

The Skunk Creek Trilogy. Author: Todd Parnell

Skunk Creek (2015)

Swine Branch (2016)

Donny Brook (2017)

Pen-L Publishing, Fayetteville, Arkansas

A Review by Hayden Head

I have found that my review of Todd Parnell's *Skunk Creek Trilogy* resembles a rolling snowball picking up speed: with every turn of phrase, the adjectives keep accumulating. Audacious, outrageous, and perspicacious. Humorous, scandalous, and frivolous. Provocative and evocative. Parnell's *Skunk Creek Trilogy* is the yellow-eyed child of the unfettered imagination of the ultimate Rotarian: former bank president, college president, and board chairman of the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce. Undoubtedly, Parnell's closest friends have long been familiar with his flights of fancy that, like Icarus, may be compelled to undertake a dangerous landing. The rest of us can only watch through our fingers.

Perhaps the best way to proceed is by presenting four facts. First and foremost, Todd Parnell loves the Ozarks and Ozarks culture. In fact, he writes with the express intention of following in the great tradition of Ozarks folklore. (By the way, if you think *The Skunk Creek Trilogy* is a bit, shall we say, earthy, just reread the bawdy folktales of Vance Randolph. You'll find that Parnell's salaciousness is actually pretty tame by comparison.)

Parnell's characters may engage in various illegal but profitable businesses, and they may wander off the marital reservation from time to time, but they never betray their Ozarks authenticity. We've all known (more or less) a Sheriff Sephus Adonis or an Editor-in-Chief Pierce Arrow, and most of us have eaten at some version of Tiny Taylor's diner. We've honored heroes like Lucas Jones and not a few menfolk have pined for a Florence Hormel. But as lascivious and wayward as Parnell's characters might be, they remain true to the clumsy cavalcade of Ozarkers who preceded them.

Second, Parnell loves the hills and caves and rivers of the Ozarks. Especially, the rivers. He has served on the boards of the Upper White River Basin Foundation, the James River Basin Partnership, the Missouri Clean Water Commission, and the Nature Conservancy of Missouri. He cares about endangered species like the hellbender, an ugly critter that would have been roundly denounced by the laws of Leviticus had it lived in the Jordan River. And he loathes the greed and political chicanery that would permit a CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation) of some 6000 hogs with its attendant hog waste lagoons and hog waste dispersal to be built just a few miles from one of the most beautiful rivers in the United States, the Buffalo River.

I am supposing—and that's what it is, a supposal—that *Skunk Creek* (published in 2015) is Parnell's response to the approval of the C & H Hog Farm CAFO in 2012, an approval bestowed, I might add, with no public input. As evidence, consider this excerpt from an article written by Jonathan Hahn and published in the Sierra Club online newsletter on February 24, 2017:

[A] Regulation 6 permit allowed the farm to come into operation with no site-specific conditions. Little was done to take into account the specific geology on which the operation would be located. The original application for the permit made no reference to the Buffalo River. It did mention the CAFO would be built on Big Creek, but identified it as being on the White River watershed, not the Buffalo River watershed—a significant omission. Just as significant, the application didn't mention that the geology of the area is made of karst—a porous form of limestone and other soluble rocks particularly susceptible to groundwater contamination. The Buffalo watershed has a lot of sinkholes and caves; when it rains, everything flushes right down into the river.

Well, this is precisely what happens to Skunk Creek when it becomes *Swine Branch* (the title of Parnell's second book). A spring flood of Noachian proportions washes out the banks of the pig waste lagoons and dumps the whole stinking mess into pristine Skunk Creek. The creek is spoiled, the hellbender is all but wiped out, and the characters of Hardleyville sink into depression.

I will forego explaining how the whole catastrophe is in part remedied by the intervention of the president of the United States. I will also forego a description of the three bloated bodies that float down Swine Branch into Hardleyville, thereby alerting the good citizens that the Demon Woman is back. (You may wish to heed this caution in the publisher's description of *Skunk Creek*: "Warning: Do not read if you blush or tire easily." Said warning could apply to all three of Parnell's books. Having fulfilled my role as prim and proper gatekeeping reviewer, I will continue.)

Third principle: Todd Parnell doesn't care what you think. Oh, he may say he means no harm. That you shouldn't take offense. In his words, "Earthy and ribald moments are meant to soften body blows and bring an occasional chuckle, not to offend" (*Donny Brook* viii). That he means well: "Herein I have sought to meld the tragic with the exaggerated to honor the mythical Arcadia of ancient lore and the dogged resilience of a people and place beset with myriad contemporary challenges" (ibid).

But Parnell's indifference to mores, his insouciance, and his *joie de vivre* are necessary ingredients for telling his tale the way he wants to tell it. Perhaps it's not that he doesn't care what you think: He *mustn't care* if he's going to tell *his* story. How else could he introduce the Demon Woman leader of a cult that worships the Great Mother? How else could he describe the death of his hero Lucas Jones, done to death by the Demon Woman?

How else could he depict the interplay of his libidinous characters, including Pastor Pat, the ecumenically minded preacher of the Skunk Creek Church of Christ? This is folklore, folks! And folklore will take you to places you both want to go and dread to go. The choice is up to you whether you do go. Don't blame me. And don't blame Todd Parnell.

And here's the fourth and final principle, the one that redeems all in spite of scandalous tête-à-têtes and slit throats: "Love wins." That may sound trite until you think of what that little sentence could mean for humanity. In *Donny Brook*, the third book of the trilogy, "love wins" means that even in the teeth of our mortality, babies are born and marriages are restored. Sacrifices are made and families reunited. And regardless of how puissant evil may seem, in the end, that old serpent in Eden will devour its own tale.

In short, Todd Parnell gives us Ozarkers hope that maybe, just maybe, the greed and chicanery and shortsightedness of boorish and powerful people will ultimately bow to the true, good, and beautiful. And of course, the true, good, and beautiful—in spite of their flaws and frequent lapses in judgment—are the people who live in the Ozarks, and the hills and caves and rivers those people call home. All in all, not bad work for an ex-college president.