

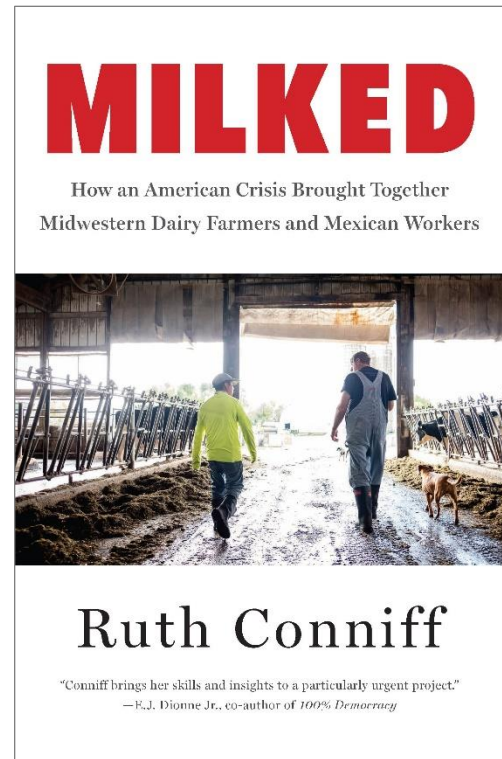
## Lessons in shared humanity from Wisconsin’s dairy farmers and Mexican workers

Book review by

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“Numbers numb, but stories stir,” as the saying goes. As a journalist and the editor-in-chief of the *Wisconsin Examiner*, Ruth Conniff is well aware of the power of human-interest narratives to grab readers’ attention and illustrate social trends. Her first book, *Milked: How an American Crisis Brought Together Midwestern Dairy Farmers and Mexican Workers*, attempts to harness this power by explor-

ing the personal motivations of dairy farmers in Wisconsin, Mexican workers on their farms, and the Mexican-American families of the workers.

The book is a biographical project spanning both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, with Conniff spending one year in Oaxaca, Mexico, beginning in 2017. In addition to farmers and their workers, she interviews interpreters who have served as intermediaries between the two groups, including on trips that dairy farmers have taken to Mexico to visit workers’ families. She also interviews a few well-known advocates and politicians, whose perspectives are presented in the book’s final chapters.

Although Conniff explores cultural differences and does not shy away from discussing power im-

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balances, her emphasis is really on the parallels between rural Mexico and rural Wisconsin, the common values shared by the farmers and workers, and the increasing interdependence of the two groups. The biographies are set against a backdrop of rural population drain and farm loss, in both Wisconsin and Mexico. Through the life stories of the interviewees with a bit of political history woven in, readers come to understand why the survival of Wisconsin's remaining dairy farms is now wholly reliant on the labor of undocumented Mexican workers, just as their rural communities of origin in Mexico are dependent on the wages they send home. Many of the workers Conniff interviews are in various stages of building homes and small businesses in Mexico, hoping to return to their extended families rather than remain in the United States. She likens their dreams—and the work ethic necessary to achieve them—to those of the dairy farmers who decided to remain in agriculture and grow their farms in order to compete in an age of ever-increasing consolidation.

Conniff knows that her readers may see a certain irony in the personal politics of some of the dairy farmers, given their close-up view of immigration issues, yet she hopes that the stories will serve “as an antidote to our divisive politics” (Conniff 2022b, para. 25). Her interview subjects, even those who voted for Trump in 2016 and/or 2020, are unanimous in their view of undocumented workers as essential to the agricultural economy. Nearly all support a visa program for year-round agricultural labor or other reforms to make crossing the border less dangerous. It is an appealing message of a path toward political unity, if not true solidarity, between farmers and workers, but it is difficult to reconcile with the realities of the political geography of Wisconsin, which has the most gerrymandered state legislature in the nation (Brown, 2023) and seems to become more deeply divided with every national election (Balz, 2021).

If readers are able to connect the stories in *Milked* to both historical and contemporary accounts of farmworker struggles in the United States, they could expect to broaden their under-

standing of the economic challenges faced by farmers and farmworkers alike. However, scholars who want to understand Wisconsin's dairy industry from a workplace safety or public health perspective, as well as those who want a full accounting of the environmental impacts of the industry, will need to complement this book with further research. Although the profiles touch on public health issues ranging from workplace injury to addiction and poor mental health, Conniff does not research the prevalence of these conditions among farmers and workers in Wisconsin's dairy sector as a whole. And in contrast to books such as *Tomatoland* (Barry Estabrook, 2011, discussing the tomato industry in Florida) and *The Devil's Fruit* (Dvera I. Saxton, 2021, discussing the strawberry industry in California), *Milked* does not examine the environmental health impacts of the sector nor the occupational hazards that farmers and workers are exposed to on a daily basis.

Still, Conniff achieves her primary purpose, which was to give voice to two groups of people who may be commonly misunderstood and to expose the fallacies of the rhetoric “that pits rural Americans and undocumented immigrants against each other, completely [missing] the point that the two groups have a great deal in common” (Conniff, 2022a, p. 7). While this point—that the groups have a great deal in common—is likely true in other agricultural sectors and areas of the country besides the Midwest, the close relationship between farmers and workers may be unique due to the specific characteristics of dairy production (e.g., workers living on-site year-round, depending on the farmers for rides).

Advocacy groups seeking immigration reform or protections for small and medium farms may find the book useful, particularly as they seek to broaden their coalitions. Despite the difficult path ahead for immigration reform at both the state and national levels, *Milked* reveals how we can follow the lead of farmers and workers who are changing the discourse and building community across cultural and economic divisions, to ultimately win transformative improvements for farmers and farmworkers alike.



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