labor organizers, and a thank-you note referring to a twenty-five-thousand-dollar check from the CEO of United Fruit to General Torrijos of Panama.

The Latin American case studies cite both resistance to and the accommodation of United Fruit within national fields of power, a topic handled by several of the contributors. Mark Moberg’s analysis of the company’s entry into British Honduras (Belize) highlights the tensions and shifting interests among the colony’s elites in respect to agricultural development. Dario Euraque, in his discussion of the banana workforce in Honduras, addresses the manipulation of ethnicity in that country’s nationalist politics. In another riveting account, Cindy Forster chronicles midcentury labor militancy in a Guatemalan corporate plantation community, showing the crucial role of worker-activists in pushing forward the (tragically thwarted) reforms of the national revolution. Ecuador, currently the world’s leading banana producer, became a site of United Fruit operations in the 1930s. Steve Striffler recounts that, in contrast to Central America, the company had to contend with the scrutiny of a populist government, as well as the demands of organized peasants.

The production regimes of these “dollar” banana zones are placed in perspective by accounts from the eastern Caribbean. In the Windward Islands most cultivation occurs on small family-owned plots, but farmers must cope with the technical demands and deteriorating terms of the global market, mediated through their own national governments and commodity associations. Karla Slocum traces the refusal of St. Lucian farmers to attribute problems in their sector to globalization and relates their efforts to create an alternative discourse that directs attention to state mismanagement. Lawrence Grossman tells the story of the St. Vincent National Banana Growers Association, which juggles roles as contract coordinator, central buyer, and development institution; it also supports smallholders while simultaneously pressuring them to conform with international quality and packaging standards.

Collectively, the contributors illuminate the specific national or regional intersections of ecology, economics, and politics in the banana business. But the global—or at least hemispheric—trade is always a factor in the equation. Without the emergence of an alternative economy and environmental stewardship, the future of bananas is no more promising than its pernicious past.

—Lisa Markowitz, University of Louisville

The average American food item travels two thousand miles to get to your kitchen. The reason behind this odyssey is no mystery when you consider how far most Americans must travel to encounter an acre of working farmland. Small farms and family farmers are under siege all over America, both from an economy that favors industrial farming and from exurban homeowners who seek pastoral scenery but not the smells and noises that accompany farming.

In The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community and the Land, editor Norman Wirzba has selected essays that resonate with moral outrage, hope, and down-to-earth suggestions for reinvigorating an agrarian ethic that calls for smaller-scale local farms, careful stewardship of the land, and the production of healthy, chemical-free food. The essays are culled from speeches delivered at a 2002 conference marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of Wendell Berry’s The Unsettling of America. Berry, a Kentucky farmer and prolific writer, is considered the father of the agrarian movement. His own essay in The Essential Agrarian Reader assesses the ongoing contest between industrialism and agrarianism and shows how the state of farming and the vitality of farming communities have worsened over the past twenty-five years.

The essays, written by leading scholars as well as novelists, farmers, and land preservationists, are presented as chapters divided into three sections: the first articulates the agrarian ethic, the second presents an assessment of the current agricultural situation, and the last offers original and pragmatic suggestions for putting agrarianism to work. Several of the essays project a similarly grim picture of modern agribusiness, such as Vandana Shiva’s description of the devastating effects of the Green Revolution and industrial farming in India. She describes modern corporate agriculture as war: a violent onslaught against ecosystems, farmers, and local people. According to Shiva, the war effort is justified by the “myth of productivity,” the argument that genetic engineering is necessary to feed the expanding population. Shiva counters that industrial agriculture has not created a safe and secure system; instead, it has created a “food dictatorship” in which consumers eat engineered grains whether they know it or not, corporations consume local farms and devastate local economies, and communities are polluted by agricultural chemicals.
Brian Donahue of Brandeis University offers an alternative to the food dictatorship. His ideas combine the new urbanist approach to land-use planning coupled with agrarianism. Donahue proposes relocating farming by transforming suburbs into agrarian villages with hundred-acre farmsteads. The farms would be community controlled, they would serve the local market, and farmers would be compensated fairly. Suburbanites could participate in farming, local food security would be better ensured, and existing open spaces would become productive, working landscapes. Starting from a clean slate—an undeveloped landscape—this approach would have made perfect sense. However, since most towns are nearing full build-out, it can’t work everywhere, particularly given Donahue’s estimate that a functioning agrarian community would need to devote about half of its landmass to farming.

