened to Ellen. They were asked how they would have finished the story and it was interesting to hear that almost all had a different idea of how Ellen's future would go. We also talked a little about the Montana One Book program for which this book had been selected. They were also told about Ripley Hugo, the author's daughter, and the book she wrote about her mother titled "Writing For Her Life The Novelist Mildred Walker".

Since the climate in our area is much like the climate of Montana the local ranching folks in the group compared raising cattle in the snow, ice, and mud to raising winter wheat. The winter wheat was agreed to be the greater risk.

The only question about the story was her depiction of Ellen venturing out from the school house at -50 degree temperature in a blinding blizzard and walking 2 miles to a ranch through waist deep snow. And after miraculously recovering from her frozen body parts in minutes at the ranch went out into it again with a partner and walked back to the school house, a feat we all considered not possible.

It was a very good discussion and the group is looking forward to discussing "The Egg and I" next time.

Dick Kalber, Pinedale

I brought a sack of wheat from Wheat Montana Farms & Bakery whose website features a photo of a solitary unpainted structure practically swallowed by the sky and the fields of wheat. It could be Ellen's family's house. I shared recipes for using the wheat, and some participants took some wheat and the recipes.

The discussion began by considering the idea of landscape as a character in the novel. All participants agreed that the Montana landscape, climate, and wide open spaces played an important role in the book and impressed itself upon the other characters. We pondered Walker's own observation in this regard: "I saw a teacherage today, a one-room school house, three miles from any other dwelling . . . The teacher is usually a girl fresh out of normal school, eighteen or twenty years of age . . . How does she stand the loneliness, fall and winter

and spring? What does it do to her?" One participant had, in fact taught in a similar school at Flaming Gorge, many miles from the nearest town. She recalled how the isolation brought her and her students close, like a family. Because of this closeness, she empathized with Ellen's loss of her student in the blizzard and understood how extremely difficult that was for Ellen.

We examined the novel according to the structure that Margaret Walker imposed upon it; i.e. the three separate parts, each introduced by a quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *Flight to Arras*. Born just 5 years apart, Walker and Saint-Exupery were contemporaries. *Flight to Arras* was published two years before *Winter Wheat*, and Exupery's plane was shot down the same year that *Winter Wheat* was first published. We discussed how each quote seemed to contain the essence of its part of the book. The first section of the book was introduced with this quote: "I shall not fret about the loam if in it somewhere a seed lies buried." We discussed how, though the events of Part I, the seed (Ellen?) has been planted in the soil of Montana. An additional image introduced in Part I and continued throughout the book is that of the shrapnel continuing to find its way to the surface of the skin in Ellen's father's leg and how that is similar to a seed finding its way to the surface of the soil. Part II's quote, "The seed haunted by the sun never fails to find its way between the stones in the ground," expresses the undeniable instinct for survival. In spite of the harsh events of Part II, Ellen finds refuge and survives. Part III continues with, "Sow the seed in the wide black earth and already the seed is victorious, though time must contribute to the triumph of the wheat" reflects Ellen's "plowing under bad feelings" (p. 288) to realize "Faith had to grow like wheat, winter wheat. Love was like that, too" (p. 306). Finally, the quote that begins the book "There is but one victory that I know is sure, and that is the victory that is lodged in the energy of the seed" comes full circle with Ellen's statement at the end, "I had a kind of pride in being born to them" (p. 306).

We also discussed how themes in this book echo, reflect, and reinforce themes we identified in *A Painted House*; i.e. family, secrets, small town values, war, prejudice, and transition away from the family farm. We are eager to see how Wendell Barry deals with these same themes in *The Memory of Old Jack*.

Pam Clark, Kemmerer

One participant disliked the writing style because of a general dislike of the use of the 1st person. She only made it through 30 pages, although was willing to stay (I think the cookies helped entice her). Several people were quite impatient with Ellen, finding her shallow, although others defended her, reminding us that this was a coming of age story.

The discussion also veered off in interesting directions. We brought up how difficult it can be to discuss the topic of war in the classroom, and the repercussions of sometimes doing so. The other big topic stemmed from thinking of Anna and Ben moving to a place that was

completely new to them. We talked about this idea in terms of a painting, and what it looks like when a person decides they don't like the painting, and so they start again with a new canvas.

A couple of people were excited to learn that some of Walker's papers are in the American Heritage Center, and are planning to take some time to look through them. We also mentioned some recent favorite reads, so that we can check them out over the summer.

Everyone loved this series. I think the state really benefits from the Reading Wyoming program. It was also great to meet at a public library, because I brought in other works by the author, or books the author liked to read. Often, people left the meeting with a bunch of books to read.

Kelley Gove, Laramie

Baggs: The book provoked many rich memories from participants' own lives: where they were on Dec. 7, 1941; what it was like to leave the ranch or small town and head of to the big city to go to college; what it was like to teach or study in a one-room schoolhouse; what it was like in the early days of rural electricity. We reflected on how these reminiscences are truly a part of the living history of the West.

We appreciated the symbolism of winter wheat as a metaphor for the parents' relationship, for love, and for personal growth, and we read several great passages that pinned this down. I had a hard time finding sources for Walker, either on-line or in print. It would've been nice to have a look at her daughter's recent biography-I'll surely get it next time.

--Rick Kempa

Clearmont: I began the discussion with background information on Mildred Walker, referring especially to her daughter's book, *Writing for Her Life*, which presents a sometimes not so flattering view of Walker. This tends to be somewhat disappointing to the groups who tend to want to identify Ellen in the novel with Mildred Walker. Someone suggested that a biography can be just as revealing about the biographer as the subject though, and maybe the daughter had some "issues"! We did look at the details about Walker's life and environs that were reflected in the book: her growing up poor and marrying "up" and her years in northern Montana during WWII.

In our discussion of the characters, our lone male complained that "once again" the men came off poorly compared to the women. Everyone admired Anna. It seems that this area around Clearmont had a lot of German-Russian immigrants who farmed wheat and beets which made Anna a recognizable type to the group. Almost all the participants in the Clearmont group are associated with ranching, so they appreciated the hardships, economic and otherwise, reflected in the novel. Also, everyone had some experiences with the one room

country schools and shared lots of stories accordingly. I don't think we've discussed a book that this group could relate to more. Needless to say, they thoroughly enjoyed it.

Medicine Bow: Everyone in the group liked this book. They thought the book well described life on a western wheat farm, and they liked the character of Ellen. They could relate to many aspects of Ellen's life. As Ellen's life was affected by grain reports, some of the group members' lives are just as affected by cattle prices. They could relate to the ever-present threat of weather and the difficulty of muddy roads. One member said she tried to organize a committee when she first moved to Medicine Bow many years ago in order to get sidewalks built and roads paved. She was told they would never have those amenities because then Medicine Bow wouldn't look like a western town.

We looked at the presence of war in the book, relating it to our current times. But some members also remembered the presence of World War II in their lives--radio reports, the death of loved ones, the economic effects. We talked about the fear of foreign people during times of war.

Of course, we spent a lot of time on the characters' relationships. Some people were bothered because they didn't know for sure what happened to Ellen. I tried to emphasize that we do know that she was moving ahead with her life as a stronger person.

--Maggie Garner

I began by telling them background on Mildred Walker, especially from her daughter's book *Writing for Her Life*. While there were lots of parallels between Walker's life and her book, the daughter clearly had some "issues" and didn't portray Mildred very favorably. The portrait of her that her daughter paints is not what her readers might develop from her novels. According to the daughter she was distant and overly concerned with status and her social life. They didn't like hearing this.

In our discussion of the novel, many of the people in the group had family stories, especially of ranching in the West, that made them relate strongly to the setting and characters. One woman said she remembers when she was a child in during the late 40's driving through the area of Montana that the novel depicts and how sad and poor the little houses on the land seemed as did the people who lived in them when they came into town. She found the descriptions in the novel to be evocative. Several others had attended country schools much like the one Ellen taught in. We also are all familiar with the situation of the families where one or both of the parents were immigrants, even Russian.

This brought a lot of sympathy for Anna. They admired her strength and refused to accept my suggestion that she might be flawed in any way. The group decided that even though the father probably would have been happier

staying where he came from (Michigan?), he learned to do everything necessary to operate a farm, and ended up attaching himself to the land. We talked about the many skills a farmer/rancher has to learn in order to survive. I was told that "You can't be calling a plumber, a mechanic, a doctor, etc. every time something goes wrong when you live like that." We had an interesting discussion about the columbine - how important a status symbol it (still) is. This novel struck home with this group in numerous ways. There was quite a movement underway to figure out which other of Walker's books were available in our library system when we finished.

I began the Sheridan discussion of *Winter Wheat* by giving background information on Mildred Walker. Next we discussed how the book fit into the series. Everyone thought that it was a realistic picture of rural America; each member of the group loved the book. In addition to finding the book an accurate picture of rural Montana they loved the writing and the weaving of the seasons of winter wheat into the story of Ellen's life.

One member of the group related the story of her life, to the book. She worked in a teacherage in Wyoming and then went east and fell in love with a man from South Carolina. Interestingly, however, she wanted to stay in the east and he wanted to stay in the west. After many years of going back and forth she, her husband and their children ended up in the west.

We discussed how Gil changed her feelings about her home and parents, and then how the seasons and experiences at the teacherage changed and matured her into an acceptance and new understanding of place and community. Ellen went from "seeing herself standing outside of her family" (p. 136) to "wanting to live with the strength of winter wheat" (p. 306). The character that everyone liked the best was Anna. I used two quotes to explore the influence of Ellen's mother; "it is what Mom says that I depend on" (p. 4); and "a thing doesn't hurt as much if you take it to you as it does when you keep pushing it away" (p. 192). We also discussed Anna's comment that Ellen is blind and does not know what love is.

Several members commented that they were reminded of *Painted House* in the description of the house and when taking the wheat to town. One member commented that he really liked the ever presence of war and the grain reports woven into the story.

--Katie Curtiss

Lusk: The women enthusiastically explored the values and attitudes and behaviors portrayed. From there they began to consider what might be the values and compelling interests attendant especially to rural life. This is their list: hard work, neighbors, weather, making do, common sense, distance; and, apropos of their participation in the WCH discussion programs, the inner life. I asked them to also begin to consider, especially as their next book is

Plainsong, how and where meanness and violence appear in rural (and other) life, how these are dealt with, and whether rural communities (e.g., Lusk and Niobrara County) see this in a different light than do those in the larger world beyond.

--Bob A Brown

Medicine Bow: We talked a lot about the relationships presented in the book. People thought that Ellen was being a silly girl when she thought her parents didn't like each other, but we talked about the reasons for her to come to that conclusion. Some people thought her parents' relationship is "what life's like" so Ellen needed to accept that. Some people mentioned that they don't think Ellen's mother was wrong in tricking Ellen's father; if he was having sex with her, then it was his responsibility to marry her. People's views of marriage and morality became a big part of the discussion.

We talked about life on the wheat farm and the amount of work such a lifestyle involves. Like the group in Medicine Bow, this group was also bothered that the ending was not clear to them. Most of them wanted Ellen to stay home and wait to marry Warren. I see Ellen as having become a stronger, more self-determined woman, not someone who would sit at home and wait.

--Maggie Garner

Farson : We began by discussing Walker's life, especially her daughter, Ripley Hugo's comments about Walker's preoccupation with social status and the fact that she kept her writing life independent of her families' life. We talked about how this would have affected her children's lives and how the issue of social status surfaced in Ellen's life in *Winter Wheat*.

Readers noted how Walker's telling of the story from Ellen's point of view contrasted with Haruf's more objective way of developing characters. The novel's descriptive detail seemed overdone to a few readers; others defended it as essential to the book's evocation of time and place. Everyone had at least one passage from the book they liked and wanted to talk about.

I shared this quote: "Fiction that explores Rocky mountain's women's lives...had its modern beginnings with Mildred Walker who looked at the meaning of western woman- hood and the ways in which the western woman achieved (or lost) identity."(Krista Comer, *Updating the Literary West*.) This prompted a conversation about how Ellen found her identity through questioning her parent's relationship, her experience at college, with Gil, teaching in the one-room school, and befriending Leslie and Warren. We also talked a little about the masculine heroes of traditional western literature in contrast to the men in *Winter Wheat* who, though likeable, seem weak when compared to the strength of Anna and Ellen. The east-west contrast between Ben's sister and Anna was also noted. We talked about the impact of both WWI and WWII

on the lives of the characters. We speculated on whether Ellen would eventually marry Warren, noting passages in the novel that hint at that possibility.

I had expected a less critical, more appreciative response to *Winter Wheat* thinking nostalgia for a simpler rural life would prevail, but instead readers approached the book with thoughtful questions and attention to particulars.

--Marcia Hensley

Story: To a person, they were enthusiastic about the book. Most declared it to be their favorite so far in the series. A new member of the group had also read Ripley Hugo's book about her mother, Mildred Walker, so we began by talking about Walker's background and about her daughter's perception of her. Then, because I worried that I talked too much last time, I suggested we go around the room and have each person share something particular that she gleaned from the novel. Some read passages and talked specifically about the book; others talked about things in their own lives that the book reflected or evoked, and then the rest of us were able to respond to each other's comments. In doing this we talked at length about the characters, the setting, the conflicts, the changing nature of the rural West and that which doesn't change. Even though they liked the book so much, the group really was analytical in their approach to it.

--Norleen Healy

My favorite article on Walker is from Wells College where she returned to teach writing after the death of her husband http://www.wells.edu/pdfs/december2001_pp4-9.pdf

The One Book Montana website offers some *Winter Wheat* Discussion Questions. In case they disappear as they move to new books, I copied them here. I raised a few of them. The group enjoyed talking about winter wheat as a metaphor throughout the book, about life in a teacherage, about farming, and, of course, about the relationships between the characters.

-Claire Dunne

Just a brief report here on a couple of strands of conversation that came up in the Afton discussion of "Winter Wheat," and that I have not seen mentioned in other scholars' reports:

- that the book is "predictable." A person who reads a lot of western literature knows there is going to be a monster blizzard, knows even that someone will get killed in it, and so on. This complaint made some sense when we looked at it closely. We considered how, while the plot might indeed be called predictable, the characters--who they were, how they interacted--were less so

- that the book suggests a comparison between the hard-working, more responsible, more independent kids of that other era and the less motivated, less equipped, more dependent kids of today. We treaded lightly with this big old generalization--but the group nonetheless found some truth in it...

-Richard Kempa

A small but chatty group met to review the December book, WINTER WHEAT, after two blizzards caused cancellations. It was a popular book because Walker made us feel like we were there in Montana with Ellie and her parents. The exploration of marriages continues to be a theme of these rural life stories, and we like that.

-Patty Myers

We all liked Winter Wheat and found it a pleasant and easy read. Several people had reread it and found it formulaic and predictable the second time. But they still enjoyed the sense of place and the view of rural life. As with nearly all the books in this series participants told their own stories. These included several people who attended one room schools, some who know people who taught in these schools, stories of wheat farming, of isolation, of newly installed electricity and telephone service. We spent time talking about whether or not Ellen's experiences walking through the blizzard were believable. Most felt not; that she would not have made it. We examined her views of her parents and inquired into the nature of being an only child and how this affects one's relationship with one's parents. We liked using the wheat as a metaphor, but felt it overused at times. The group was interested in her daughter's view of her mother, the author, from the biography. Several other discussion leaders have commented on this book and it is very helpful. This precipitated a vigorous discussion of whether one needs to live a life in order to write about it. Certainly Proulx didn't in *Ace*.... and neither did Walker. Yet we felt that Walker got most things just right. It was a fitting end to the series. I highly recommended *Breaking Clean* by Judy Blunt. We ended the evening by first talking about the possibility of doing a One Book Wyoming and speculating about the book possibilities. Then we evaluated the books in the rural series. We loved them all, but felt that *The Egg* and *I* fit the least. Our list of characteristics of rural life and people: work ethic, isolation, endurance, sense of humor, positive outlook, weather oriented. Nobody seemed to want to point out any negative characteristics!

Barbara Gose , Riverton

I introduced the author Mildred Walker by reading parts of an article from the *MISSOULIAN* (Montana) issue of May 29, 2003. Most of the information came from Ripley Hugo's book *WRITING FOR HER LIFE: THE NOVELIST MILDRED WALKER* and by interviewing

the daughter. Ripley emphasized many times that her mother was very charming in social life, but at home Walker was most difficult to live with and impossible to please. Ripley did, however, make it clear that Ellen's experiences came directly from her mother's own younger years. The discussion was delightful and interesting because of the varied and complex relationships between and among the characters. As every other group has probably discovered, discussions of place--space, vastness, solitude, weather, stillness--were easy and plentiful. The many stories of Montana brought out similar tales of Wyoming in both place and people. The most interesting comments surfaced when a reader asked, "Isn't this really a novel about forgiveness?" How many times did a character forgive someone else? How about the farmers' forgiving the vicious winter storms when the winter wheat began to grow? Or when soldiers forgave the enemy when wars ended? What a wonderful way to conclude a rewarding evening of enlightened dialogue among friends!

Jim Fassler , Ten Sleep

We spent a lot of time talking about rural schools and the old one-room teacherages, and the incident with the retarded boy's death at Ellen's school. No one held Ellen to blame.

We discussed how realistic the book was to most of our experience, and I asked them if they understood how a writer goes about making such a book. Most members seemed to think the realism came from the author's own experience, but I emphasized how a good writer researches material, through observing and interviewing people, through reading, etc. and can create worlds they sometimes don't know. Mildred Walker certainly knew much about country life in Montana, but she was a prolific professional writer and used lots of imagination and certain standard narrative patterns, too. I mentioned the daughter's biography of Mildred, which is apparently pretty hard on her as a mother.

The group had lots of sympathy and affection for Anna. We discussed her more than Ellen, as a matter of fact. The theme of the outsider came in here too, as it did in discussions of Ben and his adaptations to the West. Torrington residents, like so many in towns in Wyoming, count themselves as either oldtimers or newcomers as a matter of course. From their comments it appeared that the newcomers were a little tired of these distinctions. Just for the heck of it I introduced them to the academic concept/jargon of living as 'the other.' We discussed how embracing 'the other' seems to be the challenge of our time.

We discussed Anna and Ben's relationship and concluded they had a deep and enduring love, which Ellen was too inexperienced to see at first. The differences in how Anna and Ellen approached life were discussed too, the very different 'grab-it' and the 'reflect-on-it' schools. As Anna says to Ellen about their men: "Ben don't go away like Gil, an' I don't let him go." (287). We also discussed Leslie and his dad and mom and how each influenced the boy. We were hopeful Leslie would recover from his

mother's influence soon. Only one member was distressed to not know what would become of Ellen at the end of the book. Some hoped Ellen might see Warren in a new light, but most were concerned about his drinking and perhaps not getting it under control, as there was experience of that kind of life in the room. All in all, we had a far-reaching discussion of Winter Wheat.

Constance Brown, Torrington

The entry on Mildred Walker in *Contemporary Authors Online* says this:

Oftentimes the main importance of a story's setting is in how those surroundings shape or affect the characters whose actions comprise the plot. This is a major strength in [Schemm's] writing; readers can see the land of the community become a character, can understand its influences on the human characters, can feel its power in the working out of the story.

When discussing *Winter Wheat*, the Powell group reached this same conclusion: that the land (place) is a character in the book. According to Mary Clearman Blew, Walker's inspiration for the novel came when she pondered the effects of an isolate, desolate landscape upon character; Walker's notes say, "I saw a teacherage today, a one-room school house, three miles from any other dwelling. . . . The teacher is usually a girl fresh out of normal school, eighteen or twenty years of age. . . . How does she stand the loneliness, fall and winter and spring? What does it do to her?"

The Powell group enjoyed the novel a great deal, singling out its realism, the depictions of landscape, the characters, the recurring symbolism of wheat, and a love story that wasn't romanticized.

The humanities topics we discussed included perceptions of work (effort, accomplishment, value), definitions of happiness and success, the learning curve of humans (maturation), class issues (symbolized by Gil versus Warren), the interaction of children and parents, the relationship of self to place, gender issues, and immigration issues.

Some good sources for *Winter Wheat*:

- The study questions developed by the Montana Center for the Book at <http://montanabook.org/guide.htm>
- Mary Clearman Blew's review of *Writing for Her Life: The Novelist Mildred Walker*, by Ripley Hugo. Available from the Oregon Historical Society web site at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ohq/10.5.1/br.7.html>
- *Contemporary Authors Online* (GaleGroup) has a sketch of "Mildred Walker Schemm" dated 2003.

- Sherry Jones's 2003 article on Ripley Hugo titled "Following Mother's Footsteps" in *The Missoulian*, available online at <http://www.missoulian.com/articles/2003/05/29/entertainer/ent01a.txt>

Deb Koelling, Powell

Eight people gathered at the Upton Library to discuss Winter Wheat. Several of the participants thought this to be the best book read by the group this fall. Re-occurring themes of isolation and country vs. city were noted.

The compromise of Ellen's reputation at the school was discussed at length. Small town gossip and to some degree revenge were the apparent causes. The fact that Warren was allowed in the teacherage puzzled some. Ellen's naiveté and inexperience led to the situation. Ellen should have been aware of the possible consequences, but she was the product of a slightly larger school and had been away to college. Conversation drifted to the local community and how it views teachers. Moral expectations still prevail in this community, and teachers should not be seen at the bar more than occasionally, those being special occasions. The school board briefly mentioned her "foreign" connection. Ellen did not give those innuendos any credence. Perhaps her mixed emotions about her parents precluded her from doing so.

Much time was spent discussing the family relationships in the story. Some felt that Ellen's lack of vision concerning her parents was not normal while others felt we are all, at times, inclined to be critical of our parents. The old adage about parents getting much smarter as the children age beyond 25 or so seems to be true. The readers noticed that dysfunctional families have always been part of our society but were not labeled as such back then. Is there a family that is not dysfunctional at times?

The winter wheat as a symbol generated discussion. One noted that metaphorically it was the people that were the winter wheat. The combine was discussed as another symbol. The mechanization of the labor was a goal all strived for during that time. Strangely the mechanization process never ceases. The plains are a symbol of productivity, harshness and the reality of human existence.

The readers liked the author's use of the land as a character. It became real as the story developed. The author's stated desire to show the effect of nature on characters was fulfilled. The novels in this series can easily be related to the experiences and lifestyles of this group.

Time was spent deciding where the group would like to go next. One person suggested that a group of books chosen just because they are good, but not having a specific theme connection, would be fun. They also hoped that new choices would become available since some had been in the group so long that the choices were limited.

Ten people, in addition to the facilitator, attended the March 17 discussion of *Winter Wheat* by Mildred Walker at the Wyoming State Museum. We briefly reviewed biographical information about the author. Participants received a short handout summarizing some of this material and listing some discussion questions.

Everyone liked the book. Participants said Walker was a "good story teller". The group commented on Walker's skill at evoking time and place and capturing the personality of an eighteen-year-old girl of the era in which the novel is set. One individual had lived in Montana near where the novel took place and spoke about how very well Walker described the wind, the open spaces, the sky, and the wheat and what it meant to people who lived in the area. This was the first of the three sessions we've held where all the readers liked the book.

The group discussed the main character, Ellen, describing her as a young woman who, as an only child living on a wheat farm, had lived a sheltered life. She is judgmental, self-engrossed, and naive, obsessed with her parents' relationship. Particularly interesting is her attitude towards her mother, which seems ambivalent. At times, it seemed she was embarrassed by her mother's obvious, foreign background, her Russian heritage, accent, and sturdy physique. Yet, she is defensive and protective of her mother at other times. She blames her mother for tricking her father into marriage and trapping him in the life of a wheat farmer, not recognizing the affection and the strong ties between her parents. It is her mother, she believes, whom her fiancé, Gil, finds most off-putting. Still, in some passages in the book Ellen feels great affection for her mother.

We also contrasted Ellen with "modern" young people, who have grown up with much more technology than was available during the period in which Walker set the novel. One participant pointed out that technologies were gaining prominence in the early 1940s when the book was set and pointed out the importance of the radio. Ellen's father depended on the radio for news, especially about war, her students tell her their former teacher had a radio, and when Ellen gets a radio, it occupies a prominent place in her life, despite poor reception. It eases her loneliness.

Loneliness, the group agreed, is a theme in *Winter Wheat*, as well as in *The Memory of Old Jack* and in *The Egg and I*. We talked about how Ellen felt alone not only when she was alone, but also occasionally when she was with other people. The latter experience is something readers felt was well described and that they had experienced.

Another topic addressed in all of the books the group has read so far is the conflict between urban and rural, city and country. Old Jack's wife represents a more urban attitude than that of old Jack, and their daughter is even more "citified", leaving the farm to live in the city, but gladly accepting the food that the farm provides. In *The Egg and I*, Betty has a difficult time adjusting to the very rural area where she and Bob farm, even though she has experienced living in smaller communities and camping. Betty's eastern grandmother is unable to understand or

accept her daughter marrying someone who moves her away from "city" culture. In *Winter Wheat*, Gil is obviously unable to enjoy rural Montana, having no interest in all the places Ellen dreamed of showing him, and cutting his visit very short. The two break their engagement in a large part because of the differences in their backgrounds. Ellen's father's family, who lived in a city back east, has great difficulty accepting his Russian wife, and she cannot accept them.

The group also discussed the theme of marriage, which is common to the three books. Ellen and Gil do not marry in *Winter Wheat*, probably saving them from an unhappy marriage, such as Jack and Ruth's and Betty and Bob's. Participants discussed how Ellen was willing to make adjustments for Gil's different background, but how he appeared unable to make any concessions to her background. Gil pointed out how different the two were. The group felt that the feelings between the two were, perhaps, not deep feelings of real love, but were based upon physical attraction.

Another part of the discussion centered on Ellen's experiences as a teacher. Participants generally felt the school board was right to fire her. For the time period, her behavior with Warren was unacceptable. The Donaldson's seeing them when going back home underlines the sparse population and the smallness of the community. If Ellen had been older, with more experience, she might have behaved differently with Warren. It was not, however, the group felt, Ellen's fault that Robert died. He had seemed to be fairly obedient, and when he slipped out into the storm, Ellen was occupied making the school warmer for all of the children. She did what she could to find him. Still, the group understood how Robert's mother felt.

Religion is also a focus of the book. Readers talked about how Leslie's mother used religion to drive a wedge between her and Warren and between Leslie and Warren. Religion is also a point of contention between Ellen's parents. Something her father uses to belittle her mother, underline her foreignness. The group discussed the fact that the town had no church, a factor that seems odd given that churches are usually important in rural communities; in *The Memory of Old Jack* going to church appeared to be something everyone did, in some cases, to socialize. It is interesting that Walker portrays religion as being divisive when her father was a Baptist minister.

The group admired the manner in which Walker portrayed the ethnicity of characters in the book, the novel's realistic dialogue, and Walker's extraordinary talent at making her characters "real".

