Reviewed Book Information:
FARM CITY: The Education of an Urban Farmer
By Novella Carpenter
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NOVELLA CARPENTER IS A SERIAL SODBUSTER. From her childhood as the daughter of two back-to-the-earth hippie farmers, to her years tending raised beds and bee boxes in Seattle, she has almost always had some soil on her knees and a pair of snips at her side. So, it is no surprise that when she and her boyfriend move to the Bay Area, she wastes no time breaking new ground. But this isn’t your typical urban garden (i.e. a row of herb-filled mason jars on the fire escape); this is a genuine farm in the heart of Oakland’s grittiest neighborhoods: “Ghost Town,” she calls it. With questionable legal authority, she takes over the abandoned lot next to her apartment soon after transplanting to the new city. Blocks away from the freeway and feet away from a billboard that warns against sexual predators, Carpenter nurtures the sad, sorry patch into an oasis of fragrant lime trees, verdant mizuna stalks, and plump heirloom tomatoes.

Admittedly attracted to bucolic visions of pastoral America, Carpenter resists the notion that one must move to the middle-of-nowhere to plant and grow and harvest. She finds crop rotations second-nature, but would never consider living more than a bike ride away from the museums and bookstores and coffee shops that mark a modern, urban life. “I still regard the country as a place of isolation, full of beauty — maybe — but mostly loneliness,” she writes. “So when friends plan their escape to the country (after they save enough money to buy rural property), where they imagine they’ll split wood, milk goats and become one with nature, I shake my head. Don’t we ever learn anything from the past?” In her eyes, an urban farm is the antidote to rural melancholia. Her own beds quickly become a community garden, attracting Bobby the neighborhood homeless man, the Vietnamese family next door, the local branch of the Black Panthers, the Monks at the end of the street, and many a teenage misfit to the plot. This gathering place fosters a sense of collaboration and familiarity between them all — something rare for a neighborhood like this one. “Putting up food,” Novella offers, “is at its heart, an optimistic thing. It’s a bold way to say: I will be sticking around.”

With a thriving community garden springing up next door and a humming hive of bees hanging off her porch, Carpenter is ready for a new challenge. In rapid succession she catalogue-orders half a dozen chickens, turkeys, and ducks, adopts a trustafarian friend’s litter of rabbits, and then bids on two piglets at a local 4H auction (whose bottomless stomachs she fills with Chinese, Italian, Mexican, Fusion, and American refuse procured from the finest dumpsters around). Ultimately, she challenges herself to a month living only off the fruits of her land: a 100-yard diet. In the ultimate foray into locavorism, Carpenter discovers the benefits and limitations of a small-scale, sustainable food system, but mostly just misses carbs.

Farm City is a witty and charming memoir that makes a greater statement about our food systems. Whether you are a regular at the farmer’s market, the nursery, or a Walmart, there is something to be learned from Novella Carpenter’s unique perspectives on food, growing, killing, and eating. Meditating on her extreme experiment, she writes “The production of food is a beautiful process. Germination, growth, tending, the harvest — every step a miracle, a dialogue with life. But after the 100-yard diet was over, sharing became the main point for me. I could have hoarded all the food myself — processed the tomatoes into cans and pickled the cucumbers. I would have had a groaning cupboard of homegrown food. But then I would have eaten alone.”

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