



## Imagination in Place

*Wendell Berry*

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### **Imagination in Place** Wendell Berry

A writer who can imagine the “community belonging to its place” is one who has applied his knowledge and citizenship to achieve the goal to which Wendell Berry has always aspired—to be a native to his own local culture. And for Berry, what is “local, fully imagined, becomes universal,” and the “local” is to know one’s place and allow the imagination to inspire and instill “a practical respect for what is there besides ourselves.”

In *Imagination in Place*, we travel to the local cultures of several writers important to Berry’s life and work, from Wallace Stegner’s great West and Ernest Gaines’ Louisiana plantation life to Donald Hall’s New England, and on to the Western frontier as seen through the Far East lens of Gary Snyder. Berry laments today’s dispossessed and displaced, those writers and people with no home and no citizenship, but he argues that there is hope for the establishment of new local cultures in both the practical and literary sense.

Rich with Berry’s personal experience of life as a Kentucky agrarian, the collection includes portraits of a few of America’s most imaginative writers, including James Still, Hayden Carruth, Jane Kenyon, John Haines, and several others.

### **Imagination in Place Details**

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## From Reader Review Imagination in Place for online ebook

### Bob Brinkmeyer says

This is a marvelous collection of essays, immensely readable, immensely wise. Most of the essays are in some way literary, either about Berry's own imagination and art or about a handful of the writers who have meant the most to him. As often is the case with essays by writers on other writers, we are doubly blessed: we gain insight not only into the writers about which Berry deeply cares (he's a fine, sensitive reader), but also, and even more profoundly, into the mind and art of Berry himself. If you want an introduction into Berry's poetry and poetic vision, there's no better place to start than with his essays here on Hayden Carruth, Donald Hall, Jane Kenyon, John Haines, and Gary Snyder.

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### Cynthia Scott says

Wonderful essays, most about other authors who have a strong focus on the place they call or called home.. Last one about a denier of God and tears apart his argument without taking a stand pro or con. Really thoughtful book

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### Casey says

The hearer. The believer. The reader- the art of it. We obviously need to speak from time to time of the things that move us. Unfold us. A sort of innocent. Trying. To see. Imagine. A good enough. Get back in. A civilization to match the scenery. The human mystery all art praises. The signature of thought- long becoming. I disappear. I get back in. Passion should be used well. Paradise is a state of being in harmony with imagination. We are destroying - everything we have worked so hard for . Because of our failure to imagine

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### Faye says

Wendell Berry is irreverent, you have to love a author who adds a word like "smartassery" to your vocabulary. He writes about how each farm has unique properties such as hydrology, weather, topography, soils, etc. This demands that each farmer learn how to generate food by knowing and understanding a particular piece of land. The secessionist movement in Vermont is described as "vigorous and strictly principled." Berry wants us to imagine an America more lenient on the land that supports life as we know it, we use violence against the land and each other when there is a "lack of imagination"o and unwillingness to solve problems in a straight forward manner. He is a great admirer of Wallace Stegner who he took writing workshops with and whom he considers to be a writer of place like himself. Berry considers authenticity more important than novelty. Connecting to the place where we live in a genuine manner is significant when compared to "issues of self and career." He talks about always having been a storyteller and he recognizes that there are stories behind every poem. He got to me when he wrote about being in exile from your own life if you deny your past. I think that Wendell Barry is so well read and yet so practical at the same time. The comparison of As You Like It and King Lear and pulling into the discussion our need to be cleansed by nature, blew my mind. He points out that we all participate in an economy "that is the most destructive, predatory, and wasteful the world has ever seen."

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## Sara Q says

Mark read these essays to me while I stitched on various projects. Berry's forthright style and down-to-earthness we're so refreshing. I want to assign his last essay - God, Science & Imagination - as a reading in a class just to blow my students' minds.

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## Bob Redmond says

Berry collects 15 essays on topics and people dear to him, along the way offering a story of his own relationship to writing and a point of view of his country.

The first two essays--in breathtaking originality, scope, and relevance, and patience not least--lay the groundwork for the rest of the book and prove a thesis postulated nearly 50 years prior.

