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View from the Fazenda: A Tale of the Brazilian Heartlands

Ellen Bromfield Geld
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> *In walking, you may encounter long-legged emus and even those huge black-winged, white-breasted red-wattled storks mingling with the chickens where corn is tossed in the yard. They are not afraid, as though by experience they know it is the chickens who end up in the cooking pot, not they.*

The author is describing a visit to a friend's home in the Pantanal—the large swampy area where Brazil borders Bolivia and Paraguay. An Ohio native—she's the daughter of Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and conservationist Louis Bromfield—who moved to Brazil fifty years ago as a newlywed, Geld tells the story her life in her adopted country.

Geld, who has written nine books and contributed to Brazil's leading newspaper for many years, recalls the apparent ease with which she and her husband, Carson, picked up their Midwestern roots and went to South America so convinced it would work out that they didn't even have money for the return trip home if it proved necessary. It didn't.

By 1961 the Gelds—who eventually had five children—had purchased their own fazenda, a forty-acre coffee-growing plantation on the Tieté River, which they named Pau D'Alho for the garlic-scented trees on the property. Geld writes that the landscape reminded her of the Ohio countryside of her youth.

In often poetic language, she paints a portrait as diverse as the country itself as she traverses to its far corners over the ensuing years. Whether riding a vintage paddle-wheel steamer down the Sao Francisco River, taking a group of visiting U.S. farmers on tour, attending Carnaval, or traveling deep into a mountainside where garimpeiros search for diamonds, Geld discusses history, politics, and culture in observant, honest words.

She introduces the reader to unforgettable people: Dona Zezé, "who appeared from nowhere with her nine children and an old dog" and moved into the abandoned school house down the road; and Amadeu, who at age twelve, motherless and poverty-stricken, cut trees and planted coffee with the men. On the fazenda the Gelds also raised Santa Gertrudis cattle and, when frost destroyed the coffee groves one year, switched to grain crops and pecan trees. The couple's adult children and grandchildren also still live in country.

This book resembles Geld's tasty description of the Brazilian dish arroz carreterio: "onions, garlic, parsley, and tiny bits of sun-dried beef sauteed and then simmered with rice till dry but loose and delicious."
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