

# Short story collection 'Rural Voices' challenges assumptions

By Chea Parton  
*Literacy In Place Founder*

Rural America is not a monolith.

Some folks – especially those in cities – may find it hard to believe that the depictions they've seen of rural people in shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Duck Dynasty* and films like *Deliverance* aren't accurate or authentic depictions of rural places and people. This popular dominant narrative of rural folks as backward, ignorant, inbred hillbillies, hicks, and rednecks clinging to guns and Bibles is highly pervasive and leads to further marginalization of rural people and communities.

There are folks out there, however, who are actively working to disrupt and dismantle that narrative through their work, and one of them is Nora Shalaway Carpenter, an award-winning young adult novelist.

As the editor of *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions of Small Town America* - a collection of short-stories, poems, and essay - she and the other authors featured in the anthology diligently work to do exactly what the title says.

As Carpenter outlines in her introductory letter to the reader, this collection is meant to "change the conversation. To offer new narratives and ways of viewing the incredible people who make up rural America, the people who are so often misunderstood, made fun of and maligned, who are overlooked or even outright ignored.

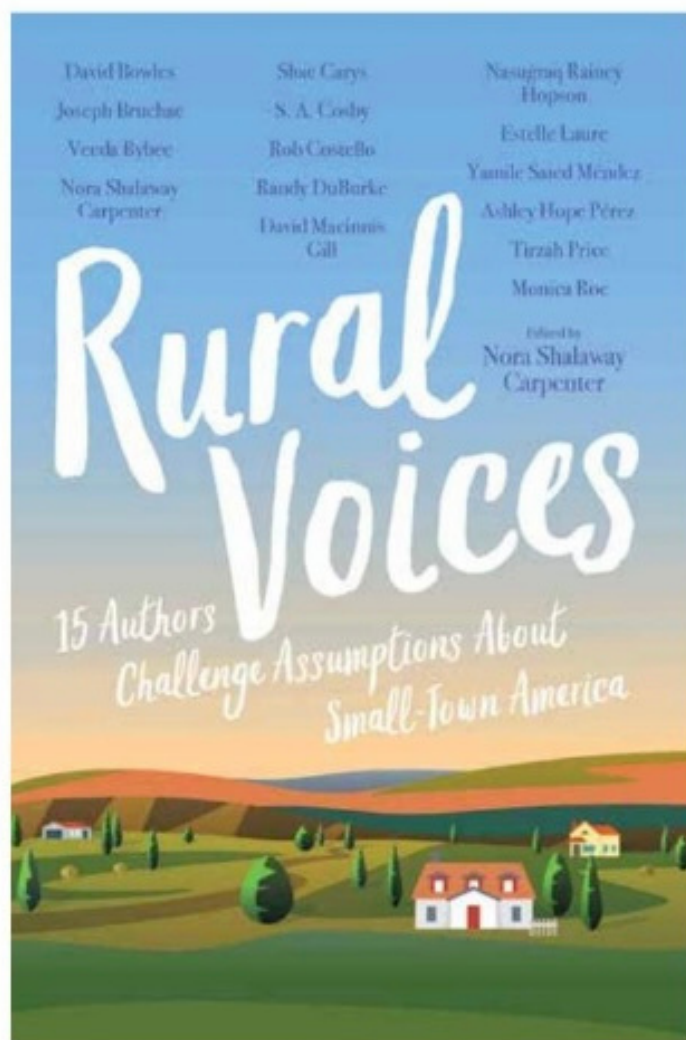
The short stories, poetry, graphic short stories, personal essay, and author anecdotes in these pages dive deep into the complexity and diversity of rural America and the people who call it home" (n.p.). This makes *Rural Voices* a perfect text for classrooms and book clubs where rural readers can dig deeply into what it means to be rural, how that connects to the way they see the world, and how it shapes the way the world sees them.

In total, there are 16 pieces in the collection: two poems; three graphic short stories; one essay; and ten short stories.



*Courtesy of Penguin Random House*

**Nora Shalaway Carpenter is the editor of *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions About Small-Town America*.**



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The states represented include: South Carolina, New York, Texas, Idaho, West Virginia, Virginia, Utah, Georgia, Michigan, Indiana, Alaska, and New Mexico.

