

Writing towards Home: A Prodigal Daughter Looks Back

Darcie Friesen Hossack

Thank you so much, Hildi, for welcoming me here tonight. Listening just now, I kept trying to spot this Darcie Friesen Hossack you speak of. I have a copy of her book and would like to point out some typos. Like, on page 80, where two words are repeated in the middle of a line—and not for effect. And on page 88, where the word “door” is used three times in the space of just one-and-a-quarter paragraphs. I’ve also heard a few other things I think you should all know about this so-called Friesen. That she pulled up her Mennonite roots when she was 13 years old and spent more than a decade as a Seventh-day Adventist. Or that she didn’t know the name of a single Mennonite author until she was almost 30. And more, she’s Mennonite on her mother’s side only and is therefore not really entitled to the name Friesen. All I can say is that she’s lucky her readers, and also the literary press, have been very forgiving.

Several months ago, when I was first asked to step up to this stage, I knew I had to say yes before taking any time to think about today when I’d actually stand here in my size seven shoes, in the footsteps of giants, the floor still warm from the feet of a Giller Prize winner. If I thought about it right now, I can tell you that the marrow in my bones would be wobbling like the jelly salad at a Mennonite potluck, and one of you would have to scurry up here with a handful of paper napkins to scoop me up.

For the last month, however, while preparing what I wanted to say tonight, I did dare to peek at the online videos of this reading and lecture series. It was Patrick Friesen who unknowingly sent a snipping of courage in my direction when he said that he, and just about every other Mennonite author in the Western world, has at one time or another slept in Hildi and Paul’s guest room. Well, I thought, sharing a mattress must make us some kind of kin. And if I can manage to fall asleep in a bed with some very illustrious dust mites indeed, maybe I’ll wake up and not think I’m still dreaming.

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As a wannabe author, which I was until about ten minutes ago, and will be again in about an hour, I learned to have expansive dreams but to keep them in an airtight box. To write as though it matters but expect no one will notice. To be noticed by Hildi, then, who's spent a career ensuring that the brightest voices of an entire tradition have been heard in a crowded room, is one of the greatest, unlooked-for blessings I never saw coming.

So, before I get to *Mennonites Don't Dance*, I'd like to express my gratitude. Thank you, Hildi, for bringing me here, giving me a home while away from home. Thank you for allowing me to sleep where great writers have slept, and for gathering me under your umbrella.

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Fourteen years ago, the first time I decided to write a book that I'm willing to admit to, I was told that to write well, I would have to write what I know. So, naturally, being the granddaughter of Dutch Mennonites and having travelled as far east as Winnipeg, I did the sensible thing. I began a novel—about India. My thought was that I could learn something I didn't previously know, and therefore avoid writing about the prairies, grasshoppers, hard winters, things fried in lard and other subjects no one, surely, wanted to read about anyway.

If I learned something new, I also wouldn't have to meddle with stories and themes that would later shock and annoy my family, whether Mennonite or—when I yoke them together with the other side of my family for the book I'm writing next—the Seventh-day Adventists.

So there I was, writing about India, a place I've only seen on the Discovery Channel. And after three years of hoarding more than a hundred library books, I did know a little more than I had known before. I even had 400 pages of writing that I proudly referred to as a novel. After a few more years, I had a file filled with rejection letters from publishers. And a strong sense that no more postage stamps should be licked-and-sticked for the sake of a story I no longer believed in. I placed that novel in a box and wrapped that box with duct tape.

In the meantime, however, I'd begun to work on a few short stories—and dammit if they weren't turning out to be Mennonite. Mennonite and, if

I'm being honest, Seventh-day Adventist too, although at the time I didn't have a strong enough wooden spoon to stir two such very big pots at the same time. So, where the different beliefs share a few square feet of common ideology, I folded them together, believing the Mennonite community was the more likely to forgive me.

As it has turned out, so many readers have been gracious and supportive beyond my hopes. Others wonder why I can't, perhaps, write nice stories that give people a laugh. Still others would rather I didn't tell people where I'm from. Stories, though, when their silence has had the power to send shockwaves through generations, must finally be told by someone who has felt the past give shape to the present.

It's been said that my stories are grim. They're dark. There's little humor to be found. I suppose this is what leads readers to ask whether I have any good memories of being Mennonite and why didn't I draw on them instead. In fact I've made treasures of some wonderful memories. And I hope they show up in these stories in moments of grace, like when Magda's grandfather keeps watch over his favorite girl. Or in the title story, when a mother rubs dough from her adult daughter's fingers with a little flour. If there is grace to be found in this book, it's because I have received it.

