

# A BOOK GROUP FOR CONVERSATIONS: RESOURCES FOR GETTING STARTED

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Book club activities are known and accessible ways to provide programming that can bring people together to learn and discuss issues related to food, farming and community. Books listed here are organized around a variety of topics:

- Agriculture & the Land
- American Agricultural History
- Agrarian Philosophy and Heritage
- Biology
- Controversial Discussion Starters
- Environment
- Family Farming
- Farming and Local History “How To”
- Food
- Land
- Local Food
- Rural Life: Bibliography for Youth Education
- Plants that Changed the World
- Organic Farming
- Poetry
- Sustainability – Big Picture
- Sustainable Agriculture

## GETTING STARTED

■ *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. Barbara Kingsolver, with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007).

Kingsolver’s first nonfiction narrative will open your eyes in a hundred new ways to an old truth: You are what you eat. With characteristic poetry and pluck, Barbara Kingsolver and her family sweep readers along their journey away from the industrial-food pipeline to a rural life in which they vow to buy only food raised nearby. Their good-humored search yields surprising discoveries about turkey sex life and overly zealous zucchini, in route to a food

culture that’s better for the neighborhood and also better on the table. Part memoir, part journalistic investigation. (Harper Collins, book cover)

See also [www.animalvegetablemiracle.com/](http://www.animalvegetablemiracle.com/) (June 25, 2007) for more information about the book, recipes, other resources, finding local foods, and more.

■ *This Organic Life: Confessions of a Suburban Homesteader*. Joan Dye Gussow. (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2002).

Joan Dye Gussow lives in a home not unlike the average home in a neighborhood that is, more or less, typically

suburban. What sets her apart from the rest of us is that she thinks more deeply—and in more eloquent detail—about food. In sharing her ponderings, she sets a delightful example for those of us who seek the healthiest, most pleasurable lifestyle within an environment determined to propel us in the opposite direction. Joan is a suburbanite with a green thumb, but also a feisty, defiant spirit with a relentlessly positive outlook. (Chelsea Green Publishing Company, book promotion)

## AGRICULTURE & THE LAND

■ *The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems With Ecosystems*. Nina L. Bradley, Dana L. Jackson, and Laura L. Jackson. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2002).

This is a vital contribution to the debate about agriculture and its impacts on the land. Arising from the conviction that the agricultural landscape as a whole could be restored to a healthy diversity, the book challenges the notion that the dominant agricultural landscape—bereft of its original vegetation and wildlife and despoiled by chemical runoff—is inevitable if we are to feed ourselves. Contributors bring together insights and practices from the fields of conservation biology, sustainable agriculture, and environmental restora-

tion to link agriculture and biodiversity, farming and nature, in celebrating a unique alternative to conventional agriculture. (Island Press book description)

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■ *Fatal Harvest: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture*. Andrew Kimbrell. (Washington D.C.: Foundation for Deep Ecology, in collaboration with Island Press, 2002).

Takes an unprecedented look at our current ecologically destructive agricultural system and offers a compelling vision for an organic and environmentally safer way of producing the food we eat. Exposes the ecological and social impacts of industrial agriculture's fatal harvest. (Amazon.com, 5/2/07)

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**AMERICAN AGRICULTURAL HISTORY**

■ *Letters from An American Farmer* J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur. (Garden City, NY: Dolphin Books, Doubleday & Co., 1782).

First published in England in 1782, this classic observation of American farming and what it means to be American is by a transplanted emigrant French aristocrat. (Amazon.com, 4/15/07)

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■ *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*. David B. Danbom. (John Hopkins University Press, 1955).

*Agricultural History Review* noted this book "A balanced economic, social, political, and technological history of rural America." *Born in the Country* was the first—and may still be the only—general history of rural America published. Danbom discusses the

alarming decline of agriculture as a productive enterprise and the parallel disintegration of farm families into demographic insignificance. (Amazon.com, 4/17/07)

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**AGRARIAN PHILOSOPHY & HERITAGE**

■ *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*. Wendell Berry. (Washington, D.C: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002).

