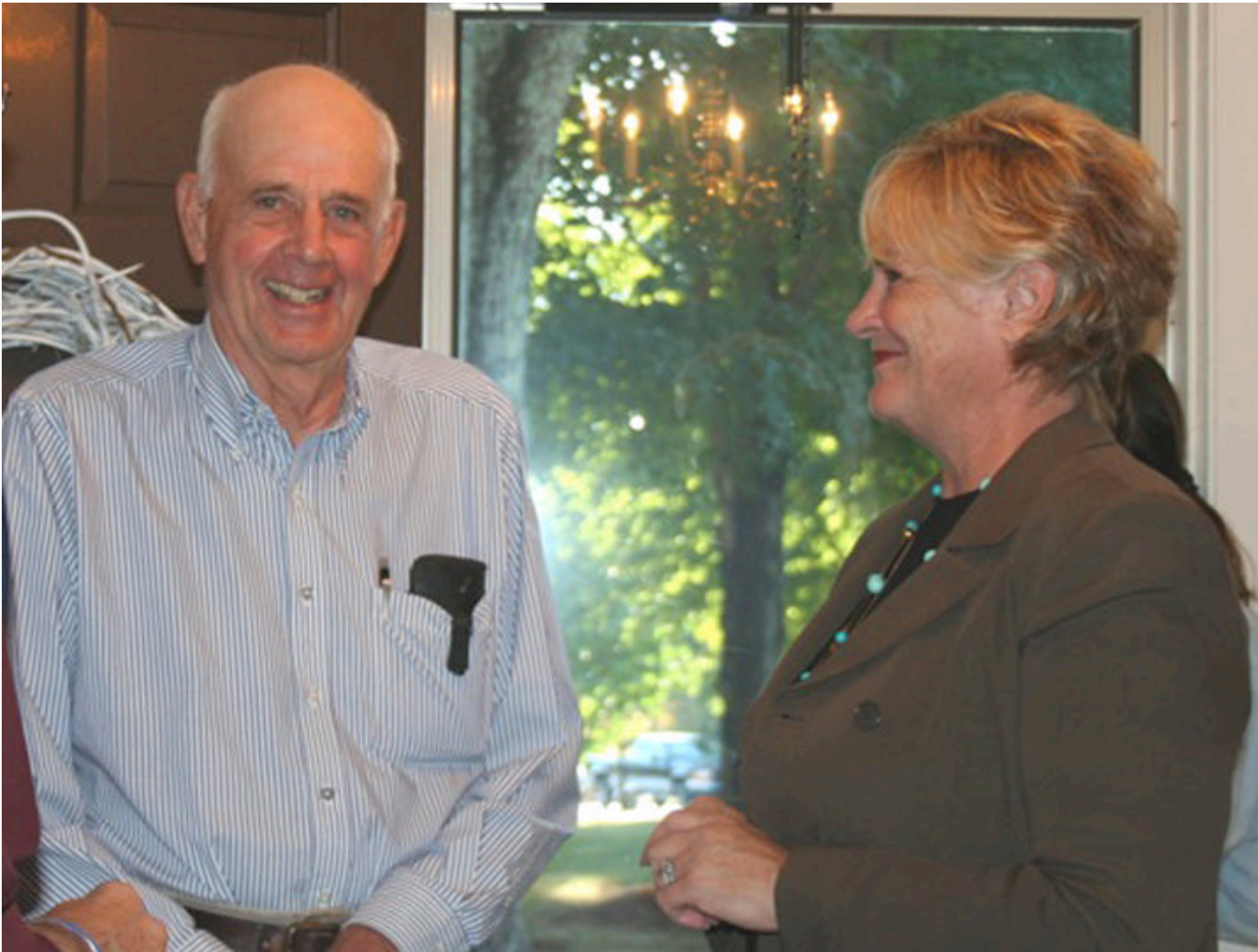


EXTRA

A Gentle Man Speaks: A Conversation with Wendell Berry



Wendell Berry and Dr. Jennifer Braaten

photo by Amy Tuggle

by Glenn Thompson
Senior Staff Writer

I missed Wendell Berry on the first day of the Southern Draft Animal Days, but caught up with him on Saturday morning, and we were introduced by Jason Rutledge of the Healing Harvest Forest Foundation. I offered to walk with him for a while so that we could get to know each other a little. It was a pleasure to watch him interact with so many different types of people, all obviously as endeared to him as he to them. After a time, he declared that I seemed to be a pretty good fellow, and since we were getting along so well, we should get to work. We found a semi-quiet space in the shade of the barn, where some extraordinary artisans had on display pieces of incredible hand-crafted furniture that seemed to sit and listen too, as he spoke. G.T.: I have to tell you, I have always been fascinated by your life, and I know that few around here know that much about you, except for the fact you are an extraordinary writer. You are an icon. That's all I can say. They teach a Literature and the Environment Course here, and I had the pleasure of taking it. If you get a chance to meet the professor, she's a great fan of

