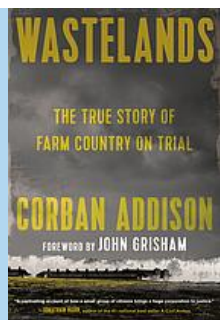


Discussion Guide



Wastelands: The True Story of Farm Country on Trial

By Corban Addison

Knopf

2022

464 pages

ISBN: 978-0593320822

Rural Health

Summary

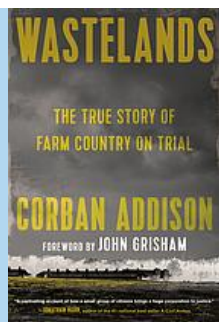
A once idyllic American landscape is home to a closely knit, rural community that, for more than a generation, has battled the polluting practices of large-scale farming that had been making them sick and damaging their homes. After years of frustration and futile attempts to bring about change, an impassioned cadre of residents, led by a team of intrepid and dedicated lawyers, sued one of the world's most powerful corporations—and, miraculously, they won. As vivid and fast-paced as a novel, *Wastelands* takes us into the heart of a legal battle over the future of America's farmland, and into the lives of the people who found the courage to fight. With unparalleled entrée in the courtroom, Corban Addison captures the stirring and unforgettable struggle to bring a modern-day monopoly to its knees, to force a once invincible power to change, to vindicate the rights of a long-suffering community, and finally to restore their heritage.

Questions

1. Much of the story in *Wastelands* is set in North Carolina's coastal plain, between the I-95 corridor and the port of Wilmington. Have you ever visited eastern North Carolina? If so, what was your impression of the place? If not, how did Corban Addison's description of the land and its people make you feel about the region? Do you agree or disagree with the following sentiment from the Epilogue: *"What makes a land beautiful isn't just the grace of its form, the bloom of its colors, or the fecundity of its ecological life. That kind of beauty lives only on the surface of things. Beneath it, there is a deeper appeal, a pearl inside the shell. Every place is lovely if it is loved."*
2. In the first chapter of *Wastelands*, Corban introduces the reader to three children—Elsie Herring, Woodell McGowan, and Joyce Messick—whose lives are destined to intersect decades later when they file suit against Smithfield Foods. Despite their humble origins, each child sees the shine in their world, as if it is a newly minted penny. In your view, is it just the nature of childhood that they feel such resonant affection for the places they call home? Or is there something deeper about their love for the land?
3. In *Wastelands*, Corban carries the story arcs of those three neighbors through the length of the book. After returning home from New York City, Elsie becomes an accidental activist as she defends her mother's property from the hog farm next door. Woodell, who is at first reluctant to involve himself in the lawsuit, experiences a transformation as the case goes to trial. Joyce, a quiet woman who has devoted her life to caring for others, finds her voice on the witness stand. How did these stories affect you as a reader? Did you find their experience vastly different from your own, or were there points of connection?

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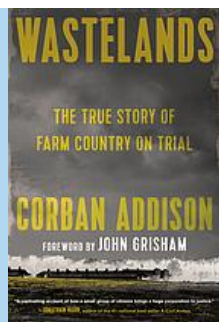
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4. In the second chapter of *Wastelands*, we meet Mona Lisa Wallace, the lead attorney in the Smithfield lawsuit. “*Her secret*,” Corban writes, “*is not perseverance. That is consequence, not cause. It is drive, mojo, energy, restless and relentless. Those who know her best marvel at it. Her older daughter, Whitney, puts it memorably: ‘Mona has enough energy for all of us.’ She is not ageless. But the years have yet to slow her. After six decades of life, she still walks the earth as if it is mostly frictionless. That is one of the reasons why people are drawn to her, that and her kindness. Mona loves people, and people love her back.*” How much of Mona’s character do you attribute to the fixed stars of personality and genetics? By contrast, how much do you attribute to her hardscrabble upbringing? How do nature and nurture, personality and experience, intertwine in your own life?
5. In chapter four, we meet the godfathers of industrial pork—Wendell Murphy and Joe Luter, III. Both men are complex characters. They hail from small towns and rise from ordinary beginnings to become captains of industry, at once widely admired and fabulously wealthy. To what do you attribute their success? An entrepreneurial drive? The imponderables of luck and timing? Ruthlessness toward their competitors? At the same time, their advancement comes at a cost to the neighbors and the environment. Are such costs inevitable in any great success? Is there a way to rise to the top without leaving a pile of bodies behind? What do the stories of Murphy and Luter say about American capitalism in the late modern period?
6. In chapter fifteen, Corban takes the reader to the American West to greet Mike Kaeske, a lawyer he describes as “*a nuclear reactor in human flesh.*” At first, Mike is skeptical of the hog farm lawsuits. But then he travels down east with his friend Lisa Blue, and flies over hog country in a small plane with the activist Rick Dove. Later, Mike attends the premier of *The Birth of a Nation* at the Sundance Film Festival. How do these experiences shape his view of the litigation and his decision to join Mona in representing the neighbors? What does Mike’s evolution say about the power of “being there” in animating people to action? Have you ever watched a film or read a book that had a similar effect on you?
7. Moral courage is a thematic through-line in *Wastelands*. How did the following characters embody that virtue: (i) Don Webb, the hog farmer turned grassroots activist; (ii) Steve Wing, the pioneering epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and (iii) Tom Butler, the hog farmer turned whistleblower? As a matter of personality, each man is quite different. Yet, in the breach, all of them speak the truth even when it hurts. They ignore the instincts of the crowd and become traitors to their own kind. Where does this brand of courage come from? What do you think you would have done had you walked a mile in their shoes?

