
Pro Rege

Volume 29 | Number 1

Article 7

September 2000

Home in Alfalfa (Book Review)

John Van Rys
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Van Rys, John (2000) "Home in Alfalfa (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 29:
No. 1, 30 - 31.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol29/iss1/7

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

what art should be. In my opinion, they ask too much of the instituted church, but these questions and potential disagreements should not detract from the thrust of this major work. Their purpose is to urge Christians to fully engage other worldviews; in fact, they want Christians to discuss these issues in depth so that we can form a more united front as we wrestle with nonchristian worldviews.

Essentially, the authors' approach is not simply one of being reactive, that is, of putting out secular fires. Their approach is this: "We begin with our personal lives and habits, move out from there to our families and schools and then into our communities—and from there into our society as a whole" (371). Rather than having the world set the agenda, they urge that Christians be proactive in showing how now we should live. They contend that the Lord's cultural commission is inseparable from the great commission (295). All the while, we are asked to think and discuss not simply the specifics; rather, "we must fight worldview with worldview" (428).

This book would be a fine choice for a capstone course in Christian colleges. But it should be read by many more. Although it is a large book, it is not hard to read. Even a chapter a day would be a helpful way to work one's way through this material. To be engaged with these issues for 45 days would be a wonderful way to understand the all-encompassing impact of a Christian worldview. This reviewer hopes readers will conclude with the authors that "we are overcome by sheer wonder that God has given us not only salvation but also a basis for living out all of life in the grace of his presence" (491).

Editor's note: We followed up on Veenstra's comment, "I would be curious to discover what scientists would say about some of the arguments Colson and Pearcey make."

Home in Alfalfa, by Hugh Cook (Oakville, ON and Buffalo, NY: Mosaic Press, 1998). 245 pages. \$16.95 Canadian (paper back) and \$21.95 U.S. (hard cover). Reviewed by John Van Rys, Associate Professor of English.

In *Home in Alfalfa*, Hugh Cook explores familiar territory, but he does so in a new direction. As in his first collection of short stories, *Cracked Wheat* (1984), and his novel, *The Homecoming Man* (1989), Cook explores from the inside the lives of the Dutch immigrant community in Canada. The difference here is that Cook focuses his attention exclusively on small town Ontario, telling a set of interrelated, serio-comical tales. Cook's success in *Home in Alfalfa* is that he effectively works in the ironic mode. That is, he pokes fun at what he loves, exposing the weaknesses and foibles of characters that he (and we as readers) laugh at and love at the same time. In *Alfalfa*, Cook captures the comical side of our fallen nature while affirming the workings of grace.

by inviting Dr. Arnold E. Sikkema, assistant professor of physics at Dordt College, to add a brief supplement to Veenstra's review. It follows below.

Colson and Pearcey are to be commended for demonstrating the role of views of science on contemporary worldviews, and the significant functioning of theistic belief in the scientific revolution. They rightly encourage us to "oppose *bad* science with better science" (61), but aspects of their portrayal of the scientific community and task might promote cynicism rather than involvement. Stating that "*the* task for Christians . . . is . . . to expose the flaws in scientific naturalism" (422, italics mine) emphasizes the reactive and defensive mode instead of promoting obedient scientific study as a direct answer to the cultural mandate. And there are several examples in which the science presented as "better" is simply wrong. For example, while Colson and Pearcey claim, in an attempt to demonstrate design, that "There is no known . . . explanation . . . for the precise balance in the electrical charges of the proton and the electron" (64), one was given by theoretical physicists in the 1960's (awarded a Nobel Prize in 1979 after being experimentally verified in 1973). Besides, when we recognize that "in [Christ Jesus] all things hold together" (Col. 1:16,17) and "[He] sustain[s] all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:3, NIV), there is no dichotomy between natural explanation and design.

Colson's broad readership will benefit from being made aware of the challenge the intelligent-design movement is posing to dogmatic neo-Darwinianism; however, it would have been helpful to point out that even among Christians there is significant debate about this movement which perhaps over-emphasizes the role of reason in the recognition of God (Romans 1).

