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Book Review of *Raising Less Corn, More Hell: The Case for the Independent Farm and Against Industrial Food* by George Pyle

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Raising Less Corn, More Hell: The Case for the Independent Farm and Against Industrial Food. By George Pyle. New York: Public Affairs, 2005. xxv + 229 pp. Notes, index. \$25.00 cloth.

Raising Less Corn, More Hell may sound like a rallying cry for the nation's heartland farmers, but this well-written series of essays by George Pyle is meant for those who eat corn. Or rather, for those of us who eat the livestock fed on corn in confined animal feeding operations, then wash down those meals with drinks high in high-fructose corn syrups. Pyle, an editorial writer from Kansas now living in Utah, brings his journalist's skills to bear on what our industrial food system has brought us. It's not appetizing as he makes his case against a corporate-controlled system that doesn't have to be this way.

His chapters are a series of essays that read like extended editorials or public opinion pieces. But they are well-documented, relying on research from academics and others who know their way through the production and control of grains and livestock. Pyle's contribution is

to describe effectively how the structure of agricultural life, under an industrial system, is dying.

Pyle's intent is to reveal the contradictions of industrialization in our food system and how commodity production not only fails to bring us cheap food but also harms the land, rural communities, and human health, not to mention the livelihoods of farmers themselves. He challenges the supposedly *fait accompli* of corporate control. Whereas many will say this is the way agriculture (or agribusiness) has become, Pyle explains why it doesn't have to be so.

After a prologue that sets the tone and alerts the reader to the problem of agribusiness giants and market concentration, the book is divided into three parts: "Wealth," "Health," and "Security."

The five chapters in the "Wealth" section, beginning with a necessary historical overview, show how "efficiency" came to trump everything, with the result that a few retain power in the marketplace at the expense of many farm families. How do policy makers respond? Pyle writes that farm bill policies are set at cross-purposes and lead to chronic agricultural dilemmas. Farmers here and abroad are sacrificed to the industrial model, even when productivity and stewardship are better on smaller farms. Government support has slid from a farmer's safety net into corporate welfare for large processors.

The "Health" section (another five chapters) begins with an informative essay on the consequences of "cheap food." The chapter on "To Hell in a Bushel Basket" gets to the book's title about raising less corn, or rather eating more of it fresh and drinking it less. Here Pyle asks a recurring question: what are we ingesting? More broadly, he examines the consequences of what is offered as food in our modern society, not only for human health but nature's environmental health as well.

The last four chapters on "Security" speak to vulnerabilities resulting from concentrated and confined livestock. The last chapter on federal farm policy is a timely one as Congress prepares for the next Farm Bill in 2007. Addressing solutions to the end of commodity subsidies, Pyle essentially supports the existing but underfunded Conservation Security Program. Couching support for conservation as a security issue is an interesting twist in agricultural policy, but these are interesting times.

A minor drawback to the book is that solutions to all the problems mentioned are only given in a short afterword—a last word, nevertheless, that offers hope for independent farms and those who may still yearn to return to the land. But this is a book meant for those who hear about problems in what we eat and need to see what has

happened on the way from the farm to the market. **Robert Gronski**, *Policy Coordinator, National Catholic Rural Life Conference*.