Rose Wagner

Kemmerer Public Library to discuss Mildred Walker's *Winter Wheat* - Last Meeting 4.21.15

5 of us met last night to discuss the last novel in the Rural in America series. In going around the table to see what participant's noticed about the novel, we focused on how the novel depicted landscape and weather, Ellen's new

understanding of her parent's love as a part of Ellen's coming of age, the economics of this novel compared to other's in the series, the lonely school house, the sometimes claustrophobic first person narrator, and how both WWI and II worked their way into the novel. While there were mixed reviews about the book, most readers found it to be a positive experience. We found that the novel well embodied many of the themes of the Rural series, but liked that this one was from a woman's perspective.

The criticisms were that it moved a bit too slowly and/or that readers felt trapped within Ellen's consciousness and that it was much more of a psychological study than several others in the series.

In bringing in research to explain who Walker was, I stated that the genesis of the novel was the author looking at a lonely Montana teacherage and thinking about what it would be like to live and work in such a place. I also explained that Walker didn't like being known as a regional novelist, thinking it an insult, and that she wasn't, having about a 1/3 of her novels set in each region: Montana, the Midwest, and New England. I gave her background as a writer, as a minister's daughter who spent time in her father's study while he composed sermons, and as a feminist before her time. I also explained how critics liked her earlier novels because of their freedom or freshness, but that after some critical reviews, that she became much more "literary," using references to other writers/myth etc, and then her novels weren't as well received. Lastly, we discussed Winter Wheat as being her most successful novel in sales and reception, and that it was popular with GI's in World War II in helping them to remember the US and/or the farming life that many of them came from.
Chris Propst

That Old Ace in the Hole

Nine of us met at the Eppson Center in Laramie to discuss *That Old Ace in the Hole* by Annie Proulx. Only one person didn't like it, feeling it made fun of people. Others liked the characters and the way they were described, although some said they skimmed certain parts because those parts were repetitive, and they just wanted to get back to see what Bob Dollar was doing. People also found it really funny.

I asked if they got to know the characters, and they had mixed feelings about this; one person said she did feel as if she got to know them, but she sure wouldn't want to have to live with or near them. We talked some about pig farms in general, both in Wyoming and elsewhere. I brought up other conflicts of rural values versus economic development, but surprisingly this didn't go anywhere.

One critic (New York Times, Dec. 15, 2002, "The News from Woollybucket," Laura Miller) wondered why this was fiction rather than nonfiction. When I posed this to the group, they simply said that nonfiction about these subjects wouldn't sell. I also used a Proulx quote about why she writes about rural issues (Public Libraries 43.1

(2004): 24-5, "A Slave to Reading") as a jumping off point for how people feel about rural life. Many in the group moved to Wyoming from other states, so were able to provide some interesting stories of contrast.

I also am interested generally in how people think about books and reading. From the same "A Slave to Reading" interview, I quoted what Proulx had to say about libraries—she feels that libraries have replaced their good books with mysteries—and reading—a lot of Americans just don't read. People were quick to ask—what is wrong with mysteries? Somehow this segued into stories about books that they weren't supposed to read as kids. One person was allowed to read anything but comic books (we have a graphic novel bookclub in town right now too, so we talked a bit about *That Old Ace in the Hole* as a graphic novel!), and another told a great story (that I won't be able to do justice to here) about a librarian who wouldn't let her check out a particular book, so her aunt went to the library and checked it out, and handed it over to her niece right in front of the librarian (and I don't mean to disparage librarians here, having been one myself).

Finally, I mentioned that Proulx is working on a book about the Red Desert. For people with access, there is a video recording online from a Red Desert symposium that was held at the Art Museum, <http://www.uwyo.edu/artmuseum/reddesertsymposium.asp> Proulx is part of a panel presentation, and Reading Wyoming

Wyoming Humanities Council

Fortunately I showed up for the evening discussion having prepared for the appropriate book! The reaction to Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* was mixed. They all mentioned that they kept in the back of their minds my suggestion as to how to approach the book, at the end of the last discussion - "just keep on reading and plowing through to the end". Some said it drove them to finish the book; others said they just could not get through to the end. Several admitted they got to the end, but skipped some of the overly wordy and tiresome stories.

I began by going around the room asking each person what they thought was the central theme of the book. This drew interesting and varied responses. Some hated the book because it was too cartoonish in terms of names, stories and hog ranching. Others said there were too many stories interspersed thus they could not get a handle on a central theme, and gave up. As we explored the various characters we all began to laugh. This created an interesting dynamic between those that loved the book and those that did not. After discussing some very funny incidents and characters in the book, wherein we were all laughing, I threw out the comment -"some of us disliked the book, others did not; but now we are all laughing" - so where does that take us?

This led us into a discussion of how the book revealed the history of the panhandle, the ways in which communities develop in the rural west, and we pulled out the themes in the book. Some did think it was a polemic about hog

ranches; others liked the rollicking ride of eccentric stories and community; while others thought it was a series of short stories that Proulx tried to blanket within a novel about the old west versus the new west, the changing west and the future of the west. I have to admit I did at times focus the discussion on the history of the panhandle, which I think Proulx does well.

Everyone liked Ace and we had a good discussion about Bob Dollar (dime, nickel). While we discussed who called him dollar, nickel or dime we had some good laughs. We talked about his role in the novel and whether he was a good guy or bad guy, or just a 24 year old without direction.

In the end some of the readers that disliked the book stuck to their guns, but admitted there are some grins in the book. Those that liked the book brought forth great comments and articulated the best qualities of the book, and those that had not finished the book, were eager to do so.

--Katie Curtiss

Members of the Lusk BDG voted with their feet regarding *That Old Ace In the Hole*, as only seven showed up to discuss it, versus the usual 20 or so. I had come prepared to ask about the moral issues raised in the book, such as conflicts between personal values and economic and other interests; degradation of our Wyoming surface and subsurface landscapes by extractive industries, including the deep irrigation wells into the Arikaree aquifer below us, CBM development, oil and coal extraction, and the history of cattle and sheep grazing. With only seven present, there were interesting thoughts regarding these topics, but not the lengthy development that comes from the more robust consideration by many more points of view.

The group spent most of its time in discussion of their perception that Proulx had failed to provide her collection of tales with empathic and soulful characters and a robust plot. Still, they discussed the frequent theme in our rural culture of "the good old days" that is reflected in the book. An interesting point made by one of those present was that the "good old days" of our own small towns is not unique to them, but is also present in urban areas, where neighborhood small businesses have been replaced by mega-malls and mega-stores such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot, and multi-generation homes by more transient residences.

One of the redeeming characteristics of the book mentioned by the group was its reflection of how life in a rural area involves all its residents in interacting with a cross section of personalities, values and behaviors. In turn, there were comments about the experience of many of us of the lack of courtesy and customer service in our small town businesses, and the difficulty doing business with local people who are overtly rude.

--Bob Brown

Rock River: Everyone in the group liked the book. Some people were offended by language and sexual details, but even they appreciated Proulx's ability to capture place and people.

In contrast to the Medicine Bow group, the members of the Rock River group could not see similarities between Woolybucket and their town (except for the everybody-knows-everybody quality of small towns). Although MB and RR are only 15 miles apart, Rock River sees itself as a satellite of Laramie and, thus, the residents look at themselves differently. Whereas the Medicine Bow group defined rural life as "a long way to the grocery store," the people in Rock River defined it as an attitude.

We talked about some of the main ideas of the book-- survival, environmental issues, relationship to the land. We compared it and contrasted it to *The Egg and I*. We looked at some of our favorite parts of the book and discussed Bob Dollar as a character and as a device for the author.

--Maggie Garner

Clearmont: We had a pretty small group this time, and only four of the seven people had read the book. One of the other three said she started it but just couldn't "stick with it". They all felt that "nothing much really happened" in the book, but we did find a lot to talk about anyway. This is a ranching community (cattle, not hogs) so there was some strong feeling about the issue of small ranchers being squeezed out by big corporations and out of state, out of touch, wealthy people looking for a tax break. This is also a conservative community, so there was little sympathy for the environmentalist agenda they saw in Proulx. One of the group said she didn't think Annie Proulx "liked" the characters; we argued this point at length. Most of the group had read at least *Shipping News*, if not others of Proulx's books, and noted that her characters are always a little "off kilter", but believable and even the oddest tend to be sympathetic. We had fun pointing out examples of humor - generally in character descriptions, notably the names.

We talked about the characteristics of rural community that seem to prevail in any rural area - things like the quilting ladies group, the local café where every one gathers to argue politics and gossip, the shared prejudices, and the suspicion of outsiders.

We also discussed the inevitable transition rural communities are undergoing, and what's lost, what's gained in the change.

Medicine Bow: We had a lively discussion about *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Participants liked the book although some said it was hard to get into and it seemed never-ending at times. One critic said that Annie Proulx's readers need to be patient because she doesn't write page-turners. I think that statement sums up this group's reading experience.

We compared Woollybucket with Medicine Bow and discovered many similarities--the characteristics of a town past its prime, the fact everyone knows everyone else, the stories that are changed with each retelling, and the desire for nothing to change (except the stories). I asked about a definition of rural life, and one woman suggested "a long way to the grocery store."

Of special interest to this group was the theme of large corporations buying up land from individual landowners because this has been the trend in the Medicine Bow area. The group members spoke of hidden buyers, absentee owners, and corporate ranching. They mentioned that these buyers, along with driving out the small rancher, do not support a town because they live and shop elsewhere. They don't bring in families to the community or interest in the community.

The discussion of corporate farming led us to discuss attachment to the land and the ideas presented by Ace about the rights of people born in a certain area. We talked about the ethics and ideals that one develops when feeling a connection with land. We contrasted the views of city dwellers who do not have attachment with land.

The group members lauded Proulx's ability to capture the people, lifestyle, and physical characteristics of a place. Overall, they very much admired *That Old Ace in the Hole*.

--Maggie Garner

Since this was our first meeting of the Rural in America series, we began by discussing the series in general. I asked what expectations they bring to a series about rural America and what does "rural" mean. Then I briefly talked about each of the 6 books in the series, and finally about Annie Proulx. Several people had read others of her books and had opinions (especially about *Close Range!*) to share.

In our discussion of *That Old Ace in the Hole* the first thing that came up was Proulx's use of names for her characters. "Does anyone have a normal name?" is the question often asked. We looked at some of the names (almost everyone had a favorite) and talked about how this affected our reading of the novel. This moved us into a discussion of several of the characters and their idiosyncrasies --some of which were funny and recognizably rural characteristics and others of which were blatantly offensive to several people because of the tone they were presented in, notably the Sheriff's "relationship" with his sister. Most of us agreed that Bob Dollar was almost an archetype of the "innocent abroad" character.

I asked them to think about what this story is really about. We talked about the following possibilities: a story detailing the history and people in the Texas Panhandle, an environmentalist warning about the dangers of industrialized farming, insidiousness of corporate America, and change and how people respond to it in rural America. In talking about ideas and themes Proulx explores with tongue in cheek we had a good time picking out passages relating to anything smacking of "liberalism" like NPR and

health food advocates (both immediately associated with Communists). It was easy to carry over the ideas and types in the Texas Panhandle to our own rural Wyoming and we did a lot of that. Everyone agreed that Annie Proulx really knows how to set a scene with her descriptions of place, be it the sleazy end of Colfax in Denver or the Woollybucket environs.

We had a good time with this book. Almost everyone had read it through and almost everyone had passages they wanted to talk about. Even those who weren't wild about the book were actively involved with each other in discussion.

Sheridan: I was little worried about this book, but it was for the most part well received. I suggested we look at the book by discussing it in several ways. First we discussed the way in which it fit into the series by looking at the characteristics of the rural landscape and the people presented in the book. The group had a wide array of ideas to share; everything from hard work and self reliance, to scarcity and intense storms weather. Then I asked them what they learned about the history of the panhandle. Some really enjoyed this theme in the book and said they learned quite a great deal - particularly about wagons, teamsters and windmills.

The group all had various opinions about the names of the characters; some found them humorous, others mentioned there were too many references to body parts (in more than just the names). I asked about Proulx's dark humor and sexual incidents. Although they thought they were for the most part unnecessary, they did not at any point give up on the book.

Proulx's political agenda kept creeping into the discussion so we next followed that theme. Many had been around hog farms and were aware of their environmental problems. Unbeknownst to me there was actually a hog farm north of Sheridan at this time. I learn so much about local history from this group! An interesting discussion ensued as to property rights and neighbors. I mentioned that a few critics of the book felt that the novel was not fiction but blatant journalism posing as fiction - "beware of the hog stink of bad fiction"; several agreed. During this discussion many had marked the passage on pg 302 about pork units and those on pgs 302-303 about "democracy as the duped handmaiden of utility". In this vein we also talked about the typical prejudices people assume rural people have, presented by Ms. Proulx; NPR, liberals, communists and gays.

Finally we discussed Bob Dollar as the main character in the book - was he a weak central character? Just an observer through which we learn about the panhandle and its characters? Was he dishonest? Did his lack of integrity make him a weak center for the book?

I wrapped it all up by asking the group what they felt was the central theme of the book and the one that resonates most strongly for them. All agreed that they were pleased they read the book and the discussion certainly showed that to be true.

--Katie Curtiss

Baggs: I rather expected that the group would not like the book very much-given the cool reception to it that a couple of other discussion leaders reported, as well as the unfavorable reactions that many Wyoming readers have of Proulx' short stories. This expectation of mine was further enforced by the largely negative reviews that the Eastern establishment gave of her book (which I found in a fruitful search of the Lexis Nexis Academic database). These reviewers' complaints focused on how the book is overfull of details, overladen with stylistic flourishes, and overburdened with environmentalist themes, at the expense of character and plot development.

Surprisingly-and happily-the astute readers of Baggs took a great deal of pleasure in the book. They enjoyed the cleverness of the writing, they appreciated the authentic description of the culture of the Panhandle, they savored the many connections between that rural environment and the one they live in, and they addressed head-on Proulx' theme of the conflict of values between those with deep roots in a place, and those who would seek to uproot others and exploit a place for their own gain. Unlike many of the reviewers-and like the inhabitants of Woollybucket-they considered Bob Dollar to be a generally likeable, well-intentioned (albeit somewhat lost) young man, the main complaint being that he didn't take up with one of the eligible young women of the Panhandle, and get his priorities totally in order.

--Rick Kempa

Gillette: This discussion went so many directions that it was difficult to keep up with it. While the story is set in the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles, the participants brought it right back home to Wyoming and specifically Gillette. A couple of the group had lived next to a feedlot, so they commented on the stench as being accurate. They discussed the "quirky" characters and the names: Bob Dollar, LaVon Fronk, Ribeye Klute, Global Park, the Old Dog Restaurant, Rope Butt, the cowboy poet. They found the book amusing and interesting.

They also discussed rural in America being the acceptance, the aid, the need to keep the old ways. Bob Dollar wanted only to make money, but he found more important issues because he was accepted by these people who were skeptical of "foreigners."

I mentioned that the book seemed to be a series of vignettes or anecdotes, and they agreed, mentioning the fat kid friend when Bob was growing up with his uncle and friend who were interested in plastic jewelry and Bob's buying the box of jewelry at the "Bobwar Fair." We also discussed Bob's involvement in the community, his interest in the people, his feeling that he is scamming people, his desire to help the people, and his final loathing for his lies and his job. They saw his not going along with his childhood friend as a sign of his growing up and of his

recognition of his accepting his parents abandoning him because the people in this community did not abandon him.

This book again had quilts, and one of the members of the group has had 2 quilts accepted for national recognition. We talked quite a bit about the quilting bee, and Bob's participation. We also discussed the book by Lt. Abert and its importance to Bob.

--Linda H. Ross

This was our first meeting for this series so I began by introducing the series in general. We, of course, live in "rural America" and I asked them to list what they consider characteristic of rural America. We talked about our view versus the stereotypical "outsider" view. I tried to set up some themes for them to consider in reading this series: sense of place and places in transition, romantic vs. reality view of rural America, values, cultural mores, and generally positives and negatives of rural life as depicted in the novels. The group was a bit impatient with all this; they kept jumping into discussion of our novel which they liked a lot. I was a little surprised by how enthusiastic they were since most of them intensely disliked Close Range last year.

Interestingly, they found Bob Dollar to be very engaging and, when one person suggested that the story was, more than anything, about him and his emerging sense of himself, they all agreed. I even argued with them about this a bit to see where it would go, but they stuck to their guns. They wouldn't even accept my suggestion that the ending was pretty unrealistic. I enjoyed playing devil's advocate because they really supported each other's point of view on several aspects and actually convinced me that I was maybe not giving Annie Proulx enough credit in her character and plot development in this novel.

Story is a community unlike most rural communities in Wyoming and tends to foster a more liberal point of view in general and certainly about environmental issues, so they agreed with Proulx's "agenda". All of us in this part of the state are aware of the trend of individual ranchers being squeezed out by big corporations and especially (in our area) by wealthy out of state people buying up huge ranches for a place to escape to periodically and "pretend to be cowboys," as one person said, so we segued into a lively discussion of this. While a lot of people in Story are "summer people", there is a core group of locals who recognized themselves and others in the Wollybucket environs. Several members of the group belong to an active, productive quilting group (in fact they had a quilt exhibit in the library as we discussed the book), so they thoroughly enjoyed that aspect of the novel. We talked about the characteristics of rural community that most share - protection of our own and hesitancy about outsiders, shared prejudices, long time feuds and so on.

As we wrapped up, they asked me about Annie Proulx. They are curious about what she must be like because her characters tend to be so "quirky". I told them I heard her

read once, but that she really didn't reveal much about herself.

--Norleen Healy

Torrington: Some had not read the book, as they found it so BAD after a few pages that they didn't bother to read the rest of it. I tried to shift the focus to the local Torrington topic of having been selected as the site for a new men's prison, hoping this might provide a parallel subject that then could be related to Old Ace's consideration of outside interests with controversial agendas coming into rural communities. Once again, the few who had THE ANSWER proclaimed to the rest of us what actually happened, shut off differing views, and thus shut down all discussion.

--Bob Brown

We had a range of opinions on Annie Proulx, this our second time around. We read her last year with the Wyoming Writer's. People seem to have liked her both times or disliked her both times.

We wondered if Bob Dollar was merely the currency of the book—the cipher who moved through so that other characters could tell stories that would somehow be related. Or is Annie actually concerned about and writing about young white male adults? Was he the every-young-white-man born into the sublime malaise of urban masculinity with its freak movie houses? Is he the zero, or at least a dollar, upon which the economy turns these days, without providing meaningful work to its Dollars, let alone its pork units? Was the really a story about Bob? We contemplated a new Meeteetse t-shirt that might read: Don't be a Bob.

We read favorite sections, and those who disliked the book and quit reading it told us the where and why of quitting. As one participant said, "If life is short, why would I ever bother to put images in my head of Orlando and his movies?"

Gender: Annie cares about men's lives, perhaps identifies with them? Does she treat male and female characters differently? From the Old Dog diner to the Tea Room, she is clearly interested in male/female dynamics, with good old Bob moving like currency in both worlds, from quilting bee (the one man who does not stay at a distance) to cock fight (the man who goes to the scene of old-world masculinity, but perhaps maintains a kind of distance while there?).

And how many aces did Annie leave up her sleeve by the end of the book?

-Mary Keller

That Old Ace in the Hole – Farson Report 1/12/06

After giving an brief overview of Annie Proulx's life and career (good source: *Understanding Annie Proulx*, by Karen L. Rood), I asked each person for their reactions.

The first comment was that they thought Proulx wrote like a man. We asked for clarification on what that meant and finally decided we agreed that her sometimes "raunchy" language and topics seemed like "guy talk." Also her interest in how things work, especially the windmills seemed masculine somehow. We related that to the fact that before becoming a novelist she supported herself writing for magazines such as *Outdoor Life* and used her initials E.A. Proulx to disguise that she was a woman writer.

We tried to figure out why she felt she needed to use such weird names. Ideas were: just to be funny, to suggest the characters' personalities, and to disguise the true identity of people she may have based the characters on. Everyone admired the amount of research that went into the book and felt that they gained an appreciation for the Texas Panhandle.

Yet, most felt some of the digressions seemed too far afield, like the episode of rescuing the old Indian. A dissenter made the point that this showed Bob's desire to help everyone, a characteristic that prevented him from being a good salesman for hog farms. From there we talked more about Bob, the fact that we couldn't help but like him in spite of his lying to everyone about his motives. His being abandoned as a child and raised by his Uncle was noted. One person wondered if the theme of abandonment grew out of Proulx's having abandoned her first child to be raised by his father. (That might be a stretch since we don't know the circumstances of that situation.)

We read passages that we found particularly well written and passages that made us laugh out loud. We reacted to a collection of comments by reviewers that I had compiled and given in a handout. This prompted discussions of Proulx's use of dialect, the believability of the novel, and Proulx's tendency to create "grotesque caricatures" rather than characters. Finally, I asked what they thought was unique about this book's perspective on rural life. They noted that there was less emphasis on individuals and a single family's relationships to each other and to the land than in other books in the series and more emphasis on the whole community's connection to a place. They compared it to the way Wyomingites often feel a fierce loyalty to the land and are outspoken in defense of it. Parallels were drawn between hog farms and oil drilling which is currently the big threat in our area of the state. We thought that more than any of the other books in this series, the land was the central character.

Those who had read Proulx's stories about Wyoming wished that she had done as much research and had presented Wyoming characters with at least as much sympathy as she did those in the Texas Panhandle. It would be interesting to know how Texas Panhandle folks feel about the book.

-Marcia Hensley

I began our discussion with a fairly lengthy biography of Proulx, ending with comments (many her own) about how she conducts research and the importance of it to her books. I also commented on her interest in history. I shared a Texas Monthly review of this book. The reviewer is very critical: Proulx doesn't know West Texas people, she doesn't know how they really speak (substituting "a" for "to" and "of," Larry McMurtry is the only writer who gets it right, and there really isn't much of a story or a central character worth anything! Well. the ready group just took off... and fell into three groups - those who couldn't stand the book (various reasons given) and didn't finish it, those who plugged along because they are loyal and read the book, but didn't like it a lot, and we precious few (two) who loved it. Some readers thought she wasn't fair to West Texas and that she doesn't get Wyoming right either. Some readers asked if we westerners aren't just more sensitive to characters and ideas that don't fit in with what we think a place is. Would people in Massachusetts complain? The discussion progressed to why people hadn't liked the book: characters too much caricature, funny names and incidents that get in the way of the story, Bob Dollar not being enough character to carry the story, writing style they didn't like and couldn't follow, among other complaints. Those of us who loved the book kept protesting that it was a story, and a well told one with a message about rural areas being bowled over by outside interests (and how they can fight that) and also a story about a boy looking for a home. I don't think I convinced the non finishers to go back and finish the book, but everyone shared opinions and felt comfortable in expressing them. Maybe Winter Wheat will get more widespread acceptance.

Barbara Gose, Riverton

This week I was out of the country, so Dorene Ludwig, from the American Living History Theater in Greybull, kindly led the discussion. Her report follows:

Only twelve people attended this meeting, compared to attendance at previous evenings, which has been as high as 25. Host librarian Becky Hawkins noted that a number of people had told her they had not liked the book and had not finished it. Even of those in attendance, none enjoyed this book and suggested dropping it.

METHODS OF DELIVERING THE STORY LINE

- Common agreement is that the plot was illusory for the first third of the book, presenting lots of incidents and numerous characters with little idea for the reader where it was all going.
- Disjointed presentations of plot circumstances, further confounded by jumping time lines, made the book difficult to get into and hard to continue.
- Contents did not seem to represent any rural life we know, as experienced by many of the group members.
- The conservation issue, although not objected to in and of itself, met objection in the way it was put forward and all neatly sewed up at the end.

- Issue taken with the naming of characters and entities: "Who would name a company Global Pork Rind?" (Didn't the name of Orville Redenbacher seem unbelievable?)

DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FAULT ASSIGNED TO BOTH STORY DEVELOPMENT AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

- The number of characters, circumstances and irrelevant items that seemed to have been saved up by the author in her research mode and inserted as she desired or needed to use them, though the novel would have been leaner and cleaner without them.
- Some character traits seemed to come out of left field, such as Bob's selection of something appropriate to wear when he had not seemed to consider his wardrobe selection throughout the book, though he spoke of the poor items brought forth from the junk store for his clothing.
- An additional example was the mention of Bob's running: he did not appear to run for his health, run on a regular schedule, like to run, or need to run, but there, for one brief moment, the author had him run as if it was a habit – it made a spectacle of him.

METHODS OF INTRODUCING AND ELABORATING ON CHARACTERS

- Characters were too numerous and were rather confusing, requiring one to look back in previous sections to find out who they were.
- Some characters seemed totally extraneous.
 - There was a suggestion that the Dutch character was unnecessary, also just excess history.
 - Coolbroth was mentioned as an example, although it was noted that he fulfilled some plot use as the father of the baby-in-making for Ace's granddaughter.
 - This sample also relates to plot – why was the sculptor there, with his partner, and was he necessary?
- Character names seemed bizarre for the sake of being bizarre.
- Characterizations were mean spirited, with no nice qualities, "as if Annie Proulx didn't like any of her characters."
- Characters were a comic parody and did not seem real.

WITH THE CONTENT OF THE DISCUSSION SOMEWHAT EVIDENT IN THE ABOVE, SOME CONCEPTS I BROUGHT TO QUESTION INCLUDED:

- Is there an actual "rural American" life, lifestyle, existence, or is that a myth?
 - What portion of the myth was achieved in the book, and what did not fulfill the local readers' expectations and why?
 - It would seem that the issues were frequently questionable due to how a subject is handled.

- The Sheriff was mentioned as an example: The telling of the life-long bedwetting problem and the incestuous relationship with his sister prompted a reader to comment, "I couldn't get beyond that; that was something we didn't need to know".
 - On the other hand, the Sheriff also had been presented with good points, competence, care for those in his town, and pulling people out of trouble.
- Is it right to expect that the myth or the reality duplicate what we know, and claim it has failed if it does not match our standard?
 - What are some of the differences between the short story form and the novel?
 - Are the things that were criticized in the long form that would have been better met in the short form?

We did not discuss the differences between the conservation issue vs. the development issue. For other groups it might be of use to discuss in what ways are these the same, different, or linked?

METHODS OF RESEARCH

- Proulx's attention to detail was admired, in particular the naturalness of her dialog and certain behaviors of characters.
- The description of the man with the neck that was long, thick and had an "Adam's apple like a knee" was cited as an example of her ability to quickly give the reader a good picture of a character.
- Her methods of research and the depth she reaches in these efforts aided in understanding her work, for example:
 - Not using the windmill repairman as the main character because she didn't feel competent enough in that field of work to center the book on him, though that seemed her intent at first.
 - Why she had chosen to write about the Texas Panhandle.
 - Prior to my bringing forth the interview article which answered this question, a comment had been made assuming that it was because of her relationship with Larry McMurtry (and his with Texas) that caused her to do so. (This connection was made solely on the basis of the *Brokeback Mountain* connection in current time.)

THE AUTHOR AND HER CHOICES

- It is obvious that with the strong polarization created by *Brokeback Mountain*, it would be almost impossible to discuss any work of Proulx's without the film coloring the commentary.
 - A few attendees had visited websites that offered interview information with Proulx, causing one to say "I liked her better after I read that".

