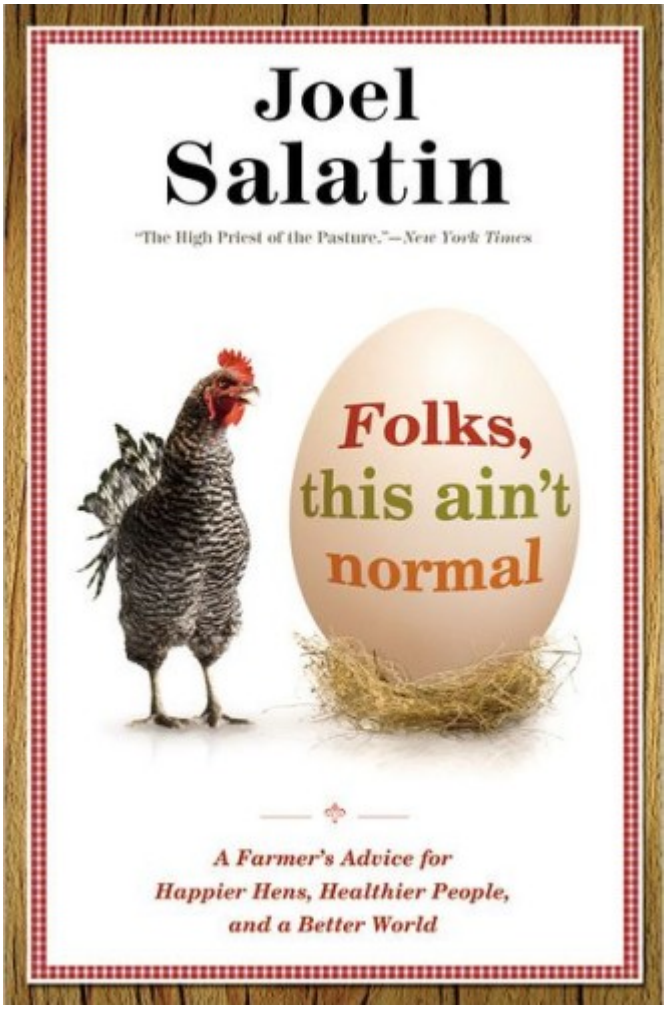
Mad farmer?

by LaVonne Neff in the August 8, 2012 issue

In Review



Folks, This Ain't Normal

By Joel Salatin
Center Street

Like a million other readers, I first met Joel Salatin in Michael Pollan's 2006 best seller, *The Omnivore's Dilemma.* To learn about what he calls the "pastoral food chain," Pollan visited Salatin, an eccentric genius who has turned his farm into a

nearly perfect perpetual motion machine using cows, chickens, pigs, rabbits, worms, grass, trees and portable corrals. At Polyface, Salatin's 550-acre farm in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, nothing—not even waste—is wasted. Instead, it is converted to eggs, meat, milk, vegetables and rich soil.

Pollan's depiction of Salatin's farming methods is fascinating, as is his portrayal of the farmer who calls himself "a Christian libertarian environmentalist capitalist lunatic." Salatin's first book from a major publisher, *Folks, This Ain't Normal* offers more than a taste of his methods and his madness. Here is the full banquet of Salatin's opinions, prescriptions and rants—ideas he has already expressed in his small library of self-published books and in speeches heard around the world—laid out on one sumptuous table. One wonders how the man ever finds time to farm.

Reading Salatin is bracing. I don't know if his wryly titled chapters—"Let's Make a Despicable Farm," for example, or "Sterile Poop and Other Unsavory Cultural Objectives"—are transcripts of his speeches or if he just writes in a folksy, conversational style. Either way, it's easy to imagine you're actually listening to him as he skewers factory farms, fast food, polluters, chemical fertilizers and genetically modified organisms. In fact, if you're a green organic locavore, it's pretty hard not to jump up and holler, "Preach it, brother!"

But then Salatin starts railing against food safety regulations, the bank bailout, most taxes and government health care, and you notice an entirely different audience leaping to its feet. Um, whose side is this man on, anyway?

That's what's fun about reading *Folks, This Ain't Normal.* You never know what to expect from this journalist-turned-farmer, a graduate of hyperfundamentalist Bob Jones University who believes that all drugs should be legal. He's also a foe of industrial farms and chemical companies as well as the agencies that try to regulate them. Salatin constantly catches you off guard, and you can tell he's enjoying your confusion.

