



# Hannah Coulter

*Wendell Berry*

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New

## Hannah Coulter Details

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Author : Wendell Berry

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## From Reader Review Hannah Coulter for online ebook

### Bryana Johnson says

Having never read anything at all by Wendell Berry, I had no idea what to expect, and was certainly blown out of the water by his elegant and singing prose. Hannah Coulter explores in beautiful language the vast questions of land and war and children and marriage and memory. It is the voice of the past speaking into the reckless ears of the present day, offering like jewels the wisdom that our age has already chosen to disregard.

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### Jennifer says

*"I began to trust the world again, not to give me what I wanted, for I saw that it could not be trusted to do that, but to give unforeseen goods and pleasures that I had not thought to want."*

Oh, how I loved this book. Wendell Berry is truly a national treasure. While I've previously read many of his poems and essays, Hannah Coulter represents my first experience with Berry's fiction.

"Coulter" is one of the last installments of Berry's novels which are set in the fictional town of Port William, KY. This book stands alone, as I imagine the others do. In this narrative, Hannah Coulter, now in her late 70s, looks back on her life, her family, her friends, and the town in which she spent her entire life. This is a "quiet" and reflective book, powerful in its imagery, sense of place, prose, and meaning. Fans of Elizabeth Strout and Anna Quindlen's *Miller's Valley* will feel right at home in the pages of Berry's book.

Hannah Coulter is a woman who hasn't had an easy life. She is never defiant, but she certainly has not been defeated by life either. With dignity, she stands as a symbol of the changing American economy -- and culture -- from the 1930s through the 1970s.

While Berry writes of simpler times in Port William, he doesn't stray into cloying sentimentality. It took me a long time to make my first visit to Port William, and I'll be making a return visit soon.

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### MomToKippy says

This is so poetic and thoughtful. So genuine I had to keep checking to see that this was fiction. Hannah is so real. This review by John describes it so well:

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Thank you to Lora for urging me to read this.

4.5

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## Joyce says

This is a quiet, simple book about an older woman reflecting on her life. It was a good simple life on a farm that not only sustained her and her husband and children but became them, the fabric of their life. It shows her thankfulness for the life she chose. It also goes into a time of close neighbors, sharing, simplicity, hard work, safety -- a time that seems to be gone. It also addresses her disappointments and losses. The writing just flows and there's so many beautiful, meaningful lines. "We were each other's chance to live in the room of love where we could be known well enough to be spared. We were each other's gift." A lovely book.

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## John says

Wendell Berry, perhaps more than any other author, understands the connection people have with place. Not only this, but he has captured the wisdom and grace that age provides to those willing to understand and to learn. This book is profound and prophetic in so many ways--it weaves an emotional web of beauty, happiness, life, faith, and hope. Yet Berry is not a naive optimist. He understands the pain of life and captures it as well as any of the other range of human emotions.

Hannah Coulter tells her story as an old woman--with the wisdom, grace, charity, and love of a mature Christian woman. She recounts her early years in Shagbark, how her mother died while she was still a young girl and the attachment she developed with her grandmother. She moves to Hargrave shortly after graduating from high school. She begins her connection with the people of Port William here. I won't spoil any more of the story, but she becomes an integral member of the community and witnesses the decline of the family farm--indeed is a part of it.

Her story is as authentic, as true, as any real person you'll meet. Berry exhibits a skill for understanding people, place, authority, youth, old age, and just about anything he puts into words. The novel is simply beautiful--reverent as one other GoodReads reviewer wrote. Berry recognizes the sanctity of life--of people--all people. Each person is their own in this novel and he gives them the dignity they deserve as people made in the image of God.

Hannah Coulter makes you want to be a better person--a better parent, a better spouse, a better image-bearer. Be gracious, be charitable. Love people, love your place, love your life, be content with where and what you are. This novel is out of step with modernity--Berry in fact rejects modernity and its impersonal disconnection from family, place, and neighbor. You'll yearn for what has been lost, and hope for what might be restored.

