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Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen (Book Review)

Sherri B. Lantinga
Dordt College

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Book Reviews

Cook, Hugh. *Heron Lake*. Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2011. 278 pages. ISBN: 9780889629400. Reviewed by Bill Elgersma, Associate Professor of English, Dordt College.

Hugh Cook's novel *Heron Lake* depicts a community in small town Ontario, Canada, through the lives of individuals whose circles touch only at the edges, ultimately leading to the central character's reconsideration of her roots in the church. Written through a frequently changing third-person-limited point of view of five central characters, *Heron Lake* reads best without too much time between readings in order to stay acquainted with the characters' places in the narrative line.

Madeline Harbottle is a local school teacher, the independent-minded single mother of two adult sons, one who is mentally incapacitated because of a near drowning at an early age and the other, more stable, older brother now absent. Divorced early, bearing the guilt of neglect in the past and the burden of her family's continuing struggles in the present, Madeline has chosen to rely on no one but herself. Multiple sclerosis, which began several years back, leaves Madeline increasingly at the mercy of a body that will not bend to her will and the threat of what may happen in her future. As she watches her rest-home-relegated father, whose dementia leaves her unrecognizable to him, she does not wallow in self-pity but goes on, on her own, bolstered by the memory of her father's once strong will. But the circles of the other lives touch hers.

Cook's narrative skill is evident as he captures the character of each of the central figures. Voice ranges from

the narration and dialogue of Madeline's son Adam, whose observations are given in simple, choppy, sentences—"He stood watching the pigeons. They have very sharp eyes. I should probably go, he finally says"—to that of the crude and vulgar character of Orrin—"Stealing cars and banging girls were both easy for him 'cause cars were a piece of cake to hotwire once you knew how and with girls all you had to know was how to talk nice to them." Through the unique voices of these essential characters, Cook enables the reader to be privy to their thinking, knowing the plot before the town does because of the intersection of the individuals involved, leaving the reader with the question of how all this will come together rather than the question of what will happen next.

The story lets the circles of these authentically depicted characters touch, some in the past and some in the present, but all with some level of influence on Madeline. For those familiar with Cook's other work and his background, we pick up on a few details of how a faith community works quietly in the life of a woman who pushed her father's church far from her but can no longer handle life on her own: a visit here, a friendship club there, ready attention during catastrophe. We accept that those are enough for her to rethink her life's journey and God's grace throughout. For those unfamiliar with such a world, her sudden realization of God's grace may seem somewhat surprising.

MacDougall, Christopher. *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009. 304 pages. ISBN: 9780307279187. Reviewed by Sherri B. Lantinga, Professor of Psychology, Dordt College.

I hate running. I would have never, ever considered reading *Born to Run* if a friend hadn't so strongly recommended it and, to be honest, if I hadn't been out of other books to read. So, with a sigh, I picked up *Born to Run*. It has a nice-enough cover: a very fit man silhouetted on a mountaintop. Unfortunately, I opened the cover, which quickly led to hiding from my children so that I could keep reading.

In *Born to Run*, MacDougall searches to relieve his running-related pain. Given that shoe companies, sports science, and the medical profession warn that running is "an inherently dangerous sport" (155), the only solution they offered was to wear ever-more-expensive, cushioned running shoes or to quit running altogether. MacDougall's search for alternatives grows into a rich re-discovery of the

human spirit and body—and the wisdom of crazy people.

MacDougall, a perceptive writer who frequently contributes to *Men's Health* and *Runner's World*, seeks running-related information from all kinds of sources. Soon he focuses not on fast runners (where the bulk of the science is directed) but on those who run well over very, very long distances. There are those who run 100-mile trail races—nearly four marathons—such as the Leadville Trail 100: "Try running the Boston Marathon two times in a row with a sock stuffed in your mouth and then hike to the top of Pike's Peak. Done? Great. Now do it all again, this time with your eyes closed" (60). The Badwater Ultramarathon through Death Valley boasts a ground temperature of 200 degrees that melts runners' shoes unless they stick to the white line painted at the road's edge. MacDougall follows

African Bushmen who use “persistence hunting” to catch fleet prey, not by speed but by running it to exhaustion. Finally, MacDougall tracks down a legendary American runner, nicknamed Caballo, living among the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico’s remote Copper Canyons. Members of this tribe regularly play running games of 60 or more miles in 100+ degree heat, powered only by chia beans (think chia pets).

