

Rural Voices

15 Authors Challenge Assumptions About Small-Town America

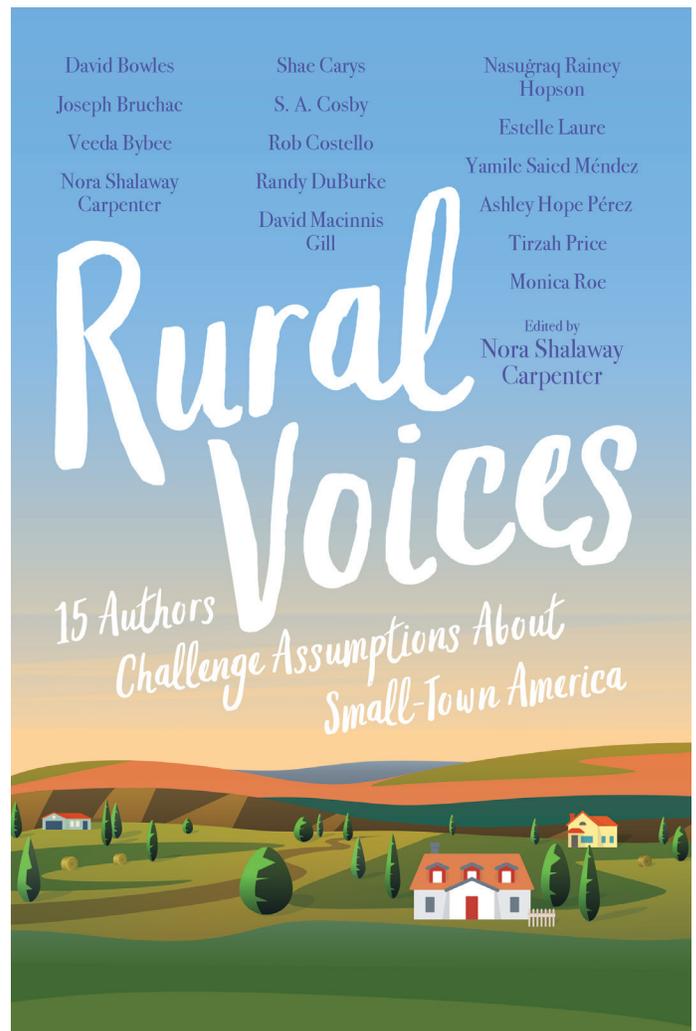
edited by Nora Shalaway Carpenter

About the Book

For most of America's history, rural people and their culture have been mocked, stereotyped, and deeply misunderstood. This array of short stories, poetry, graphic shorts, and personal essays dives deep into the complexity and diversity of rural America and the people who call it home. Fifteen authors—diverse in ethnic background, sexual orientation, geographic location, and socioeconomic status—explore growing up in rural America. From a mountain town in New Mexico to the gorges of New York to the arctic tundra of Alaska, you'll find yourself visiting parts of this country you might not know existed—and meet characters whose lives might be surprisingly similar to your own.

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the standards for reading literature and informational text for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL and CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI). They also include the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



