

Evelyn I. Funda. 2013. *Weeds: A Farm Daughter's Lament*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 297 pp. + xvii. Illus.

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Occasionally a book fails to fulfill the scope of its title, but almost the opposite is true of *Weeds: A Farm Daughter's Lament*, for Funda's scope and insights are not limited to gender-specific perspectives or to lamentations. Although it delivers the experiences of a daughter on a small farm, experiences that include loss and grief, *Weeds* is also a broad and, at moments, joyous book. Funda narrates her loss of the people, the place, and the past that granted her identity, yet she moves on to discover new connections, to complicate the iconic, pastoral images of farm life, and to examine the forces that are arrayed against the survival of small farms.

This book is foremost a memoir as the author recounts her childhood in western Idaho during the 1960s and 1970s and analyzes her inability to fully embrace or reject the land that shaped her. Her paternal grandfather, who had emigrated from Czechoslovakia to the United States in 1908, acquired the family farm in 1919, and Funda notes that although she represented the third generation on this land, she feels that from the moment of her birth she "was destined to have to leave the farm" (2). Although she was an only child, her parents expected her to marry and to move from the farm rather than to inherit it, and she observes that her father's stories about the family's past "always trailed off a bit at the end" (19) because he did not have a son. By her high school years, she had grown to feel that the farm was "a hostile place" and that "behind it was a force that neither

wanted [her] to stay nor would allow [her] to entirely escape" (23). She relates several happenings that prompted that view, such as a much older neighbor man asking for permission to date her when she was fifteen, a boyfriend explaining that he wished to spend his life farming in the local valley, and a high school English teacher challenging her to attend college and to explore opportunities beyond the farm.

The past becomes unstable as Funda moves beyond narrating her experiences to research the lives of her grandparents and mother. At first this search results in additional loss, for although the past cannot be changed, the past she inherits has been manipulated. She soon realizes that her grandfather's stories about his family's high social status in Europe, his success as a homesteader, and his ownership of the "very first all-electric bakery in the whole state of Idaho" were fabrications (152). Although initially distressed by these falsehoods, Funda works to place them in perspective. She notes that her grandfather's boasting might be excused because the American West was "a culture of embellishment, where stretchers and whoppers and colorful tales were merely an expected part of the local rhetoric" (163–164). Not satisfied with this rationalization, she seeks other reasons for his lies, and she states that they may have been "a consistent effort to refashion the world around him" (185) to present himself as a success in the New World to his family members who remained in the Old World (195). She observes that her grandfather created the version of the world that he needed to help him survive and that to him "truth was a thing made—it was participatory" (194).

Although Funda experiences loss as she researches her family, this is also a voyage of gain as she breaks out of the patriarchal paradigm of identity formation to discover connections to other people, other places. In contrast to her grandfather, her mother, who immigrated to the United States from Czechoslovakia to escape the communist regime, was tight-lipped and understated about her past, and Funda discovers that her mother had an admirable, adventurous past as a member of the Czechoslovakian underground. In 2007 Funda visits her mother's homeland and experiences an epiphany about her own connection to land: "I was surprised to realize . . . that my true ancestral roots in agriculture came from my mother's lineage, not from my father's side of the family" (274). In addition to discovering her ancestral landscape and her mother's large family, she also establishes a connection to her Czech heritage, a heritage that includes "[a]n unfulfilled desire for a homeland" (245), and she then recognizes that she is no longer alone in such longings.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of *Weeds* is its challenging of the common romantic images of the farm lifestyle. Although only a miniscule percentage of Americans earn a living on small farms, a lifestyle that too often involves grueling physical labor, reverses of fortune, and social isolation, the image of a pastoral, idyllic rural existence persists in the American consciousness. Funda's childhood experiences directly counter such depictions as she recalls the "drafty, converted shepherd's shack" (7) that her parents lived in during most of her childhood, the challenging and desolate landscape, her father's long hours of dangerous work, and her parents' lack of retirement—both died within three months after the sale of their farm. She also discusses several aspects of American culture that contribute to the destruction of this once profitable and accessible profession, such as urban sprawl, inflated land prices, inflated property taxes, increased use of chemicals, and competitive agriculture, all of which reduce the profit margin and quality of life for the small farmer.

Weeds is an excellent addition to Bison Books' American Lives Series, for Funda's life is a quintessential American life in several ways. She is the granddaughter of an immigrant who attempted to homestead the West, the daughter of an immigrant who came to America to escape communism, a farm kid who experienced the loss of the family farm, and a member of the working class who became an educator. Most important, however, she is a writer who uses her talents to understand her loss of the past, to discover a new sense of place and identity, and to move beyond lamentation.