yours, Dr. Allison Harl. I am sure she will probably find you at some point over the two days.

W.B.: I'll look forward to it.

G.T.: I know you are here for the Southern Draft Animal Days, and I wondered if you would comment on horse logging and the future of non-industrialized production.

A concern of mine is, we are fighting against overpopulation and overproduction as a result of that same overpopulation. Do we stand a chance? Are we going to be overcome by our own industry?

W.B.: Well, we are at present being overcome by industry because we are, so to speak, using up the principle. We really are destroying the world. The cost in soil erosion and so-called development is simply not supportable. Mountaintop removal coal mining is an extreme example. We sacrifice a great forest ecosystem that could be productive virtually forever with proper use. We destroy that in order to get the coal, which is valuable only while it's burning, and is not renewable. So, to destroy things of permanent value for a temporary good is not a sustainable way to do things, but predicting the future is not something I like to do. We don't have a right, I think, to work at this effort of conservation with some kind of feeling that we're going to

win. Really, the proper motivation is that we should work at it because it's the right thing to do. The movement...the conservation movement...the local economy movement which is maybe even more significant...those things are growing. This kind of event would have been unthinkable fifteen years ago. So, on the one hand we have to confess...acknowledge that we're in danger from our own livelihood and our way of living. On the other hand, we have to say that the effort to correct that is a viable effort and it's growing. G.T.: There's hope yet. I'd like to talk a little about your life, if we may. You had three siblings... You became the poet, the writer... the icon, really of conservation and preservation...sustainability. What did they do?

W.B.: Well...my sisters have not been politically active, but my brother served two terms in the Kentucky State Senate. He's been pretty actively involved in these efforts towards a local, sustainable agriculture, and he and I have been allies.

G.T.: So, you've been able to work together on the problems.

W.B.: My father was involved in agricultural politics all his life. He worked with the Tobacco Program.

G.T.: He was a lawyer, too.

W.B.: Yes...and a farmer. He was involved in the Burley Tobacco

Growers Cooperative Association. He helped found it, and served it for his active life...fifty years or more. So, my brother and I have fairly well taken up that cause, which is really the cause I have for the small farmer, and carried it on with changes that were necessary in our time.

G.T.: It's good that you work together on a mutual cause.

W.B.: My sisters are completely supportive and friendly towards these causes.

G.T.: Did your father share the views that you espouse today?

W.B.: Pretty much...my father remembered farmers leaving the tobacco warehouses crying because they didn't get a living from their work. He remembered his own father selling a crop of tobacco about 1907 that paid the commission on its own sale... and after that there was nothing left. In other words...a year's work just gone for nothing to tobacco companies that did profit appreciably from it. So, he really dedicated his life to correcting that, and of course it was a successful program as long as it lasted.

G.T.: Things I found fascinating in your life...In 1958, you were a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford, with Larry McMurtry...

W.B.: No...no...Larry wasn't a Fellow that year...he was a Fellow later. He came to Stanford as a Fellow about 1960. I stayed two years and left in the Spring of 1960, and if I'm not mistaken, Larry came in the fall. The class that I was in...Ernest J. Gaines...

G.T.: *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*?

W.B.: That's right...and *A Lesson Before Dying*. Ernie was a Fellow the same year I was. Ken Kesey was in the class I was in.

G.T.: That speaks to my generation...I remember *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. The reason I mention McMurtry... in my research some sources indicated you and Larry had overlapped.

W.B.: No...that's just legendary.

G.T.: Was Tillie Olsen there?

W.B.: Tillie Olsen, I think...well, she wasn't my contemporary at Stanford. I'm not sure whether she was before or after...I think maybe before.

