Ron Hansen Interview

Ron Hansen
Are You Now or Have You Ever Been
A Member of the Communist Party

an interview with Ron Hansen conducted by Stephanie Vaughn (Ithaca, New York, Spring, 1986), with an introduction by Bronwyn Pughe.

Ron Hansen’s latest book, THE SHADOWMAKER, is a children’s novel forthcoming this year from Harper and Row. It is an ironic parable of self-image and fantasy not limited to an audience of children at all. But Hansen is best known for his pair of historical novels, THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD (Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), and DESPERADOES (Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), for which he also wrote the screenplay. He has published numerous stories, essays and reviews in such nationally recognized magazines as The Atlantic Monthly, MSS, Esquire, Runner’s World, The Iowa Review, The West Coast Review of Books and Private Pilot. His story, “Can I Just Sit Here For A While?,” was anthologized in the collection, MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH, edited by Tobias Wolff.

Ron Hansen has taught at the University of Iowa, at Stanford and Cornell. He has also served as a visiting professor to Breadloaf and the San Miguel de Allende Writers’ Conference. His numerous awards include the Penthouse New Writers Short Story Contest, a Shane Stevens Fellowship, an NEA Literature Fellowship and a PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction nominee for THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD.

In addition to making his current living and success as a writer, Hansen has also worked as a live-in babysitter for John Irving’s children and a travelling textbook salesman for Knopf. During his tenure as a salesman he was able to complete DESPERADOES with the inspirational and informational help of K-Mart bookshelves.

Ron Hansen has a unique grasp on the place of commerciality in the writers’ world. He is able to combine this with art, history, personal background and a variety of interests.

CutBank is fortunate to have Stephanie Vaughn interviewing Ron Hansen.

Bronwyn Pughe
SV: What attracted you to the Dalton gang as a subject for fiction?

RH: Basically, I was looking for stories I thought I could sell. I thought the Daltons were exciting—there was romance, bank robberies, plenty of activity. No time for rumination.

SV: You actually set out to write a novel that would sell?

RH: I didn’t want to write the kind of stories I saw people at Iowa [Iowa Writers’ Workshop] writing. I didn’t want to write autobiography—the kind of story in which someone looks out at the world for a very short time and then spends the rest of the novel looking inside. Young writers are usually self-absorbed. They spend a lot of time getting in touch with who they are and then write only about themselves. They write about themselves because they haven’t yet learned that their best material is going to be about other people.

SV: Do you dislike a novel when you perceive it as autobiographical?

RH: No, in fact, many of the books I admire are autobiographical or are memoirs—A Fan’s Notes, Stop-time, many of John L’Heureux’s novels and stories. John Irving’s novels strike me as autobiographical.

SV: You were a babysitter for John Irving’s children.

RH: I rented a basement room from him when I was a student at Iowa and he was teaching there, so I became a live-in babysitter for his sons, and now we’re good friends.

SV: You have an access to his life, then, that allows you to see where his fiction is autobiographical? I ask because I always think of Irving as a wild inventor—a fabulist.

RH: What he does brilliantly is take elements of autobiography and exaggerate them to such an extent that they become fiction. For example, he grew up at Phillips Exeter Academy where his father was a teacher, he was a wrestler in high school, he got married young and went to live in Vienna—all of those things happen to his characters. Or I remember an incident in The World According to Garp, a story within the story, in which there’s an accident involving a bowling ball. When John was at Exeter, there was indeed a dinner party, there was an accident outside, a car was overturned, and inside were a man and a bowling ball. In Garp, John has made the incident comic when it was in fact very tragic. It always enrages John when readers say that he writes autobiographically, because that seems to undercut the purely imaginative qualities of his work. Of course any writer remembers best the parts he has wholly invented.

SV: Have you never written autobiographically?

RH: My Master’s thesis at Iowa was titled No Cares Have I to Grieve Me. It was a series of connected stories starring Jack Baker [laughs]. They were based on my own life from the ages of twelve or thirteen to graduation from college.

SV: What became of those stories?

RH: They’re still in a book I have upstairs. I took the manuscript and had it bound because I knew that was the only surviving form it was going to be in.
SV: Is there none of you in the Daltons or Jesse James or Robert Ford or Eugenia Moore?

