

**‘Direct Action: Memoirs of an
Urban Guerrilla’ Reviewed by
Jonathan Slyk**

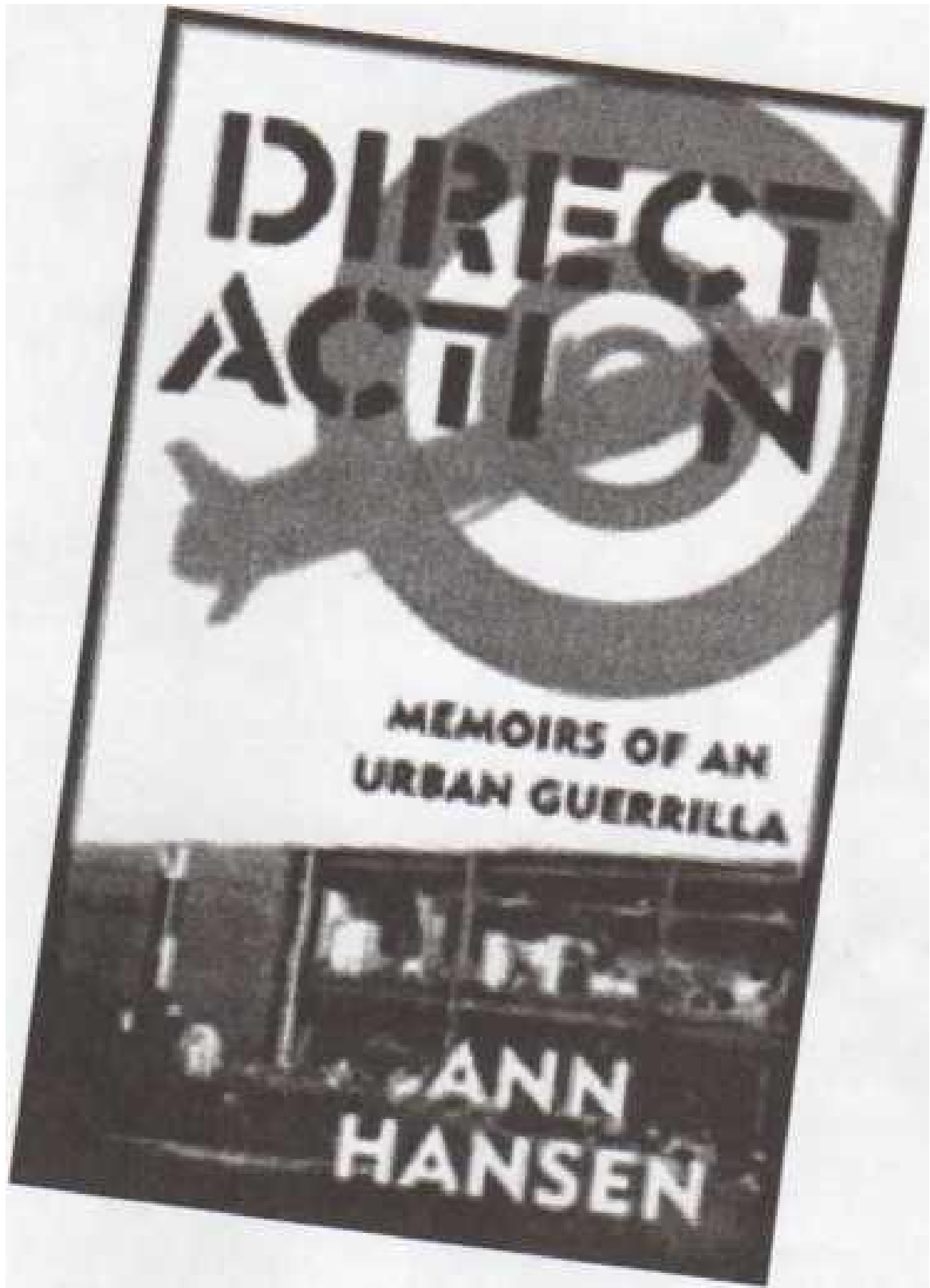
2002

Direct Action: Memoirs of an Urban Guerrilla by Ann Hansen (Between the Lines, 720 Bathurst St, Suite 404, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 2R4, Canada, www.btlbooks.com; and AK Press, 674-A 23rd St, Oakland, CA 94612-1163, & POB 12766, Edinburgh, EH8 9YE, Scotland, www.akpress.org; 2001) 493 pp. \$19.95 paper.