I remember being sick with the flu while spending the night with my grandparents in Schoenfeld, Saskatchewan. I was still young enough that I was sleeping in a crib they'd set up in the living room. All through that night, my grandmother slept across from me on the chesterfield, her hand reaching through the crib's spindles, where it rested on my forehead until my fever broke in the morning. I remember the night my grandfather put on his hat and coat, and drove all the way into the city because I'd forgotten my pink blanket in the dryer that morning and couldn't sleep without it. I remember him making a swing to hang over the rafters in his workshop, so I could spend time with him while he cobbled together bits of wood.

Because of my Grandma Friesen I know when bread has been kneaded enough. When a pot of cream gravy is ready by the way it coats the back of a wooden spoon. And, because of my Grandpa Friesen, I know that scripture being spoken in Low German at the breakfast table sounds like music. I also know what it is to pretend that I have joy down in my heart, when hidden there are sorrows that remain invisible to eyes that don't know how to see.

John Lent, a fellow Thistle-down Press author and one of the first writers I ever met in person, said that “Writing fiction is taking a grain of truth and then lying like crazy.” This, of course, for the purpose of telling a greater truth.

So, with the India novel put aside, I began to write what I knew. I lied to tell the truth, and all the time wondered who besides me might want to read short stories (when no one reads short stories anymore), written by a once small town girl, about an obscure group of conservative Christians who believe farming is next to godliness and fight over who gets to eat the chicken’s feet at lunchtime. I wrote about prairies and grasshoppers, hard winters, things fried in lard and other subjects no one, surely, wanted to read about anyway. I wrote “Poor Nella Pea,” a story of how a grandmother’s suicide affects, years later, the granddaughter she never knew.

An Excerpt from “Poor Nella Pea”

The last time I saw my mother alive was early last December. I drove all night, blowing snow making the usual two-hour trip from Regina a wheel-gripping four, until I finally pulled up in front of the house near midnight.

As always, my father had left the porch light on for me and was dozing in a living room chair when I let myself in. It was an old habit of his, waiting up for me. Mom couldn’t go to sleep if she thought there might be a knock at the door in the middle of the night. With Dad keeping watch, if I didn’t come home and was discovered lying in a ditch somewhere, he’d be the one to meet the police at the front door. He could break the bad news to Mom, gently, after breakfast.

“Hi, honey, rough trip?” Dad had yawned and stood up when I came in and shoved the front door shut hard against a gust of wind and snow and an ill-fitted frame. I stomped my boots, snow slugging away from them to melt on the rubber mat that filled the entryway.

“No worse than usual.” We both knew it was a lie, the kind we always told if Mom was in the room. Even when she had still been lucid. “How is she?”

My mother had been diagnosed with dementia a year earlier

and ever since we had watched her give in to it as though she were crawling under a warm blanket for a long and needed sleep.

“I think she’s still awake. Why don’t you go on up and check on her before you head in.”

Abandoning my suitcase, I flapped my arms out of my winter parka and headed up the stairs, padding softly over the hallway floorboards without causing a noise.

“Mom?” I said quietly when I reached her half-opened door. I learned in and found her sitting up in bed, an afghan and lamplight draped across her lap along with a picture album open to the middle. She was staring off into a corner of the room as though she truly was somewhere else. Off wandering through those pictures, perhaps. Re-imagining our history.

“Mom? It’s me. I just got here.” I stepped round to the side of the bed and knelt on the bare floor where that old rug used to be. When she didn’t acknowledge me at first I rested my head on the mattress, tired from the trip, tired of pretending I didn’t think dementia was just another way for her to keep me at a distance.

After a few minutes I lifted my head when my mother spoke.

“This was my daughter,” she said. Her words came slowly and she paused, seeming to search for her next syllable. “Tess,” she added with some difficulty and pointed to the page she’d stopped on. Both sides were covered in a tidy collage of pictures. Me as a grass-skirted hula girl in my first figure skating recital, dressed in stiff corduroy slacks and vest for my first day of the third grade. Another of me hugging Socks.

“Mom, that’s me,” I said and covered the papery skin of her cool, age-mottled hands with mine. Like everything else about her, her hands had aged suddenly, blotting out the woman she used to be.

“No,” she said. “My daughter died a long time ago. Like everyone else.”

I looked into my mother’s face, expecting to find the worry creases she’d always worn at the corners of her eyes between her brows. They weren’t there. Her face after all her years, was more peaceful than I’d ever seen. As though in believing she had really, finally, lost those

she always pushed away—seemed to test whether we'd keep coming back—she had found a way to let go.