Berry begins by relating his choice to move from New York back home to Kentucky in 1964. As a graduate of Stanford's writing program (taught by Wallace Stegner), Berry would have achieved a certain fame along with classmates Edward Abbey, Larry McMurtry, Robert Stone, Ernest Gaines, Tillie Olsen, and Ken Kesey. Instead, he quit his teaching post and moved to Kentucky to farm and teach at the University of Kentucky, baffling the establishment in the process. His purpose was simple enough: he wanted to return where he belonged.

In the titular essay, he writes, "If one is a writer, is to accept the place and the farming of it as a literary influence. One accepts the place, that is, not just as a circumstance, but as a part of the informing ambience of one's mind and imagination." (p. 12)

Indeed, for Berry, farming and the work of Imagination are practically the same: they require an embrace of particulars: of a climate, a topography, of plants, neighbors, of relationships. "Whereas Hamlet saw art as holding up a mirror to nature, and thus in a sense taking its measure, [some] agricultural thinkers have developed the balancing concept of nature as the inevitable mirror and measure of art." (p.11)

He describes a concept of Imagination that is akin to Plato's Forms or Kant's "das Ding an sich" [The Thing in Itself]--a spiritual essence that gets beyond bounds of human frailty and yet (in Berry's case) depends entirely on embracing the particulars of human existence, the little quotidian things, which in their particularity become perfect in and of themselves.

This kind of Imagination by definition eschews the literary industry, the agricultural industry, political and economic machines too. Berry elaborates on Imagination in the book's second essay, the tour-de-force "American Imagination and the Civil War."

"And yet... how do we equilibrate or even negotiate between local identity and the abstractions of regional or national identity with the attendant clichés of "economic growth"? Obviously there can be no general answer to this question. If we see the need for an answer, then we must attempt it for ourselves in our communities. I believe that there is hope in the increasing uneasiness of people who see themselves as dispossessed or displaced and therefore as economically powerless. Growing out of this uneasiness, there is now a widespread effort toward local economy, local self-determination, and local adaptation. In this there is a new potential of imagination, and at least an authentic settlement of our community." (p. 34)

The rest of the book elucidates the wide themes of the first two essays, by way of short essays, introductions, remembrances, eulogies on other writers known and not: Stegner, Hayden Carruth, Harlan Hubbard (of Kentucky), John Haines (poet laureate of Alaska), James Still (also Kentucky), Gurney Norman (another local writer friend of Berry), Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon (of New England), Gary Snyder, James Baker Hall, Kathleen Raine. Berry focuses on poetry in particular and his additional touchstones of Christian spirituality, classic literature, and the United States.

Citing one's friends and neighbors might seem disingenuous; Bill McKibben does the same when he describes all the great stuff his friends in Vermont are doing. But for Berry (and McKibben), it simply proves his thesis: a commitment to the local, the ability of the particular to be the ideal as much as one cares to know and cultivate it.

The last two essays--a long one on King Lear as a hopeful, not tragic, figure (go, Quixotic Wendell!) and another on science and faith--wrap up the book nicely in an expansive fashion. Let us not despair! Get beyond empiricism and believe!

The elephant in this living room--in a book that addresses America as an imaginative farmscape, and even addresses its failures--is the systematic destruction of indigenous cultures of the country.

Berry goes as far back as the Civil War: "I have been describing an enormous failure, and to me this appears to be a failure of imagination. Though we are now far advanced in the destruction of our country, we have only begun to imagine it. We are destroying it *because* of our failure to imagine it." (p.30)

But he doesn't go further. How can he not address "a suffering that the statisticians would undoubtedly render in gallons of blood and gallons of tears"--Berry's words describing the Civil War, which should be applied to the genocidal roots of the country?

This is not an idle critique, either: twice Berry calls for an "authentic settlement" and another time suggests that the authentic farmer/writer become a "born-again native."

He cites his friend and exemplar John Haines:

*I have come to feel that there is here in North America  
a hidden place obscured by what we have built upon it,  
and that whenever we penetrate the surface of the life  
around us that place and its spirit can be found.* (p. 52)

Well, yes, there certainly is a place obscured by what we built on it... Instead of following the real root here, Berry talks immediately about "unabashed love of country--an authentic patriotism," and the importance of Haines' work to those who long for "an authentic settlement of our country."