RH: Well, yes, there's a lot. When you invent a villainous character, you give him your own most evil characteristics, and when you work with heroes, you give them the qualities you would like to have other people perceive in you.

SV: What made you look for stories that would sell?

RH: Many discouraging attempts at selling stories and having them rejected. Realizing that the problem probably was not in the writing but in the stories. Concluding that my prose style was really just an effort to mask that I didn't have a story.

SV: And how did you choose the Daltons?

RH: I happened to be in a K-Mart check-out line, and I picked up a paperback about the Dalton gang. The facts were so interesting that I thought maybe I could fictionalize the people. I was especially entranced by the ending. Emmett Dalton lives until 1937, becomes a screenwriter in Hollywood, and then goes back to Coffeyville, Kansas, just before his death, and people who shot at him in 1892 shake hands with him even though he had tried to kill them. I thought there was something peculiarly American about that tale and that it deserved telling. I had originally planned to write it as a short story but it got too big. Of course, if I had come across a book in that K-Mart about Dillinger, I might have written about Dillinger.

SV: Where was this K-Mart which we should now enshrine?

RH: [Laughs.] Columbus, Nebraska. I was working for my brother-in-law as a housepainter and general factotum—screwing in lightbulbs and that sort of thing.

SV: Was that after you left the Writers' Workshop?

RH: Yes.

SV: I thought that you told me once that you wrote Desperadoes on the road when you were a textbook salesman for Knopf.

RH: I did. In Nebraska, I outlined the story and put it away. Then I got a job as a salesman. When I was on the road, I was working on a story about a guy who heists a plane. The words I kept putting in his mouth didn't sound as if they belonged in the 20th Century. They belonged in the 19th Century. So I realized that I was writing ahead—I was unconsciously thinking about the novel. So I wrote on the top of a piece of paper: DESPERADOES: A NOVEL BY RON HANSEN. And that was the beginning.

SV: You kept writing as you drove with your textbooks from university to university?

RH: Yep, I did it while I was living in motel rooms. I'd get done with the day, go for a run, have dinner, then write from about seven to ten. In some ways it was the ideal job to have while writing a book. I didn't know anybody in those towns. I didn't even have the phone ring.
SV: What towns were those?


SV: Not Coffeyville, Kansas? You never got to the territory you were writing about?

RH: After I'd written for a while, I took a vacation and went to Coffeyville. I visited museums and acquired whatever I could. Books, photos, memories of what the area looked like.

SV: What's the difference between that K-Mart book which gave you the idea and Desperadoes, the novel you wrote?

RH: The Dalton Gang provided me with an outline—with a chronology of events. All of that was available in newspaper accounts from the time. The book that was most helpful to me was Emmett Dalton's book, When the Daltons Ride. My sense of what the people looked and spoke like comes from Emmett.

SV: What attracted you to Jesse James?

RH: That was as much an accident as the Dalton gang book.

SV: Another K-Mart experience?

RH: [Laughs.] Having just written Desperadoes and having done a lot of reading for it, I knew a lot about Jesse James already. Then I was asked by Bill Kittredge to contribute to a special issue of Triquarterly on the American West which he and Oakley Hall were editing. So I wrote back to Kittredge and said sure, I'll do a story about the assassination of Jesse James and what the consequences were. Weeks later, I wrote Bill and said the story was coming slowly and put off the deadline. Finally, I had to write him and tell him I didn't have a story, but I did have a novel. That was a great issue of Triquarterly, by the way. There was a great story by Richard Ford and a great story by David Quammen and a great one by Toby Wolff. I'm sorry I missed being in it. [Pauses.] After you finish a novel there's a residue of feeling you had when you were writing the book but you have nothing you can do with that feeling. One way to exorcise it is to sit down and tell another story with that feeling, and that's what happened to me with The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford. I had a flip-side of the Dalton gang story to tell. It's almost as if the two books are twins. The bright side of the outlaw story and the darker side.

SV: You're a twin yourself. An identical one.

RH: [Laughs.] Let me re-phrase that last sentence. It's almost as if they're paired.

SV: Is your next book going to be part of a pair?

RH: Oh, it might.
SV: *What is the next book?*

RH: I have a novel in the works about an old cattlem an who goes down to Mexico to discover what has happened to his son who seems to have committed suicide.

