

Recounting the Richness of Farm Life: Vermont Farmer and Author Eugenie Doyle

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Farmers are known for the multitude of stories they hold, derived from a lifetime of experiences. For farmer Eugenie Doyle, those stories came to life when she put pen to paper. Over the last two decades, she has written two novels in addition to numerous short stories. Her stories tell the tales of life on a farm, and in the case of the two books, growing up and coming of age on a Vermont dairy farm.

Eugenie and her husband, Sam Burr, own and operate the Last Resort Farm in Monkton. There they grow organic vegetables and keep a flock of laying hens. They are probably best known for their strawberries, raspberries, and garlic. Twelve varieties of garlic are grown on the farm and beautiful, handmade garlic braids can be found hanging in their self-serve farm stand. In the old dairy barn on the property, thousands of heads of garlic are laid out for drying, over the same stalls where the couple once milked a herd of 60 Jersey cows.

Eugenie and Sam started milking cows on this farm in May of 1986. Before that they farmed in Brookfield on a farm they named “The Last Resort.” There they milked 28 cows and grew a small crop of strawberries. Eugenie says that first farm was anything but a resort, so the name was “very tongue in cheek.” When they moved their dairy operation to Monkton, they kept the name. Eugenie says on the new farm with more land, they were able to expand their herd and their crop production acreage, including strawberries. At the time, she was told growing strawberries organically could not be done. She decided to give it a try, as there was at least one other grower in Vermont (Joey Klein of Plainfield) also experimenting with this type of production.

By the late '80s, with low milk prices and the advent of the growth hormone bovine somatotropin (BST) to push production levels, “The forces were definitely against a 60 cow herd,” she explains. In the next few years, Eugenie recounts, many dairy farms in Vermont were going out of business. As there was yet no real market for organic milk as an alternative, the family decided to sell their herd. “It



Eugenie Doyle with strawberries at Last Restort Farm

was really hard,” she says. “We had to figure out what to do.”

Eugenie says she went from a life of cows to raising kids and starting a new career. She had taken a creative writing course at Burlington College, so to build on that she enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts writing program at Vermont College. She produced a series of short stories under the title, *Useless Splendor*. Eugenie says, “I felt I had a lot

to say about farming. There is so much to say about small farms and the value they have, especially to children growing up, and it was disappearing, really without people realizing what was being lost.”

After sending out her stories to literary journals, Eugenie states, “I was lucky enough to win the Glimmer Train Award for New Writers.” She also began assisting a class at Vermont College on writing for children. “It had not been my focus at all, but a lot of my characters were kids on farms.” One of the faculty members encouraged her to try a novel geared towards young adults.

With small children at home and a busy vegetable farm, Eugenie did a lot of her writing in the winter. When her kids entered school she was able to devote part of her day to writing. “My first book was written on Tuesdays. I was extremely disciplined.” However, she says, “My home is still a farm, which is full of distractions, whether it’s making jam or returning emails.” As a retreat, she has periodically taken two weeks away at the Studio Center in Johnson to focus solely on writing.

After five years of writing, Eugenie produced her first book, *Stray Voltage*, in 2002. It is the story of an eleven-year-old boy named Ian growing up on his family’s >>

Eugenie Doyle, continued from previous page

dairy farm. There are tough times on the farm, along with a stray voltage problem that causes the cows and family members to get random electric shocks in the barn. Everyone is at their breaking point. Ian is a sensitive child, who is trying to come to terms with his mother's sudden leaving, not long after the loss of his pet cat. Ian's brother doesn't say much and his father retreats into depression. The cows are due to be sold, which Ian has no control over. He wonders what they will do when the cows are gone. Eugenie explains, "This child Ian became a character that I just cared a lot for."

Eugenie says that writers often incorporate a lot of accumulated personal experiences, especially with their first book. "I tell people it took 50 years [to write]. It was published right after I turned 50," she explains. In *Stray Voltage*, Ian's cat disappears and it is devastating to him. Eugenie's son Silas had a similar experience as a child, so she wrote this event into the book. She also drew inspiration for her story from a drawing of the old LaPierre farm in St. George. The sketch depicts one of their young sons holding a cat standing in front of the barn. Eugenie says the story says a lot about loss and the resilience of children. "There are a

million coming of age stories, but not so many about kids coming of age on Vermont dairy farms."

At the end of 2009, Eugenie published her second book, *According to Kit*. In this book Eugenie draws from another experience of her life, dancing. She says she still takes ballet

lessons to this day and decided to incorporate her love of dancing into her second novel. This story revolves around a fifteen-year-old girl, named Kit,


growing up on a dairy farm and desperately wanting to be a dancer. On a deeper level, it is about Kit's relationship with her mother and how a self-absorbed teenager begins to see other people around her. Booklist's review says, "Doyle has chosen every word carefully in her description of the frozen Vermont winter, the daily details of farm life, the physicality of dance, the raw emotions of adolescence.... Her characters are complicated and authentic."

Eugenie's books have been published by the small publishing house Front Street (now Boyds Mills Press), which she describes as having "a wonderful editor that gives a lot of attention to the writers." With a small company such as this, she must do a lot of her own promotion. She has toured the local bookstores, and has her own Facebook page. She keeps active in the literary community in various ways. One is teaching at the Young Writers Conference at Middlebury College's Breadloaf campus in Ripton, which attracts young people from all over the country. On a more local scale, her farm sponsors the annual "Farming in Monkton" young writers contest to get kids in her own town writing about local farms.

Looking ahead, there are more stories on the horizon. Eugenie says she is currently working on two shorter pieces, "One about a little boy at a farmers market, the other about a family of girls on a strawberry farm." She has produced a collection of short stories that she'd like to have published as a book and also has plans to publish another novel on farm families. She says there is a richness the farm life can give to writing. With such a renewed interest in local food and farming, Eugenie's stories can provide insight into farm life, while simultaneously giving young people growing up on farms something to identify with.

Eugenie Doyle's books *Stray Voltage* and *According to Kit* are available at local book stores. ❧

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