

The Corresponder



Spring 2006

Fan Letter on Minnesota Writers

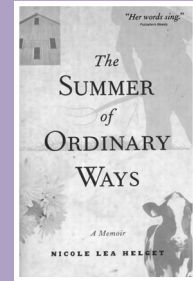
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The Summer of Ordinary Ways

By Nicole Lea Helget
Borealis Books, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$19.95

Reviewed by Roger Hart



Tolstoy wrote that "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." My wife's view is that every family is screwed up if you look close enough. I think she's right. I also think this is what fuels many memoirs. But a great memoir separates itself from the others by going beyond the expected. *The Summer of Ordinary Ways* by Nicole Lea Helget does that and more. It offers illumination and insights into our humanity and it does this with language that is poetic. Helget writes the way her father swung the bat in his heyday with the Red Sox organization, and she has clearly belted this one over the fence.

The Summer of Ordinary Ways, Helget's memoir of growing up as the oldest daughter in a family of six girls gives an insider's view of farm life in rural Minnesota: "Grandpa and Grandma Helget gave the new couple a homestead with a house and outbuildings for livestock, grain, and machinery, eighty acres of tillable land for corn and soybeans, twenty cows, a bull, and a pickup." There's the garden and the church, the baseball playing father, the beautiful mother, and the young man who picks up the milk. Sure, there are the never ending chores and the poor family cow's gruesome death and the puppies that are killed. There's alcoholism, depression, desertion, disappointments, crazy neighbors, ghosts, and babies, lots of babies. There's recipes for whiskey and dandelion wine and there's humor, great humor, whether it be glue in the mashed potatoes or cockle burrs in the socks. But there's also family: the heartbreaks and disappointments, the dreams, both those potentially realized and those that are lost.

The importance of guarding family secrets so the neighbors don't suspect what they already know is one of the central tenets of farm life in the Eighties and is probably a fact of life for many families today, whether they live on a thousand acre farm or in a big city apartment. But in describing the particular, Helget reveals all our secrets. She illuminates the way family history, whether it be bootlegging or mental illness, can follow one generation to the next. She

describes tragedy and guilt and hope without blinking. This isn't just a book about life on the farm, it's about life.

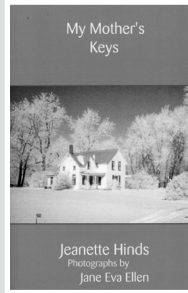
Helget not only breaks the rule of keeping secrets, she breaks rules in her writing. In both cases, we're better off for it. She shifts tense, telling the story in the present, shifting to past, and then jumping back into the present, sometimes all on one page. She even shifts point of view, presenting the memoir at times in the first person and at other times in the second. Events are not told in chronological order and one story may jump back and forth in time repeatedly. And she makes it all work beautifully. Her descriptions are fresh. Her sentences crackle with energy and insight that make the reader nod. "Cruelty is close to curiosity," she writes and two pages later, we understand. In a moving section toward the end of the book, Helget speculates on the dangers of not seeing and not questioning. "What if, instead of discovering Truth, you are told the Truth...What if you grow up believing this, and you have children? What if you teach them the same things?"

Throughout the memoir, parents, grandparents and neighbors are always giving young Nicole advice. Colie, choke up. Colie, don't say a word. Colie, don't talk dirty. Readers of her memoir will suggest one more thing. Colie, keep writing. We can't wait for your next book.

My Mother's Keys

By Jeanette Hinds
Photographs by Jane Eva Ellen
Lone Oak Press, 2002
Price (Softcover) \$7.95

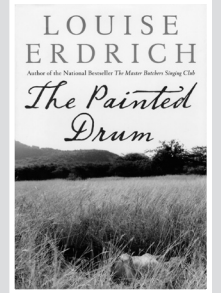
Reviewed by Natalie Stowe



The Painted Drum

By Louise Erdrich
Harper Collins, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$25.95

Reviewed by Nate LeBoutillier



Many Minnesotans remember growing up on a family farm or visiting grandparents' plowed fields and cozy kitchens. The book *My Mother's Keys* is Jeanette Hinds' tribute to her experiences both as a child living on a farm and as an adult coping with the decline and death of her mother. It received an honorable mention in the poetry category of the 12th Annual Writer's Digest International Self-Published Book Awards. Hinds tells her story in two sections of free verse poetry; photographs by Jane Eva Ellen, Hinds' daughter, complement the poems' images and settings. *My Mother's Keys* will interest people who appreciate poetry and farm life in rural Minnesota.

Hinds' attention to diction is one of the strengths of *My Mother's Keys*. Rarely does a line appear that would not hold the reader's interest if it stood by itself. Hinds arranges words to give each line weight. The book begins: "Her gabled farmhouse stands solidly." This line introduces the reader to Hinds' mother and the family farm, two central themes. Hinds' figurative language appropriately describes country life. "Each hill of corn stood separate / like green yarn tying a black quilt," she writes in "Meditation on a Plow." Other similes draw from farm imagery to create complex descriptions.

The photographs by Ellen act as visual descriptions of the family farm. When Hinds writes about an auction in "The Last Unlocking," Ellen includes a picture from the auction that is referenced. When Hinds writes about her mother's thinning hair in "Hair Pieces," Ellen provides the reader with a picture of the wigs her grandmother bought. Also included are photographs of the farm house, farm machinery, and other household items. People rarely occur in Ellen's photographs which makes them less personal than the poems, but they are still helpful to explain the exact images Hinds references.

My Mother's Keys is a mother/daughter collaboration which tells the story of Jeanette Hinds' memories and experiences on her family's farm through poetry and photographs. While the poems are personal, readers will have no difficulty following Hinds' story about the farm or sympathizing with her as her mother ages. Her writing reaches a range of readers because of its clarity, control, and precision.

Why is the author Louise Erdrich so good? Metaphor, a virtuosic use of verbs, figurative language, musicality—yes, all of these. She could write the nutritional value information on the backs of candy bar wrappers in a captivating way, could poeticize the instructional booklet to assembling your kid's bicycle if they let her. On the sentence level, Erdrich is so masterful that it's unfair, comparatively, to the other writers whose books you inevitably pick up next. So could it be that Erdrich, with her eleventh fictional novel, *The Painted Drum*, gets lazy and forsakes the importance of other important things like plot or characterization or setting, and writes a clunker? No way.

The Painted Drum is a story of lost souls and perseverance, set in New England and the Midwest. Written in three parts, the novel is tied together by Erdrich's familiar use of the art of Native American storytelling as well as a painted drum that has journeyed from an Ojibwe chief who created it to an Indian agent who bought it to an appraiser who stole it and gave it back to its rightful owners. The appraiser, Faye Travers, a woman who lives with her mother, is the narrator of part one, and the most compelling character in the story.

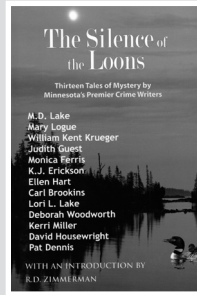
Faye's sister died in childhood in dramatic fashion, willfully stepping from an apple tree's top bough to her death to spite the girls' eccentric father. When Faye's father rushes off to the hospital with the dead sister, he tells Faye to stay put in the orchard, which she does for a while, thinking. Erdrich writes: "*Thinking saved me. Perception saved me. I saw that the spiders were just substance. No bad, not good. We were all made out of the same stuff. I saw how we spurted out of creation in different shapes. How for a time I would inhabit this shape but then I'd be the lace on my sister's shoe that had dropped off her foot into the weeds and tamped grass, or I'd be the blue pot my parents argued about, or maybe something else.*"

The second and third parts of the book are less arresting, but worth the read as the story of the drum comes full circle. The second part is narrated by an Ojibwe named Bernard Shaawano, and herein lies Erdrich's main weakness in the novel: making believable, sympathetic male characters. Bernard's voice is virtually the same as Faye's in part one and therefore less stirring. It seems Erdrich made him male (and Indian, for that matter) to fill a quota for males (and Indians). But the heart of this book is the phenomenon of the strength of female relationships, so that complaint should be kept quiet. Read this book, whoever you are, and see what it means when an expert says, "Good writing is good writing is good writing..."



