

Discussion Guide

W E N D E L L B E R R Y

Andy Catlett A Place on Earth A World Lost H

Jayber Crow Nathan Coulter Remembering T



Hannah Coulter

The Memory of Old Jack Andy Catlett A Place on Earth A World

Lost Hannah Coulter Jayber Crow Nathan Coulter Remembering



A Novel

kyhumanities.org



Kentucky Reads

Kentucky Humanities has selected Wendell Berry's *Hannah Coulter* for Kentucky Reads 2020. The novel will be at the center of statewide conversations on the changes in rural America and rural Kentucky, including what it means to be part of a rural community.

Hannah Coulter was selected in conjunction with the arrival of the Smithsonian traveling exhibit *Crossroads: Change in Rural America* coming to Kentucky.

Kentucky Reads will include scholar-led discussions of *Hannah Coulter* hosted by community organizations throughout the Commonwealth. The discussions are free and open to the public.

Book Discussions

March 9, 2020 — Northern Kentucky University, Newport, Mark Neikirk, neikirkm1@nku.edu

March 26, 2020 — Lexington Public Library-Beaumont Branch, Lexington, Emily Collier, ecollier@lexpublib.org

April 7, 2020 — Edmonson County Public Library, Brownsville, Ruth Parker, rparker@ecplibrary.com

April 20, 2020 — Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, Jason Crosby, jasonwcrosby@gmail.com

April 20, 2020 — Good Foods Co-op, Lexington, Jewel Vanderhoef, jvan1144@gmail.com

April 25, 2020 — Wayne County Public Library, Monticello, Olivia Anderson, olivia_a2002@yahoo.com

April 28, 2020 — Mercer County Public Library, Harrodsburg, Tony Sexton, contentedme48@gmail.com

May 2, 2020 — Green County Public Library, Greensburg, Missy Curry, mkcurry68@yahoo.com

May 14, 2020 — Boyle County Public Library, Danville, Caleb Conover, cconover@boylepublib.org

May 19, 2020 — Calloway County Public Library, Murray, Sandra L. Linn, sandy.linn@callowaycountylibrary.org

May 19, 2020 — Hindman Settlement School, Hindman, Hannah Markley, hannah@hindmansettlement.org

June 1, 2020 — Clark County Public Library, Winchester, John Maruskin, john.clarkbooks@gmail.com

June 2, 2020 — Logan County Public Library, Russellville, Tracy Houchens, tracy@loganlibrary.org

June 16, 2020 — Woodford County Public Library, Versailles, Nancy Dicken, tmdicken@aol.com

June 16, 2020 — Faul Family Riverside Farm, Sulphur, Lynne Anderson, ande2873@bellsouth.net

June 17, 2020 — Lexington Public Library-Tates Creek Branch, Lexington, Heather Prichard, hprichard@lexpublib.org

June 18, 2020 — Graves County Public Library, Mayfield, Deana Gschwind, directorgcpl@mewsbb.com

June 22, 2020 — Louisville PAGETURNERS, Louisville, Dee Allen, deecallen2018@gmail.com

August 10, 2020 — Scott County Public Library, Georgetown, Mike Key, mike@scottpublib.org

September 13, 2020 — Bourbon County Public Library, Paris, Cheryl Caskey, info@hopewellmuseum.org

September 17, 2020 — Gallatin County Public Library, Warsaw, Shirley Warnick, shirley@gallatinpl.org

September 22, 2020 — Marion County Public Library, Lebanon, Jama Watts, jama.watts@marioncopublic.org

September 28, 2020 — Bullitt County Public Library, Mt. Washington, LaDonna Thompson, ladonna@bcplib.org

October 13, 2020 — Lexington Public Library-Eastside Branch, Lexington, Leslie Tate, ltate@lexpublib.org

October 22, 2020 — Mary Wood Weldon Memorial Public Library, Glasgow, Amy Tollison, atollison@weldonpubliclibrary.org

October 29, 2020 — McCracken County Public Library, Paducah, Darlene Mazzone, darlene@paducahlife.com

November 7, 2020 — Trimble County Public Library, Bedford, Sarah Karns, sarah@trimblelibrary.org

January 16, 2021 — Johnson County Public Library, Paintsville, Christy Terry, jcplprograms@gmail.com

Kentucky Humanities

Telling Kentucky's Story

Kentucky Humanities is an independent, nonprofit corporation affiliated with the National Endowment for the Humanities. Kentucky Humanities is supported by the National Endowment and private contributions.