Herman Daly, from the University of Maryland, presents an economic argument for agrarianism, challenging traditional calculations that fail to account for the benefits provided by nature or for the social and environmental costs of industrial production. He advocates measuring sustainability by physical throughput, “the flow from nature’s sources through the economy and back to nature’s sinks.” Viewed this way, much of what we commonly think of as growth is revealed to be economically inefficient: the increased environmental and social costs outweigh the increased benefits in production. Overall, the destruction of natural capital creates poorer societies with fewer prospects for prosperity.

The essays by Wes Jackson and Gene Logsdon present other agrarian alternatives. “Soil is as much a nonrenewable resource as oil,” Jackson says, and he discusses creating a new agriculture for the neoagrarian: one that perennializes the major crops and cultivates them in polycultures that enhance the soil rather than deplete it. Gene Logsdon offers another sustainable practice for new agrarians: using grass-fed livestock, a practice that can help farmers make greater profits while producing healthier and better-tasting meat.

From one perspective, agrarians have an uphill battle against agribusiness, although the number of farmers’ markets, organic markets, and “Buy Local” bumper stickers testifies that plenty of people wish to follow the agrarian path. For those wanting to understand the agrarian ethic as an utterly sensible credo for contemporary culture, The Essential Agrarian Reader offers an ideal starting point.

—Sarah S. Gardner, Williams College

Morel Tales: The Culture of Mushrooming
Gary Alan Fine
(Originally published 1998 by Harvard University Press)
xii + 324 pp. $19.95 (paper)

Never hunted for mushrooms? Puzzled that a sociologist could spend 324 pages discussing the hunt in cultural terms? Then go back to your childhood and visualize your first Easter egg hunt. Like eager children, mushroomers carry out their task with eagerness, hope, and curiosity. When they spot their treasure, they stoop, reach, pull the fungus gently away from the basal mycelium, brush off any attached soil, and place it reverently in the basket. Sound familiar?

Gary Alan Fine studies the reasons why people engage in their various satisfying activities. Given the passion and dedication of mushroomers, it was inevitable that Fine would eventually discover them, and in writing about them, he becomes a philosopher, questioner, and explicator. He is an objective observer, mingling but not joining, translating what he hears and sees into cultural observations.

Fine shows how many aspects of culture exist within the wanderings and conversations of mushroom pickers. Their language ranges from casual localisms (morels, merkles, roons, sponges) to Latin binomials (Morchella esculenta, M. deliciosus, M. gigantica), but while the terms may differ, the intent is the same: to describe what has been found. Mushroomers sing songs, treasure photos, tell and retell incidents from the past. Here is a culture that has its own language, music, art, oral traditions, and foodways.

Fine’s chapter headings hint at the basic reasons why mushroomers become enamored of their activity: “Being in Nature,” “Meaningful Mushrooms,” “Sharing the Woods,” “Talking Wild,” “Organizing Naturalists,” “Fungus and Its Publics,” “Naturework and the Taming of the Wild.” In “Meaningful Mushrooms” he uses field guides to illustrate how mushroomers describe the objects of the natural world through metaphor (though professional mycologists, deep in their scientific method and taxonomies, might scoff at his idea, citing reasons other than the search for metaphor for the intricate nomenclature of fungal groups).

“Sharing the Woods” leads Fine to observe that “mushroomers relish sharing their experiences. They venture into nature in groups and then share the experience with others” (p.94). Yet there is another side to this: mushroom hunters may begin as a group, but the venture is usually individual, as members wander in search of their grail. A call to join a generous harvest may bring the group together, but the density of the fruitings is the element that determines the