

Patrick Hicks, ed. A Harvest of Words: Contemporary South Dakota Poetry.  
Sioux Falls: The Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 2010.

### SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

If more people read poetry, the world would be a much better place. Poetry at its best is language at its best—imagistic, full-voiced, meaning-full. With its wonderfully natural human rhythms, its back and forth movements on the page, and its provocative silences, it is a welcome and even therapeutic contrast to our increasingly prosaic, across-the-page-and-down world.

So why don't more people read it? Why does it occupy only a few out-of-the-way shelves in most bookstores, and why is it often absent altogether from the book shelves of homes, even those lived in by people who think of themselves as readers?

One of the answers to these questions is societal conditioning, especially in America. Our educational systems, focused as they are on vocation and on what is assumed to be the most practical knowledge, clearly prioritize prose. The reading of poetry sometimes happens in English classes, but even there it is usually subordinated to prose, and it is rarely seen or heard in other classrooms.

Another reason that people do not read poetry is the perception that it is esoteric and difficult to access. Well, some of it is. But the best of it has the immediacy of experience. Indeed, at its best, poetry *is* experience, vivid, multi-sensory, alive. And in its vivid immediacy, a good poem, like any other unforgettable experience, connects its reader to other experiences, other times and places and feelings, in very informative ways.

An especially good demonstration of the value of poetry is A Harvest of Words: Contemporary South Dakota Poetry, a splendid collection which was long overdue. The following fourteen poets are included in it: Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Leo Dangel, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, Jeanne Emmons, David Allan Evans, Linda Hasselstrom, Allison Hedge Coke, Patrick Hicks, Debra Nystrom, Jim Reese, Lee Ann Roripaugh, Dennis Sampson, Christine Stewart-Nunez, and Lydia Whirlwind Soldier. For each of these there is a generous selection of poems, so this is really a collection of self-contained little books, which can be read in any order the reader chooses, as the editor points out in his excellent introduction, in which he also expressively introduces readers to the geographic space which is South Dakota.

On that topic there is David Allan Evans' "A South Dakota Inventory, 1989," which is a vividly multi-sensory depiction of South Dakota's "infinite variety." Here's how that poem concludes:

Dogs chasing rabbits zigzagging across fields; ice houses with  
portable tv's; the sun rising in alleys; one hundred  
blackbirds suddenly flying up as one black wing and  
away; garage sales; powwows; the earnest swing of  
lunch pails on sidewalks at 6 a.m.; white country  
churches; swiveling owl-looks; farm ponds; prairie  
grass; nine sparrows neatly spaced on a powerline . . .

Another of Evans' poems included here is "Neighbors," a terse tragic-comic depiction of a couple who are living together without relationship, which can also be read as the story of

South Dakota's often troubled bi-cultural history. "They live alone/together," he says, before describing a domestic event in their lives. Evans, South Dakota's Poet Laureate, is especially good at describing concrete events which can have important universal applications, and "Pole Vaulter," one of his better known poems, is another fine example of that. That poem begins: "The approach to the bar/is everything/unless I have counted/my steps hit my markers/feel up to it I refuse/to follow through/I am committed to beginnings/or to nothing."

This collection is also inclusive of strong indigenous voices, including Lydia Whirlwind Soldier, a Sicangu Lakota whose "Lacol Wicoun" begins:

I retreat to the edge of dreams  
empty my heart of haunting fears  
I fly with the red-tail hawk  
along the bank of rolling thunderheads  
into the mysteries of prayer

And ends with her addressing her grandchild:

Takoja, remember to return  
to that center  
honor the silence  
where the life force  
whispers in the wind  
and tells  
the story of our people.

Another tribal writer included here is Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a Dakota poet and novelist who is also one of the foremost American Indian Studies scholars in the world. In a poem called "Cather's Oeuvre," subtitled "the immigrant story written after a night of re-reading O Pioneers!" Cook-Lynn expresses an essential difference between her traditional tribal people and others:

Out of the white-dark glare a voice comes, saying that  
god was on her side. I stop turning the pages.  
Pages written by the eponymous white woman  
whose point was: "the history of every  
country begins in the heart of a man or woman."  
It is the immigrant story. Different from  
the indigenous one which says "the heart  
of any country begins in the heart  
of the Earth."