*The Silence of the Loons:
Thirteen Tales of Mystery
by Minnesota's Premier
Crime Writers*

By The Minnesota Crime Wave
Nodin Press, 2005
Price (Softcover) \$17



Reviewed by Michael MacBride

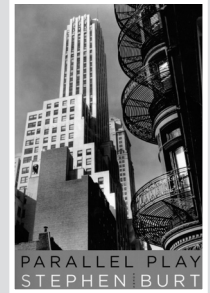
The Silence of the Loons contains 13 short crime stories by Minnesota writers, but it is not just any collection of stories. When formulating this idea, the group that calls themselves The Minnesota Crime Wave (Ellen Hart, William Kent Krueger, Carl Brookins, and Mary Logue), decided that it would not be enough to just compile crime stories, nor would it be enough to compile crime stories written by Minnesota writers. To challenge the writers, and to give these unconnected stories continuity, they devised a list of eight clues that the writers were to incorporate in their stories. These clues are listed on the last page of the collection, but before you peak, try to figure out which images pop-up in multiple stories—it is nearly as fun as trying to figure out 'whodunit.'

As one might suspect, all of the stories take place in Minnesota. Krueger's story, "Before Swine," tracks a suspicious death just out side of Plainview. His worldly, yet naive, deputy and wise Sheriff investigate what appears to be a simple crime; but in the end they find an opportunity for happiness through a new beginning. "The Gates," Guest's contribution to the collection, includes all of the eight clues and takes place in Edina. Her character, Archie Trebold, battles against his archenemy Dank Wagner—who may or may not really exist. In Hart's "Norwegian Noir," her character, Cora, ventures through several Minnesota towns: Le Sueur, Rose Hill, Minneapolis, and Burnsville. Cora finds that fame clashes with her deep-seated religious beliefs, but trouble finds her when she seeks to settle down. Brookins' mysterious thriller, "A Winter's Tale," takes place in Fertile, Minnesota during a fierce snowstorm. When the protagonist's identity is finally revealed in the second half of the story, an old grudge is resolved. "Waltz of the Loons," Woodworth's offering, takes place in Loon River and shows how law enforcement in small towns can take advantage of town gossip. When everyone knows one another, it is only a matter of time before the dirty laundry is aired-out.

The Silence of the Loons provides a short biography of each of the crime writers, which is placed right before their contribution. It is clear from the profiles of the writers that The Minnesota Crime Wave could not have compiled a more outstanding bunch of authors in a single collection. Minnesota should be proud of this Crime Wave. The genius of these stories really lies in the eight clues that will taunt readers throughout the book.

Parallel Play

By Stephen Burt
Gray Wolf Press, 2006
Price (Softcover) \$14



Reviewed by Jean Prokott

Stephen Burt's second book of poetry, *Parallel Play* examines themes of place and person—individually and as collective individuals—in four thick sections of observation. Burt's poetry examines the often small instances of poems, but also scales out and conquers intelligent, philosophical thought. Burt notices and questions. He reports. All the while he is entirely conscious. *Parallel Play* is not a book to be read through quickly—the sharp metaphors and complex references need time for resonance. Burt expects care from his reader, but that is certainly not to say that the poems aren't worth the time and investment.

Burt has strong ties to Minnesota: he teaches at Macalester College in St. Paul, his book was written with grants from the Wells Fargo Foundation of Minnesota, as well as from the Minnesota State Arts board. This book focuses on place, of association with place, and Minnesota is certainly not neglected.

Parallel Play is divided into four sections, each unnamed but beginning with a quotation that encompasses ideas, themes and inspiration for its following section. Burt tends to punch a point with lyricism and thought, but then moves on to see what quirky observation or deep thought he can tackle next. Burt inserts a clever voice throughout the poems: wise and humorous.

Burt is not afraid to use personas, to make dramatic shifts in form—entirely formal poems to some experimental forms complete with asterisks and attention to white space. In short, his poems aren't making the same moves. Burt goes from simple observation, to a whim of the narrator, to worldly observation, to political statements, to admiration. Burt asks questions.

Perhaps the strongest qualities of Stephen Burt's poems are the way they punch an image into the reader and also the way they work variations on a theme. Some of Burt's metaphors or images are entirely resonant—for example in "Morningside Park," he writes: "the sun strikes, as in bowling / And all is cleared away, although the wind / Competes." Or his observations are fresh, yet comforting. From "Steam," he writes: "the taller boy / with freckles is your past— / the ovals on the paving stones, your technical and profitable future—"

Otherwise, Burt is conscious of the line; this is apparent with his sometimes-used formal capitalization at the beginning of each line. His content, more than his music, moves the poems beginning to end. He often ends the poems with a soft image or statement. Many of the poems are separated in sections in and of themselves—variations on a theme, shifts in thought, multiple observations.

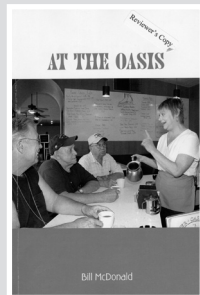
Burt does expect careful time from his reader. His poems are difficult without knowing the references, yet the images are still clear. He does include a hefty section of "Notes" at the end of the book, which helps to make some of the poems more clear and complete.

Parallel Play acknowledges self-awareness via observation and comment. Burt makes unexpected moves, and he allows place to provide for strong image.

At The Oasis

By Bill McDonald
Trafford Publishing, 2005
Price (Softcover) \$17

Reviewed by Jessica Benjamin



Bill McDonald combines contemporary poetry, friendly discourse, thoughtful meditation, and imaginative speculation in his latest book, *At The Oasis*. McDonald's previous book publications *Dakota Incarnate* (a collection of short stories), and *The Nunda Irish* (a fictionalized history of a Dakota community) both revealed his talents in fiction, but *At The Oasis* presents his skill in the nonfiction genre.

Having eighty-one years of life to reflect on, McDonald realized he has "many stories to tell." McDonald called upon his "three suns" to find the voice of his stories; Café Philo (a "wise man's group"), Oasis Café (a small town diner subject to little change), and Mankato's own MFA writer workshops. As the reader learns of these separate inspirations, their influence is evident throughout his work.

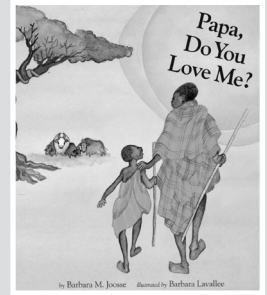
McDonald struggles to find balance between isolation and community. His desire for solitude is often interrupted with a "strong need for human companionship." In his writing he is able to combine the two, "writing...a solitary activity" and his time spent with those in his familiar community as well as those from a greater community as he reflects on his travels. Whether retelling stories heard at the Oasis Café or telling his own at a hotel bar in Ansbach, Bavaria, McDonald finds a way to show the human connection. He arranges his stories like a mosaic of thought which provokes the reader to also question the personal line between the individual and social. Where do we go to tell our stories? Who is willing to hear them?

The Oasis Café is the perfect backdrop for McDonald's musings. The regular's at the café all carry their own hefty bag of stories and feel left out of a changing world, and since nobody else seems to have the patience, they take the time to talk to each other. This discourse allows them each "to be heard and heeded." And according to McDonald, that is what keeps this country going.

McDonald's insights reach both the local and universal reader as his experiences are local and universal in nature. They represent McDonald as an individual as well as a member of our community, a position which we can all relate to.

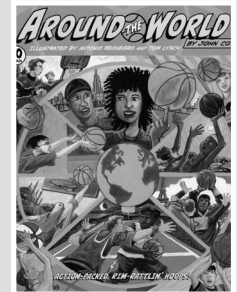
Papa, Do you Love Me?

