

## Brian Brett's poetic, non-romanticized view of nature and farm life

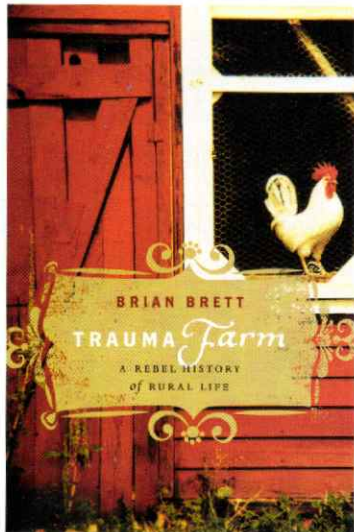
AMY REISWIG

A day on "Trauma Farm" leads to a meditation on rural life full of education, lament and celebration.

A very wet border collie bounces and barks out a noisy, muddy welcome to Trauma Farm. Author Brian Brett warns me about the decomposing porch as he warmly invites me into his home, and while worrying about falling through the floor, I pass beside a blue neon sign which announces to all entrants: "Poetry."

This first glimpse of life on Trauma Farm (officially Willowpond Farm) was a good introduction, since Brett is a man enchanted by the beauty of a good mess.

Born in Vancouver, Brian Brett studied literature at Simon Fraser University in the '70s, but has lived and worked on this Salt Spring Island small mixed farm for almost 20 years. Here he has cultivated a prolific writing life as well as a richly productive farm. A poet, novelist, journalist and memoirist, his recent book *Trauma Farm: A Rebel History of Rural Life* won the Writers' Trust of Canada non-fiction prize in November, a fact by which Brett seems still surprised and almost embarrassed. "They tricked me!" he says, laughing, as he prepares us a pot of home-grown tea.



On the farm with his wife Sharon and their motley crew of chickens, sheep and peacocks, it's the trio of dogs that are really in charge, he claims. Although big black Olive snoring on her bed in the corner wasn't preventing chickens from stealing seeds from the song-bird feeder on the deck. As he steps outside to shoo the chickens away, he says, "Those guys are a bunch of thugs!"

While often photographed looking serious, even dour, Brett is quick to laugh and obviously enjoys the simple fact of being alive. Dressed in a pale blue shirt and jeans with thick

navy blue suspenders, he looks every bit the farmer...until he serves the mild long-steeping tea in tiny Japanese cups. He is not a man to be easily categorized or summed up, and neither is his book.

Blending memoir, natural history, industry exposé and philosophy, *Trauma Farm* combines prose and poetry, the personal and the professional, hilarity and tragedy. That was the only way to get it all in, he explains.

For years, writer and publisher friends, including Margaret Atwood, kept pushing him to write about the farm—partly to compensate for the poorly-paying habit of writing poetry—and eventually he agreed. "It's one thing to talk about it at a dinner party after a couple of glasses of wine," he says, but faced with actually getting started he wondered: "what were we thinking?" How do you condense 20 years of living, learning, loving, hurting and hoping on the same plot of land into a coherent narrative?



PHOTO: MICHAEL SCHENHOLTZ

Brian Brett

Simple: you don't. At least not if you're Brian Brett.

Told as if experiencing one long day on the farm, his style has been called Joycean. But Brett explains that his structural model was the native teaching tale. "It's a holistic tale," he emphasizes, one that passes on history and traditional knowledge, combining education, celebration and how-to manual.

Loss of traditional knowledge is at the centre of the book's message and form, and this loss is one of the greatest dangers to society, according to Brett. In the book, the death of a local farmer means "another library gone to the ground," and Brett admits *Trauma Farm* is partly a way of preventing that from happening to him. Originally contracted for a 64,000-word book, the first raw draft was, he says, 260,000. Good thing he knows a thing or two about weeding.

Brett believes the book's seemingly-meandering form reinforces his message that a sustainable life requires both reason and intuition, science and traditional knowledge, organization and chaos. "The story style is the argument," he asserts.

As a result, *Trauma Farm* sprouts a variety of tones: anger, humour, sadness, acceptance, defiance, bitterness, awe—the daily emotional range of farm life. From the meditative "song surf of the birds" to the "big plop of skanky peafowl shit on the spruce floor" to the eagle eating the head of a lamb as it's being born, the book celebrates the messiness, complexity and diversity of life.

"Our minds can't encompass the multiplying intersections of a farm's diverse interactions: it's a mystic star map whose interconnections are larger than human imagination and certainly beyond the reductionist mind trap of the logic that led to the thrills of globalization," he writes. Brett's is a poetic but not romanticized view of nature and farm life.

Nor is *Trauma Farm* a simple "us versus them" discussion of small



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farm life dying in the shadow of urbanization and big agribusiness. He writes, "The natural world is full of false turns, which is why I've gradually learned not to become so angry about the stupidities of the human species." While readers are initiated into behind-the-scenes horrors of factory farming, Brett's ability to see absurdity and entropy at work everywhere prevents him from offering easy answers.

He maintains that the two ends of the farming spectrum—the small and the industrial—are each absurd in their own way because they are both becoming unsustainable and subject to human idiocy. "The plow can be a weapon of mass destruction, depending on how it is used," he writes.

"We're never going to have a safe world, but by trying to make one, we're making it a more dangerous one." Ever-increasing government regulations give rise to the hilarious yet deadly serious "guerilla" activities of unpasteurized apple juice sellers, raw milk drinkers, fresh egg purveyors and seed preservers. Looking out the window to the fields and pond, he laments: "In ten years it will probably be illegal for us to grow vegetables for people." This absurdity irritates yet fascinates him about humanity.

Of his own farming life, he admits, "Much of this is on principle," noting that farmers almost always incur a financial loss, not a gain. Even

the recent \$25,000 award will mostly go to maintaining his current lifestyle while it's still possible. "I'll just keep farming until it's all gone!"

Like his book, Brett is pleasantly destabilizing in that he's not as judgmental or anti-urban as I expected. He loves Montreal, for instance, and says that if he ever had to leave the farm he'd like to live in downtown Vancouver. As he writes in the book: "If farming teaches anything, it's tolerance."

That surprising tolerance is what makes Brett such a talented observer, learner and therefore teacher. If you're looking for a book to inspire a shift in consciousness for the new year, take a ramble with Brett through Trauma Farm—"a pretty cheerful despairing book," he says with a laugh.



Amy Reiswig is a happily transplanted Montreal writer and editor who has published book reviews in a number of Canadian journals as well as non-fiction in *The Walrus*, *Danforth Review* and *Utne Reader*.

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