- The objections raised in Wyoming (I am going on local commentary and a letter to the editor in the *Casper Star Tribune*), regardless of whether people have seen the movie or read the short story, are repeatedly stated:
 - Wyoming is not properly represented
 - There are no gay cowboys
 - These were not cowboys they were SHEEP herders (besides, it wouldn't take two herders to handle the number of sheep shown in the movie.)
- A person asked of the group if all her books had homosexuals – mentioning the characters of Tam and Bromo in *Ace* and the aunt and her companion in *The Shipping News*. I doubt this would have even brought a comment without *Brokeback*.
- I offered the question: was an actual homosexual relationship visible, apparent, and stated by the author, or implied to the reader? or assumed by some readers? In *Ace*, for example, Tam and Bromo had not been described in intimate contact.

At the opening of this session I noted to the group that although sitting in the leader's chair for the evening it is not possible to replace Claire Dunne. Claire is greatly liked as a person and highly prized as a leader of this group. With that said, I certainly enjoyed serving in her stead and would be delighted to serve in this capacity locally, or in other areas of the state should a substitute be required, or should a book series in another location require a permanent facilitator. Thanks to Claire and the WCH for allowing my participation in this event.

Dorene Ludwig , Basin

Annie Proulx, Chapter 1 (CLOSE RANGE)

Readers fell into two categories: like or dislike the author.

Annie Proulx, Chapter 2 (THAT OLD ACE IN THE HOLE)

Readers fell into three categories: like, dislike, or "We'll decide after we hear the discussion, and (for some) we finish reading the book." Those who enjoy Proulx continued to appreciate her vivid descriptions of people and of place; she did research of the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles so she knows about PLACE. Those who did not care for Proulx's writing found fault with many elements of the novel. If she creates a character such as Bob, why doesn't she develop that character. Who is Bob? What is Bob? What does he really represent? Next, a lengthy bashing of her characters' names ensued. Why is he called "Dollar" if he isn't worthy of that amount? Then "Roughbug," "Beautyrooms," Ribeye Clucke," and many other names were analyzed for their lack of propriety. At that point a few readers said that perhaps finishing the novel would help them make a less biased decision about Proulx and the story. Since hog farms were destroying the land and life of the panhandles, I asked

what other "hog farms" have changed rural America. Feed lots, meat packing plants, rendering plants, sulfur plants, sugar beet plants, oil rigs, barbed wire, pioneers/foreigners, housing developments, railroads, and women changed native lands. Obviously, not all changes were bad so their influences improved lives as well as lands; churches, schools, and libraries were most frequently mentioned. A few of the readers saw this novel as a patchwork quilt with many beautiful pieces making a delightful novel. Another reader saw Proulx more as a magazine writer with catch phrases and bits of information than as a novelist with a plot and character development in mind. , Jim Fassler, Tensleep

Wright Branch Library enjoyed its last meeting of the year, even though no one admitted liking the Annie Proulx book. In fact most of them didn't even read the whole thing. The complaints were mainly the confusion of the stories and the corniness of the names, which they considered insulting rather than comical.

But when we talked about the rural themes they agreed it fit-- Bob Dollar found a community and a home that welcomed him; The panhandle landscape rang true, as did the local sense of protecting the land;

The rural relationships were wildly exaggerated but some were familiar.

The hog ranch and corporate agriculture concepts of outsiders controlling the land is very visible in Campbell County, and the current coal-bed issues with ground water and land contamination and damage made the story and our lives very relevant.

So the conversation led to the "rural ideal" and the changing concepts of what is rural.

Overall, Annie did her job. She led us into a lively conversation of Rural in America.

Patty Myers

The Powell discussion of *That Old Ace in the Hole* echoed what other discussion groups have reported--ambivalence about Proulx's depictions of the rural West. Some participants feel that Proulx's depictions of small town folk and conservatives ridicule their subjects too much; others feel that there's affection in her character sketches. Some find her use of regional dialect annoying; others think it rings true. Some love her writing style; others don't. It's a mixed bag of response.

Proulx tends to focus upon the eccentrics among us, even suggesting that we're all a little eccentric. (What is *normal* in a Proulx work?) She makes me think of *Winesburg, Ohio*, with its world of "grotesques"--all of them with "the sweetness of the twisted apples." I think her work leads to interesting discussions of essential human nature, but resistance to her writing sometimes makes it hard to get there.

Our discussion centered upon the humanities themes of people's connection to the land, how history influences the present, and the impact of change. As one participant said, change is inevitable, "but if we were sharper, could we manage change better?"

Interestingly, we didn't really spend much time discussing the environmental issues. But we did have a good time talking about plastic as a symbol. Just think of all the attitudes we've held toward plastic over the years: wonder material of the future, cheap material for inferior goods, and--in this novel--a valued collector's item. We decided that's an apt metaphor for change.

Deb Koelling, Powell

It's always great to be surprised by a group's responses to a book, and the astute Green River readers did just that with our discussion of "That Old Ace in the Hole." In the two previous discussions of the book that I've led, readers mainly took pleasure in the book's humor, depiction of colorful small town life, and authentic rendering of the Panhandle. The tenor of this discussion resembled instead what nearly all the book's reviewers have written: how Proulx loses the story amidst the details, how she shovels a little too much of everything into the book, how she abandons character development and resolution in favor of the big eco-theme, how all those oh-so-weird names can be distracting... Valid responses, all of them. We aired them, then worked to get past them towards a more generous reading of the book. One person's comment, that Proulx's big business land (ab)use theme was--like it or not--totally relevant to we Wyomingites was especially resonant.

Rick Kempa, Green River

Eight of us met to consider *Ace in the Hole* at the Dubois library. Again, we enjoyed the insights of members of the high school English class.

All of us connected with the power of land as a pivotal character in the book. The land defined the lives of each of the families whose lives intersected with Bob Dollar during the three months he lived among them. Each technological change served as a catalyst for changing social relations. Barbed wire ended the open range, contributing to erosion along the rivers in the process. Wooden windmills opened the possibility of agriculture. While metal windmills and electric pumps both opened the aquifer for use and made the discovery of oil possible.

The discussion wove appreciation for Proulx use of descriptive language to shape character with enjoyment of her research into aspects of small town life and work. We admired her use of Lt. Albert's journal with its description of the land and its people before settlement as a device for creating a baseline for understanding change over time.

Our hero grew beyond his job, the students observed. They pointed to his emergence as a man capable of making his own decisions from the aimless job seeker at

the beginning of the novel. His scrutiny as an outsider seemed quite familiar to Dubois natives as did the multiple influences on his development played by the many people he encountered.

Dorothy Remy

That Old Ace in the Hole, by Annie Proulx, was the last reading for the Guernsey group, and seven of us gathered to discuss it. To be frank, it did not engender the same enthusiasm as some of the earlier titles. At least one participant noted that she had to go rushing for a dictionary all the time, how enjoyable could the book be? Participants noted that the plot was pretty thin, although Proulx is masterful in her many descriptions. The problem for most of us, I think, was just that there were too many of them, and more to the point, a good number of them didn't seem to advance the plot in any significant way. Many characters that were the subject of various amusing anecdotes disappeared and did not return; still others made recurring appearances, but their place in the overall narrative was not always clear.

It was significant that several members of the group did not finish the book. Always an ominous sign, I think, among a group of dedicated readers! Some of us wondered why, if we were reading a Proulx book, didn't we do one of her Wyoming books? Some of the members have read those, and had mixed opinions, as well as on her more well-known *The Shipping News*, although pretty much everyone was in agreement that those books of hers were better than this one. Not that it was a bad book; but taken on the whole, it wouldn't be the kind of book you'd read for pleasure and I think the sentiment of the group was, if there's not pleasure in it, what's the point? I think there is more of a tendency to read for edification where nonfiction is concerned, but in fiction, the entertainment element is crucial, and if a long book such as this one (359 pages) is not telling a compelling story, readers are more likely to lose patience with it.

Ms. Proulx does have a way with description, however, as noted, and we could all cite passages we enjoyed, and that were so memorable it almost wasn't necessary to consult the book itself, because we remembered them so well. So that was certainly a point in the book's favor; whereas with some of the books we could all remember the story clearly but couldn't necessarily pick out passages with a good degree of ease, in *That Old Ace in the Hole* we could all recall certain passages very clearly. These stories, taken individually, were often very good. We enjoyed her creative use of language, although some were a little skeptical that she had the Texas twang "down." So for us, this book was a rare case of the total being somewhat less than the sum of its parts.

Court Merrigan

The Egg and I

I gave background information on Betty's divorce from Bob, the fact that contemporary reviewers thought that Bob was Bob "MacDonald," some quotations from those reviews, and finally passed around Life Magazine pictures of Betty and her family in 1946 (thanks to Babs at the Central Wyoming College library) and a map showing the chicken ranch area. Then we moved around the group with each person commenting on the book, but with plenty of comments interjected by others in the group. Some of the topics covered are listed below.

We were pretty evenly divided on whether or not MacDonald's humor (which we all applauded) masked a darker side, even a desperate side of her personality and circumstances. The reviews of the book when published loved the humor and rarely mentioned a darker side.

We loved her personification and description of landscape and surroundings (even STOVE).

She wrote kindly of her neighbors, so very different from herself. The seemed real.

Friendships and the difference between men's and women's friendships evoked different views from readers. Some felt she contradicted herself, as in needing perfect friends, but seeking friendship from the less than perfect Mrs. Kettle and Hicks.

We talked about the language in the book, the abortion conversations, child raising, and the wastefulness of reading in the eyes of Betty's neighbors

The early years in Betty's life were examined, along with the role played by both Gammy and Betty's mother. Did she resent her mother for encouraging her to follow her husband's wishes or did she simply see this as the culture she grew up in? After all, she appears very independent in "Egg" and managed to divorce, find work, and thrive in the 30's.

The fact that this book was a realistic look at farm life in the late 20's prompted us to look at whether or not this had changed by the time the book was written in the early 40's. We decided it had not.

In the end, we wished that McDonald had lived longer, written more, and above all, written a complete autobiography. And then we adjourned to check out the Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle books! These Lander folks are careful readers and they had a lot to say. It was a delightful evening.

Barbara Gose , Lander

Since we had a couple of new folks we had a quick introductory activity wherein we introduced ourselves and shared a quick personal story about home-canning and whether that was (or is) a largely rural activity. This line of

discussion segued nicely into talking about the marathon canning described in the book.

The general reactions to the descriptions were a mix of nostalgia, envy, and empathy for the hard work involved. This in turn led to the question of why the author would put up with a husband who would drive her so hard. The group concluded that the time period determined Mrs. McDonald's willingness to drive herself so hard.

The primary reason, we agreed, was the societal deference to men in general and husbands in particular. Some of the older members stated, "That's the way it was, before the Women's movement. You didn't complain." We also agreed that the shortages of "The Great War," might have influenced this urge to lay up food. And finally, the cultural ideal of "waste not, want not" drove the couple to preserve the bounty around them. Regardless of the other factors, Mrs. McDonald's husband was clearly not a new-age sensitive guy.

Another area of the book that clashed with modern sensitivities was the blatant race-based criticism directed at the Native Americans. Several group members commented that they had not noticed this when they read the book in the 1950's for college or High School, but re-reading the text this time made them uncomfortable: A clear indication that attitudes have changed even in more conservative rural areas.

The final area of discussion for this book centered on the author's style, and her motivation for writing the book. As a group, we decided the Kettles could not live in the filth the author describes; "stove" could not be that bad that often; and the work could not be that endless and unrewarding on a regular basis. We concluded that the exaggerations were the author's method of adding humor. We then wondered if the writer waited some 25 years to write her recollections to avoid polluting her daughters' attitudes toward their father, or whether it took her that long to gain a bit of perspective that allowed her to write about the trials and tribulations in a humorous fashion. Finally, we speculated about what made her finally sit down and write her story. One member suggested that the author may have written this book at the urgings of her family and friends, who loved her funny stories. The dedication of the book seems to point the finger at Mrs. McDonald's sister.

James Mims, Worland

Two participants had read it previously, and many had heard of the movie and the Ma and Pa Kettle series. As other discussion leaders mentioned, people were quite pleased to learn that Betty and Bob were divorced. Many were angry that Betty was not treated with respect. We talked about why this book may have been so popular when it came out, and how it transcended its location. The group didn't think of it as taking place in the West, but instead focused on how it spoke to many of their experiences of living in a rural area. Several were raised on chicken farms. One woman talked about being a new bride who did not grow up on a farm, going to live with her

in laws, and receiving twenty pumpkins as a gift. She remarked that would make for a lot of jack-o-lanterns, only to find out she was expected to make pies and breads.

I brought in the photo layout in *Life* magazine that was mentioned in the introduction. The article in *Western American Literature* that another discussion leader referenced was also really interesting in putting the book in perspective. We watched a clip from the film version, and many remarked that of course Hollywood would make this a romantic story. I think this book will make for a good contrast with the next one in our series, by Wendell Berry.

Kelly Gove, Laramie

Two did not like the book. They were not sure why. They thought it was not exciting, was quite plain; it could not keep their interest. I wondered if it might be that they were the 2 youngest in the group and had a harder time relating to the story. The other ladies in the group liked the book for the reason that some had lived on places similar. Several had lived on farms or ranches where they had to carry water and there was no electricity. One lady said her family only raised a few chickens for their own use and she couldn't even stand those few. It was surprising that none of the ladies knew that the movie series "Ma and Pa Kettle" came from this book, even though several remembered the movie, "The Egg and I" with Fred MacMurray and Claudette Colbert.

The stories told by the author of experiences on the chicken farm reminded each of the ladies about various experiences in their own lives or stories they had heard from family members that were very similar. Sometimes it was hard to keep just one person at a time talking as others all wanted tell their story too.

Dick Kalber, Pinedale

Baggs: The group had no trouble at all relating to MacDonald's book; it provoked many specific memories and anecdotes from our own lives and that of parents or friends. As for exploring the ideas in the book, we looked at the various marriages in the book-and remarked how the Kettles' marriage, strangely enough, was the only one that could be called successful. We talked about the hard lot of the women-both major and minor characters-the stifling and sometimes (literally) maddening loneliness they suffered-and how they each tried to cope. We agreed that loneliness seems to be a fact of human existence, and we compared MacDonald's book to Haruf's in this regard, and "rural loneliness" to "urban loneliness." We also made a few nice connections over to Wendell Berry's book-discussing how some characters were stewards of the land and others abusers...

I didn't find much published literature on the book or author-some good websites, and the interesting first review of the book in the New York Times in 1945. We thought it was pretty interesting how the book was a

blockbuster in its day, a million-seller translated in numerous languages (Several of the group had in fact read it and her two other memoir books when they were first published), and how her two homes in the Northwest—this one and the one on Vashon Island—remain pilgrimage points for those who loved her life and work.

Clearmont : I began with some of the background about Betty MacDonald and the culture of the 1940's, especially post WWII. We agreed that MacDonald's background, her early marriage and training about a wife's role, is consistent with what we would expect and with what some in the group experienced during that period. Getting divorced with two small children must have caused some consternation though. It's hard to believe that she ends up, in her second marriage, running another chicken farm!

A couple of folks in our small group had read the book before many years ago. Both said they remembered it being much funnier than it actually struck them this time. While her purpose was clearly to entertain, there was an underlying frustration and desperation. We talked about how our response to books differs depending on our own "place" in life when we read. Everyone agreed that, no matter what, there were certainly many funny, even laugh-out-loud, parts of the books. We all told our favorites. Mine is the comment by one of the neighbor ladies explaining Betty's "stolid dullness" by saying, "She reads." (p. 129).

We spent time on some of the issues the book brings out about rural life, what it takes to alleviate the loneliness and isolation, the little pleasures, and the difference between living in a rural area from the beginning and moving to one later. We had people in our group who represented both experiences in Clearmont. We discussed and argued about MacDonald's assertion that men make friends easier than women, or at they that "they adjust more easily to new surroundings and people" (p.211).

Tongue River: I thought the group would be enthusiastic about this book and was surprised that the initial comments were less than that. A couple of people commented that her writing style seemed awkward, long run-on sentences and too heavy on the personification in her description. However, over-all the discussion was still lively with lots of references to specific passages. We talked about what Mc Donald's purpose was in writing the book and agreed that it was primarily to entertain, even though she said she wrote it to debunk the popular and romantic notion of the "simple life" without dependence on modern amenities (like electricity and running water!). We talked about the nature of the humor in the book Much of it was self-deprecating and the rest of it was in her portrayal of the other characters in the novel. We agreed that the tone was generally affectionate toward the other characters, even when she was making fun of them. The exception to this, of course, was her attitude about the Indians in the area. One person who is Native American in our group told us that even among the Native Americans, the Indians in the Washington coast area are looked down upon and viewed much the same way McDonald

portrayed them. When I asked if there was evidence of stereotyping here, someone pointed out that Guthrie in *The Way West* which we had read in another series had singled out these "fish eater" Indians in the Northwest as being without any redeeming qualities too. Moving on, one of the passages cited (pp. 211-212) motivated a discussion about the nature of friendship between men vs. between women.

When I told them a bit about Betty McDonald's background, they were interested that she and Bob divorced after 4 years of marriage. Some said they wondered when they read the book about the marriage, that there seemed to be an "edge" and a suggestion of its eventual demise in the story. We noted that that to divorce with two small children in what must have been the late 30's was unusual.

Rock River: Everyone in the group liked the book, but they had varied reactions. One person thought it was filled with acerbity; some thought it funny, and some not.

A few people had lived lives like Betty described in the book.

Understandably, they can see the humor in their past situations now, but certainly saw no humor in them at the time. We talked about how Betty could see the humor in the situation in retrospect but probably was miserable when she was living it.

People in this group saw Bob as a nice enough guy but just a typical man, especially a typical rancher/farmer in the mid-twentieth century. We talked about how he could have shown more care towards Betty. But overall, they saw him as typical and told some similar stories about husbands!

We talked about rural life in general and how this book represented rural life--its loneliness and isolation. We talked about the contrast between city folks' idealism about rural life and the reality of it. We talked about how women coped with their situations--Betty, Ma Kettle, Mrs. Hicks.

Between recounting incidents in the book and telling our own stories, we had a high-spirited discussion about *The Egg and I*.

--Maggie Garner

The Medicine Bow group thoroughly enjoyed this book (as I expected). They enjoyed its humor and readability. Many group members live on ranches or grew up on ranches so they could relate to many of the stories. In fact, one woman had a stove like Stove.

Some people thought Betty could have been a bit more responsible (e.g., remember to get kerosene), but everyone sympathized with her situation and admired her humor. Most people thought Bob was self-centered and

uncaring about her. But ranch wives understood the concept that "livestock comes first." We talked about rural life in general, especially the loneliness that goes along with it and the romantic view versus the realistic view of rural life.

--Maggie Garner

Sheridan: I gave some background on Betty McDonald. One member of the group had been to the area and brought pictures to share with the group. Many members of the group were familiar with other books written by Betty McDonald and were eager to share their information.

I based the discussion around asking if they found the book exhausting or hilarious and what were the good times, bad times and chuck holes. All agreed that Betty's life was exhausting but they also thoroughly enjoyed her humor. This group could identify with many of the challenges Betty faced and many shared stories of their rural childhoods on ranches, dairy farms and their experiences with chickens. There was an interesting exchange amongst group members about the land. Some felt the looming mountains and the ever presence of the trees slipping down the mountain while others felt that the description of the landscape did not ring true. No one liked Bob and felt that he added to her sense of failure and inadequacy. We had a fun discussion about rural gossip and how everyone does know everyone else's business.

The group found it to be a good representation of the challenges of rural living and appreciated the fact Betty had a good sense of humor. They could identify with her loneliness and the enormous work it took to create the chicken ranch, let alone her struggle with day to day chores and existence.

--Katie Curtiss

I began with biographical information on MacDonald. Several people were familiar with the Mrs Piggie Wiggle series but did not know those stories were written by MacDonald. Interestingly those that knew she had divorced Bob admitted that it influenced their reading of the book. Those that did not know about her divorce were so happy when they learned she did divorce him! Everyone laughed when they found out she married another man with whom she engaged in "chicken ranching". The group also enjoyed learning that the other very popular book at the time was Cheaper by the Dozen.

I organized the discussion by first asking what in Betty's background prepared her to move to a chicken ranch or farm. Hmm I think to myself what is the appropriate term - ranch or farm? Several people found the first part of the book, her years in Butte, the most interesting part of the book. Then I used MacDonald's words - smooth times, good times, bad times, things she good not get over, and chuck holes to discuss her experiences. This went well for awhile but the group kept veering off to Bob so we discussed him. Several pointed out that all we had was

Betty's point of view and others pointed out that in this book characters are not well developed and many people became caricatures. (Obviously MacDonald was successful in that, as the Ma and Pa Kettle series was quite a hit!). We discussed her underlying sense of failure and Bob's "looks" when she could not succeed at the task at hand. Most did not feel he was necessarily a horrible guy but a typical man on a mission who enjoyed his life but was not always sensitive/aware to her needs. Women from ranching backgrounds found him pretty typical; and they did not mean that in a negative sense. In rural life you face the task at hand and get it done. Many commented that the difference in their experiences and MacDonald's was the challenge of starting from scratch. There was some laughter about chicken scratch and starting from scratch.

Some interesting comments from the group included: it was an interesting look at how people deal with the circumstances in which they are in; rural poverty and rural life - for example Ma Kettle gave up on a clean, ordered life; except for two rooms in her house. Lots of laughter about the outhouse ensued.

Betty knew she could leave as compared to the characters in the Painted House who had fewer choices.

Betty's feelings about clear cutting in a region dependent on logging, which seems unusual for her time frame; versus her comments on abortion and illegitimacy which in Sheridan County, at the time, no one would have spoken about or admitted.

family stories about the hardships of rural life over time do indeed, with distance, turn into events that from a later perspective and the way they are told, become humorous.

I ended by showing part of the video The Egg and I and we all had a good laugh. Everyone agreed that a discussion of the book informs us and comments made by members of the group enriches our perspective and understanding of rural America.

--Katie Curtiss

Lusk discussion included the 1945 movie based on the book (marginally, it seemed). The group met ½ hour early and began the movie, then stayed late after the discussion to watch the rest of the movie. The discussion itself focused on a number of motifs in the book: the wife's role to support the husband (p.11); the vulgar westerner (p.13); Bob (p. 37), though Bob and his values and behaviors cropped up throughout the discussion; "battre l'eau. . ." (p.49), which I translated as beating water with a stick, and then the subsequent French as wanting an eel to bend at the knee (anyone better at this?); neighbors (p.110); protocols for visiting (p.127); men when they're sick (p. 239); reading as laziness (p.195); men's vs. women's friendships (p.211); child care rules (p.221); and county fairs (p.271). I had listed these as part of my preparation, and found that they provided both opportunities, frequently hilarious, to discuss the rural lives depicted in the book, and to segue to reflections on the series as a whole.

The group thought this was the most poorly written of those in the series, and wished Betty had told more of her inner processes during the episodes she related. Nevertheless, I think the book provided a good source for thoughtful and insightful discussion.

--Bob A Brown

Story: I began with some background on McDonald and on the period during which the book was so wildly popular. Concerning the former, the group was gratified to hear she and her husband Bob divorced. We talked about the clues in the book for the dissolution of the marriage and noted that in 1945 divorce was quite uncommon. The ladies in this group did **not** like Bob, and even lapsed into a little good natured "male bashing" while they were at it. We did have an interesting discussion about why the book would have been so popular in the immediate post war years.

I had asked people to come with passages that illustrate something about the book or characters that they found noteworthy for whatever reason. Sometimes when I ask them to do this, some are a little reluctant, but this time they had lots of passages to read and discuss.

The book was written to be funny. We looked at what the humor was comprised of. Much of it, we decided, was McDonald's self deprecation (along, of course, with her descriptions of some of the locals, notably the Kettles). We also talked about what lay underneath the humor. Certainly the loneliness, isolation, deprivation, and just plain overwhelmingly hard work were themes too. We talked about McDonald's notice of and attitude toward some of the environmental issues as being perhaps ahead of her time as well as her attitude toward Indians as being reflective of her time.

--Norleen Healy

Wright: We began by reviewing the concepts of Rural in America that we started with Memories of Old Jack, and talked about what themes again appeared in The Egg and I. People, community, work, and "warts and all"--the concept of realty; this is what it was like.

Poor husband Bob took quite a beating from the participants, but as a husband in the 1920s he was probably pretty average. Still the marriage created lots of curiosity for us. This is Betty's first marriage, and she is grateful and willing to try extra hard, partly because she was raised by her mother and grandmother to accept the man's power over her. At this point we talked a lot about Betty's real life-- 1st and 2nd marriage, and chicken farms with both men and about fact and fiction in this book. A 1951 lawsuit declared the book a novel and the characters as fictional composites, and the book was written 20 years after the event. How much does memory distort?

Everyone liked the book, and we talked about personal experiences with chickens, fear of the kerosene lamps and

pressure cookers, insanity amongst women from isolation and prairie winds, the mixture of neighbors.

The fascinating chapter on the loggers and the strange relationship with the moonshiner and Indians were discussed too. The home remedies, the fits of the Kettle children, and Bob's flu opened another avenue. And we all loved the dog Sport and thoroughly understood the love-hate relationship with The Stove.

The Kettle family is beyond belief, with one participant saying Ma Kettle should be up for sainthood. The bizarre events at the Kettle home created wonderful humor. It could be compared to today's "redneck" humor with all the evils of the world emanating from Washington, D.C

One of the reviews I read talked about Betty's sense of humor to fight adversity. We talked about her lack of power in the 1920s, the neighbor who had not been into town in 27 years, the lack of voting rights. Another review talked about Betty's sarcasm when describing the idyllic life of country living. Her detailed descriptions of the mountain and the land are beautiful, and she uses detail in describing chores that to many are unthinkable. The Egg and I is a book so full of detail and historical changes it knocks your socks off.

I usually take a hand out to the discussions, and this time I had a copy of Betty's obituary. There is a ton of information on line, and the library has the Ma and Pa Kettle movies and the Mrs. Piggie Wiggle books so I had them to share too.

--Patty Myers

Torrington: The discussion was a happy and at times hilarious consideration of the characters and behaviors in MacDonald's The Egg and I. Several people compared the situation of the memoir to their own families' backgrounds, and provided many personal anecdotes as the discussion progressed. To keep focused on the book, I asked about responses to each of the principal characters. Predictably, Bob was seen as somewhat of a villain, Betty's excessive use of personification was disliked, and Ma and Pa Kettle were viewed with considerable sympathy. I provided biographical material on Betty, and this helped set the book's tales in the early 1920s, versus the initial tendency to think of them as occurring in the late 30s through the 40s. Still, many of the rural prairie memories from group members, though occurring decades later, were remarkably similar in their details.

Other motifs considered were: the farm/ranch is first; self-validation through scapegoating and looking down on others, especially neighbors; visiting rules; dismissive attitudes of Easterners towards the west and westerners; sexism and role expectations; and The Stove.

