

HE DIDN'T HAVE AN INKPOT TO PIDDLE WITH

(or)

A REVIEW OF A PSEUDO-REVIEW OF DIRT SONGS BY
TWYLA M. HANSEN AND LINDA M. HASSELSTROM

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

Sometimes the writer is moved to commentary for no reason other than sheer indignation. Such is the motive for my present disquisition.

A short piece from the March/April 2013 issue of Nebraska Life came to my attention. This publication itself comes to few readers' attention since it is a small, regional magazine published but six times a year. But the piece I mention came to me because it purported to review a book I myself had reviewed: Dirt Songs: A Plains Duet by Twyla Hansen and Linda Hasselstrom (Omaha: The Backwaters Press, 2011). My review was published in Baumli's Mirror on the website: viaticumpressinternational.com and has garnered considerable commentary.

The piece in Nebraska Life disappointed, bewildered, obfuscated. I thought to write a letter to the editors protesting these literary lapses, but since

I am neither a subscriber nor a Nebraska native, I was sure the editors would either not publish my letter or they would publish it only after truncating it into oblivion. So here I embark upon writing a review of a pseudo-review of a splendid book. A strange pursuit, maybe, but in this case a certain writer's sins are so offensive as to warrant a prosaic spanking.

The writer: His name is Alan J. Bartels. What he wrote was supposed to be a significant feature-length review of the book. I know this on the word of one of the book's authors. Alan J. Bartels interviewed Twyla Hansen (of Nebraska) twice and gathered material from her and also from the book's other author (South Dakota native Linda Hasselstrom). The result? Note that I more than once above referred to it as a "piece." I use this word because what Bartels wrote is only 268 words long—counting the title. It is too short to be a book review, with too much errant verbiage to even qualify as a "book notice." As for all that research which preceded the writing of this piece? What happened to it? One has the impression, in reading this little piece, that the author forgot to finish his project before submitting it. In fact, when I first received

this small compilation of Bartels' words, I read it and immediately did some shuffling of pages to find the rest of the article before I realized that there wasn't anything more. This is a shame, because the book here under scrutiny is a brilliant, profound, and provocative work of high literature. Moreover, something Bartels seems to have almost overlooked: it has two authors. What few words he does devote to the authors are focused on Twyla Hansen, and only passing mention is made of Linda Hasselstrom. I concede that Hansen is a Nebraska native, and the magazine is a Nebraska publication, so maybe this emphasis is fair; but for a reader such as myself who has already absorbed the book several times over, it is difficult to not feel that the South Dakota representative deserves a slightly more equitable hearing.

Even more, it is difficult not to rancor over the fact that the book itself did not get a hearing. Hasselstrom is mentioned, Hansen is discussed briefly, but as for the book? I am quite sure Alan J. Bartels not only forgot to finish his review, he also forgot to read the book. Nowhere in what he wrote does he mention even one poem, much less quote from a poem. I daresay

an omission of this magnitude disqualifies Bartels' piece as a book review, although one could concede, from what little he wrote, that he did make a reluctant attempt in the direction of hagiography toward Twyla Hansen. But even this focus was diluted, and went astray, because Bartels began this piece by quoting from Carl Sandburg and then proceeded to refer to that quote so many times that by the end it seemed he was beating a dead horse—the dead horse being either Carl Sandburg himself or his broken banjo.

But I have here registered what I consider to be Alan J. Bartels' omissions. There also is an unsavory commission which deserves an adjective no less condemnatory than "egregious." I refer to the title which he gave his mini-review. The title appears thus:

Dirty Words Earthy Plains Poetry

Cleanses the Soul

I ask any reader to look at this title and mull it over. Say it aloud. Try to think about it. Then write it out as the clumsy sentence that it is: *Dirty Words Earthy Plains Poetry Cleanses the Soul*. You scarcely need be a disciple of Wittgensteinian language philosophy to say: "What does this mean?"