From the opening pages describing the spectacular arrest on a winding mountain highway to the finely-grained portraits of daily existence within the claustrophobic world of underground sabotage, this sprawling adventure reads at times so much like a plot lifted from an espionage thriller that it's hard to imagine such remarkable events occurring in a young, white, idealistic woman's life. But for the author, living the dream as an urban guerrilla was anything but glamorous, even though there were occasional thrills and moments of triumph.

In the early 1980s, Ann Hansen was part of a west coast anarchist group that would go on to engage in the most notorious antiauthoritarian armed resistance in Canadian history. Calling itself Direct Action, the five-member cell began a D.I.Y. lifestyle that included shoplifting, dumpster diving and auto theft before stepping up to what culminated in the bombings of both a B.C. Hydro substation on Vancouver Island and a cruise missile guidance system manufacturing plant in Toronto. This was back in the days when *direct action* meant something more than giant street puppets or going limp at demos. A time when punk, peace, anti-nuclear and environmental protests all converged in a way not dissimilar to today's anti-globalization movement. The exploits of Hansen, Brent Taylor, Doug Stewart, Gerry Hannah and Julie Belmas, later dubbed "The Squamish Five" by the media (after the nearby logging town where they were eventually arrested), reached national cult status by the time of their capture and subsequent trial, but within a few short years had receded into relative obscurity. All received lengthy prison sentences. Hansen, the eldest, got life and did seven years of hard time before being paroled.

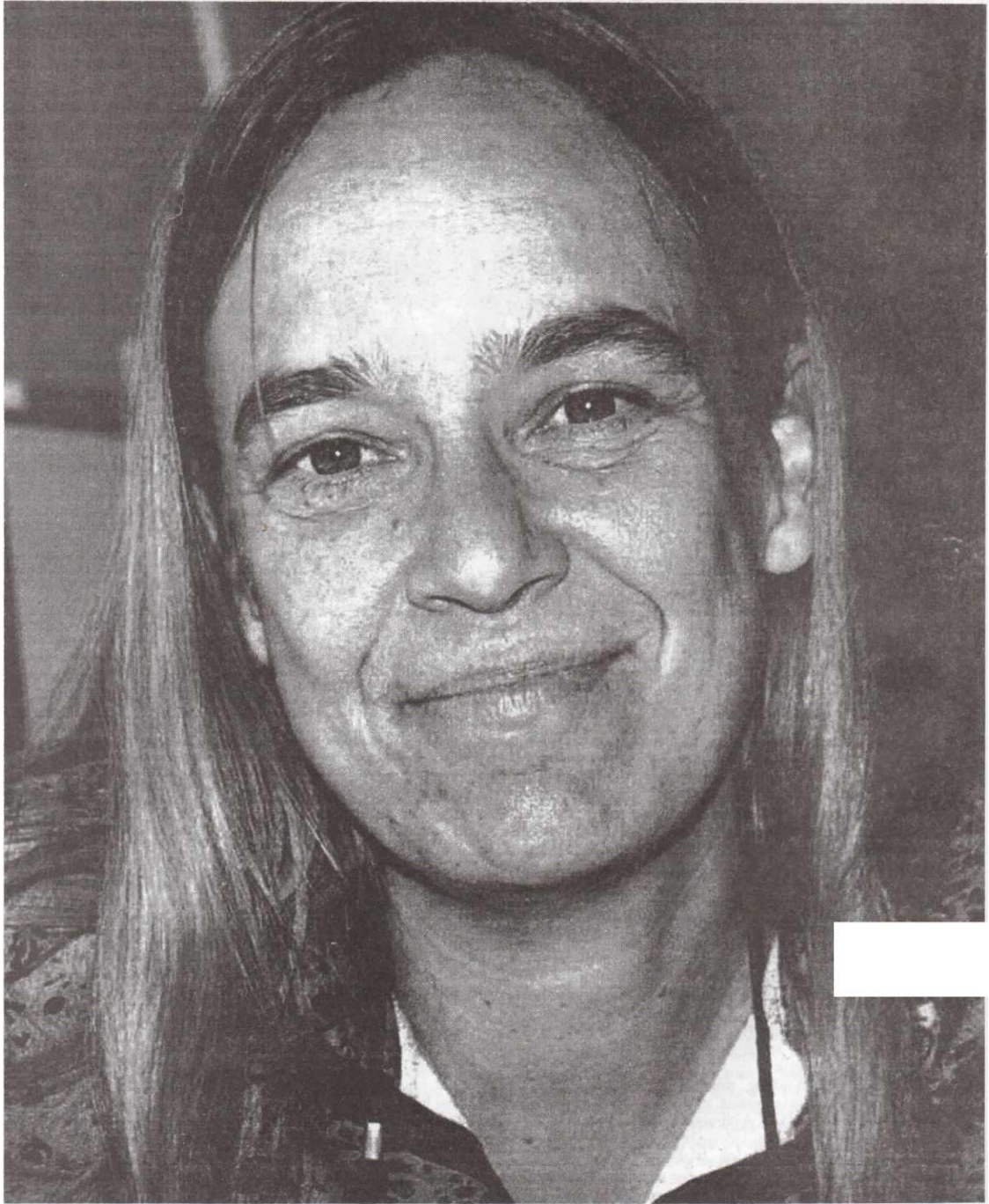
Expecting a tough-talking, streetwise excon, I was somewhat surprised to hear a warm voice sounding like a children's librarian on the other end of the phone. "What do you think of the cover?" she asked me nervously. "Do you think it's, you know, too similar to those planes and buildings in New York?" As fate would have it, the first copies of *Direct Action* landed on the Toronto publisher's desk the morning of September 11. Not surprisingly, the book's release was delayed for a month. Also previously receiving the manuscript were three of the other four former members—who gave their approval. Hysteria over terrorism and the current fear surrounding dissent have kept publicity and speaking engagements low profile.



