

# Allen T. Stanton: Why I hate Wendell Berry



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It's not the renowned writer himself that's the problem, writes a pastor who grew up in and serves rural communities. But his writing projects an idealized vision of rural life that ignores current realities.

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If you are in ministry, Wendell Berry is ubiquitous. If you are in rural ministry, he is inescapable.

His poems are read as *lectio divina* at retreats. He is quoted in conference presentations and referenced in sermons. He is the subject of documentaries. An album of his poems arranged for a choral group can be downloaded on Spotify (which seems ironic, given his disdain for technology).

There is a great deal about Wendell Berry and his writing that I respect and admire. Yet I find that his idealized vision of rural life is not helpful -- especially for people who have never lived in the country.

I grew up in a rural town, the kind you would read about in one of Berry's novels. During the summer, I would wake up early and ride with my mom, a schoolteacher, to my great-aunt's house. We would pick corn, green beans, butter beans and potatoes in her garden. I would sit with my cousins snapping green beans and peeling butter beans, and we'd spend hours upon hours shucking corn.

In the fall and winter, I would walk with my older sister to the elementary school a few blocks away. Afterward, I would congregate with the rest of the neighborhood kids or wander in and out of the local shops on the main street.

In high school, I started working at one of those shops, a small family-owned grocery store. I stocked shelves, bagged groceries and carried the bags out for our customers -- people I knew by name. The butcher, the baker, the owner and the assistant manager had, quite literally, known me since birth.

It was a place of safety and stability, filled with people I knew and loved, and who knew and loved me. I could depend on them, and they each had a hand in shaping and forming me.

On the surface, my town was a picturesque embodiment of Berry's community. But there's another part of the story. The local textile mill closed in the 1990s. Ever since a massive flood in 1999, residential streets have sat empty, their houses demolished and never rebuilt after FEMA buyouts.

When I was in high school, tobacco farmers would leave their crops to die in the fields because it was cheaper to let a crop go to waste than to harvest it and not be able to sell it. When Walmart came to town, our small grocery store was forced to close.

My small rural town could also be suffocating. No one expected my dreams to expand beyond the 2 square miles it occupied. Whenever I talked about living in other places, someone would remark, "Oh, you'll grow out of that. You'll end up here, like everyone else did."

My freshman year of college, I was surrounded by people from elite prep schools. During orientation, one dorm mate said, “You went to a poor rural school; I went to one of the best prep schools in the nation. How are we both at the same college?”

It was insulting, and I became desperate to prove that I belonged. I worked to drop, or at least soften, my thick Southern accent. Each assignment became a competition, and not just about the grade. I wanted to show that I could do the work faster, more efficiently and with less apparent effort than my classmates.

“Rural” became something to escape.

It would be years before I learned to appreciate rural places in their complexity, to see their beauty without sacrificing their reality.

Because, like most rural communities, my small town is and was a complicated place. The rural communities I serve now are just as complex.

There might be rolling fields of produce, but they employ fewer and fewer people. People are friendly, but often only after a long initiation (my parents bought our house in 1989, but my father is still not considered a local). And in an age where fear is the dominant political language, suspicion of the stranger can twist strong community ties into an impenetrable knot.

Berry, of course, recognizes that the communities he writes about aren’t simple. In several of his essays in “What Matters: Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth,” he insists on understanding the complexity of an economy and rebukes the fantasy of simple solutions.

In his work, I catch glimpses of the places in which I’ve served and lived. Berry knows about and portrays this other version of rural. But he doesn’t linger in the grittiness of it before moving back to the ideal.

The account of a deadly winter in the novel “Jayber Crow” showcases the beauty of community and family, for example, but leaves unexplored the emotional and psychological impact of the devastation and loss. People who expand their farms are cast as greedy villains rather than farmers trying to survive in a competitive market.

Yet what really bothers me is not Berry's work itself -- literature that simply tells the story the author wants to tell. What bothers me most is its influence on people who don't spend their days working in a rural setting.

A preacher from an affluent urban church will address small-church pastors at conferences, quoting Berry to us, speaking about how necessary our ministry in rural communities is. Between the lines, though, you can hear the real message: "I'm glad it's you and not me."

Too often, people use Berry in a way that commodifies rurality. Rural places become picturesque landscapes where life is simple, communal and agrarian. Rural places can be enjoyed at a distance but aren't places in which to serve, live and work.

I love rural places. Rural communities are particularly fertile for creative ministry, and I am optimistic about the ways our rural churches and communities can grow, thrive and lead in our rural spaces.

Yet I am wary of idealism about rural life and its future.

That idealism allows my urban colleagues to disengage from rural spaces, giving them permission to ignore the ways our communities are interconnected. It allows people to believe that rural churches and communities have nothing to teach except as a nostalgic model.

That oversimplification allows leaders in government, in business, and even in our denominations to offer one-size solutions that fail to take seriously the complexity of our rural places.

The title of this essay was originally meant as a joke. I texted it to a friend and mentor. He is an unabashed lover of Berry's work and of rural life. His reply was insightful: "Even when they quote him reverently, the whole world hates Wendell Berry, because so few actually live the way he calls for."

The truth is, Berry's way of life, for most of us, is impossible. It's much easier to read his poems and essays as a beautiful, idealized version of the world.

But if we're not careful, idealism can too easily morph into fantasy. Fantasy, as even Berry reminds us, isn't all that helpful.

Fantasy cannot restore, because it refuses to see what is real. Our rural communities deserve better than romantic images. They deserve leaders who see their faithfulness, strength and gifts and sit in the grittiness of reality. Our rural communities deserve leaders who live in and cherish that complexity.