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The Youngest Boy (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Jim Heynen, *The Youngest Boy*. Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 2021. 127 pp. ISBN 978-1513645-59-9. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, Professor Emeritus of English, Dordt University.

It's not nostalgia, although romantic fashioning sometimes appears or opens the stories. It's not memoir, even though the tales feel very much as if what happens to the boys could have happened to a young Jim Heynen. It's not a book of cartoons, although sometimes you can't help thinking the youngest boy's antics could become a comic book (wonderful illustrations by Tom Pohrt throughout suggest as much too). And there's just a smidgeon of magic realism, even though the stories are never really "out there."

In his latest book, *The Youngest Boy*, Jim Heynen, who graduated from Dordt way back in 1958, returns to what has become his signature genre. Call these little tales prose poems or flash fiction—whatever you'd like to. They're just little stories, barely two pages long, that effortlessly climb up into a bunk bed somewhere in your consciousness and stay there like good stories do.

The setting is the almost forgotten world in which Heynen grew up here—rural life on a family farm, circa 1950s, when whole sections of Siouxland farm country might still be divvied up into 160-acre plots, so that a ton of kids from big farm families got an education in the country schools that dotted whole townships, a time when, on a clear night when the crop was all comfortably in, you could sit out on the back steps and hear a neighbor laugh or sing or a child practice piano, even though the neighbors were a half mile away.

What Jim Heynen does again in *The Youngest Boy* does not simply create a museum of old farm implements. You certainly don't have to be pulling down a pension to enjoy the world he remembers and creates, because the youngest boy somehow manages to do what all of us do, even those who didn't grow up on a farm, post-Second World War. Somehow, the youngest boy thinks what we think, dreams what we dream. Heynen's stories carry us into what almost certainly is an unfamiliar world but leaves us where we're all just kids again.

Example? Let's try "Oatmeal and Raspberries."

The youngest boy looked at his plate. Mashed potatoes and carrots sat next to each other. The next night red cabbage was on the same plate and very green peas. For breakfast the next morning, someone had sprinkled red raspberries on top of his oatmeal.

He is greatly pleased at really good eating, when some grownup tells him the plain and simple truth: "Everything is better when you have different colors on your plate."

The next morning, the youngest boy gets deliberate about that doctrine, takes it to heart, and pulls a red sock on one foot and blue one on the other.

Had he gone off to school, the story might have gone off in a different direction; instead, he runs out to the pasture, where "one large Holstein raised her chin and aimed it at him as if she were about to moo her applause," Heynen says. "It was clear they all could see that his different-colored socks had put a new bounce in his step."

That's where the tale ends. No bulls chase him down the lane. There's no car chase, no bullies, no embarrassment. And, as so often happens in these little scampish tales, the animals somehow offer him their own kind of wisdom.

What wisdom? What the youngest boy sees in the bovine attention is the Holstein's approval of the idea that those red raspberries were a wonder, the idea that somehow life shouldn't be colorless but colorful, that even the cows understand harmony as gift, a blessing.

Jim Heynen's little stories always suggest more than meets the eye, and *The Youngest Boy*, this lat-

est volume of his, is no exception. Through several decades of writing, he has created his own genre—witty and endearing little tales set in a way of life that's all but passed on, tales that nonetheless evoke what's universal, a lifetime of experiences we can't help but feel to be our very own.

It may have begun way back in 1979 with *The Man Who Kept Cigars in His Hat* (also illustrated by Tom Pohrt and published by Graywolf Press), a book of tales that Raymond Carver called, with abundant precision, "little news items of the human spirit": little tales like "An Alligator in the Sandpit," which features a shocking discovery that draws the boys' attention, as well the attention of most of the neighborhood. No one sees the alligator, but they watch fervently, religiously. Soon enough the corn beside the sandpit gets trampled by the crowds' attentions, but people keep watching. One Saturday, oddly enough and for no apparent reason, the crowd breaks into song, begins to make music. The boys sing along, even though later they're a little sheepish about losing themselves the way they did in the oddly inspiring moment.