G.T.: So, it was you...Kesey...and Gaines...even then, the three of

continue to the next page

Gentle Man, continued from previous page

you...Stegner being who he was...

W.B.: Nancy Packer was in that class too, and she's still publishing short stories. Ken Babs...Kesey's friend of the Merry Pranksters legend was there.

G.T.: That makes it even more of a Power Group. It amazes me that fate...or whatever brought such a powerful group of people together in one class.

W.B.: Of course, we weren't powerful then...we were unformed...we were really just a bunch of boys. I've stayed friends with Ernie Gaines...friends with Kesey and Babs. Kesey and I were friends...he's gone now...I was not a Merry Prankster...

G.T.: Did you ever want to be?

W.B.: No (laughing)...our ways were different ways...nevertheless, we were friends.

G.T.: Stegner was a very strong voice for conservation in his time, and when you got to Stanford... obviously he would have been some sort of inspiration to you and some of the others, but especially to you...you basically took up his mission.

W.B.: When I was a Fellow at Stanford, I didn't know what my life was going to be. In 1958, I was 24, and as far as I understood myself at that time, I thought I would be a kind of university bum, and make a career as a college teacher...and I didn't know what was going to happen. I didn't think that I would go home to live...but then in 1964, my wife and I went back to Kentucky to my home country and settled...and then Wallace Stegner and my friendship with him began to mean more to me than they had before.

(At this point, we broke for about five minutes. An Amish farmer, who had waited patiently, approached Berry, and even though it was their first meeting, within moments they sounded like two old friends catching up. They shared mutual friends, and it was amazing to see the camaraderie that one cannot help but feel about Berry so warmly demonstrated.)

We resumed.

G.T.: In 1961, you won a Guggenheim Fellowship and took your family to Italy and France.

W.B.: Yes, I had a wife and daughter.

G.T.: How was the trip? This was a strange time in modern European history...so much going on in so many places...wildness...

W.B.: Well, the wildest thing was that the war in Algeria was still going on...In 1961, I still did not know what my life was going to be...but, by a series of



Wendell Berry

photo courtesy of Peace Heroes (www.peacebypeace.com)

coincidences and advice from people who knew Europe, we decided to go to Florence...and by further coincidence, we were able to rent a sort of cottage... which you know, is a rare thing in Italy. It was actually the barn of an old monastery...just south of the Arno, and it was between the city and the farmland. So, from where we were sitting, we could see the farming going on on those terraces. I looked at the art and the architecture, and that sort of thing, and it was of enormous benefit. I had a student pass to the Uffizi Museum in Florence...and I could go to the galleries. In those days there wasn't the crush of tourists...I would go to the Uffizi some days and be the only person there. So I did study the works of art and so on. What I didn't understand was how important it was, to see the agriculture of Tuscany while the old peasant traditions and ways were still intact. That's all gone now. We were back thirty years later and it was entirely gone. It was very beautiful farming in those days... it was mixed farming, highly diversified, on terraces...olive trees, grape vines, wheat interplanted with the other things...and, of course it was possible because they were still working those big white cattle...cows, actually. Because I was incurably interested in farming, I paid a lot of attention. That gave me a glimpse of a kind of farming and a kind of land care that I had not thought of before. It was farming very beautifully done and very conservingly and carefully...lovingly done, really. Beautifully done.

G.T.: When you came back, did

that change the way you did your own farming?

W.B.: When I came back...I came back willing to think of something else...and I had something to compare the local ways with. Actually, I had grown up in a fairly good way of farming...it was, by that time established in that part of the country...farms of 100-200 acres, with a small acreage in tobacco...a small acreage in corn, to be fed to animals on the farm, not grains normally raised for export. Cattle, sheep, and hogs...and an elaborate subsistence economy. From farm to farm, they were growing virtually everything they ate. By the time I came back to Kentucky to settle, that old way was beginning to go, and I could see that it was...and I had Tuscany in my mind. So, I became pretty much committed then to study agriculture...not in a formal, academic sense...but studying farming and land use.

G.T.: I think of what you do and propose here is stewardship...it doesn't matter what you are doing with it...as long as you are still functioning as a steward.