Writer and farmer Berry has long been an inspiration to the contemporary agrarian movement and a guiding light to people who care deeply about the health of their land and their communities. A splendid introduction to Berry's work. Twenty-one essays present a reverence for the beauty and complexity of our natural world and a call to be good stewards of the earth and our limited resources. (Amazon.com, April 17, 2007)

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■ *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. Wendell Berry. (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1996).

Written in a prophetic mode, Berry argues that if Americans are to heal the environmental wounds their land has suffered, they will also need to create more meaningful work, sustain happier and healthier lives, and return to what conservatives call "family values." (Amazon.com, 4/17/07)

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■ *What Are People For?* Wendell Berry. (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1990).

Twenty-two essays convey a deep concern for the American economic

system and the gluttonous American consumer. Berry talks to the reader as one would talk to a next-door neighbor . . . and presents convincing steps for America's agricultural and cultural survival. (North Point Press description)

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**BIOLOGY**

■ *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's- Eye View of the World*. Michael Pollan. (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

Working in his garden one day, Michael Pollan hit pay dirt in the form of an idea: Do plants, he wondered, use humans as much as we use them? While the question is not entirely original, the way Pollan examines this complex coevolution by looking at the natural world from the perspective of plants is unique. The result is a fascinating and engaging look at the true nature of domestication. (Amazon.com, 5/1/07)

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■ *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. Michael Pollan. (Penguin Press, 2006).

Pollan writes about how our food is grown—what it is, in fact, that we are eating. The book is really three in one: The first section discusses industrial farming; the second, organic food, both as big business and on a relatively small farm; and the third, what it is like to hunt and gather food for oneself. And each section culminates in a meal.

(Amazon.com, 5/1/07)

## CONTROVERSIAL DISCUSSION

### STARTERS

■ *Oryx and Crake*. Margaret Atwood. (Doubleday/Random House, Inc. 2003). Futuristic novel set in the near-future bio-wasted world that has been impacted by war. Runaway technology and social problems includes extreme genetic alterations in food. (Amazon.com, 4/17/07)

■ *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals*. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003). (Also a film.)

Makes the case that the animals humans eat on a regular basis—pigs, chickens, sheep, cows and ducks—feel, think and suffer . . . a voice for the domestic animals . . . farm animals are systematically ignored because the fact that we kill and eat them. (Amazon.com, 4/18/07)

### ENVIRONMENT

■ *The Sea Around Us*. Rachel L. Carson. (Oxford University Press, 1951).

One of the seminal books of the environmental movement in America. (Amazon.com, 4/17/07)

■ *A Sand County Almanac*. Aldo Leopold and Charles Schwartz. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

A classic of nature writing, widely cited as one of the most influential nature books ever published. Much of *Almanac* elaborates on Leopold's land ethic and on Leopold's view that it is something of a human duty to preserve

as much wild land as possible, as a kind of bank for the biological future of all species. (Amazon.com, 4/18/07)

■ *Water Wars: Privatization Pollution, and Profit*. Vandana Shiva. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002).

While draught and desertification are intensifying around the world, corporations are aggressively converting free-flowing water into bottled profits. The water wars of the twenty-first century may match—or even surpass—the oil wars of the twentieth. Shiva here shines a light on activists who are fighting corporate maneuvers to convert this life-sustaining resource into more gold for the elites. Shiva calls for a movement to preserve water access for all, and offers a blueprint for global resistance based on examples of successful campaigns. (Amazon.com, 5/1/07)

### FAMILY FARMING

■ *Here and Nowhere Else, Five Thousand Days Like This One*, and *Clearing Land: Legacies of the American Farm*. Jane Brox. (North Pointe Press, 1995, 1999 and 2005).