--Bob Brown

The Egg and I – Farson

We started the discussion by each telling one thing that we wanted to talk about in relation to the book. Then I shared some biographical information about Betty MacDonald: how and why she wrote the book and what really happened after Bob bought the new chicken farm. Knowing that Betty left Bob before moving to the next farm and that the book was written 14 years after the divorce shed new light on the way we interpreted the book. I asked them to think of clues in the book that divorce was imminent. We found quite a few. We speculated on why Betty would not have revealed this in the book. We talked about the various ways to interpret the last chapter's title "You Win."

We also discussed how Betty reflected both the influence of her mother (trying to follow her advice to please her husband at all cost) and of Gammy (seeing the western landscape as threatening and men as unreliable). Other topics of interest were: Betty's reaction to the landscape of the Pacific Northwest and her observations on environmental problems; her self-deprecation as humor and other sources of the book's humor; her attitude toward Indians; the crushing work of the chicken farm; Betty's liberal use of anthropomorphism in her descriptions; neighbors, especially the Kettles and Betty's reactions to them. Readers found many passages to illustrate. One person was familiar with the movie and pointed out how it differed from the book.

Our discussion was enlivened by the personal reminiscences of several members of the group. One woman's experience of marrying an older man when she was 18, then moving to a remote Wyoming ranch was really close to that of Betty's, except she stayed married. We talked about the importance of a woman setting boundaries as making the difference. Betty was so young and she didn't seem to ever "stand up" to Bob. If she had the group thought the marriage might have endured (assuming that Bob would listen). We could have talked on and on I think, but we wanted to leave 30 minutes to watch some of the 1947 movie. It was delightful.

A new and excellent source of information on the book and on MacDonald's importance as a western writer can be found in the most recent issue of *The Western American Literature Journal* (Fall 2005). It is worth finding. The WWCC library subscribes as I imagine UW and other community college's do.

-Marcia Hensley

Riverton readers simply loved this book and couldn't stop talking about it. As I have mentioned before, we have several farm/ranch people in our group and they related similar stories to Betty's, from Kettle type neighbors to bone hard work and few pleasures. These folks are a treasure for this particular series. I started with some basic biographical information on Betty MacDonald and we were off and running when the group realized that Bob of the book and Don of the introduction were two different husbands. People simply thought she changed her husband's name in the book. I brought along a map to show where *The Egg and I* took place and then where she

lived as Betty MacDonald. We spent a great part of the evening on the subject of whether or not the book was funny, what makes for humor, and how we saw the book as dark and her life as desperate. Reader after reader brought up examples. We talked about how MacDonald handled Indians and his broadened into a discussion of groups who are targeted with impunity, even today. Several people loved her descriptions, especially of landscape, but were saddened by her dislike of most of this very landscape (such as seeing the mountains as threatening). Our rural readers assured us that the personification of items such as "stove" is very typical in isolated rural settings and that they did this themselves. We ranged far and wide in our comments, from the differences in the film and the censorship of films at that time (we saw an early part of the film) to child rearing, from gender roles and their differences today (or similarities!) to an animated discussion of how farmers are perceived today (this from a long time reader whose son is writing a master's thesis on the topic). The evening ended by the group laughing that they didn't let me say much. I was reminded once again that the best discussions seem to take on a life of their own and that we leaders have to sometimes take a back seat!

--Barbara Gose

Discussion Questions for *The Egg and I* (1945, Betty MacDonald)

WCH Book Discussion Program **Rural in America**
d.s.koelling | 23Jan06

- Many people have fond memories of *The Egg and I* (book or movie) because of the funny way it debunks rural life. ("A rural pastoral gone comically awry. . .") Whatever we think of the book now, it captivated and amused the imagination of the 1940s and became a best-selling phenomenon.
- Do you find the book that funny? Do you think it was considered funnier in the 1940s? What is the source of humor in the book?
- One critic says the book is an example of "funny feminism"—a woman using the techniques of humor to explore the problems of gender roles, thus muting hostility and avoiding didacticism. Do you agree?
- *The Egg and I* portrays many marriages: which ones seem the most successful? Why? (Any nominations for the Kettles' marriage?)
- How does the book portray gender-appropriate behavior?
- How are women's lives portrayed in the book? What is their preparation for (and expectation of) marriage and the wife's role? What is their world of work? How do they deal with isolation and loneliness? How do Ma Kettle, Mrs. Hicks, and MacDonald variously approach domestic duties? How about maternity? (The central image, after all, is an ovum.)
- What do you think of Bob? What of the portrayal of men's roles and work in the memoir? MacDonald asserts that men make friends more

easily than women; is that true to your experience?

- Margaret Mead said (at about this time), "Choose any set of criteria you like and the answer is the same: women—and men—are confused, uncertain and discontented with the present definition of woman's place in America." Does *The Egg and I* address these uncertainties?
- In the 1940s, distinguished American psychiatrists and social scientists—including William C. Menninger, Margaret Mead, and other experts—were worried about the American family. The headlines of some popular magazines asked, "What's the Matter with the Family?" (*Harper's*) and "What's Wrong with the Family?" (*The Atlantic*), while the headlines of others offered dark pronouncements: "The American Family in Trouble" (*Life*) and "The Vanishing Family" (*Time*).

Given this context, how does *The Egg and I* portray the American family? Stereotypic? Monolithic? Full of contradictions and ambivalence? Does the book tout a middle-class ideology of family? Is it challenging a domestic ideal? (As one article asks, "What would Ward Clever think?")

- Betty MacDonald ended up divorced with two small children before she remarried and ended up on another chicken farm. Does that knowledge affect your reading of the book?
- Do you find any dated issues in the memoir? (I'm wondering particularly about environmental issues, attitudes toward Native Americans, and comments on abortion and illegitimacy.)
- What is the book's message on modernity? In the book, the standard migration of rural-to-city (or suburbs) reverses itself. The family steps outside the consumer economy and embraces rural self-sufficiency. How successful is that? One review I read suggests the book endures because it affirms the value of a hard day's work; do you think the book romanticizes rural life?
- How does MacDonald's version of rural life compare to
 - Grisham's (*A Painted House*)?
 - Haruf's (*Plainsong*)?
 - Proulx's (*That Old Ace in the Hole*)?
 - and Walker's (*Winter Wheat*)?
- What do you think of MacDonald's writing style?

Deborah Spangler Koelling, Ph.D.

After a short introduction of MacDonald's life and her early death, I told the group that in 1951, a lawsuit had declared this book not an autobiography but a novel because the characters were "fictional composites." However, the edition we read which was published in 1987 still shows the Library of Congress filing as {B} 92 a biography. Why does James Frey get all the press?

Before I could announce the first topic for discussion--the

characters, poor Bob was being raked over the coals for his attitude toward Betty. Did he appreciate anything that she did for him and the farm? Did he ever ask for any advice or comment after the two of them had written on a weathered shingle the MOST DELIGHTFUL DESIGN FOR LIVING EVER DEVISED (our emphasis)? Why not? How many times throughout the book did MacDonald give the reader clues that the marriage wouldn't work out? Was it the times or was it Bob's personality? As we discussed the other characters and their idiosyncrasies, the struggles of the farming and logging communities of the 1920's were related to many personal experiences of the readers. There were many stories also about chickens (and what they do), pressure cookers, kerosene lamps, and wood stoves (and what they don't do). I then read the titles of the six Ma and Pa Kettle movies since their family added to the book's enjoyment. Grammy's observation that "Western landscape is threatening" helped us close the discussion with comments about isolation, loneliness, and unrelenting weather. Or were we talking about Grammy's further remark that "men are unreliable."

Jim Fassler

All the attendees were shocked that She had left her husband after 4 years and it did change the reading of the book for them.

1. Many people have a very Romantic View of Rural Life. McDonald painted a different picture. Do you agree or disagree with her picture?
2. How is her marriage portrayed in the book? Is her Husband just a hard worker and a Quiet man or is he expecting too much work of her?
3. Is Bob Uncaring or just too busy with the Farm?
4. Does the Fact that McDonald didn't Stay married for more than 4 years change the way you see the novel?
5. Was she spoiled and just didn't want to help support her husband in making a living?
6. She was already remarried and 12 years later wrote the book-Why did she make it a happy ending when the truth is it wasn't?
7. Why did the Portrayal of The Kettles become so Interesting to America at the time that movies were made around the 2 characters?
8. Which portrayal is more realistic as far as the neighbors are concerned. Are there only 2 choices—The Kettles or the Hicks? Did MacDonald try to portray herself in between these 2 extremes?
9. What about the Portrayal of Native Americans in the book. Bob seemed to be Best Friends with several "Indians" but Macdonald uses a lot of Stereotypes and derogatory language concerning them. Does she look down on Bob in this area too?
10. Is the amount of work that needs done only true if you live in a Rural area? What about bringing Groceries up the Elevator or on the Bus because you

don't have a car in the city. What about other husbands who don't do Housework –is that only a Rural attitude?—what about now in 2006 Versus in the 40's when Macdonald wrote the book.

11. Is Rural Life easier now? Unless you want to be isolated you can have TV and Internet almost anywhere –Does it make it easier? It does for Military personnel overseas who can now keep in touch with Family.
12. Does Macdonald like Ma Kettle? She sure goes over there a lot and spends time. Why if she is such a messy hard person to be around.
13. What are any positives in the book about the Rural life? America is obsessed with camping—Why if living without a bathroom etc is so bad? Does Macdonald give us any positives about Rural life?
14. Why was the book so popular? Did so many people relate to her Struggle living in a rural area or did they just enjoy the humor in the book? It was so popular that many readers must have been “city dwellers”.
15. What parallels can you see between this book and the other Rural books in our series? Sears Roebuck Catalog; Trips into Town; Running out of Supplies; Living based on the Weather ; Women who hate the Ruralness while their Husbands thrive in it. Women who move to these places for Love and then in many ways resent their choice.

Nikko Smith, Encampment

Rather than being amused by *The Egg and I*, most of the participants at Powell's discussion were exhausted by it—not by the reading of it, but by the imaginative recreation of what poor Betty MacDonald's early married life was like. This led naturally to prolonged discussion over the function of work in our lives. Participants speculated that the incredibly hard-working MacDonald probably would have found it gratifying to be a fundamental part of the family's economic team had the essential nurturing emotional element been present, but that element seemed absent. Was it absent from her marriage with Bob (leading to the later divorce) or is it simply absent from her writing (the writing conventions of a different time)?

We spent some time comparing and contrasting the cultural differences between 60 years ago and now on issues such as humor, attitudes toward Native Americans, land use (the logging, the fire, agrarian practices), children (as a topic, the baby seems largely absent in the book—only mentioned in passing as an additional concern or obstacle), mental health problems, and marriage.

We also spent a fair amount of time on Mrs. Kettle, whom we decided is an interestingly complex personality. She appears to be a competent woman of high standards who gave in to the inevitable when her husband's essential slovenliness manifest itself. She seems to have surrendered to chaos in most areas of life (including child-rearing), preserving only a few islands of calm and order

(the parlor, the guest bedroom, her quilting). What could a woman of the 1920-40s do in the face of a fundamental marital incompatibility when she's female, isolated, an immigrant, and without resources, family support, or education?

Some resources on MacDonald:

- First chapter of *The Plague and I* (1948), MacDonald's account of her year in a TB sanitarium is available online at <http://raggededgemagazine.com/0902/0902ldc.html>
- "The Egg and I." *Magill's Survey of Cinema* 15 June 1995. Available online through eLibrary.
- 1946 biographical article "MacDonald, Betty" from *Current Biography*. Available online through WilsonWeb.
- Hayner, Norman S. "Regional Family Patterns: The Western Family." *American Journal of Sociology* 53.6 (1948): 432-34.
- Levey, Jane F. "Imaging the Family in Postwar Popular Culture: The Case of *The Egg and I* and *Cheaper by the Dozen*." *Journal of Women's History* 13.3 (2001): 125-150.
- Walker, Nancy. "Humor and Gender Roles: The 'Funny' Feminism of the Post-World War II Suburbs." *American Quarterly* 37.1 (1985): 98-113.

Deb Koelling, Powell

Upton Library 12 participants

The group began by presenting the overall reaction each had to the book. The responses ranged from the surprise at the blatant prejudice in the book to admiration for the strength of the women to nostalgia. It was noted in the opening discussion that women of that time were underappreciated (which may be an understatement), but the women were living up to the expectations society had for them. More than one member could remember living without the benefits of running water and electricity. One member noted that she was watching TV on the East Coast while rural Upton was still waiting for electricity (circa 1953).

As the evening progressed members expressed a dislike of Bob, but to some degree, an understanding of his connection to the land and that men were more "comfortable" with the environment including the natives and neighbors.

Many thought the author worked too hard and Bob did not treat her very well.

It was decided the author's point of view may have precluded the reader from having an honest perception of Bob. Many were happy to learn she had divorced him and noted divorce took a great deal of courage in the 1930's.

It was thought the author probably did not have her heart in the chicken ranch dream. Everyone enjoyed the Kettle family. It was stated everyone has acquaintances resembling the Kettle, Hicks and MacDonald families. Those connections were part of the general appeal of the book.

The isolation of the setting was connected to books previously read by the group. The love of the land or the lack of love for the land was a factor in the story. Bob had a relationship that made him successful, whereas Betty had difficulty with most aspects of living in the isolated countryside. The Kettles fell somewhere in between.

One group member was impressed with the literary devices evident throughout the story. She felt it would make a good book for teaching literary devices, voice, and description to high school students. Overall group members enjoyed the book for its lighthearted look at difficult times.

One member had lived in the area not far from the setting of the book. Her knowledge about the difficulty of living in that area gave additional insights into the story. Others in the group had visited the area so connections were established to the landscape and the hardships it caused. The diversity of the group's backgrounds left mixed feelings about whether it was a good life or a miserable life in the story. It is difficult to understand the isolation of the people in the story because we are now dependent on instant communication.

Generally the book was enjoyed by everyone in the group. Not much information was found about the author and no reviews of the book seemed available. The group concluded that the book was a view into life during the 1930's and a piece of light reading.

Betty Strong

Ten people, in addition to the facilitator, attended the February 17 discussion of *The Egg and I* by Betty MacDonald at the Wyoming State Museum. Although the book is categorized as autobiographical, a memoir that appeared on the nonfiction lists at the time of its publication, it does not cover MacDonald's entire life, so we briefly reviewed biographical information about the author as well as the substantial success of this work. Participants received a short handout summarizing some of this material and listing some discussion questions. The group kept the information in mind during the discussion because it might be pertinent to the contents and interpretation of the book. We also, when appropriate, compared/contrasted aspects of *The Egg and I* with aspects of *The Memory of Old Jack*, the first book we read in the discussion series to generate some continuity of discussion.

We reviewed information that included how *The Egg and I* made the list of the top ten bestselling nonfiction books for three years, 1945, 1946, and 1947. MacDonald sold the movie rights; Claudette Colbert and Fred MacMurray starred in the popular 1947 film that also inspired a series of motion pictures featuring the Kettles, who appear prominently in both the book and the 1947 movie. The work was also the basis for a short lived 1951 television series. Two law suits were filed against MacDonald by people claiming they were models for "people" (the Hicks,

the Kettles, Crowbar) in the book and had suffered damages to their characters and lives as a result. While one of the suits was settled outside of court with an agreement the details of which are vague, the other was resolved by a judge who ruled in MacDonald's favor because the author maintained the "people" in the book did not represent specific individuals, but were characters based upon composites of a number of people she had known.

Additionally, we discussed MacDonald's real life marriage to Bob, her husband in the book. The union ended in divorce. It is generally agreed that Bob was not only an alcoholic, but also most likely a physically abusive husband.

Only one person did not like the book because MacDonald had made a bad choice in marrying Bob, yet continued to stay in the marriage. The situation was similar to that of Old Jack and his wife, Ruth, who remained married until Ruth's death. This led to a discussion of MacDonald's mother's admonition that it is a wife's duty to ensure her husband is happy in his work. Everyone agreed MacDonald did everything she could to support Bob in his desire to operate a chicken farm. Several women stated that although they would be willing to help with the farm, they could not imagine doing all of the work Betty did, at least for very long.

We considered whose work we knew more about -- Old Jack's or Betty's. Most of the group felt Betty gives the reader a better idea of Jack's work. One participant suggested women in the group might feel they knew more about Betty's work because much of what she does in the book is work women still do and so they can relate better to it than to Old Jack's work. Betty, in fact, some felt, might, in terms of her work ethic and support for her husband's work, fit into Old Jack's definition of an ideal wife. A few participants commented that Betty went into such detail about her work tasks so many times in the book, it became tedious.

A discussion of MacDonald's writing style centered on her use of humor, exaggeration, and, perhaps, sarcasm. One group member pointed out it is sometimes difficult for readers to determine whether the author is being serious or humorous. The passage in the book where MacDonald describes the impact of humans and the mountains, then states how beautiful they are, is one example.

One person commented that MacDonald's exaggerations in some cases make her life more real. Several others found the author's writing style made sections of the book and some of the characters very funny. Almost everyone enjoyed MacDonald's stylistic devices of humanizing inanimate objects, animals and nature, and of comparing humans to inanimate objects or nature. "Stove" was a favorite of the group. Nature is often portrayed as deliberately and willfully antagonistic to people, unlike the partnership people and the land can achieve in *The Memory of Old Jack*. Few in the group had a much better opinion of chickens, at least in terms of their care, than Betty expressed in the book.

MacDonald, a few felt, appreciate nature for its beauty mostly when she was not required to be working or struggling against it, but could merely enjoy it as scenery.

Part of our time was spent considering MacDonald's opinions of people in the book. Almost everyone agreed that the author's treatment of Native Americans was a reflection of the time as her daughters explained in the forward and would be different if she were writing today. The group, in general, did not feel that MacDonald was harder on the "white" people in the book than she was on the Native Americans, although she described the "white" characters as having traits she disliked in common with the Native Americans, for example, uncleanliness. Some participants felt that MacDonald's eventual acceptance of the way the Kettles live, for instance, was more a matter of the author spending time around them and becoming accustomed to their habits. If MacDonald had spent more time around Native Americans, they contended, she would have also become accustomed to their ways of living.

The group discussed MacDonald's portrayal of Bob, particularly in light of their subsequent divorce and disclosures about his alcoholism and abusive nature. Some participants did not detect any difficulties in the book between the couple. One member pointed out that the work of the farm consumed both of them so much they appeared to have little time to spend together. One person commented she did not like the way Bob ignored Betty's request to tell the "Indians" they could not come around when he was not there. Another said she felt MacDonald did not write about any men in the book in a very good light. MacDonald's father appeared to be a strict dictator, who controlled how the family lived, and his death did not have much of an impact at all on their lives, except for making their schedules less stringent. Another person stated that in Bob, MacDonald had married a man who was just like her father: controlling, willful, rigid.

Generally, the members agreed that MacDonald did not portray any of the men in the book in a very positive light with the exception of the hired man who disliked women intensely and the moonshiner. Both of these characters were more thoughtful of her feelings than Bob was.

The group felt it was obvious that MacDonald was very different from the rural women in the book. She came from a more urban, cultured background and appreciated different things in life than they did. In this way, MacDonald shared something in common with "Deargrandmother", with whom she felt little connection. MacDonald's view of the rural women in the book was similar to "Deargrandmother's" view of MacDonald's father and the western part of the country. Also, much of MacDonald's cultural background came from "Deargrandmother". It is possible that MacDonald's feelings of loneliness and isolation -- feelings she also attributed to her women neighbors -- were not as deeply shared by them as she thought.

We noted how MacDonald classified people and situations as either "interesting" or "uninteresting"/"dull". For the most part, the group agreed that MacDonald was an interesting woman, and it is her personality, her viewpoint,

her sense of humor, and her style of writing that make the situations and the people in *The Egg and I* vibrant and interesting, even when, in reality, these situations and people may not be quite so remarkable.

Rose Wagner

Once again the Dubois discussion group consisted primarily of high school seniors. A community elder brought samples of fancy work as a visual. The conversation was animated and engaged.

The group teased out the many ways Betty positioned herself as outsider in the narrative. The consensus emerged that this stance enabled her to have a light, non-judgmental touch, avoiding ridicule of the people and incidents she described. The students, especially, did not find her descriptions of the Native Americans "racist" as did some of the on-line commentators on the book. They accepted her account as of its era.

The most animated discussion revolved around Bob's harshness toward Betty, especially around un-necessary work (such as insisting on white pine floors which required daily scrubbing) and reluctance to install labor saving devices (such as electricity) which were in use by their neighbors. All of the students rejected the notion that the role of the wife was to please the husband.

As in other discussions, the cross-generational insights added richness to the conversation. The students liked Painted House and Egg and I best of the books. They found the others "difficult" and "hard to get into." While they did not consider reading a sign of laziness (as did many of Betty's neighbors) nor did they see the value of "fancy work," they acknowledged a preference for being active and doing something over reading. The discussion group, they felt, encouraged them to move outside their comfort zone. I highly recommend collaboration with high school honors or advanced English classes for other groups.

Dorothy Remy

Eight of us gathered at Guernsey-Sunrise High School to discuss *The Egg & I*. I learned that at one point several of the participants read this book as a school assignment (not that long ago, of course), which I thought was wonderful. This book struck me as an adult Little House on the Prairie of sorts, chockfull of insights into the trials and tribulations of "pioneer" farm life in the early part of the century. We all enjoyed the great good humor that runs throughout the book, the way MacDonald managed to make light of some very intolerable situations. In particular we enjoyed the scenes involving ironing with literal hot irons off the stove, the whole story of the belching Stove, and the ways in which what little romantic air there was to MacDonald's marriage swiftly dissolved in the fog of work when they bought the chicken ranch. We discussed the portrayal of Native Americans and considered the biases which are more obvious to us, a century on; and we also really enjoyed the portrayal of the Kettle family.

The discussion of the book led us to talk about the local area, the way in which very similar characters, not long ago, were to be found seemingly everywhere (if you knew where to look). We also discussed the tradition of having dances in various places on Saturday nights, which according to participants in the group, was also a regular feature of life in this area up until about the 1980s, when cable TV became widely available. Many of the participants regularly went to these shindigs, and one even played in a traveling band that was the entertainment at many dances. I grew up in this region and had heard such stories, but never actually experienced any; by the time I would have been old enough, that particular aspect of culture was gone.

We also talked about how different the climate is in the book, as compared to Wyoming. Hard to imagine an area where the problem is too much growth, not enough! A lot of the participants themselves had experience raising chickens, including me, and we laughed about how true it is, that chickens really are stupid, ungrateful animals who repay all your efforts on their behalf with no more than a squawk (although at least one group member maintained that there is no more stupid animal than sheep). All in all, we found *The Egg & I* to be a far more realistic appraisal of country life than *A Painted House*, which we read last time. We wondered, too, whether MacDonald wrote any of her experience down as she was actually living it, and we concluded that this was unlikely, since she was an 18-year old bride who was working her fingers to the bone, and more than likely wouldn't have had time to write anything down as she was actually experiencing it. So we appreciated how her account was pretty much free of nostalgia and sentimentality and longing for the "good ole days." MacDonald told it like it was, and even when it was funny, I don't think any of us would have exchanged our place for hers.

Court Merrigan

The Memory of Old Jack

Attendance dropped to six readers for our second book in the Rural America series. Since we are a rural community, I suspect the low number was due to conflicts with other activities.

All attendees enjoyed the book. I handed out two family trees, one I compiled and used as I read, and the 2nd one from the Port William web site. These are very helpful to readers as the relationships get confusing, but I recommend distributing a tree prior to the discussion (a major failure on my part - I had book dates confused). I also printed copies of an area map showing the location of the character's homes. A reader located Port Royal, Kentucky in an atlas. I also explained that many of the author's books are about this family and community. Background information on Mr. Berry came from Wikipedia and was helpful in understanding why he writes what he does, as he does as well as his impressive body of works. We discussed the major, and many of the supporting, characters. In the ebb and flow of talking and hopping from person to person (in person and in the story, which

makes it difficult to recount specifics of the discussion) we touched on the major themes of:

1. Leaving home/uprooting (Nettie and Aunt Fanny, Andy, Will Wells);
2. Faithfulness to the land/place/people, (the core men's group of Jack, Mat, Wheeler, Henry, Nathan, Andy, Jarrat, Burley, and Elton, to Ruth (physically, emotionally, spiritually);
3. Death (Jack's brothers/parents, Joe Banion, Jack's son, Ruth, Virgil, Rose, Jack himself);
4. The past/connecting generations (stories from old to young);
5. Events that formed Jack (marriage, triumph over McGrother, Will Wells, barn burning);
6. The women of the story and their importance (Ruth, Rose, Clara, Hannah, Granny/Margaret Feltner, Mary Penn, Mrs. Hendrick);
7. The importance of non-humans (the house, the Farrier place, food, debt).

Lightening & Smoothbore Berlew merited comment for contrast with Jack's attachment to "work" and place. No one really sympathized with Clara and Glad - most regarded Clara as either spoiled or uninformed of Jack's sacrifices or simply a creature of her mother's making. We all were disappointed in Brother Wingfare's meddling regarding Jack's final send off.

Other comments of note: willing and selling the place to Elton; Jack's anger of regret; Jack's perseverance in repaying his debt (15 years? would that we were so lucky these days!); being 48 years old when his life truly began; the relationship between work and hope. I ended the evening with a summary of Mr. Berrys seventeen rules for sustainable communities/economies. We agreed that the author wrote what he knew and believed and lived.

I began with some brief comments about Wendell Berry and passed around a map to show both the location of the fictional Port William and New Castle, where Berry was born. Discussion from the group was a little slow in coming, as everyone "loved the book," but didn't have any passionate points they wanted to make. So I asked some questions. Did the book sort of fizzle out after Jack died? The group loved the funeral and the competition between Mat (of the land) and Clara (consumption personified). Why were Ruth and Jack so profoundly mismatched? Neither really knew the other and they idealized the image of the other. Was the book a romantic or realistic view of rural life? Romantic, as it presents an ideal and mostly lost way of rural life. After these questions we moved on to talk about whether it is possible to live the type of life Jack (and, we hope, Andy) personifies in this day and age. This conversation led us to a good discussion of the economics of such a life (who can afford this). I interjected some thoughts about Berry's views on

education, healthy small communities and the environment. Discussion continued concerning the characters and their relationships to Old Jack and how much of this would be possible today. Jack himself was discussed and we agreed that his failings made for a better book and a more well rounded characterization. The group was amused at the irony of the farmers making their living from evil tobacco! Only one person had any other Berry and we all vowed that we would read more. Incidentally, this is true of all the books in this series: readers report reading more Haruf and MacDonald.

Barbara Gose , Lander

Although the author has published around 40 books of essays, poems, and novels, as well as being a professor, lecturer, conservationist, and still finds time to keep up with his farm in Kentucky he was not known by this group. However his writing did bring the group to a lot of discussion relating to their own experience. A number of people in the group are either ranchers or have ranching backgrounds and Old Jack's life resonated with them. The story was about change and the group spent time talking about the changes in the cattle industry. Ranching, as they have known it for many years, has changed. Most, of course, do not like to see the sort of changes that are happening. In an effort to protect what they believe in, some ranchers are giving their lands over to conservation easement instead of selling to developers or multi-millionaires who simply turn the land into a large front yard and see the property several weeks out of the year while a care taker lives on the place. No cattle allowed. The idea that the land is primarily for cattle grazing is deep in western ranching culture. Old Jack says, "He had been faithful to his land through all its yearly changes from maiden to mother, the bride, the wife, the widow of men like himself since the world began." This was an apropos statement of many ranching families in this area.