W.B.: Yes...if you accept stewardship as an obligation... and a necessity, then that leads to all sorts of fascinating questions about scale...issues of scale...farm structure...diversity. You're really thinking of the circumstances that enable stewardship...and of course, it becomes obvious that you can pay attention to a certain amount of land...and beyond that, you're going to be careless. My thought, along with other people... who are also thinking along with me...a handful...we were thinking about limits. We were thinking

about what Wes Jackson calls the *ratio of eyes to acres*. At the time all of this was beginning with me, I had a few allies...my father and my brother understood what I was talking about. Then I met Gene Logston, a farm writer and a farm-raised fellow from Wyandot County, Ohio, who started out working for the *Farm Journal*, came home and became freelancer and a farmer...again, on a small acreage. I met Maury Telleen, editor of *The Draft Horse Journal*, who helped me to meet the Amish and learn about the draft horse world. I met Wes Jackson and David Kline...and for a long time, those were the people I knew...and to a really remarkable sense, was thinking with.

G.T.: So this was all part of your learning process?

W.B.: Oh yeah...learning all the time from these people and studying examples. I had looked at a few examples I thought passed as good agriculture...good farming... by the time I wrote *The Unsettling of America*. Then I continued that, as I traveled about trying to find the good farmers...and, of course I met David Kline...who's an excellent farmer in the Amish community in Holmes County, Ohio. I met Elmer Lapp, who's an excellent farmer and another horse user in Pennsylvania. As time went on I met Bill Yoder and his family in northeast Indiana.

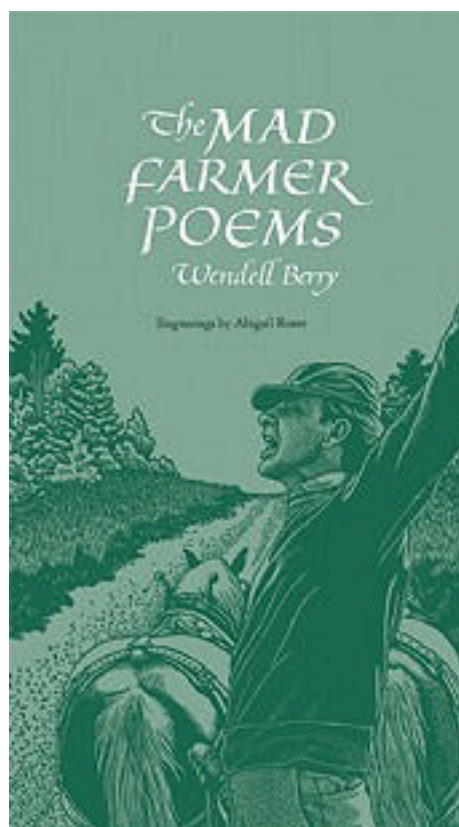
G.T.: Seems as if you were collecting the best ideas of everyone.

continue to the next page

EXTRA

Gentle Man, continued from previous page

W.B.: I was finding the best farmers I could hear of...and visiting them. These were very careful visits...I learned you couldn't do it in one day. You had to visit...you had to look around... talk and walk with the farmer. Then you had to go away and sleep and think about what you hadn't asked and should have and come back the next day.



G.T.: Let me get you off farming for a little while...I want to talk literature for just a minute. You said that "poetry exists at the center of a complex reminding." I understand the statement, but what I wonder is, what do you feel the poet's responsibility...your responsibility is in such a position?

W.B.: Well, just as a vocational responsibility...a poet's obligation is to practice the art as well as he or she possibly can...and learn the tradition...the inheritance...as well as possible, so that the art is passed on intact to whoever wants it after you.

G.T.: It should be everyone.
W.B.: Well...it should be everyone, but you can't depend on everyone. Then there are

responsibilities towards subject matter and those things that come in as a more personal part of the obligation.

G.T.: Your poem about JFK, *November twenty six nineteen hundred sixty three*, as I said, was the first of your work I ever read... and I could laud it all day...people have spoken of it for years...I have always wondered...was that the day you started it or did you write the whole piece then?

W.B.: That date's two or three days after the assassination...

G.T.: So that was the day you started it? After you had time to digest the tragedy?

W.B.: Well, you know it was completely on everybody's mind... I'd never experienced anything like it. I suppose if I had been younger and lived in New York, 9/11 might have been as impressive. But that event...that's one of the few things that I can remember where I was when I heard about it.

