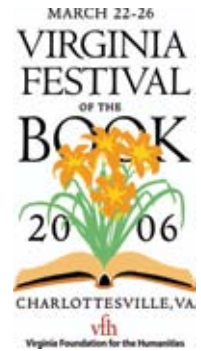


### *An American Homeplace* by Donald McCaig recommended by Geraldine Brooks

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Geraldine Brooks—author of the international best-seller *Year of Wonders* and the historical novel *March*—recommends *An American Homeplace* by Donald McCaig. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



I have lived a dozen years now in the soft folding lands at the foothills of Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains. The dirt beneath my fingernails is the heavy clay of these local soils and the view I see, even when I close my eyes, is a gentle one; farm fields yielding to a ragged scallop of woods and a misty line of hills rising up on the horizon. I know this place now, in the deep way you come to know a place when you’ve born a child there.

But that wasn’t how it was back in 1992 when I first arrived, an Australian, used to the hard sandstone ribs, the drought-tolerant bushland of Sydney and the careless, hasty bustle of city relationships. Donald McCaig’s *An American Homeplace* was my guide book and my guardian angel in those early months. It told how he and his wife, Anne, had come to Virginia from New York City two decades earlier and how they had learned to live and belong in a small rural place. The book is beautifully written, wise and humorous, and it saved me, a dozen times over, from the kind of blunders a city person can make as they try to learn the nuances of country ways.

One of my favorite chapters in a book of favorites is entitled “Making Enemies.” It tells of a vile man who, for a time, rented fields next to the McCaig place and neglected his livestock through a hard winter, then failed to pay the vet bill when the animals foundered. “We actually hated that man,” McCaig writes. He and Anne would go into the local store and curse him, and the response of the locals would be a bland, “Uh-huh.”

It was only three years later, long after the man had moved on, that people in the store began to remark on what a despicable individual he’d been. The McCaigs came to understand that “If you’re going to be living in a place all your life, you don’t make enemies you don’t need to. And if you run across someone who you know, deep down, you’re not going to like, you might take three of four years just to start disliking them. No hurry. They’re going to be an SOB all your life.”

McCaig’s eye for the human and natural world is perceptive and empathetic, his story telling gifts prodigious. For me, *An American Homeplace* is an American classic.