

Jim Heynen's Knack for Wonder-Filled Literature

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66 The stories of the boys are not without miscues, mishaps, and, at times, original sin. Through a lifetime of writing imaginative literature, Jim Heynen has given us more than enough to enjoy, more than enough to prompt wonder from what's here in the natural world all around.

JIM HEYNE'S KNACK FOR WONDER-FILLED LITERATURE

In a homecoming all its own, Jim Heynen ('59) entertained warm and appreciative crowds in three separate readings—Orange City, LeMars, and Sioux Center—in March, offering more of the stories that have blessed him with a devoted following throughout the upper Midwest. Heynen, who grew up just north of Sioux Center and attended Dordt at a time when it offered only two years, has a long and distinguished writing career in genres that include poetry, non-fiction, and both short fiction and novels.

For years, for decades, his forte has been a genre of writing sometimes called prose poetry or flash fiction: very short stories, some only a page long, tales that effortlessly climb up into a bunk bed in your consciousness and stay there, smilingly, like good stories do.

Heynen's tales are not simply nostalgia, although growing up on a small Iowa farm in the 1950s lends itself, these days, to fond memories. What he's doing is not memoir either, even though his tales feel like personal reminiscence—and a few likely are. His fine literary reputation has been established by the way he centers his tales on a handful of farm boys who can't help thinking that the most thrilling days of their lives happen not only on trips to towns like nearby Rock Valley or any other neighborhood burg, but by the farm's everyday things, the daily drama of rural life.

Their strength is how they manage to carry more meaning than a simple rehearsal of what might have gone on. Most often they begin in and develop into sheer wonder—the miracle of birth, of odd wisdom of old men's yarns, the special grace of good farm dogs.

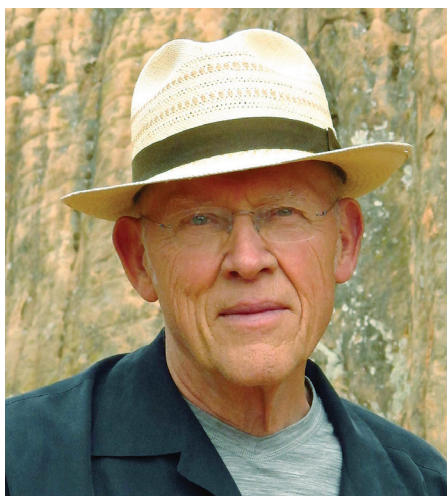


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Jim Heynen, who lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, has had stories featured on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" and *Booklist*.

The readings he did in Northwest Iowa came largely from his latest collection of tales, *The Youngest Boy*, a farm kid in the 1950s one reviewer described as "plucky and expendable, constantly courting trouble, curious, tirelessly industrious in his shenanigans, and ever alive to the unfolding creation of farm life."

Heynen's stories carry along this in common: they lift the reader to something higher than what the simply present. In "Plowed Field," Heynen opens with a memory, but carries what he experiences into something bigger and greater:

The youngest boy was not big enough to drive a tractor, but he was big enough to stand at the edge of the oats stubble field to which the tractor pulling the plow through the field. The oats stubble bristled like the head of a boy with a buzz cut, but the oats stubble

was a dull color and definitely needed plowing over. The plot turned that dull oats stubble face-down and turned the black dirt face up. Back and forth the tractor and plow went until the entire field was a lake of fresh black earth. So much change happening right there in front of his eyes.

That last line, "so much change happening right there in front of his eyes," charts the vision the younger boy sees, the one Heynen notes here for our appreciation.

Heynen is good at what he does, especially the readings, the performance of his tales of the boys. But then, we'd expect no less from a man who, years ago, was the president of college dramatists, who somehow helped get that huge Dordt rock on campus (you'll have to ask him to tell the story).

The Youngest Boy, like *The Man with Cigars in His Hat*, *The One-Room Schoolhouse*, and *You Know What is Right* bring life and truth to a time and place which could really be any time but happens to be the time and place when Dordt was a brand-new institution planted here, amid all the corn and beans.

The stories of the boys are not without miscues, mishaps, and, at times, original sin. Through a lifetime of writing imaginative literature, Jim Heynen has given us more than enough to enjoy, more than enough to prompt wonder from what's here in the natural world all around.

Wonder-filled literature like Heynen's stories of the boys helps us all to see.

JAMES CALVIN SCHAAP ('70)