Another poet who writes about what could be characterized as culture-clash is Christine Stewart-Nunez, whose poetry is often about the time she spent in Turkey. Her “On History” begins:

Above ground I search concrete ledges, scour  
a four-lane street, pick apart a park and a statue  
of Ataturk, and try to imagine Constantinople,  
the Ottoman empire, Turkish troops marching

toward a Republic. Instead I see scenes someone  
else described: a river red with Armenian  
blood, boys hiding in building rafters –  
stories passed through generations by Kurds

and Christians.

But there’s also levity throughout this book—black humor, wry humor, and the just plain hilarious—and some of Leo Dangel’s poems are especially good examples of that. “After Forty Years of Marriage, She tries a New Recipe for Hamburger Hotdish” is as funny as its title, as is “What a Cat Can Do in Katmandu,” which ends with the poet addressing his cats thusly:

I say we split for Katmandu. Just drop  
it all, get on that long road for Nepal,  
because a cat can do in Katmandu  
what a cat can’t do in South Dakota.

Linda Hasselstrom is also capable of that kind of levity, and her “Mulch,” one of the finest poems in contemporary literature, is seriously funny, as is her “Make a Hand.” But Hasselstrom also demonstrates the great range of her writing with several deeply serious poems, especially “When a Poet Dies,” which is both an extraordinary tribute poem and one of the strongest arguments for the power and importance of poetry one will find anywhere. It concludes with these lines:

When a poet dies, someone throws a stone  
to vanish in a river rushing  
over rounded rocks and driftwood.  
In an eddy under willows, a circle grows,  
spreading outward. Water laps the shiny hooves  
of a mule deer doe stepping off a shelf of ice.  
The ripple breaks against her nose  
as she begins to drink.

The above mentioned poems are only a few of the many poems in this volume which can be read and then re-read with increasing understanding and appreciation. This collection is truly “a harvest of words.”

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does poetry mean to you?
2. What are some of your favorite poems and why?
3. What is the underlying philosophy of Evans' "The Bull Rider's Advice"?
4. What can one learn about the power of descriptive writing from Roripaugh's "Octopus in the Freezer"?
5. How does Whirlwind Soldier use metaphor to effect in "New Age"?
6. What might one learn about the art of poetry from Emmons' "The Genesis of a Poem"?
7. How does Hicks use irony to effect in "Lipstick Traces"?
8. Why is Hedge Coke's "The Change" more effective as poetry than it would be as prose?
9. How does Nystrom use history to address the present in "Regardless of the Final Score"? What are the implications of the title of that poem?
10. How does Dangel use colloquial language to effect in "Farming in a Lilac Shirt"?
11. In "In This," to whom might Cook-Lynn be speaking, and why?
12. Which of Driving Hawk Sneve's poems is the strongest affirmation of her Lakota culture? Why?
13. Why does Stewart-Nunez number the stanzas in "Seven Spills"?
14. Which poetic techniques does Hasselstrom use in "Butchering the Crippled Heifer"?
15. How does Hasselstrom use itemization to effect in "Much"?
16. William Blake invited readers to "See a World in a Grain of Sand,/ and Heaven in a Wild Flower." Which of the poems in this collection is the best demonstration of that way of seeing?
17. Which of the poems in this collection might be most likely to promote cross-cultural understanding? Why?
18. Which of the poems in this collection best characterizes the way things are in South Dakota? Why?
19. Which of the poems in this collection is your favorite? Why?
20. Would you recommend this book to other readers? Why or why not?

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE EDITOR

Patrick Hicks is the Writer-in-Residence at Augustana College and the author of five poetry collections, most recently Finding the Gossamer and This London. His work has appeared in international journals, and he has been nominated several times for the Pushcart Prize. He recently won the Glimmer Train "Emerging Writer's Fiction Award." He has been a Visiting Fellow at Oxford and has been the recipient of a number of grants, including one from the Bush Foundation to support his first novel, which is about Auschwitz. He has lived in Northern Ireland, England, Germany, and Spain, but has returned to his roots in the American Midwest.

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