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## Michael says

This was a perfect follow-up to recently reading Berry's *Jayber Crow*. It gave me a chance to revisit the fictitious farming community of Port William in north central Kentucky, which barber Jayber Crow considered as a form of heaven. In this tale, published four years later in 2004, Hannah marries into a clan of farmers in Port Royal at the onset of World War 2 and finds her version of bliss there. She records her memories, reflecting back from a point where she is an isolated widow at age 78. Her gospel is of love, and thankfulness:

*There is no "better place" than this, not in this world. And it is by the place we've got, and our love for it*

*and our keeping of it, that this world is joined to Heaven.*

Hannah assumes a lifetime “membership” in an extended family and their neighbors who work together and help each other. They cleave to her through her loss and grieving over her first husband, Virgil, a “missing in action” casualty at the Battle of the Bulge. And they come round several years later in support of her love and marriage to Nathan Coulter, one who survived the war, but who would never talk about the horrors he experienced in Okinawa beyond saying, “Ignorant boys, killing each other.”

The world events impinging upon the home front had dual effects. On the one hand, the war had a way of making their rural life seem small: *Our minds were driven out of the old boundaries into the thought of absolute loss, absolute emptiness, in a world that seemed larger even than the sky that held it.*

Paradoxically, it also reinforced the value of their special island of sanity and caring. For Nathan: *He had come back after the war because he wanted to. He was where he wanted to be. As I too was by then, he was a member of Port William. ...members of Port William aren't trying to “get someplace.” They think they are someplace.*

They build up a family farm together and raise her daughter with Virgil and two sons of their own. The story Hannah revisits of her courtship with Nathan is movingly rendered, a part of the path to be bound into community: *Love in this world doesn't come out of thin air. It is not something thought up. Like ourselves, it grows out of the ground. It has a body and a place.*

Whereas the novel *Jayber Crow* had a focus on the assaults upon traditional agrarian ways after the war due to the rise of agribusiness, *Hannah Coulter* dwells on the decline of family farming due to the next generation of children taking up work in cities. While she maintains a fervent hope that one of her grandchildren will take over the farm, her memory alone is a way to keep her people and their way of life alive:

*When you remember the past, you are not remembering it as it was. You are remembering it as it is. It is a vision or a dream, present with you in the present, alive with you in the only time you are alive.*

This is the seventh of eight independent novels of this place, a record supplemented by dozens of short stories. I can see how it is considered by some as a special distillation by Berry of what Port William has to teach us. Given that the community seems a lot like that of his own rural origin in Kentucky and of the site of the homestead he established in his 30s, it is natural that he uses his stories to illustrate the vision behind his essays and activist work. I imagine many of my Goodreads friends would find this book too bland for its want of dramatic plotting or might object to violations of the rule of “telling instead of showing”, given how Hannah sums up so much in broad strokes. There is a message pointed to by the story, but does that make it preaching?

For me, I don't feel preached at, but more like the beneficiary of the poet in Berry. Judge for yourself in the following passage:

*One of the happiest moments of my walks is when I get to where I can hear the branch. The water comes down in a hurry, tossing itself this way and that as it tumbles among the broken pieces of old sea bottom. The stream seems to be talking, saying any number of things as it goes along. ... If our place has a voice, this is it. And it is not talking to you. You can't understand a thing it is saying. You walk up and stand beside it, loving it, and you know it doesn't care whether you love it or not. The steam and woods don't care if you love them. The place doesn't care if you love it. For your own sake you had better love it. For the sake of all else you love, you had better love it.*

My rural background and appreciation for Berry's advocacy of small farmers perhaps makes me more receptive to the paean for a disappearing way of life than others. The rhythms of the seasons determine so much about the rhythms of life in this community, and it makes a nostalgic song I love to hear. As a reader, I feel a sense of bounty, which is vividly focused in this passage:

*You look around presently, and it is summer. It has been dry for a while, maybe, and not it has rained. The world is so full and abundant it is like a pregnant woman carrying a child in one arm and leading another by the hand. Every puddle in the lane is ringed with sipping butterflies that fly up in a flutter when you walk past in the late morning on your way to get the mail.*

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## **Carol says**

My copy of this book is almost a palimpsest of pencil marks, yellow highlights, and multicolored pen marks from previous reads. I don't love *every* paragraph. The faith of Port William's characters seems truncated; I don't believe neighborliness itself is enough to sustain a community caught in cultural upheaval.

