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The Dirty Life: A Memoir Of Farming, Food, And Love



Synopsis

From a graceful, luminous writer with an eye for detail, this riveting memoir explores a year on a sustainable farm and the real world epitome of Michael Pollan's food philosophy. "This book is the story of the two love affairs that interrupted the trajectory of my life: one with farming that dirty, concupiscent art and the other with a complicated and exasperating farmer." Single, thirtysomething, working as a writer in New York City, Kristin Kimball was living life as an adventure. But she was beginning to feel a sense of longing for a family and for home. When she interviewed a dynamic young farmer, her world changed. Kristin knew nothing about growing vegetables, let alone raising pigs and cattle and driving horses. But on an impulse, smitten, if not yet in love, she shed her city self and moved to five hundred acres near Lake Champlain to start a new farm with him. The Dirty Life is the captivating chronicle of their first year on Essex Farm, from the cold North Country winter through the following harvest season complete with their wedding in the loft of the barn. Kimball and her husband had a plan: to grow everything needed to feed a community. It was an ambitious idea, a bit romantic, and it worked. Every Friday evening, all year round, a hundred people travel to Essex Farm to pick up their weekly share of the "whole diet" beef, pork, chicken, milk, eggs, maple syrup, grains, flours, dried beans, herbs, fruits, and forty different vegetables produced by the farm. The work is done by draft horses instead of tractors, and the fertility comes from compost. Kimball's vivid descriptions of landscape, food, cooking and marriage are irresistible. "As much as you transform the land by farming," she writes, "farming transforms you." In her old life, Kimball would stay out until four a.m., wear heels, and carry a handbag. Now she wakes up at four, wears Carhartts, and carries a pocket knife. At Essex Farm, she discovers the wrenching pleasures of physical work, learns that good food is at the center of a good life, falls deeply in love, and finally finds the engagement and commitment she craved in the form of a man, a small town, and a beautiful piece of land.

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Customer Reviews

Kimball chunked life as a Manhattan journalist to start a cooperative farm in upstate New York with a self-taught New Paltz farmer she had interviewed for a story and later married. The Harvard-educated author, in her 30s, and Mark, also college educated and resolved to "live outside of the river of consumption," eventually found an arable 500-acre farm on Lake Champlain, first to lease then to buy. In this poignant, candid chronicle by season, Kimball writes how she and Mark infused new life into Essex Farm, and lost their hearts to it. By dint of hard work and smart planning--using draft horses rather than tractors to plow the five acres of vegetables, and raising dairy cows, and cattle, pigs, and hens for slaughter--they eventually produced a cooperative on the CSA model, in which members were able to buy a fully rounded diet. To create a self-sustaining farm was enormously ambitious, and neighbors, while well-meaning, expected them to fail. However, the couple, relying on Mark's belief in a "magic circle" of good luck, exhausted their savings and set to work. Once June hit, there was the 100-day growing season and an overabundance of vegetables to eat, and no end to the dirty, hard, fiercely satisfying tasks, winningly depicted by Kimball. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Journalist Kimball accepts an assignment to interview a lanky, determined Pennsylvania farmer who runs a community farm supplying subscribers with beef, chicken, pork, vegetables, and grains. He may look a rustic, but he has a college degree and a burning passion for natural living and initiating a barter economy. The interview very quickly turns into something of a date. His visit to her on the Lower East Side of Manhattan only intensifies these two disparate characters' mutual attraction, and they soon launch a dream farm in the Adirondacks. She proves an eager, but inept, partner who must quickly shed her urban inhibitions and learn to slop pigs and slaughter chickens. Planning a wedding that will satisfy both the couple's rustic friends as well as her urbane family proves daunting. Kimball has a gift for throwing into high relief contemporary Americans' disconnect between farm-life realities and city ambitions. --Mark Knoblauch

