



**Oehlschlaeger, Fritz. *The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2011**

I have been a long time Berry enthusiast and have a lovely letter from him that hangs framed on my bedroom wall. It is a hand written letter from him to me, written in response to a fawning piece of fan mail I wrote to him one day two decades ago when I was sitting out on my tiny plot of Palouse organic acreage fearing the leaching of agri-chemicals from high-tech farming practices into the ground water that my children drank from our well. His return letter to me was a letter of thanks that in my small way I was trying to preserve what he called, "A diverse green island...a precious hold-out against a nearly overwhelming tide" (Berry 12/14/1991). So it was within this context and with much interest that I approached a book dedicated to taking stock of Wendell Berry's "achievements."

Oehlschlaeger's book, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love* is a must-read for any Wendell Berry fan or for anyone who is curious about the writings of Wendell Berry and doesn't have the time to read the full body of his work. The book is 267 pages long with a ten-page bibliography and eleven-page index; the book contains only seven chapters (in addition to the introduction and the acknowledgments). Yet within these modest 300 pages, Oehlschlaeger manages to capture both the spectrum and the spirit of Wendell Berry's views on art, nature, religion, philosophy, practical living, and politics.

Oehlschlaeger opens his book with this brief caveat: "To attempt a work of literary criticism devoted to the writings of Wendell Berry might seem foolhardy" (1). He qualifies his misgivings by quoting from Berry's novel *Jayber Crow* where, from Crow's narrative voice, this warning is issued:

Persons attempting to find a 'text' in this book will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find 'subtext' in it will be banished; persons attempting to explain, interpret, explicate, analyze, deconstruct, or otherwise 'understand' it will be exiled to a desert island in the company only of other explainers. (1)

Despite its overarching purpose as a self-declared piece of literary criticism, Oehlschlaeger's book succeeds in being a synthesis, consolidation, and translation more than a pedantic investigation of the many potential meanings embedded in Berry's corpus and contextualized by Berry's life. *The Achievement of Wendell Berry* is neither an objective academic analysis, nor a dense treatise on a large literary legacy, nor a sort of CliffsNotes or SparkNotes of Berry's mass of written material. It is much more than that: it is a thoughtful piece of literary non-fiction written in a prose style worthy of Wendell Berry himself.

It is perhaps because there is so much of Berry interpreted and quoted in this book that it is sometimes difficult to separate where Berry starts and stops and where Oehlschlaeger's artfulness resides. Oehlschlaeger is so clearly sympathetic to Berry that it is no wonder he has integrated much of Berry's earthy style and grounded vocabulary into his own tone. It is equally problematic to try and put this book into a tidy genre (it certainly does not read like any piece of

literary criticism that I have every read); it so tightly pulls together the many genres in which Berry worked and weaves them into its own distinct cloth of powerful and pragmatic wisdom.

Oehlschlaeger's book is impossible to read quickly. It is such a dense portrayal of both the spirit and the content of Wendell Berry's writings that this reader was forced to stop after almost each paragraph to process the magnitude of the insights presented therein. In one quite solid and graceful synopsis, Oehlschlaeger writes,

Living within limits requires other virtues as well, and these too, must be learned, as Aristotle made clear, from those who know how to do the right thing at the right time and in the right way and for the right reason. In addition to humility and patience, a brief list of the virtues about which Berry has written should include prudence, courage, justice, equity, friendship, and the three theological ones, faith, hope and love or charity. (17)

Oehlschlaeger's list of the virtues found in Berry's work is just an opening sample of the intense explications that appear in this book. None of these qualities is left as an abstraction. Each virtue is investigated and contextualized by Oehlschlaeger's thorough reading of Berry's extensive collection of work and then invigorated by Berry's own words, from his fiction and non-fiction alike. Each virtue is pulled out and prodded and coddled and held up for the reader to wonder about, ponder over, and practice. The vocabulary of virtue is what provides the skeleton of this book. But the meat, muscle, and message of this book-length essay are in the discussion about and explication of the places where we allow these virtues to either blossom or wither—in our hearts, our homes, our schools, our communities, our governments, and our churches.

One of the reasons this book was so difficult for me to read quickly was that each time a virtue was presented, both in the framework of Berry's large body of work, and in its placement by Oehlschlaeger within the larger context of existence and humanity, I had to stop and consider my own life, my own purpose, and my own behaviors relative to my perceptions of what it meant to be a loving, ethical, moral person. This required a great deal of slow digestion and resulted in a fair amount of existential angst. And this took time and courage. Perhaps the subtitle of the book, *The Hard History of Love*, should have been my first clue that this book would not be an easy read. And this book is very much a book about love: love of land, of nature, of country, of tradition, of freedom, of art, of humanity with all of its foibles and frailties.

This book is not only a reverential consolidation of the thoughts and achievements of one of the great thinkers/poets of our time; it is more importantly a powerful reiteration of certain vital values: the values of land conservation un-dissected from the values of national security; the values of commitment in marriage as related to the values of healthy community. This book is a wake-up call about the consequences of living in debt and of the larger social and political ramifications of living in an economy where debt is not only allowed but encouraged. It is a reminder of the tenuous nature of the wilderness and of the relationship between being free and being wild – and of how the protection of one is not separate from the protection of the other.

This is a book that takes the loving works of Wendell Berry and frames them within the loving words of Fritz Oehlschlaeger, and it results in a sermon of sanity. No dogma; no drama; just simple good sense for a peaceful and productive way of being in and with the world.

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