G.T.: I think it's pretty much true about anyone alive and old enough to remember...we all remember where we were on that day. I remember I was in my class and they pulled us all into one classroom. It was a small school and there was only the one television. They crowded us all in the room, and teachers were weeping and we had no idea what was going on. Nobody would tell us anything...they just turned on the television and we got the bad news from Walter Cronkite.

W.B.: We were in New York then and our daughter had started her first year of school at St. Luke's. I was walking along Christopher Street, holding my little daughter by the hand, and somebody came along in a car, and hollered out the window, "They've shot the President!" So, that was on my mind, and the words began to come. How that comes about is a mystery...but the words have to come. In my younger days, I tried to write poems...I tried to give myself a task of writing a poem. As I matured as a poet, I began to see that patience was part of it... you couldn't force it. I would have to wait until the words began to come somehow.

G.T.: With this piece when they came, they came...and you couldn't stop them...

W.B.: When they come then you've got to meet them with art... you're not going to become an artist by inspiration.

G.T.: Perspiration...

W.B.: That's part of it...Carlos Williams says you can't become a

poet by ineptitude...you've got to learn the art, so if the inspiration comes...which for me is usually words...or a cadence...or words with a cadence. Then you have to become an artist...not just a person who's heard from the muse.

G.T.: You are a Fellow of the British Temenos Academy, often considered one of the greatest gatherings of spiritual minds in our world...what's it like?

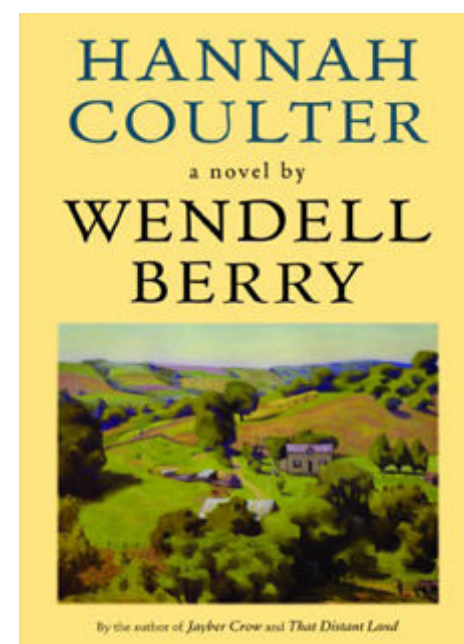
W.B.: (Laughing) I am an odd member of that...I have a large debt to Temenos. The magazine that has been transformed into the Temenos Academy Review...

essentially the same lineage... the same people. Kathleen Raine, British poet and critic... mainly known as a critic of Blake...a defender of Blake... she started Temenos. She and three friends started it...but she was the unifying and driving force...but I have an enormous debt to her. By way of Temenos, I met Phillip Sherrod. He was a poet...but I think mainly Phillip will be remembered as a kind of theologian...Greek Orthodox tradition. He and his wife showed Greece to Tanya and me...not all of it, of course. We traveled in Greece with them and went to churches and monasteries...and we went to Delphi with them. I met Brian Keeble before Temenos got started...back in the seventies, I suppose. Brian, and Phillip, and Keith Krichloe were Kathleen's allies in formation of Temenos.

G.T.: Do you contribute annually?
W.B.: When I have something...I send it to them.

G.T.: You can't put poetry on a schedule...writing period, really.
W.B.: That's true...I've never been the kind of poet who could... as I say, I can't work it up from nothing. If I don't have anything to go on...I don't work as a poet. Prose is a kind of daily thing...you go to prose like you go to work... like you go to a job. In my fiction, I've needed a start...I mean... something to begin...to start me. I'm a little dependent upon the muse for that too...but I've been an essayist because I've been a lecturer or a speaker...and I'm too scared...too uncomfortable in front of crowds to speak off the cuff. Undoubtedly, most of my essays started out as speeches.

