

Mary Ann Loewen, ed. *Sons and Mothers: Stories from Mennonite Men*. Regina, SK: University of Regina Press, 2015.

Ably edited and critically introduced by Mary Ann Loewen, *Sons and Mothers: Stories from Mennonite Men* is a welcome entry into the burgeoning fields of Mennonite memoir and life writing, as well as a compelling case study in the adage that all writing is ultimately autobiography. *Sons and Mothers* includes a dozen contributions of prose and poetry from Mennonite Canadian men of Swiss or Russian descent.

Loewen uses her introduction to ground the collection in recent Mennonite life writing, as well as the broader critical conversations that inform the project. Noting that the idea for the book came from a question raised at the launch for Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast's *Mothering Mennonite* (Demeter Press, 2013), Loewen positions this collection as an important supplement to the earlier book, even as she anticipates a challenge to its differently gendered frame. "[I]t is not only *politically correct* to allow men to tell stories about women; it is imperative that both genders tell their life stories for only when men and women work together is the gender divide likely to dissolve," she writes. "[W]hat makes these particular narratives legitimate," she continues, "is that they are written from the sons' perspectives."

One could question the decision to frame these debates with a language of "political correctness" or a singular "gender divide," but the collection as a whole justifies Loewen's larger arguments: that the particular form of truth being sought and found in the collection is explicitly personal; that the story-telling process is central to both the construction and comprehension of self and community; and that the mother-son relationship is a key and underexplored component of the emerging conversation about motherhood and Mennonites.

The collection is notable for its intimate and often beautiful writing, as well as the mosaic-like portraits of Mennonite mothers that it constructs through historical detailing, personal anecdotes, and community narratives. A number of contributors aim to trace the full arc of their mothers' lives, or, as in Lloyd Ratzlaff's strong piece, focus on their mothers' final days. Others explore the complicated legacies that their mothers have left behind, as in Andrew C. Martin's open and challenging essay. Several pieces, including those by Paul Tiessen and John Rempel, are deeply affecting, offering

contemplative and careful accounts of complex women. Others are more playful, including Lukas Thiessen's interview with Mennonite mothers about dating and sexuality, and Bryon Rempel's episodic romp, "Fifteen Ways to a More Beautiful You."

Numerous threads link the essays, including religion (most commonly presented as a barrier to overcome), and food, which plays exactly as consistent a role as one would imagine in a book written by Mennonite men about their mothers. What may be most clear across the collection, however, is the men's deep respect for their mothers, which is evident even where the relationship is strained, and which in a number of pieces verges on veneration. Only one author goes so far as to suggest "Maybe the world doesn't need God so much as everyone needs my mom," but several are happy to concede that they effectively worshipped their mothers in their youth. It is a theme that should be a reminder of the very personal lens through which these stories are presented, as well as of the heavy demands these authors place upon their subjects.

Loewen deserves credit for shining a light on a perhaps surprisingly neglected relationship in the patriarchal structure of Mennonite life, and for bringing together this collection of essays. Its audience will include not only the broader reading public and the smaller Mennonite community, but also a deeply invested group of friends and family members with their own memories of the sons and mothers in question. Indeed, watching the authors negotiate these multiple audiences makes for fascinating reading, and there is a gentle irony in the fact that the strongest pieces are about women who have already passed away.

Perhaps it was inevitable that *Sons and Mothers* would tell us more about its contributors than it does their Mennonite mothers, but Loewen, well aware of the project's complexities, gracefully prepares us for this discovery and encourages us to appreciate its full meaning. "Surely *the act of remembering* deepens the original experience," she writes, adding that "the story gradually unfolds itself as it becomes part of a life's (indeed, a son's) greater narrative."

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