By Barbara M. Joosse
Illustrated by
Barbara Lavallee
Chronicle Books, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$15.95



Around the World

By John Coy
Illustrated by Antonio Reonegro
and Tom Lynch
Lee & Low Books, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$17.95



Reviewed by Trisha Shaskan

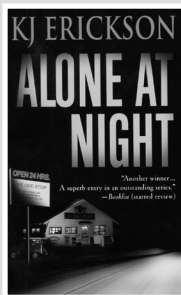
The picture book, *Papa, Do You Love Me?* written by Barbara M. Joosse and illustrated by Barbara Lavallee is not only an endearing story, but is also educational. Joosse's poetic prose combined with Barbara Lavallee's vivid watercolors combine to make a wonderful book for parents to read to their children. While Joosse resides in Wisconsin; this book was inspired by her "visits to schools in Kenya and Uganda in 1997, and the Maasai and their tenderness toward their children." The book is a series of "What if" questions that a boy asks his father. The boy asks, "What if I was afraid?" and the father answers, "I'd wrap my arms around you so you could hear my heart beat like a drum." The story not only illustrates the love of a parent for a child, but also introduces readers to the landscape and culture of the Maasai who live near wildebeests, hyenas, and lions, and drink water from calabashes. There is a glossary in the end of the book where children can explore the topic further.

Minnesota writer, John Coy, also introduces a global passion in his latest picture book, *Around the World*, illustrated by Antonio Reonegro and Tom Lynch. Coy, who has a "lifelong passion for basketball" writes about the sport with fresh and lively language while illustrators Reonegro and Lynch's comic book style layout juxtaposes with their painterly pictures to create scenes that leap off the page. The story starts in New York, where Jamal and his sister Tanika are playing a game of *Around the World*. From there, the book literally takes readers around the world where Coy describes basketball games in Perth, Australia, and Lagos, Nigeria, and several other countries in between. The games are described in play-by-play action where "shoes squeak like birds as defenders rush to cover." The story ends back in New York where Jamal and Tanika finish their game of *Around the World*, completing the circle. In addition to this, the book also includes a diagram and directions of how to play the game.

Alone at Night

By KJ Erickson
St. Martin's Press/Minotaur,
2004
Price (Softcover) \$6.99

Reviewed by Amanda Higgins



This is KJ Erickson's fourth book featuring Marshall Bahr (Mars, for short), who has just joined the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension's Cold Case Unit after years of experience being a Minneapolis homicide investigator. His first case is the 1984 disappearance of Andrea Bergstad from a rural Minnesota convenience store. The clues are few—a fuzzy security video, a call to a friend, and an anonymous tip of the store being empty—but they're enough for Mars to get a crime-finders show involved to feature the case and bring in new leads. The tips unravel more and more information until Mars finds himself and his partner, Nettie, in trouble like never before.

Erickson's writing is strong and imaginative. She starts the book with a thought not many have ever had: "A door with height charts running either side of the frame is a door you should think twice about walking through." I, for one, have never paid much attention to the inside of convenience store door frames, but I'll be sure to look next time I go to Kwik Trip. She continues: "Not that anybody does. The last thing people going into a convenience store think about is that they've just got up close and personal with the possibility of real trouble. The kind of trouble their car alarms and home-security systems aren't going to help them avoid." Erickson captures human nature right from the start, and makes us want to read on.

Mars Bahr's had been "three hours and forty-three minutes" into his first day as a sworn-in officer at the beginning of his career when there was a convenience store murder. That murder convinced him that police work was a worthy job and made him continue in his profession. Andrea Bergstad's disappearance being the first case he gets in the Cold Case Unit is poignant, unifying his two first days in different lines of investigative work, and also because he's an older man now, divorced, with a teenage son. Mars needs this case, which leads to two powerful, destructive people in the country and changes the lives of several, to "bring back the bile to his professional life."

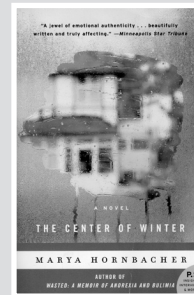
Erickson piles more and more problems and intrigue on top of her characters' shoulders as the book moves forward. The case turns out to have many layers and the evidence mounts in surprising directions. The end of the book is bittersweet—some characters' lives are made easier, and the main characters suffer in ways that are true to their line of work. The author doesn't spare her characters to spare readers' feelings or desires.

Alone at Night is exciting and fun to read. The tight writing, concise storytelling, and personable, realistic characters KJ Erickson brings to life make this an enthralling tale, a joy to read.

The Center of Winter

By Marya Hornbacher
Harper Collins, 2005
Price (Softcover) \$13.95

Reviewed by Catherine Hooper



The Center of Winter, Marya Hornbacher's fiction debut, describes a wounded family's recovery from the emotional aftermath of suicide. Hornbacher, a long-time Minnesota resident, depicts life in the rural, upper Midwest with an empathetic understanding of the characters she creates. The book portrays Arnold and Claire Schiller and their two children Kate and Esau, relating the family struggles that lead up to and result from Arnold's suicide.

Claire, Kate, and Esau tell their stories in interwoven sections delivered with distinctive voices. Claire describes her fight to nurture a precocious six-year-old daughter and a nearly-autistic son after her husband's death, a death she feels responsible for, while living in the town her husband loved and under the scrutiny of small-town suspicion. With wisdom surprising for such a young child, Kate defines the complexities of the adult world with straightforward and simple care for her mother and brother. Esau provides a poetic, original, and highly eccentric understanding of his role as sudden man of the family. Hornbacher leads her audience through the end of a marriage, the death of a troubled man, the pain of a woman suddenly alone and guilt-ridden, the struggles of a boy whose reality is unlike that of anyone else he knows, and the fortitude required of family members to support each other in the aftermath of public tragedy.

Hornbacher's language is eloquent and fluid; each character tells his or her version of events with a strong sense of personal voice. Esau's distinctive presentation is the strongest voice in the novel. He is a young man whose perceptions are different than those of the people he loves, and he is often, though not always, aware that his family does not see the world in the same way. Esau's description of his need to stay with his mother and sister and not be sent back to the state institution where he was receiving treatment when his father died, shows a mature self-awareness, a lyrical voice, and a completely individualistic worldview: "It was very, very important that I not go away. I felt like I was holding still so nothing could bump me and break me apart. It is so easy to get broken. People don't know that, but I knew." Barely a teenager, Esau possesses knowledge of human limitations that might have saved his father and he shares this knowledge with a style that is solely his own.

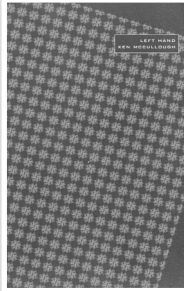
The Center of Winter comes after Hornbacher's highly successful debut *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*, further proving her talent for thoughtful grace while addressing emotionally difficult subject matter. An artist with a gypsy spirit and degrees in both philosophy and poetics, Hornbacher displays her understanding of evocative language, resonant emotion, and the strength required to

survive and thrive despite painful circumstances. *The Center of Winter* is a sensitive portrayal of a family traveling through crisis to that which lies beyond.

Left Hand

By Ken McCullough
Seismicity Editions, 2004
Price (Softcover) \$12.95

Reviewed by Brian Baumgart



What Ken McCullough manages to do with his first collection of short stories is to remove all expectations. The range of the stories in *Left Hand* is expansive, moving from a darkly comic tale of awkward criminals to a memoir-ish baseball tale to character sketches to an anecdote about the sexual exploits of Benjamin Franklin (yes, *the* Benjamin Franklin). Amidst the variety of styles and topics and lengths is one consistency: The writer obviously loves these stories and the characters that inhabit them.

This writer, McCullough, is an accomplished poet with a tendency toward Native American themes and an obsession with the natural world—leaning on a heavy spiritual bent in much of his writing. In addition to several books of poetry (*Walking Backwards* as his most recent), the award-winning poet worked with U Sam Oeur on the latter's memoir, *Crossing Three Wildernesses* (currently a 2006 Minnesota Book Award Finalist). McCullough lives in Winona, Minnesota.

