

Jayber Crow, by Wendell Berry

reviewed by [Bill McKibben](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

The main story in a recent issue of the newspaper that serves my small town was "Nevins Retires After Decades of Parts Service." Nevins sold auto parts for 40 years. At the end of this career, he offers no deep conclusions about life, but he does recall that "years ago, all Chevrolets took the same points, same condenser," and now auto parts have proliferated. Local residents recall him opening the store on Christmas morning to supply batteries. "Nevins isn't one to seek the limelight, so the *News-Enterprise* was pleased when he agreed to meet with us and talk about working in the Main Street store over the years." Anywhere outside the confines of northern Warren County the story would have no significance, but as Wendell Berry reminds us in *Jayber Crow*, a quietly perfect book, anywhere outside a real community may be outside the moral universe as well.

This novel--one of many Berry has written about the fictional town of Port William--works backwards. Instead of the usual story of a young man growing up in the stifling confines of a small community and breaking out into the freedom of the world (with perhaps a wistful glance back), Berry presents a character who grows up with too few attachments and finally escapes into the fabric of life of a real place. "You Can Go Home Again" could have served as the book's title. It is a daring idea, for Crow embraces limitation. He gives up a possible career as a preacher, the chance to be a university boy intent on studying literature, and then a job as a big-city barber, with all the gaudy diversions of town.

Settled back in the place where he was born, he even eventually gives up his car, confining himself to the distance his legs can carry him. He doesn't take a wife because the woman he loves is unavailable. Instead he marries her secretly, in his heart, and remains faithful to her. And yet the limits make no difference--or rather they serve to enlarge and deepen his understanding.

He stands and cuts the hair of the men in this town for decades, listening to their stories and jests repeated ad infinitum, and slowly but surely grows to love them. And as he does--though this is just one small element of his maturation--he develops

a theology of love that is itself so lovely that nothing more is required. "Now (by a kind of generosity, it seemed) the world had so beaten me about the head, and so favored me with good and beautiful things, that I was able to see. 'God loves Port William as it is,' I thought. 'Why else should He want it to be better than it is.'" Loved it all, even the mean and the cruel, the people who make hell on earth for themselves and each other.

And so this barber "could imagine a Father who is yet like a mother hen spreading her wings before the storm or in the dusk before the dark night for the little ones of Port William to come in under, some of whom do, and some do not . . . I could imagine God looking down upon it, its lives living by His spirit, breathing by His breath, knowing by His light, but each life living also (inescapably) by its own will-- His own body given to be broken."

If there is a writer who understands more of the real human condition than Wendell Berry does, I have not read him. That he writes of small rural places like the one in which he lives makes his message no less universal. We are all lost, all looking for some kind of home. If we can place limits on the fantasies that our consumer world encourages, even if they are very different limits than the one Jayber Crow embraces, than we have some hope of finding that resting place.