In addition to Kentucky Reads, Kentucky Humanities shares the unique experience of Kentucky Chautauqua® and the diverse knowledge of our Speakers Bureau, celebrates literacy by bringing PRIME TIME Family Reading Time® to libraries and schools across the Commonwealth, produces *Kentucky Humanities* magazine, manages the Kentucky Book Festival, brings Smithsonian traveling exhibits to community museums throughout the state, and so much more!

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Wendell Berry



By Morris A. Grubbs

Many Kentuckians know Wendell Berry as a Kentucky writer. But if there is one thing we Kentuckians know about the best of our writers, it is that their work transcends the boundaries of our Commonwealth to strike universal chords.

Berry's books, numbering more than 50, are as widely known, maybe even better known, outside the Commonwealth as they are within it. Berry is appreciated nationally and internationally as an essayist and a poet whose central subjects include the complexities and rewards of traditional farming, rural life lived in the effort of harmony with land and neighbors, and the consequences of the widening divide in the modern world between people and nature. Many readers, scholars, and teachers consider him to be one of the finest essayists writing today. Still others appreciate him as one of America's finest poets. He is admired as a master of the art of the sentence, and many college textbooks hold up his essays and his poems as exemplars.

Berry's mutual successes as essayist and poet place him into a league of rare writers, which is why his accomplishments as a novelist make him even more rare. Over the last 60 years, all the while crafting his essays and poems, and farming, Berry has created one of the largest bodies of fiction in American literature to be set in and around a single community. His Port William series of novels and short stories portray the drama of the universal human condition played out on a small-scale stage.

Try naming another writer who has written, and written so much and so well, across all three distinct forms—non-fiction, poetry, and fiction. You will be hard pressed for examples. Combine this singular achievement with the timeless, timely, culturally contentious, and politically provocative topics he confronts in his essays, and it becomes clear that Kentucky has a native son who is one of the most vital writers of the 20th and 21st centuries. This is why the National Endowment for the Humanities chose Berry as its 2012 Jefferson Lecturer.

Now The Library of America, a non-profit publisher of classic American literature, established "to ensure that every volume in the series will be permanently available," has begun collecting and publishing Berry's work in new editions. *Wendell Berry: Port William Novels & Stories: The Civil War to World War II* appeared in 2018. And *What I Stand On: The Collected Essays of Wendell Berry 1969-2017*, a two-volume set, appeared in 2019. A volume of the poetry and a volume of the remaining fiction are planned.

How did a boy from Henry County, Kentucky, become a classic American writer? A satisfactory answer would take a whole book, and more, but suffice it to say that his family and home community, his teachers in and out of school, his communion with books, and his life and work as a traditional farmer have all been formative forces. As Berry has shown in many of his essays, nature in a small locale is the best teacher, not only for good farming, but also for great writing. We Kentuckians are blessed that Wendell Berry has paid close attention.

