

Fall 1986

on Jim Heynen

Bronwyn Pughe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Pughe, Bronwyn (1986) "on Jim Heynen," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 25 , Article 54.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss25/54>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

with the natural world serving as crystalline mirror for the inner state of the poet. An ostensibly simple line like “nights will now grow longer” yields a profound communicative effect when read in the context of the sequence as a whole, indicating both a very literal statement of natural process as well as a plaintive assessment of the speaker’s loneliness.

While Gerner’s sense of image is relatively simple and uncluttered, it never becomes prosaic or dull. The language is kept alive through abundant in-rhymes and subtle assonance, and when he chooses to startle us, it is most often done with imagery that spans the gap between inner and outer worlds, while still managing to remain firmly grounded in the observable. Consider these lines from “Tenth Moon”:

Stars spill
 from the crystal cup
 of moon. In the cold dark
 before dawn, snowflakes drift
 down the valley’s clear sky.

By never allowing his imagery to stray too far from the world of phenomena, Gerner creates a transparency of voice that allows the inner world to shine through. His poems have the clarity, precision, and emotional depth associated with the greatest of the Chinese masters, and the humility of a man who has realized that in order to be heard, he must let the things he cares about speak for themselves. Reading his *Throwing Shadows*, one can hardly doubt that this kind of humility will indeed be exalted.

—Joseph Martin

Jim Heynen, *You Know What is Right*; North Point Press; Berkeley, CA; \$13.50

In the over eighty stories of *You Know What is Right*, Jim Heynen creates an image of rural America which is timeless. The characters, their interpretation of events, platitudes, scatological remarks, and morals he describes present problems and not so likely solutions found in this rural life. Often the solutions are really justifications or rationalizations by the well-practiced citizens.

The first section of the book sets the colloquial thinking patterns and morality of the place through its children. They are of diverse ages. The younger question the older (including the men), obey them, hang on their every word until they

can devise reasons of their own. In "Bat Wings," a story about casting for bats, a man asks, "If they have such good radar, . . . why don't they catch the fly in their mouths?"

Maybe their wing is just like a hand and they have to catch the fly first, said the littlest boy.

No one paid attention to the youngest boy, because his idea sounded so silly, but many years later—at thousands and thousands of dollars expense—somebody in a laboratory, using infrared cameras, found out that bats really do catch their food in their wings, using them like hands to feed themselves,

You write the moral to this story:

(from "Bat Wings")

The children reflect the manner of the adults, as they will in any society, but also lend a fresh understanding of nature and of child development. Through them, Heynen gives us a sense of the group, of community and a sense of a very male world. Females are not excluded, per se, but they appear as aberrations.

There was a lady who kept one hand in her pocket . . .

The boys laid out the string one day, but when the lady passed by, they weren't able to pull it and trip her. They got too scared thinking that if they saw what the lady had hidden, she might give it to them.

(from "Who Kept One Hand in Her Pocket")

Nature has more to do with the way things are than the mothering influence, though no sense of neglect is ever felt. Animals and countryside, as they are observed by the children, provide the framework for these country fables.

In the second section of *You Know What is Right*, Heynen draws us into an evolution of character and thinking. "The boys" reappear older and the old man who tells stories is introduced. The spiral of this evolution is inward, from an innocent agreement on the state of their world and a necessity of peer duplication to a growth into hazy questions of right and wrong in the face of disillusionment. This section contains the title story of the book, a humorous tale involving the repetition of the boys asking "But was that right?", bullying, and learning the rituals of public urinals.

Heynen introduces Uncle Jack, the family and town fool, in the third section of the collection. He has more wisdom to offer, more suggestions towards solutions through images and riddles, than those caught up in their everyday lives. He is a medieval court jester whose comic relief is welcome, whose seriousness can almost be ignored, and whose entertaining presence and wisdom are anticipated.

He looked more like a bear standing upright than a human being.
Do you know what can go out in the rain without a cap on and
not get its head wet? he shouted up to them.
. . . Wrong, little one. Not everything can be a duck. You have
guessed too quickly this time, said Uncle Jack. Now you'll have to
listen to all the clues.

(from "Uncle Jack's Riddle")

Part four throws us into the cycle of life where the elders who *know* things are amplified to the point of caricature. They resemble the "youngest boy" in their simplistic solutions, yet are unnerving in their unbending belief of them. These people have returned to choose a particular idiosyncrasy which colors all their present actions and what they know is right. It is a particularly poignant juxtaposition to the court jester offered in the previous section, even in its titles: "The Good Hider," "The Man with Smart Hands," "Who Always Came Early," and "The Meddler," to name a few.

You Know What is Right is a book of astute observation. Few but telling details are offered allowing for Heynen's uniquely concise but always complete stories. This newest collection is an enjoyable read and worth a careful look at his question, do "*You Know What is Right?*"

—Bronwyn G. Pughe