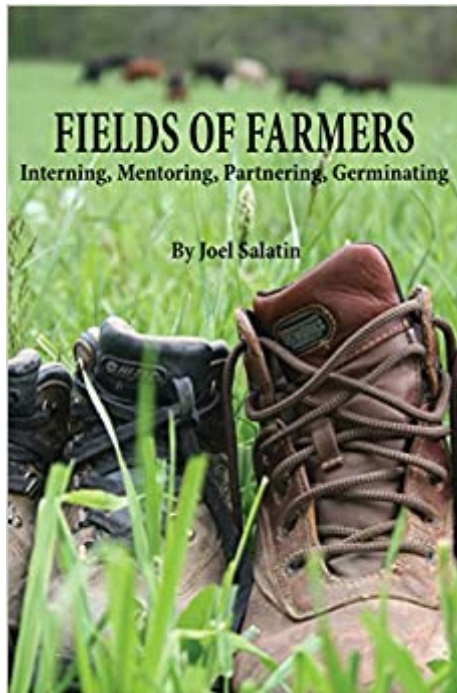




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# **Fields Of Farmers: Interning, Mentoring, Partnering, Germinating**



## Synopsis

America's average farmer is sixty years old. When young people can't get in, old people can't get out. Approaching a watershed moment, our culture desperately needs a generational transfer of millions of farm acres facing abandonment, development, or amalgamation into ever-larger holdings. Based on his decades of experience with interns and multigenerational partnerships at Polyface Farm, farmer and author Joel Salatin digs deep into the problems and solutions surrounding this land- and knowledge-transfer crisis. This book empowers aspiring young farmers, midlife farmers, and nonfarming landlords to build regenerative, profitable agricultural enterprises.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Joel Salatin and his family own and operate Polyface Farm in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. The farm produces pastured beef, pork, chicken, eggs, turkeys, rabbits, lamb and ducks, servicing roughly 6,000 families and 50 restaurants in the farm's bioregion. He has written 11 books to date and lectures around the world on land healing, local food systems.

I've been waiting to read this book for some time now and after reading it (in three days time) it ended up exceeding my high expectations. Anyone who has followed this blog or peeked at my book review section knows I'm a fan of Joel Salatin. It was his first book "You Can Farm" which was the inspiration that set me on this journey. After writing his first book, fifteen years later with numerous inspirational books in-between Joel has written another book that

equals the first one on the scales of practical inspiration. I'm certainly not saying the others aren't great books, I love them all, but this book spoke to me in a powerful way much like the first one did. I will admit different books speak to us at different times when we are in need of what they supply, but aside from that I think this book has some ground breaking ideas for the future design of the world foodscape. The complete title of the book is "Fields of Farmers: Interning, Mentoring, Partnering, Germinating" and it lives up to the title in every respect.

**What's in the Book?** The book is broken into five sections, which include 17 chapters, and 320 pages. Section one, What's the Big Deal? is more of an introduction section which covers the need for new farmers and the idea of what a healthy and productive classroom or learning environment is and should be. Section two, Especially for Mentors is as the title suggests a section written for the farmers who will be teaching the aspiring farmers ( the interns and apprentices), and it covers wages, mindset, skills, and investing in people. Section 3, Especially for Interns is written for interns and covers the cost it takes for a mentor to host an intern along with the spirit or attitude an intern should have to justify that cost among other things. Section 4, How it Works talks about the vetting and selecting of interns, how the internship program works at Joel's farm " Polyface, housing, leveraging labor, and what to do when a mentor/intern relationship isn't working. The final section Future Farming Success addresses land access, creating new farmers, food clusters or networking, and stacking or adding multiple enterprises to the farming business.

**Highlights** It's tough to choose highlights from this book, as I feel the entire thing is a highlight, but I'll try to pick a few of the ripest cherries, at least to my taste. One of the big takeaways I got was in examining the relationship between the mentor and intern and looking at value. The value the mentor gives to the intern is quite easy to see, but the value the intern exchanges for the mentor's knowledge is hard to recognize, and sometimes it's simply absent. Being someone who is looking to be an intern in the near future this section was very useful to help me gain the proper perspective and mindset when it comes to thinking about the value I can add for my future mentors. The fact is the intern costs the farmer money for at least the first two months of any internship. There are broken tools, there is time wasted in what Joel refers to as "work slippage" this is when the intern does a task incorrectly and the mentor must do it again correctly with more time spent on repeated instruction. Joel says it's not until the 3rd or 4th month that the intern is able to begin adding value to the operation. All of this is very natural of course and part of the learning process, and above all else it's critical for the intern to have a positive attitude and always be looking to learn, improve, and share positive energy, but it's crucial for the intern to be

aware of the fact that they are causing the operation to lose money and not take it for granted. Joel also makes a point that no farm should ever take on an intern in hopes of getting cheap labor, and that a farm should be fully operational and profitable before even thinking about taking on an intern. The bottom line is farms are businesses and survive and grow from profit. It's their profit that allows them to mentor the aspiring farmer by providing housing, food, time, and absorbing the damage they may cause to property or tools due to their inexperience. So the question the intern should be asking him or herself is: "How can I help this operation be more profitable?"

Here is a telling passage from the book on this topic: Interns must be as careful about watching costs and stopping slippage as the mentor. Unless and until that personal ownership occurs, the intern works along with a misplaced notion of entitlement and importance. When the interns figure out how to make their mentors money, guess what? They've just figured out how to be financially successful themselves. The past is a prologue. The attention to frugality and financial stewardship in the internship will carry over into an intern's future endeavors. The internship is an incubator for habit development. Habits are not just procedural how-to's. This is a critical point. This is really the ultimate lesson for any wannabe farmer. If one plans on running their own operation it involves much more than labor, it involves efficient labor, along with a multitude of other things that can only be learned from working with the mentor. If the intern continually keeps the profit reality in the back of their mind during the internship they will emerge from the program with a much greater chance of being able to run a successful operation of their own some day, and the mentor will have been rewarded for his efforts and be able to continue to work with new interns in the future.