As its title suggests, Cook's collection of stories takes us into the heart of fictional Alfalfa in southern Ontario—a small town filled with small-town people, events, and institutions. Here, we meet the crowd at Lucille's Lunch, gossiping and commenting on all subjects under the sun. Here, we find aging Dutch immigrants (some aging gracefully, others not), characters like Hilbert TeBrake, who gives his long-suffering wife Dorothy a garage door opener for her birthday. Here, we also follow the comical love life of 39-year-old Virginia Wiebinga, from a nightmarish nighttime date collecting moths in the woods all the way to the altar. And we meet men and women in the middle of raising families, from Dorothy DeHeer, a frustrated minister's wife and mother of three teenage boys, to

forgetful Jerry Sprik and his wife Donna, baker of the church's communion bread, to Harold and Marilyn Droge, who flee the city to return home to Alfalfa.

These are just a few of the memorable characters in Alfalfa. Some appear once, and others recur in several stories. The result is that Cook constructs, as the stories proceed, a sense of community. As readers, we receive glimpses into the lives of these people, and these glimpses build eventually into a full portrait, like the curious church portrait taken by town photographer Robert Meyer, a photograph in which one of the narrator's friends appears twice. The collection also hangs together effectively because Cook has arranged the stories carefully into four seasonal sections, moving from summer around to spring so that we experience Alfalfa for a year. Cook begins with summer stories, like "Wild Oats," the story of three Dutch farmers capitalizing on one boar's gift during Sunday services, to fall stories, like "The Ragweed Blues," to winter stories, such as "Electric Blanket," to spring stories, such as "Gift of Finest Wheat," an Easter vignette. This arrangement of stories subtly emphasizes the comic mode of life in Alfalfa, clinched, in a way, by the collection's final story, which focuses on Virginia Wiebinga's wedding.

As a whole, then, *Home in Alfalfa* explores the seasons of its characters' lives, and it does so successfully not only because of the overall shape of the collection but also because of the narrative voice that runs throughout. That voice, the voice of a town native, is ironic in the best sense—clearly able to identify weakness of character, to laugh at it, but also to generate sympathy and even admiration. In other words, Cook's narrator walks a fine line in his portrayal of small-town life. Many moments are laugh-out-loud funny. For example, we first meet Milt Coombs catching and killing chickens. In one attempt, "The chicken squawks and leaps straight up as Milt dives for its legs and grabs nothing but air. His dentures come flying out of his mouth as he lands with a whomp, feathers and dust swirling into his face. 'Thuck me down the thewer,' Milt mutters, picking up his teeth out of the sour-smelling dust" (114). In this and many other episodes, Cook relies on dramatic or situational comedy built right

into the plot. Related to this comedy is comedy of character, in which the narrative exposes human frailty, frustration, self-deception, even hypocrisy. Many of these are digs at the Dutch immigrant character and jibes at the folly of some religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices. For example, Hilbert TeBrake, a favorite target, gives the narrator many opportunities to comment on folly and self-deception. As Hilbert contemplates installing the garage door opener as a surprise for his wife, the narrator comments, "Nothing stirs a man, nothing gives him as much sense of purpose as an altruistic mission for his wife—maybe it's a subconscious act of penance for being a jerk the rest of the time" (91). The stories are permeated with similar and more subtle digs.

However, Cook never succumbs to bitterness and simplistic attacks. Rather, the stories contain grace, a yeast working in the lives of these foolish, fallen characters. With grace, Cook brings out the extraordinary in the ordinary, the poetic quality of daily life, the ambiguity of the real and the dream of the ideal. For all his faults, Hilbert TeBrake loves his wife, and we can't help feeling some sympathy for him as he faces potentially serious health problems. Virginia Wiebinga's disastrous date with Myron Q. Fowles leads to a "chance" meeting with her future husband. A stolen car on a bitter winter day leads to a Florida holiday. A tobogganing hill filled with children becomes "an aviary holding hundreds of shrieking Arctic birds" (161). On Easter Sunday, feeding leftover communion bread to ducks opens Donna Sprik to glory "in the crisp spring air, in the grass and water, in the bread, above all in the blue and green iridescence on the ducks' heads glittering in the sunlight with the very effulgence and glory of the risen Christ" (209).

For readers who don't mind laughing at themselves and who wish to see something luminous in ordinary, small town life, *Home in Alfalfa* is an excellent read. For Canadian readers, it takes its place alongside Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. For Dutch immigrant readers, Cook's collection holds up a humorously warped mirror on themselves. For any reader, *Home in Alfalfa* offers windows into the human spirit, into its dark and well-lit rooms.