None of these sources are credible by professional running standards. No self-respecting running coach would attend the Leadville race, “that giant outdoor insane asylum in the Rockies,” because ultra-marathons are viewed by *real runners* as “somewhere between competitive eating and recreational S&M” (77). Some of the Tarahumara had participated in a few Leadville races, further widening the gap between professional and crazy. MacDougall reports that at one Leadville competition, the Tarahumara team captain “looked like a Keebler elf, [. . .] a short fifty-five-year-old grandfather in a blue robe with flashy pink flowers, topped off by a happy-go-lucky grin, a pink scarf, and a wool cap” (64). Further, the Indians eschewed running shoes but “disappeared into the town dump, emerging with strips of tire rubber that they began fashioning into sandals” (64). As a research psychologist, I was initially wary of MacDougall’s non-scientific sources, but I was captivated by the characters and hints of a “stick it to the man” attitude. Rather than reading like a litany of anecdotes, MacDougall’s book skillfully frames his quest for to run without pain inside his befriendings of Caballo.

Engrossed in the personalities and anecdotes, I was slow to realize that *Born to Run* is more than a story of gifted (if quirky) endurance runners. MacDougall skillfully works at a deeper level to show us the world he has long sought, where running is joyful instead of painful. His thesis? Being human means being born to run—designed, even, to run over very long distances rather than to run fast. Further, endurance running requires being a lover of life. As a non-runner, I was skeptical; as a Christian psychologist longing for a holistic view of personhood not found in my discipline, I was willing to listen. To support his thesis, MacDougall weaves three lines of argument throughout his narrative. And, unknown to him, he reveals some of the creational norms that have been hidden under so much technology, individualism, and other cultural baggage.

First, he includes insights of those deeply involved in distance running but willing to look beyond corporate sports’ research for ways to improve. Dr. Joe Vigil, an elite coach, attended a Leadville race to learn what he could about technique and motivation: how people run a ridiculously long and difficult race that doesn’t come with fame or prizes (All participants—winners and losers—merely receive a belt buckle). The Tarahumara were competing, and Vigil was astonished by what he saw. Rather than individuals forcing themselves to take each painful,

exhausting step, the Tarahumara ran together with shared joy and laughter throughout the grueling race. Vigil, forced to re-think his ideas about endurance running, gradually concluded that human endurance may come less from technique and willpower and more from a capacity to love: “It wasn’t just how to run; it was how to *live*, the essence of who we are as a species and what we’re meant to be” (99). MacDougall gains similar insights from American ultra-runner Scott Jurek, unbeaten in endurance races until he ran against the Tarahumara. Jurek reflected that the Indians’ purpose in running and racing is “to be *with* each other, [. . .] adding power to the pack” (253). What a reformed Christian understands as our innately communal nature was good news for these professionals: we gain invaluable and immeasurable strength, encouragement, correction, and motivation through our relationships with others.

MacDougall’s second line of support for his thesis comes from recent findings in morphology, a branch of biology that studies the structures of human and animal bodies. Again, some researchers asked questions outside the academy’s current paradigms and identified several features that appear to uniquely suit humans for endurance running (e.g., ability to breathe independently of our stride). MacDougall uses these findings to argue rather convincingly that humans are designed to run, that running is not just about speed or just for a gifted few. Although he comes to his conclusions through an evolutionary argument, the scientific findings are intriguing and drive Christian readers to wonder at a Creator who attends to the smallest details in knitting us together.

Finally, MacDougall argues that Western culture, technology, and economic interests have stunted our created nature as distance runners (not that MacDougall would say “created”). Rather than being progressivist (“what’s newer is better”) or pessimistic (“the old ways were better”), *Born to Run* refreshingly allies a primitive Mexican tribe and American ultra-runners to challenge current views of running and of being human. Both groups seem crazy, but their successes belie the medical and corporate research that serves giant sportswear companies: “Traditional podiatric thinking still saw human feet as Nature’s Mistake, a work in progress that could always be improved by a little scalpel-sculpting and orthotic reshaping” (177). As the Tarahumara have long known, and as more ultra-runners are discovering, running barefoot protects one’s knees, back, and body; shoes cause injury by blunting the signals feet receive from the ground and therefore prevent the body from making needed adjustments. These primitive people may know something about our created structure that Western cultural development has distorted. These strange peoples know great joy in running together, with small steps, to reflect their humanity.

MacDougall’s writing illuminates and entertains. His playful style has a strong intellectual appeal that engages even couch-loving readers. His style evokes Michael Sims’

Adam's Naval and Mary Roach's *Stiff* in their everyday-language descriptions of the history and science of the human body; of Tim Cahill's *Road Fever*, Bill Bryson's *Walk in the Woods*, and Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions* in the self-effacing insanity and deep relationships that accompany long tests of endurance; and of anti-corporate books like Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* in its economic analysis of how technology shapes values and behavior.

