

# Land Girls Short Guide

## Land Girls by Angela Huth

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## Overview

The British government organized a corps of "land girls" to replace male farm workers who had been drafted as soldiers, sailors, and airmen to fight World War II. Domestic agriculture was vital to the British war effort because the island nation could no longer rely on imported foodstuffs getting through from Europe or America.

Land Girls tells how the young women Prue, Ag, and Stella begin their land army assignment with high spirits but a certain amount of trepidation. The Lawrences' remote farmstead seems as alien as the moon to this trio of lively and spirited girls.

Land Girls is the story of their year of gritty toil, grueling hours, and small epiphanies on the farm. Mr. Lawrence, their host, doubts they can do the work at all; with only minimal instruction, they start out milking cows and driving tractors. When it is time to shovel out the pigsty or to poison rats, he even takes a grim satisfaction in their dismay, but they persevere. The girls, after choosing their favorite animals and tasks, take great pride in handling them as best they can.

The farm work serves as a backdrop to the drama of personal change and growth the girls undergo. These three young women probably would never have met if the war had not intervened, yet they quickly build friendships out of their common situation that will continue throughout their lives. These friendships begin as each girl comes to appreciate her comrades' unique personalities and enthusiasms, and then are nurtured when each supports the others' dreams, even when they seem feckless or impossible. The girls also blossom sexually during the year, and they finally come to a hardwon affection for Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence—at first appearance so dour and formidable—as well as for Ratty, the peculiar old farmhand.

## About the Author

Angela Huth was born in London on August 29, 1938, just before the advent of World War II threw Europe into bloody conflict. Her father, Harold Edward Huth, was a film producer, and his profession may have nudged her towards writing for a variety of media—television, the theater, magazines, and newspapers— which she has done throughout her career. As well as this multi-media work, she has published short story collections and almost a dozen novels.

Most of her novels are primarily 'relationship stories' about the bittersweet disappointments, reversals, and rewards of love. *Land Girls* offers a sophisticated, adult treatment of character and motive, but the trio of young women at the heart of the story make it very appealing for young adult readers.

Angela Huth attended schools in England and France before embarking on her writing career. She has daughters, Candida and Eugenie, from her two marriages, and she now lives in Oxford, England. She has been a supporter of the other arts, especially ballet and photography, and has also served as a presenter and reporter for the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation.)

# Setting

Dorset, a county southwest of London, has often been portrayed in writing and painting as a model of the gentle British countryside. Placidly grazing sheep, picturesque haystacks, neat hedgerows dividing carefully tended fields—all combine into a pastel image of rustic charm.

This book takes both protagonists and readers behind the image. The picture is not so idyllic upon close inspection. Life at Hallows Farm means dealing with mud and animal waste. The constant chores are more likely to exhaust the body than to inspire communion with nature. The houses and barns, so quaint and cozy from a distance, lack many of the conveniences of 1940s city life. Prue feels she has stepped back in time when she first walks into the cavernous farmhouse kitchen. Its dank flagstone floor and 1914 calendar make her desperately homesick for her own mother's cheerful little kitchen. Even the crisp nights and misty early mornings are depressing, as are the Blackout rules that forbid any artificial light from escaping the inside of houses that might possibly guide German bombers to targets. All nighttime walking and working therefore has to be done in darkness, which is hazardous if one does not know the farm's layout.

Yet these harder aspects are not shown merely to debunk the idealized picture of the countryside. The gritty details become a daily reality for the land girls, something they have to cope with to do their jobs. Once they have accepted these hardships as a "given" of their situation, they begin to see the land in a different light.

Beyond the dirt and discomfort—on another level—this countryside really does reflect nature's glory.

The girls only realize this after some months of toiling through their farm work. Prue notices the intense blues and violets in a patch of wildflowers while she worries about how to find fabric for a nice frock. Ag discovers a plover's nest while plowing a stony field behind the house. Having steered around it, she reflects on the bird's will to survive and starts making plans for her own future.

This vision of the countryside, as a place where wonder occasionally shines through all the dirt and stress, serves as a subtle metaphor for the human condition as the land girls experience it. In the farm year and afterwards, they manage to pull small moments of joy and love and triumph out of the most unpromising events.

American readers may also notice the very different geographic scale within this novel. Unlike American flyers who spent years overseas in World War II, British servicemen were stationed relatively close to home.

