



Beyond the Barnyard: Boardbooks and Other Big Lies We Tell about Industrial Farming

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Abstract

Boardbooks featuring farmed animals are a staple of literature for very young children. Yet their depictions of happy, colorful, and cute barnyard animals obscure the grim realities of farming today, including the fact that industrial animal operations are one of the key drivers of the climate emergency. This article explores this tension and suggests alternative ways to help youngest readers connect to the realities of farming through children's texts.

Keywords

[boardbooks](#), [farmed animals](#), [industrial agriculture](#), [barnyard friends](#), [CAFOs](#), [slow violence](#), [convenient self-delusions](#)

In 1850, the United States Federal Census counted 11,516 pigs and 5,000 humans living inside 571 square miles of Mesquawki land that would soon be named Washington County, Iowa (U.S. Census Bureau, 1850). These pigs lived alongside other animals: chickens, sheep, draft horses, milk cows, wild turkeys, foxes, domestic cats, mice, and more. As that century became the next, this agricultural diversity remained largely the same for the 2,500 farms raising over 120,000 total pigs and other livestock (U.S. Census Bureau, 1910). The growth continued. With the advent of veterinary vaccines, improved concrete formulas, more efficient manure removal, automated watering and feeding infrastructure, and a growing urban public, [confined animal feeding operations \(CAFOs\)](#) came into prominence as an unprecedentedly efficient technology. CAFOs segregated pigs into distinct buildings that corresponded with discrete stages of swine growth: farrowing houses, nurseries, and other buildings were designed and built for each phase. Farms specialized and consolidated. The markets shifted. Overhead plummeted. Today, Washington County is home to 22,000 humans and 1.5 million pigs: the third greatest concentration of pigs in the U.S. (USDA, 2017). The confinement buildings housing these pigs are ubiquitous, lined up along the highways and gravel roads cutting perpendicular across the flatness. You can drive through the entire county and never see an actual pig.

Just as ubiquitous, though less immediately obvious from a passing car, is the havoc of [slow violence](#) (Nixon, 2011) this industry wrecks: [worsening water and air quality](#), myriad physical and mental health risks, and economic stratification ([Gurian-Sherman](#), 2008; [Castillo & Simnitt](#), 2020). In 2004, a study of rural wells in Iowa found elevated nitrate levels in half of those sampled and detectable levels of coliform bacteria in nearly a third. In 2018, 700 Iowa waterways were found to be polluted, largely owing to nitrates from manure runoff (Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 2020). Research has also directly linked the intensification of the livestock industry to increased reports of cyanobacteria content in drinking water near livestock operations and to destructive algae blooms across the nation, particularly in the lower Mississippi River delta (Burkholder et al., 2007). Humans who live near CAFOs are more likely to experience a range of adverse health effects, too, including respiratory disease, hypertension, bacterial infection, and cognitive impairments ([Casey et al.](#), 2005).

In face of this reality, here's a fiction: the dozens and dozens of [boardbook titles](#) that comprise a fictitious genre called [barnyard friends](#): a motley crew containing pigs, sheep, cows, ducks, horses, geese, dogs, and one lazy farm-cat lounging in the haymow (Lawrence, 1989). These invite readers young and old to “imagine blissful barnyard friends who eat grass all day in the sunshine and go to warm snug stalls at night” (p. 73). Some barnyard friends boardbooks are narratively driven, such as [Good Morning, Farm Friends](#) (Bach, 2018), in which the multispecies cast enjoys life on the same farm over the course of a plot—in Bach's book, it's a morning routine. Other boardbooks, like [My Friends](#) (Tufari, 1987), constitute what Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer call [concept books](#) (2005). In these barnyard friends boardbooks, each page includes only one image of a farmed animal set above their common name in text. Taken in totality, without plot, the images collectively coalesce into a concept: a diversified, small, sustainable farm.