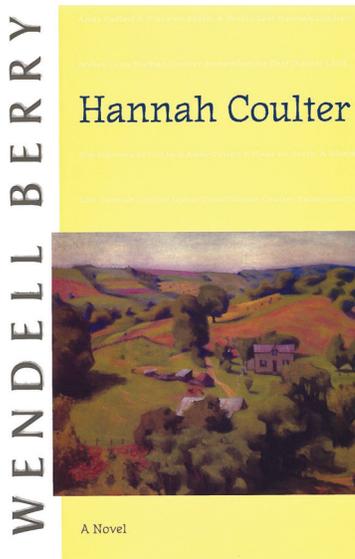


Photo courtesy Gray Mendes, 2012



Hannah Coulter: A Love Story

By Morris A. Grubbs



To read a novel or short story by Wendell Berry is to enter a world many Kentuckians know well, of small towns and rural communities whose people are intertwined with the well-being and fate of the land. Like good comfort food, to some readers this is good comfort reading, spiced with a good story, good storytelling, and vigorous, crystal-clear prose. For those who are more urban or suburban, reading a novel by Berry deepens the understanding and appreciation of rural places and rural people. For those who crave a readerly escape, a novel set in Kentucky may at first seem unappealing. But here is good news for all readers: Your cravings can be satisfied by a masterful writer who has the uncanny power to usher us not only into another space and time, even if it's down the road and a few decades ago, but also into another mind, to see and feel the world of the novel intimately. An encounter with good literary fiction, like an encounter with a gifted teacher, awakens our curiosity and heightens our sensibilities. Regardless of setting, good fiction exercises our empathy, enriches our understanding of humankind, and, if we are open to it, changes us.

Among the eight novels Berry has published to date, *Hannah Coulter* stands out in many ways, most particularly for its female narrator, the novel's namesake. Published in 2004, it is Berry's seventh novel, and one of four told from the first-person point of view (the others are *A World Lost*, *Jayber Crow*, and *Andy Catlett: Early Travels*). Berry's nov-

els and short stories are set in and around Port William, the fictional counterpart of Berry's home community in Henry County, Kentucky. Port William is one of the largest fictional communities in American Literature, rivaled mainly by William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, whose town of Jefferson is the fictional counterpart of Oxford, Mississippi. Port William is so populated that the novels and collections of stories are accompanied in recent editions by a map and a genealogy of the primary families. Not only is Port William the setting, but at times it is also a central character exerting its presence and holding the membership together. "Members of Port William aren't trying to 'get someplace,'" Hannah says. "They think they are someplace" (67).

Hannah Coulter spans eight decades, from the 1920s to 2001. As Hannah looks back over her life and tells her story, the portrait she paints of the membership shifts from a community at its peak, before World War II and the industrialization of farming, to the new millennium, when most of the members have died out, later generations have scattered, and Hannah is one of the last remaining. Along the way she recounts the pivotal episodes of her life: the loss of her mother at age 12; her upbringing by her grandmother; her father's remarriage; her early teenage years living and working in the county seat of Hargrave; her courtship and marriage to Virgil Feltner; Virgil's disappearance in the war and her widowhood and motherhood at age 23; her courtship and marriage to Nathan Coulter at age 26; her children's leaving home; Nathan's death; and the eventual disintegration of the membership. This outline is not a spoiler; it merely hints at the majesty and mystery of the tale Hannah tells. Attentive readers will be rewarded.

Hannah's life in Shagbark, Hargrave, and finally Port William provides the context for the novel's main themes—among them, deep affection for rural life and communities; the dissolving of boundaries between the present and the past, the living and the dead; "living right on" in the presence of loss and grief; enduring the local reverberations of a distant war; and higher education as an uprooting force. Above all, though, is Hannah's profound gratitude to the Port William membership past and present.

One of the golden threads running through the novel and tying it together is Hannah's addressing Andy Catlett directly from time to time as the imagined reader of her story. Hannah is 12 years older than Andy, and they have known one another since Hannah's courtship with Andy's Uncle Virgil. As a boy, Andy held a crush on Hannah, and they have



remained close to one another ever since. Both characters first appear in Berry's second novel, *A Place on Earth*. And in Berry's most recent novel, *Andy Catlett: Early Travels*, Andy tells episodes of his early life and of his affection for Hannah. But why does Hannah imagine telling her story to Andy? To the members of Port William, Andy is one among them who went away to college and returned home to stay. We know from other novels and short stories he is bookish and is viewed in Port William as a scholar-farmer. At the end of Chapter 5, when Andy's mother goes to look for Andy after the Christmas dinner, she finds him "in the dining room, in the corner at the end of the side-board, crying." We get a glimpse of the seven-year-old Andy as a perceptive and sensitive soul, a moment foretelling his eventual role as listener, empathizer, and recipient of the membership's stories. "He didn't know," Hannah says, "as we grownups knew, what the war meant and might mean. He had only understood that what we were that day was lovely and could not last" (40).