There is an RAF base just a bicycle ride's distance from Hallows Farm; the pilots can fly missions over the Continent and return to base the same night. The downside of this propinquity is the battering that German forces inflicted on England during the Blitz.



Although the Dorset countryside is not a specified target for bombing, there is always the possibility of spare bombs being dropped there as the German bombers start home.

Although the Lawrences have a car, their son Joe usually walks or bicycles to meet his friends at the pub in Hinton Half Moon, the nearest village.

There are also regular buses from the larger towns of Blandford and Guilford, not too far away, and train connections from there to Britain's cities. The girls feel isolated more by the quiet patterns of country life than by the distance to their homes.

The farms also are on a smaller scale than in America. Like American farms of the same era, there is some mechanization. The Lawrences own a tractor but also use a horse-drawn plow for part of their work. They have milk cooling apparatus but milk their cows by hand, having decided milking machines were not economical for such a small herd of dairy cattle. Product images from the World War II era add to the story's "trip back in time" effect.

Drene shampoo, Spam sandwiches, and rayon stockings (in place of impossible-to-get nylon hose) carry the aura of a bygone time. Churchill and King George VI—only names from a history book to today's young readers—are vital figures in the world the novel depicts. World War II was the defining experience for the generation who went on to shape the world we live in today. This novel gives us some unusual glimpses of that process.

## Social Sensitivity

Very little of the novel should raise concerns about content. A world at war, when clothing and even indoor light is rationed, is an alien setting to today's American and West European teenagers. Reading about it can build an understanding that war is not all 'guts and glory,' and that different generations have had different experiences that shaped their views of life.

Some readers might object to the premarital sex in the book, but it is not explicit, it is sensitively handled, and it matter-of-factly reflects the way things were in many young women's lives during a wartime of wrenching social dislocation.

A more ambiguous issue is raised by the two older men's guilty attractions, each to one of the land girls. It is easy to interpret these as just the lust of old men. On the other hand, to both John Lawrence and Ratty Tyler, the girls probably represent "the road not taken," the promise of that time in youth before one's own decisions limit future options. It would never have occurred to these men that they could start over in midlife or later, based on their own whims. It is obvious that Mr. Lawrence loves his wife. In fact his strongest worry is that he will betray how fond he is of Stella, even though it could well be seen as a fatherly type of affection.

As for Ratty, tied to a shrewish and irrational wife, Ag's "holy" quality mostly serves to brighten up his life.

At eighty, he does not have illusions that anything more will come of their relationship. Finally, these men grew up in a society which schooled young men and women separately. The unease they feel with the land girls may stem more from social awkwardness than from anything else. There is one minor but definite anachronism: early in 1942, John Lawrence worries that Hitler may be working on an atomic bomb. Only a few high officials and physicists actually knew such efforts were going on. Nuclear research and bomb design were carefully kept secrets until the very end of the war on both the Allied and the Axis sides.

While several science fiction writers had speculated on such a weapon, it is unlikely that a Dorset farmer would have heard about it.

# Literary Qualities

Land Girls is written in a smooth, unobtrusive style. Despite the very strong sense of setting the author conveys, there are few criticisms to startle American readers. Each scene usually focuses on the actions and feelings of only one land girl. However, the author shifts points of view readily, showing the thoughts and memories of the three young women and the other farm characters as well.

For this particular story it is a very effective technique. We would not know the Lawrences or Ratty nearly as well if we had seen them only through the girls' eyes.

Framing the story of their year in Dorset are a prologue and an epilogue that take place in the contemporary world. In the prologue, Ag and Prue meet at a hotel restaurant for lunch.

They are waiting for Stella to join them. The three have held these luncheons almost every year since World War II, keeping in touch while their lives have taken different directions.

In the epilogue, we see Stella, who has become ill and cannot join Prue and Ag; the novel ends with her reflections about how each of their lives has worked.

Land Girls is a novel of character and quiet insights. It is not structured like most popular fiction, with rising tension, a climax to the action, and then a denouement in which all the disparate story strands come together. Serving a similar purpose, though, is a definite shift in pacing about three-fourths through the book. The first, and longer part, is a slow-paced account of the land girls' new work and life on the farm. Texture is almost as important as event here; one almost feels the mud, muck, and misty autumn air and hears the whispered secrets in the attic dorm. In the last fourth, unanticipated events occur in quick succession.

Prue's pilot boyfriend Barry is shot down; Joe and Stella realize the strength of their attraction; and Prue goes to London to a royal reception.