Judging by what follows, it doesn't mean much. Maybe Mister Bartels meant for this title to suggest something about dirt, or the earth—as in soil. But we can't be sure, and since what he proceeds to write provides so little information, we can't infer anything. Moreover, we can not deny the fact that the uncertainty of this uninformative, nonsensical title led too many casual readers astray. I know this because both writers have received emails from Nebraska Life's readers telling them that they will not read the book because, judging from Bartels' title, these two authors have obviously stooped to writing pornography. Perhaps it is understandable that the casual or hasty reader would get this misimpression. After all, that phrase "dirty words" isn't exactly foreign to our language—whether in common parlance or in careful prose. A five-year-old knows that the phrase "dirty words" means "potty talk." The average reader, encountering "dirty words," raises an eyebrow. The careful scholar grimaces.

So Twyla M. Hansen and Linda M. Hasselstrom both received indignant emails from readers. But note that I above described such readers as "casual." It warrants

being stated, even emphasized, that most lovers of poetry are (if I may use the word salubriously) patrician readers. Of course, like all readers, they spend part of their time casually glancing, skimming, garnering initial impressions. But then they settle into a mood of careful scrutiny, immersing themselves in a poem thoroughly, absorbing meaning and seeking pleasure. In other words, if serious readers of poetry first encountered Bartels' title, which is careless, haphazard, and laden with language that has intimations of the salacious, and even if they then were provoked to reflexively judge that this book is not worth reading, I am quite sure that any of these people who are worthy readers of poetry subsequently reflected upon Bartels' title, furrowed their brow while wondering what in the world that fellow was trying to say, and thereupon decided it would be better to examine the book themselves and pass their own studied judgement. Which means that if Bartels' piece failed to do Dirt Songs a service, then his piece also failed to inflict upon it a disservice.

If readers of the book continue to feel anything negative, it will only be dismay at realizing how the

title of Bartels' pseudo-review temporarily led them astray—before they quickly divined that this book does not contain a single line that is obscene, crude, or prurient.

On a happy note: Alan J. Bartels' misuse of language attests to the power of the word. All he had to write was that misleading phrase, "dirty words," and both of the books' authors were immediately accused of descending into obscenity and writing pornography. But on an even happier note, my own staunch response to Bartels' misuse of language attests to the obvious fact that good literature has its vigilant and staunch defenders. Mister Bartels may utterly fail to exercise authorial responsibility (while his editors fail to exercise due oversight!), but fortunately there are responsible readers who are quick to react to authorial negligence with a stern reprimand.

If Alan J. Bartels well deserves a reprimand, then praise is due to those authors (actually, those poems) he has so miserably neglected. While I myself, in the above referred-to review, already bestowed no small degree of praise toward these poems, it also deserves being stated that Dirt Songs has received very concrete

praise in the form of some very prestigious
recognition, to wit:

**Winner of the 2012 Nebraska Book Award for
Poetry (sponsored by the Nebraska Center for the Book)

**Women Writing the West 2012 WILLA Award Finalist
(runner-up) in the poetry category

**High Plains BookFest 2012 Book Award Finalist
(runner-up) in the poetry category (sponsored by The
YMCA Writer's Voice and Parmly Billings Library)

Some very prestigious organizations honored this
book; but you, Mister Bartels, who promised to review
it did not even read it. Shame on you.

One last point deserves being made. There are many
people who write mediocre poems. But I have encountered
very few mediocre readers of poetry. Poetry demands too
much for that. It beckons committed, circumspect,
intelligent readers. If Mister Bartels' lame pretense
of a review caused any disciples (sic) of Hansen and
Hasselstrom to initially chastise them, I also am sure
that the title of that review—misleading,
irresponsible, and (summarily stated in one blunt word)
stupid—caused those same readers to quickly abandon
their initial reflexive judgement and subsequently

scrutinize the actual poetry of Dirt Songs. Which then caused those readers to put their reflexive judgements aside, and forego any chastising attitude for a more charitable one: gratitude toward Hansen and Hasselstrom for the abundance of their literary generosity.

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