Several weeks after our initial conversation, at an all-day grill in downtown Vancouver, Ann Hansen and I are wolfing down breakfast and talking about politics, running a small business and the book that finally spells out what really happened all those years ago. Hansen, who by law cannot receive money from the book, says the writing experience was cathartic. “When I got out of prison, my whole political identity was disintegrated. It took me ten years just to recover emotionally. It was only after my cabinet-making business ended, when I was mentally more free, that I started to think about that period in my life again.” The memoir, she says, was intended as both an historical document and a cautionary tale for would-be guerrillas. Yet it can also serve as a basis for discussion around tactics (which are explicitly detailed), since it highlights the uneasy relationship between pacifists and more militant activists and discloses some of the righteous condemnation that often divides the wider milieu in general.

The sense of time and place in British Columbia are accurately conveyed, as is most of the political dialogue, reflecting a local anarchist scene that was strongly influenced by eco-feminism. Direct Action’s critique of civilization was at least as sophisticated as any other of the time, which, considering it was largely an intuitive grasp of Leviathan by individuals in their early twenties, and Perlman’s classic work *Against His-Story* had yet to come out, is a tribute to their nascent understanding. Access to thousands of pages of police wiretap and bug surveillance transcripts allowed Hansen to literally recreate verbatim much of the psycho-dynamics among the group members, producing a slice of reality that is dramatic without being maudlin. And the narrative device of interspersing the cops’ perspectives, whose characters are fictionalized, helps to heighten the sense of jeopardy. My only problem with the book is it seems overly drawn-out with the entire last quarter devoted to preparation for a Brink’s robbery, and no less than three pages elsewhere concerning a haircut at a beauty school. Meandering details tend to make this otherwise extraordinary and intensely moving account drag in places. “But that’s what our lives were like toward the end,” explains Hansen. “I wanted to describe the action, but also those times of monotony and boredom we faced.” The story’s denouement is handled in the epilogue, where, in the sagacious final paragraphs, the author’s own hard-won thoughts on tactics affirm an unwavering militancy.

Written with passion and a fearless honesty, *Direct Action* will likely set the gold standard for contemporary anarchist memoirs, if not for its superior writing then for its relevance for today’s struggles around globalization, eco-defence and the “war on terrorism.” Reading about the promise and perils of direct action, the personal doubts and the philosophical contradictions reminded me of Derrick Jensen’s poignant line: “Every morning when I wake up, I ask myself whether I should write or blow up a dam.” Ambivalence over choosing the pen or the sword is not an uncommon feeling for many of us. Of course it doesn’t have to be either/or, and our gift is that Ann Hansen—a real life warrior princess—has now done both.



Ann Hansen, author of *Direct Action: Memoirs of an Urban Guerrilla*. Photo ©2002 Peter Steven (thanks to *Between the Lines*).

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