Later, in discussing Gary Snyder's poem "Mountains and Rivers without End," Berry writes (p. 107-8): "It is possible for humans to fabricate a human condition that obscures their natural condition:

*us and our stuff just covering the ground* [Snyder]

so that we can know neither the mountains nor the Mountain Spirit. The solution to the moral problem (which is always more than moral) is to "become born-again natives" of the places where we live.

Some moral problems, however, are moral enough, especially if they are missed. How can he miss this one and then use such unintentionally ironic language to address it?

It's a huge blind spot in an otherwise visionary book, and one which I believe he has to address elsewhere in his 50-some other books.

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#### WHY I READ THIS BOOK:

I'd had a passing knowledge of Berry from various friends and citations--as "the farm poet guy"-- although I'd never sat and read anything more than a poem here and there. Meanwhile (and over time), I'd not only become interested in the intersection of many themes central to Berry, but begun a beekeeping practice and also founded a non-profit organization based on the intersection of arts and service. Our programs, such as "Art + Agriculture" and "Bilocal" explored place, imagination, and the intersection of culture and agriculture; with no compass however we were flying blind. In fact, one of our goals was to develop a language to discuss such crossings.

Along the way one of our board members had suggested I read Berry's essay "The Idea of a Local Economy," and for a year I kept the document on my desktop. Another chance circumstance found me holding this volume--IMAGINATION IN PLACE" in a bookstore, stunned that it existed. Finally, on a long-delayed vacation, I read the book and the essay on the plane ride home. Mind blown, I returned from vacation to a time-sucking day job, and set aside all book reviews for nearly 18 months. But the seeds were sown: we changed the name of our organization (to THE COMMON ACRE) and re-focused our mission and programs. I also eventually quit that day job to focus full-time on beekeeping and Permaculture, and also have at last written this review of one of the landmark books of my reading life.

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#### Artemisia Hunt says

Always insightful and thought-provoking, Wendell Berry assembles another fine book of essays on imagination, in several of its many forms....social, spiritual, literary and philosophical. In some pieces, he also honors and extols the virtues of some of his own literary colleagues and heroes....Wallace Stegner, Hayden Carruth, Kathleen Raine and even Shakespeare. As always, he brings to each conversation new and deeper perspectives and a fond appreciation for the people and ideas he believes in.

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#### Lisa-Michele says

"Is imagination merely a talent, such as a good singing voice, or the ability to make things up or think things up or get ideas? Or is it, like science, a way of knowing things that can be known in no other way? We have much reason to think that it is a way of knowing things not otherwise knowable." So much to consider. I read this book very slowly. Wendell Berry has something to say and I want to hear it.

Berry is a writer first, and a farmer second, or is it the other way around? But one defines the other. His sense of place – for him, Kentucky – is unmatched. He is one of the few writers I have read on this "sense of place" business that really describes it the way I see it. Place is so influential in my life I can't put it into words, but it helps to read Berry's view. His essays, written about Wallace Stegner or Gary Snyder or James Still or the Civil War or "God, Science, and Imagination" are all so provocative. I finished the book with a list of writers and poets I must consult further in order to continue my study of place.

"One meets not only the weather and the wildness of the world, but also the limitations of one's knowledge, intelligence, character, and bodily strength. To do this, of course, is to accept the place as an influence." My sense of place comes from southern Utah and I am interested in its influence on my writing, by which I really mean my thinking. Berry intertwines writing and influences and his sense of place. He writes in order to come to terms with his actual experiences: "Devotion to any particular place now carries always the implication for heartbreak." Whether it is the stereotypes of rural Americans or the desolation of the ruined agricultural fields, Berry is willing to wrestle with and write about all aspects of his sense of place in the

Kentucky wilderness. His observations on writing are helpful to me: "I have often begun with an actual experience and in the end produced what I have had to call a fiction. In the effort to tell a whole story, to see it whole and clear, I have had to imagine more than I have known."

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### **Ian Caveny says**

As with all Wendell Berry works, this collection of essays is an odyssey, a journey through literary and physiographic landscapes with the intentions of bringing together two powerful, but oft-disparate, worlds: Poetry and Geography, or, more accurately, Poetry and "the Land."

