

Farmer Arnold's Barnyard: Book Two

M. E. Hulme

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There's plenty of warmth to the stories of Farmer Arnold's Barnyard, which make life on a farm seem charming and serene.

In M.E. Hulme's bucolic collection *Farmer Arnold's Barnyard*, uplifting tales team classic farm animals with a friendly caretaker.

In the book's twenty-four selections, Farmer Arnold conducts his daily chores. He's a good farmer with a penchant for taking pictures, saying "golly," and talking to himself. He also solves problems, enlarges his cheerful menagerie, and goes on errands.

Each story spans a few paragraphs; begins with "one day" or a close variant; and describes a mild dilemma, such as being thwarted by rain or chasing after a wandering pig. Most conclude on a positive note. This formulaic structure is comforting for early readers, but repetitive when it comes to reading aloud. It also leads to single-note sketches in which the ebb and flow of farm life remains much the same. The farm animals are anthropomorphized but interchangeable. One dog, Popeye, stands out among them; he's persistent, mischievous, and resourceful.

Several stories feature the arrival of new animals. Others center on animals that encounter danger, from an electrical cord to a river. At times, the text is unsubtle about its lessons, like that "It is important to be careful around water." Lessons regarding kindness are more implicit, as when Farmer Arnold leaves a door open for a family of wrens, or when he helps a spider to find its way out of the recycling pile.

Color photographs are included. They portray the workings of a farm, including animal husbandry, and reveal the Canadian setting that's sparse in the text itself. The images vary in composition and quality; some are close-ups, while some are blurry shots. Clear, numbered dividers between the stories suit the book's purpose, while colored pencil illustrations range from cartoon animals to more realistic images.

The plainspoken narration focuses on action, but such action is weakened because of prefatory, distracting conjunctions. Italics are used for emphasis; they undermine otherwise evocative images. The book is at its best when it concentrates on naturally embedding useful information—as with an explanation of what a hay-bine is—into events. Farmer Arnold's habit of musing aloud leads to sweet, sometimes rueful monologues in which he walks through his problem-solving process.

Between their slow, everyday approaches, tendency to state what's happened, and familiarity with their topics, there's little surprise, but plenty of warmth to the stories of *Farmer Arnold's Barnyard*, which make life on a farm seem charming and serene, though not neglecting to mention its hazards.

KAREN RIGBY (January 13, 2020)

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