After reluctantly picking up *Born to Run*, I confess to

weeping at times and cheering at others, interrupting family activities to recite some cleverly worded commentary or intriguing scientific findings. I must also admit that I may even try a little running once, under cover of night, on dewy lawns in my bare feet. And I shall look for a renewed sense of freedom, of hope for the human condition, and of inspiration to trust my feet to recover some of my humanity.

Heynen, Jim. *The Fall of Alice K*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2012. 347 pp. ISBN: 978-1-57131-089-7. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, professor of English emeritus, Dordt College.

Perhaps the most difficult question arising from Jim Heynen's new novel, *The Fall of Alice K*, is the nature of "the fall" Alice K prompts or experiences. The title suggests that the plot will nosedive into something sad or tragic, and the ingredients are here—a bright but naïve high school girl and an ambitious young man, her lover, with a slightly checkered past, an outsider. Throw in two pairs of "tribal" parents (Dutch Reformed and Hmong) who oppose whatever it is their two children "fall" into, and we've got what might be another *Romeo and Juliet*.

Not really. Nickson, the eldest son of a Hmong family who have just moved into Dutch Center (a town which is exactly that), is no Romeo, save, perhaps, in his considerate love-making. But Heynen is cautious, even foreboding, in his descriptions of Nickson, suggesting his difficult past in St. Paul—some run-ins with the law, some issues with drugs.

Alice Krayenbraak, on the other hand, is Juliet in wooden shoes. Like dozens of young Dutch-American women, she's tall and blonde, smart as a tulip, and quite regal in her bearing, even though her kingdom is her parents' hog farm just a few sad months from foreclosure. She's drop-dead gorgeous, she is blessed with angelic skin, and she falls. That's true. For Nickson, at least. Of that fall there is no question. Nickson reciprocates in actions, but Heynen never suggests that he is as deeply taken by Alice as she is by him, all of which makes us wonder not only about the genre of the novel, but also a bit about Alice's motivation—why does Alice K fall?

The Fall of Alice K is a love story, but when passions untangle, the novel begins to feel more like a coming-of-age story, in part because Heynen is far more interested in family dynamics among both the Hmong and the Dutch Calvinists than in Alice and Nickson's teenage passions. In fact, the issues in the Krayenbraak family go a long way toward explaining why Alice K, a bright and engaged student in her final high school year, falls so utterly for a guy she barely knows, a very short young man whose eyes, whether he likes it or not, are right there at the level of her breasts.

Alice's father is stoic and dour, the quintessential Dutch Calvinist farmer, a man whose love for his daughter

is expressed obliquely in the pitch he uses to remind her to do chores. But then, Farmer Krayenbraak has good reason to be so serious. He's about to lose his farm, his livelihood, his life—to become little more than an hourly employee to some local agri-business man, right there on the very ground he worked his whole life. Meanwhile, Alice's seemingly paranoid mother is hunkering down for Y2K, the end of the world somehow imminent. For much of the novel, she's downright scary. Alice's only sibling, a sister named Aldah, "the canary that went down into the deep well of her family's misery," is mentally disabled but fully capable of resourcing the love her sister needs so badly to both give and receive.

Color all of this in the ominous shades of darkness that Calvinism traditionally lays over its adherents in almost any novel (save Marilynne Robinson's), and there is likely good reason for Alice's seeking love with Nickson, in hay mow and open fields. He is almost everything her family is not. And that's a "fall"?

But it's Nickson's family who is more troubled by their relationship than her parents are, and it's his uncles who drag him back to St. Paul to protect him from what they undoubtedly believe is Alice K's siren song of seduction into American culture and away from his own kind.

Alice's "fall" would be emotionally liberating if the torrid affair rather predictably triumphed over the self-righteousness of her hopelessly Calvinist parents, a scenario most readers would expect. But love doesn't conquer all, and, oddly enough, by the end of the novel, Alice K appears to have learned something valuable about being a *dweller*, someone who lives comfortably in the world, and not just a *seeker*, one who doesn't, terms outlined in the preacher's sermon at the novel's outset and woven into the story throughout.

And there's much more to the novel. Heynen wanted to get everything he could into this book, maybe in the way Calvin got just about everything anybody knew into the *Institutes*. As a result, the novel is a love story, a coming-of-age story, and a whole lot more.

Jim Heynen is a writer with an authentic rural past, a man who remembers, as if it were yesterday, the magic of light brought to farmsteads when rural electrification