Country Roads: Memoirs from Rural Canada
edited by Pam Chamberlain

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

*Country Roads: Memoirs from Rural Canada* is a collection of short writings (3-12 pages each) from authors across the country, all of them dealing with the topic of growing up on a farm or in a small town. Writers are included from all provinces, with a predominance of those from Alberta and Saskatchewan. (I did wish someone from the Territories had been included.)

Thirty-five authors reflect on their experiences, including award-winning ones such as Wayne Johnston, Sharon Butala, Roch Carrier and Rudy Wiebe. Other well-known Canadians, such as NHL coach Brent Sutter, broadcaster Pamela Wallin and actor Gordon Tootoosis, are also included, while some contributors are people with perhaps only a little writing experience. About 15 of the selections were previously published, some as excerpts in longer works, while others may have been written specifically for this collection.

Including all provinces, and writers of various ages, the anthology reflects a variety of upbringings, but they’re all interesting. Having a rural background myself, I found them all thoroughly readable, and I believe anyone who grew up in rural Canada would feel the same.

The experiences vary, of course, from person to person. Some writers loved the experience and stayed in rural Canada; a few found it an isolating, stifling experience, and couldn’t wait to get away; some left but returned later, or longed to return. Nova Scotia writer Rose-Marie Lohnes, for instance, developed a “love-hate relationship” with farming and left when she was 16. She found the life to be too restrictive but recognizes the effect it had on her: “I know . . . why I love homemade food, why I am known as a diligent worker with myriad practical ideas who can be relied on when the going gets tough. I also know why I did not become a farmer or, worse still, a farmer’s wife.” (171)

In contrast, Marianne Stamm, who farmed in the Peace River country of BC, then in Switzerland, and then back in northern Alberta, is proud to call herself a farmer. The
Honourable Pamela Wallin (now a member of the Senate) spent thirty years as a journalist and broadcaster, but she was raised in Wadena and to her that small town will always be “the centre of the universe.” Her family still lives there so she returns for visits, and she always sees the world through a “prairie lens.”

Manitoba residents will enjoy the selection “Valley Girl” by Shirlee Smith Matheson, who grew up in the Rossburn area south of Riding Mountain National Park, and the story by Pamela Banting, raised in the Birch River area. Although it lacked the amenities and culture that urban dwellers took for granted, Banting considers it to have been a “charmed life.” Hockey fans will enjoy Brent Sutter’s details about how hard he and his brothers worked on the farm, but still found time to play hockey, even when the snowmobile had to pull the boys two miles on a sled out to the main road where someone would pick them up. Despite his hockey career, he feels that “there’s still no better sight than a combine cutting a perfect swath through a field of wheat, no better smell than the air at harvest time” (125).

Some stories led me to reflect on how much things have changed – that if the children were brought up in this manner today, the parents might be considered to have neglected them. Others made me remember my own upbringing with nostalgia and longing.

Sharon Butala’s story, in contrast, describes what life was like in “the city” (Saskatoon with under 50,000 residents) for a country “bumpkin,” who had moved there at age 13, and how the family intimacy and harmony gradually dissolved as they became city people. Her definition of rural life is in what city life lacked.

Editor Pam Chamberlain grew up in the rolling hills of the North Saskatchewan Valley. Her introduction at the beginning is also interesting. She has divided the book into three sections: Home; Journeys; and Departures.

I would have liked to see the location in each essay identified early on. Sometimes it wasn’t given at all, and I had to turn to the authors’ biographies at the end of the book to determine what region was being described.

If you have a rural background, or if you are someone who would like to try rural life, pick up this book. There’s something here to please all those who call rural Canada “home.”
Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is *Sarah: A New Beginning*, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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