I read *Hannah Coulter* in between two landmarks of my life: the 50th anniversary of my mom's death, and 40th anniversary of marrying the man I deeply love and respect.

I have a son who works in manufacturing and is raising sheep, a first generation (part-time) farmer. I have a son who works in IT in the land of Boeing. I have a son who, like a reader, has lost his place, and is trying to find it. I have an Ivy in my life. My 13-year old grandson, who loves the land and hard work, is showing his lamb at livestock show next week.

This book articulates the varied layers and textures of my present life with its gifts and absences, its griefs and thanksgivings.

I keep coming back to this book. One thing it does is inspire me to hard physical work. Last weekend in the absence of the usual crew, I joined my husband in cutting our firewood for next winter. I worked beyond what I believed myself capable of. As I pushed and carried and loaded and stacked, I thought of Burley Coulter. I didn't want to be a shirker.

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## **Callie says**

Wow. This book is a gift. I first heard about Wendell Berry in college when we were studying nature writers and I think we read some of his poetry. But I haven't really thought of him since then, yet I am so glad I picked this up. I loved this novel. It's about a small farming community and covers the life of one woman in that community. The way people are in this book and their values feel so familiar to me, and I don't find many books like that. And although there is much about this that feels old fashioned and familiar, there's something revolutionary about it too. Made me feel the way I felt the first time I read Thoreau, reminding me to question my assumptions and to really ask myself who I am, what it is that I want for my life, and not to be afraid to march to the beat of a different drummer. I just don't find books like this everyday, something with so much wisdom. A lot of reviews I read call Wendell Berry a prophet and I can see why, having read this, he's almost in a class of his own. And, after reading a lot of post modern stuff, which sometimes seems empty, he makes me feel like there is still hope. Now more than ever I need to read books that give me hope.

I have to put in some quotes from the book about married love that made me weep (literally) for their profound beauty and truth.

"Watching him and watching myself in my memory now, I know again what I knew before, but now I know more than that. Now I know what we were trying to stand for, and what I believe we did stand for: the possibility that among the world's wars and sufferings two people could love each other for a long time, until death and beyond, and could make a place for each other that would be a part of their love, as their love for each other would be a way of loving their place. This love would be one of the acts of the greater love that holds and cherishes all the world."

"We were looking at each other, though we could barely see. It was almost dark. But to know you love somebody, and to feel his desire falling over you like a warm rain, touching you everywhere, is to have a kind of light. When a woman and a man give themselves to each other, they have a light between them that nobody but them can see. It doesn't shine outward into time. They see only each other and what is between them."

"What I was always reaching toward in him was his gentleness that had been made in him by loss and grief and suffering, a gentleness opposite to the war that he wasn't going to talk about, and never did, but that I know at least something about, having learned it since he died. The gentleness I knew in him seemed to be calling out, and it was a gentleness in me that answered. That gentleness, calling and answering, giving and taking, brought us together. It brought us into the room of love. It made our place clear around us."

"The rhymes came. But you may have a long journey to travel to meet somebody in the innermost inwardness and sweetness of that room. You can't get there just by wanting to, or just because the night falls. The meeting is prepared in the long day, in the work of years, in the keeping of faith, in kindness. The room of love is another world. You go there wearing no watch, watching no clock. It is the world without end, so small that two people can hold it in their arms, and yet it is bigger than worlds on worlds, for it contains the longing of all things to be together, and to be at rest together. You come together to the day's end, weary and sore, troubled and afraid. You take it all into your arms, it goes away, and there you are where giving and taking are the same, and you live a little while entirely in a gift. The words have all been said, all permissions given, and you are free in the place that is the two of you together. What could be more heavenly than to have desire and satisfaction in the same room?"