Ag gathers her courage and writes to Desmond, the man of her dreams. A bomb falls in a field—the closest the actual war comes to Hallows Farm—and kills a cow. Finally, the carefully thought out plans of Joe and Stella fall to pieces when her fiancé Philip is badly injured.

These changes crowd in on the girls' lives with a realism not always found in more tightly plotted stories. Land Girls is a much quieter novel than many of today's books, but young readers may find it uncannily reflective of their own concerns.





## Themes and Characters

Prue, Stella, and Ag have come to the farm as land girls from very different segments of British society. Prue, an apprentice hairdresser from a working-class neighborhood in Manchester, is always experimenting with new makeup and trendy clothes, and she finds the wartime restrictions on the latter a heady challenge. The shortage of eligible males is another challenge, but Prue enjoys solving that problem; she is always on the lookout for potential short-term boyfriends. In fact her unfazed enjoyment of their physical charms, which she relates matter-of-factly to her friends, both shocks the other girls and forces them to reassess their own idealized fantasies of romantic love.

Ag is a shy, intellectual girl whose studies at Cambridge were interrupted by the war. Her first challenge is to avoid irritating the other girls with her "book knowledge," which may inadvertently come across as an air of superiority. She stumbles in this upon first arriving at Hallows Farm, when she correctly identifies a squawking bird as a bantam. ("How'm I supposed to tell a bantam from a hen?" Prue thinks angrily.) Crowded into a small attic bedroom with the other girls, she also has to keep some separate space for her own thoughts and possessions, a task essential for her own sense of self. Finally, she has to fight her fear and nausea at the sight of dead animals. Ag never quite brings off this last task, but by the time a rat hunt is held, she has won enough respect from Ratty and Joe that they are willing to spare her the task of handling the rat carcasses.

Stella, unlike the two other land girls, is never identified in terms of social class or place of origin. She is a very pretty young woman, though unwilling to invest the time to make the most of her looks as Prue does.

Stella plays the piano and sings well, but she has no definite career plans or strongly held interests. Instead, she daydreams, mostly about Philip, the Navy Lieutenant, with whom she shared some furtive petting sessions before they both went off to war.

She is convinced that because her mind and soul will be with Philip while her body is doing the farm work, she can handle any unpleasant job; indeed, her mental tricks do help her stay cheerful. Stella's very dreaminess means that when tragedies or revelations which she cannot ignore occur, she has trouble "shifting mental gears" to figure out the right thing to do. Her challenge in this year is to reconcile the gap between her fantasized vision of the way things are supposed to be and the way the real world works.

Land Girls is primarily a coming-of-age novel, in which the farm and the war are the arena in which three young women complete the passage to adulthood. Both Ag and Stella, in different ways, have to "come down to earth" and learn to negotiate the real world without giving up their own identities and values. Prue changes much less. Her goals at the end of the year—a good time, and eventual marriage to a rich man—are no different from those she has at the beginning.



Whether these are more realistic goals than the other girls' could be debated endlessly, but she does eventually get what she wants. Perhaps it is her drive which makes the difference. Prue, nonetheless, comes to respect and learn from the lifestyles of those around her so naturally different than her own, like Faith Lawrence's immersion in domesticity. Her concern for the sow Sly is a poignant sidelight in the book.

"The war has changed everything" is a comment the characters often make, although it is a secondary theme in the novel. The three young women would certainly not have met each other had they not been brought together by the Land Army. The friendship that follows brings new insights to all of them. Their ability to handle farm work may well have given them a confidence in their own abilities that their mothers lacked. But this last reading is not the only possible one.

Prue's mother has her own business, and Stella's mother contributes to the war effort by driving an ambulance in London. The war's greatest impact for the land girls is on the overall gestalt of their times, and the way its vicissitudes lead to new friendships and experiences.

For the older characters, the war also means adjusting to new people and perceptions. Mr. Lawrence, the taciturn farmer, has not had much to do with any other females since he married Faith many years ago. The land girls are a big intrusion into the settled unpredictability of his farming life. His doubts are not just about whether they can do the work, or the loss of privacy in his house. He feels ill at ease with them simply because they are young women. He slowly becomes grateful for their work on the farm, and then begins to also feel much later a fatherly affection toward them.

Ratty Tyler, the old farmhand, at first is even shy about talking to the young women, but their cheerfulness and vigor win him over. His wife Edith, a woman with neither empathy nor other interests in the larger world, comes to view them as her rivals. She has a nervous breakdown near the end of the year which finally gives Ratt, in the absence of her dominance, a serene old age.

