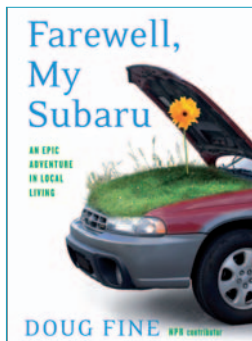


The Fine Life



FAREWELL, MY SUBARU: AN EPIC ADVENTURE IN LOCAL LIVING

by Doug Fine

Villard: 2008. 224pp. US\$24

Humour can be a great vehicle for sustainable-living messages, but a lack of substance makes for a faltering ride

It is now 30 years since the hugely popular comedy *The Good Life* ended its first four-season run on UK television. The series followed Tom and Barbara Good as they strived to break free of the rat race and become self-sufficient. Its comic conceit lay in their doing all this in the net-curtained uptightness of 1970s suburbia. They converted the small garden into a farm, tried to generate fuel from manure, and enjoyed liberal amounts of homemade peapod burgundy. Frequently voted one of the nation's favourite comedies, its simultaneous attacks on the pressed-trouser drudgery of the middle classes and the knitted muesli earnestness of the alternative-lifestyle brigade made for an enduringly popular combination.

Three decades on and with human-induced climate change a rapidly intensifying threat, such sustainable living has become a lifestyle aspiration for millions. In *Farewell, My Subaru*, journalist Doug Fine describes his own journey towards a low-impact lifestyle. But instead of the leafy English suburban backdrop of *The Good Life*, Fine must face this challenge in the blistering heat of New Mexico. The strap-line for this slim volume proclaims it as “a hilarious, adventure-filled memoir that shows it ain't easy being green — for fans of Bill Bryson”. Being one of those Bryson fans, my hopes were high.

Fine begins with the protracted ‘adventure’ of his beloved Subaru rolling into a bush on his newly bought ‘Funkybutte Ranch’. He then expounds on the trials and tribulations of giving up mall shopping and precooked chickens, the vagaries of the local climate and the joys of becoming part of the local community. True to the book's title, there is plenty of detail on his transition to a

carbon-neutral form of transport. This starts inauspiciously with the purchase of a three-quarter-ton truck to replace the Subaru — travelling just 12 miles for each gallon of fuel used, the new vehicle is hardly a great step towards sustainable living.

There then follows the drawn-out process of converting its monstrous engine to run on waste cooking oil and of obtaining sufficient supplies to keep it going. In terms of cutting Fine's greenhouse gas emissions, this conversion sounds pretty good, albeit one that ignores the embodied energy — that is, emissions associated with production — of the new truck. Of more concern is the blind assumption that burning large amounts of vegetable oil to get around is impact-free. Jolly references to the Chinese-takeaway odours emitted by the converted truck's exhaust are littered through the subsequent pages, but nowhere are the less humorous air pollution risks of increased carbon monoxide and particulate emissions addressed.

Fine has an eye for the absurd, and his acquisition of two goats, their insatiable hunger for his rose bushes, and the resulting battles between man and livestock make for the occasional *Good Life*-like giggle. Usually I would shy away from using a UK-centric example like *The Good Life* in an international review, but US readers can rest assured that Fine's book is so chock-full of Americanisms and in- references to contemporary US culture that some passages will be virtually unintelligible to anyone not living under the stars and stripes.

Overall, then, the humour falls well short of Bill Bryson standards,

and as a ‘My New Life in the Country’ book, it compares poorly to classics like Chris Stewart's *Driving Over Lemons*. This could be excused if Fine at least provided more insight into the environmental benefits of his new lifestyle. There are occasional text boxes declaring vacuous facts such as “Solar panels are mandatory on all buildings in Spain,” and the changes he makes to his lifestyle — including home-grown food, water storage, photovoltaics and solar water heating — should certainly represent a substantial reduction in his ecological footprint. But nowhere are these reductions clearly quantified, with Mark Lynas's handy *Carbon Counter* containing more factual information on one diminutive page than is present in this entire book.

Fine can certainly write, and his story is at times engaging, but the overt attempts to make it Bryson-esque too often come over as clunky and forced. Conveying the sustainable-living message has never been more important, and humour can be a great vehicle for this. Like Fine's Subaru, though, this book provides a faltering and underpowered ride.

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