HC: 978-1-5362-1210-5
Also available as an e-book



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Discussion Questions

1. The book dedication reads “To anyone who’s ever felt ‘less than.’” What are examples from the stories of people feeling “less than”? Why do some people from cities or suburbs assume rural people are inferior to them? If you live in a rural area, have you encountered such stereotypes? If you live in a city or suburb, do you or people you know make that assumption? Have you ever been treated as “less than”?
2. Discuss Nora Shalaway Carpenter’s memories in the introduction about encountering negative stereotypes when she was growing up in West Virginia. She remembers “internalizing shame about where I was from and trying to reconcile my lived experiences with the almost universally negative and simplistic portrayal of rural people on TV and in other popular media” (page xii). Describe those stereotypes and whether you’ve seen them in the media. How does her short story “Close Enough” explore the stereotypes?
3. In “The (Unhealthy) Breakfast Club,” Gracie says that before she went to a new school, “I didn’t know I was supposed to feel ashamed of where I come from” (page 8). How does attending a private school introduce Gracie to stereotypes about her own life? How does she react to John’s Trailer Trash party theme? What’s his defense? Connect this to the scene in “Best in Show” when visitors from Chicago take photographs of Molly.
4. Overall, what are some of the differences for teenagers between living in a rural area and living in a city or suburb? What are some general advantages and disadvantages of the different places? In your answers, give examples from the book and from your own experience.
5. Ashley Hope Pérez writes, “Home is being in a class with the same thirty kids from first grade to senior year” (page 123). In “Black Nail Polish,” the narrator says, “There aren’t enough people in my high school for popularity to even really be a thing. We all know each other too well” (page 233). Discuss the effects of always going to school with the same kids, including the effect on keeping anything private.
6. Some of the characters find a group or place in their rural setting where they fit in and have a feeling of belonging. The Breakfast Club in the first story serves that purpose. Identify other such groups or places and discuss how they make life better for the character. Are there refuges in suburbs or cities that are the same or serve a similar function?
7. Some characters show competency in specialized areas, such as trapping in “The Cabin” and raising pigs in “Best in Show.” Find other examples and talk about whether urban or suburban teens are as likely to have these skills. What are some benefits of having a useful or meaningful skill? Are there skills that urban and suburban teens are more likely to have than rural teens?
8. Cite instances in the stories where girls break traditional stereotypes about females and how they do so. How does the rural setting contribute to their less traditional roles or interests? What concerns and experiences do girls in the stories have related to their gender that urban and suburban girls share?
9. What are some other ways that their environment shapes the main characters? To what extent does the greater access to the natural world—such as woods—influence their lives and choices? Which of them do chores or follow other pursuits less likely to be part of life in cities or suburbs?

10. Compare the stories that explore being a person of color in a largely white rural population. What are some of the challenges the protagonists face? Give examples of being treated negatively because of race or ethnicity. Discuss the narrator in “Fish and Fences,” who describes what she likes about “being one of the few people of color in a mostly all-white community” (page 67).
11. Some chapters explore being gay in a small community where it’s unusual. Describe and compare some of those experiences. Talk about the family reactions in “The Hole of Dark Kill Hollow” and “A Border Kid Comes of Age.” Why was Molly in “Best in Show” comfortable coming out to her family but worried about being seen with Amoreena at the fair? Discuss Tirzah Price’s comments in “About the Contributors” about being gay in a rural area.
12. In “What Home Is,” Ashley Hope Pérez writes, “Home is learning that you get to love this place and leave it./Home is learning that you can leave it and come back, if you want” (page 128). Who in the book loves their rural home? Who expects or hopes to leave home, and how? Who thinks about returning someday, and why? If you wrote a poem similar to “What Home Is,” what would you write about?
13. The entries in this anthology attest to the fact that, as the introduction says, “There’s not just one type of rural” (page xiii). What are some of the differences among the settings, people and characters, experiences, and emotions in the anthology entries?
14. Talk about the different approaches to storytelling that the anthology features, including traditional short stories in different genres, personal essays, verse stories and essays, and graphic short stories. Discuss some of the themes, such as friendship and loss, and how they are conveyed in different formats or genres.
15. If you are not from a rural area, what surprised you in this book, and why? Discuss whether some of your beliefs or assumptions about rural life have changed. If you are from a rural area, what rang true to you? Are there aspects of rural living that weren’t explored that matter to you?

About the Editor

A graduate of Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults program, Nora Shalaway Carpenter is the author of the young adult novel *The Edge of Anything* and the picture book *Yoga Frog*. She previously worked as the associate editor of *Wonderful West Virginia* magazine and is a certified yoga teacher. Originally from rural West Virginia, she currently lives in Asheville, North Carolina, with her husband and three young children.

These questions were prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years who now gives professional development workshops for educators about new books for children and teens. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery Award Committees.



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