

Farmer Arnold's Barnyard: Book Four

M. E. Hulme

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The stories collected in Farmer Arnold's Barnyard: Book Four reveal both the fun and the frustrations of life on the farm.

M. E. Hulme's *Farmer Arnold's Barnyard: Book Four* is a charming collection of vignettes about life on a farm.

Life in the barnyard may appear peaceful on the surface, but from the collection's first story, it becomes clear that the animals have their disagreements. When the farmer's attempt to bring peace to the barnyard fails, the animals, including Dot the dog and John the gander, find their own way to resolve the conflict.

The book goes on to tell the stories of a wandering calf with poor eyesight, of how the goose got on the cats' nerves, about the fun calves have frolicking in a new pasture, and about the farmer's conversations with a wiggly worm and a spider who each teach him about their contributions to a healthy farm's ecosystem. The stories also reveal that events don't always go as planned. Chickens escape their pen, deer invade the garden and eat the farmer's peas, and calves are sometimes born with problems and need special care.

Narrated in a reflective tone, each vignette is accompanied by photographs showing the animals interacting with each other and with the farmer. Farm-related vocabulary appears, including the names and purposes of several items of farm equipment. The stories about animals behaving badly are often funny, and those that show children learning farming skills from their grandparents are examples of how satisfying hands-on learning can be for teachers and students. People participate in conversations and reflections, and each is rendered equal: it's just as likely that the farmer will learn from a worm as it is that a child will learn from his grandfather.

The stories move at a slow, steady pace, and their language is direct. The illustrations—a mix of photographs and drawings—have vintage sensibilities. But the photographs are too small, and they are often blurry and awkwardly cropped. They sometimes conflict with the narratives, too: in the first story, "John got out" is conjoined to a photograph of Dot the border collie instead of John the gander, and a story about a black calf shows a red calf as its second image. And the narratives themselves include muddled details: the farmer says that he will drive his combine to the field but starts his truck and drives home instead; a cow gives her calf "lunch" at bedtime. Grammatical and punctuation errors further undermine the book.

The pleasant children's stories collected in *Farmer Arnold's Barnyard* pluck moments from life on the farm.

KRISTINE MORRIS (November 7, 2022)

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