Many readers view Andy as the fictional counterpart of Wendell Berry himself, and there are parallels aplenty throughout the novels and stories to bear this out. In *Hannah Coulter*, Andy provides the motivation for Hannah to perfect her story and serves as a loving muse to her. "Often

as my mind moves back and forth over [my story], I imagine that I am telling it to Andy," Hannah says. "He loves us all, the whole membership, living and dead. He has listened to us all, and has stayed with us, farming in his one-handed fashion over there on Harford Run. We are in each other's minds. I perfect these thanks by telling them to him" (158). Andy Catlett, the listener and story collector. Wendell Berry, the author. What better agents than these for Hannah to convey her love story and give her thanks?

With loss, and the love of what has been lost, at its core, the novel may be read as an elegy, though it is less a lament than a rejoicing in having known and loved the dead. The novelist, who is also an acclaimed poet, relies often on poetic or lyrical language to connect us to timelessness and mystery. The novel abounds with lyrical language and imagery. The chapter title and repeated phrase "the room of love," for instance, carries shifting connotations, ranging from a space of desire and physical love to one of platonic and pure spiritual love. The novel's dreamlike ending, "Given," is a lyrical vignette transcending the bounds of prose, joining us to a beautiful otherworldliness. Hannah shivers at the novel's end. And so do we. This is how we know we are in the hands of a masterful writer.

For Further Reading

If you like *Hannah Coulter* and want to extend your stay in Port William, here are the other novels and short story collections to date (not including the recent The Library of America editions mentioned on page 3):

Novels

Nathan Coulter (1960) *A World Lost* (1996)
A Place on Earth (1967) *Jayber Crow* (2000)
The Memory of Old Jack (1974) *Andy Catlett: Early Travels* (2006)
Remembering (1988)

Short Story Collections

The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership (1986)
Fidelity (1992)
Watch with Me (1994)
That Distant Land: Collected Stories (2004)
A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port William Membership (2012)

For readers of non-fiction and poetry, here is a short list of selected works:

"The Rise," "The Long-Legged House," and "A Native Hill,"
autobiographical essays in *The Long-Legged House* (1969)
A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural (1972)

The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture (1977)
The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural (1981)
Home Economics Fourteen Essays (1987)
What Are People For? Essays (1990)
The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry,
edited by Norman Wirzba (2002)
Conversations with Wendell Berry: Selected Interviews,
edited by Morris A. Grubbs (2007)
It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays (2012)
New Collected Poems (2012)
This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems (2013)
Our Only World: Ten Essays (2015)
The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings
(essays, stories, and a Sabbath Poem; 2017)

Other Related Works

Belonging: A Culture of Place, by bell hooks
On being 'country': One Affrilachian Woman's Return Home
by Crystal Wilkinson
Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes, edited by
Dwight Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford pp 184-186.



Discussion Questions

By Kentucky Humanities & Morris A. Grubbs

Today, rural communities are changing rapidly and are at a crossroads. In *Hannah Coulter*, Wendell Berry helps us understand rural communities more deeply by introducing us to the residents of Port William, Kentucky. How do you think understanding rural America today can help us shape the future of our country? Why is it important for all Americans, whether they live in rural communities or not, to consider changes happening in rural America?

