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Looking for Dawn (Book Review)

Howard Schaap

Dordt College, howard.schaap@dordt.edu

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Christians “to respond to the deep inner crisis that Hungarians faced after the war: a spiritual crisis rooted in both the circumstances that led to and followed from the Hungarian Holocaust and the imposition of an aggressively anticlerical regime” (Soviet Communism). *Geneva Psalm 50* is both a warning and a call to repentance (134).

EMPHASIS

Along with *what Christian scholars pay attention to*, one could note *what Christian scholars emphasize*. The Orthodox faith of contemporary Polish composer Arvo Pärt is no secret. However, Andrew Shenton’s chapter brings it to deeper levels of awareness. Shenton provides a detailed analysis of Pärt’s *Magnificat* of 1989 according to the linguistic model of Umberto Eco and the classic and rigorous music analysis system of Jan La Rue (*Guidelines for Style Analysis*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1971 and 2011), showing how this landmark piece exhibits a pinnacle of the development of Pärt’s compositional style. But that technical musical analysis is not the final goal of his paper. In “Magnificat: Arvo Pärt, the Quiet Evangelist,” Shenton reveals how Pärt’s compositional process was undertaken for the purpose of achieving union with God and “exegetes” the piece as “part of the hesychast

tradition—one in which practitioners seek divine quietness through contemplation of God” (155). Further, Shenton claims that Pärt is “evangelizing Christian theology not just to the initiated, but to a much wider and more diverse audience” (155)—Pärt the evangelist.

Other chapters, focusing on topic, factors, and emphasis, address theology and musical conventions in the cantata arias of J. S. Bach; the librettos of the oratorios of C. P. E. Bach and G. F. Telemann as a religious response to Enlightenment skepticism; the practice of “tuning up” in black preaching as it relates to Gospel song; and a sonic approach to the theological content of congregational music, particularly praise and worship music. In a concluding chapter “Bridging the Old and the New in Contemporary Contexts,” Ghanaian scholar J. H. Kwabena Nketia lays out the challenge in his country of moving “from mission Christianity wrapped in Western attire” to African Christianity, with music that successfully incorporates the tonal patterns of African music and acknowledges the instrumental and other conventions that tie songs to specific contexts.

Readers may be interested in the topics of specific chapters or in the whole as an approach to Christian scholarship in music.

Looking for Dawn. James Calvin Schaap. Alton, Iowa: Floyd River Press, 2017. Amazon Digital Services LLC. ASIN: B078L72CDL. 349 pages. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Associate Professor English, Dordt College.

“You should read Faulkner in the dog days of August,” my sister once advised me. “That’s when he’s best—in the sweltering heat.”

If Faulkner should be read in August, James C. Schaap’s *Looking for Dawn* should be read in February, well after the January thaw and before it has become apparent that deep winter on the northern plains will ever relent. *Looking for Dawn* leans into winter. The lashing winds of the prairies that spirit ghosts of snow across open roadways are both a beautiful, animating life-force in the book and a deadly killer, and that’s just as it should be.

Looking for Dawn is Faulkner-esque in another way, too. As the book opens, news has broken that a Lakota teenager, Dawn Burnett, has attempted to take her own life via exposure: she has somewhat

inexplicably driven into a ditch in the middle of nowhere as a northwest wind bears down on her in sub-zero weather. Exploring what has led her to this action, *Looking for Dawn* follows multiple narrators in and around the fictional town of Cottonwood, South Dakota—a northern-plains version of Jefferson, Mississippi, one of Faulkner’s fictional settings—to uncover the buried past.

Dawn’s actions are not really that inexplicable if you know the whole story, but only a few characters have any idea of the story. Woody Dekkers, long time Cottonwood history teacher, is one of them. Woody and his wife, Tienieke, are the primary narrators in *Looking for Dawn*, and they piece together the story for us in a twenty-four-hour period that runs from first news of Dawn’s

suicide to a communal ritual that points the whole community toward healing just one night later.

Dawn is a beautiful if troubled girl at Cottonwood High School. She is mixed-blood, the product of a teenage affair between her Lakota mother, Celine Burnett, and Scotty Faber, a white man who, when we meet him as an adult, is a pillar of the community: a church-going businessman who owns and operates a trucking business alongside his wife, Karin.

Scotty—and Karin, too—have their own troubled pasts. Scotty and Karin got married when they were young and wild, a wildness that includes plenty of alcohol and infidelity on both their parts. But then Scotty and Karin have a baby girl, Kaylee, who prompts them, once they've hit rock bottom, to change their lifestyles. This turn to the light includes faith and a new hope, but it doesn't include dealing with their pasts. As Scotty puts his life back together, he gives hardly a second thought to Celine and Dawn.

Kaylee, meanwhile, grows up blissfully ignorant of these tumultuous times. Kaylee is the good girl of Cottonwood High, noted for her excellent singing voice as part of the church praise-team.

Dawn, on the other hand, haunts the fringes of Cottonwood High, running with the wrong crowd, barely passing classes, involved with an older guy named LeRoy, who has used her and disposed of her. There's a pregnancy involved, and everyone involved suspects the worst: that Dawn has aborted the child and that that has left her in despair. Woody Dekkers manages to figure most of this out through his contacts, former students scattered throughout Cottonwood's few businesses, and so the story begins to unravel.

If these stories seem tangled, they're really not—not any more tangled than any small town with secrets. It's uncovering the secrets, in reading *Looking for Dawn*, that's so rewarding.