The group also talked about relationships. Old Jack and his wife had a pathetic relationship so the discussion centered on who is the enabler in bad relationships. Who keeps the relationship alive and for what purpose? Using the title of the book some discussion concerned the idea of memory and why some people live in our memories for generations and others do not.

The group agreed this was an excellent book for our theme of Rural America.

Dick Kalber, Pinedale

The discussion over *The Memory of Old Jack* in Kemmerer began with creating a Beechum family tree so that we could keep track of who was related to whom and how. While "family" is a theme in all of the books in this series, it is particularly relevant in this one. The family tree helped keep everyone straight and clarified the importance of friends and family to the welfare of the farmer. One member asked a pertinent question, "Why did they raise tobacco?" As Berry is a strong defender of family, rural

communities, and traditional family farms, the group felt that the presence of a cash crop such as this one -- rather than wheat or vegetables or some other crop the family could use to live on - seemed to contradict Berry's (and Old Jack's) emphasis on the self-sustaining lifestyle of a farmer.

We discussed Berry's use of names in this book and possible Biblical meanings for Ruth, esp. when contrasted with "Rose." The name "Lightening Berlew," reflects distaste for someone "not connected to the land." While discussing another Biblically-inspired character - Hannah - group members observed that she provided one of the few instances where readers learn something other than through Jack's eyes. This seemed to place quite a lot of emphasis on this character, and participants felt this was justified because of her connection to the land and to the family; i.e. she named her children after the grandparents Matt and Margaret.

We examined Berry's 17 rules for "healthy functioning of sustainable local communities" (www.heureka.clara.net/art/berry.htm) and identified how the book exemplified each one of them. This led to a discussion of what is necessary to sustain communities in general and our own community in particular, followed by discussion of farmers' markets, community gardens, and CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture). Information at www.localharvest.org/csa.jsp.

Pam Clark, Kemmerer

We talked about what we thought of Jack and Ruth. Many referred to Ruth as spoiled, although some people pointed out that what we know of her comes from Jack, so the viewpoint is limited. We wondered what happened to her family, and discussed her lack of a community. Our group spent a lot of time trying to make sense of the incident between Jack and Will Wells. Like other leaders mentioned, the group really responded to Berry's writing, with many reading different lines aloud. Several contrasted his writing with Annie Proulx's, saying she seemed to pare her writing down to the absolute utilitarian, while Berry provided lots of cushioning. We also wondered about other types of rural writing that could be included in this series, perhaps from a Native American or African American viewpoint, or something rural that doesn't include farming. The most fun of the night came from weaving together the three books we've read so far. One person imagined what "The Memory of Old Bob," from *The Egg and I*, would look like, or who in Berry's community would take in the pregnant Victoria from *Plainsong* (what if Jack shared the farm with her? Would he have then remained there instead of moving, because she would have taken care of him?) We are looking forward to *Winter Wheat* next month.

Kelly Gove, Laramie

Everyone really enjoyed the book and their passion for the book and wonderful comments, led us through a great

discussion. Additionally, because I love this book, I was able, thanks to the enthusiasm and help from the group, to discuss themes and characters. We talked about the rich language and descriptions in the book. We explored the themes of land and how it shaped the characters and community.

--Katie Curtiss

Sheridan: Everyone loved this book and what enlivened the discussion was the rich variety of responses from the group as they explored turning points in the book and shared favorite passages from the book. I began the discussion by asking how the book fit in the series - rural America; every one agreed this was an accurate portrayal of rural life and not at all romantic or idealized. One person did comment that if there was anything idealized, or romanticized, in the book it was that Jack grew and learned from his failures and became a better man. Rarely does anyone consistently learn life's lessons!

Next we discussed Jack. This led to a very engaging discussion which I decided not to interfere with as group members started conversing with each other, which was terrific. One member felt that Wendell Berry manipulated the reader into liking Jack and that he was not really that likeable. Others argued that he was a decent man and his love of the land was noble and virtuous. The discussion was great because it led to several members changing and reshaping their thoughts; the group worked with each other to come to new conclusions. Every member of the group jumped into the discussion and it became a round robin of ideas.

We discussed the turning points in Jack's life and I asked why the incident with Will Wells was such a low point. This led the discussion in many directions and one which was particularly interesting was a conversation as to how the marriage and the community shaped Jack. The group was divided as to what was more important in Jack's "evolution"; the land, community, family or the (failed) marriage. This led into a discussion of Jack's relationship with Ben and Matt as well as and his thoughts about Hannah, Ruth and Rose. Those familiar with Berry's writings and philosophy felt that the marriage was incidental to the development of Jack's connection to the land and the community that created, around him. We discussed the classic "city versus rural values and attitudes" which Berry could present through Jack marrying Rose.

It was a great discussion and several members had a specific passage in the book that they wanted to share. All loved Wendell Berry's beautifully crafted language. One member commented; "reading the book was like fine dining". To which another member answered; "I thought the same thing, it was like tasting the most delicious morsel of food".

--Katie Curtiss

In an interview in Mother Earth News Wendell Berry says of his protagonist in *The Memory of Old Jack* that Jack figures out that "a man can't help being ignorant, but he can help being a fool." After a brief discussion of Wendell Berry's background and how this novel fits into his group of writings about the Coulters, Feltners, and Beechums, I asked the group how they see this quote pertaining to Jack. We spent a lot of time talking about Jack - his strengths and weaknesses (pride being the source of his failings, we decided), the lessons he learned, the people he loved and why, the people he distained and why. We talked about the turning points in his life and why, in so many cases, it took him so many years to recognize them as such, wisdom and patience coming slowly to him. Jack, like many of Berry's characters, is potentially his own worst enemy, but he does come to a sense of peace and reconciliation.

We had an interesting discussion about the whole situation around the acquisition of the Farrier place, the Will Wells episode, and the hard lessons Jack learned about his connection to the land therein. As usual, I asked what values are affirmed in this novel. Wendell Berry's voice comes through strongly here in terms of the value of labor, connection to the land, rural vs. urban, technology, integrity, patience, and so on. We looked at passages relating to those and other places that are almost asides from Berry.

We talked about the structure of the novel, the shifts from past to present. There were two ladies in their mid 80's present and we asked them if they felt that it is characteristic that the older one becomes, the more apt one is to go back in memory like Jack does. Their answers were somewhat equivocal! The group as a whole found the style of the book hard to follow and said they found it to be a book that had to be read slowly, but they seemed to agree that it was worth the effort. I don't think they were just humoring me - I had told them that Wendell Berry is one of my all time favorite American authors and that I can't be expected to be objective!

In terms of how this book fits into the series, we noted that it, as so many of the others, deals with transition, the final days of traditional farming until influences after WWII of technology, economy, and social structures so change farming. The group acknowledged that even in the area around Tongue River, the small ranches are becoming a thing of the past, giving way to conglomerates and absent landowners. We saw this novel fitting into the more romantic view of rural life as opposed to some of the others.

Rock River: We spent most of our discussion time talking about Jack, his successes and failures, and the turning points in his life. We discussed city people versus rural people (always a hot topic in Rock River) and the causes for the failure of Jack's marriage. We also talked about what Rose brought to him. We discussed as some length the role that false expectations had in the failure of the marriage, the tendency of people to see what they want to see before marriage, the inability of Jack and his wife to change.

--Maggie Garner

Medicine Bow: Group members did not like this book, saying it was boring and difficult to read. One said it was 170 pages too long. I was disappointed because I like the book.

Although the book was not liked, it did engender good discussion. I began by giving some information on Berry's life and attitudes towards land. Using Berry's comments on the environment, Jack's attitude on land, and the participants' own experience as reference points, we had a long discussion about land--a theme that ties together the books in this series. It is an issue close to the hearts of the Medicine Bow people because they are seeing land being gobbled up by large corporations, and some of them have lost ranches.

The participants liked Jack and understood him, knowing other individuals like him. We talked about his funeral--what he and Mat wanted versus what Jack's daughter wanted. This led us to a short discussion of rural perspectives versus city perspectives. Although the book was not liked, I think it is a good book to include in the series. It extended our discussion of land, environment, and rural perspectives.

--Margaret Garner

The Lusk group, 20 strong, spent a great deal of time on Jack's failed marriage and how Ruth's expectations led him to change his expectations of himself. His flaws outweighed his strengths in the early discussion, as did the flaws of Ruth. However, the motif of expectations--their sources and their capacity to both consciously and unconsciously change our way of being--was a fruitful topic. I gave some biographical information on Wendell Berry, including his life style choices, and how during my preparation time I had difficulty separating him from Jack Beechum. As I wanted to get the group away from Jack and Ruth (did I need to?), I asked for thoughts about the theme of the series having to do with myths versus realities in rural life. Suddenly, one of the new members, a Wyoming native, blurted out that she had come to the series to find out what "rural" meant, as she didn't have a clear sense of this as idea or geography.

This allowed me to ask some of the more withdrawn members for their ideas, in addition to the many definitions coming from the more outgoing members. Here is a partial list: reliance on people, especially neighbors, versus the urban propensity for choosing social groups and personal interactions away from neighbors and neighborhood; sparse population density; the influence of agriculture on local economies and activities; the humility that stems from open space and life in the midst of weather; a slower pace of life versus urban and suburban life styles; distance between people and towns, etc.; and finally, rural as an attitude as much as geography, and not necessarily tied to agriculture. There was more, but I couldn't keep up.

The attitude toward rural life of the daughter Clara and her husband Glad, as well as that of Ruth's parents, was discussed. This in turn led to comments about how many Lusk town children are as unaware of the agricultural lives and products that surround them, as is the stereotype of urban people. As an offshoot, the group commented on the Niobrara County Conservation District "Ag in the Classroom" school day, during which different ag people present displays and exhibits for school age children. There was lots of energy in this group, and it was fun to be a part of it.

I gave some background on Berry - explained how he really tried to live the authentic life he feels so strongly about. I also told them about the other novels that deal with Port William and the families introduced in *The Memory of Old Jack*. We talked a little about the structure of the book, how it is one day, the last day, in Jack's life where he his reviews his past which is more real to him now than his present and puts its into a kind of perspective allowed by distance and experience. We discussed the following points:

- characterization of Jack - his positive qualities, his flaws, turning points in his life, lessons he learned, etc.
- the women in the novel - Ruth, Clara, Rose, Hannah - what each represents to Jack and, ultimately, what they reveal about the female qualities that Berry values.
- the marriage (I hope I convinced them that they couldn't entirely blame Ruth as they initially seemed to want to do...that it was much more complex than that.)
- the transition in rural life during the period of the novel

During much of the discussion above we segued into issues in *Clearmont* (the epitome of rural living) that relate to the novel. There were many!

The people in the group did a great job picking out particular passages to illustrate points they wanted to make.

--Bob Brown

Baggs: The group was interested in Berry's reputation as "America's most eloquent and prolific defender of traditional rural life," and we identified many of these rural values in our conversation about the book, including:

- the "husbanding" of the land
- the passing on of knowledge and experience from one generation to the next
- the importance of the community of relatives and neighbors who share the same values; the estrangement-as seen in Clara and Glad--that results when people turn their backs on this community
- the respect given to the aged by everyone

We looked at Jack's failed relationships with both Ruth and Rose, and it was nice that no one was judgmental.

Two of us had gathered some material on Berry from the wealth of online sources-quotes from his essays that articulated the themes of his book. One source in particular-that both of us, coincidentally, found-was his "17 rules for the healthy functioning of sustainable local communities," which includes such gems as "make the community able to invest in itself by...caring for its old people, and teaching its children."

--Rick Kempa

I began with introductory comments about Wendell Berry and mentioned the book I believe to be his most recent - Hannah Coulter. We proceeded around the room, with each person introducing him/herself and commenting on the book. Everyone loved it, although several people admitted that it was hard to stay with in the beginning due to the movement back and forth in time. People with farming/ranching backgrounds were especially enthusiastic about Berry's authentic description of rural life, from plowing to big noon meals during harvest/branding time. A reader commented that farm wives and their needs have to come second to the farm, and perhaps that helped to explain Ruth and Jack's estrangement. Others believed their sour marriage stemmed from unrealistic expectations and not knowing each other well. Rose's role in Jack's life, and her acceptance of him as he was, prompted good discussion.

From that discussion, we looked at Jack, his lonely childhood, spirited young years, and prideful beginnings. People were puzzled about the hired man Will Wells, and we analyzed why their working arrangement ended violently. This opened up the discussion of land and its meaning to Jack. We had a spirited discussion about Jack's mental acuity - was he simply exhibiting old age with more interest in the past, or did he suffer from Alzheimer's disease? Nearly everyone read a favorite passage, as often as not based on the beauty of Berry's language as the content itself. We examined the roles of the following in the book: Andy, Lightning and wife, Clara and her husband, and Wheeler. We read one of Berry's poems. I ended by asking the group to think about two things as we begin our second book in this series: what do we mean by rural and how do the characters in the books (Jack and next month, *The Painted House*) depict realistic and/ or romantic views of the rural life?

--Barbara Gose

Farson: I read some quotes from interviews with Berry, one done in 1972 and another that appeared in the November issue of *Smithsonian* magazine, about how he and his wife have lived and worked on the same small farm most of their married lives. I wanted the group to see how closely the novel illustrates Berry's land ethic.

One reader kicked off our discussion by announcing she didn't like *Old Jack* and thought the book was depressing. Others agreed that the book was depressing citing as reasons that it reminded them of their own mortality, that it was about the end of an era, and that there was so little happiness in the book. The woman who didn't like *Jack* eventually confessed that it was probably because he reminded her so much of her father-in-law. She felt that Ruth was not expecting too much of Jack to want him to "do something with his life" and saw Jack's devotion to his land as a fault ("its *only* land"). These comments prompted much discussion about Ruth and Jack's relationship. The consensus was that they were both at fault for the failure of the marriage.

I had drafted a chart of the Port William families and their relationships which helped us move on to discuss the other characters in the novel. Readers thought the characters were realistically drawn, especially the farm wives, how they were partners in the work, and the men's way of passing down knowledge between the generations by working together, joking and teasing. The incident with Will Wells was puzzling, prompting various theories about Jack's violent actions. We discussed other incidents in the novel illustrating that "the anger of regret" was "one of the powerful themes in Jack's life" (p.31). Then we discussed other themes in his life (husbanding the land, avoiding the house, the importance of work, Rose's role in his life and her death).

--Marcia Hensley

Torrington: Two people disliked the book, so I asked them why, and they lit into both Jack, and Berry's "wimpish" style. This set off prolonged conversation about both the writing style and Jack's life. Happily, all were quickly talking to each other (one at a time), engaging in thoughtful give and take.

My notes from the discussion don't show anything that hasn't been covered in other group scholar's notes, including my own from previous discussions of the book. I gave some biographical information, and the group quickly assimilated the similarities between Berry's chosen way of retrograde farming and techno-absent lifestyle, and the characteristics he painted as most praiseworthy in Jack. There was good discussion of Jack's relationship with Will, and the several possibilities for why their blowup occurred and why both men knew immediately their relationship had irrevocably ended. Similarly, there were both pros and cons considered for Hannah, and their daughter and her husband. This group was more sympathetic to Hannah's disappointments, and cited passages from the book to illustrate how neither Hannah nor Jack were unable to act in ways to mitigate their disastrously unhappy marriage.

We discussed whether our prairie distances lend themselves to the same types of friendships the book describes (although a few were described by members of the group); in this light, we also talked about the lack of more than a few generations of European ancestors here as opposed to in Kentucky, and whether or not this might also limit multi-generational families and friendships.

--Bob Brown, Story

I began the discussion by telling the group some of the biographical details of Wendell Berry. I read them some parts from an interview where he talks about how he lives and works on his farm in Kentucky... draft horses instead of tractors, a "clean white privy" in the back yard (where the wastes deposited there are made into compost) instead of a modern toilet, and minimal use of any technology (to avoid participating in "the rape of nature" - -coal mining, etc to produce electricity). We decided that our kids would refer to him as a classic "granola" type. I also explained how his novels and short stories all deal with many of the characters they read about in **Memory of Old Jack**. Because almost everyone in the group liked the book so much, they were particularly interested the other stories, so I went over which they were and which characters and time period they center on. Needless to say, since I'm such a fan of Berry's, I'm anxious to engage other readers.

In our discussion of the book, we covered the expected topics: Jack himself, his strengths and weaknesses, the women in his life, what he learns over the long period of his life, and, of course, his relationship with work and the land. We shared many passages from the novel in our discussion. Not everyone was terribly enamored with Jack himself, a point which brought on some interesting arguments. We especially looked at those times in his life when, looking back, he is aware of where he could have/should have done things differently and agreed that we all have those insights as we age if we allow ourselves to be honest. Most in the group felt that the kind of man Jack is and the values he holds are in danger of becoming obsolete in today's world.

One person claimed disliked the book because she lives with and cares for her 84 year old mother and found the book too painfully close to her own life situation. Several thought Jack to be a victim of early Alzheimer's. We REALLY argued about that.

In all it was a provocative and energetic discussion, characteristic of this group. It was our last of the series and we had a couple of new people who are anxious to join the next series, so that's a good sign.

1. With all of this said about Berry—Do you agree or disagree with his approach to farming. Is he painting too easy of a picture when he would be living in poverty were it not for his writing and teaching? Can farms that do not use modern methods survive and prosper? How do the amish make it work?

2. Was the book hard to read at first? Could berry have done anything to make it easier to understand? Could he have made it more clear when Jack was going back in his memory? Did he introduce too many characters at once?

3. Does Jack's life start out well? Did he have a good childhood? If he didn't why would he have stayed on the land and in the house?

4. He associates the house with Death why? (2 brothers civil war and mother died of sorrow).

5. He seems to blame Ruth for their Marriage and distance and she blames him for not being a success? Are these 2 people the norm? Did she not ask him where he lived and what they would live on? Did he present himself falsely? Should Jack have had to go without shoes and jeans during Harvest to send Clara to school? Was that an extra that they could have lived without?

6. Do you think that Jack's having an affair was a surprise? Should Ruth have expected anything else?

7. Do you think that if Jack's son had lived he would have had a better relationship with the son? Do you think Ruth would have left the son alone and let him work in the field or would she have also insisted that he work to get off the farm and as far away as possible. The same theme as in Grisham's novel a painted house—The wife hates the farm and can't wait to get away from it.

8. For a While Jack wanted to expand and own land and Have more —the land was kind of like a possession to him. Did he put real effort into making the 2nd arm work — Could he have treated the African American workers better—The man was faithful to him and his farm. Did he lose hope after that or just decide he wanted to stay small?

9. Is it sad that the Blood line has to be broken to find someone who appreciates farming? Elton and Mary Penn take over and Elton becomes like a son. Is that true to life that often our own children go another way and have to find a mentor or a person they relate more to? (Read page 8 of Interview with Berry)

10. Are Clara and her husband the pettits really that bad? Clara is her mother's daughter but is life in the city really so awful as portrayed? Is it bad that Clara's husband is a good provider or can offer her extras? Is Clara unhappy? Jack seems to think their life deserves little respect? Do you think Clara appreciated or even knew about her Dad's sacrifice? Should she have felt guilty?

11. If a person spends their entire life on a piece of land and the family knows it means sooo much to them—Why didn't they find a little hut or a back bedroom for him to live in? Is it sad that he ends up in a motel?

12. Did Jack deserve better? Was his daughter trying to make herself happy or give him what he deserved? The author paints it as though she were giving him something he wouldn't have wanted? Was Mat worshipping things about Jack he shouldn't have? Do you have to be poor to be simple?

13. What lessons did Jack feel you had to learn from being in debt? And that you had to owe someone to know something?

14. Rose received the Brunt of the Bad things about a small town—the gossip about her—Is this character

developed enough to understand why she married the doctor and why she stayed in town?

15. After Jack Died what was his legacy?

Nikko Smith, Encampment

A few thoughts from two recent discussions of "The Memory of Old Jack"-one in Afton, one in Green River.

Once again, the uncertainty with which I approached the discussion of this book was unfounded. The book requires more work than any other in the series, but the payoff is also greater than most of the others, and readers responded to that.

I was struck by how the thread of themes with other books in the series is especially strong for the Rural America books (compared to some of the other series). For instance: how some of the most meaningful relationships are based on something other than blood lines-as seen also in "Ace in the Hole," "Painted House," and especially "Plainsong" how the nature of work is thoroughly explored in most of these novels: meaningful, meaningless, fulfilling, debilitating how urban values and lifestyle are contrasted with rural, sometimes to celebrate the rural over the urban, but sometimes (as in "The Egg") to make the opposite point.

I like to put all the books of the series out in the middle of the table as we talk, to invite connections with what we've read or previews of what we will read.

To better appreciate the poetry of Berry's writing, we read some passages aloud-something I ought to remind myself to do all the time. It's one thing to read with the eyes, quite another to feel the words in the mouth and inner ear!

Rick Kempa

I began with a short biography of Wendell Barry but discovered that several readers knew much about him so they added many interesting insights about him. When he wrote, ". . . we should protect the natural foundations of the human economy: soil, water, and air," he meant it. He uses horses to farm, uses an outhouse, and does not use a computer when writing. Obviously then, he is very concerned about the disappearance of agrarian life as he knew it. We talked about the many contracts in Jack's life including life, land, marriage, and bank. We discussed the pros and cons of the "male way" of achieving excellence. Relationships in this book plus those in other selections in this series were analyzed from a variety of reader viewpoints. One reader felt that the theme of this novel is work. Some examples were "The work satisfied something deeper than his own desire," "He worked from dark until dark . . . trading and deal(ing) . . . at night when he could not work." He worked at the marriage with the land but not with Ruth. He would solve the sorrow and loneliness of farming but failed at those shortcomings with Ruth. Jack was one who escaped mere proficiency in his

farm work to achieve mastery because it seemed the correct thing to do. (Paraphrased from Victor Suthren's novel THE BLACK COCKADE, copyright 1977) Finally, the group agreed that the selections did, indeed, offer romantic and realistic views of rural life with "place" accurately depicted. Thanks for including rural Kentucky in your choices.

Jim Fassler , Tensleep

Although a slim volume, *The Memory of Old Jack* struck many of the Powell participants as a longer reader because of the density of ideas within the novel. Some readers wondered if Berry sufficiently justified many of his conclusions. As an example, consider Jack's judgment of his son-in-law Gladston as being a person absorbed in worthless activity and a worthless profession (banker). Or Jack's feeling that the only worthwhile activity is farming, that all other professions have no meaning. Conclusions like these seem asserted in the novel rather than illustrated.

The humanities themes we discussed included the interconnecting ideas of wealth, worth, value, and money; the function of memory as one ages and approaches death; whether a sense of belonging is necessarily rooted in longevity of place; the concepts of integrity and faithfulness; the process of change and the tension it creates with tradition; freedom and fulfillment; and rural economy.

Some resources on Old Jack & Berry's philosophy:

- Idaho State Library's webpage available online at <http://www.lili.org/read/letstalk/themes-books/berry.htm>
- Berry's 2002 article "The Agrarian Standard," available online in an abridged version from *Orion Magazine* at <http://www.oriononline.org/pages/om/02-3om/Berry.html>
- Berry's 17 rules for the healthy functioning of sustainable local communities, available online from <http://www.heureka.clara.net/art/berry.htm>
- *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry on Berry, available online via GaleGroup's Literature Resource Center

Deb Koelling, Powell

Six people gathered to discuss The Memory of Old Jack. Initial reactions varied, but most liked the book. Several found it a bit difficult to get into, but as the story progressed reading was easier. Following family lineage was a difficulty even if the author had edited to fix those problems. Much time was spent talking about Old Jack's character, his relationship, and his memory. The title was interesting because most anticipated the book to be a

story of someone remembering Old Jack rather than his actual memory. The point of view provoked some discussion because it makes the story deeper than if the first person point of view had been used.

Several thought the book to be an illustration of Romanticism. The events connected with good, simple country living were shown to be much more wholesome than the views of city life. Clara's life appeared to be shallow when viewed through Old Jack's eyes. The visit Jack and Ruth paid to Nettie and Aunt Fannie made them uncomfortable in the barrenness of the city. This book was similar to The Egg and I in that aspect. The country provides abundance of food but not money.

Jack's affair was generally accepted by the group as not interfering with the integrity of Jack's character. Most thought that Ruth could have been more agreeable to what Jack wanted in life. She was not shown to be the partner in the operation as the other women were.

Comparisons were made to ranchers and farmers of today. The stewardship of the land is a strong value of many older men, but is less evident in the younger men. Jack's work ethic and honesty where his debts are concerned was another admired trait.

One member of the group thought that it was a happy story because Jack lived his life as he wanted and died in a desirable way (not like Ruth). The others thought that it had an undercurrent of sadness, but that Jack would not admit to that. He made his decisions and did not really regret them or look back with a desire to change things.

The book was considered a reflection of life, family, and death, and made the reader reflective. Jack's honesty in dealing with his past was something that could be difficult. He didn't look at his life and make himself appear better; he accepted his faults in the events of his life.

A number of the sixteen people who attended the discussion of *The Memory of Old Jack* by Wendell Berry at the Wyoming State Museum on January 20, have a rural background. Their perspectives were both useful and enlightening during the discussion. We began by briefly reviewing biographical information about the author. As recommended by a previous discussion leader, I passed out copies of a map of Port William, the fictional community in the book, and a genealogical chart of Port William characters to help clarify relationships among characters, demonstrate the complexity of the fictional universe created by Berry, and provide a graphic of the place depicted in the book.

We began by discussing how well everyone liked the book. Only one person did not like the book because of the negative, often depressing, viewpoint of Old Jack and the difficult style. Another pointed out that Old Jack's memories reminded her of the speech of someone with Alzheimer's. Several others agreed that Berry's writing style, while lyrical, often poetic, was difficult to read, the cadence hard to aspiration follow. One participant

described the writing as stream of consciousness, which was done well, but is sometimes not easy to understand. Another participant indicated the reading became easier once she stopped struggling against the words and the style, and just let the writing flow. A number of readers agreed Berry's handling of the characters is confusing; different characters share the same name; some, such as Elton, suddenly appear in the book and play a only a brief, but important, role. In general, the group agreed that the book was not easy reading.

Most of the discussion centered on the character of Old Jack: whether he is a realistic or a romantic character; his relationships with other characters; his attitude towards life; and his impact on others. Through its discussion of Old Jack, the group identified and discussed significant themes that can be found in the novel.

Most participants felt Old Jack is a realistic character, exemplifying the serious, hardworking nature of individuals who farm for a living, particularly in the era depicted in the book.