Hannah's children move away from Port William. "With every year that passed," Hannah says, "it was getting less likely that a farmer's child was going to grow up to be a farmer" (121). These departures are happening in most rural communities. Young people go away to college, find themselves at a crossroads, and then either do not want to return to their home community or town, or their jobs take them elsewhere. Imagine you are at your own crossroads, to stay or to go. Which direction would you head—toward the countryside or toward the city? Why is it a problem for a community if its young people move away and never return?

What is the best thing about being from or living in a rural community? What is the worst thing? Sometimes these answers are the same. Do the descriptions of the land and community in *Hannah Coulter* make you want to live in a rural community? Why or why not?

Near the end of the novel, Hannah is relieved that her grandson Virgie has come back. "But he was weeping with relief, I think," she says, "and sorrow, and regret" (182). Virgie goes right to work on the farm, trying to begin to work out what's in his DNA. How does it feel to return home to a community, whether rural or urban, after being away for some time? On the flip side, how can a community make newcomers feel like they belong?

Why is it important that we tell our children stories, and, as Hannah says, "the kind of stories that endear them to home?" What are some of the stories that you have told your own children about growing up and the way life was when you were young?

What do you think are the most important issues facing our communities in Kentucky today? And why is it important that we engage in discussions about our communities and their future?

What tone is set by the novel's opening line, "I picked him up in my arms and I carried him home"? What moral ideals spring from it? What tensions are inherent in it? How might the scene serve as a resonating image as the novel progresses?

Near the end of Chapter 1, Hannah makes a sweeping statement about her past that piques our interest: "This is the story of my life, that while I lived it weighed upon me and pressed against me and filled all my senses to overflowing and now is like a dream dreamed" (5). What does this statement suggest about the nature and complexity of the story to come?

What does Chapter 2 reveal about the life and work of women in pre-World War II Port William and by extension rural communities of the time?

By Chapter 3, what portrait of Hannah is emerging? What specific cultural and individual forces are forging her character?

At the end of Chapter 4, when Hannah foretells Virgil's disappearance in the war, we are reminded that she is telling the story from a long distance in time. How does this distance enrich Hannah's storytelling and your experience of her story?

In Chapter 5, two characters have tears in their eyes: Virgil Feltner near the beginning when he looks at Hannah, and seven-year-old Andy Catlett in the corner of the dining room "at the end of the sideboard" in the final paragraph (40). What do their tearful reactions have in common and how does each deepen and propel Hannah's story?

What do Hannah's details of the Christmas dinner 1941 reveal about gender and racial roles and relationships at that time?

In Chapter 6, Hannah tells of what is known of the misty origin of Port William. We also realize that perhaps her strong command of details of her early membership in Port William comes from her daily letters to Virgil. What portrait of the Port William membership is emerging? How does this chapter set the stage for Hannah's future?



Chapter 7, the end of Part I, is a deeply emotional portrait of the primal antidote to grief: communal love, kindness, and gratitude. What does this chapter reveal about Hannah's growth as a member of Port William? How does Hannah's shift away from girlhood in this chapter connect with Nathan's shift from boyhood at the novel's opening? How does this chapter set the stage for Nathan to enter Hannah's life in Part II?

Attraction, desire, and female beauty are at the heart of Chapter 8. How acceptable today is Hannah's description of how women realize and gauge their beauty through men's reactions?

Chapter 8, titled "Nathan," reveals one of the great central beliefs of the community Hannah has embraced and that has embraced her: "Members of Port William aren't trying to 'get someplace.' They think they are someplace" (67). This statement projects a tension reverberating throughout the last few chapters of the novel. At this point in the story, how does Nathan embody this belief?

Hannah says in Chapter 8, "There can be places in this world, and in human hearts too, that are opposite to war" (68). How is Port William and what it represents opposite to war? How is the war felt in Port William? What is the scale of its effects?

