



## This Is Eden?

### Nancy Radcliffe

AuthorHouse (Jul 13, 2021)

Softcover \$13.99 (152pp)

978-1-66553-020-0

*This is Eden? is a careful historical novel that follows a pioneering family woman along her new adventure.*

A Christian family from Chicago moves to rural Wisconsin in Nancy Radcliffe's brisk historical novel *This is Eden?*, a story about homesteading and resilience.

In 1913, Hattie, the mother of six, is married to John, a dairy driver who aspires to become a preacher. When John buys forty acres in Wisconsin and dubs the plot the Garden of Eden, Hattie is sent ahead of him to prepare the land with their children. Once Hattie arrives, though, she learns that their new log cabin home is far from finished. Armed with encouraging Bible verses, she nonetheless begins forging a home in the wild.

A steadfast woman who guides her family well, Hattie is characterized most in terms of her everyday industry. Her more personal thoughts are constricted to general misgivings and faithful notions of provision. The result is an archetype of an obedient spouse who embodies a dry bygone ethos: rugged necessity leaves her little room for sincere emotional responses. Her story becomes a distant, matter-of-fact one—more consumed by reportage regarding the family's work than it is an engaging narrative on its own. In the meantime, absent John is rendered a stark background figure whose actual influence is abstract.

The book's chapters are as efficient as Hattie: topical and devoted to detailing the family's steps toward settlement. At first, Hattie and her children are overwhelmed by the tasks ahead, but then they receive help from their neighbors—a sometimes warm, sometimes skeptical secondary cast whose members are unsure about the newcomers from the city. Once the family settles in, they work to cope with the fresh challenges presented by their pine-laden acreage.

The book captures the period well, with details about the family's chores and interpersonal dynamics. Hattie's older children are called upon to help her: one son labors at a saw mill in exchange for shingles, and one daughter watches over her younger siblings. From chinking spaces between logs to establishing a garden and canning food, their overlapping concerns are shared in lucid terms.

Still, the family's goals are clear and predictable, resulting in a story that contains few surprises. Even once the cabin is completed, there is little time for joy: the seasons march on, each bringing additional tasks. Whether she's knitting in anticipation of harsh winters or tending to illnesses, Hattie is an unwavering figure, despite her loneliness. An abrupt development late in the story pushes the book toward an unsatisfying conclusion that undoes much of what came before it.

*This is Eden?* is a careful historical novel in which a woman calls upon her pioneering spirit, and her faith, to make a new home for her family.

KAREN RIGBY (September 12, 2022)

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