Group members commented that Old Jack's serious nature and the unhappy events that occurred in his life combined to make the book depressing at times. Jack's dedication to hard work and his focus on his farm and the land are, however, most agreed realistic portrayals of people who make their living from agriculture. Jack's extremely limited participation in social events, such as dances, and his guilt when he is not working are also realistic. One participant commented that like Old Jack, her father, who is a rancher, feels guilty and ill at ease and worries when he is away from the ranch, not working. A few group members did feel that the character is idealized in some ways, Jack's complete devotion to the land and his extreme work ethic being ways in which this is true.

A number of participants felt Ruth, Jack's wife, represents a shallow person, more concerned with possessions and with social status than with making her marriage work and helping Jack. She is illustrative of the growing materialism, the urbanization and mechanization of the world, while Clara, Jack and Ruth's daughter, carries this trend even further and does not contribute in any way to the farm, but takes what it produces without really valuing it.

Although some of the group pointed out that Ruth did work hard, they agreed she did not support Jack in the ways he needed support and disapproved of him in many ways. His occupation as a laborer, who wore old clothes and dirtied himself working the soil, was not what Ruth wanted in a husband. She dreamed of living a life of ease with servants to do her work and social activities to occupy much of her time. All too soon after their marriage, she stops looking at Jack in the eyes, which is symbolic of how she does not see Jack for the worthy person he is. Each character has unrealistic expectations of the other and neither sees the other for what he or she really is. Most felt that Jack's aspirations to own and successfully work the Farrier property in addition to his own stemmed from a

desire to please Ruth and meet her expectations rather than from his true ambition.

In contrast to Ruth, Jack's mistress, Rose, accepts him as he is, sees him as he is, and asks nothing from him, attaches "no strings" to their relationship. Participants pointed out that Rose's character is in some ways defined by a sense of loss that also in part defines the character of Jack and contributes to their feelings for each other and their affair.

Hannah, most agreed, is the character that most closely represents Jack's ideal woman; she is strong, connected to the land, works in the fields when she is able, and supports her husband's work, while retaining her sense of self.

The group saw that in the book, Jack's real marriage is to his land.

Participants also discussed Jack's connection with Will, his hired hand. Members pointed out that Jack attributes the fight that ended their relationship to neither being able to reconcile himself to Will's having no hope of ever owning the land upon which he has been working so diligently and making so many improvements. Several participants felt, however, that the root cause of the characters' falling out is Jack's inability to accept anyone else working his land. They pointed out that Jack likes working alone, is accustomed to it, and makes no real effort to look for help either before or after Will. Jack does not appear to be closely associated with the share cropping that is occurring in 1952, when the book takes place. The intense silence and independence with which Jack is frequently associated contrast with relative companionship of share cropping and the sense of camaraderie present during lunch at Mat's.

Several group members said the book would have been enhanced if more had been included about other characters' perspectives, particularly Will's. Inclusion of other viewpoints might clarify or enhance Jack's own views on life, which, a few participants felt were sometimes depressing in their negativity, although these views were contrasted with Jack's sense of joy and light, experienced when he felt closest to the land, worthy of the land, while the land was worthy of his care.

In the end, several people in the group said this particular book contains a great number of topics and ideas worth discussing, and the discussion group could have lasted much longer.

Rose Wagner

A snowy night deterred all but five high school students, their English teacher and the two discussion leaders from the February discussion of *The Memory of Old Jack*. The lively conversation focused on two primary issues—Jack's courtship of Ruth and respect for a strong work ethic.

The courtship discussion began with the question: has electronic communication transformed the way young couples get to know each other? The answer was clearly yes, but the four young men in particular discussed the ways continuous texting and use of email enabled people to get to know each other in great detail. This greater knowledge would then contribute to a more successful marriage all the students agreed. The three older women found Jack's ten mile ride on horseback several times a week to court Ruth both romantic and a real reflection of his devotion. The misalignment of expectations, the women felt, could not have been avoided through use of electronic communication.

The second theme of respect for a solid work ethic revolved around Jack's commitment to restoring land (and animals) that had been mistreated. The young men admired this quality in Jack. A more general discussion of Jack's work with Will on the Farrier place led to an appreciation of working for one's self. One of the men told of his pride in the long process of training his own horse. There was a clear consensus that work for another, while satisfying, does not have the same intrinsic reward.

All participants in the discussion acknowledged the challenge of keeping the relationships among the characters and across generations clear. And all valued the quality of the writing and the power of Berry's use of present time as a catalyst for memory.

The active presence of high school students in the two discussions thus far has greatly enriched my appreciation for the texts and for cross-generational dialogue.

Dorothy Remy

The Memory of Old Jack
Discussion at Kemmerer Public Library with 6 participants
on Jan 20, 2015 Led by Chris Propst

Since this was the first meeting of the group with the Rural America theme, we explored some of what this novel had to say about living on a farm, small town life, and how the landscape or place you live in shapes you. One group member had been raised in Kentucky on a small tobacco farm, and she shared her experience with us, and stated that Berry capture that life well. Some of those characteristics include close community (the idea of family extending out to those outside of the nuclear family), the nobility and embrace of hard work, the idea of man as steward of nature, the isolation of small towns, and the changing nature of America and what we've lost as more of us have moved farther away from rural farm life.

I used previous Wyo Humanities discussion leaders notes, a review by Bruce Bawer of Berry's short story collection, "Five Stories," a Summary and Study Guide (Google it) to help get to know the novel better and to find good questions to help guide the discussion.

We did notice that Berry did tend to overtly romanticize living and working on the land, by showing the characters who were from the city or who were just migrant workers like the Berlews as being suspect, while those who did

have a connection to the land as more genuine people, having worthwhile lives. The group pointed out the fight with the tenant Will as being caused by both Jack's and Will's understanding of Will not having ownership of the land.

Berry's style was noticeable to the group, so intense and poetic, highly detailed and sensitive, capturing Old Jack's memories and his character so distinctly. I pointed out that Berry was well rounded writer, a poet, essayist and novelist, and brought in a map of Port William, and that Berry set all his stories there, much like Faulkner with his Yoknapatawpha County. The map shows how little the town mattered, but how much The River was central to the farms and shaped the landscape and farmsteads.

Overall, participants found Old Jack to be a memorable character, as Berry says, one who we'll not see again. They were quite captivated by the relationship between Jack and his wife, how tragic it became, and the connection/disconnection between them. Then, they also paid close attention to Jack's relationship with his lover Rose. The group picked up on the pattern of moving from the present of the old man wandering the town, in one day, and all his memories. Then, they noticed how the book went on even after he died, showing his impact or legacy on his family and friends.

Most of the group were veterans of the Beat book discussion, which they found to be difficult, but found this year's choice of theme and this first novel to be a nice change. Chris Propst

Painted House

Six of us met at the Eppson Center for Seniors to discuss John Grisham's *A Painted House*. Everyone had read and enjoyed other books by him, although did not care much for this one. We had a good conversation about what makes a book profound (a question asked by one of the members). To add to this, I used a quote from Grisham about his desire to write "commercial fiction of a high quality—no attempt at literature here" (Seymour, Liz. "Grisham Gets Serious." Book. Jan, 2001, available though the Gale Literature Resources Center). This article also contains other information that I brought up with the group.

We talked about how the book was originally published as a serial, because some people remarked they thought the pacing was too slow. It was felt that *A Painted House* made more sense in serial form. I had tried, unfortunately to no avail, to ILL the issues of the Oxford American literary journal that had originally published this story. Not only is there an epilogue, but there are paintings that go along with it, which I thought would be interesting to share. There was disagreement in the group over the ending: one thought it would have been better to have ended without the bus station scene, so I really was curious about what they would have thought of the epilogue.

There were also many questions about Grisham's life in general, which I was able to answer, again by using the Gale database, and Contemporary Authors Online. I am looking forward to our next book, *Winter Wheat*.

We opened by learning our right-hand neighbor's name and sharing a brief rural experience with him or her. Run-ins with snakes proved to be a dominant theme. The idea was to have the group members identify their preconceived notions of what a rural lifestyle entailed by recalling incidents from their own past and bridging from there to common rural experiences.

The group identified a number of features of rural life: neighborliness, family, hard work, a certain amount of deprivation and a good deal of improvisation. And we found them present in the novel.

We next turned our attention to individual characters from the book. We considered Hank Spruill, who I thought might elicit mixed feelings but found the group had written him off as villainous. Oddly, Cowboy was considered more worldly and regarded less harshly despite his cold blooded murder of Hank. Some seemed more critical that Cowboy had taken advantage of Tally and then run off with her to Canada.

One participant commented that all the families in the book seemed dysfunctional. Other group members conceded this point but thought it realistic. Furthermore, many group members thought that most rural families were dysfunctional in some way but they treated this as a private family matter that they did not share. This maintenance of secrets was especially true at the time this novel took place.

While most readers enjoyed the book, others found Grisham's seven-year old narrator unbelievable in spots especially his interest in spying on the bathing Tally. Still others found the wealth of this seven-year old's experience--two murders, nude bathing, and near witness to child birth--beyond belief.

Despite differing opinions on the quality of the novel, the book did inspire a lively discussion about the evolution of the rural lifestyle and that seemed to be the point.

James Mims, Worland

The critics, as we know, hate the book. Meanwhile, the readers loved it, or at least liked it a good deal. Clearly, my proper role was to ignore the niggling P of V problem, the reworked GRAPES OF WRATH-style ending, the weirdness of all that money being spent on paint, and to side with the readers. This was liberating, and we had a great discussion of all the different ways that this book advances the "rural in America" theme.

Rick Kempa, Rock Springs

A discussion that began with comparing the families in the book -- The Chandlers, the Spruils, the Latchers, and the Mexicans -- touched upon the following: authenticity of the narrator -- Most thought Luke sounded wise beyond his years, but they said it didn't bother them, as they took it to be a "Wonder Years" type of narrator looking back on his past.

Conflicts -- north vs. south (with Jimmy Dale coming to town, as well as the St. Louis Cards vs New York bb teams), town vs. country (i.e. painted houses vs. unpainted houses), land owners vs. sharecroppers, Mexicans vs. hill people, Baptists vs. Methodists. One participant who grew up on a farm in the Oklahoma panhandle, verified the rivalry between Baptists and Methodists, commenting that the Baptists were always in church, while the Methodists were the wealthier, more social members of the community.

Respect -- Participants felt that, while respect was a strong value, the respect was more a respect for dignity and family values than it was for the local law.

Tally/Cowboy vs. Ricky/Libby -- Kemmerer participants felt overwhelmingly that Tally & Cowboy would NOT make it as a couple, while Ricky & Libby probably would. They believed that Tally was just too young, and that Cowboy was her "ticket out of there," and she probably continued on her own from Chicago to Montreal. Also, Cowboy was too mean, and they commented that interracial relationships were not accepted, even in Chicago. They observed that, while Ricky may not want to return to the farm after being in the war, he would, out of respect to his family and to help his grandparents.

Transition -- Everything had always been the same on the farm until this summer, after which everything was different. The Chandler farm represented the nationwide beginning of the breakup of the family farm and of the family. This led us into the final discussion of the evening,

"Is there such a thing as 'small town values,' and if there is, how does the breakup of small, family farms impact them? Participants observed that there is a negative side to "small town values" in that small towns tend to be very insular and not accepting of new people, but they all agreed that positive small town values included friendliness, greater intimacy through knowing more people, strong sense of community, etc. The breakup of the small family farm precipitates the dissolution of small towns. Many participants knew of towns whose businesses have boarded up making them ghost towns, so there is a corresponding economic loss as well.

We're looking forward to Winter Wheat next month.

Pam Clark, Kemmerer

The group talked quite a bit about John Grisham and his career. I had prepared a map showing there area covered in his novel, "The Painted House" as well as how far he was moved as a child from there to Southaven, Mississippi where he graduated from high school and later

had a law practice. They were suprised at how young he is and the things he has accomplished, being elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives at 28 and publishing at least one book a year since 1991 and being one of only 2 authors to sell 2 million copies on first printing. "The Painted House" was very typical of the time and place. The group thought the narrator, 7 year old Luke, was much more worldly than his age but did not say it took away from the story. They thought the Mexican cotton pickers were treated in the story a lot better than some of the Mexican crop workers are treated today. They liked the author's ability to let the reader think ahead at what might happen only to be fooled with a much different twist in the story. They decided this was a very good book to end on as they liked it the best of the 4. This was the last book in their series for this spring session.

Dick Kalber, Pinedale

Medicine Bow: Some group members were very bothered that Grisham does not mention Blacks in the novel. They thought that very unrealistic and a weakness in the book. I tried to steer the discussion towards the book's focal points, but we kept getting back to the absence of Blacks.

One member lived on a farm near the setting of Painted House in the mid-1930s and talked a lot about the experience, specifically the problems encountered by Blacks in the area. The insights were helpful in looking at the plight of poor farmers, but again we kept getting back to the complaint that Blacks were not mentioned in Grisham's novel.

I was able to lead the discussion to other matters of concern, however: the characters, small farms in the U.S., the rural/small town experience, the Mexicans and hill people, baseball, and Luke's family's migration to Michigan. We talked about how they had to become migrant workers. I adore the narrator Luke, and group members agreed that he is a strong element in the novel.

--Maggie Garner

Clearmont: The first issue that came up was whether the voice of the seven-year-old narrator was believable. They thought it was. I seem to be the only one who ever questions that. They gave lots of valid argument for accepting his maturity: the fact that he only lived around only adults, the kinds of responsibilities he was expected to take on, his relative independence, and so on. The books lend itself to discussion of the culture of the 1950's, and the participants like that aspect and find it truthful. It also brings lots of memories into play. We also talked about the transition from rural to urban that occurs in several of the novels in this series and how that impacts the people. While we recognize the economic pressures precipitating the move, we worry about the expectations the mother holds. We discussed what's gained and what's lost in the move. This segued into a discussion of the value of the rural community as depicted in the novel as well as some of the shortcomings.

When we talked about the migrant workers, I learned about the migrant groups that were brought into this valley around Clearmont (some, not many, Mexicans but also Chinese!) to work in the beet fields. I also learned that there was a documented German POW camp in Clearmont and a small Japanese internment camp in the area. I never knew any of this and am becoming more and more intrigued by the character and history of this small out-of-the-way community now being impacted by the coal bed methane frenzy.

Rock River: We talked about the effectiveness of Luke being the narrator and his attractiveness as a character. We discussed other characters as well, especially Luke's mother and her strong desire to leave the farm.

We talked about migrant workers and the Mexicans being the more responsible workers. A group member's father was a sharecropper in the South, and she shared experiences with cotton picking and the struggle to survive in those circumstances. We talked about the "no win" situation of small farms and how Luke's family was better off than people like the Latchers.

Group members thought Grisham represented the era and the place well. I shared information that Grisham had lived on a cotton farm until he was seven and, although he says the novel is not autobiographical, he did check with his parents to be sure he was conveying farm facts correctly.

The group liked the rural in America series a lot and could relate well to the books. They related well to life in small towns, perhaps too much so. Sometimes there would be the sense that "yes, that's the way it is" and, consequently, there was not much to discuss about the rural aspects.

Maggie Garner

Sheridan: The group all enjoyed this book. We discussed the various rhythms of rural life threaded throughout the book (weather, crops, prices, labor). We also discussed the elements of rural life presented (town, church, baseball, cotton gin and picnics). The group agreed that the book was a good representation of the rural south and it was a believable story. One of the ladies in the group grew up a sharecropper's daughter in the same area that Grisham's book takes place. Her insight and comments were wonderful. I asked her how she ended up in Wyoming and she responded that she looked at a map to find a place that she was sure, would never grow cotton; Wyoming was it. We discussed rural America in transition and various values which were juxtaposed in the novel, in terms of the "wealth" of the rural family and the lure of city "wealth" and jobs in the north.

We analyzed the authenticity of characters and groups, and agreed that Grisham presented good representations of rural folk, but that Grisham did some manipulation of characters to drive the mystery/tension flow in the novel.

Naturally the conversation involved the believability of Luke.

I am fortunate to be able to be part of this discussion group for the series Rural America. They all have a rich, yet diverse, rural heritage and have wonderful comments and stories to share with the group. The books so far have been a springboard to terrific personal stories and remembrances.

--Katie Curtiss

Baggs: Everyone enjoyed this fast-moving, easy-to-read, engaging book. The group was willing to overlook the problems that some of the reviewers had a field day with: the whole improbable idea of painting that house in the worst of times (which the Boston Globe reviewer called "a major attack of literary symbolism"); the question about whether this is an authentic voice for a seven-year-old. We liked the idyllic images-those late nights on the front porch listening to the baseball game, the trips to town, the church picnic. We sympathized with Luke, the Keeper of Secrets-although we were surprised he didn't bust right open, he was so full of them. Thematically, we discussed the tensions between different groups-the Hill People and the Mexicans, the Baptists and the Presbyterian(?), the poor and the poorer-as well as the internal struggle that his parents, like so many people, faced: choosing between the permanent struggle of country life and the uncertain promise of city life. The book sparked some reminiscences of Mexican migrant workers who used to come to Baggs.

Sources: Along with some good reviews from the Lexis-Nexis database, I found some useful online interviews with Grisham (and the usual not-so-useful discussion questions from someone else's book group).

The Lusk group found Grisham's book not very stimulating. Most had anecdotes to share about their own experiences with Mexican Nationals, both in Wyoming and elsewhere, and we spent time discussing the negative stereotype versus most of our personal experiences of hardworking friendly and courteous people. Interestingly, most thought Ricky would not marry Libby, but that Cowboy and Tally would end up a stable long-term couple. Most of us have had to deal with an Eli or two, and town/painted house versus rural/unpainted buildings was an opportunity to explore some of the local dynamics and prejudices between these groups. All had a feeling about why it was important to paint the house, but also had difficulty articulating it, as the logic seemed counter-intuitive.

--Bob Brown

Sheridan: In discussing the book specifically we explored the various groups and their interactions; the meaning of wealth and generosity and what a painted house meant to the plot of the book. We discussed how the various family,

social and religious groups made decisions, interacted; and how that applies to the community we live in, today.

Interesting parts of our evening discussion included a discussion of migrant labor in the group's memories. Those who came from Colorado were familiar with Mexican American family migrant labor, those in Sheridan remembered single men coming to work in the beet fields.

The group engaged in a great discussion as to who believed the story could be told by Luke, at his age. One group participant pointed out that a boy of Luke's age could not throw a curve ball!

We also discussed the various generations of characters and how, and if, they ring true today. Grandmothers, mothers, daughters and sons; as well as grandfathers, sons and grandsons and all relationships within those groupings.

We ended with a discussion of whether or not this book will become a classic in terms of a coming of age story.

Finally we talked about how the book represents a transition from the rural west to the city.

--Katie Curtiss

Tongue River: The discussion took right off with observations about how different this was from the usual Grisham novel and from what the group was expecting. Most of the participants had read many of Grisham's books. I told them a bit about what Grisham says about writing this book: that it was a departure and that it reflected much of his own youth growing up in rural Arkansas along with stories he had heard repeated as a boy about people and events in his community. When I asked if they could see any elements of his other books reflected in this one, they didn't think so, so I held off until toward the end of the discussion to pursue this topic.

The aspect of the novel that engendered a lot of discussion was the setting and the reflections of rural America in 1952: the Korean War, baseball, radio shows, the transition to television, etc. Most of the group had memories of their own that the novel evoked, and we did a lot of sharing. It was especially interesting to hear from those older people who were born and raised in this area. We talked about the socio-economic shifts that we were seeing in the novel. The period was one where that move from the country to the city that began during and after WWII was really apparent. We had an interesting discussion about the expectations the young Chandlers (especially the wife) had about the move to the city. We talked about what's gained and what's lost in this transition in terms of all the characters it affected.

We discussed the rural groups represented and the individual characters. We argued about whether or not the story was really reflective of a 7 year old child's view. Some pointed out places where they thought he showed too much maturity and others argued that considering that he only lived around adults and the kind of responsibilities

he had, the voice was believable. We talked about our own early memories of significant events in our childhood. Actually, we spent a lot of time going down memory lane during the entire discussion.

I asked the group to consider what Grisham was affirming in this novel. They offered the ideas of community, family, generosity, respect, fairness, and hard work. To me the novel reinforces very traditional values rather than really challenging the reader to think about complexities. But I guess that's OK too.

--Katie Curtiss

Riverton: Enthusiasm was high; nearly everyone attending was a huge Grisham fan. They loved the book in every way - loved the writing, the evocation of southern farming, the characters, and the descriptions of Hill people, Mexicans, Baptists, Methodists, baseball, weather (which we pointed out was a character in the book), and family. I briefly gave some background on Grisham and how he came to write this book. The group found it helpful to know that it was serialized first, as for some the book reads better as a series of vignettes, than as a novel with a plot. They wanted more: does Ricky come home, what happens to the baby, does Pappy paint the rest of the house and does he stay on the farm, and do Luke and his family come back? We are blessed with eloquent ranch women who regularly come to the discussion and they were wonderful in describing their own experiences. They argued that indeed a young Luke would be knowledgeable about the farm and the financial problems and that he would certainly understand the need for extra hands to do the labor.

The group found Luke believable as a narrator, arguing that only children are privy to adult conversations and are often included in adult activities. We agreed that the story presents both a romantic and realistic view of rural life. Our best discussion centered around poverty, and how it is relative. Our ranchers argued that the self contained farm life of the 50s (that allowed the Chandlers to eat well and also feed the neighbors) no longer exists. We found it ironic that Luke and his family themselves became sharecroppers in a sense. Finally we ended by discussing social class in rural communities and small towns. Readers commented on church distinctions, which farm was rented versus owned land, town versus rural schoolchildren, and how migrant workers were welcomed and treated.

--Barbara Gose

Meeteetsee: I began the discussion taking a survey on what the members thought of the character Luke, and that produced a lively go round with much exchange between members regarding how believable his voice was as a 7 year old. There were Moms nodding that their kid would have done those things and there were Moms saying their 7 year old children back in the day and their grandchildren today wouldn't have pursued knowledge the way Luke did.

But all agreed that they followed this little guy's story eagerly, and his access to adult knowledge, as well as all the stuff that goes on underneath the radar of adults made him a great cipher for all the characteristics about rural and small town life that they recognized. We talked about gender, race, region and class as they worked themselves out between the characters, noting the inevitability that the two male characters who took on the hierarchy (Hank and Cowboy) would be the two who ultimately meet in conflict. Discussing each character's role allowed the conversation to roll, and then we'd pick up issues like nostalgia and explore the book for favorite spots that evoked nostalgic memories. I'm getting me one of those biscuits some day.

Our conclusion ended on a really interesting note about fighting. Apparently in Meeteetse there was a long tradition of the Labor Day Weekend always, always, ending in a brawl. Two of our members were in high school in the 50s and one still remembers the bloodied pulp that was left of one man's face as the victor headed to the bar to be congratulated with beer. She watched him and waited until someone dragged him away, and it seemed like forever to her. From that point on, she said, she started running in the other direction when fights started instead of running to join the crowd. People who had moved to Meeteetse in the 70s were warned to stay out of town on the day. But by then there was such a big county police presence that the fights were being severely contained, and folks complained that it wasn't like it used to be. This led into stories about violent to mortal combat in recent years. People wondered whether sex and fighting weren't the entertainment of rural kids and rural folk, given the active presence of both in Meeteetse and in the literature from the series even though the normal social decorum would not have permitted either.

--Mary Keller

Farson: We began by talking about how House compared/contrasted with other Grisham books. I shared some information about Grisham's life and a quote from an interview in which he explained that the book grew out of family stories and his own experiences on his grandparents' farm in Black Oak. We found Black Oak on the Arkansas map. Two people in the group had lived near there. Both of them felt that Grisham depicted life in that area accurately.

Everyone liked the way the book captured the feel of 1952, in a time just before the transition from a simpler rural life to a more complex urban one. Everyone liked the details of farm life and thought they seemed true to their memories of farm life then: the Saturday bath and trip to town, Sunday fried chicken dinners and no working allowed, listening to the radio, sitting on the porch on hot nights.

We talked about Luke. While they found his character appealing, everyone admitted that there were times that Luke seemed much wiser than a 7 year old. Even though a 7 year old, who was an only child and grew up working on a farm would probably be more mature than most, it didn't explain the times when his voice seemed more like

that of a mature narrator looking back at his experiences. However, no one felt this was a major flaw. We decided that it was believable that blacks were not a part of Luke's world since rural Arkansas before the Civil Rights movement was so segregated that blacks and whites had little contact.

We discussed other characters and how well they were developed. Pappy and Luke's mother and grandmother were seen as well-rounded characters. We compared and contrasted Luke's mother and Old Jack's wife, Ruth, who both wanted better lives away from the farm. We noted that several of the books we've read have dealt with times of transition in rural life when the younger generations are breaking away from the established patterns of rural life. We wished that Grisham would write a novel that followed Luke and his parents' experiences after moving to Detroit to show how rural people adjusted to urban life.

Because I anticipated a positive response to the novel, I compiled five one-paragraph quotes from various reviews of A Painted House, most of them critical. Considering the reviewers' criticisms as we discussed the book helped broaden and deepen our discussion of the book which readers might otherwise have accepted uncritically because they enjoyed reading it so much.

- Marcia Hensley

STORY: The discussion covered the usual topics that come out of this book: the elements of the 1952 setting that lend such credibility to the story, the argument over whether or not Luke's voice was really representative of a seven year old child, the rural groups and social stratification of them (lots of opinions as to why no reference to African Americans), the culture of small town America – then and now, and so on.

While I tend to find this book to be one of the least provocative in the series, these ladies, as usual, got me to considering some issues I hadn't before. Someone brought up the issues of violence in the book, not just in the obvious examples of the fight between Hank and the Sisco boys and the brutal murder scene with Cowboy, but the many examples of underlying violence: the wars, the fights, the references to Pappy's violent streak, and the Lacher family. This led to an interesting discussion as did the concept of the cycle of poverty and what it does to people (like the Lachers). There was lots of discussion about the significance of the title.

Ten Sleep Library: I read an open letter from Grisham (dated 1-25-01) telling that this work of fiction was inspired by his early childhood in rural Arkansas. While the setting is fairly accurate, the characters came from ". . . family lore . . . a most unreliable source" and the events are based on so many family ". . . versions that I believe none of them myself." I also pointed out that this book is a series of vignettes and is not a novel; there is no plot.

We discussed the social stratification of the various groups in the book and how each influenced the other groups. Then we talked about the various acts of violence; though

some were extremely brutal, the readers did not object because the author was describing the reality of the times. Several readers pointed out that Grisham had prepared us for the brutality by inserting underlying violence; the Civil War, World Wars I & II, Korea, Pappy's violent streak, and the Latcher family. Luke's first-hand observation of poverty early in the book and later his renewed experience during the rescue of the Latcher family illustrate the horrible stages of suffering and despair.

The ever-present "characters" in rural life--wind and rain--raise their ugly heads wherever you farm or ranch was discussed along with the importance of a family garden and home canning. Almost all the readers shared childhood memories of pulling weeds; picking, pulling, and peeling vegetables, and washing jars.