Another highlight was in the last section that described what Polyface does and how it's developed over the years. The Salatin's have been hosting interns and apprentices for 20 years now and the family of farmers that's grown from those relationships is amazing. Every intern who has graduated from their intern program has found land to work. It was never the plan to grow and produce for as many customers as Polyface does today, it developed over time naturally from demand for their products and the Salatin's desire to give young farmers the opportunity to get a start in farming without all of the beginning trappings like going into debt.

I've said this more than once in other book reviews, but it's very relevant here so I'll say it again. The average farmer in America and most of the world is 60 years old. In this book Joel mentions the endless letters that come to him from older farmers asking him to send a young farmer to them to work their land in partnership. The demand is never ending and growing day by day. The reality for the young farmer is it's nearly impossible to buy farm land today with inflated land prices all over the world, and unfortunately too many people take that as a barrier

to farming and give up, or never try. The fact is you don't have to own land to be a farmer. Joel even references Greg Judy's book "No Risk Ranching" which I reviewed last month for a great example of how young farmers can access land through leases. Over the years Polyface has leased numerous farms in the surrounding area to manage. Guess who manages these farms? Polyface interns and apprentices who have graduated from the Polyface program. What an opportunity for a young farmer just getting started. They need zero capital. They don't need to worry about marketing as everything is marketed through Polyface. An agreement is made including how the young farmer can make profits and he or she is essentially given a farm to operate at zero cost. You might think that this is just a way for Polyface to expand and make more money. It couldn't be further from the truth. Not only does Polyface give the young farmer this golden opportunity to get started but they allow and encourage the farmer to farm and create their own separate enterprises "enterprises that compete with the Polyface label and surely take Polyface customers away from their customer pool. What company hires an employee, puts them in a high management position, then encourages them to start a rival company that would surely take away from their customer base? Not a company that's sole interest is profit, that's for sure. Talk about giving back in incalculable ways.

Final Thoughts

There is so much more to say about this book, but I'm trying to keep my book reviews down to a more digestible 1,000-1,500 words. The idea about Food Clusters at the end of the book which I only touched the surface on when describing the Polyface network and partnerships is I believe the future of local food as I alluded to at the beginning of this review. The future farmers of America and the rest of the world who are going to lead the way healing the land and growing the healthiest food possible will not be land owners. They will be farmers with a working knowledge of how to be productive and profitable. The beauty of this is a natural byproduct of being productive and profitable is the healing of the land. The two go hand in hand. Perhaps a few generations later these farmers will be able to take a majority stake in ownership of the land, I think that likely will be the case as economic bubbles created by poor government policy pop and deflate over the coming decades. And when that does happen there will be a legion of capable farmers who will have made a profit and accumulated savings waiting to take the land back into healing hands as owners. I look forward to being a part of the new wave that reshapes the way we think about food and farming, and anybody who wants to join me or anyone who simply wants to have a clearer picture of how the future foodscape will look I couldn't endorse reading this book anymore than I already have.[...]

You may want to consider reading some of Salatin's other books first. You will appreciate more of what he has to say. However, if you are looking to intern or hire interns or apprentices, of any vocation, this is your book. This is Salad Bar Beef or Pastured Poultry Profits of interning. I enjoy farming, agriculture, and environmentalism so this was great to curb that appetite. Very personal, and many great stories. This is a very niche book, and not what I expected, but well worth owning. I aspire to grow earth healing methods of agriculture, so I am pleased to have read this work. I hope Polyface grows to be an institute of higher learning. This brings Joel one step closer, and will add to anyone's farming curriculum.

I think Joel Salatin is inspiring. This book excited me more about health, farming, and life in general than pretty much anything I've ever read. He's very clear, he practices what he preaches, and he really conveys his own spirit and vision for the future in his writing. I came away thinking: "I can do this." Even if I never do an internship at Polyface, I feel like I've been pointed in the right direction.

great book , easy read, Joel's humor as all his books . A great read for the aging farmer trying to figure out how to keep the farm going . Im the 3rd generation on my place , none of my kids are interested in keeping the farm going. This book gave me some ideals.

For someone like me, a former management consultant for fortune 500 companies and now, owner of a software company catering to Agri-Businesses I like this book. It provides a fundamental understanding of the challenges faced by farmers in the US. There are clear examples of success and practical guides such as how to structure contracts, MOU's (memorandum of understanding), insights to profitability, how to run a farm like a business, succession planning and of course there is no lack of great wit and humor from Joel Salatin. But there is more, I found consistent mention of SOP's (Standard Operating Procedures) something that is so fundamental for any business, I would concur this is critical especially for farming operations. Running a business based on consensus planning and execution (Sales & Operations Planning) where various representatives such as Marketing, Operations, Processing & Distribution are brought together to make decisions; is something even fortune 500 companies struggle with today and they look to optimize on a periodic basis via Sales & Operations Planning Processes. This book has great insights, Mr. Salatin could probably advise a management board based on these principles. And as for making use of the energy, innovation, willing to change the world that comes with youth these concepts are also employed by large profitable companies. I think this book makes a great attempt to highlight those

opportunities, so read this with an open mind and you may find insights to drive your business like you never thought possible.

Very information. A wealth of knowledge.

Classic

Joel Salatin has an amazing ability to relay the untold realities of sustainable, organic farming.

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