



Those We Leave Behind: The Cruellest Crop

John Scott Winters

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Those We Leave Behind is a moving novel in which a grieving family pursues healing, love, and joy.

In John Scott Winters's poignant novel *Those We Leave Behind*, a farmer and his children try to find meaning in their lives after a sudden loss.

Harley and Ellie treasure their life together on their Tennessee farm. They have four sons, are somewhat profitable, and can call on their small community for support. But Ellie longs for a daughter. Harley gives in, only for disaster to strike. They welcome a sweet girl into the world, but Ellie dies during childbirth. Harley is set adrift. Still, he hopes to keep his children from succumbing to grief too.

When Sara, a friend's daughter, needs a place to stay for a few months, Harley allows her to stay on the farm. He asks her to help him with childcare and household chores. In time, he sees the qualities that he loved about Ellie in Sara too. Thus, the family endures their period of grief and mourning, pushing toward glimmers of future joy.

The opening chapters set a poetic, if vague, tone, following Harley as he digs a hole near a tree on his property. His children are under the supervision of a trusted family friend; there's little explanation as to what's happening. Hints of the family's daily life abound, as with descriptions of the farm's smells and family members' habits. Then, a brief, heated exchange between Harley and his oldest son, Cy, results in context clues: Cy accuses Harley of forcing Ellie to have another child. Ellie's absence is clarifying as well.

Gruff but loving, Harley centers the novel; his perspective frames its events. His recollections of Ellie, his attempts to be the best father to his children, and his struggle to form new emotional connections consume the book. So too does his tendency to throw himself into addressing immediate concerns direct it: he has to keep his farm afloat, so he avoids confronting his pain. Once Sara softens his defenses, movement becomes possible; the family's healing process begins in earnest. Still, while the time that it takes to arrive at this healing seems natural, it leads to a languid tale. And later, a violent feud interrupts the otherwise tranquil story's conclusion.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (June 21, 2023)

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