The first "story" in this collection, "Buffalo Nation," retains ties to previous works of McCullough's. The connection to Native American culture stands at the forefront of this paragraph-long piece, while the author's poetic music and rhythm pulse beneath the surface in sentences that ask us to pay close attention and at the same time simply listen: "Just then, from the north, a herd of buffalo moved steadily across the sky and D and I looked at each other and roared..." But it's the movement between the stories in this collection that makes the work as a whole so dynamic. After the contemplative "Buffalo Nation," McCullough sends his readers into a world of gambling, gangsters, and getaway cars in "Heist," a tale of small-time hoods planning a robbery. Here, it's the narrator's voice that carries the story with catchy, fiery sentences—even if the voice does, at times, go a little over the top.

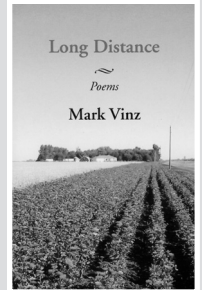
And this is the way the collection works: we're given a world and a language for that world, and then we are pulled away, given a whole new language and a whole new experience. Though some of these stories may falter in various ways, what McCullough has done here must be applauded. His grip on discovering the right style and right voice for each piece is immaculate. From the grotesque prose poem visions in "How I Got My Summer Vaccinations" to the touching intonations and unsentimental language

of "Father's Day, 1990" ("The calf's breathing is shallow, and there is milky slobber hanging from its muzzle,") this author manages to come to terms with what is at the heart of these stories. Sometimes it's to be expected (how could Ben Franklin's sex life be told without abounding humor?), but sometimes he takes us on an unpredictable trip (as in the sobering "Heirloom").

This debut work of fiction is a stellar achievement from an exceptional poet, offering an array of styles and visions not often seen in a single collection by a lone author. *Left Hand* is smart and sharp and an experience to read.

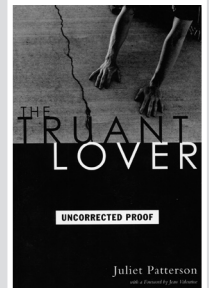
Long Distance

By Mark Vinz
MWPH Books, 2006
Price (Softcover) \$12.50



The Truant Lover

By Julie Patterson
Nightboat Books, 2006
Price (Softcover) \$14.95



Reviewed by Christina Olson

Mark Vinz is a poet to whom Minnesotans, whether they know it or not, are grateful. Here is a man with an unwavering eye for detail, and yet he remains in the region of his birth, finding his inspiration around him. While some poets may have fled the Midwest in order to find "better material," Vinz has instead turned his gaze to the rolling hills and small towns of Minnesota.

"From time to time, there comes a need to / drive the backroads, past meandering streams / we didn't expect, the tiny graveyards / and falling-down shed, the lone trees / plowed around so carefully. / In a place this flat and endless, / each small variation seizes the eye." ("Red River Valley") Vinz, here and throughout *Long Distance*, relishes such small variations: a small town caf, lilacs in bloom, the treadle-run sewing machine in his grandmother's house, sepia-toned strangers captured forever in old photographs. Each poem, none longer than a page, examines things at a minute level. We so often disregard little things, but Vinz fixes his gaze upon them and gives them a treatment they deserve.

Although most of *Long Distance's* four parts are devoted to the local (the book is sectioned into "Backroads," "Life & Times," "Tour Guide," and "Mementos"), the third section

finds Vinz abroad in Europe. In this series, each poem is dedicated to a specific country or region. And although Vinz has temporarily left the Midwest, he has brought to Europe his quiet, observing eye. In Amsterdam he is drawn to the tall canal houses "lined up / to show off their finest clothes" and is left holding his breath. In Vinz's poems the mundane, the familiar backgrounds—vineyards in France, monuments to the war dead—become the object of entire poems, and the reader delights alongside Vinz in the quiet discovery of remarkable beauty in unremarkable places.

Where Vinz's greatest asset is his unwavering observations, Julie Patterson, recent recipient of the 2004 Nightboat Poetry Prize, is at her best when using language. In marked contrast to Vinz's poems, Patterson's are sparse, use white space frequently, and bleed from page to page. *The Truant Lover* is pastoral, hungry, and bare—and yet the reader finds himself/herself transfixed.

Patterson is skilled at providing just enough detail; these are poems for readers who delight in accompanying the poet in discovery. "Three fish lie on a plate / in front of an open window / on the balcony / through which we can see..." ("Balcony with Fish") We see, along with Patterson, the fish, and what lies beyond them. These are poems that move carefully, unhurriedly, and stop frequently to examine. Many focus on the body, and its dark cousin, the heart; the poems serve to unravel the mysteries of each: "She experiences flesh precisely. / Not suffering from any kind of hysterical / numbness, but obstinately / confronts the physical..." The poem is "Homage to Francesca Woodman" but may as well describe Patterson's inward gaze.

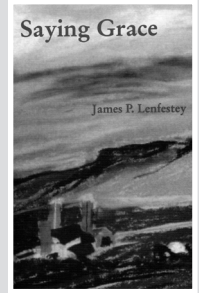
Often contemporary poets hasten to explain everything, long for the reader to *get it*. Patterson is concerned with meaning and understanding, but allows the reader to understand at their own pace, often after several rereadings. When a reader dedicates the proper time, they are rewarded with the delicate precision of Patterson's eye. She asks us, in "American Reverie:" "Do you know what you've seen? / Do you know what to do?" A careful reader will be able to always answer yes, yes, yes.



Saying Grace

By James P. Lenfestey
Marsh River Editions, 2004
Price (Softcover) \$10

Reviewed by Jenny Cropp



James P. Lenfestey's chapbook, *Saying Grace*, criss-crosses the landscapes of Minnesota and Wisconsin, often with poems set on highways. What the average traveler may only glimpse in passing, Lenfestey takes the time to really see. However, this kind of vision is wrought with its own troubles, and he seems unafraid to express this conflict.

Lenfestey seems to know a lot about traveling back and forth across the region. Living in both Minnesota and Michigan, Lenfestey is a poet and writer who has worked as a college literature instructor, a playwright, and an editorial writer for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. He has published eleven chapbooks and a collection of personal essays.

In *Saying Grace*, Lenfestey's poetic highways are lined by the burgeoning wildflowers, "yellow sunbursts" and "a hundred luscious lavenders" (from "Roadside Flowers"), and the "(b)loated white belly" of a dead deer (from "Dead Deer with Flies"). He does not hesitate to acknowledge this duality of nature, and his poems trace a gentle, rolling path through moments of beauty, shame, mourning, and bliss.

One of Lenfestey's strengths is his ability to take the ordinary image, the thing we think we've seen so many times, and complicate it. In "My Wife Sleeping Beside Me," the wife is asleep in a moving car, her "foot on the dashboard, / a last defense against troubles." This sleeping wife is on guard against "the old and painful traps." In the title poem, "Saying Grace," the speaker is once again out on a highway, this time looking at the devastation caused by building the highway through local farmland. In a direct address to the farmers, the speaker says that the fields are "so rich and gold / they burn our eyes the way a true king's crown / compels heads down in rank obeisance."

Despite all of this complication, many of the poems are relatively short, and the collection as a whole does not seem to build a sufficient momentum of its own until it's almost over. It would be interesting to see where those highways would go if Lenfestey had the space of a full-size collection in which to travel.

What's most interesting in this collection is the conflict that arises from wanting to see what others generally ignore. In "The Day I Was Shamed by Two Amish" the speaker witnesses an "eternal moment" between two people who live in a "shared world / they do not feel the need / to fully own or understand." The scene provides a strong juxtaposition for the solitary vision of a poet who perhaps has sacrificed being in the world for understanding it. This sort of complexity and conflict is what Lenfestey seems to be on the verge of exploring just as the chapbook ends.