Take, for instance, this parable:

> We have neighbors—I'll call them Cleve and Matilda—who would be the bane of liberal environmentalists. . . . Members of the National Rifle Association, they hunt avidly and procure all their meat that way. They scavenge firewood from neighbors' woods to fill their home-built outdoor wood furnace that supplies all their domestic heat. Their huge garden, filled with blackberries, strawberries,

> and vegetables, offers a cornucopia of bounty, which they freely share with neighbors, including us. They can, freeze and dry their bounty.
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> They don't go out much. . . . They don't buy new vehicles, seldom or never eat out, do fix-it jobs in the community to earn their living. They don't buy things or shop—their clothes are common working threads, worn out and eventually discarded for rags. They listen to Rush Limbaugh. . . .
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> Now let's meet another family, living in suburbia, utterly dependent on industrial food, helter-skeltering daily between charitable and recreational activities. Shopping and getting take-out food routinely, amassing 20 pairs of shoes and a dozen trousers. Jetting to Disney World for vacation and popping pharmaceuticals for mental and physical survival. Big paychecks, lots of paper wrappers, big lawn to mow and nice annual donation to an environmental organization. Goodness, maybe they even sit on the board of a prestigious greenie.org.
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> Let me ask you a question: Of these two scenarios, who is the true environmentalist?

Oops. Does it help that I almost never eat red meat?

Nope. "I have no problem with vegetarians who choose to vote against industrial farming by eating that way," Salatin writes. "Teresa and I have said that if we didn't know somebody like us, we'd practically be vegetarians too." But vegetarianism will not save the planet. In fact, if everyone switched to beans, we'd have a real problem, and not just the one that springs immediately to mind. "Not a single long-term tillage system on earth exists without an herbivorous component," Salatin explains. "You can't just substitute tofu (made from tillage—soybeans) for the herbivore. It doesn't work ecologically. Period. No matter how much you like tofu." That's because tillage depletes the soil, while manure builds it up. To have good soil and good vegetables, you need plenty of animals, preferably cows. Or buffalo.

I love an author who makes me confront my own prejudices and takes me where I don't want to go. I disagree with some of Salatin's pronouncements, especially in the book's last five chapters, where he gets all political, but he helps me understand why some of my beloved friends feel the way they do about taxes and government regulations ("Every time the public asks for government oversight, it eventuates in the bigger players getting more power and the smaller players being kicked in the

teeth”). Maybe if they read this book, they’ll begin to understand why I prefer to eat organic.

But, they might ask, can organic farms feed the world, or do they just pander to a trendy suburban affectation? Salatin is convinced that intelligent farming practices—fertilizing with manure, not chemicals; feeding cattle grass, not grain; letting animals roam and graze, not forcing them into tiny stalls; planting gardens in backyards and on vacant lots and in median strips—could indeed feed the world if used in conjunction with “appropriate technology to leverage the wise tradition of nature’s biology.” “Not only can the biological approach feed the world,” he writes, “but it is the only one that can do it regeneratively over the long haul.”

Industrially farmed foods may be cheaper to buy than organically farmed meat and produce, Salatin allows, but that’s only because the true costs of factory farms are hidden. The farms don’t pay for the damages they cause by pollution, for the wars required to keep their fuel costs low or for the health care needed by people who contract antibiotic-resistant diseases or whose immune systems are weakened by a steady diet of junk food. *Folks,* Salatin repeats throughout the book, *this ain’t normal.*

What does pass for normal in Salatin’s countercultural world? Gardens. Food preservation. Cooking from scratch. Compost piles. Forage-finished beef. Personal responsibility. Innovation. Smart consumers. Staying home. Family. Here’s how Salatin describes *normal*:

> Our four generations living on the farm is perhaps my single greatest blessing. Surrounded by this emerald farm in God’s creative crown, surrounded by abundance in the fields, the gardens, and the basement larder, feasting on compost-grown, pasture-raised food minimally prepared in our home kitchen, communing with family—this is normal. This is connection, foundation, heritage, tradition. And yet most modern Americans can’t conceive of living like this.

As a person with a brown thumb whose family and friends are scattered all over the world, I can’t conceive of living like this. But it all sounds warm and wonderful in a Peaceable Kingdom sort of way, and I’d love to buy all my family’s food from normal lunatic farmers like Joel Salatin.