Sure, farms like the one depicted in *Good Morning, Farm Friends* do indeed exist. But they are not nearly as common as is suggested by their abundant misrepresentation in boardbooks, nor do they supply a fraction of the total animal product that Americans consume annually. Moreover, there are zero boardbooks that depict CAFOs. So, what is at play in the disjuncture between contemporary American agriculture and the prominence of barnyard friends books? Are they merely one of our convenient self-delusions? Barnyard friends boardbooks are, for many infants, among the first encounters they will have with depictions of farmed animals. Yet, the books' lexical simplicity belies their massive ideological weight. So, in the face of an increasingly [industrializing animal livestock industry](#) and an increasing distance between the majority of Americans and the animals they consume, I wonder: why should boardbooks be so instrumental in maintaining a lie?

Here's another truth: boardbooks are important. They help infants and toddlers develop preliteracy skills that support lifelong literacy. Boardbooks orient our youngest readers to the materiality of books themselves. They are made to withstand slobber, mud, paint, rips, bites, and all sorts of destruction wrought by the little hands capable of manipulating their easy-to-turn pages. Likewise, the stark visual contrast between boardbooks' plain backgrounds and simplified focal objects helps young eyes learn to distinguish images; clean fonts, consistently positioned on every page, aids in differentiating text from image. In short, as very young readers learn the sensorimotor

skills needed to manipulate a book, they are also learning that a book conveys meaning beyond itself.

Boardbooks also do important cultural work. Like all literature, boardbooks suggest something about the way the world is—and, by extension, what their young readers should expect from it. As with any ideological production, barnyard friends came from *somewhere* and some *time*. The condensed history goes like this: ABC books featuring animals aboard Noah's Ark become pastoral odes to an increasingly distant rural life. Serendipitously, they proved just right for the simplified content needed for modern boardbooks. Cows say *moo*. This is a *pig*. Can you see the *duck*?

Despite its fictionality, the diverse barnyard remains pervasive, even celebrated. This celebration of a pastoral fantasy masks a truth about American agriculture that adults do not wish to admit to themselves, let alone share with the young people in their lives. And yet this reality must be faced if we are to understand the underlying socioeconomic structures upholding the climate emergency.

If barnyard friends mask the ecological harm of the livestock industry, what can boardbooks do to help alleviate it? A knee-jerk reaction would be to publish boardbooks that depict CAFOs. As a thought experiment, this is provocative. But in reality, CAFO boardbooks would neither be the most practical nor ethical response. Here are three alternatives:

1. Instead of purchasing one of the hundreds of barnyard friends boardbooks, adults could choose boardbooks that depict local agriculture that infants could experience firsthand. Sara Andersen's [Vegetables](#) (2008) or [A Day at the Market](#) (2009) could invite talk about the produce seen at farmer's markets or community gardens while also offering opportunity to develop inside-out pre-literacy skills that center vegetable-related vocabulary.
2. Boardbook creators and publishers can produce and promote more books akin to the above: concept books featuring farmer's markets, regenerative [agriculture](#), [permaculture](#), or [community gardens](#). They should also do so equitably, signing BIPOC creators and highlighting BIPOC producers and communities that have historically been made invisible in environmental literature, ecofiction, Cli-Fi, and other genres.
3. Collectively, as educators and adults, we must develop the language needed to nuance the distinction between the farms depicted in barnyard friends books and the industrial farms that supply the vast majority of food in the United States. So, too, should we get smarter about what exactly is meant by the terms family farm, organic, industrial, diverse, and more.

By clarifying the differences between livestock agriculture as it is practiced, livestock agriculture as we might wish it to be (if we even wish it to be at all), and the ways that it is misrepresented on the page, adults and young people alike can better understand the differences between fiction on the page and truth in reality. We need to learn to confront [convenient self-delusions](#). It will be a necessary skill for continuing the work of facilitating discussions about the [Anthropocene](#) writ large.

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