

More Reviews of Kansas Notable Books

Angle of Yaw

by Ben Lerner

Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2006

Reviewed by Tom Averill

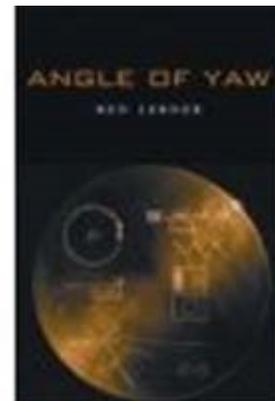
Topeka native Ben Lerner took the title of his first collection of poems, *The Lichtenberg Figures*, Copper Canyon, 2004, from the fern leaf patterns that can appear on surfaces after a lightning strike. His professor from Brown University called the book, “An argument with America in the American language, Topeka talk, real time.”

Lerner continues this argument with his striking poetry in *Angle of Yaw*. This time, the metaphor is “yaw,” the angle at which we perceive the world on the vertical axis. In other words, as the epigraph by Walter Benjamin suggests, the flat page of the book has been replaced by the vertically held newspaper, the television screen, the film, the billboard. Lerner teaches us how we see, what we see, and how what we see affects our perception. In this book of mostly prose poems, we encounter a detective pushing pins into a map at the sites of murders, the murderer knowingly murdering in a pattern until the detective’s pins make a smiley face. We learn that hideaway beds were not created to increase space in a room, but to hide the “unseemly reality of prostration”; that “the bees we sent to space stopped making honey”; that “Our bombs are dropped from such altitudes, our wars have ended by the time they reach their targets.”

Lerner’s language is deliberately sly, surprising, full of puns and seeming non sequiturs that add up to uncommon sense. The poems are philosophical, intellectual, political, but also full of popular culture the shared history of disasters from Challenger to 9/11. Lerner wants us to think about where we’ve been as a culture, and where we’re going. As he said in an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* last November: “Watching regional culture get replaced by its image was one of my formative experiences growing up in Topeka, and it is a recurrent theme in my writing.... *Angle of Yaw* is largely concerned with simulation—with video games, the suburban, technologies of viewing, etc.—with how public life has been usurped by spectacle.

These are certainly relevant to my growing up in the ‘heartland’ in the ‘80s.”

The final poem of *Angle of Yaw*, “Twenty-one Gun Salute for Ronald Reagan,” contains the line, “The play is making Hamlet’s mother uncomfortable.” In the same way, these poems often make us squirm. The book was one of five finalists for the National Book Award last year. As a judge of that competition noted: “The sights here are not welcome to the eye, as it is our ‘radical emotional incapacitation’ being shown. Violence absorbs the background. No offhanded commentary, no prophecies, no reassurances are given here. Instead, a sane voice orbiting the failed authority of a culture. Instead, there is the



radiant sanity of dissent."

Read this book, head bowed in humility, mind delighted, and you will suddenly see the world from the angle of a fresh young poet.

Kansas Murals: A Traveler's Guide, by Lora Jost and Dave Loewenstein
Reviewed by Roger Carswell

Lora Jost and Dave Loewenstein have done a service for Kansans in writing their fine book *Kansas Murals: A Traveler's Guide*, published by the University Press of Kansas. Both visually attractive and full of information, the book fills a need we may not even have realized we had.

While the book is, as the subtitle suggests, useful to those who wish to see murals in their travels, its usefulness is much broader than that. It serves to document publicly accessible mural art in the state, and is a valuable overview of the topic as well. Muralists themselves, Jost and Loewenstein traveled the state to find, photograph and research murals. The book contains 90 photographs of murals, along with a page of information about each one. An appendix lists many more; the authors estimate Kansas has over 600 public murals.

The foreword and introduction convey much information. We learn about the wide variety of places murals can be found, from churches to post offices to outside walls on buildings. We learn about the different ways murals came to be. Some murals in Wamego were painted for the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, and brought to the town by a local businessman after the Fair ended. The WPA and Treasury Department commissioned many murals for public buildings during the Great Depression. In recent years, many murals have been community projects to spruce up and build pride in home towns.

Mural making enjoyed a renaissance beginning around 1980. More than 80% of the murals the authors discovered were created since 1980. Most of these, unlike earlier murals, were created outdoors rather than in interior spaces.

Muralists themselves, Loewenstein and Jost know their subject and have produced a work which is truly notable.