Catch and Release

By Karla Huston
Marsh River Editions, 2005
Price (Softcover) \$10

Reviewed by Britt Steiger



In the first poem of Karla Huston's reminiscent book, *Catch and Release*, an adolescent girl wades in Lake Neshonoc while watching her father enjoy a hot August evening lakeside with her brother and mother. The speaker of the poem reflects on the happiness and love that surrounded her family:

"[...]Falling asleep later, / the lake came back,
the water still / hugging my skin, my father's
face grinning / mischief, those waves rocking
me to sleep."

Huston recently earned an MA in English/Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, was winner of the *Main Street Rag* chapbook contest, and received residencies from the Ragdale Foundation in 1998 and 2002. Huston is the author of four chapbooks including *Flight Patterns* (Main Street Rag Press, 2003), and *Virgins on the Rocks* (Parallel Press, 2004).

Catch and Release's celebration of childhood blunders describes first kisses, movie star crushes, and playing with dolls in the basement with a close girlfriend. Huston's book includes coming of age poems of the embarrassment of losing a swimsuit top in the water with friends, or realization of mortality upon finding a dead bird in the back yard. Huston also reflects on the generational differences between herself and her daughter, from the comprehension of war to the speaker's understanding of self-image in the poem "How I Went from Cooler Than Ratshit to Lame and Really Annoying."

The revelation that comes from reflection is the groundwork for *Catch and Release*. The voice in Huston's book is consistent throughout, creating revelation through verse of looking back on adolescent experiences, learning what is to gain and what is lost in growing older.

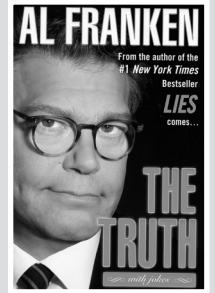
Huston succeeds in varying form and subject matter in her book of poetry. She is able to bring universality to the speaker's particular experiences and passions to the page. This is a great collection, and we can be thankful that Huston put into words the emotions we've wanted to say but never knew how.



The Truth (with jokes)

By Al Franken
Dutton, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$25.95

Reviewed by Colleen Godfrey



Al Franken, author of this satiric political narrative, self-identifies as "America's finest prose stylists." As such, *The Truth (with jokes)* should appeal to everyone: liberals, intellectuals, and anyone "thumbs-up" for homosexuals. I couldn't agree more. Even former Bush voters ought to snare a copy of this 336-pager, have a laugh at themselves and set partisan bitterness aside for the betterment of American "children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. (Generations beyond that will have to fend for themselves.)"

Alas, Al is a man who understands the limits of his own power (and the shelf-life of a good joke). On gay marriage, Al writes: "George W. Bush wants to amend our Constitution to make it illegal for gays to marry. But evidently, he has no problem with terrorists getting married. America can't afford a president who is soft on terrorist marriage. Because unlike gays, terrorists can breed."

In State of the Union-style, Franken writes: "I present THE TRUTH not just to shock you, not just to make you laugh and cry alternately, or maybe even at the same time, not just to set the record straight—but to rouse you, to prepare you for battles ahead. The only vaccine powerful enough to inoculate you from lies is the truth. This book is both sword and shield. With jokes." Speaking of truth, I think a copy of the book should be distributed to al Qaeda. Bin Laden could probably use a laugh. And Al is sensitive to Bin Laden's predicament: "Here he had gone to all this trouble to murder thousands of Americans, and Saddam-Saddam, the infidel!—was getting all the credit! Who was the head of al Qaeda?! Who was funding al Qaeda?! Somewhere along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border there was a very angry terrorist mastermind." I haven't been to Harvard, but I get where Franken is coming from. If Bin Laden can't be "smoked out" by George WWW maybe Al can laugh him out.

Among the strengths of the book are its footnotes. For example, on the bottom of page 28 Franken notes: "After my last book, some ...younger and/or less bright readers complained that they couldn't tell when I was joking and when I was merely reporting true things in a comedic manner. The quote from Cheney...while cartoonishly inflammatory, is real. The quote about terrorists attacking swing states is, to my knowledge, just something I made up."

Hyperbole abounds, but Franken sites sources and works the math as only he can. On social security he reports: "The number Bush kept using, \$11 trillion, represented the total shortfall from now until the year Infinity. If you think about it, \$11 trillion over infinity years is nothing. Over the first 11 trillion years, that's just one dollar a year. Easy. After that, it's

over. You're done. What, exactly, is the problem?"

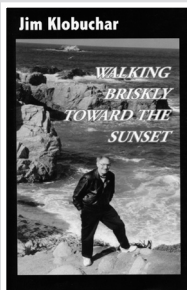
Be it the social security "crisis", the Baghdad debacle, or the word of God, Al Franken testifies to its ridiculousness and its truth. Do I recommend this book? In a word of Al Franken's, duh.

Al Franken graduated high school in Minneapolis, MN (1969), and earned a BA in Political Science from Harvard University. He performed with the *Brave New Workshop*, a Minneapolis-based satirical theater company, and was a regular on *Saturday Night Live*. The author of several self-glorifying books including *I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart Enough, and Doggone It, People Like Me!*, he now hosts a daily political talk show, cleverly titled *The Al Franken Show*, on Air America Radio. Al lives with his wife and two kids in Minneapolis and New York.

Walking Briskly Toward the Sunset

By Jim Klobuchar
Nodin Press, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$18.95

Reviewed by Darren Wieland



Jim Klobuchar's collection of articles, *Walking Briskly Toward the Sunset*, contains musings from the past ten years (though most were published in the last four) on a variety of subjects including Ginger Rogers, aging, dating, political campaigns, travel abroad, and the ever-changing landscape of American culture. Varying from droll observations on culture to heartfelt pieces of personal narrative, Klobuchar's style is imminently accessible and always engaging.

Most of the articles collected here come from his days as a columnist for the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the latter his working home for many years. It is not surprising then, that several of these articles have a local Minnesota flavor. However, Klobuchar also indulges us with his passion for travel, and as such gives this collection a much broader perspective than one may expect.

Walking Briskly Toward the Sunset is divided into six sections based on theme. The first, "Days We Engrave" demonstrates the author's command for personal narrative, covering a variety of subjects from Ginger Rogers and Bob Hope to Klobuchar's own struggle with alcoholism. Section two, "Up Close and Personal" deals with age, the third and fourth, "The Odd Elixirs of Up North" and "Africa Spins the Mind" are engaging travelogues and contain the best writing in the collection. In the last sections, "Life in Today's Arena: Helmets and Stock Options" and "The World Begins a New Millennium and the Road to Sanity Narrows," the articles verge on being a series of polemics, especially the latter. Despite this, Klobuchar's prose maintains its

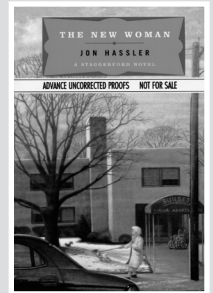
distinct, affecting voice that draws readers into the narratives, no matter the subject.

At the root of these stories is a very humane tone that imbues an undeniable honesty and authenticity to the collective voice of the book. *Walking Briskly Toward the Sunset* is an imminently readable and enjoyable collection marked by Klobuchar's astute eye for detail and vast breadth of worldly experience. Readers seeking a complex discussion of American policy and culture will not find such here, but the great humanity with which Klobuchar writes, his engaging voice and absolute honesty, lend to this collection a unique yet accessible tone. The warmth and humor of the stories here will please a great many readers.

The New Woman

By Jon Hassler
Viking, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$23.95

Reviewed by Jason Benesh



The New Woman is Jon Hassler's twelfth novel set in tiny, remote Staggerford, Minnesota, and the second starring Agatha McGee, a retired school teacher. In this story, Hassler captures the insularity of small-town life and uses it to his advantage, presenting a series of events that couldn't happen anywhere else. He populates the story with likeable, quirky characters and manages to reveal the humanity in each, no matter how minor.