I took the album and closed it lightly, kissed my mother on the cheek, and turned out the lamp. When I went downstairs, Dad was waiting for me in the kitchen with a pot of camomile tea.

“Figured you probably drank a lot of coffee on the way here,” he said and handed me a clunky mug, which I'd always preferred to Mom's dainty teacups that had been passed down to her from my grandmother. Now, Mom is gone and I can hardly believe how distant that night seems. And I'm here, alone, following my mother's footsteps into her kitchen.

I open the door to her tea cupboard where delicate cups still dangle by their ears from small brass hooks. The hooks were installed because of the trains that sped along the tracks just yards from our back fence.

The whole house rattled when the trains passed by, carrying their heavy loads of wheat and potash out of the province, causing the china to tremble to the edge of their shelf. So I suppose it may have seemed deliberate when, a few days after my cat was eaten by coyotes, I opened the cabinet door and one of the teacups fell, breaking in half against the sharp edge of the countertop before tumbling to the floor and shattering.

My mother rushed into the kitchen, already wringing her hands. “What did you do?” She grasped my arm with anxious, pinching fingers that would leave a bruise.

“It—it fell,” I said. “I didn't mean—It was just there when I opened the door. I tried to catch it.” For proof I held out my hand, which had been cut against a falling shard.

“But you didn't catch it.” She sucked in a thin, serrated breath before she let go of me and stared at the shelf, as though expecting to see the rest of her teacups lined up along the edge, ready to leap down after the first. Tenderly, nervously, she nudged each one to the back of the cupboard, counting as she touched their rims. With one gone, the remaining ones could no longer be called a set.

She knelt and, with shaking hands, began to pick up the pieces

of broken pottery into her apron.

“From now on you don’t touch these,” she said. She glanced at the blood that was dripping slowly from my fingers. I thought she’d offer a Band-Aid, but she only cradled the broken cup in her lap, fitting a few pieces together as though it might miraculously be made whole again if it was all accounted for, and fault assigned.

“We could try to glue it,” I said, tucking my hand behind me.

My mother was quiet for a moment. “And do what with it? Tea would dribble into my lap. It’s in a hundred pieces. No. No it’s broken, and that’s that.” She stood up, found a small box in a drawer, arranged the shards inside and placed the box on the shelf with the rest of the cups.

While I swept up what remained, dust and slivers, Mom went upstairs to lay a cold cloth over her eyes. She disappeared into her bedroom, drew the blinds and didn’t come back downstairs until after I’d left for school the next morning. By then my father had installed the hooks.¹

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But what, people want to know, does it mean to be Mennonite? Sometimes the answer seems so elusive, the only one I can think to say is that being Mennonite is why I will never, ever, be skinny. It was my Grandma Friesen who taught me to cook like a Mennonite. In an impossibly small kitchen built onto the side of their farmhouse (because the kitchen that came with the house was, of course, just for show), we baked *zwieback*. We cooked fatty meats, and stuffed pockets of dough with cottage cheese, or saskatoon berries and sugar, for *verenyky*. We made *plummamoos*, because fruit is always better cooked in cream. Home-made noodles were covered with cream gravy and Rogers syrup. We ate *porky* cracklings. And if I spent a morning in the barn with my grandpa, grandma would greet us at lunch time with a platter of lard-fried chicken and spears of sweet watermelon, because a little fresh fruit never hurt anyone.

Growing up, I spent most of my weekends at my grandparents’ farm.

¹ In *Mennonites Don’t Dance* (Saskatoon, SK: Thistle-down Press, 2010), 181-84.

It may have been because I insisted on naming the livestock that Grandpa always seemed to know I wouldn't one day marry a farmer. Once the chickens had had their heads lopped off, though, I did love helping to pluck and then reach inside those freshly-killed birds to pull out warm gizzards and half-formed eggs. Or when it was time to slaughter pigs, I'd bring a snout to my city school the next day for show-and-tell.

I am Mennonite. And I am a prodigal daughter. Before I turned 14, I left Saskatchewan, my grandparents and my mother, and in Alberta became my father's daughter: a Sabbath-keeping Seventh-day Adventist vegetarian, eating peanut butter and onion loaf, fried gluten steaks, and mayonnaise and banana sandwiches. At the time, I didn't know to think of the change as culture shock. I simply knew I had to keep moving.

From Alberta we moved to British Columbia, where I finished high school, worked at a lumber yard, started university, got married, worked in a pancake house, dropped out of university, worked two jobs in retail and reception to put my husband through cooking school, wrote a bad novel about India, began to freelance, established myself as a food writer, wrote some Mennonite short stories, published one, won a minor award with another, published a third, and finally discovered that I was still Mennonite and that I wasn't alone in not understanding what it meant.

