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Ordinary Sins: After Theophrastus (Book Review)

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only possibility and obvious to anyone, yet did not offer evidence” (238). Indeed, with only a 30-page position paper, three responses, and a rejoinder from each presenter, repetition and assertions without evidence do occur. This is really a benefit of this book, though. Each view is exposed and well critiqued.

As is common with most debates, readers may not find here the firm conclusions they are looking for. Instead, what they will find is an appreciation for the enormous complexity of the debate over the historical existence of just one man (and woman—let’s not leave Eve out of this). Most of the arguments in the book focus on Genesis, but they occasionally and fruitfully veer off into the New Testament, asking questions about what Jesus and Paul believed about Adam. Indeed, *Four Views on the Historical Adam* is really about how we read the Bible, which exposes what we assume right interpretation is.

Despite the four views presented, the book demonstrates the quite obvious point that there are and must be more than four views on Adam’s possible existence. Gaps in logic, shoddy arguments, and short-sightedness

abound, which is a feature of the book, not a defect. I was quite frustrated with each presenter at times. None of them put everything together, though Walton’s view is persuasive, and he is the most exacting about the logic of the other writers. They all ignore something crucial in key moments, especially modern anthropological findings and the impact that each of their views has on the doctrine of the Fall. But that’s because they cannot address all of the subjects and problems that loom over the question of the historical Adam. This is a topic that requires the most erudite of polymaths to be rhetorically savvy; anyone else who weighs in, beware. Questions about Genesis 1-11, a historical Adam, and human origins demand seasoned thinkers who are reasonably well-read in ancient history, anthropology, population genetics, linguistics, hermeneutics, Christian theology, the philosophy of science, geology, literary theory, evolutionary psychology, and other disciplines that give insight into the question at hand. Yes, all that and more. May the Lord raise up such faithful, humble thinkers for His church and for His kingdom.

Ordinary Sins: After Theophrastus. Jim Heynen. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions. 150 pp. ISBN: 978-1571310903. Reviewed by Jim Schaap, Professor Emeritus, Dordt College..

Hoarders is, at least for me, a reality show that smarts. After all, I’m in it. Not me exactly, but I can’t help but recognize that more than just the outline of something similarly psychopathic abides in my soul too. There but for the grace of God and all that.

Or how about this? You walk down a midway and stumble on an artist doing quick caricatures. You pose, and hefty Magic Markers fly around freezer paper. A crowd gathers, judging the likeness as the image appears. Ten minutes pass, the artist rips off the portrait, and you see a chin three times larger than you’ve ever imagined, or a pear for a nose, maybe two bulbous eyes.

It’s exaggeration, but you can’t help but smile because, dang it!—it’s you.

The gang of eccentrics that people Jim Heynen’s latest collection of stories, *Ordinary Sins: After Theophrastus*, is a collection of midway portraits of men and women, many of whom deserve their own reality shows, most of whom we recognize not because they are strange—they often are—but because, as the title suggests, they are, well, ordinary, just exceedingly so. They’re not us, but they’re not all that distanced.

Take, for example, a character in Heynen’s story, “The Grim Reaper”: “When others chuckled, he sneered. If someone laughed at a joke, he stared at them as if they’d passed gas on an elevator.” He’s Heynen’s version of Young Goodman Brown, which is why Heynen says people had no trouble giving him his nickname. I

know people just like him. They exist, and they exist within me too.

Wonderful characters too have a place on stage, like the woman who lives “The Wondrous Quiet Life,” visiting animal shelters and libraries. “In this woman’s life, there were more books than traffic lights, more cars than cell phones, more vegetables than credit cards.”

She is, bless her soul, sanctified.

Ordinary Sins is full of caricatures you can’t help but smile to meet because you know them, both in life and in yourself.

Sometimes magical things happen in Heynen’s little sketches. When a bar owner decided to create a “Sad Hour” as a way of getting rid of customers more quickly after Happy Hour, the move surprisingly caught on, despite the fact that he deliberately hiked the prices for drinks. Those who purposely arrived for “Sad Hour” sat quietly alone and seemed to fade away into nothing, “looking more like hats and coats draped over counters and tables than they did like people.”

So the bartender let them know it was time, turned up the volume on the juke box, flipped on the lights, and lifted his arms “the way a minister might gesture for a congregation to rise.” All do. Life returns. “Calmly, they walked out onto the noisy streets, almost smiling.” Something magic sometimes happens.

The namelessness of the characters increases the sense of parable in these poetic portraits. “The Love

Addicts” are almost shockingly virtuous: “To each other’s eyes, they were bright roses in a dense forest.” Even their lust is pure.

They are their own aphrodisiac, smooth and moist and just short of violent. But in the delirium of their readiness, they are not helpless servants of lust. They are not desperate pilgrims on a treacherous frontier. Their marsh of passion does not foreshadow the ashy pyre. This is their verdant kingdom, and they are the king and queen.

Heynen claims that he wants to channel Theophrastus in this scrapbook of characters, an ancient Greek whose similar character portraits Heynen says enchanted him way back in high school. While that may be true, the form these character-sketches assume is nothing new to Jim Heynen. Those of us who’ve been reading him for years will recognize the genre from *The Man Who Wore Cigars in His Cap* (1979) and *You Know What Is Right* (1985) and then the masterful *The One-Room Schoolhouse* (1993).

He’s not departed from these books with *Ordinary Sins*. He’s doing what he’s always done so well—creating miniatures whose sometimes astonishing heft make them feel like parable if they wouldn’t be so charmingly mysterious. As one of his blurb-ers says, on the back cover, this is “serious fun.”

What separates this new collection from *The Man Who Wore Cigars in His Cap* is basically setting. Let me

be inexcusably provincial here, but I miss the country, the sense of Heynen’s own northwest Iowa home that frequented the old tales. “The boys,” whose misadventures are the stuff of Heynen’s earlier collections, weren’t just any kids; they were rural, they were upper Midwesterners, and, at times, they were rather delightfully Dutch Calvinist kids, as Heynen was, and, well, is.

While a few of the sketches go back to the Heynen farm and homestead, *Ordinary Sins* reaches beyond geography, or attempts to. His characters’ namelessness is most often matched with a place-lessness that creates a warm and loving kind of universal sensibility present in the earlier volumes but not as deliberately created.

As a Dutch Calvinist myself, living in Heynen’s own boyhood haunts, I’ll admit it—I miss ye olde regionalism. But I love the character of the characters in this book, despite their being, well, diaspora. In inching away from his roots, he may well have given the portraits a wider berth.

That doesn’t mean that Jim Heynen is not still one of the boys.

“I’d like to think,” he says in the preface, “that Theophrastus was gently mocking himself in some of his portrayals.” Then this darling confession: “I certainly am in *Ordinary Sins*, several of which are thinly disguised self-portraits.” Then he starts a game: “You are welcome to find Waldo, if you can.”

I like that. But then, I like *Ordinary Sins*.