



## THE FARM IN THE GREEN MOUNTAINS

by Alice Herdan-Zuckmayer

Introduction by Elisa Albert

Translated from the German by  
Ida H. Washington and Carol E. Washington

\$15.95 US • \$21.95 CAN • £10.99 UK • Paperback • 256 pages

ISBN: 9781681370743 • ebook ISBN: 9781681370750

“The Zuckmayers’ courage and strength is an inspiration to all who may be set in unfamiliar surroundings, even in their own country.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

**Alice Herdan-Zuckmayer** (1901–1991) was born in Vienna, where she spent her childhood. After living for some time in Berlin as an actress, she married the writer Carl Zuckmayer in 1925. When Hitler came to power in 1933, her studies in medicine were interrupted and she and her husband had to flee Germany. They went first to Austria, then, five years later, they again had to flee for their lives, taking separate routes to a reunion in Switzerland. In 1939 they immigrated with their two daughters to America.

**Elisa Albert** is the author of the novels *After Birth* and *The Book of Dablia*; a short-story collection, *How This Night is Different*; and the editor of the anthology *Freud’s Blind Spot*. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in various publications, including *The New York Times*, *Tin House*, *The Guardian*, and on NPR.

**Ida H. Washington** taught German literature for many years and, along with her husband, Larry Washington, helped found the German-language program at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. She is the author of *Dorothy Canfield Fisher: A*

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

Alice Herdan-Zuckmayer and Carl Zuckmayer lived at the center of Weimar era Berlin. She was a former actor turned medical student, he was a playwright, and their circle of friends included Stefan Zweig, Alma Mahler, and Bertolt Brecht. But then the Nazis took over and Carl’s most recent success, a play satirizing German militarism, impressed them in all the wrong ways. The couple and their two daughters were forced to flee, first to Austria, then to Switzerland, and finally to the United States. Los Angeles didn’t suit them, neither did New York, but a chance stroll in the Vermont woods led them to Backwoods Farm and the eighteenth-century farmhouse where they would spend the next five years. In Europe, the Zuckmayers were accustomed to servants; in Vermont, they found themselves building chicken coops, refereeing fights between fractious ducks, and caring for temperamental water pipes “like babies.” But in spite of the endless work and the brutal, depressing winters, Alice found that in America she had at last discovered her “native land.” This generous, surprising, and witty memoir, a best seller in postwar Germany, has all the charm of an unlikely romantic comedy.

### FOR DISCUSSION

1. Considering the circumstances leading to the Zuckmayers’ journey to America—being, in effect, banished by the Nazi party—and the fact that they lived in Vermont during the most intense fighting of World War II, did you find it surprising that Herdan-Zuckmayer rarely ruminates on or even mentions the war, except in passing, throughout the book? Did you ever wish she expressed more of her thoughts about the war?
2. On pages 11 and 12, Herdan-Zuckmayer writes a bit about “the general fate of the emigrant” and the experiences of accomplished individuals who have had to leave successful careers behind to get to safety. She also writes a bit about the restrictions put on her family as émigrés in the Christmas chapter (p. 41). What did you make of Herdan-Zuckmayer’s account of the émigré experience? Do you ever sense dissatisfaction in Herdan-Zuckmayer’s writing regarding how they were

*Biography* and collaborated with her daughter **Carol E. Washington** on the translation of *The Farm in the Green Mountains*.

NYRB Classics are available  
from all booksellers and at  
[www.nyrb.com](http://www.nyrb.com)

treated as emigrants or does she seem content?

3. Early on after moving to the US, Herdan-Zuckmayer finds that “Americans are not dependent on any landscape, any house, any surroundings, because they are at home everywhere in their gigantic and truly borderless land, and for all the differences of the East, South, West, and Midwest, speak one and the same language” (p. 38). Do you think that this assessment of Americans rings true today? If not, how have things changed?
4. As Herdan-Zuckmayer makes clear in the first chapters dealing with starting their farm, such an endeavor takes an enormous amount of work and expertise. Seeing as the Zuckmayers’ lives had been so cosmopolitan before—complete with multiple homes and servants—did you ever find it remarkable, or even foolhardy, of the Zuckmayers to take on such an ambitious project? Do you think their naïveté helped or hindered them in their project?
5. Herdan-Zuckmayer writes a good deal about her Vermont neighbors, particularly in the chapter about their party telephone line (pp. 46-53). What was your sense of the Zuckmayers’ relationship with the Americans around them? Were these relationships purely practical or were they true friends?
6. At the end of the book, Herdan-Zuckmayer declares her and Zuck’s years on Backwoods Farm as the “hardest and happiest” of their lives. How does Herdan-Zuckmayer relate the relationship between joy and pain in farm life? What seems to be hardest for her family in this new life, and what seems to bring them the most joy?
7. In another reflection on their time in Vermont, Herdan-Zuckmayer notes that moving to America was like being “reborn”: “In America, we learned to walk, listen, touch, smell, and taste” (219). How does Herdan-Zuckmayer demonstrate this rediscovered infancy of sorts throughout the book? How does this sentiment seem to relate to the Zuckmayers’ feeling that in Vermont they had found their “native land” (p. 215).
8. It is only in the last chapter that Herdan-Zuckmayer relates the details of her and Zuck’s life together before the war and what they lost leaving Germany (p. 214). Why do you think she waits until this point to share these details?
9. The prologue, the second version of the ending (pp. 221-228), details the Zuckmayers’ attempt to return to Vermont life after going back to Europe for several years. Were you surprised that they did not stay in the US in the end? Why or why not?
10. In her introduction to the book, Elisa Albert writes about how Herdan-Zuckmayer’s account of farm life has comforted her in troubling times, making particular note of Herdan-Zuckmayer’s optimistic perspective: “A change for the better can happen, a change that won’t come from common sources, like the government, nor from indefinite sources, like historical developments, but can and will proceed from individuals” (p. x, p. ?). How do you find this sentiment reflected in aspects of Herdan-Zuckmayer’s life in Vermont?
11. Even though she does not finally settle in Vermont, what of her farming days does Herdan-Zuckmayer seem to take with her back to Europe and in what ways does she seem irrevocably changed by the experience?