G.T.: I try to be a bit of an essayist myself. Port William...Kirkus Reviews once called Port William "...one of the most richly imagined communities in contemporary fiction." You refer to it as "... human economy conducted with

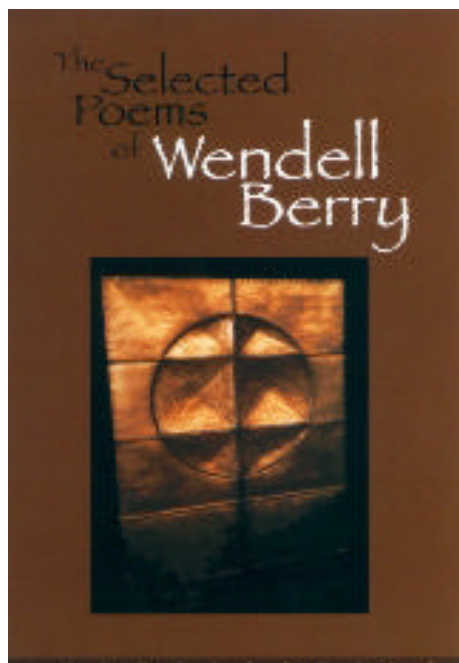


reverence." Two questions. Was it inspired by any other community you've lived in or been to...and would you like to live there?

W.B.: Oh, of course I would...if I hadn't known the little towns...the farms...and the people I've known in my lived life, I wouldn't have known Port William. However, it's different...and it's not strictly realism. I think it faces up to the difficulty, hardship, and tragedy of our life...human life. But it also is under the influence of a question, and that question is...how people who love each other live together. I didn't have a name for it...finally I began to call it the Port William Membership (at this point, the donkey in the stall outside began to bray loudly, washing out our voices with his brash trumpet)...That's not me, folks! (shared laughter) Saint Paul, of course, speaking to the churches, said "We're members...one of another." My character, Burley Coulter, adds to that...usefully, by saying we all are members of each other. There's no help for it, and the big difference is not between people who are members and people who aren't... the difference that's significant is between people who know they're members and the people who don't.

G.T.: My favorite...from *Jayber Crow*... "I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been wandering and unmarked. Often what has looked like a straight line to me has been a circle or a doubling back." I have found this so true about my own life, but my question is "Is this true in any way about you?"

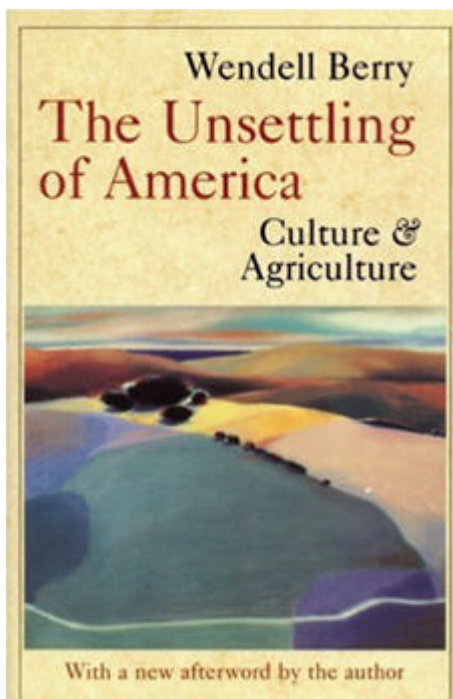
W.B.: In a way, I suppose. *Jayber Crow* is very much an imagined book. I don't think *Jayber Crow* has a counterpart...I don't think there's anybody I've known who's remotely like *Jayber*. Burley Coulter is the same way...he starts out as a kind of archetypal black sheep who becomes a person of compassion...a person



EXTRA

Gentle Man, continued from previous page

of membership...a conscious member. Jayber, of course, is a reader...and Jayber is under the influence of Dante and Milton. Dante, of course...his great gift was to have guides. Jayber was making it on his own, and he does feel guided...but not very clearly. His course is wandering. I think maybe the most revealing thing about Jayber Crow and his destiny is when he is in Frankfurt during the flood in 1937, and the cop stops him from crossing the bridge, and he said "I've got to get to my people." Until then, he had never thought consciously that he even had a people. After that, he knows he has a people, and he's going back to them. So...in that sense...some kind of guidance has taken place. It's a kind of inspiration that happens to him. The cop says "You can't go there," and he says "I've got to get to my people." The cop says "I didn't see you go," or something like that.



G.T.: Please share your economic insight...your renowned insight...there's no denying that. You once said "Nobody can have good things when you let money become its own value." Our present structure of economics is a house of cards, waiting to fall apart at the whim of the rich and powerful. How can it be repaired? Reinforced? What chance do we stand?