One of the key characters that Woody will discover is Marcus Pritchard, a “half-breed” teenager himself, and the novel's hero and heartbeat. Marcus is a character that you want to believe in, a very American character. Marcus comes from nothing. Both his father and mother have run off, but in their place his grandmother has helped him set his compass to true north.

There's a purity to Marcus that, for argument's

sake, I'm tempted to call original goodness. That is, when you look at Marcus's circumstances—poor, without connections, not really belonging to either group, Native or white—he shouldn't be as virtuous as he is. Yet because his good-heartedness is some combination of instinct and street-smart wisdom, it's a virtue that is both believable and endearing.

In one of the book's early scenes, Marcus comes upon Dawn at her most vulnerable, after LeRoy has disposed of her and after she, he suspects, has disposed of the child. Dawn is an artist, like her mother Celine, and she has come out to the house where LeRoy and Marcus both live to fetch some drawings she's made of LeRoy in order to destroy them.

Marcus can see the hurt in Dawn, which is another reason to love him. Acting almost purely on instinct, Marcus stumbles his way through a ceremony of sorts on this bitter winter night when Dawn needs something to hold onto. He takes the drawings and Dawn out into a cold setting familiar to most of us in the upper Midwest: “So there he and Dawn sat in the middle of the machine shed, wind singing through the cracks in the walls. He dumped the trash on the floor, raked it into a pile with his gloves, and grabbed wooden matches from the back-door ledge. He wadded up some Kleenex and jammed it in a Cheerios box, hoping to get things going, cupping the match after he lit it.”

They sit on a hay bale, wrapped in a blanket, the shed lit up by the fire. Self-consciously, they mention the old ways to each other, these modern teens far removed from that lifestyle but not far from the landscape of memory where those ways happened. Marcus approaches this truth, that they're playing at ceremonies they both know are sacred but which neither is really qualified to perform:

“This is going to be something,” he said. “We're going to take our blessed time. Has to be done with reverence, like the old ways.” He smiled broad enough to make sure she saw it.

“What you think you know about the old ways?” she asked him. “You're just a kid.”

Still, something ceremonial happens:

Together, wrapped in bundles, they watched the fire in a silence that seemed right to him because

sometimes, when you didn't talk, you could say more than you could when you did. It was almost a trance, middle of December, gusts of punishing wind outside the shed in another world altogether, just the two of them and a roaring blaze inside. Even beautiful, he thought. He couldn't help thinking that he'd done things right for once in his life. (44)

Later that same night, when Dawn attempts to drive off into the cold and end her life, Marcus, again acting on instinct, is the one who saves her. Over the next day and night, Marcus walks alongside Dawn as she travels to the brink of death and back.

But *Looking for Dawn* is not simply about distraught teens on the prairie. It's about American history and the conflict of cultures and religions.

There's a scene in *Looking for Dawn* that I took to be a parable of the rural towns of the upper Midwest, and of protestant Christianity in particular. As the news of Dawn's—his daughter's—suicide attempt reaches Scotty Faber, he does what many church-going men would do: he keeps the regular schedule of his life and turns to his community and God for support. In this case, that means Scotty goes to his weekly Bible study at the local café. As providence would have it, Dawn and Marcus see him there. In fact, Dawn walks by trying to get Scotty's attention, but he's too focused on the Word to notice—he does not even see her.

The scene is symbolic, not just of Native people's presence in the upper Midwest but of American history more generally. Descendants of Euro-American settlers are oftentimes oblivious of the history—often bloody or brutal when it comes to Native people—that happened in their own backyards. In the case of Scotty Faber, the disconnect is more immediate, between a dutiful piety on the one hand and the trouble he's sown in the world on the other.

To Scotty's credit, once a man at the Bible study mentions the fact that Dawn was there, he does everything in his power to try to find her and—in a typical male way—to fix the situation.

But the situation is beyond what any fixer can do. Nothing can heal the wounds of Dawn Burnett—or Scotty's own wounds—but ceremony. That ceremony is where the book ends, as the various characters are drawn back out to the machine shed where the first ceremony happened.

No more spoilers, but suffice it say that it's a ceremony that asks profound questions about culture and faith, about sin and forgiveness and healing.

The final scene, too, is worth mentioning. Set as it is in South Dakota, *Looking for Dawn* takes place with Wounded Knee as a backdrop. Throughout the book, Marcus' grandmother is making preparations to feed the riders who will stop at her house as they commemorate that terrible event. The last scene of the novel finds Trent Sterrett, the new white principal of Cottonwood High, helping the truant Marcus get back to his truck. Marcus will come back to school, his grandmother has promised, after he helps her feed the Wounded Knee riders. Principal Sterrett is "lost"—about riders, about Wounded Knee, about what it means to be Native in South Dakota. Marcus has to fill Sterrett in about just what happened at Wounded Knee, and once again Trent Sterrett could stand in for you or me.

As Sterrett leaves, in the book's final moments, Marcus is haunted—in a good way, in almost a great-cloud-of-witnesses way—by the presence of riders, Native people who, past and present, continue to bear witness to the terror that was Wounded Knee—and, more to the point, to the continued survival of Native people in a history that has most often conspired against them.

Looking for Dawn goes a lot of places that are risky to go, places that at this present moment are being questioned and tested in the greater public: how far can the imagination go, especially in crossing gender and racial lines? But at a time when we are becoming more and more tribal in the worst sense of the word, hunkering down with our own kind and unable to communicate across the barriers we've created, *Looking for Dawn* is doing exactly what we need: looking around, taking in, reaching out.