

We won't "Get big or get out": The farmers who stayed put

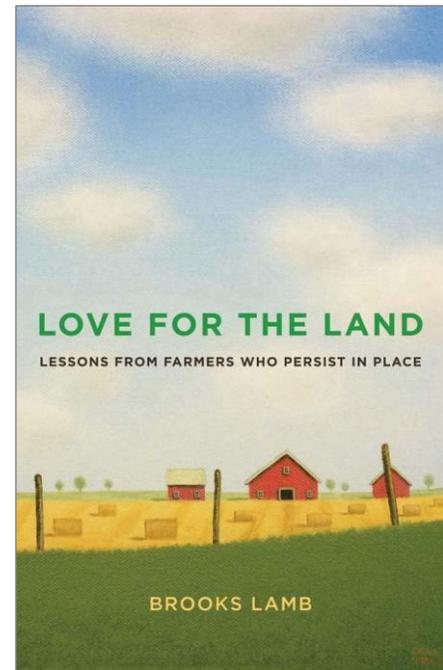
Book review by

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Review of *Love for the Land: Lessons from Farmers Who Persist in Place*, by Brooks Lamb. (2023). Published by Yale University Press. Available as paperback, hardcover, eBook, and audiobook; 288 pages. Publisher's website:

<https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300280104/love-for-the-land/>



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In the U.S., farmland is steadily declining. The number of farms has declined dramatically from a peak of 6.8 million in 1935 to 2.04 million in 2022, and further to 1.88 million according to the 2024 Census of Agriculture (Lacey, 2025). Tennessee reflects this trend. The farmers' persistence in place is a remarkable feat, especially amid long-

standing trends in farm loss and consolidation that have reshaped the agricultural landscape.

As a boy who grew up on Tennessee farmland and returned to document the stories of those who stayed, Brooks Lamb offers a moving tribute to agricultural resilience. In this review of *Love for the Land: Lessons from Farmers Who Persist*, I reflect on the importance of these stories and the enduring wisdom they carry. Lamb sets out to preserve the voices of small-scale farmers to reframe persistence as a form of resistance. His goal is not simply to document survival, but to illuminate the emotional, ethical, and imaginative commitments that sustain farmers in the face of erasure.

Love for the Land gathers the stories of farmers in Robertson and Maury counties, Tennessee.

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Brooks Lamb spent time interviewing farmers in both regions—white farmers in Robertson County and Black farmers in Maury County. While their histories and geographies differ, what emerges is a shared ethic of care, commitment, and deep-rooted connection to the land.

This book presents a powerful exploration of the deep and often fraught connection between farmers, their land, and their legacy, by focusing on three core virtues that shape how farmers embody land stewardship: imagination, affection, and fidelity. These virtues are not abstract ideals but lived commitments, expressed through the farmers' actions, relationships, and enduring ties to place. Imagination is presented as an essential quality for farmer-stewards. Lamb describes it as the ability to “visualize what is possible” for the farm and the land, a forward-looking mindset rooted in care and creativity (pp. 6–8). This imaginative vision often stems from ancestral connections to land, particularly for those farmers who inherited the land they grew up on and played on as children (p. 9). It allows farmers to hold a “child-like view of the world” that deepens their connection to the land, enabling them to envision futures beyond extraction or sale.

Affection is the emotional force that sustains commitment to the land. Lamb describes it as “acting on emotion” and “deciding to care for the earth” (pp. 13–14), echoing relational practices common among farmers. He identifies affection as the primary reason farmers persist as “stickers” (p. 93) and stewards, noting that “without imagination, affection cannot arise” (p. 13). This deep love manifests in farmers' refusal to sell—one example being Phillip, who insists that “no price could ever be high enough” because selling would violate an authentic love for the land (p. 93).

Fidelity reflects unwavering dedication to the land, even amid hardship. Lamb frames it as a virtue that marks farmers as good stewards of the land (p. 17). Fidelity fuels persistence and resistance to external pressures, enabling farmers to persist in place. It is demonstrated through farmers' determination to remain, rehabilitate neglected land, and pass on their legacy—especially among minority farmers facing systemic barriers. Their commitment to continue caring for the land, even

when it has been disrespected or devalued, speaks to a deeper ethic of stewardship and survival.

Lamb's virtue-based framework offers a compelling lens, and in the book's final chapter, he connects these virtues to broader structural forces. He discusses how imagination, affection, and fidelity can serve as forms of resistance to land loss, racial exclusion, and development pressures. This concluding discussion deepens the book's engagement with policy, race, and power, particularly in relation to the historical and ongoing dispossession of Black farmers—a theme explored in depth by scholars such as Penniman (2018) and White (2018). Lamb's approach resonates with literature on moral economies and agrarian ethics (Bell, 2004), while also contributing to a growing body of work that foregrounds agrarian resistance and place-based justice.

Despite neighboring farmland disappearing around them, and often transforming into sprawling subdivisions, farmers in Maury and Robertson counties persist in place. Lamb establishes that many farmers, particularly those operating on a small scale, are struggling with the rapid disappearance of farmland, driven by housing developments and the expansion of large corporate farms. These farmers are frequently left behind, facing continual pressure to sell from neighbors, developers, and encroaching urban areas. Their decision to remain is not passive but deeply intentional, reflecting a commitment to legacy, stewardship, and resistance to displacement.

Diversity among Tennessee farmers remains low. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, the state included 105,222 white producers, compared to just 1,176 Black or African American producers, 351 American Indian/Alaska Native, 221 Asian, 49 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander producers, and 798 identifying as more than one race (U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2022). These stark disparities underscore the significance of Lamb's decision to center the narratives of Black farmers in Maury County—stories that are too often marginalized or omitted in dominant agricultural discourse. His research approach was not only intentional but also relational: by collaborating with a Black historian who helped connect him to local

farmers, Lamb enacted principles of ethical storytelling rooted in participatory and decolonial research traditions (Smith, 2012). These traditions emphasize relational accountability, co-authorship, and the refusal to use extractive knowledge practices—values reflected in Lamb’s commitment to honoring lived experience and building trust. This method allowed him to access voices that might otherwise remain unheard, offering a more inclusive and historically grounded portrait of land stewardship in Tennessee.

Lamb’s work resonates with a growing body of scholarship that reclaims agrarian life as a site of resistance and ecological care. In conversation with thinkers like White (2018) and Penniman (2018), *Love for the Land* joins a tradition that

frames farming not only as survival, but as collective resilience. White’s notion of “collective agency” and Penniman’s emphasis on land as a site of healing echo through Lamb’s portraits of farmers who persist in place despite systemic erasure. His narrative contributes to a broader reimagining of rural futures. It invites us to ask: What does it mean to remain when the land itself is under siege?

Although these farmers are dealing with land disappearing around them, their persistence gives hope to the future of farming and agriculture. Those who remain do more than survive; they steward, resist, and imagine. Their stories, as Lamb shows, are not relics of the past but blueprints for a more rooted and just future. 

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