

BRIAN FAWCETT / Why Sharon Thesen Doesn't Win Poetry Prizes

Sharon Thesen doesn't win poetry prizes. She's been nominated for several, but she doesn't win. How come?

It isn't lack of talent. She's among a very small group of Canadian poets who is genuinely interesting every time her pen hits the paper. She was very good 35 years ago when we were married, and she's better today, *sharper*, one of those unusual poets who has gotten better as the hormones have cleared the system. That slight Virgilian twilight that blurred some of her early poems has lifted, leaving full-colour silhouettes, fine wood grain on the incoming bludgeon, or like those sword victims from the Japanese Samurai movies, severed heads sitting on necks as if nothing and no one had been touched by the blade's sweeping arc. Not a single one of her poems has ever sounded like a machine, or like she set out to write it in the face of more practical things to be doing.

I'm tempted to think she doesn't win poetry prizes for the same reason I married her: she's a smart-alec, a woman without an earnest bone in her body, a poet whose poems spend no energy at all sanctifying this or that parcel of sentimental nonsense because they are too busy executing the many prisoners they take. Thesen herself is also intelligent, sensitive, well-read within the trade, can read her poems aloud without having to interject a "you-know" or a not-really-interrogative "eh" every 3-5 words, etc. But so are at least 200 other prize-sniffing poets across the land, not a goddamned one of whom I'd have married even if I were dead-drunk and they were proffering certified cheques for \$100 grand. She's unique, and her grasp on the ironies of human life are sublime.

I'm sometimes tempted to think that she doesn't win poetry prizes because she grew up in Northern B.C. and that this is where the smart-alec gift/curse comes from. Then I remember that I fell in love with her because she was the only competent female smart-alec I encountered while we were growing up there, the only one whose brain made music in my head. She was as unique up there as she is today at a sit-down dinner for the Writer's Development Trust: the only one in the room willing to shoot everybody. I'd like to think she fell in love with me for my smart-

alec tendencies—I didn't own a pickup truck, after all, and what else was there aside from wanting to get the hell out and be somewhere else? Was I tall or impossibly handsome? Could I play the cello, and make green ceilings turn purple? No, but I wanted to get out of town as badly as she did, and I guess that made me good enough.

We had about six years together, through most of which I behaved like a poetry-writing mandrill: I wrote lots of self-declarative verse while she typed the stencils for *Iron*, the magazine we edited together (and I took all the credit for). All the while, she was thinking carefully about what sort of poems she wanted to write.

I'm not heaping these compliments on her because I secretly think I had something important to do with her smart-alec genius. Nah. She bulldozed her way through what I knew about poetry and could do with it like a D-9 cat harvesting a stand of poplar trees. Certainly, her poems haven't spared me. She's documented, in about a half-dozen lines, what a shithead I was while I was a young man (which I don't dispute) and what a crappy marriage we had (which in my view had its more-than-good-moments despite episodes of lousy behavior from both child-bride and child-groom. After I read the lines she wrote about me I tugged gently on my topknot to see if my head was still attached to my body. It wasn't, but then it wasn't supposed to be, right?

And anyway, all of these private reminiscences beg the looming question of what exactly it is that makes a prize-winning poet, which is what will explain why Sharon Thesen doesn't win prizes for her poetry much more accurately than any of this cultural history. So let's see: to win poetry prizes in Canada, your poems must deploy the following properties, and you, as poet, must exhibit the following personality traits:

a) Both poems and poet must exhibit a powerful and recurring streak of earnestness. I list this first because it might actually be the most important component to prize-worthiness, given that there are several hundred prize-capable poets running around the country sincerely declaring their allegiance to whatever generalities are wafting on the Zeitgeist that day, mothers milk, equality of the sexes, the Armed Forces, the Prime Minister's fat behind. It's enough to make a man decide that irony and prize-winning poets are natural enemies. At the core of a prize-winning poem is unspoken abstraction: the nation; the national literature; love of god or one's loved ones; poetry itself, all in flamboyant upper case. Sharon Thesen's poems put up with none of these, or with any other

abstraction that dictates the nouns and verbs of the poem, even silently. Her verse is what poetry ought to be: utterly unpredictable; each thing present on its own terms, each action never to occur again.

b) The prize-winning poet must treat her or himself as illustrative of repetitious tropes. If female, her heavy thighs must quiver only with archetypal desire. If male, his bony throb must be that of Zeus, Maurice Richard, or Stockwell Day. There is a required shamelessness, in other words, a presumption that, well, Carl Jung would be fascinated. One's lips must remain firmly glued to the ass of the Sacred. You don't get a moment of this in Thesen's poems.

c) The prize-winning poet must campaign patiently for awards: treat all prospective jurors as if they were as interesting as Jackie Kennedy; fawn over every arts bureaucrat as if he/she were the federal Heritage minister or the Queen of Diamonds; attend every poetry launch, cocktail party; sit through—with head cocked attentively and without losing consciousness—the interminable semi-public outbursts of hubris and self-declarative puke we call poetry readings. Thesen has never been very good at these tricks, never a woman to suffer fools without grumbling, and even today she seems to be unable to bite her lip for longer than a few seconds, whether she's inside or outside a poem.

d) The Prize-winning poet must crave public recognition, and be willing to sacrifice love, liberty and first-born children, shirk public and private sense and crawl-along-belly like-a-reptile to win prizes. Thesen has seldom shown interest in prizes and prizewinning, and at this point I see no evidence that she'd walk across the street to win a poetry prize.

Sharon Thesen doesn't win poetry prizes because the judges can't trust her not to turn on them and what they find palatable to get a better, sharper poem next time. She is the poet whose books of poems are never found lying atop the face or chest of a sleeping person.

In this country, that might be the only poetry prize worth winning.