Hassler has written an interesting "coming of age" novel in *The New Woman*. His protagonist, Agatha McGee, finds difficulty adjusting to the emerging circumstances of her life in small-town Minnesota. Along the way, Agatha copes with moving from her home, the deaths of friends, and an increased exposure to society's seedier elements. These complications are all standard fare for this sort of story, but the protagonist is not. At the time Agatha begins to make her place among all of these changes, she is eighty-seven years old.

A resident of Staggerford all her life, Agatha becomes "the new woman" when she moves into Sunset Senior Apartments and encounters a collection of oddball residents, some her life-long friends, and others she's never met. Crude John Beezer, persnickety Thaddeus Druppers, and fat busybody Edna Brink are more than just furniture in Agatha's life—they provide the material for Agatha's transformation. As amusing as they are on their own, it's through Agatha's interactions with them that they gain depth.

Though this is a small town—everyone seems to know everyone else, by reputation or relations, if not personally—minor menace rears its lazy head. Some mild intrigue results from a missing brooch, and more complications arise from a kidnapping. These developments aside, the plot of *The New*

Woman is driven by family conflicts, and the story becomes a study of small-town people and their interactions and relationships.

This story has depth and addresses serious matters, albeit in a lighthearted way. Hassler manages to ruminate on social issues, death, and human failing (both physical and spiritual) without resorting to sentimentality, relying on an ironic view of a remarkably naive protagonist. Agatha comes across as a sheltered woman whose new perspectives seem genuine and honestly earned.

The New Woman isn't likely to keep readers on the edges of their seats, but it is a satisfying, comfortable read, and may even demand the identification of a different sort of tale: the "coming of old age" story. Fans of Hassler's Staggerford series are sure to be satisfied, and those unfamiliar with the town and its residents shouldn't be disoriented. Hassler has provided himself with a long history to draw from, but he doesn't use it as a crutch. This story stands on its own.

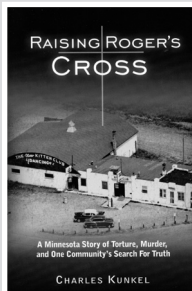
Raising Roger's Cross

By Charles Kunkel

AuthorHouse, 2005

Price (Softcover) \$18.95

Reviewed by Bronson Lemer



Acknowledging the ever-present role of rumors and cover ups in society, author Charles Kunkel attempts to unearth the real story of a 17-year-old Foley, Minnesota teen's brutal death in his book *Raising Roger's Cross*. The book tacks together over 150 interviews to "explore how a real story of suffering creates a community of suffering" after Roger Vaillancourt died Oct. 6, 1957.

Kunkel is quick to acknowledge the complexity of the issue, stating that the information about Vaillancourt's death is clouded in secrecy and rumors. He states: "it was still not clear if this information was truth or unfounded rumor" through the book, giving the reader a glimpse into the inner workings of the rumor mill in small-town Minnesota. The result is a compilation of theories, stories, hearsay and speculation about Vaillancourt's death floating around "bars, bazaars, and backyard parties" in Foley for nearly 50 years.

Kunkel is a Crosier, a member of the Canons Regular of the Order of the Holy Cross, one of the Catholic Church's oldest orders of religious men. The group emphasizes the glorification of the cross and has religious communities in Phoenix, Arizona, and Onamia, Minnesota, where Kunkel resides. *Raising Roger's Cross* is Kunkel's first book.

According to newspaper reports, Roger Vaillancourt, a 17-year-old senior at Foley High School, died Oct. 6, 1957, as the result of a hit and run accident on Highway 169 near Princeton, Minnesota. Vaillancourt had been drinking

with friends at The Kitten Club, a popular dance club near Princeton. *Raising Roger's Cross* attempts to piece together the real events behind Vaillancourt's death. One common theory that Kunkel uncovers through research and interviews is that Vaillancourt was taken into the cornfield surrounding The Kitten Club where he was beaten, castrated, humiliated, and murdered by nine youths from Foley.

The vastness of this task provides a unique look at how a community is affected by such events, and how time can quickly turn facts into rumors. Kunkel takes his time to piece together the information of Vaillancourt's life, murder and the effect the death had on the community. He also provides speculation into the motives behind Vaillancourt's death and reasons why the truth behind the incident was covered up.

The most astonishing effect of Kunkel's research is his ability to present how people were affected by Vaillancourt's death—48 years after the event. One community member said, "Like most other teenagers, before the death of Roger, I was mostly self-absorbed, concerned about myself and my own future, and all of that self-centered stuff. After the death of Roger, my life focus changed." Another Foley resident express concern that the people involved with Vaillancourt's death never stepped forward: "How can they live with their conscience? Don't they want to deal with this before they die?" His research also leads to a Minneapolis television station committed to investigating Vaillancourt's death; the family of Vaillancourt requesting that the coroner exhume the body and perform an autopsy; and the Mille Lacs County Sheriff's Department deciding to prepare an official investigation into Vaillancourt's death. Kunkel's blog (www.rogerscross.com) details the investigations and addresses comments from people interested in Vaillancourt's death.

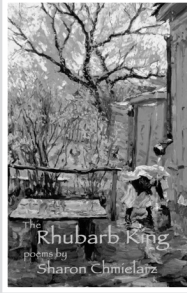
In the end, Kunkel concludes that the group involved with Vaillancourt's death created a myth about what really happened to Vaillancourt. In doing so, the group created a "mixture of fragments of truth and invented details" to create a new story. His conclusion accurately sums up *Raising Roger's Cross*, a book detailing the myth created from one brutal event.



The Rhubarb King

By Sharon Chmielarz
Loonfeather Press, 2006
Price (Softcover) \$11.95

Reviewed by Kristyn Blessing



Sharon Chmielarz is a two-time winner of the Minnesota Voices Contest. This Minneapolis resident has previously published four books of poetry. The poems in her new book, *The Rhubarb King*, center around memories, family, and family history. The main figure in many of these poems is *The Rhubarb King* himself, her father.

Through the book the reader is led on journey in memory, divided into three sections: "The King," "In a Russian Garden," and "Rooms" (each section title is also the title of a poem within the section). The first section begins with the King in court ("The Rhubarb King") and ends with him "undefeated in his kingdom, which I can find / listed only in my records" ("In His Car"). The poems in this section largely deal with memories of the poet's personal experiences with her father. The second section is a collection of poems that detail elements of the poet's cultural heritage. The final section begins slightly scattered but settles into a theme of finalities: the things that are lost, the things that remain. "How light, how brief this kingdom. / How large the hand that loved him" ("Bread, 1908").

Chmielarz blends personal memory with family memory; she merges memory with history, giving us detailed glimpses into the life that was, and lives that probably were. Through her descriptions of the family she knew and the family that came before, she grants us an illustration of "Bessarabia in North Dakota:" "And what are the other colors of the lost? / Half moons and grape vines and morning glory clusters, / bachelor buttons escaped from gardens, diamonds / on housetiles in old woman yellows, lavender, and blues." Her gaze sweeps again and again through her past, illuminating both positive and negative aspects. In the poem "Hands" she writes: "When we visit, we keep them in boxes, / avoiding accidental touch, but look: / Yours. Mine. Worlds. Within reach."

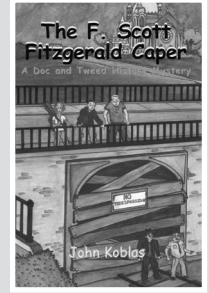
A book of poems that returns again and again to the same themes may run the risk of becoming monotonous. However, Chmielarz has avoided this; each poem is a new approach, and this makes *The Rhubarb King* a successful collection. Each poem reveals, little by little, different aspects of memory and history. Through these slow revelations we are drawn into the work of the poet.