#### ON MEDITATION:

"I sit and let the quiet come to me. It doesn't come right away. I have to quiet myself before I can hear the quiet of the place, and a car passing along the road up on the hillside or an airplane flying over makes it harder. But I listen and wait, and at last it comes. It is an old quiet, only deepened by the sound of the creek, a bird singing, or a barking squirrel. It goes back to the beginning..."

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## Poiema says

Rich life story of a woman who belongs to a tight-knit family farm community. From childhood to old age, the voice of Hannah Coulter reflects on the significant and the minute moments of her life. She draws a haunting portrait of the rural life that was once so typical but was drawing to an end after WWII. Have we as a culture progressed? Or have we lost the wonderful sense of purpose and community that Hannah recounts in her memoir?

quote: "Love is what carries you, for it is always there, even in the dark, or most in the dark, but shining out at times like gold stitches in a piece of embroidery."

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## Chrissie says

Many people will enjoy this more than I do. I would not classify it as religious, but instead inspirational in tone. I prefer grittier books; I want to see how people struggle and then maybe resolve their problems. Here we are told the story after it is completed, all solved, by a woman who is happy with her life.

We are told of Hannah Coulter's life. We are told by Hannah. She is almost eighty. She was born in 1922 and now it's the year 2000. She lives in the fictive town of Port William, Kentucky. Through her the author writes of his own Kentucky. He was born there and lives there now on a farm. Hannah begins with her youth, then her courtship, her husbands, her children and grandchildren, tying in all the inhabitants of Port William. The author has a whole series of books about these people. Significant dates, all the different characters, each with their specific quirks, where they all live and how they help each are cleverly intertwined in these books. Any reader must acknowledge how well the author pulls this off without glitch. A central theme that runs through all the books is the value of small towns, of friendship and closeness between neighbors and of farming on a small scale. Clearly a direct contrast to the direction our modern world is taking us. A bit idealistic, but not wrong, as a counterweight to big business farming.

The early years pull you in more because Hannah is relating her own thoughts, what she remembers. The end is good too, for the very same reason. Here too she is voicing her thoughts, now as an old woman, but much of the central section is about her children. Here she is telling us about them. Rather than experiencing their thoughts you are being told how she sees their lives. You are being TOLD, rather than experiencing firsthand.

You are told right off the bat what will happen. You are given her present situation; you know how it will end. Recounting it again in more detail feels slow and without punch.

Little humor. Hannah is so darn wise, which is nice, but also kind of boring. The book isn't preachy, but on the verge.

I preferred the author's Jayber Crow. It annoyed me too, but this one is so bland. I hesitate to read more of the books in that the views expressed are repeated.

The audiobook narration by Susan Denaker is very good. A strong, clear voice and easy to follow.



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## Jimmy says

Normally I would not be drawn to a book like this. But from reading the back cover (the blurbs were actually surprisingly substantive in this case) and the first few pages, it seemed to share many similarities with a book I read earlier this year and loved, *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*. So I started reading this as if it were *The Book of Hannah Coulter*. And my initial suspicion was correct, there *were* many similarities. Both are told from the perspective of an older person who has lived off the same land all their lives. Both were addressed to someone whom we find out only towards the tail end of the book. Both concerned themselves with tradition and the plight of tradition in the modern world. Both talked about what it felt like to be left behind. Both recounted war's effects on the community. Both had me teary eyed.

You think you will never forget any of this, you will remember it always just the way it was.  
But you can't remember it the way it was. To know it, you have to be living in the presence of  
it right as it is happening. It can return only by surprise. p. 148

What really worked in this book was how simple it was. How simply told. And how little it concerned itself with the details. As opposed to Ebenezer's endless tall tales, where story after story built up into a mosaic of life with a rich fiber to it, here we are given only generalities. Always Hannah's old voice, her wisdom which spoke to all things, came around to comment on things in broad strokes. That's hard to pull off. But Wendell Berry pulls it off here--mostly. It's not supposed to work, but it does because the prose itself seems honest. He doesn't have any literary tricks up his sleeve, and his protagonist speaks plainly, though beautifully also. There's an open quality here, and no feeling that we are reading a novel--

For example: it manages to go 190 pages without any conflict or tension, save very minor ones, and maybe "modern life" towards the middle. But it's all done with this peaceful meditative rhythm to the sentences, so that it never seems to oppose anything, just accept accept accept. And though I feel the book did have an agenda, it was a well-earned one that grew out of the lives of its characters (that agenda being the idea that we must know intimately the people and place we came from, and tend to that place).