Jane Brox tells the story of her family's Massachusetts farm in three thoughtful and elegant memoirs *Here and Nowhere Else*, 1995, and *Five Thousand Days like This One*, 1999). In her third, *Clearing the Land*, she continues to chart the fortune of family and farm, albeit from within a fresh and incisive history of cultivation in America, beginning with the contrast between Native American agriculture and the expectations of white settlers, and extending to Thomas Jefferson's agrarian vision, the cultiva-

tion of the West, and the replacement of New England agriculture with industry as textile mills shadowed once pristine rivers. (Amazon.com, 4/17/07)

■ *Fields Without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Idea*. Victor Davis Hanson. (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, Simon and Schuster, 1996).

We are in the penultimate stage of the death of agrarianism, says the author, a fifth-generation vine and fruit grower. Hanson has written an eloquent and bitter elegy for the American family farm and calls for America to take notice of its lost simplicity and purity before it is too late. (Amazon.com, 4/18/07)

■ *The Land Was Everything: Letters from an American Farmer*. Victor Davis Hanson. (New York: The Free Press, Simon and Schuster, 2000).

"What does the imminent death of the family farm mean to the average American? A great deal," declares Hanson, who as both a farmer and a classics professor imbues this provocative, eloquent polemic with personal experience plus an unshakeable agrarian vision that harks back to Greece, Rome and the early American republic. (Publishers Weekly, from Amazon.com, 4/18/07)

■ *Mapping the Farm: The Chronicle of a Family*. John Hildebrand. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1995).

Both a personal testament and an absorbing chronicle of agrarian history, Hildebrand relates the story of four generations of farming—a quintessen-



Marion Nestle's details how the food industry—through lobbying, advertising, and the co-opting of experts— influences our dietary choices to our detriment. Central to her argument is the American “paradox of plenty,” the recognition that our food abundance leads profit-fixated food producers to do everything possible to broaden their market portion, thus swaying us to eat *more* when we should do the opposite. (Amazon.com, 5/2/07)

#### LAND

■ *The Land System of the United States: An Introduction to the History and Practice of Land Use and Land Tenure.* Marion Clawson. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1968).

An overview of the history of land use and ownership. Includes the impact of surveying in the United States, origins of the “public domain”, farmland, forest land and urban land. (Avery, 2007)

#### LOCAL FOOD

■ *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods.* Gary Paul Nabhan. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002).

Does it matter where our food comes from? Do we, our communities, and the planet do better if we choose food grown by local sources we trust? Nabhan explores these and other questions of dietary and spiritual subsistence and presents a compelling case for eating from our “foodshed.” (Amazon.com, 5/2/07)

Gary Paul Nabhan is a MacArthur Fellow, prize-winning essayist, and ecologist, and director of the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern

Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.

#### RURAL LIFE: BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR YOUTH EDUCATION

■ *Place Value: An Educator's Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeways, Environments, and Purposes of Education.* Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal. (Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 1998).

Five bibliographical essays, review nonfiction and fictional literature that emphasizes how rural areas are forged by their particular ecology, politics, economy, values, and spirituality. (Avery, 4/20/07)

#### PLANTS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

■ *Seeds of Change: Six Plants that Transformed Mankind.* Henry Hobhouse. (Harper & Row, 1999).

A personal and highly original take on the history of six commercial plants— sugar, tea, cotton, potato, quinine, and the cocoa plant that have shaped our past. Plants are a central and influential factor in the historical process. (Library Journal and Harper & Row from Amazon.com, 4/18/07)

#### ORGANIC FARMING

■ *Good Growing: Why Organic Farming Works.* Leslie A. Duram. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 2005).

With its comprehensive view of the status of farming and its compelling

portraits of organic farmers, *Good Growing* is, finally, a work of scientific advocacy describing a course of action, based on the best research available, to improve the health of agriculture in our day. (Bison Books promotion)

#### POETRY

■ *In Praise of Fertile Land: An anthology of poetry, parable and story.* Claudia Mauro. (Seattle, WA: Whit Press, 2003).

