Each day, Bob Sheasley leaves Lilyfield Farm and heads into the city. And each day, he brings along a basket of eggs for his coworkers at The Philadelphia Inquirer. Depending on the breed of hen, these eggs may be white, green, rose, blue, or as brown as chocolate. And they are all deliciously fresh, a taste of the rural way of life that people have enjoyed for millennia, one in which chickens have played a supporting role for nearly as long.

In Home to Roost, Sheasley tells of the intertwined relationship between humans and chickens. He delves into where chickens came from, what their DNA tells us about our kinship, how we’ve treated our feathered fellow travelers, and the roads we’re crossing together. This is a story of agriculture and human migration, of folk medicine and technology, of how we dreamed of the good life, threw it away, and want it back.

Modern farming has changed the lives of both bird and man over the past century. But backyard farmers like Sheasley offer hope for a return to the pleasures of locally grown food, as diverse as the chickens he’s raised on Lilyfield Farm. With wit and personal insight, Home to Roost examines of how our lives can be changed for the better, with something as simple as a backyard coop.

My Personal Review:
Posted on Sun, Jul. 13, 2008

Pure poetry from a man who loves his poultry

Home to Roost
About 8,000 years ago, in Southeast Asia, the chicken came, before the egg. That is, humans captured the wild red jungle fowl, cherishing its fierceness. The last thing these ur-chickens were was chicken. Cockfighting, the blood sport, way predated exploiting the fowl for eating or brooding eggs or coddling the things.

Today, each year, every citizen of the United States consumes, on average, 60 pounds of chicken flesh. Annually, the nation markets 90 billion of their eggs, about 300 per capita. Today there are 24 billion chickens on Earth, four for every man, woman, and child.

Now comes Bob Sheasley with a comprehensive, concise treatise on the bird. It is encyclopedically packed with facts such as these, a scholarly work with 13 pages of footnotes and an elaborate additional bibliography.

The book is also a love story. And a treatise on the practice of agriculture. It is a history of the chicken, as bird and phenomenon. It is a handbook of fowl husbandry, a survey of the literature of chickens, of chicken origins, development, and maintenance. It is a compilation of the mythology of chickens, deep into pre-history. Most powerfully, it is a memoir, a very personal story.

It contains maybe just a tad more than some readers really ever wanted to know about chickens, but it is so utterly enchanting that I can barely imagine anyone - even those numb to both chickens and country life - who would not find it delightful. At his best, Sheasley writes poetry.

As he finished writing the book, he and his wife, Suzanne, had lived for six years on their five-acre farm, which they call Lilyfield, between Philadelphia and Lancaster County. Her grandfathers ashes are buried near a weeping cherry tree there. They have been raising chickens and selling their eggs since the spring of 2004.

Sheasley draws provocatively from history, ancient and contemporary. He gives great tribute and affection to Ulisse Aldrovandi, who completed a 2,000-page treatise, Ornithology, in the year 1600, when Aldrovandi, a dauntless scholar, was approaching 80. His elaborate household, gardens, and coops were in the Apennines, not far from Florence, near Bologna, where he established botanical gardens. Sheasley learned a lot from him.
So from time to time throughout his own book, Sheasley carries on conversations with Aldrovandi - informed and respectful chats. They apparently occur in the early 1600s. This is a contrivance, of course, a benevolent conceit of the narrative voice. That might put off a pedant, but Sheasley handles these conversations with wit and gentle irony that goes far beyond redeeming them, at least to my ear and eye.

There is a great deal here that is not fantasy. Going very technical, Sheasley is deeply skeptical of such commercial designations as organic - dismissing them as based at best on hopelessly flimsy laws or regulations, enforced trivially if at all. Even if the ill-drafted free range labeling regulations are followed, he insists, most probably the only range such birds will ever encounter is the one in the kitchen. As to the commercial trade: A case of eggs can be stored as long as eight months in serious cold storage rooms, and most or many you get in supermarkets may be many weeks old.

So, you want eggs that are healthful, nutritious, and delicious? Go to a farmers market, or better yet a farm. Examine the circumstances, the sanitation, the commitment. Look the proprietors - and, better yet, the birds - squarely in the eye.

Chickens should run free, for your sake and for theirs. Predators abound and invade, of course, in truly open chicken yards: weasels, skunks, foxes, hawks and domestic critters. But those that die by the talon have nonetheless fulfilled their destiny, writes Sheasley, which is to be consumed. From a chickens perspective, better to perish in a meadow than a processing plant. As the prey of human consumers, it dies shackled and hanging on the disassembly line. As the prey of raptors, the end comes in a swoop of wings, in a field, swiftly. This is death. Its part of life.

A copy editor at The Inquirer, Sheasley regularly puts all his eggs in one basket and peddles them to his colleagues. Alongside journalism and chickens, he celebrates the American family farm as one of the great institutions of history - sustained by hard work, fortitude, honesty and much more. He bemoans its all-too-rapid deterioration. He rages against the descent of what used to be poultry farming into industrialized chicken manufacturing.

In the course of the book, there are places where it is impossible not to weep. An example is the final chapter, but dont, dont jump forward to read it. Begin at the beginning. A remarkable writer, a classic romantic.

And, my, my, the man does love chickens.

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Home to Roost: A Backyard Farmer Chases Chickens Through the Ages by Bob Sheasley - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!