Berry's arguments for "the Local" are eloquent and well-spent on a task as esoteric as literary criticism. In some sense, I feel as though Berry here provides for the literary person a fine example of the *purpose* of literary criticism. Here we see no haughty critical-mindedness whose purpose is to excoriate the author's hidden (Freudian) intentions; instead, we see a gregariousness and a graciousness that belies Berry's critical wit. He is a generous critic, and when he does speak critically it is always on-target and with the right spirit.

The vast majority of the essays in *Imagination in Place* are reflections on specific poets or specific poetry collections, in particular those who Berry knew personally from either his literary circles or his studies. He provides a great many poets for the young poetry-reader hungry for good literary work to discover and munch on; but even better he provides a localized reading of their work, tying the work of the poet to the land from which the poet works. There's a deep spirit-of-the-land resonant in the poets Berry discusses, as well as in Berry's thought, calling for a needfulness to the local author and artist (as opposed to our current artistic situation of centralized arts in New York, L.A., etc.).

As with all Berry writings, he inevitably turns each and every essay into a discussion of the ways our society is destroying its topsoil and its watersheds. But he never does so as a pariah; rather he does so as a well-read and articulate *literati*, who holds his calling as a farmer co-inherent with his calling as a poet. This indomitable and persevering will of environmental critique undergirds all of Berry's critical writings, demonstrating the needfulness of all poetic work.

A surprising addition to all these poetical interventions is a longer essay on *As You Like It* and *King Lear*. It feels a tad bit out-of-place in light of the more personal engagements surrounding it, but it reveals Berry's talented humanistic criticism nonetheless. Of all the essays, I found it to be the one more of the classical "literary criticism" genre, and perhaps one of the more enjoyable ones for those who are strangers to the other authors.

Altogether, this collection of essays reminds one that Berry is not just a poet and a farmer, but a true humanist of the classical tradition. And Berry reminds us humanists of the values and purposes of our critical work, as we have all-too-often neglected our *telos* in this modern day and age.

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### **Randy says**

I have now read ten book length or, like this, collections of Wendell Berry's essays. This is the latest and it distinguishes itself in that it is the first collection of his essays I have read that is entirely devoted to the process of writing and other writers.

As is customary with me, I will read this again. I am a beginning artist, and, although my art is visual rather than literary, it is very useful to read the insights of a thoughtful artist exploring his art, his process, and his fellow artists.

I have reread the title essay, 'Imagination in Place' where Mr. Berry examines his influences and how they have affected him. I will quote what I have found to be a significant insight he shares.

"If...you want to write a whole story about whole people...you must reach for a reality which is inaccessible merely to observation or perception but which in addition requires imagination, for imagination knows more than the eye sees, and also inspiration, which you can only hope and pray for." pg. 15

As usual, Mr. Berry is clear and deliberate, but not simplistic or linear in his presentation. I make a second or third read in order to mine the gems I find meaningful and worth treasuring/pondering once I put his well read books on my shelf.

Although this first essay in this collection is a complex look at the interaction of influences and work, he fills it with direct insights about his intentions and his wider aspirations in his lifetime of writing. I will close my review with a second quote from the first essay 'Imagination in Place.'

"Hovering over nearly everything I have written is the question of how a human economy might be conducted with reverence, and therefore with due respect and kindness toward everything involved. This, if it ever happens, will be the maturation of American culture." pg. 15

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## **Joel Pinckney says**

I really enjoyed this collection of essays by Berry. In the first half, he speaks at length about several of his influences and friends; reading those reflections were valuable in gaining a fuller understanding of the mind of Berry, and from whence it comes. Those not discussing Berry's influences/friends generally each illustrate Berry using his sense of imagination and his keen eye as a reader to analyze a text or discuss an issue. Overall, the collection reveals Berry as a man faithful to the extensive definition of imagination that he provides in the collection's final essay, "God, Science, and Imagination":

We have much reason to think that it is a way of knowing things not otherwise knowable. As the word itself suggests, it is the power to make us *see*, and to see, moreover, things that without it would be unseeable. In one of its aspect it is the power by which we sympathize. By its means we may see what it was to be Odysseus or Penelope, or David or Ruth, or what it is to be one's neighbor or one's enemy. By it, we may 'see ourselves as others see us.' It is also the power by which we see the place, the predicament, or the story we are in.