A feast of poetry and stories uniting many of the world's most eloquent voices in honor of the people, places, and labor of our fertile lands. (Whit Press, book jacket)

#### SUSTAINABILITY – BIG PICTURE

■ The AtKisson Accelerator ([www.atkisson.com/accelerator/index.html](http://www.atkisson.com/accelerator/index.html)) is a comprehensive toolkit developed by AtKisson Inc. to support sustainability initiatives for a wide range of organizations. There are five sets of tools with corresponding symbols designed to orient organizations to sustainability, to help plan and train for sustainable implementation, and to provide a management framework for sustainability initiatives. (From *Museums & Social Issues*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2006)

■ *The Natural Step for Communities: How Cities and Towns Can Change to Sustainable Practices.* Sarah James and Lahti Torbjorn. (British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2004).

Provides inspiring examples of communities that have made dramatic changes toward sustainability and explains how others can emulate their success. The

book first clarifies the concept of sustainability, offering guiding principles—the Natural Step framework—that help identify sustainable action in any area. It then introduces the 60+ eco-municipalities of Sweden that have adopted changes to sustainable practices throughout municipal policies and operations. The third section explains how they did it and outlines how other communities in North America and elsewhere can do the same. Key to success is a democratic, “bottom-up” change process and clear guiding sustainability principles, such as the Natural Step framework. Also see [www.naturalstep.org](http://www.naturalstep.org). (New Society Publishers from Amazon.com, 4/18/07)

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■ *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture’s Essential Role in Public Planning*. Jon Hawkes. (Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd, 2001).

The book proceeds with an examination of how culture is integral to the new paradigms in public planning including sustainability, and concludes with a range of practical public planning initiatives. (From *Museums & Social Issues*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2006)

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■ International Institute for Sustainable Development ([www.iisd.org](http://www.iisd.org))

This website engages with decision-makers in government, business, non-governmental organizations, and other sectors to develop and implement policies that contribute to sustainable

development. (From *Museums & Social Issues*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2006)

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■ *Our Common Future*. United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development. (Oxford University Press, 1987).

Also known as the “Brundtland Report” after the Commission Chair, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, this document firmly placed ecological concerns onto the international political agenda, emphasizing the interconnected relationship between economic policies and environmental consequences. The report defined the term “sustainable development” (From *Museums & Social Issues*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2006)

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#### SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

■ *Food for the Future: Conditions and Contradictions of Sustainability*. Patricia Allen. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993).

Ten years ago, sustainable agriculture was not considered a viable option within the food and agriculture industry. Today, it has become imperative, as resources are depleted, toxins enter the food chain, farmers lose their land, and children go hungry. Sustainability is the new framework for addressing these issues, and is promoted by agriculturalists, researchers, and visionaries alike. Fifteen leading scholars of food and agriculture present a detailed description of the

social, economic, and political aspects of the sustainability concept and address important questions surrounding these issues (John Wiley & Sons, 1993)

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■ *Sustainable Capitalism: A Matter of Common Sense*. John E. Ikerd. (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005).

In order to maintain a new economics of sustainability, social and ethical values must be reintegrated into capitalist economics, thus restoring a sense of balance into the economic system that ensures that communities the world over will benefit and thrive. . . . [this book is] both a penetrating critique of capitalism and an exploration of its vast and untapped potential for maximizing human welfare. (Kumarian Press promotion)

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■ *People Sustaining the Land: A vision of good science and art*. Cynthia Vagnetti and Jerry DeWitt. (Available from the author: [voices@msu.edu](mailto:voices@msu.edu), 2002)

A lesson in sustainable agriculture and a Saturday morning visit over coffee, all rolled into one. Crafted in both pictures and the farmers’ own words, the result is a heartwarming and hopeful snapshot of what works in agriculture today. The stories that emerge are authentic and heart-felt. The book also provides a good look at sustainable agricultural practices—unique to each operation and region—sprinkled with a healthy dose of farm-bred philosophy. (Excerpted from The Leopold Center book review, Winter 2002.)