SV: *Is the book set in the 19th Century?*

RH: Oh, no, I'm done with the 19th Century for a while. This one is set in the present.

SV: *Have you had any trouble working with historical documents? Do you ever feel limited by chronology or trapped by a fact?*

RH: Yes, it's much harder to write a historical novel. There are all sorts of scenes you've never experienced that you have to experience in your imagination.

SV: *What do you do when you come up against a fact you have to use but don't want to?*

RH: Muddle through. One of the problems with the historical novel is that they are always going to have to have dead scenes in them. Scenes not compelled by spontaneity.

SV: *What did you do when you thought you had a dead scene in Desperadoes or Jesse James?*

RH: Tried to cut them all or finesse them somehow. Sometimes I wrote a scene in dialogue and when it didn't work, I tried to fall back into narration and rely on indirect discourse and exposition. Sometimes in the Jesse James book, there was so much historical corroboration that I had to have James speak lines that I couldn't even get my own mouth around. I'd try to tiptoe around them by saying that Jesse was putting on airs or just acting.

SV: *Next February, Harper & Row is publishing your children's novel called The Shadowmaker. How did you make the leap into children's books?*

RH: I guess I was always interested in them. When I was babysitting for Irving's kids, I read them stories, and I also read stories to my nieces and nephews when I was home in Nebraska. I always thought that they were a wonderful outlet for a kind of looney sense of humor. They were so relaxing and fun to read that I thought it might be relaxing and fun to write one, and it was.

SV: *Would you mind revealing ahead of the publication date what The Shadowmaker is about?*

RH: Well, it's about a little man who comes into a town and tries to sell people things, but they're completely happy and don't need to buy anything. So then he decides to open a store selling shadows. He gets the townspeople into his store and convinces them that their own shadows are puny and paltry and don't really reflect who they are. People start buying new shadows. The mayor buys a king's shadow and so on. Pretty soon the shadows take over the town and turn it into night. The problem is that the shadows don't work very well. A person who bumps into a bathtub will hear a clanging sound. Or a person walking along a building finds that his shadow folds up against the building wall and won't straighten out. The heroine of the story is a little girl named Drizzle who discovers that The Shadowmaker is a Wizard.
SV: John Gardner was one of the people you dedicated your last book to. How did you get to know him?

RH: I knew him as a writer first. I read Grendel and The Sunlight Dialogues and was so taken with them I read all of his stuff. I finally met him when I had a fellowship at Breadloaf. We got along well, and the next year at Breadloaf I was his assistant. He read the first part of Jesse James and was very encouraging. I was his assistant again the following year. Eventually he read all of the book I had written, up to his death in the motorcycle accident. The year he was killed, 1982, I saw him again at Breadloaf in August and was planning to make a trip the next month to Batavia and Rochester for his wedding to Susan Thornton. Instead I made the trip to his funeral. [Pauses.] He was a very flattering and very acute critic. He managed to make you feel like a genius. He would use words like “goofy” and “stupid” and “wacky” to describe your work but you wouldn't feel offended. He had a charm about him that made you feel he might make that particular mistake in his own writing that he had pointed out as a flaw in your writing. He was wonderfully encouraging about your work and about the writer's life.

SV: You were a student in the Iowa Writers' Workshop and have taught writing at Stanford, Michigan, and Cornell. What do you have to say about the workshop experience in general?

RH: You have to approach workshops with a degree of skepticism. You have to be a contrarian. You have to go against the received wisdom. Over a twelve year period around workshops, I've seen that there's generally a kind of writing that's approved in workshops in a given period—then that changes, and something else is approved. People not given to a particular kind of writing at a particular time are not rewarded in workshops. Often an individualized voice will be seen as peculiar—and it is peculiar.

SV: What did you get out of your two years as a workshop student?

RH: Mostly a sense of the discipline and dedication you need to be a writer. I learned about lots of people's methods of writing and what their first drafts looked like and what could be done to improve those drafts and how I could improve my own drafts. What any workshop affords the student is a sense of support and collegiality. Everyone's doing the same thing, and it's approved.

SV: If you were interviewing yourself and asking a question, what would it be?

RH: Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?

Stephanie Vaughn/Ron Hansen