The F. Scott Fitzgerald Caper: A Doc and Tweed History Mystery

By John Koblas
North Star Press of St. Cloud,
2005
Price (Softcover) \$12.95

Reviewed by Elysaar Khoury



Tweed Salter is a boy from Mendota with a head for history. An avid fan of Minnesota's past, he will play tour guide for anyone willing to listen. Tweed's best friend is George "Doc" Diezel, a would-be tough guy from Wood Dale, Illinois. Doc lacks some of his friend's smarts, but makes up for it with strength and courage. What this odd pair has in common is a love of mysteries and a knack for attracting trouble. The two fourteen year-old sleuths have already solved crimes and helped the police in two previous adventures, *Peril at Pig's-Eye Cave* and *The Return of Jesse James*, when trouble comes calling again in this third book in the series.

The F. Scott Fitzgerald Caper begins with a symposium on the author held in St. Paul. On display will be numerous priceless items, including a first edition copy of *The Great Gatsby* signed by Fitzgerald himself. Before the exhibit can officially open, Doc and Tweed witness the theft of the signed *Gatsby*. Before long, other Fitzgerald memorabilia in the area begins to go missing. Doc and Tweed must brave the perils of shadowy basements, abandoned warehouses, gangsters, and even time travel to uncover the truth behind these cultural crimes.

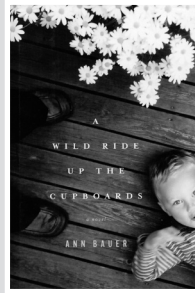
The Doc and Tweed books set out to educate young people about Minnesota and its history by weaving extensive descriptions of local landmarks and historical background into the format of a traditional mystery. Koblas is overenthusiastic at points: characters with more than two lines are often given a monologue—sometimes at an inappropriate juncture in the plot—that reads like an entry from *Children's Britannica*. It strains credibility, for example, that a man from 1910, confronted by the appearance of a child from 2005, would immediately react by offering an explanation of the workings of his steam-driven automobile. The book could also have benefited from the attentions of a careful proofreader; the frequency of typographical and grammatical errors may hurt its chances with librarians and teachers.

These shortcomings aside, though, the charm of reading an adventure story set in familiar locales should appeal to young Minnesotan readers or young visitors to the state, and parents may be pleased to introduce local history to their children in the form of leisure reading. Seven more of Koblas's "History Mysteries" are slated for release. Among those is one that should have particular appeal for a southern Minnesota audience: *Mischief in Mankato*.

A Wild Ride Up the Cupboards

By Ann Bauer
Scribner, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$24

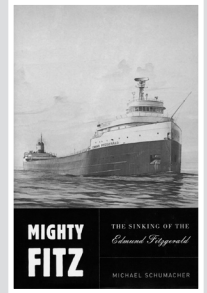
Reviewed by
Teresa Kay Albertson



Mighty Fitz

By Michael Schumacher
Bloomsbury, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$ 24.95

Reviewed by Sara Hein



While reading *A Wild Ride Up the Cupboards*, the reader is constantly checking and double-checking whether this is memoir or fiction. Although the book is marketed as a novel, the tone is so realistic we are left wondering.

A Wild Ride, by Ann Bauer, is a fictional tale about a woman, Rachel, and her family. She marries a dynamic man, Jack. The two eventually have a child, Edward, a bright and blue-eyed angel. They go on to have two more children. Before Edward reaches his fourth birthday, he abruptly begins to withdraw from the world. Rachel embarks on a nightmare ride in her attempts to find a diagnosis and treatment for Edward. Although she receives plenty of medical input, she never locates a final diagnosis and related treatment.

Bauer skillfully weaves through Rachel's story, a fictional related story about Rachel's Uncle Mickey who, like Edward, had a history of confusing behavior. The title is taken from Mickey's experience as his older brother picks him up off the floor quickly. Mickey watches his surroundings fly by and says he feels like he is taking a wild ride up the cupboards.

Rachel's story becomes more terrifying as Edward's withdrawal brings him to chewing his clothes, repeatedly waving his hands before his eyes and going days without sleep. After twelve days without sleep, Rachel takes Edward to a sleep clinic where the child finally falls asleep. However, monitors indicate even at rest Edward's brain is most active than other people when awake.

Perhaps the most difficult point in the book is where Rachel describes Edward's miraculous recovery after a tonsillectomy. The boy came out of the anesthesia with bright eyes, ruddy cheeks, and speaking in complete sentences. His gray complexion, hooded eyes and withdrawn behavior had evaporated. For the next twelve days after the surgery, Edward took a codeine prescription that allowed him to sleep regularly and peacefully. During these 12 days he was alert and communicative. But when his prescription ran out, he began a slow and terrifying regression away from Rachel and everything else in his life. Although Rachel begged for codeine prescriptions where she could, physicians would not, or could not, assist her.

A Wild Ride is Bauer's first book. She is an accomplished wordsmith and senior editor at *Minnesota Monthly Magazine*. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *salon.com*. She lives in Minneapolis with her three children.

Think of a historical work—Patrick O'Brien's *Master and Commander*, for example. The attention to detail to make sure the ship, the costuming, and the peril from nature's elements are true to the period. Patrick O'Brien, however, is creating a fictional story. In *Mighty Fitz*, Michael Schumacher recreates the 1975 tragedy in Great Lakes naval history: the mysterious sinking of the ore carrier, the S.S. *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

Writing nonfiction is nothing new to Schumacher—he has written biographies of visionaries like Allen Ginsberg and Francis Ford Coppola, and scripts for twenty-five documentaries about Great Lakes shipwrecks. In *Mighty Fitz*, Schumacher presents a documentary about the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* in book form.

Mighty Fitz takes readers back to several historical periods: when the Native Americans marveled at the storms on the Great Lakes, when the *Edmund Fitzgerald* was built in the 1950s, and when so many other ships broke, crashed, sank in a Great Lake storm. Because of the *Fitz*'s praised fortitude, its demise shocked naval and civilian folk the world over. The ship became a legend in the media and in naval history: "The November 9-10, 1975, tempest on Lake Superior eventually earned its own title: the *Edmund Fitzgerald* storm." Schumacher also writes in painstaking detail of the investigation by the Coast Guard and Marine Board—and how their report ended up being "maddeningly inconclusive" as to why the ship sank. He depicts the pain the families' of the crew felt when divers continued their trips to the wreckage over the next two decades, to take both pictures and artifacts with them. Finally, in 1999, a legal action was agreed upon by families and government alike to have the wreckage "formally consecrated as a gravesite" because no corpses could be recovered from the vessel.

This is where Schumacher's greatest talent lies—in detail. He gives readers any communications from the *Edmund Fitzgerald* on its final voyage, and interviews from the crew of the *Anderson*, the last ship to see the *Fitz* above water. The document provides as much dialogue as possible from anyone related to the wreck, Sailors' stories, Native American myths, and other tales add their own layer of mystery to the *Fitz*'s lost crew: "Lake Superior never gives up its dead."

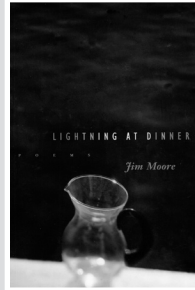
Such attention to detail, though, makes the book a very technical read. While this is fine for a documentary, *Mighty Fitz* may be more difficult to handle if one is seeking a story-driven book. However, if one wants to read of real danger on the water, the tension of facing the elements, the duty

to understanding truth, then Schumacher's work is perfect. Like Patrick O'Brien, who both teaches and entertains with his *Master and Commander* series, Michael Schumacher immerses readers with historical information to recreate the period, the people, and the legacy of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

Lightning at Dinner

By Jim Moore
Graywolf Press, 2005
Price (Softcover) \$14

Reviewed by Brian Baumgart



It's as if Jim Moore is praying. And if we allow it, we will pray with him. But the prayers in Jim Moore's newest collection of poetry, *Lightning at Dinner*, are neither the prayers of the religious zealot nor the prayers of the obedient church-goer. Instead, Moore's poems evoke intimate ties to the rest of humanity, connections to the experience of living and the entire gamut of real and true emotions we both suffer and adore. Moore does not so much examine or explore the topics of his poems—he embraces them through flowing and natural language.