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## **Dee says**

"With love, in friendship." p.110

"As I seem to be confessing, I have grown or aged into difficulty in distinguishing between art and life. The reason may be that the difference is not always as neat or convincing as I used to think. When we make our

art we are also making our lives, and I am sure that the reverse is equally true. When Jim wrote in one of his more recent poems that 'Light and dark became my sudden work,' so brilliantly using that adjective, he was talking about photography surely, but for me the line has a larger resonance. I hear it referring also to his long and arduous work of making his life by drawing it from darkness into light, and so making it whole." p.111

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## **James says**

Though I read a few scattered essays first and a book of short stories (Fidelity), it was Berry's poetry which first grabbed me. Then I fell in love with his fictional town of Port William and his characters. Only then did I re-engage with his essays with renewed interest. As a shepherd without a sheep, I read Berry's agrarian essays in the bastardized way commended by Eugene Peterson, adjusting what Berry says on farming to the realm of pastoral ministry. This book requires no such adjustment, because it is primarily an exploration of his other vocation, writing.

Berry's life work is as an author and farmer who thoughtfully explores his place in the world. He does not 'use' the place in his writing so much as he cultivates and is cultivated by the land he stands on. The essays in this book, explore the world of like-minded writers, poets and short-fiction writers who are friends of Berry. A good number of these, memorialize friends who have passed on, extolling them as much for their literary gifts as for their humanity and friendship.

I would say the chapters are uneven, but there are some real gems here. I especially enjoyed: "My Friend Hayden" "Sweetness Perserved" and "Against the Nihil of the Age" (these chapters speak of Hayden Carruth, Donald Hall & Jane Kenyon and Kathleen Raine, respectively. The final two essays are also brilliant. "The Use of Adversity" provides a reading of King Lear which is neither dark nor nihilistic (as it is sometimes read) and in "God, Science, and Imagination" Berry sets his sights on scientific and religious fundamentalism and urges a generous imagining (and respect) from both sides.

Good book, and the last book of 2011 for me.

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## **Patti says**

In reading this book, Wendell Berry led me to poets I hadn't yet discovered that I now have put on my to read list - Jane Kenyon and Hayden Carruth. A recommendation from Wendell Berry is high praise indeed. I was fascinated by Berry's essays in the first part of the book about authentic writing set in a real place and dear friends with whom he has shared the journey of balancing real work and writing. I have to admit however, that I lost interest in the two last essays, thus the rare Wendell Berry low rating from me.

One of my favorite essays was "My Conversation With Gurney Norman".

"The axis of our conversation has been this river(The Kentucky River). Its headwaters gave Gurney his formative experience and have kept his allegiance and attracted his thoughts all his life. My own life was formed and has been lived mostly down here near the mouth. We have spoken to each other from opposite

ends of this gathering of water. I speaking upstream to Gurney, he downstream to me. We have driven the roads and walked the paths, telling each other our stories, sending up our laughter like a ceremonial smoke. Some stories we have told again and again, trying to tell them right and to have them rightly understood. The effect has been stereoscopic.

What has this conversation been worth? Well, try imagining an upstream or a downstream writer traveling alone, talking to himself."

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## **Jaime says**

This is a collection of essays, and I suppose it is inevitable that I would have a rather high opinion of it, since I agree with much of Wendell Berry's commentary on life, culture, society. But I am glad it took me so long to finish, having read the first essay a year ago and only picked it back up a few days ago. I think I needed to be in a certain place and time to truly understand much of what he wrote here and feel it so viscerally. I particularly recommend the following essays:

The Uses of Adversity, on Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Lear*  
The Momentum of Clarity, on his studies with Wallace Stegner  
My Friend Hayden, on friendship and the cycles of life

Excerpts:

"I would like to speak instead of the instructiveness that arises from a certain difference between our own present society and that earlier "folk society that hardly exists today." The difference is that certain matters that were merely personal or communal in the old society have now become ferociously political."

"Well, I am a farmer, therefore a pragmatist: Half a crop beats none...But as I am a farmer, I am also a critic, and I know the difference between a bad result and a good one."

"At that time I wanted only to be a writer; beyond that, I had little self-knowledge, and not an inkling of what I wanted to do or where I wanted to do it. I was living outside my life."

"...though you may get a new life, you can't get a new past. You don't get to leave your story. If you leave your story, then how you left your story is your story, and you had better not forget it."

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