We listed all the loses which Luke suffered as the book ended; daily contact with Pappy and Gran, the farm's diversity, old friends, Ricky (who is lost whether he dies in Korea or returns to marry Libby), and the comfort and security of his room. What he gained was learning the importance of respect of others, realizing that poverty is relative, knowing that baseball will return in the spring, and painting can be rewarding because he left his grandparents A PAINTED HOUSE. I closed the evening by showing the group a Rawlings baseball glove given to me in 1950 by a brother who was being shipped to Korea.

-Jim Fassler

As with other groups, as reported in the scholar notes, this book led to many personal memories and family legend/anecdotes. I shared some of the available Grisham biomaterial, and his comments about the book. There were no new motifs introduced, either by me or by the participants, although we spent quite a bit of time on the significance of painted houses and painting the house of the story.

Most thought that Cowboy and Tally had the best chance for a lifetime relationship, versus Ricky and Libby, and discussed the reasons for this. Also considered was the difference in attitudes evidenced by Gran and Kathleen, e.g., their comments to Libby on p. 200, and the reasons for this difference.

In summary, I can only repeat that the discussion followed the trends outlined in the other scholar notes for this book.
--Bob Brown

We discussed Grisham's book in its usual "browsing" way, touching on all the topics this book and series leads us into. I especially like this Rural in America series because the books are so easy to tie to the themes and to each other. The participants can easily compare young Luke with Ike and Bobby in Plainsong. The societal role of bullies, social stratta, fighting, sex, and cultural themes were all discussed. We talked about the unchanging world of cotton farming from the 1860s through the 1950s,

and we talked hand labor and hard work as part of the rural world. This book was well-liked.

I want to share that I used the Meeteetse story about Labor Day celebration fights. It really hits home for us small town, rural families. Thanks, Mary Keller, for sharing such a good description for all of us to use with this book.

Patty Myers, Wright

Grisham-readers and non-Grisham-readers alike had mixed reactions to *A Painted House*. Objections included the following, most based on the book's literary merits:

- the book's mixed intentions (a cozy read or a thriller?)
- the book's uneven pacing
- implausible voice for 7-year-old narrator (too deep, too precocious, too casual about the murders)
- unfocused flip-flopping between realistic and nostalgic views of rural life (parts are too golden, too idyllic, too warmly remembered)
- questionable theme about the redemptive quality of baseball

That said, our discussion covered some interesting humanities themes: the clash of cultures during a time of poverty (land-owners, share-croppers, migrant labor); the perception of work (effort, accomplishment, value); rural ethics (reactions to poverty, illegitimacy, violence, crime); the exploration of human stereotypes; social justice; and the links among self, family, and community.

Selected resources on Grisham:

- Doubleday Books' online Reader's Guide <http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780385501200&view=rg>
- 1993 *Current Biography* article on John Grisham
- The John Grisham Room at Ole Miss http://library.msstate.edu/grisham_room/
- Geoff, William. "A Brutal Crime, a Passion for Justice." *Biography* Jan. 1997: 68-71.
- Norton, Will, Jr. "Why John Grisham Teaches Sunday School." *Christianity Today*, 3 Oct. 1994: n.p.

Curious note I never pursued but probably should have:

When Grisham serialized *A Painted House* in *The Oxford American*, he included an epilogue which was cut from the book edition. Purportedly, the epilogue tells us what happens to our protagonist after leaving his grandfather's farm. For anyone interested, I figure it's the sixth and final installment of the serialization, dated November 2000.

Powell, Deb Koelling

Eight people, in addition to the facilitator, attended the April 21 discussion of *A Painted House* by John Grisham at the Wyoming State Museum. This session was the last

of the series. We briefly reviewed biographical information about Grisham, noting that of all the authors in this series, he is the one who has experienced the most financial success from his writing.

Everyone liked the book. Participants said it was a fun, easy read. The group commented on Grisham's skill at creating a variety of characters, particularly the seven-year-old narrator, Luke, although Luke seems somewhat precocious for his age. This may be attributed to his having no siblings and being around adults most of the time. Others, who had lived in the South, remarked on how well Grisham described Southern attitudes and lifestyles.

The group then voted on which book in the series is their favorite. *Winter Wheat* received slightly more votes than *A Painted House*.

We discussed the social order set out in the book, including sodbusters, sharecroppers, land owners, town people, hill people, Northerners, and "the Mexicans". The group thought it was unusual to read a book about the South in which "the Mexicans" played a large role, but Black characters did not. Participants who had lived in the South indicated there are places where few Black people live. This led to a discussion of incidents of discrimination group members had witnessed in Wyoming, particularly in Cheyenne and Sheridan, and how small a percentage of the state's population is non-White. We talked about Luke's mother's concern for the treatment of "the Mexicans", his grandmother's attitude that some of the characters are "good people, just different", and how many of the characters felt that "the Mexicans" didn't care how they traveled because they were just happy to be "there" and making money; these characters, however, never asked "the Mexicans" about their feelings.

Some of the discussion focused on what set characters apart from each other, including living in town, being Baptist or Methodist, owning land, having a painted house, and differing race or ethnic backgrounds.

Pride, the group agreed, is a theme in *A Painted House*, exhibited in various ways by various characters. Hank, who boasts that his family's house is painted and they live better than the Chandlers, feels it necessary to bolster his pride, be better than other characters because of his family's material possessions or his superior physical strength. Luke notes how much it costs Mr. Lester to ask for help. Cowboy has pride in his abilities and does not see himself as lesser than other characters, although he understands that others look down on him. Pappy is the proudest of all the characters.

We also discussed secrets, how they are a theme in the novel and how they affect the characters, particularly Luke, who feels guilty at keeping secrets, feels guilty at betraying confidences, and, many times, keeps secrets at great cost to himself and his peace of mind.

Another topic we addressed was how Grisham uses contrasts between characters, for example, Luke's mother and his grandmother. Although the women agree on

many things, including how others should be treated, they do not get along. In part this may be a natural when a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law live together, and in part this may be because Luke's mother is determined to move off of the farm and find a better life in the city, while Gran's life has been, and always will be, on the farm. Also, Hank and Cowboy both commit murder, but Hank's motives arise from his mean spirit, his total focus on self, his disregard for others, his lack of control over his own, base emotions. Cowboy, on the other hand, kills to protect himself and Tally as well as for revenge, and does not murder Hank in the heat of emotion, but carefully plans how and where he will end Hank's life. Cowboy works hard, while Hank does not. Cowboy also has empathy for other characters, as he demonstrates when he is pitching in the baseball game. Unlike the selfish Hank, Cowboy repays his debts as he can, for instance, when he and Tally leave Pappy's truck at the station, keys in it, filled with gas. And, although Cowboy is clearly a man whom it is dangerous to cross, he is not, like Hank, prone to senseless violence or violence for its own sake. Hank's own family is clearly afraid of him.

The group also discussed the baseball game played among the workers and the Chandlers, and how the game – "the Mexicans" against the others – is representative of some themes in the book and foreshadows future events. Baseball serves as a representation of the dreams and goals of some of the characters. The Spruills' total disregard of Pappy's instructions as to where to camp and their decision to camp on Luke's precious baseball field also foreshadows plot development.

Another part of the discussion centered on the part a painted house played in the book. The painting of the house, the group felt, is related to several themes. When "the Mexicans" join in to help paint the house, demonstrates their appreciation of others property, their appreciation of the work the Chandlers give them, and their camaraderie with each other, as well as dissimilar characters. Additionally, it demonstrates they have a broader range of skills, lives beyond, picking cotton. Trot's initiation of the painting of the house illustrates his empathy for other, despite his physical limitations, and is one way in which Grisham makes the reader aware that Hank's family does not always approve of his actions. Trot begins painting the house, at least in part, as an apology for Hank's rudeness and inappropriate behavior. Tally, who helps purchase the paint, participates in the apology. The action is a small rebellion against Hank's domination.

Painting the house is also representative of change in the lives of the characters. Luke's mother has always tried to convince the Chandlers the house should be painted, a characteristic of "town" attitude. Pappy has always held out against painting the house, the land and working the land being more important than painting the house. In addition, money is scarce and not as easily made as in the city, so it must be spent on what Pappy considers more essential to making the farm work. In the end, when the house is painted, Luke and his parents leave for the city and leave Pappy and Gran with a painted house, probably never to return to live on the farm. Whether or not Ricky

will continue farming is not clear. One hope for passing down the Chandlers' rural heritage lies in Ricky's illegitimate child, but Grisham leaves the fate of the Chandlers farm in question.

In fact, several participants commented they would have liked the book to include a short chapter about what happens to the characters, particularly Luke. Does he become a major league baseball player, for example?

Finally, the group reviewed books with a similar theme they might enjoy reading. Participants had been asked to suggest books with a rural theme that other members of the group might like to read. Among those recommended were: *Out Stealing Horses* by Per Petterson, which takes place in Norway and is written in a style similar to that of *The Memory of Old Jack*; *Breaking Clean* by Judy Blunt, which is Blunt's memoir of growing up and becoming a wife and mother in rural Montana; *The Bottoms* by Joe R. Lansdale, which is a coming-of-age story about rural Texas during the Great Depression that is somewhat derivative of books such as *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, but well written; *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley about a man who decides to turn over his farm to his daughters; *Hot Biscuits: Eighteen Stories by Women and Men of the Ranching West*, edited by Max Evans and Cindy Moulton, which features a variety of views and genres; *Fire on the Mountain* by Edward Abbey, which pits a New Mexico rancher versus land-grabbing government agencies; *Where the Rivers Run North* by Sam Morton, an historical novel set in Montana and winner of a 2008 WY Historical Society award; books by Ivan Doig; and *Cocktail Hour in Jackson Hole* by Donald Hough, a book about Jackson before it became a popular place for the wealthy, billionaires

Rose Wagner

Fourteen readers, including four high school students, attended the first book discussion in Dubois in several years. We live "Rural in America" here, with most having experienced dependence on the land directly or through parents/grandparents.

I began the discussion with themes common to our four authors and to many memoirs and fictional accounts. Most approach rural life from one or more of the following perspectives:

Romantic identification of rural life with all that is good
Realistic descriptions of actual, complex rural life
Rejection of rural life by those who find it constraining
Return, changed, to the country after a period away

These perspectives, I thought, link with three core questions in each of the four authors:

Land and/or weather: do the land and weather themselves become a key emotional element in the story (almost like another character) or do they serve as backdrop for a story focused on human relationships?

Perspective: is the writer (or narrative voice) an outsider describing the reality of others or has the writer him/herself been shaped by the community?

Dream: what is the dream that shapes the writer's (or character's) life (to find deep value, to survive, to flee, to re-engage)?

These general observations provided a context for a discussion organized around more specific questions. Here in Dubois, weather dominates conversation, making the theme of land/weather as an emotional presence accessible and immediate. Most anticipated a climatic, weather related conclusion to the story.

The interconnection between sin as preached in the Baptist church and Luke's burden of secrets also resonated with our group. Was Pappy the only accessible and safe adult? We discussed the effects of secrets and the awareness of a seven year old of the primacy of the cotton crop—get the crop in and, then, confide. Luke finally cried in his mother's lap, as a small boy rather than the secret bearer for the family.

We enjoyed identifying the various strong colors Grisham used to highlight emotion in the fairly monochromatic landscape of the unpainted house and bleak cotton fields. A green snake, the red Cardinals jacket, the shocking white of the freshly painted house, the red car from Detroit and the blood of the murders each linked Luke to his world in new ways.

I thought baseball was a dominant theme, but questions about the various games described in the novel failed to generate much discussion. At the end of the conversation, I distributed some reflection questions for our next meeting.

Dorothy Remy

Nine of us gathered at Guernsey-Sunrise High School to discuss *A Painted House*, by John Grisham. (Incidentally, I learned from the participants that the merger of the Guernsey and Sunrise school systems a few decades back was not without its controversies, and many members of the community retain pointed memories of those events.) As compared to last month's reading, *Plainsong*, the group found *A Painted House* to be generally easier going, a lot more "unputdownable." Several of the participants had read the book previously, and didn't seem to mind reading it again. We had some discussion on the backbreaking nature of farm labor in the days before agriculture became so highly mechanized; several of the participants had family members with experience in the cotton fields down south, while others performed a lot of similar labor themselves when they were younger. In particular we talked about how every member of the family, no matter how young, was expected to participate, as was the case in the book. We talked also about how such hard labor and relative lack of reward led to so many families migrating north to where the jobs were (Detroit, in the world of the book). We have a lot of romantic associations surrounding the "family farm" today,

but back then, to many folks, the family farm didn't represent heritage so much as a lifetime of labor.

Several participants remarked on the relative isolation of farming families at the time, and how that was consistent with their own upbringing. Memories of big shopping trips down to Torrington and – once a year, for Christmas maybe – a trip to downtown Scottsbluff or Cheyenne or maybe even Denver, where there was shopping and good food in the restaurants. In the book, the family really only socializes via their church and once a year the county fair; participants remarked that their own upbringings were in some cases similar. The family in *A Painted House* are all huge St. Louis Cardinals fans; one participant grew up in St. Louis in the 50s and remembers cheering for those same teams, especially Stan Musial, and cheering along on the radio. We laughed about how “unfair” it was to the main character in the book that the two teams playing for the World Series that year were both from New York. Come to think of it, that would still seem unfair today.

We also discussed the nature of news in the book versus today, especially via the radio. The family has a member at war in Korea, yet the only updates they get come via Edward R. Murrow's nightly broadcast, which gives war news only in the most general of terms. This as of course contrasted with the instant and all-enveloping nature of news today. Further, we talked about how that seven year-old boy had in one summer more adult experiences than many adults ever experience in their whole lives. This led to a general sort of view that the book was not especially “realistic,” although that very fact also made it a very enjoyable read. We had a bit of a discussion on the seeming lack of racial prejudice evident in the book, despite the fact that it took place in the Jim Crow South of the 50s. Though there are no black characters, there are migrant workers from Mexico; but the family in the book doesn't seem to regard them as any worse than the “hill people” who come in to work the fields during harvest. We wondered, too, how it was possible that the hill people could have nicer homes than the farmers they came to work for, and whether that was even true, or just boasting on the part of prideful hill people. The book doesn't provide any answers on this point. Nor do we find out the answers to two of the book's central points of suspense: whether Ricky will return in one piece from Korea, and whether he in fact is the father of Tally's baby. We could make some guesses, but the book never says for sure.

Our next book will be *The Egg & I*, which a few participants indicated they had also already read. I haven't, so I'll be looking forward to comparing their views with my own.

Court Merrigan

Kemmerer Public Library Book Discussion Group
Led by Chris Propst
Met Tues 3.24 w/ 7 participants for *A Painted House* by John Grisham

In using the method of having each of the participants state what stood out for them from the reading, we make sure that each voice is heard from the group. There was almost universal acclaim from the group for the novel, especially in illustrating the themes of the Rural series—especially about what was gained/lost from the family's decision to be economic migrants themselves and ideas about isolation and the benefits/drawbacks of small towns versus big cities.

Several people mentioned, and I echoed, that a strength of the novel was in capturing what it was like in the changing South of the 1950's as America transitioned away from farming and into manufacturing. The setting of the house, farm, town, attitudes of the farmers, and the cotton fields were well captured by Grisham. Several people shared that they had read the usual fast paced, lawyer-centered novels but did like the leisurely pace of this novel.

Other themes or literary characteristics readers like were the relationships (between family members and in the town), the language of some passages, the repeated motif of the weather and seasons and how important they are in the novel and in farming, the idea of hard work, baseball as play in this world of work, and how different levels of poverty pervaded the novel as even the “well off” were constantly in debilitating debt.

I voiced one of the only dissenting opinions about the narrator, finding him to be precocious for the age of 7 years.

Towards the end of our discussion, we explored the idea of the painted house and what it meant. While it was begun by Trot as a way to console Luke after Hank bullies him, it also became Trot's work, a sign of his trying to do something greater than his disability kept him from. It also, of course, is the sign of affluence in a poor area, that the family was aspiring to something greater. It was interesting how so many people, especially the Mexicans, worked on painting it—a project that brought the community together. It was ironic that the mother got her wish just as the family was to begin its diaspora.

Also toward the end, several readers did express some surprise with the fact that no Black people were mentioned and that race was glossed over in general in the novel.

I shared with the group some of Grisham's autobiography, especially that he grew up on a cotton farm, and that the novel was serialized and that the epilogue, which would explain what happened to the uncle Rick in the Korean War or the new baby, was left off of the novel due to influence on Grisham by agent/editor/and a wife.

We're looking forward to discussing *Winter Wheat* next month. Chris Propst

Plainsong

Six of us met at the Eppson Center for Seniors in Laramie for our first meeting of the Rural in America series, which began with Plainsong. This was my first time with this group, and they said it was the first time they had met in August, which is why it was small. We started by talking about what people wanted from a book group. This turned out to be helpful since I had brought all of the books from the series to show, and everyone had a negative reaction when they saw the Annie Proulx book (although no one had actually read anything by her). Talking about what a book group might bring to people even when they are reading something they don't like, or don't think they'll like, was a good idea.

The group really enjoyed Plainsong. It was thought to be believable by everyone, which was especially evident in the fact that the characters and situations reminded the group of people they were related to and experiences they have had. No one minded the hanging ending, although people tried to fill in stories about what some of the characters were like before the book began; for example, what the mom was like before her depression.

I gave background information on the author, including information about the play based on this book that premiered in Denver. I also brought in West of Last Chance, a collaboration between photographer Peter Brown and Haruf.

For our final gathering in 2008 eight people came to discuss Plainsong, including a "homeless" woman (her description) and a visitor from the Colorado area where the story took place. Both were active and interesting contributors to the discussion.

I read some biographical information on the author and provided some interview insights on his writing career and influences, especially Hemingway and Faulkner. The group thoroughly enjoyed the story. The discussion again surrounded the main themes of the Rural series (which don't need repeating for the fourth time), and ran through all four books. We thought this story included more focus on issues of abandonment, grief, and hope.

As with other groups, the brothers McPherson were the stars. They are not an unknown "type" in the area and, like elsewhere, are much loved and respected. Most of the readers did not think it unusual or unbelievable that the brothers would act as they did, although we discussed the likelihood of two bachelors taking a young pregnant girl into their home acceptable in our current political correctness climate. We compared and contrasted the two sets of brothers, the young Guthries and older McPhersons, and were hopeful the the young ones would find joy and love and compassion through helping/loving another in need. The Guthries experienced "enough trouble" for a worthwhile life and were the recipients of much kindness and understanding, but perhaps too undeveloped to do anything but virtually flap in the wind of their existence.

We also speculated on what was not said about characters. For example, what was Ella like before she became depressed and eventually left her family; Iva Stearns' prior life which we glimpsed through her actions, possessions and recollections of family; Maggie's life with her father and what made her the connector for all the others; Victoria's life with her mother and lack of father and how that impacted the whole story; why the young boys acted as they did when Iva died and why they went so far from "home" and didn't tell anyone. The author certainly did not flesh out the characters any more than necessary to tell the story, but very cunningly included enough detail and history to allow us to speculate and read our own experiences into the tale.

No one seemed to mind the writing style, especially the lack of quotation marks. It seems that we all fell into the cadence of how the story was told and agreed it was a simple and direct device to describe events as they unfolded. We did try to determine the time frame from several remarks in the book and decided it was probably around 1964 or 1965. Some of the incongruent items noted were Ivermec, VCR's, copiers, vasectomies, and home pregnancy tests. The old Ford Mustang, phone booths and ditto machine led us to our dates. (Remember the smell from mimeograph machines?)

This book was the favorite of the series, which included The Egg and I, Winter Wheat, and The Memory of Old Jack (my pick). We also discussed the possibilities for next Fall and this group chose Women of Mystery.

We'll be looking forward to trying to outguess the authors.

Virtually everyone loved the book and envied the woman who had checked out the Lander copy of the sequel, Eventide! After background on Haruf, we proceeded around the group so that each person could share views on the book. One interesting point was quickly evident. Several people from the East found that his style of writing and use of language took getting used to for them. It made the book slow going at first until they fell into what they considered a western style of writing. We talked about landscape and the the sense of place that Haruf captures so beautifully in Plainsong. The group appreciated the way the book was organized, with characters each taking a turn until they came together at the end (and I brought up plainsong and music at this point). Each character was discussed and several readers were nonplussed by the fact that Haruf provided so little information about Ella's depression and Victoria's background. Others felt that this didn't detract from the story and kept the reader focused on the main characters. Some believed Tom to be a weak character; not a good father and a hothead when it came to Russell. But as we moved beyond these topics we broadened our discussion to themes of the novel: love, loneliness, redemption, forgiveness, compassion, community, and having enough "trouble" to lead a worthwhile life! Everyone had a favorite character, scene, or description and so we did a good bit of reading to each other. Barbara Gose, Lander

Opinions of the novel were close to evenly divided: a little over half the group enjoyed it but the other folks were less than enthusiastic. One member summarized the reaction to the novel precisely, "I didn't dislike it, it was just my least favorite of the four novels."

Other reasons for luke warm responses to the book included: The graphic autopsy of the horse, the lack of historical content and (perhaps most telling) "The book just ends, it doesn't have a clear conclusion." This departure from the conventions of the traditional novel was somewhat offputting, even for those who liked the novel.

Readers who enjoyed the novel cited the likeable characters such as the McPheron brothers, the manner in which the central characters rebuild community from their failed relationships, and the many questions about both the future and the past that the novel raised. I was intrigued by the sense of pairing or parallel structure I saw throughout the novel--the two sets of brothers, the fertility checks of human and heifers, and the Guthrie boys' reaction to the death of the horse and the old woman who mothered them.

We discussed the characters, their strengths and flaws at length. We also mulled over some of the conclusions of the Lander group. I shared that, easterners in the Lander group found Haruf's style spare and a bit offputting at first. I also shared their (the Lander Group's) conclusion that Haruf's style is typically western. Surprisingly the group accepted this observation with little comment other than, "I didn't notice that," or "I don't know if I would have thought of that."

When asked whether they considered Tom Guthrie weak, the group decided he was a man beset with difficulties and was doing his best to muddle through. And perhaps that assessment of Guthrie sums up our reaction to the novel as a whole. All of the characters were doing their best to rebuild lives after their previous lives came apart.
James Mims, Worland

It was a great discussion that took a shape of its own, with little direction from me. In general, people liked the book and felt it reflected their experiences. There was discussion about whether it was about rural life in particular, or if its themes were universal. I read a couple of quotes from Haruf's interview on identitytheory.com about his resenting his books being called regional.

There was also talk of the set of assumptions that goes with telling people one is from Wyoming, but a couple of people mentioned that this works in the opposite direction as well. The scathing "Pottery Barn" review in the New York Times (May 23, 2004, Jonathan Miles) prompted this part of the conversation.

There were a couple of people who really disliked Tom, and a couple of others who did not like the way the book ended. They said they didn't need a happy ending, but wanted some sort of ending.

Some people had a hard time taking Haruf's writing this book with a cap over his eyes literally. A couple of people

mentioned that the lack of punctuation was distracting at first, but that they soon grew used to it. One person mentioned that she didn't even notice it until it was brought up in the discussion (admittedly, this happened to me as well; it wasn't until I looked at reviews of the book that I realized this fact).

This was a great group of people, and I look forward to our next book.

Kelly Gove, Laramie

We began with a statement by Haruf about his writing style: "My intention is to write clear, simple, direct sentences and to believe that if you write clearly and cleanly enough then the reader will get what you want him or her to get. Beyond that I want people to think that they have been in the presence of real people." Most of the participants felt that Haruf accomplished this in *Plainsong* because they felt they knew these characters. One participant, however, said he found the characters all to be "black and white" with no depth. He said *Plainsong* was his least favorite of the series because of the lack of dimension in the characters and because he found the plot to be very predictable with no twists and no surprises.

We discussed how Ike and Bobby's search for someone -- from Mrs. Stearns to the McPheron brothers -- manifested the loneliness inherent in their lives and in the lives of all the other characters. Discussions on the other books in this series dealt with the break up of the family farm and small town values, and we talked about how the setting for this book is a town where these changes have already occurred. Ike and Bobby don't know their next door neighbor, and when they do encounter him, it is at the end of his loaded shotgun. From the boy's newspaper boss to the barber, to the Beckmans, most of the inhabitants of the town are unfriendly, gruff, and even dangerous. Participants observed that the only place where the idealistic "small town values" exist is at the McPheron's ranch outside of town. People who need love and companionship gravitate there -- with the help of Maggie Jones -- and that is where, at the end, they create their own form of family, or community.

As products of small towns and farms and ranches, we all enjoyed this series. When asked what was their favorite, most everyone agreed that *A Painted House* was "a good read." Without exception, everyone liked *Winter Wheat*. *The Memory of Old Jack* was one person's most favorite of the series, and others said it was, if not their favorite, still "okay." Several said they would read *Plainsong* again, and everyone except the one participant who did not like this book, was curious about its sequel, *Evantide*. They want to know what happens to Victoria and her baby. The group voted on Women of Mystery as the next series they would like to read.

Pam Clark, Kemmerer

Baggs: I began this discussion by sharing some of the paeans that reviewers lavished on the book (and that a quick search of Lexis-Nexis Academic readily yielded): "Like authentic Shaker furniture, beautiful in its plainness" (Deirdre Donahue, USA TODAY); "a simple field planted with one rather exciting crop, which is the staff of life" (Gail Caldwell, Boston Globe); "a novel so foursquare, so delicate and lovely, that it has the power to exalt" (Verlin Klinkenbord, NYT).

However, many in the group didn't like Haruf's book quite as much as the reviewers (and I) did. Several had trouble believing that two old bachelors would ever be considered suitable caregivers for a pregnant teenage girl-and thus the book did not ring true to them. Some felt that the early sex scene in the abandoned house was gratuitous and unnecessary. There was also a stylistic impediment-absence of quotation marks and so on.

We worked through these issues, spent time with each of the characters-with special attention and sympathy for the young "sojourners" Ike and Bobby, and, I think, moved to a collective appreciation of the book's strengths: how it can make us ache with the loneliness that most of the characters feel; how kindness and caring can give relief from loneliness; how (as Haruf said in an interview with Publisher's Weekly), people "need trouble of the right kind" to fully mature as human beings.

Finally, we had some fun envisioning the much-reported tactic that Haruf employed in writing this book: pulling a stocking cap over his eyes and typing madly and uninhibitedly at the keyboard.

--Rick Kempa

At the end of the preceding meeting I had discussed the structure of the book, as I had initially experienced difficulty with the way each chapter speaks about different characters. Several participants in this meeting expressed gratitude for this preparation, which was another reminder to me to do this at the end of every discussion, which I sometimes forget to do. The participants commented that they could hardly wait for the next chapter about some of the characters, especially the boys Bobby and Ike, and the McPheron brothers Raymond and Harold. They remarked on a few of the bachelor brothers on some of the local ranches, who they could not imagine taking in a pregnant teenager. They found the father Tom Guthrie to be a weak character and a poor father, and Maggie Jones to be a kind of earth mother who tied everything together.

