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Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

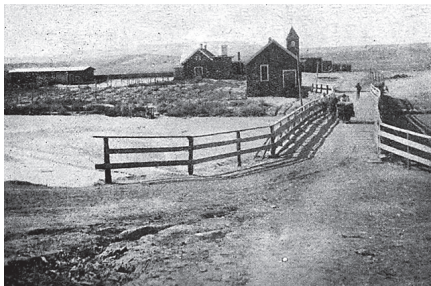
Egan, Timothy. *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis*. New York: Mariner Books, Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2013. 329 pp. ISBN 978-0-10276-7. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, emeritus professor of English, Dordt College. Published preciously in *Siouxlander*. blogspot.com.

Somewhere around the turn of the nineteenth century, Andrew Vander Wagon, who was never an officially licensed pastor but became one anyway, decided to build a bridge across the Zuni River because he was tired of being on the outside of the heart of Zuni life. The brand new Christian Reformed Church mission in the Zuni pueblo stood just on the other side of the river, which often wasn't a river, *per se*, but then again too often irritatingly was.

As long as the mission stood that far outside the pueblo (it's at the heart of things today, by the way), he was determined that his mission of missions would be crippled. Furthermore, when water actually flowed in the Zuni River, his only means of getting across was up on the shoulders of a Zuni man whose grace was abundant but, according to Andrew, unnecessary.

He told the tribe that he'd like to build that bridge, but the tribe's eyebrows narrowed. If the gods wanted a bridge over the Zuni River, they told him, there would be one. Andrew told them that was nonsense (no one knows how he phrased his response, but "nonsense" wouldn't have been, at that time at least, far from possibility with him). Vander Wagon the missionary became Vander Wagon the carpenter. He built the bridge, and it lasted almost 20 years before a bigger and stronger one was finally constructed.

Here's Brother Andrew's bridge:



Timothy Egan's wonderfully readable biography of Edward Curtis, *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher*, makes it abundantly clear that Curtis, the photographer, himself the son of a madcap missionary to Minnesota's Ojibwa, was right there at Zuni pueblo during what might well be considered Vander Wagon's reign as the Zuni mission king. I know enough about Vander Wagon (I share

some of his DNA, by the way) to know that it's impossible to think that the two would not have met — Brother Andrew cut that kind of swath, believe me.

That meeting — at least in my imagination — must have been memorable, Curtis despising Christian missionaries (his father was preacher) as much as Brother Andrew loved being one, both of them immensely larger-than-life characters, the courses of their lives determined severely by a unflagging sense of their individual callings: Brother Andrew to alter the eternal destinies of the Zunis, Curtis to hold back the tide of white culture and document a way of life that was vanishing, in part because Brother Andrew was doing exactly what he was doing.

I didn't know much about Curtis's life, but I knew his work because I used a portrait of his on the cover of a novel of mine, *Touches the Sky*.

In fact, it's quite likely that everyone has, somewhere along the line, seen a Edward Curtis portrait. He made documenting Native Americans at the turn of the century his life's mission. Absolutely nothing else mattered. His wife left him, and with good reason: he was no more her husband than was Andrew Vander Wagon. His family despised him, save his children, who generally adored him.

Basically, he did years of intimate portrait photography among the nation's Native people without pay, so he died unknown, penniless, an old and angry man.

But he'd once been a friend of luminaries, of President Teddy Roosevelt, who appointed him the official photographer for his daughter's wedding. He gained the bankroll it took for him to travel all over the west from J. P. Morgan, whose railroad empire was, as Timothy Egan deftly points out, doing as much as anything or anyone at that very moment to destroy the very cultures Curtis himself wanted to preserve with his portraits.

Neither Edward Curtis nor Andrew Vander Wagon, despite their passionate callings, was above skullduggery. Both pushed envelopes. Curtis's portraits often were sentimentally posed, even though he wanted his viewing public to see them as true-to-life candids. Many were anything but. Some of his "indian braves" were outfitted in regalia none of them wore by, say, 1915, which made Curtis little more than Buffalo Bill with an expensive camera and enough chemicals to doctor his negatives.