The big idea of education, from first to last, is the idea of a better place. Not a better place where you are, because you want it to be better and have been to school and learned to make it better, but a better place somewhere else. In order to move up, you have got to move on. I didn't see this at first. And for a while after I knew it, I pretended I didn't. I didn't want it to be true. p. 112

Well, there is one exception, and that is my complaint with the book. The Okinawa chapter didn't sit well with me, I couldn't hear Hannah's voice saying those things. It seemed too much like the author trying to insert his anti-war message in there, and it muddled up the simplicity of the story. But even in that chapter there were good parts. If I were his editor I would suggest changing the "you" 2nd person voice in those passages to be less direct... maybe a series of "I read about..."s from Hannah. And definitely cut that section a little shorter, without so much imagery. Then, maybe, *just maybe* it will work.

Living without expectations is hard but, when you can do it, good. Living without hope is harder, and that is bad. You have got to have hope, and you mustn't shirk it. Love, after all, "hopeth all things." But maybe you must learn, and it is hard learning, not to hope out loud, especially for other people. You must not let your hope turn into expectation. p 146

Two more things. One: this book had very little humor in it, though there is a light-heartedness to some sections.

Two: show don't tell is a bit of writing advice that it ignores completely... and for good reason, it's a stupid bit of advice that only works for business majors taking creative writing classes. Great writers often tell, but the key is to tell well, which is difficult to teach (which is why they avoid it by saying don't tell). About 90% of this book is telling, and reflecting, and it works.

OK, three: Out of the 163 books I've read by male authors -- granted not all are novels -- only two were written completely in the voice of a female narrator: this one and Wittgenstein's *Mistress* (which itself wasn't that convincing as a particularly female voice). Others dip in and out of it like *As I Lay Dying* and the last chapter of *Ulysses*, but don't stick with that voice throughout. And there are those where it is not clear whether the speaker is male or female like *How I Became a Nun*. But it got me thinking about how rare this is. And for female writers writing in the voice of a male? 0 out of the 98 in my bookshelves, unless I misremembered some.

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## **Ilenia Zodiaco says**

Brava gente di campagna.

Ma solo io ho desiderato che qualcuno, in questa splendida e bucolica cittadina immaginaria, dove tutto è oro quel che luccica, improvvisamente impazzisse e, brandendo un'ascia, sgozzasse il pastore o - chessoio - diventasse uno stupratore di ortaggi (per citare un'immagine aulica di McCarthy) o si scopasse la sorella, avvelenato da un'orribile e biblica maledizione di famiglia, come ci ha insegnato il buon Faulkner?

Più che un romanzo - per quanto pieno di momenti commoventi e intenti nobili sul senso di comunità e serenità interiore - mi è sembrato un pamphlet conservatore, a tratti moralista, senza la minima traccia di ironia, dallo stile talmente delicato da risultare impalpabile.

I personaggi sembrano tutti partoriti dalla stessa madre (ovviamente un angelo del focolare), si distinguono appena, nessuno commette una cattiva azione, si vogliono tutti bene e sognano di vivere nello stesso luogo per sempre, con molta prole e una bella fattoria. Chi lascia la scuola prematuramente è più felice. E udite, udite, chi tradisce la moglie lo fa perché "non è abbastanza stanco". Se si fosse rotto la schiena zappando la terra invece di essere un insegnante di storia scansafatiche, irretito dal temibile mondo moderno, avrebbe tenuto a bada il pitone.

Che bel posto in cui vivono i tuoi personaggi, Wendell, davvero. Peccato che non esista.