In Chapter 10, the very core of the novel, Port William and its obligations of membership are portrayed as sacred: "And it is by the place we've got, and our love for it and our keeping of it, that this world is joined to Heaven" (83). Further in Chapter 10, Hannah says, "The stream and the woods don't care if you love them. The place doesn't care if you love it. But for your own sake you had better love it. For the sake of all else you love, you had better love it" (85). How do these statements deepen your understanding of Hannah's story and the Port William membership? What can you take from these passages to enrich your life and home community?

Near the end of Chapter 10, Hannah makes one of her many sweeping and resounding comments: "What will finally become of this lineage of people who have been members one of another? I don't know. And yet their names and their faces, what they did and said, are not gone, are not 'the past,' but still are present to me, and I give thanks" (94). How often in your reading of Hannah's

story is the line blurred between the past and the present, the living and the dead? How is Hannah's telling of her story a form of gratitude?

At the end of Chapter 10, how does Hannah portray the Banions' relationship to the Feltner place and Nettie and Aunt Fanny's departure from Port William?

Chapter 15, "A Better Chance," pivots the novel toward the future and raises the specter of the disintegration of the Port William membership. One of the forces pulling the young members away is higher education. As Hannah says, "The way of education leads away from home. That is what we learned from our children's education" (112). Have you experienced this pattern in your family or observed it in your home community?

Chapter 17 reminds us of how impersonal and cold life and work can be in a rootless existence: "The life of membership with all its cumbers is traded away for the life of employment that makes itself free by forgetting clean as a whistle when you are not of any more use. When they get to retirement age, Margaret and Caleb will be cast out of place and out of mind like worn-out replaceable parts, to be alone at the last maybe and soon forgotten" (133-34). How is life in Port William and places like it the antidote to loneliness and obscurity?

In Chapter 20, Hannah suggests why she often imagines she is telling her story to Andy Catlett. Why is Andy particularly appropriate as the recipient of her story?

How does Hannah portray Nathan's dying and death?

Why do you think Hannah chooses to tell what she has learned about Okinawa right after telling of Nathan's death? How is Port William reflected in Hannah's description of Okinawa?

What forces have helped create the real estate developer Kelly Crawley? What does his vision of the land and community portend for Port William?

What is your interpretation of the final dream-like vignette, "Given"? Why is it in present tense? What else gives it a different feel than most of the rest of the novel? What does it contribute to the story and your experience of it? How is it a fitting ending?



Crossroads: Change in Rural America

The Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street, in cooperation with Kentucky Humanities, will bring *Crossroads: Change in Rural America*, an exhibit examining the evolving landscape of rural America, to seven rural Kentucky communities in 2020 and 2021.

Crossroads explores how rural American communities changed in the 20th century. From sea to shining sea, the vast majority of the United States landscape remains rural with only 3.5 percent of the landmass considered urban. Since 1900, the percentage of Americans living in rural areas has dropped from 60 percent to 17 percent. The exhibit looks at that remarkable societal change and how rural Americans have responded.

Designed for small-town museums, libraries and cultural organizations, *Crossroads* will serve as a community meeting place for conversations about how rural America has changed. With the support of Kentucky Humanities, these towns will develop complementary exhibits, host public programs, and facilitate educational initiatives to raise people's understanding about their own history, the joys and challenges of rural living, how change has impacted their community, and prompt discussion of goals for the future.



KENTUCKY HUMANITIES

Crossroads Tour of Kentucky

September 12-October 10, 2020

Loretto City Hall in partnership with
the Loretto Heritage Center
in Loretto

October 17-November 14, 2020

Trimble County Public Library
in Bedford

November 21, 2020-January 2, 2021

City of Morgantown Community Center
in Morgantown

January 9-February 13, 2021

River Discovery Center
in Paducah

February 20-April 3, 2021

Big Sandy Heritage Museum in
partnership with the City of Pikeville
in Pikeville

April 10-May 15, 2021

South Central Kentucky Cultural
Center in partnership with the
Mary Wood Weldon Library
in Glasgow

May 22-June 26, 2021

Hopewell Museum
in Paris