They spent quite a bit of time discussing Bobby and Ike and their problems, and how they responded to them. Their mother's major depression had puzzled some in the group: some didn't know what was wrong with her, and some couldn't believe that as a mother she couldn't snap out of it. I tried to assure them that her symptoms were realistic. In turn the boys' time in Denver met with sympathy, and comments about the difficulties most of us, whether native or newcomers to Wyoming rural life, experience when in Denver and other metropolitan areas. This segued into animated discussion about the

meanness and cruelty of Russell Beckman, and how his parents and he were remarkably like some of the Lusk families and their teenage sons, especially the athlete sons. They also compared Guthrie's meeting with the principal (pp 19 - 21) to the known behaviors of the Lusk high school principal. This in turn led to discussion of the drug problem in Lusk, and the failure of the town police and county sheriff to do anything about it. Group members expressed their frustration and anger with this situation. Some in the group had tried various ways of trying to address these problems, but had met with indifference (police and school officials) and social exclusion (friends and other townspeople). These topics were an interesting commentary on the culture of this small Wyoming town and county, and the many similarities with the culture of Haruf's fictional Holt, Colorado.

I found two web resources to be especially helpful for me: interviews with Kent Haruf by Robert Birnbaum at <http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews>, and by Catherine McWeeney at <http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/1199/haruf/interview>. And, I remembered to give some background on the group's next book The Memory of Old Jack. What a wonderful series!

--Bob Brown

Medicine Bow: We talked about the loneliness that each character had at the beginning of the novel. People were upset that Mrs. Guthrie was never diagnosed, and they could not understand why she wasn't happy with her life. Consequently, we talked about depression and the fact that people used to not discuss it and medications were not used as much as now. It was one of those diversions I had not anticipated because her condition was just accepted when I discussed this book in Rock River.

I have found that a quote from a reviewer works really well when discussing this book because the quote so well describes the book. It's from Richard Tillinghast in The Washington Post Book World. He calls Plainsong "Resonant and meaningful....A song of praise in honor of the lives it chronicles [and] a story about people's ability to adapt and redeem themselves, to heal the wounds of isolation by moving, gropingly and imperfectly, toward community."

The quotation leads the discussion to the ways that the characters reach out to each other and, by the end, form a community. We expanded that discussion to look at how people in rural communities help each other, how Holt (and similar places) don't have social services and organizations to help people, and how people in small places know everything that is going on. Group members thought it odd that church was not mentioned in the book because the church is often the gathering place in small towns. We discussed that the American Legion was the gathering place in Holt.

--Maggie Garner

Rock River: The participants liked this book, which surprised me but pleased me. They even liked the lack of quotation marks.

They well understood life in Holt, CO, because they saw it as just like life in Rock River, WY. They appreciated that the book is about people's ordinary lives in an ordinary place. They saw the lives portrayed realistically and compassionately.

We talked about the fact that each of the seven main characters were lonely at the beginning of the book but by giving and receiving care, they redeem themselves and find more contentment. By the end, they have formed an odd but mutually satisfying extended family. One person pointed out that the one traditional family in the book--the Beckmans--is the most dysfunctional group of people in the book. The view of family that Haruf gives us goes far beyond tradition.

Of course, the group members related stories of men they know like the McPheron brothers. We talked about the possibilities of Ike and Bobby ending up like the McPheron brothers and the similarities between the two brother teams.

We discussed the effect of abandonment by parents (whether through death, emotional withdrawal, or desertion) and how this abandonment shapes people's lives. The book not so much gave participants insight into rural life as it allowed them to reflect upon their own lives in a small town, and the disadvantages and advantages of such a life.

--Margaret Garner

Two people came with Colorado maps to show us exactly where Holt would be. Even though it's an imaginary town, it seems so specific that people always want to find it. However, one person said that the place could have been Clearmont as easily as anywhere else. Finally, we all agreed that it represents any small town in the rural West. We discussed the characteristics of this kind of town - the good and the bad. This part of the discussion segued into a lot of personal accounts of living in one of those towns. We agreed that change comes more slowly and perhaps meets more resistance, or at least is less noticeable. One person made the interesting comment that even small towns have "the wrong side of the tracks", but that there still isn't much of difference between people socially or economically. One of the limitations is how little understanding there is for someone like the boys' mother.

Tom Guthrie, the group decided, was pretty typical of rural men in the West. He seemed baffled and somewhat impatient with his wife's depression. He is decent and takes care of his children, but is not a warm, "sensitive" type. Of course, everyone loved the McPheron brothers and found them highly believable. We discussed the other characters and how they relate to the idea of community in the novel.

To a person, the group loved this book. I began by reminding them of the expectations they acknowledged last time that they bring to a book about "rural" life. We looked at how this book fulfills and/or doesn't fulfill those expectations. We talked about Holt (by the way even though it's a fictitious town, several participants could place it very specifically there in northeastern Colorado) in terms of general characteristics, and then its limitations and strengths. We saw insularity as a disadvantage and lack of understanding and help for someone like the boys' mother. We felt that the taciturn nature of the characters, most notably, of course, the McPheron brothers, was believable and highly characteristic of that setting. Interestingly, almost everyone who came from a rural background insisted that they have known brothers like those two old men. We talked about, in spite of its being such an uplifting book in so many ways, it does not idealize or romanticize. All the characters are somewhat limited, even flawed, and we worry about their futures at the end of the novel. The group recognized, without my prodding, the major themes such as redefinition of family and how civility and kindness can be forms of salvation. Among the passages that people chose to share, several were descriptive of the landscape. I thought that was interesting because less sensitive readers could miss that in Haruf because of the sparseness of his style.

In my research I couldn't find much at all on Haruf, but lots specifically on Plainsong. Several people in the group plan to read Haruf's latest novel, Eventide. One person already had, but we wouldn't let her tell us too much since we know it is a follow up to this one with many of the same characters.

Sheridan: Five members of the group made their way to the library; it was 10 below and snowing. The evening began as one member followed through with our mini theme of the painted or unpainted rural house; in this book the painted house that was now without paint, belonged to the McPheron brothers. Additionally a member of the group pointed out that in the flyer for the series it mentions that the book takes place in 1952. A rancher, she pointed out that Ivermec was first used in 1984. Also the presence of soap operas and recording devices were not in evidence in 1952. We all laughed and appointed her senior book editor.

I began the discussion explaining how Haruf wrote the book (thanks for clueing me into that Rick - I found that interview with Haruf). This led us into a discussion of the lack of quotation marks and the structure of the book. No one had a problem with this.

We discussed the book by going through the various characters, the strengths and weakness' inherent in rural towns and how the characters formed families, and found hope, kindness and dignity. Two members of the group really liked Maggie and wished she was more developed. Everyone loved the McPheron brothers; many had marked the description of the McPheron brothers and Victoria's trip to Phillips as one which captured the landscape beautifully. I got the feeling that whether it was believable that they would have actually taken in Victoria was not

important to the group. Instead they commented that they knew men like them and that Haruf captured their house, pick up truck, conversations and attitudes, perfectly.

When discussing Ike and Bobby we segued into an interesting discussion as to whether their actions in going to the abandoned house, alone in the dark at night were believable, and whether some of their other actions were age appropriate. This took us into a discussion comparing them to Luke in *A Painted House*. We threw around why we seemed to not believe the character of Luke, as much as we did the characters of Ike and Bobby.

--Katie Curtiss

Gillette: After introducing ourselves at our first meeting on August 17 (yes, I'm very late turning in this report!), we began discussing *Plainsong*. I began by asking how it fit "*Rural in America*." They responded variously, mentioning space, country, animals, heartland, quilts and quilting. They also talked about people being down to earth, provincial, and everybody knowing everybody else and everything.

Of course, they loved the McPheron brothers, and thought their relationship with Victoria very believable. When I suggested that this novel was a love story, the group of 12 was a bit non-plussed, but after considering that suggestion, they decided that the relationship between the McPheron's, the two young boys, the boys' concern for the old woman to whom they delivered papers, and the rather formal situation with their mother and father, and the McPherons' and Maggie's relationship with Victoria did make it a love story, perhaps the only kind of love one can find in a rural environment.

Linda Ross

It's hard to get a real critical discussion of this book because everyone loves it and seems to find it hard to look at the issues objectively. The discussion began with the group agreeing that the characters were so "real" that we felt we knew them and people like them. I pointed out that this was a feat on Haruf's part because we never see into the characters' heads; we only know them from what they say and do. We talked about the landscape (reminiscent they decided of southwestern Wyoming) and whether or not the characters are products of the landscape. We didn't get too far with this - I'm not sure the group could see where I was going with that. We did talk about the taciturn nature of the men characters - and saw that as characteristic of (at least) Western rural men. Of course we had a long discussion about the McPheron brothers. It always amazes me how everyone has know their own set of McPheron brothers in Wyoming. We spent time talking about the strengths and limitations of rural life as illustrated in the novel which took us into many different directions.

Interestingly, there were several teachers in the group who wanted to talk about the culture in rural high schools. Even

though we agreed that the time of the book is contemporary, some pointed out that a teacher wouldn't dare get as involved as Maggie did (taking in a student herself, much less moving a young girl with two old men) today. A member of our group who is a counselor at Sheridan high school said that around a hundred students at Sheridan High School are homeless each year for various reasons and that these are at the top of the "at risk" list.

We ended by sharing authors that we've read that deal with similar themes---names like Hassler, Meyers, Ivan Doig. Several had read Haruf's latest book, *Eventide*, but they wouldn't tell us what happens to the characters in *Plainsong*. We have to read it.

Nine of the sixteen signed up for the series made it to our first discussion. Although a couple of our "regulars" couldn't attend, we had two new people and two former attendees returning. It looks like it will be a good mix of ages and perspectives.

We reviewed some of the basic information about how/why books are chosen in each series and talked about the importance of keeping an open mind while feeling free to state thoughts and questions. I asked whether they like receiving a hand-out with information about the book and/or author and suggested discussion topics. They liked having the hand-out, although our discussions generally take on a shape of their own anyway. We then talked about the theme for this series and what we might expect of the books we are going to read.

We discussed Haruf's life, his bizarre typing "blind" technique and a statement he made in an interview that echoes in Maggie's words to the McPheron's: "people need trouble of the right kind." One of the main topics of discussion for *Plainsong* was the question of when it took place. The "*Rural in America*" brochure states that the book is set in 1952, but readers pointed out a number of contradictory details (e.g.the mimeograph machine is consistent with the 50s; Guthrie's vasectomy and Victoria's pregnancy test are not). One person had found a reviewer who thought the contradictory details gave the book a timeless quality. Those inconsistencies bothered people more than the lack of quotation marks. We also discussed the effect of not being given much background on the characters. That troubled a few readers, but most liked the immediacy of it, as if you were getting to know the characters in real time.

That said, everyone was totally won over by the McPheron brothers. They thought it was believable for the McPherons to think they might be able to help Victoria because they were used to treating pregnant heifers with special care and concern, just as they treated Victoria. One person noted that Victoria's red purse was symbolic. When Dwayne took it, Victoria began her transformation into a stronger person.

We talked about the nature of the families depicted in the novel, noting the irony that the most intact biological family

consisted of the least likeable characters. We liked the way characters lives were interconnected and how the "family" picnic in the last chapter underscored this. Other topics we covered were the believability of the characters and their actions. A couple of readers said they wouldn't have finished the book if it hadn't been for the discussion because they felt the characters were so ordinary and predictable. That led to a discussion of the ways the book is a "plain song." I liked one reader's observation that the book flowed like people singing together. There was interest in reading Eventide in hopes of finding out more about the characters.

--Marcia Hensley

Afton: We appreciated the authentic nature of the book and looked at all the characters—how they resembled people we knew in our small towns, or even people we had become. We talked about the pervasive loneliness, and the goodness to be found, and one participant's idea that the book shows how people in small towns find creative ways to solve problems seems as true a statement of theme as any that the critics have put forth. Only one person did not like the book—it rang too true to her, she said. Some of the participants checked out and immediately read Haruf's "Eventide," while others planned to do the same.

--Richard Kempa

Saratoga: Book Club Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not? More or less than our other two previous choices?
2. After reading the interview of the Author—Do you see why he picked his title? Plainsong can mean "unadorned music still sung without harmonies" in some Christian churches. Do you see any parallels?
3. What brings the characters together in this book? Happy circumstances?
4. How does rural Colorado shape them or shape the story?
5. The McPherson's are Older brothers and Ike and Bobby are the younger set of brothers—do they have similar lives or different?
6. A lot of people have lost both parents in an accident etc.—Why do the two brothers never marry and take up farming? Young age—Never got to go to school etc.
7. Does Victoria really have a rural life? Or more a small town life? How do the other character's lives differ from hers regarding where they live?
8. Who are the caregivers in this book? Are they all women? Maggie cares for her dad.

9. What thoughts on parenting do you have from the stories in the book?

10. Who is the pivotal character in the book who ties the entire group together? How does Maggie create a family group out of these 7 individuals.

11. What are the parallels between the two teenage girls in the story? Victoria does get pregnant and for a time goes back to her boyfriend but does stand up for herself and what she wants in the end—What about the girl in the car? She never stands up for the 2 boys and watches them harmed.

12. Does the problem that Tom has as a schoolteacher fit the normal experience? Do many troubled children have parents who defend them too much? Why are they in the book? Does this happen more often in rural areas or why did Haruf use this story?

13. What is Ira Stearns case in the book? Is this another example of someone's loneliness being helped by another? Even though the 2 boys are very young.

14. Again we have a "hanging ending". The author speaks to why in his interview. Is this the type of ending you like because it's realistic or would you prefer more information on characters lives?

15. Do you feel that you really ever get to know the characters in Haruf's book? Some more than others?

16. Is Haruf trying to show that even in a small rural area children can be exposed to violence; Sex; and that these are not just "big city" problems?

--Nikko Smith

Riverton: I asked one of our readers to begin as she is from the area of Colorado that Haruf writes about and her family knew his. She shared stories of him and the small towns in the area and brought along a clipping from the local paper describing the author's visit to the town of Fleming. Sitting alongside him in the picture is his Uncle McPherron, whose name is used with a different spelling, for the beloved elderly bachelor farmers in the book.

Those few who didn't care for the book (because the characters were too real and nothing much happened), did, however, appreciate it. As usual, we went around the room with each of us sharing thoughts about Plainsong. We spent time on the way in which the book was written; the use of the names in lieu of chapter headings and how the story sang back and forth between characters, the spare use of words by both the author and the characters, the vernacular - picture show, out west. We read portions of the book to each other, sharing our favorite parts. We agreed that this is a rural story, but not necessarily a western story. The group favored the boys, wanting them to meet young Luke of Grisham's novel, and insisting that the three would be best friends. We talked about how the boys (really all the characters) simply accepted, coped, with what happened in their lives. Their rather formal

relationship with their parents we felt reflected the times and the geography. The group decided that the boys' burying their mother bracelet was a form of acceptance and saying good bye - she was no longer a part of their lives and they couldn't and wouldn't count on her. We discussed each character in turn and several people questioned why the book just ended, with their lives unresolved. It was agreed that we simply lived among them for a while and then moved on, not staying to see the outcome. We talked about the title and its meaning. Several readers commented on the humor, especially between the McPheron brothers. Themes were cited - abandonment, community, love, cruelty, among others. Finally, someone asked if this was a romantic or realistic view of rural life and we all agreed it was realistic. As the other book groups have noted, we know this town and we know these people.

--Barbara Gose

Plainsong – Basin Group

The "Rural in America" brochure states that the book is set in 1952, but readers pointed out a number of contradictory details [e.g. the mimeograph machine is consistent with the 50s through 60s but Guthrie's vasectomy and Victoria's pregnancy test are not. Someone drives an old Ford Mustang (the first Mustang was made in 1964). Dwayne's mother tells Victoria, "I wouldn't know you from Nancy Reagan." whose husband ran for president in 1980]. Do the contradictory details give the book a timeless quality?

We talked about the nature of the families depicted in the novel, noting the irony that the most intact biological family was dysfunctional, the least likeable characters. We liked the way food connected the lives of the characters, with the last scene being the dinner of the newly created family.

Many were surprised to realize we never hear the characters' thoughts; we only know them from what they say and do, and we know them so well by the end of the book. A few were eager to read Haruf's latest novel, *Eventide*, to follow many of the same characters.

To counter the universal acclaim for the novel, I read a criticism from Salon: "You could quibble with the quiet, almost ingenuous triumphalism that pokes through the novel. Troublesome figures, such as Guthrie's wife or the abusive father of Victoria's baby, simply go away. In real life, the people you don't want to deal with hardly ever disappear; they hardly ever willingly forfeit their stake in the things you care about. The trick is figuring out how to share the earth with them. The novel's brief, celebratory conclusion might have been even more effective if it had included one or two disagreeable people. But Haruf is not naive about human nature; he doesn't look away from violence, and he has a keen eye for the devastatingly casual acts of cruelty that punctuate daily life. He's simply convinced that decency is ultimately its own reward, and it's this optimism, along with the quiet sophistication of his technique, that allows him to look into the hearts of his characters while still respecting their privacy. "

--Claire Dunne

PLAINSONG was well liked--the characters are people we know. We talked about the small towns of Holt, CO, and Wright, WY, but Wright is younger and busier than Holt. But all of us know the McPheron brothers--or at least one bachelor like them. Everyone loved them and their tremendous effort with Victoria, laughing at their sweet effort to talk to her -- about the cattle market, and crying with them when she left. Why aren't these men married? Their closeness, their loss of their mother, their comfort zone, the ranch. Ranch people are different, said one of our ranch women.

All the characters give rise to discussion about their lives, their role in the story, their role in the community. Victoria's Indian heritage, Guthrie's confrontation with the parents, Maggie as the special woman,. The small town compared to big town issues about the importance of school athletes, the outsiders, the bully, the sadness, and the hope. It is an amazing novel with simple writing and so much clarity we can all see two small boys riding their bikes to deliver the morning newspaper. It does not ignore the ugly side of life, but it is a book that allows us to see good things happening at the end.

-Patty Myers

PLAINSONG is a disturbingly-written yet pleasant novel of rural America. The absence of quotation marks and the difficult-to-find plot make the unusual typing and writing styles a bit of a challenge at first, but most readers were able to proceed without many problems. Only one reader had lived in eastern Colorado, and her memories of place were wind and dust. So much for first-hand experiences. Then we discussed the need of space for many characters while others, especially Mrs. Guthrie, seemed quite comfortable in confinement. That led to the question, "Which came first, confinement or depression?" Haruf's inclusion of typical rural themes of acceptance of outsiders, willingness to help others, desire or need to hang on to old ways, and commitment was noted by and through characters' actions and reactions. As we analyzed these people, I noticed the repeated use of "concern" and "caring" to describe individuals or actions. Is this a love story? Sibling love. Marital love. Love of neighbor. Love of the troubled young. Love for the old and lonely. Love of animals. Love of space? The final concern by the group was the lack of closure for the characters. What about Victoria? What happens to the two boys? Will Victoria stay with the McPherons? Is there any hope or only despair? Two readers provided a solution; read Haruf's novel *EVENTIDE*. P. S. Don't expect any quotation marks.

Jim Fassler

Drawing from the interviews posted by Bob (?) in the archived discussion list, I began the discussion with

background on and comments from Haruf. As I look back on it, I wonder whether I wouldn't be doing the group a service by concluding the previous section with a brief bio and discussion of the next author. People like to develop a sense of the "where" of the author, and maybe it would warm them to a text if they had some of the human-ness of the author in their mind as they began reading?

One of our members arrived with one of the biting reviews to which Haruf refers in the interview from identitytheory.com and she largely registered a criticism of the dullness of the book, and read from the critic as he related *Plainsong* to a Pottery Barn catalog-nostalgia gone fuzzy and consumeristic. We moved around the room to get other readers' feedback, generally more positive to glowing. I realize that one of my roles as a facilitator is to take the sways and throes of conversation, and try to feel for constructive edges that can help move the discussion if it is encountering either great resistance or benign reception. That is the part that keeps me on my feet.

I raised the question whether Haruf hadn't touched on the greatest contemporary anxieties in this book, and wrapped them in a rural story that allowed us to look at the issues, but come away from them with a sense of hope in the human spirit. From depression to teen pregnancy to an old smoker dying on her own without kin, to unsupervised children confronted with bullying, to rural farm families that do not hold forth the promise of the next generation, to the rights and wrongs of sexual lives outwith marriage, to the failures of mediocre school leadership, to masculine violence against men and women, and homeless kids. As such, Maggie carries quite a bit of the weight of the world in her ability to surmount the tragedies by building bridges between people.

We went into each character as we thought about the style and work of the book. Tensions raised that found less-than-fully-tragic resolutions as with the bullies who strip the boys, but do not rape or beat them. Poignant moments of redeeming acts of compassion, as with the purchase of the crib. The courage of the pregnant girl to leave the trash of her lover's life, and the bus driver who stepped forward rather than step backward. I noted that both Haruf and Spragg are contemporary writers who figure in the character of a woman in an abusive situation who LEAVES.

Conversation was engaged, the story works as a great tableau for discussion, (though two people admitted that they had read the book early and before they came to the discussion had to re-visit the book because they had absolutely forgotten what it was about and couldn't recall without the book in hand), and Haruf was largely appreciated even in his no quotes style.

Mary Keller, Meeteetse

During our discussion of *Plainsong*, I asked the group to respond to some Haruf quotations I had gleaned from elsewhere. The quotations helped kick-start the humanities discussion, so I share them here.

First, from a *Publishers Weekly* interview:

"That's a fond notion of mine," Haruf says, talking about how adversity and sacrifice can bring healing, strength and wisdom, "assuming you survive and come through without being maimed in some way. These two old guys [the McPheron bros.] know how to deal with cattle and ranch life. But they need trouble of another kind to fully mature."

From a review in *The Washington Post*:

". . . human beings with their ordinary griefs and troubles superimposed against a stark and difficult landscape. This is a story about people's ability to adapt and redeem themselves, to heal the wounds of isolation by moving, gropingly and imperfectly, toward community." (10Oct99)

Another, from a different work by Haruf:

". . . a Great Plains motto: Course it's not fair. There ain't none of it that's fair. Life ain't." (*The Tie That Binds*)

And finally, two observations by Haruf on rural and city life:

[Haruf] tells his students that they are lucky to come from the small towns of the Midwest. "They feel embarrassed, but I tell them it is a great advantage to grow up in a distinct place with so many little towns," he said. "You know people, you know their histories, whose pickup is in front of the bar. You may not know everything, but you get a sense of the stages of life." (*NYT*, 01Dec99)

"I don't want to think that this [*Plainsong*] is somehow regional literature or topical," he said. "I want to think this story is elemental and universal. I want to think it has relevance to city folk as well." (*MJS*, 15Nov99)

Some of the humanities themes we discussed included these:

- a sense of where you are (landscape, weather, community)
- human reactions to adversity in life (hard work, harsh weather, betrayal, isolation)
- community (strength of human bonds to each other and to the land; the function of those bonds during the disappointments and accommodations of life)
- how humans forge community (communities) in an urban setting
- what constitutes a family
- what it means to be "mature" and have balance in one's life
- the values of small town life (attitudes toward sex, violence, kindness, simplicity)
- the role of shelter/houses (solace? refuge? psychological entrapment?)

Sources for Haruf quotations:

- Blades, John. "Kent Haruf: Home on the Plain." *Publishers Weekly* 1 Nov. 1999: 59-60.
- Carpenter, David. Rev. of *The Nature of Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction*, by Diane Duvfa Quantic. *American Literature* 68.2 (1996): 489-490.
- Sharma-Jensen, Geeta. "Plainspoken: Author Haruf Quietly Accepts His Newfound Fame." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 15 Nov. 1999, Cue & Jump: 1.
- Smith, Dinitia. "Eyes Covered but Seeing, A Novelist Looks Inward." *New York Times* 1 Dec. 1999, late ed.-final: E1.
- Tillinghast, Richard. Rev. of *Plainsong*, by Kent Haruf. *Washington Post* 10 Oct. 1999, final ed.: X05.

Powell, Deb Koelling

Seven people gathered to discuss *Plainsong* by Kent Haruf. Generally the novel was liked by the participants. Some had a vague sense of having read the book before; the consensus being it was in a discussion before.

The McPheron brothers were the focus of much discussion. The relationship of the two brothers, their willingness to accept the girl, their common sense, and their ability to communicate without many words were traits noted. The group felt that the Guthrie brothers were not destined to the same life style of the McPheron brothers because they gravitated to the baby in the end and had tried to bond with Iva Stearns.

The landscape which seemed barren was reflected in the lives of the characters. The stoic acceptance by many of the characters was challenged by Maggie and her interventions on behalf of Victoria. The end of the story held more promise than the beginning. The dysfunctional family is found throughout society, but the group felt that many are "fixed" in the same manner as those in the novel.

The concept of good being rural and evil being city was mentioned in comparison to *The Memory of Old Jack*. The events of the book brought discussion to current events and the view that bad things happen in the city and not in small town America. The group finally decided the gang rape of the young girl with numerous observers and passers-by which has been in the news lately could happen in a small town.

Love seemed to be the central focus of the book, both conditional and unconditional. The sex scenes, which at first seemed not so connected to the story (Several members were certain they served no purpose other than selling copies.), could be explained with the conditional and unconditional concept.

An interesting aside was that the loss of one of our community leaders, was tied to the book repeatedly and to some degree, logically so. Another thought was that in the story Maggie said the times were crazy. Every generation

says that and will continue to. Next year will be crazier than this year.

Seven of us came together at Guernsey Sunrise High School on 9/4/12 to have a discussion about *Plainsong*. As is my wont, I immediately turned the discussion over to the participants, asking if anyone had had any strong impressions from reading this prize-winning book. It turns out that nearly everyone had. Though there was some consensus that the book was initially a little difficult to get into, with several participants noting how Haruf chose not to use quote marks for dialogue, which took some getting used to, as well. I hypothesized to the group that this was because Haruf was intentionally setting off his book as "literary," as opposed to "popular." (Of some relevance to our group because we had just decided to read Grisham book for the next session.)

We spent some time discussing the likely time period in which the book was set. Most of us thought as indicated by the social mores, the available technology, and the lack of social services, that the book was set in the mid-60's at the earliest, and likely earlier. The only thing that didn't jive with our theory was the section in which one of the one characters is described as taping her favorite soap opera while she is at work, technology that wouldn't have been available until the early 80's, at the earliest. One of the participants thought that maybe Haruf did this on purpose, to indicate how backwards the country was as compared to the city, but to me it seemed and still seems like an editorial oversight.

We also spent some time discussing how times have changed. These days, for instance, there are social services available for unwed teen mothers, and we all knew of multiple instances of teenage mothers who had more than one child by the time they graduated from high school. This as compared to the high school memories of some of the participants, who could remember how young girls "in trouble" used to be shipped away to a "distant aunt's" house to see out their pregnancies, before returning to school. One of the participants even remembered how a pregnant girl at her high school was not allowed by the district superintendent to graduate. Times have certainly changed on that score. None of us were exactly sure whether that was a good or a bad thing.

Plainsong has been made into a TV movie, which a couple of the participants have seen. It apparently is not a masterpiece, but may be worth seeing.

I'm only catching the edge of our discussion; it was a good one and the time flew. I look forward to more meetings with this group.

Court Merrigan