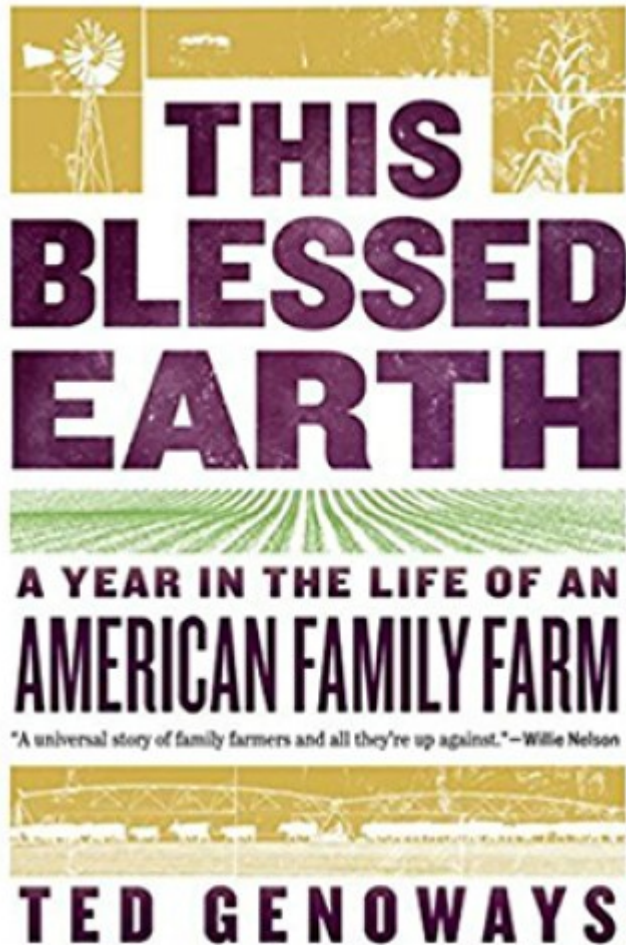


The complex world of one family farm

Ted Genoways overturns assumptions not only about industrial agriculture but also about the farmers who are part of it.

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [January 31, 2018](#) issue

In Review



This Blessed Earth

A Year in the Life of an American Family Farm

By Ted Genoways

Norton

In my early twenties, I worked on two organic farms and fell in love with small-scale, organic agriculture. Since then, I've grown vegetables in my backyard and subscribed to farmers' shares of produce, eggs, and meat. In my early thirties, I married into an Iowa family that makes its living in agribusiness. Since then, my worldview of industrial versus sustainable agriculture has become less clear-cut.

My father-in-law can talk your ear off about the problem of phosphorous run-off and how his company works to address it. My mother-in-law has a home powered almost entirely by geothermal energy. They see many problems with "big ag," but they see it in a complex, nuanced way.

Ted Genoways writes from a worldview similar to that of my in-laws. He profiles a farm family caught in the middle of the turbulent markets of modern agriculture where, as he puts it, *agri-culture* has been transformed into *agri-business*. Rick and Heidi Hammond, along with their son, daughter, and her fiancé, raise corn, soybeans, and a small herd of antibiotic-free beef cattle. They allowed Genoways to document a year in their life as well as six generations of their family history on the same Nebraska farmland, dating back to 1874.

Like many American farmers, the Hammonds rely on commodity grains like corn and soybeans to make their living. While they care deeply about the environment—actively opposing the Keystone Pipeline and very proud of the strong history of water conservation in their state—they rely on heavy machinery, use fertilizers and pesticides, and do not raise organic crops.

The Hammonds come from a long line of determined men and women who stayed put, farming on the Plains, while many others gave up, sold their land, and moved either "back East" or into a town. On the frontier, few farmers (or ranchers for that matter) were able to survive the harsh conditions: locust plagues, blizzard-laden winters, drought, flooding, economic depression, and the constant uncertainties of weather or food supply and demand. The Hammond family and so many other modern farm families are able to continue to farm today, and thus to ensure steady food supply and pricing for consumers, because of various technologies, from

combines to hybrid seeds to crop insurance to the mortgage industry—in addition to government regulation and subsidies that prevent famine and reduce the potential for bankruptcy. And none of these things promises a living wage or a dependable income.

Genoways tells this story of the expansion of agribusiness alongside the story of the Hammond family. He sees both gain and loss in the advances of agricultural technology in the last 100 years, and he tells that story with even-handed, and often entertaining, journalistic skill. The book includes some surprising lessons in history, geography, economics, and biology. You may not have realized that Henry Ford paid for research on making car parts from soy plastics expressly to offer farmers a steadier income. You may not have heard of Henry A. Wallace, later Franklin Delano Roosevelt's vice president, who was inspired by his professor, George Washington Carver, to do for northern farmers with the soybean what Carver did for southern farmers with the peanut. Like me, you may not know that male and female hybrid corn must be planted at staggered times, with one male for every four female seeds, or that hybrid corn requires large amounts of fertilizer because it consumes so much more nitrogen than traditional corn seed (and more even than almost any other crop). Hybrid corn can stand the cold, so it is planted earlier than traditional seed. Thus, the old saying "knee-high by the Fourth of July" is no longer true: corn is now *head-high* by the Fourth of July.

Finally, you might be surprised to learn that agriculture sometimes resembles a high-stakes action movie. In 2011, Chinese spies were observed sneaking around Nebraska in rental cars, stealing hybrid soybeans right out of the fields, which set off a two-year nationwide FBI investigation resulting in the arrest and jailing of an American citizen.

This book overturns assumptions, not only about industrial agriculture but also about Midwestern farm families. Genoways notes that a neighbor greets Rick Hammond with: "Well, if it isn't the local liberal!" In college, Rick majored in Latin American studies and spent two years in Ecuador with the Peace Corps. Meghan, his adult daughter, fights with her father about branding their calves: they are already marked with ear tags, and she doesn't see the point of making them suffer. Kyle, her fiancé, listens to classical music as he drives the combine. Despite the title's religious language, Genoways does not speak about the family's religious life except to mention a family funeral at a Presbyterian church in the 1920s.

For anyone who cares about the future of ecology, agriculture, food, and water, Genoways offers a dramatically different perspective than books like *The Omnivore's Dilemma* or documentaries like *Food, Inc.* He reassures those of us concerned about these issues that there are in fact many allies out there, even in the middle of Nebraska, with wisdom to share and deep ties to the land and water. This would be a terrific book for pastors new to rural areas or cities where the principal economic engine is agribusiness. The more we know about our neighbors, the more we can find ways to commiserate and collaborate on the issues we care about.