

**Jane Rowling**

***Environments of Identity – Agricultural Community, Work and Concepts of Local in Yorkshire, 1918–2018***

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Jane Rowling's *Environments of Identity* is a deeply engaging and critical examination of life in rural Yorkshire over the period 1918–2018. At a time when the British countryside faces mounting tensions – such as balancing food production, ecological concerns, development, and heritage preservation – this book provides important historical context for understanding the roots of those pressures. The book offers a nuanced fusion of environmental and agricultural history to offer a richly layered account of how landscape and community evolve together. The book's empirical focus is on the landscape of Lower Wharfedale, North Yorkshire, and draws on more than 50 oral history interviews conducted with farmers spanning three generations. Using these, Rowling constructs a nuanced portrait of how farming practices, identity, and a sense of belonging have changed – or persisted – across a century. Reflecting, in Chapter 1, on how testimonies of landscape and environment may be brought into conversation with the oral testimonies favoured by social scientists, the rest of the book uses the voices of participants to take the reader through the rhythms of rural life, highlighting the symbiosis between people and place.

Chapter 2 of the book considers farming childhoods – taking its conceptual springboard as Chris Philo's seminal poststructuralist intervention of the early 1990s, which encouraged rural scholars to move beyond the discussion of average white men to include those, including children, who were previously cast in the shadows. Farm children, Rowling shows, inhabit a different kind of landscape – one where danger and freedom coexist. Drawing in some of the recent explorations from within Children's Geographies, the author explores how spaces such as farmyards double as playgrounds, as children grow up navigating a world filled with machinery, animals, and physical risk, and develop a form of practical literacy distinct from their urban or even village peers. This formative exposure to risk and responsibility, Rowling argues, was more than a rite of passage- it serves to shape the values and resilience needed for adult life on the farm. The analysis considers how such rites of passage evolve over time, with those who began farming before the Second World War often emphasising stewardship and working within environmental limits, whilst their children, who were exposed to mid-century agricultural modernisation, have often embraced a technological awareness characterised by heavy reliance on synthetic inputs and a preference for 'tidy' landscapes. Interestingly, they note that more recent generations, while influenced by contemporary environmental

concerns and incentive-based policy frameworks, actually share more with their grandparents than their parents in ethos, though their motivations differ.

A key theme running through the book is the intersection between work and gender – a theme explored in chapter 3. The author examines how traditional ideas of masculinity, often centred around physical labour and endurance, intersect with farming identity. The book reports how men typically handled outdoor, hands-on farming tasks, while women took care of behind-the-scenes responsibilities like managing the household and supporting farm operations. Women played a crucial part in keeping farms running but were rarely acknowledged as equal partners in the business. Although women's roles have expanded over time, traditional ideas about gender still shape who gets credit and control. These gendered dynamics are also mirrored in how farmers project their success. Straight lines in ploughed fields, healthy livestock, and weed-free crops are not just signs of productivity – they are public displays of competence, interpreted and judged by a community that shares an implicit code of what 'good farming' looks like. This performative aspect of rural work underscores the depth of connection between labour, land, and identity.

The book's final chapters consider how older farmers navigate ageing in a physically demanding profession and how changes in infrastructure, such as the closure of local livestock markets, have eroded some of the social fabric that sustained rural life. The book notes how older farmers often keep working well into later life, driven by habit, pride, and a deep link to their land, even when their physical strength fades. Handing over the farm to the next generation can lead to tension, as older people may resist letting go of control, while younger family members feel held back. Growing older brings a shift in how people see themselves and are treated – sometimes gaining respect, but also feeling left out or less needed – though many still play active roles and depend on close relatives rather than outside help.

In relation to the environment, Jane Rowling shows how, in Lower Wharfedale, farmers view the land as more than just ground to be worked – it carries deep personal meaning, shaped by ancestry, memory, and a sense of duty. The countryside is tied to reputation; a well-maintained field reflects pride and care, while signs of neglect may be seen as a lack of commitment. Nature is something to be respected but also shaped – there's satisfaction in managing it through physical effort, creating a landscape that shows human skill and order. Although many farmers feel strongly about looking after their surroundings, they often see outside environmental rules as disconnected from real experience, causing frustration and mistrust. The natural world, in this context, becomes a powerful mix of tradition, identity, responsibility, and resistance to imposed change.

The overall conclusions of the book emphasise how farming in Lower Wharfedale is deeply shaped by social relationships, identity and cultural norms, not just economics or practicality. It shows that farming is more than a

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job – it is a way of life tied to ideas about gender, age, family and belonging. The study highlights how farmers make decisions based on values like tradition, duty, and care for land and kin, even when this conflicts with business logic. It also reveals how roles and identities are continually negotiated, especially around gender roles and ageing, and how change happens unevenly and with tension. *Environments of Identity* is a wonderful book to read. It is rigorous, detailed and faithful to the people whose stories it draws on. Ultimately, the book calls us to recognise the emotional, symbolic, and relational dimensions of rural life, which are often overlooked in policy and public narratives.

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