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I grew up in an agricultural community. My family owned a cotton farm they rented out to farmers each season, but I never lived on the farm. As a young girl I did raise ducks and chickens, but in a pen in town. I've always held a romantic vision of someday actually living on a farm, having a garden, maybe some horses and chickens. So it was with this idyllic vision of farming that I eagerly read Kristin Kimball's *The Dirty Life*, a memoir about establishing a "whole foods" farm with her husband. I learned so much from this book: about farming and about life. There is so much WORK involved in farming and so much RESPONSIBILITY for living things. As Kristin shows us, there are just some things that can't be put off until tomorrow. Like milking the cow despite a heavy snowstorm or planting potatoes during the night in anticipation of a coming rain. Kristin and Mark developed strong working relationships with the animals on their farm and dealt with most every possible situation. Their first milk cow was attacked by dogs, they lost baby turkeys to a weasel, and they had to put their trusted draft horse, Silver, down when he broke his leg. Kristin realized she was truly becoming a farmer when she became less emotional about loss of an animal or a crop to death of all kinds. She learned that death is just the other side of life. I was impressed with the determination and work it took to keep weeds out of the vegetable gardens without using pesticides of any kind. I will never choose an organic vegetable over a conventionally raised one without thinking of all the work it takes to make that healthy difference in what we choose to eat. My husband did grow up on a cotton farm, and I have heard him say that farming, simply put, was optimism, turned to despair, turned to prayer. This seems to complement Kristin's view of agriculture: Farmers toil. Nature laughs. Farmers weep. I realize that my romantic vision of a farm was far from the real thing. I've learned what I yearned for was basically a house in the country, with a garden and some pets. Mark and Kristin have truly earned the title of Farmer. I have such admiration and respect for them and for how they have gone about achieving their dream of providing whole food for their family and their community. I loved this memoir.

I have longed for, and not found, many modern biographical books out there about women who farm. I was excited to find this memoir, and enjoyed it, but despite the talented writing, I felt a lack of connection to the author and the people she includes in her story. I wanted to love this book, but found myself disappointed by the lack of deeper characterizations and motives revealed. Many of

the author's actions, large and small, are described, but go unexamined and unexplained. I wanted a 'new best friend' in this book, but I found the author oddly emotionally unavailable, offering what felt to me like detached, generic platitudes for unique descriptions (however beautifully phrased), instead of deeply personal truths. On the other hand, I enjoyed the 'shop talk' of farming that the book offered. Much of what she describes, and describes well, will be very familiar to people who have worked on a small scale organic farming operation. I found myself laughing and sighing at what was very recognizable. Occasionally a detail is thrown into the story that to me didn't quite resonate with the rest of the character of the book - a few of her musings and memories felt gratuitous, undeveloped, or incongruous with what I found relatable about the author. Perhaps this was in part because of the 'one year' format of the book, edited for space. I would have appreciated fewer lovely vignettes in exchange for deeper reflection on the inevitable, sometimes heartbreaking compromises and conflicts that farming can push one up against. There certainly are enough how-to books out there. At times the author's voice veers from humility to a sort of eco-pious braggadocio -- that inconsistency makes me think she hadn't quite found her comfort zone within the diverse roles that small scale family farming places one in. But it is her story, and she does tell it for the most part in a self-deprecating tone that I enjoyed. It's a fun look at her transition from city to country. I certainly respect all of the skills she managed to gain in one short year, and the time it took her to write the book while trying to raise a small child and continue to run her farm. Never having tried to put my own experience down in a book - it's easy to be a critic. And when you run a farm -- it can be like living in a fishbowl, so perhaps the emotional omissions are deliberate. Definitely worth reading!

This book, very timely with our national interest in eating local and sustainable food, is a touching account of a woman falling in life with a man and falling in love with the land they work. Anyone who has ever been drawn to growing their own food, or who has nostalgic memories of parents or grandparents doing so, will be greatly rewarded by this book. Kimball's writing style is direct, enjoyable, and quite humorous. A story she recounts about both she and her soon-to-be husband's parents meeting for the first time is absolutely hilarious. Though this book is a book about farming and the lives of a husband and a wife, the book ultimately connects readers to themselves and the world around them.

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