Joe, the Lawrence's only son, is more socially adept than his parents.

His quiet competence helps the land girls handle tasks that seem impossible to them. Joe also has a romantic fling with each girl in turn. His intimacy with Stella turns out to be far more meaningful than either anticipated. This leads to mutual anguish because both Joe and Stella are engaged to others. He is, however, in some ways the very opposite of Prue—he does not pursue his own goals.

Rejected by the Armed Forces for his asthma, he stays on at home and helps his parents run the farm. Ag is delighted when she realizes he shares her enthusiasm for literature; and he wants to go to Cambridge after the war. Apparently he never does, as he marries Janet, whom he does not love, because he has promised to. If there is a theme to the subplots involving Joe it is "follow your dreams." The book ends with the reader uncertain whether Joe and Stella, free to be together openly after many years, ever do manage a "happily ever after" life.

# Adaptations

An audiocassette version of *Land Girls* was issued by Isis Audio (Winter Springs, Florida) in 1997. A motion picture version, made by Gramercy Pictures, stars Catherine McCormack, directed by David Leland. The script, written by Huth and Leland, remains true to the novel but with more emphasis on the girls' relationships and romances than on their farming experience.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Were the land girls seeking adventure and new experiences as well as acting from patriotism when they joined the land army? If so, did they find what they expected?

2. Stella does not have any specific career interests or goals for the future.

Yet she plans to work after she marries Philip. Is her lack of focus just a sign of her overall dreaminess? Or was it typical of young women of her time?

3. Each girl soon finds favorite tasks on the farm: Prue the plowing and the sow's care, Stella the milking, Ag the hens and bantams. What does this suggest to you?

4. When she hears about Pearl Harbor being bombed, Ag feels guilty at being such a safe distance from the war. Edith, on the other hand, just ignores the news and makes scones to sell. Is Edith's willful ignorance covering up a deep fear, as Ratty tells himself? Is this episode connected with the later one where she makes scones that give the villagers food poisoning?

5. Prue is almost crushed when the only notice her plowing draws from Mr. Lawrence is "Looks all right to me." Does he ever realize that the girls need more recognition and praise for their work?

6. If Stella and Joe had married each other, do you think they would have lived happily ever after?

7. In what ways is Prue's behavior similar to Joe's? In what ways is it different?

8. Even though their year on the farm drew them together, the three land girls' adult lives went in quite different directions. Does this mean that year was just an interlude without serious consequences for them? Did the war change everything, as the people in the book often said?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Talk to an older person who lived through World War II, either in America or in Europe, and ask how the war changed their daily life. Write a report comparing their memories about shortages, civilian defense, and attitudes in general to those shown in *Land Girls*.

2. There are many other novels and poems set in the English countryside.

Find one of these and explain how its vision of country life resembles or differs from that shown in *Land Girls*.

3. Read about the home front war effort in Britain in World War II. List some of the other ways Prue, Ag, and Stella might have taken part in it if they had not become land girls.

4. Look up some book or movie descriptions of the aerial war over Europe in World War II. Create a written or multimedia depiction of what it must have been like to be an RAF pilot in this war.

5. Draw a map or collage of Hallows Farm as you envision it from the novel. Be sure to show or label the various types of crops and animals. Show where each girl would be if she was working at her favorite chore.

6. Near the end of the year, Ag writes a long letter to Desmond describing her life as a land girl. What do you think she included in the letter?

Left out? Write a sample page or two of the letter as you imagine she wrote it.

## For Further Reference

Connally, Molly. "Land Girls." *School Library Journal* 42 (October 1996): 162. Points out the developmental tasks the characters face, and how their experience of the war varies from that described in history books.

"Huth, Angela." In *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*. Volume 20. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986.

This reference article gives brief biographical information and lists Huth's published and media-produced works to date. A "Sidelights" section describes the author's novels as tragicomedies. Huth indicates here that her goal is to give readers pleasure and moments of insight.

Isaacs, Susan. "Their Finest Hour."

*New York Times Book Review* June 16, 1996: 41. Isaacs, an accomplished novelist herself, praises the book for its finely drawn characters and the way it draws the reader into the land girls' circle of friends. An extraordinarily perceptive review.

"Land Girls." *Publishers Weekly* 243: 5051. Review summarizes the story and its appeal to readers, finding it a novel of "high drama and intense meaning . . . in everyday life."



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