A Hunter’s Confession
by David Carpenter

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Although I once earned marksman badges in pistol and rifle shooting, I personally have never hunted. But living in rural Manitoba in the last half of the twentieth century, I participated in the rewards of hunting—venison steak, roast duck, pheasant, and partridge, and later, moose stew, ground moose spaghetti sauce, sucker antipasto, fish fillets. Once in BC I ate bear sausage, and, of course, much canned moose meat, and much gifted wild salmon. So for me, hunting and fishing are always linked to eating, to subsistence or augmented food sources. The idea of sport hunting is just not part of the cultures I’ve lived in. And the idea of the adventure of the chase and catch is also not part of my experience. I chose to read David Carpenter’s A Hunter’s Confession because, in my jumble of clippings, I have an old article by Carpenter, I think from Western Living, about a hunting trip with the late iconic American writer Raymond Carver. That clippings file also includes an article on the sacrament of hunting and an old photocopy of an Ernest Thompson Seton story. So Carpenter’s hunting theme connects to both my personal history and my literary interests.

The Hunter’s Confession, although ”a serious book about hunting” (2), its culture and history, is also a story about why the writer hunted and then abandoned hunting. Carpenter braids both themes together, presenting, in chronological order, chapters about the adolescent lust for manhood, action and killing; a history of hunting; life lessons and dawning awareness of dissonance in the world; women and Aboriginal hunters; the pleasures of the escape; the changes that happen in our psyche when the blood is our own; and finally, the possibility of a mutually sustainable relationship with ”the wild.” Each chapter combines first-person narrative with literary, historic, or academic references to that topic. It is memoir, clustered around outdoor adventure, linked like fish hooked on a chronological dragline, and retold in the light of a life-changing personal crisis.

I much prefer the memoir aspect of this book. Carpenter’s life includes enough interesting characters, familiar places (or at least places familiar to me, making me homesick for the North and the Cree), conflict, and excitement. However, Carpenter chooses to use the life writing as a device providing a logical ingress to the theme of hunting in literature and mythology, in Aboriginal, British, and American culture. I could have done without most of the anthropology and all of the footnotes, which make it read like a dissertation. (I do confess that I have noted names and titles from the sources section and added them to my To Read list.) Carpenter’s life-changing decision to abandon the chase is not, however, based upon increasing self-actualization, on personal growth, the development of a higher stage of moral reasoning, or the development of a spiritual consciousness. Rather it is the result of a near-death situation and a bargaining: “Get me through this, Lord, and I’ll do this other for you.” A sacrifice.

The historical aspect A Hunter’s Confession is weakened by a couple of absences. First, there seems to be no exploration or challenge to the idea that changing attitudes towards hunting are an evolution, implying an improvement. For example, Carpenter cites Teddy Roosevelt as the great hunter of his era being photographed with his kill, something no president would ever do today. Yet, in failing to mention the “teddy bear,” Carpenter skips the fact that most of today’s young people
base their attitudes towards wild animals on the emotional bonds they have to the stuffed toys in their bedroom. It is a different world, true. But is it necessarily a better world? Perhaps the anti-hunting lobby is skewed by people who are bonded to inanimate objects and who have no experience of the real world of nature and wild creatures. My other disappointment is that the attitudes and references, with Coleridge as the exception, are much too American. If you’re really looking for a book about hunting, read Jake MacDonald’s With the Boys. Or, better still, read Ernest Thompson Seton’s The Trail of the Sandhill Stag, set firmly in southern Manitoba, about the development of a hunter over the years—skills, connection to the land, the social aspect of the hunt, questionable interpretation of observed animal behaviour, the hunter’s feeling when he becomes the prey, and finally, in a scene abducted by “the monarch of the glen” and The Queen, spiritual growth taking the narrator beyond the “dominion over the land” into something more profound. To me this Victorian-era tale is the ultimate Canadian hunting story—with enough hyperbole and just a hint of anthropomorphism to keep the discussion going. Yet it is not mentioned by Carpenter in his pages of footnotes.

But I’m not saying here that you should avoid A Hunter’s Confession. I recommend it as a well-written memoir about the life of one man in western Canada at the end of the twentieth century. Read about father-son relationships, male bonding and hazing rituals, teacher and adult pupil interactions, our relationship to First Nations people (who may teach us, quoting writer Barry Lopez, that “a spiritual landscape exists within the physical landscape” (160), how new ways are interfering with the old, the unexpected way in which the routine can become life-threatening, and the way, in our panic, we attempt to bargain with fate. Looking back, with his new awareness of self as nearing an end, Carpenter shows us how his attitudes towards life and death changed and developed with age and experience. Although he does not preach, Carpenter dreams that a youth of the future generation will emerge as “one of those hunters who become guardians of habitat, who walk the woods with reverence, and who gain a great abiding love for the wild creatures they pursue” (232). The fact that there is no “one-size fits all,” whether we are speaking of Gore-Tex or ethics, is another recommendation for this book. ♦

J. M. Bridgeman was born in Rivers and writes from the Fraser Valley.

Buy A Hunter’s Confession at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):