The wily narrator of the tales then explains: "This lasted until corn-picking time, when there was too much to do." It was simply the kind of strange and beautiful moment that most of us spend our lifetimes looking to find. Heynen's great strength is little Siouxland stories that never stay here but take the reader on a journey that never ends, the journey far into the human heart.

In *The Youngest Boy*, Jim Heynen returns to that first thin book of stories by bringing us specifically to the funeral of the man with cigars in his hat. Originally, he had been the foil of the boys, who were always obsessed with what he kept partially concealed up top of his head—cigars, then a rat, then a baby skunk, then an owl (you'll have to read the story yourself). Every time they try to flip his hat, the man with the cigars in his hat outthinks them, a wonderful game.

He'd been, we're told, a marvelous storyteller, a man who kept listeners engaged as he started in to wash eggs out back of his place. People dropped by just to hear the stories because he "had more stories under his cap than cigars."

Unwinding little tales from some gargantuan spool in his head, the man with the magic hat told dozens and dozens of stories people loved so dearly they would tell those stories themselves, pass them along to others. But in this latest twist of the story, the youngest boy attends the funeral of the man with the hat but is disappointed by the meager attendance: "He sat on the hard church pew puzzled. He didn't hear a word the minister said. He didn't close his eyes for the prayers."

When the ceremony is over, the youngest boy alone heads up to the casket, where someone has laid the cap the storyteller wore throughout his life, the cap with the cigars, the cap with the stories: "He didn't care if anyone was watching. He reached for the cap and lifted it. No cigar fell out. Nothing fell out. The cap of the man who kept cigars in his cap was empty.

Way, way back in Christian school—or in Sunday school—I once learned that a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Can we call Heynen's work "parables?" Perhaps not in a Sunday School sense, but they are, to be sure, earthly stories, and they carry, frequently too I'll wager, something akin to "heavenly meaning."

Thus, I was saddened to read the last line of "At the Funeral of the Man Who Kept Cigars in His Cap," because I couldn't help thinking that "the heavenly meaning" of this little parable was as empty as the cigar-man's hat as it sat there on the funeral bier. I felt robbed somehow, not deceived but depressed when the youngest boy discovered there was nothing there.

So, at a reading Jim Heynen gave not long ago in Orange City, I asked him what was going on when he finished that story of a hero storyteller with nothing under his hat. "Why is that hat empty?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Because they're out there," he told me—and the festive crowd that night. "Because all those stories are out there somewhere." He pointed up and out, wearing a big, cagey smile.

I loved that answer—I'll admit it. It had a touch of that old line from Psalm 90, that line about establishing the work of our hands—or our words.

But the funeral story isn't the final tale of *The Youngest Boy*. Instead, there is an odd little story whose five paragraphs all end with the same line, a line which Heynen uses as the title of the tale: "It's

a Wonderful World."

The first four paragraphs offer a panorama of the glory of farm life—"Nothing to do for a whole hour. What a beautiful world." Corn leaves dancing to the crisp air—"What a beautiful world!" Birds come flapping and fluttering toward him when he whistles their song—"What a wonderful world." A Hereford calf bounces across the cattle yard—"What a wonderful world."

But then, a dark curtain. A bunny is hit by a car and dies on the gravel road; and finally, Heynen writes, "A crow cawed for its friends to join in on the feast—What a beautiful world."

The final tale ends with a celebration of life—even in death.

"What a beautiful world!" reminds me of the epitaph on the grave of another wonderful Siouxland writer, the novelist Frederick Manfred, born and reared here, a man who wanted this inscribed on his Doon cemetery tombstone:

> "It was marvelous.
>
> I don't regret a minute
> of it. Even the pain
> and hunger were sweet
> to have. It was life,
> not death. And all
> moments of life
> are very precious."

Joyce Sutphen, one of Minnesota's finest poets, says this of the story and Jim Heynen's *The Youngest Son*: "'What a beautiful world,' the youngest boy says to himself, and readers will be telling each other: 'what a wonderful book.'"