Forse la mia idea di campagna americana è stata traviata dalla lettura di Flannery O'Connor.

Forse sono solo una malvagia e corrotta ragazza di città con il cuore nel frigorifero.

Ma lo devo dire: una partita a bocce con mio nonno riserva più sorprese di questo romanzo.

Du'palle, Hannah. Ma un po' di cocaina per raccontarci della tua lunghissima vita fatta di "lunghe e placide conversazioni", duro lavoro in campagna, scambi di cortesie, dolori che son sempre descritti nello stesso modo, di qualsiasi cosa si stia parlando, l'eternità e l'amore paragonati ad una "colomba avvolta di luce"? Capisco la difesa di un mondo di frontiera che sta scomparendo, capisco la nostalgia, capisco l'incrollabile volontà di rendere onore ai solidi principi morali che governano la tua vita ma veramente mi hai appallato, Wendell. Si badi che quando uso il termine "appallare" non intendo il "verbo gergale dei cacciatori della Garfagnana, "un colpo così preciso e centrato da fulminare un animale".

Occhi al cielo, tante volte. Ma proprio tante.

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## **Jeanette says**

Oh this is gently written and quite a family tale. It's a wonderful window into a woman's life lived in Port William, Ohio farmland from birth in the 1930's to just after the turn of the 21st century.

But is it SAD! It is an ordinary life. And it holds so many connections to all humans in their options for future as they go through becoming adult and also for the saying of goodbye over and over if you live long enough. BUT as much as I wanted to love this gentle voice, and the writing was actually at least a 3.5 star, I could not round it up.

Because Hannah is so passive. And so strongly conducive to following strong suggestion that I just couldn't connect much to her. Looking back on the life of your beloved and known in all aspects farmland and imagining it with a mushroom cloud over it?? That aspect of Hannah cherishing the portents as sorrowful and the looking for the negative scenario so readily as she held the past great losses to her heart? And when her soldier died, she had people to grieve WITH her and not chide or insult his life for the "wasted" sacrifice of his own stupidity. So that part was very hard for me to read. Yes, I guess then with that type of community, that you could just take 3 years to get used to a "different" day among people who shared grief and supported you. It was not that way for the Vietnam widows, that I know.

I actually loved the last 1/3rd the most when she categorized her kids' outcomes and the closeness or NOT to the grandchildren and the last 20 years of her marriage. That was truly spot on. You have to have a common culture to talk about and more in common than just a bloodline for "knowing". And how in a long life that section which holds children in the home was so short and fleeting- Hannah made that a premise. Not always so true anymore. Hannah's kids left young for their life adventures. And Hannah and her husband could maintain in one place as a permanent "home". Is that "normal" any longer? That style of continuity seems beautiful to me.

But Hannah was so sad and never at all seem to anticipate the joy of an adventure? Or really fling the power of her own beauty or spirit when young or in her prime? Oh, that takes an entire star off her tale for me and makes me feel her words in a rather non-female cognition.

This is a warm and loving book, but will not raise your spirits for energy.

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## **Brooke says**

Such an insightful book. The sentimental in me really was affected by Hannah's memories and observations of the changing times. It definitely increased my longing to be a part of a community (a "membership", if you will). Anyone want to be a part of my community? We'll all move out to the country and live within walking distance of each other, our kids will grow up together, and we'll experience life's joys and sorrows together. Seriously, when I read books like this, I realize just how old-fashioned I really am. They make me want to be more agrarian: have a garden, know my neighbors better, move closer to home. I loved Nathan and his ability to "live his life", come what may (made me think of Elder Wirthlin). While this book made me a little fearful for the future day when my children will leave me and live their own lives, I couldn't help but look to Nathan, and then Hannah, for hope.

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## **Gloria says**

For the life of me, I'm finding any and all words inaccurate and insufficient to relay the painful beauty of Hannah's tough and tender resolution to her world.

Aside from having been "reset," in order to view one's own circumstances with a fresh eye and perspective, it would seem better to simply recommend a read of Wendell Berry's resilient Hannah.

Her words, through his incomparable pen, explain it so much better...

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