

*Direct Action: Memoirs of an Urban Guerrilla*

Ann Hansen

Toronto: Between the Lines, 2001. 493 pp. \$19.95 paper.

*Guilty of Everything*

John Armstrong

Vancouver: Transmontanus/New Star Books, 2001.  
98 pp. CDN\$16/US\$12 paper.

SCOTT BEADLE

*Vancouver*

THE AUTHORS OF *Direct Action* and *Guilty of Everything* made their mark in BC popular culture during the first few years of the 1980s. John Armstrong was a creative force in Vancouver's independent rock music scene, while Ann Hansen made her mark with a bang – literally – as a member of the urban guerrilla group Direct Action, better known after their arrest as the Squamish Five.

Authors Hansen and Armstrong revisit and confront their respective cultural legacies. Both works are autobiographical and explore a narrow segment of the authors' lives soon after they had come of age.

Some reviewers will inevitably link *Direct Action* and *Guilty of Everything* with Vancouver's punk rock subculture – indeed, that is why they are being reviewed together. In Armstrong's case the punk link is self-evident because his story directly concerns his role in Vancouver's then developing punk scene. Hansen, on the other hand, is only distantly and accidentally related to punk, so this linkage is a bit misleading. However, *Direct Action* does offer a glimpse of the relationships

that were formed between some of the city's radical activists and punks in the late 1970s.

Although it is possible that Hansen and Armstrong crossed paths at a punk concert at the Oddfellows Hall, or rubbed elbows at the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret, they probably did not know each other at all. Armstrong and Hansen tell two different, but not necessarily opposed, sides of the punk experience. Hansen's story is concerned with the nature of political activism, commitment, self-doubt, and the gritty day-to-day realities of being an urban guerrilla. Armstrong, mirroring the nature of his musical contributions, is totally unconcerned with punk's political dimensions; rather, he focuses on the romance of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle and its outlaw mystique. Their stories are representative of the polarities of attitudes that existed at the core of the punk experience: one camp saw punk as a musical and artistic rebellion – an embattled, romantic reclamation of rock's lost passions; while the other camp saw it as a socio-political rebellion, an expression of the desire for change, and an opportunity for

radical agitation. In punk's early days, these tendencies formed a more or less natural alliance; but during the 1980s the punk movement began splintering across these and other lines.

While the audience for *Guilty of Everything* will be more or less limited to those interested in the history of Vancouver's independent rock music, the appeal and significance of *Direct Action* goes well beyond its minor but interesting connections with Vancouver punk rock. It should be remembered that, during their spectacular trial, Hansen and her co-conspirators were nearly household names in Canada, making headlines as the country's first post-FLQ guerrilla group. In 1982 Ann Hansen, Brent Taylor, Doug Stewart, Julie Belmas, and Gerry Hannah began a bombing and arson campaign that eventually culminated in their arrest in January 1983 on a highway just north of Vancouver. Dubbed the Squamish Five (after their place of capture) by local news media, they were charged with blowing up a BC Hydro substation on Vancouver Island, blowing up a Litton Systems plant in Toronto, and helping to fire-bomb some Red Hot Video stores in Vancouver. They were finally apprehended while in the final stages of planning an armed robbery of a Brinks guard in a Burnaby shopping mall.

Hansen was an activist in the Toronto area in the mid-1970s. At a political conference in Toronto she met Vancouverite Brent Taylor, and she was drawn to his infectious energy and activist inclinations. They became fast friends, and a couple of years later Hansen visited Vancouver and looked up Taylor to renew their acquaintance. Hansen stayed in Vancouver and eventually moved in with Taylor as their mutual political and intellectual attraction transformed into romantic involvement.

Taylor was already a veteran of a Yippie-inspired group called the Groucho-Marxists. In 1977 Taylor "pied" a visiting Joe Clark at UBC, the first of several pie-throwing incidents for which the Groucho-Marxists were notorious in Vancouver. The Grouchos were a radical clique comprised of student activists, Yippies, former *Georgia Straight* staffers, and founders of the anarchist paper *Open Road*. In 1978 the Anarchist Party of Canada (Groucho-Marxist) organized a May Day anarchist festival in Stanley Park that included a few local punk bands. The organizers followed that up with an Anti-Canada Day punk rock concert in Stanley Park in July. These events marked the start of a lengthy relationship between this group of activists and some key punk rockers. Two members of this anarchist-Yippie axis, Ken Lester and David Spaner, became the managers of seminal Vancouver punk bands DOA and the Subhumans, respectively.

Future *Direct Action* members Gerry Hannah and Julie Belmas were both active in the punk scene. Hannah, as Gerry Useless, was a bass player and one of the songwriters for the Subhumans. Belmas also played bass, and, in 1980, she co-wrote a punk "fanzine" called *Opposition*. After Hannah quit the Subhumans in 1981, the two began living together. It was Brent Taylor who introduced Hannah and Belmas into the small circle of political activists that included Ann Hansen and Doug Stewart.

In *Direct Action*, Hansen weaves a tale that is very readable and perhaps surprisingly enjoyable. She carries the reader effortlessly through a cinematic-style narrative, populated by believably complicated characters, and she builds suspense like an accomplished fiction writer. Its only weakness is that,

because Hansen is from Toronto, she is not able to provide a historical background or context for Vancouver's anarchist-activist underground. She engages in some slight fictionalization – for instance, a composite police investigator character was created to help tell “the other side” – but this does not impede an essential sense of accuracy. The quality of Hansen's writing is much greater than is usually expected for works of this nature.

Sadly, the same cannot be said for John Armstrong's slim memoir. As Buck Cherry, Armstrong was the singer, guitarist, and songwriter for the Modernettes, arguably Vancouver's finest pop-punk band of the early 1980s. *Guilty of Everything* chronicles Armstrong's career from his first band in White Rock in 1977 to his tenure in Los Popularos, a group that also featured Armstrong's friend and mentor Art Bergmann. Armstrong's narrative ends abruptly when he quits Los Popularos before its ill-fated move to Toronto. He does not describe the reforming of the Modernettes or his semi-retirement into journalism (he wrote for the *Georgia Straight* before becoming an entertainment columnist for a major daily newspaper).

Where Hansen is able to describe inner turmoil and self-doubt, Armstrong's writing is notable for its lack of personal insight. There is little vulnerability to Armstrong's Buck Cherry character; there is no awkward transformation or embarrassing past. Any embarrassing revelations invariably involve other people, not Armstrong. One of the most interesting things about punk was the way that individuals who were often outcasts or misfits felt they could reinvent themselves, carve new personae, lifestyles, and avenues for self-expression within the precincts of an encouraging subculture. Armstrong seems to want us to believe that he has always been “cool.”

When Jean Smith's *Ghost of Under-standing* was released a few years ago, it was criticized for its lack of historical insight into Vancouver's punk subculture. That criticism was a little unfair as it was ostensibly a work of fiction. However, it is not unfair, in this case, to say that *Guilty of Everything* suffers glaringly from a lack of historical context. We learn little or nothing about the other bands and individuals that made the Vancouver punk scene – and stories like Armstrong's – possible.