



Leaving the Land

Douglas Unger

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Leaving the Land deals with contemporary rural America, and it does so with an exceptional fidelity to detail, circumstance, and feeling that captures the modern condition in the countryside: the winds of change bearing down hard on a once remote and deeply rooted way of life.

Douglas Unger has a sharply focused but widely ramifying story to tell. Its compass is 12 miles, the distance between the Hogan farm and the small town of Nowell, off in the desolate "gumbo" land of the western Dakotas. Its principal figure is Marge Hogan, a bright, pretty, spunky girl and then woman who dreams of the bright lights of Rapid City but whose destiny is to stay where she is. Early on, she works side by side with her father at the grueling, dispiriting tasks of turkey raising, her two brothers having gone off to World War 11 and both having been killed. Evenings she sadly sorts through men left behind by the war for a husband who can help with the farm and eventually take over. Just as she is about to marry the best of a bad lot, a convoy of trucks arrives in Nowell, along with a man in a snappy convertible, and her life changes...for a time.

Like a patch of earth and rock that contains much of the geology of a region, the story of Marge Hogan, along with those of her father, husband and son, her farm and town, is indelibly marked by the recent history of the Farm Belt. The man Marge marries is the lawyer for Nowell-Safebuy, the local turkey-processing plant and a link in the giant food chain that is bent on bankrupting the farmers of the area and buying up their land. In the protracted, unequal and eventually violent war that ensues, one can see first hand and in concrete human terms the forces and conditions by which the agribusiness has depopulated the countryside. Most of the farmers lose out, but so does Nowell-Safebuy when the land's productivity sharply declines from being managed by farmers who no longer own it. The once thriving community becomes a ghost town and the farms, including the Hogans', are abandoned to the prairie winds and rodents.

The second half of the novel is told by Marge's son, Kurt, who returns to Nowell many years later to spend Christmas with her. We see much of the later history through his eyes and memories, his brooding sense of futility providing a counterpoint to Marge's passionate will to hold on to the property that has destroyed her marriage and foreclosed her future. Only at the end, in a disastrous and heartbreaking visit they make to the farm, does Kurt finally grasp the full meaning of his mother's sacrifice.

Leaving the Land, then, is a novel about keeping faith with the land against implacable and ruinous circumstances. By virtue of his quiet artistry and his intense feeling for his subject and his people, Douglas Unger has made the Hogans' story into a work of tragic power and implication.

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