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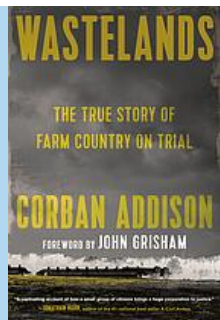
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8. As the trials approach, the neighbors face not opposition from Smithfield and the hog barons but also from their own representatives in the state legislature. When you read the account of HB467, were you surprised by the efforts of Jimmy Dixon, Brent Jackson, and their bedfellows to change 400 years of law to protect the hog industry? If so, what aspect of their behavior troubled you the most? If not, do you think politics is inherently corrupt? Have the rich and powerful always been able to pull the strings of legislative action to advance their interests? Also, what did you think of the Republicans who allied with the neighbors and voted *against* the industry? What inspired them to stand against their own party and vote their conscience?
9. While lobbying in the statehouse, Bill Graham, Mona's law partner, has an exchange with Jimmy Dixon, the hog industry's favorite friend. Dixon asks, "*Why'd you really file all these lawsuits?*" Graham replies: "*Jimmy, let me break this down for you. These people tried back in the nineties to get the government's attention. That didn't go anywhere. They tried the local government. They tried the county government. They tried the state government. They tried the federal government. They tried everything. And you know what? When you wear out your welcome in the executive branch, the courthouse is the only place left to go.*" What does this exchange reveal about the nature of government in Twenty-First Century America? What, if anything, could be done to change that?
10. Many Americans think of trial lawyers as ambulance chasers, at once sleazy and greedy. Yet Mona Lisa Wallace and Mike Kaeske are trial lawyers—and proud of it. Did reading the story of *Wastelands* change your view of plaintiffs' lawyers like Mona and Mike? What do you think of their business model—the way they charge their clients nothing up front and invest millions of dollars and years of their lives in cases they might end up losing in court? Now that you understand the risks that attend trying cases to verdict, what do you feel about the fees trial lawyers take when they win (e.g. 25% to 40% of the net proceeds)?
11. In the last third of the book, Corban Addison brings to life the five federal trials that took place in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the hearing in the court of appeals in Richmond, Virginia. What did you find most memorable about these clashes in the courtroom? What witnesses did you find most compelling, or damnable? What did you learn from the trial sequences about the challenge of bringing a multi-billion-dollar corporation to heel in court? Finally, what did you think about Judge Wilkinson's surprising statement from the bench about the lawsuits?

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12. *Wastelands* reveals both the inestimable power of the law to redress injustice and the limits of the law as a driver of social change. In what ways did the hog farm lawsuits force Smithfield to amend its business practices? (Hint: See page 346) In what ways did the lawsuits fall short of solving the problems posed by the lagoon and sprayfield system? How do you feel about the fact that the lagoons and sprayfields are still operational in North Carolina? With waste management technology like Super Soils on the market, what do you think is the ultimate solution for America in cleaning up industrial pork production? Do you think any of the legal or legislative approaches discussed on pages 375 and 376 will be successful?
13. Did reading *Wastelands* change your view of eating pork? What responsibility should consumers bear in reforming America's food system? In the long term, do you believe that industrial meat production should be abolished and replaced by old-fashioned regenerative farming (i.e. smaller herds of animals outside on the ground)? If so, how do we meet the protein needs of a growing population without desecrating the landscape and depleting our water supplies (e.g. the Colorado River system). What role should climate policy have on the future of America's food system? Should we all simply become vegan? Or is the solution to eat less meat and produce what we do eat in a manner that is healthy and sustainable?
14. Many have remarked that *Wastelands* reads like a novel, despite being true. Most have praised Corban's stylistic choice, but a few have complained, preferring a more reportorial approach to fact-based storytelling. What kind of nonfiction do you prefer? What are the challenges, do you think, of writing a true story in the style of fiction? Have you read any of Corban Addison's novels? If so, how do they compare with *Wastelands*?

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