

Living Off the Land, Surrounded by Asphalt

By DWIGHT GARNER
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I had a feeling I might like this memoir when I came upon on its first sentence, a gentle twist on the opening of [Isak Dinesen](#)'s "Out of Africa." Here is Novella Carpenter: "I have a farm on a dead-end street in the ghetto."



Novella Carpenter

FARM CITY

The Education of an Urban Farmer

By Novella Carpenter

276 pages. The Penguin Press. \$25.95.

But I didn't truly fall in love with "Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer" until I hit Page 38. That's when the [bees](#) that Ms. Carpenter has purchased from a mail order company arrive at her post office in Oakland, Calif. A panicked postal employee calls, begging her to pick them up because they're attracting other bees and "freaking everyone out."

So Ms. Carpenter hurries over, picks up the humming box, and casually plops it into the front basket of her bicycle. Then she has a parade. “I proceeded to ride down Telegraph Avenue, laughing out loud at the bees who tried to follow us amid the traffic,” she writes. “At stoplights I looked down at the mesh box, the bees churning around, and told them to get ready for” — and here she gives her neighborhood’s nickname — “GhostTown.” Fresh, fearless and jagged around the edges, Ms. Carpenter’s book, an account of how she raised not only fruit and vegetables but also livestock on a small, scrubby abandoned lot in Oakland, puts me in mind of Julie Powell’s “Julie & Julia” and Elizabeth Gilbert’s “Eat, Pray, Love.”

Like those writers Ms. Carpenter is not a pampered girl or a trustafarian; in fact she has a beautifully cranky side and can drink and swear like a sailor. Like them too she is hyper-literate. The whole beekeeping business is preceded by a bit of [Sylvia Plath](#)’s poem “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” including these excellent lines: “I lay my ear to furious Latin./I am not Caesar./I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.”

And finally, like Ms. Powell and Ms. Gilbert, Ms. Carpenter is very, very funny. She won’t kill the slugs that have wrecked her garden, as some people propose, by drowning them in Budweiser, because “this seemed suspiciously close to buying the slugs a beer, which was more generous than I felt.” When “[yoga](#) people” suggest she stop drinking coffee, she thinks: “I want to tell them maybe they should saw off their legs.”

“Farm City” begins as Ms. Carpenter and Bill, her auto-mechanic boyfriend, move from Seattle to a small apartment in Oakland. They steer clear of San Francisco, she writes, because they are misfits and because San Francisco “is filled with successful, polished people.” Oakland, on the other hand, “is scruffy, loud, unkempt.” They fit right in. They fill their apartment, at least partly, with furniture they’ve scavenged from the street.

It is a rough neighborhood, “a postcard of urban decay.” There are gunfights and drug dealers; homeless men wander about, muttering. Oakland has the highest murder rate in the country, she notes. She and Bill

take it all in and begin referring to the lost hairpieces that flutter down the street — they have fallen off the heads of hookers — as “tumbleweaves.”

The garden Ms. Carpenter begins to create, at first squatting and then getting the owner’s permission, is anything but bucolic. A loud freeway runs nearby; the place borders on a repair shop and junkyard; a billboard overlooking the lot warns against sexual predators.

Before long, however, she transforms this lot into a small slice of paradise. “There was a lime tree near the fence, sending out a perfume of citrus blossoms from its dark green leaves. Stalks of salvias and mint, artemisia and penstemon. The thistlelike leaves of artichokes glowed silver. Strawberry runners snaked underneath raspberry canes.” She begins to add animals — the bees, turkeys, ducks, a goose, rabbits and finally pigs — to the mix.

“Farm City” is filled with terrific stories. But as it strides artfully along, you begin to see that Ms. Carpenter has other things, even a larger argument, on her mind. Her own parents were back-to-the-landers whose marriage went bust when she was only 4. She blames rural solitude. And by gardening in a bustling urban space she wants to have it all: ducks and heirloom artichokes and, well, friends.

“I still regard the country as a place of isolation, full of beauty — maybe — but mostly loneliness,” she observes. “So when friends plan their escape to the country (after they save enough money to buy rural property), where they imagine they’ll split wood, milk goats and become one with nature, I shake my head. Don’t we ever learn anything from the past?”

At heart “Farm City” is more about Ms. Carpenter’s experiences with livestock than it is about growing plump [tomatoes](#). In fact “Farm City” is a serious, if tragicomic, meditation on raising and then killing your own animals. She wants to have “a dialogue with life,” she writes, and she realizes she can do that only by also having a dialogue with death.

Animals run through this book like messy toddlers at a busy playground, and Ms. Carpenter names and adores just about all of them. The bustle is

invigorating. But she is raising most of them as meat animals and sees no contradiction in loving them and, ultimately, seeing them — as painlessly and humanely as possible — to their ends. There is gallows humor here. She dispatches a duck in her bathtub and notes that it “went from being a happy camper to a being a headless camper.”

The two pigs, Red Durocs, are the biggest job. They eat so much that by the end Ms. Carpenter and Bill are forced to spend hours foraging through Dumpsters to feed them. These pigs once ate pellets. “Now they were eating Chinese,” she proudly writes, “like good urban pigs.”

On one of her Dumpster-diving missions, for which she often wears a headlamp, Ms. Carpenter meets a local chef, Chris Lee, who was for many years a farm produce buyer for [Alice Waters](#)’s restaurant, Chez Panisse. He allows her to feed her pigs from the glorious dumpster behind his own restaurant, Eccolo.

Once her pigs are killed (and badly, to her horror, by a woman she’d hired to do the job), Mr. Lee helps her carefully make prosciutto and salami and soppressata out of them. “We had used all the parts of the pig,” she writes, “the ultimate show of respect.”

“Farm City” is a consistently involving book that includes one of the purest expressions of happiness I’ve read in a while, so I’ll end with that: “I felt young and healthy,” Ms. Carpenter writes, “and nostalgic for the present.”