Most of the stories are realistic fiction but there are a few with speculative elements to them. All of them are deeply connected to the authors' own experiences as rural people and illustrate the complexity of what it means to be rural across different states and geographies.

The pieces gathered here tackle everything from issues of class, ableism/disability, mental health, family, religion, LGBTQIA+ identity building and acceptance, and just being a human being with all the beauty and challenges that come with it.

For example, in Carpenter's own story in the collection entitled "Close Enough," we meet Alina (the main character) as she's chopping wood to put off writing a short story for a writing scholarship. She's struggling to write her story because she knows winning stories always feature recognizable or "tellable"



narratives of West Virginia - "topics like dried-up coal-mining towns, mountain dulcimer-playing grandparents, or extended families who'd lived on the same land for generations" (p. 85). These are undoubtedly authentic narratives for those writers and are experiences of some folks who live in West Virginia. Just not for Alina.

For her - "trying to find herself in those stories was like seeking her picture in another family's photo album" (p. 85) because she had only lived in her West Virginian home since she was three, so none of those were her experiences. She tells us she has "no West Virginia relatives or roots of any kind" making her feel "utterly other."

Alina tells her friend, Mori, "Even though I've lived most of my life here, I don't truly belong. But I don't belong anywhere else either" (p. 99), realizing that she "may be embarrassed about being too West Virginian and also jealous that [she's] not West Virginian enough at the same time" (p. 99). And that line right there points to an important and often ignored discussion around identity and what it means to be from some place.

With all the moving around that people can do nowadays - both into and out of rural places - considerations for a much

more nuanced understanding of what it means and who gets to identify as rural or from a rural place is much more complicated than it might seem. Rural could but doesn't necessarily mean that your family has been there for generations or that you're a farmer or a miner or a bullrider or a hunter or in 4-H or conservative or Christian or white or heteronormative - the list could go on.

Alina and Mori's experiences living in West Virginia and the way they're shared through the story forces readers to reckon with what it means to be from somewhere, what it means to belong, and how that connects to the stereotypes typically associated with that place.

Carpenter's story isn't the only one that does this work, but it's an example of one that really tackles it head on.

What it means to be rural differs across places and people and experiences. Definitions of rural also continue to shift across time. Reflecting on our layered rural identities, connecting them to the rural experiences of others, and understanding how the outside world sees and understands rural people are all vital for pruning and preserving rural cultures. Rural Voices offers important opportunities for readers to do just that.

## Resources for reading rural gems

### Reading Guide Questions for Book Clubs and Classrooms

Because this collection offers such a wide variety of depictions of rurality, it makes a perfect text to help readers tackle important questions about who they are and what it means to be rural. As the class or book club reads the individual pieces in the collection they could ask:

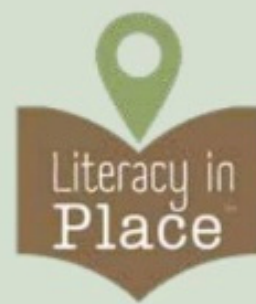
- What does it mean to be rural in this piece? How does that connect my own definition of what it means to be rural?
- What does rural look like, sound like, taste like, feel like, smell like in this piece? How are those sensory details similar to and different from my own experiences in my rural place?
- Once readers have finished each of the pieces, thinking of the collection as a whole they could discuss how does their senses of rurality compare to those featured in the collection - what they recognize and what they can learn from what they don't?
- Readers can also visit the Author Talk with Nora Shalaway Carpenter on the Reading Rural YAL YouTube channel to further consider the importance of reading and writing rural stories for pruning and preserving rural cultures.

### Possible Activities for Classrooms

There are so many possibilities for connecting stories in Rural Voices to other texts and their own experiences as rural people in their rural communities.

Students could:

- Find a song that they feel like represents rural people and compare/contrast it with one or more of the stories, poems, or essay in the collection.
- Write their own rural stories (either fiction or non-fiction) using one of the stories in the collection as a mentor text. Literacy In Place would be happy to publish those on the web-site.
- Interview folks in their rural communities collecting oral histories and stories about them and the town to compile in a Humans of \_\_\_\_\_ type of collection, comparing the rural experiences of folks where they live to those represented in the pieces in Rural Voices.



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