W.B.: Well, we're sitting right here in the middle of the answer to that, I think. This gathering here of Jason's is being motivated by an interest in alternative energy sources...and an interest in local economy. I don't know that there is a large-scale answer to this economic predicament that we're in. The learned economists are still talking about growth as a sign of a healthy economy...and what we're coming to is returning to the idea of local economy...the idea of

neighborliness...neighborhood...community, and ultimately, local adaptation. Jason's forestry...what you call sustainable forestry, worst first single selection or whatever...that's not a universal solution as practiced by Jason in his locality. It would have to be a little modified if you took it to Troy Furth's country in Pennsylvania...or mine in Kentucky...or the Pioneer Forest in Missouri. The principle is correct. The application would have to be locally adapted.

G.T.: You think the solution lies in a return to community-based society.

W.B.: The solution will be a lot of little changes that are instigated by individuals. One of the remarkable things going on...I've been calling it *leadership from the bottom*...is the number of people who, without official permission, or advice, or grant, or any of those artificial helps, have just seen what needed to be done, and started doing it. Look at what this Weaver family from Casey County, Kentucky has done with these treadmills and so on. Absolutely sophisticated mechanical engineering, really, is what they're doing. Utterly sophisticated and admirable, based on a power source that is ancient and admirable.

G.T.: Hay is a bio-fuel.

W.B.: Horses are solar converters...if you want to see it that way...so are our bodies.

G.T.: Your children's book, *Whitefoot: A Story from the Center of the World* is delightful. It has delighted children and adults. Are there going to be any more children's books?

W.B.: I don't have any planned.

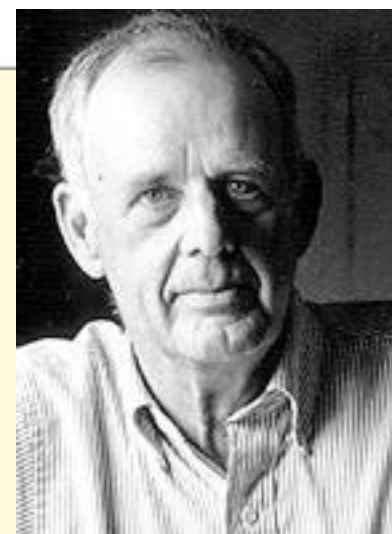
I'd love to be able to write another

The Peace of Wild Things

By Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake rests
in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water
and feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Excerpt from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*,
North Point Press, 1998



book like that...but I don't see it coming. Maybe it will...I could see that one coming for quite a while. That was a pleasure.

G.T.: It was a pleasure to read, too.

W.B.: Thank you.

G.T.: I'm looking forward to reading it to my first grandchild. She's due in November.

W.B.: Well, good. Thank you.

G.T.: You've told us for years about the constant poisoning of our land that goes on every day. Can you talk for a moment...you separated the two, and I've joined them here...what is the Myth and Measure of Progress?

W.B.: Well...along with my great ally, Wes Jackson, I think that the measure of progress is ecological. If we've met the ecological demands that our places impose on us, really...that would be a fine example of progress. That would be the ecological standard. If we were all living as good neighbors to one another...that would be the social standard.

G.T.: I, for one, growing up in a community in Arkansas where you never had to lock your front door...sometimes when I reach back to those memories, it's hard to handle the concept of where our society is going.

W.B.: Well...we've allowed the principle of competition to become dominant...and we resort to that principle as an explanation of everything. So we've permitted the so-called leaders and influencers of our society to persuade us that we're all in competition with each other for the things we want. Of course, there is another principle...and that's the principle of cooperation. This is, I think, really the principle we're trying to learn to live by

in these efforts at local economy. A CSA farm...a Community Supported Agriculture farm, for instance, is founded on the concept of cooperation rather than competition between the consumer and the producer. This is hard for us to learn because we've been so indoctrinated with the ideas of competition...and the idea that selfishness is okay. So, that among groups, in a given region or state...one of the problems that they are having is that the organizations who are trying to establish local economy will begin to be territorial...competing with each other for grant money and so on...
G.T.: A good idea gone bad...
W.B.: It's a good idea...the right idea being infected with the wrong idea. So, that's going to be a long road for us to learn how to set ourselves aside...get out of our own light...and cooperate together to make the things we really want. But it's a real problem.

G.T.: I want to tell you how much I appreciate you talking with me...I am extraordinarily grateful. It has been a pleasure. Thank you.

W.B.: You're welcome...and thank you.