Both an award-winning poet and a teacher, Moore splits his time between Saint Paul, Minnesota (where he teaches at Hamline University); Colorado Springs, Colorado (teaching at The Colorado College); and Spoleto, Italy (the apparent inspiration for many of the poems in *Lightning at Dinner*). He has authored five previous poetry collections.

Weaving throughout Moore's poems is love, in multiple guises but there in the words and the tone. And in that love dwells an acceptance of the emotion and a fear of it. In "Pompeii," the love arrives in the form of familial love, the love between a boy and his mother: "The son gives his mother the lily, / then runs away, as if / afraid he will be caught / loving someone that much." In fact, it is this fear of love in its many forms that Moore returns to time and time again, even quite directly in "It Is Not the Fact That I Will Die That I Mind" when his title leads into: "but that no one will love as I did / the oak tree out my boyhood window, / the mother who set herself / so stubbornly against life..." Moore understands the brevity of life, and his poems allow readers this same revelation, such as in the simplicity of his comparison between love and language in "Learning a New Language." Here, Moore offers: "But I keep forgetting how hard it is / to speak a language so foreign / to my tongue."

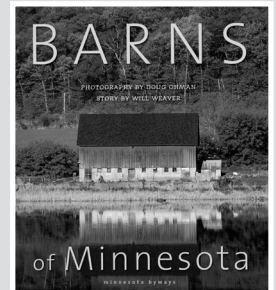
While keeping his language authentic to the way we speak, the flow of the poems is so tonally adept that it is easy to drift right along from one poem to the next, feeling the speaker's emotions and living in the world he has created. And even in the moments when Moore flirts with the sentimental through his choice of words (the flowers he

describes or the color of the sky), he rearranges himself and comments upon the choices: "Does He Dare / to use the word swallows, / ever again, in a poem?" ("Does He Dare") and "God forgive me all pettiness: / olive trees, olive trees, olive trees" ("What to Write When a Landscape Is Too Beautiful").

These poems are human and dreamlike in their revelations; they cast spells of authentic emotion, remaining as unsentimental as can be while still drawing on the eternal topics of love and loss, nature and religion.

Barns of Minnesota

Photography by
Doug Ohman
Story by Will Weaver
Minnesota Historical
Society Press, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$19.95



Reviewed by Natalie Stowe

Barns of Minnesota is a coffee table book that is unlike most coffee table books: its text draws the reader into the history of barns rather than merely describing their architecture. Award-winning author Will Weaver, professor of English at Bemidji State University, creates a fictional narrative which he describes as "the imagined life of one barn." The story of Emmet and Clara Anderson weaves between photographs taken by Dough Ohman, a Minnesota photographer who had work featured in the Smithsonian exhibit "Barn Again! Celebrating an American Icon." The combination of well-composed photographs and engaging prose make this book appealing to any reader regardless of his or her original interest in barns.

Nothing is predictable about Ohman's photographs besides their subject. While the uniqueness of each barn naturally creates distinct images, Ohman varies each image by using different perspectives. Some photographs show the barn in the context of the farm; other photographs show closer details, like a barn's cupola or writing on a wall. He also took pictures of interior of barns. Ohman's photographs allow the reader to see different examples of cultural architecture, like Dutch or Scandinavian, and compare stylistically distinct structures designed to survive in the same climate. All photographs are clearly marked, and some contain comments. "'The Pink Barn' has been pink since it was built in 1904. The current owner has painted all his outbuildings pink as well." These comments are interesting facts or commentary which would interest readers.

Weaver's text reads like ten pieces of flash fiction. Each "chapter" is relatively short and follows a progression of time. The story begins in 1999 with Emmet Anderson remembering details about his farm and then transitions back to 1924 when Emmet and his wife move to Minnesota to

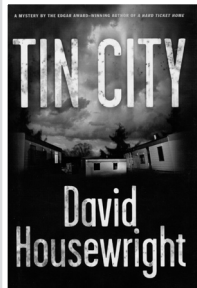
start farming. The barn plays a central role in Emmet's life and identity; at the end of the story the barn has recently fallen. Weaver's attention to detail in his story shows his professionalism as a writer. He includes details from actual Minnesota farm life. "She drives the little orange Allis-Chalmers, and Emmet the big red M Farmall that pulls the John Deere wire-tie baler," he writes in the 1955 section. By including pieces of machinery which would have been found on a rural farm, this makes his story more credible. On a technical level, his writing is error-free. The story is easy to read and adds to the mystique of barns.

Barns of Minnesota will interest a variety of readers. It accomplishes Ohman and Weaver's goal: "[We] hope that this book gives new voice to old barns. For if we all pause, look, and listen, they have stories to tell." This book encourages people, Minnesotans in particular, to discover—or rediscover—their heritage.

Tin City

By David Housewright
St. Martin's Press, 2005
Price (Hardcover) \$23.95

Reviewed by Bryan Johnson



Tin City, David Housewright's second novel starring police officer/bounty hunter turned millionaire do-gooder Rushmore McKenzie, balances clichés and innovations in the crime fiction genre, which ultimately leads to an entertaining and fast-paced read, worthy of its Minnesota Book Award nomination.

The story opens with dead bees, a catalyst fit for an *Encyclopedia Brown* mystery. McKenzie takes the case of the bumped-off bugs because the beekeeper in charge of these insects happens to be longtime family friend, Mr. Mosley. However, the investigation leads to greater consequences: murder, rape, crooked FBI agents, and a mafia power struggle that sends McKenzie on a quest for vengeance and justice. The *Tin City* of the title is a trailer park in Hilltop, Minnesota where most of the central figures of this novel come together, but the title best performs as a reference to the Twin Cities and its suburbs that act as the setting. Housewright, a Minneapolis/St. Paul native, uses his detailed knowledge to create what could be a travel guide for visitors to the area.

While the gunplay and action scenes in this book are suspenseful and the plot twists are engrossing, the real attraction of this work is McKenzie. Housewright gives this character a set of subtle and unique flaws, like McKenzie's self-consciousness and the quiet pining for his ex-wife. Also, in a feat rarely seen in this genre, the violence perpetrated by the main character carries emotional weight beyond simply vanquishing evil. After one act of violence, McKenzie

contemplates the effect of that action and what kind of person it makes him, which is a refreshing take on the ubiquitous carnage of crime fiction. The conversational tone of the book could be considered another asset to this work as it makes for an exceptionally easy read, but at times feels like pandering to a less educated audience.

Tin City does fall into some of the stereotypical trappings of crime fiction. All the women are beautiful and all the men have guns. McKenzie utilizes a never-ending stream of helpful, but eccentric crooks to piece together this mystery. The convenience of having a stable of ne'er-do-wells ready to be trotted out when their function fits the hole in the story undercuts McKenzie's ability as a detective, making him more of a networker and a constant recipient of *deus ex machina*, including the clunky finale with the mafia boss that could have been an intense stand-off, much like the ending of James Ellroy's masterwork *L.A. Confidential*, but just fizzles instead. And the last true scene of the book solves the murder that kicked off McKenzie's quest with a 'The butler did it' style revelation.

The twists and the turns keep this novel afloat and enjoyable, in the face of the lackluster resolution to the plot. Housewright, winner of the 1996 Edgar Award for Best First Mystery, has an intriguing star in Rushmore McKenzie, and, hopefully, has plenty of mysteries for him to uncover.



NEWS AND NOTES

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FALL 2006 GOOD THUNDER READING SERIES EVENTS

September 14th

ROBERT WRIGHT MINNESOTA
WRITER RESIDENCY
Alison McGhee (Fiction)
Dodie Miller (Fiction), Robert Wright Award Winner

October 5th

Samrat Upadhyay (Fiction)

November 2nd

Terrance Hayes (Poetry)
Jim Moore (Poetry)

November 30th

Melanie Rae Thon (Fiction)