Vander Wagon didn't know how to color within the

lines either. He was, more than once, fired. He was as good a trader with the Zuni and the Navajo as he was a missionary. When his colleagues disagreed with him and his wild ways, he went quite offensively on the offensive. He could be a dirty rotten stinker, and I may be unduly sweet to use such cute language.

But both absolutely loved their respective callings. Both were passionate about what they did. Both were given to sacrificing everything for what they felt called to do. They were, in some ways, partners in both crime and redemption.

As Egan points out, no one appreciates the work of Edward Curtis today more than Native people because his work — whether or not it was staged or posed — does exactly what he wanted it to do: it tells a story that ended when what some Native folks I know call the “illegal immigration” of white people to North America became a flood.

Fiction can go where history can't, of course. And the mere idea of a meeting, on that bridge, between Brother Andrew and Edward Curtis, right there in Zuni pueblo, circa 1910 or so, beckons me to take a shot at the story. Curtis hated missionaries; Brother Andrew never met a man — white or Native — he didn't try to strong-arm

to the Lord. But what linked them in an ironic way was a love for the people in that pueblo.

I don't know if I'm a good enough writer to put that story on paper, but after reading Timothy Egan's fine biography of the passionate life of Edward Curtis, I know I'd have loved to be there on that bridge.



Edward Curtis, *A Zuni Governor*

Bret Lott. *Letters and Life: On Being a Writer, On Being a Christian*. Chicago: Crossway, 2013. 191 pages. ISBN 978-1-4335-3783-7. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, emeritus professor of English, Dordt College.

By the logic that permeates this book of essays on writing, Bret Lott should not have written it, nor should Crossway have published it. What most readers will discover rather quickly in it is the infrastructure of paradox — to wit, that while this book is meant to teach readers (and writers) something about the art and function of writing, Lott rather clearly insists that that job simply can't be done.

But he does it. He's written what he's written, and Crossway has published it anyway, and the book is a blessing.

For the record, just google “writing fiction” sometime and you'll discover, as I just have, about 266,000 entries, not all of which are of equal value, of course. No one on earth has time to sift through all of them to establish a best-of-show list; but it's fair to say, I'm sure, that some of the sites offer really fine advice about creating character and setting, about generating plot and playing with themes. Adjust the wording a bit, and Google tells me (or did just now) that roughly 53 million sites respond to “how to write dialogue.”

To say that advice for writers isn't rare is understatement, but then potential writers aren't at a premium either. Not long ago, some researchers determined that fully 81 percent of the American people believe they have a book in them. Even though believing that we have a story is continents away from actually writing a book, the

math still says that 200 million Americans have at least thought about putting their own stories (memoir or fiction) between covers. Thank goodness for e-books; every last library in the nation would have to remodel.

Two hundred million would-be writers may be stretching it, but with the changes technology has wrought in the business of publishing, it's altogether possible that someday every last one of us will have his or her name on the spine of a book up there on our own library shelf. Every bookseller and publisher in the nation knows the plain-and-simple facts: there are more would-be writers in North America than there are actual readers. The truth is, publishing books these days, in the traditional way, is incredibly difficult because publishing books these days, in new ways, is incredibly easy.

There's a paradox for you, a statement that would appear totally absurd if it weren't so obviously true. Bret Lott's *Letters and Life*, a book of advice for writers, is full of such paradoxes.

In one of the opening essays, Lott, whose dozen or so novels have created a presence for him in this country's most esteemed literary circles, remembers taking a writing class from James Baldwin, who was determined not to give his students what they were expecting “because he was a *writer* [emphasis Lott's] and not a trafficker in matters of technique.” If readers were expecting “ten ways to make a setting marvelous,” Lott's tip of the hat to James