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Fall of Alice K (Book Review)

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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

came in the late '40s. Few American writers today have his agricultural pedigree; few know or remember what it's like to clean a hog house or sit in the cavernous glory of an empty haymow. Heynen knows the farm and loves it; and it may well be that the most memorable parts of the novel are Alice K's reveries in the barn and on the farm. That her parents' operation is going belly-up is not a joy to her but a horror. She loves the farm as greatly as she loves the Ford 150 she drives all over the country. Really, she is not dying to get away, and her redemption may be in her staying.

The Fall of Alice K is a farm novel, one of very, very, very few anymore, in a culture in which the number of people who work the land decreases significantly every harvest. It is clear that Heynen wanted this novel of his to be exactly that. He takes great glory in close and sometimes rhapsodic descriptions of farm life, occasionally at the expense of narrative drive.

And there's more. Some of us with Dutch blood find the novel a compendium of Dutch-Calvinist life in the rural Midwest, complete with a full recitation of the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. The novel is a GPS, an annotated map, of Heynen's homeland. The truth is, I could show you exactly where Alice K's farm stands, just off Highway 75, where he says it is. Anyone with any background in what the novelist Frederick Manfred called "Siouxland" could too (by the way, Manfred, another Dutch Calvinist novelist, is in the novel). Dutch Center is Sioux Center; Midwest Christian High School, under a slightly different name, isn't far away from the desk where I'm typing right now. Redemption College is really the place I taught literature and writing for the last 37 years.

In fact, I'm in this novel as James Schaapsma, an inclusion which perhaps should have barred me from writing this review. It's a cameo appearance I'm proud of, a quick reference to a prof who has no role in the story but teaches at Redemption College and writes short fiction. A ton of such brazen wooden-shoe reference and prototypes exists. Alice K's angelic English teacher at Midwest Christian is Miss Den Harmsel, a gracious reference to Dr. Henrietta Ten Harmsel, who was likely one of Heynen's

own teachers when he was a high school student at Midwest Christian—make that Western Christian.

Those familiar references make someone like me, a Dutch Calvinist from the neighborhood where Heynen grew up, smirk and smile at Heynen's cleverness all the way through, an aspect of the novel most readers, I'm sure, are not likely to share. And here's something else perhaps only a Dutch Calvinist would perceive: the novel's unique and even sometimes blurry vision.

What does a writer like Jim Heynen owe to his past, to his tribe, to his people? It's fair to say that he hasn't always thought the world of his world, his tribe—I could quote chapter and text. But *The Fall of Alice K* is more fully about respect than it is about love, even when respect is hard to give because love is so blessedly hard to find. Alice's mother is a strange bird, as we say out here in Siouxland, but threaded throughout the novel are references to her thoughtful character and intelligence, references that Alice hears but finds impossible to believe.

By the end, however, Alice's father's deep and unwavering stoicism, as well as her mother's paranoia, is somehow blessed, offering Alice K a place to stand, a place to dwell, in the preacher's terms. Alice's fall—her impetuous and angry, even, at times, arrogant behavior—is righted by her acceptance of what Lewis Smedes used to call her parents' "mystery," her acceptance of what she doesn't know about them.

This Dutch Calvinist likes to read the love story as a real coming-of-age story, the "fall" as a fortunate one, the novel itself as a treaty of peace between a writer and his people, because what's there at the end of the novel, quite grudgingly, is still a good, good thing—respect, which is, in a way, yet another word for love.

All the loving asides—the love of the farm, the respect he grants his people—sometimes diminish the dramatic movement of the plot; but then Heynen's new novel is a story to get lost in.

The Fall of Alice K?—Jim Heynen's new novel?—I liked it.

Then again, Dutch Calvinist that I am, I should.

Marty, Martin E. *Building Cultures of Trust*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010. 192 Pages. ISBN 9780802865465. Reviewed by Donald Roth, Instructor of Business Administration and Criminal Justice, Dordt College.

"How can I trust ____?" Many people echo the concern that modern America is a society marked by a crisis of trust. How can we trust a government so slow to respond to the needs of victims of Hurricane Katrina, an economy rocked by the collapse of a credit default swap scheme, churches plagued by abuse scandal. The list goes on, and it is these sorts of questions that led Martin Marty, professor emeritus from the University of Chicago and renowned religious history scholar, to write this book.

The remedy, as Dr. Marty puts it, is building "cultures of trust" at every level of social experience, from the home to the statehouse, and it was this proposed remedy that drew me to the book. However, expecting a "how to" guide, I was disappointed to find more of a prolegomena to such an endeavor; nevertheless, this book, though a sometimes flawed meditation on trust, is shot through with gems of wisdom and arresting elucidations of profound truth.

As more of a scholarly set of "first things" than an