It was Miriam Toews's novel *A Complicated Kindness*, with its bewildered teenage girl trapped in Manitoba Mennonite country, that began to peel back my own pages. Although I despaired a little at how high the literary bar had already been set, I began the first ten years of reaching. During this time I dared to believe that if I had been dragged to an unlicensed chiropractor to have my spine manipulated by a hundred-year-old woman who'd gotten her start on chickens before moving up to sheep and people, others might be able to relate. From there, doors began to appear. One opened when poet and memoirist Elsie K. Neufeld accepted my story "Ashes" for publication in *Half in the Sun*, an anthology of writing by West Coast Mennonites that included Andreas Schroeder, whose writing I was also discovering for the first time. I thought I was finally getting somewhere.

And then, as still happens right about the time I think I've learned something about writing, I discovered that I am, and always will be, dust. In 2005 I sent a query and my first few stories to Thistle-down Press, a

literary house in Saskatoon. They surprised me by asking to see an entire manuscript. After those first stories, though, something had gone terribly wrong. I'd begun to drag emotional baggage across the page, dropping socks and underwear as I went. If I'd ever known before, I'd forgotten how to write. Thistledown's subsequent rejection letter, which arrived within the month, simply and firmly said, "These stories are not yet ready for a literary audience."

I needed help. While I probably should have started with a 101 course on beginnings, middles and endings, I gravitated, like any good Mennonite, to a trial by fire. College dropout though I was, I applied to the post-grad mentorship program through the Humber School for Writers in Toronto. A correspondence course that would allow me to slowly lose my mind in the comfort of my own home. For whatever reason, Humber's advisory board took a chance, waived their own admissions requirement of a bachelor's degree, and paired me with Sandra Birdsell, whose Giller-finalist novel, *The Russländer*, would become the book I read whenever I need to feel completely inadequate as a writer.

Now, given that tonight's theme seems to be my great and abiding ignorance, it shouldn't surprise anyone to know that until I had to choose which of Humber's instructors I'd like to work with, I had not yet heard of Sandra Birdsell. But by the time I wrote down her name, I had read every book of hers I could find, and I can promise you that I'd acquired the proper amount of fear and trembling. I was so afraid, in fact, that I listed her as my second choice.

The advisory board saw through me, and "Mennonites Don't Dance" became a book during that year with Sandra. Some stories went in the shredder. Others were stripped back to their titles more than once, after Sandra, as gently as was possible, might say of them, "Well, Darcie, it's clear that you tried very hard." Among my fellow correspondence students, who faithfully spatulaed me off the floor, this became known as "being Birdselled."

There were days when I forgot to rinse the conditioner out of my hair. Or my husband would come home to find me rocking and humming on the couch, after which he'd take me for a long drive until I'd recovered my wits enough to start over. Eventually, Sandra taught me to get out of my own way and just write.

And so I wrote a story about a young boy who, as he grows up, struggles to undo the sins of his father. I knew something was finally going right when Sandra's critique arrived in the mail, and she said, "I have been wrapped in my mother's afghan and reading 'Luna' nonstop and thinking what a fine story this can be!" After "Luna" things that had hidden themselves began to become clear. Characters came to life and grafted themselves into their settings. By the end of school, I had workable drafts of eleven stories that were almost, but still not quite, ready for a literary audience. For several months following, I worked with an editor who was also a classmate, and then took a giant breath and began to submit my work to publishers.

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Over the next two years, I sent queries to Thistle-down Press and half a dozen other houses. Three of them took "Mennonites Don't Dance" to a final vote of their executive boards before saying no. Critiques included "Are there too many stories here about very young people?" and "A few of these are the best stories we've read all year, but we've decided to go with another author." One day, holding a letter that read "I have no doubt you'll be published someday, but not with these stories," I began to wonder whether I should have listened to my grandmother-in-law, who once tried to put a stop to my typing and fit me for a job as her dry cleaner's apprentice. My book's final rejection arrived in the mail while my now chef husband was overseas.

Eight years had passed since I began these stories. Eleven since I began that novel about India. Although it wasn't the first time terrible doubts had knocked at my door, it was the first time I'd let them in. My husband sent flowers, while my sister got on a bus and arrived in time to sweep the crumbs of me off the floor. My Humber classmates, spread over the entire country, gathered round by e-mail and were as protective of me as a circle of buffalo.

And then. Finally. Thistle-down Press, which had been silent for a year after I sent them an unsolicited rewrite, offered to publish "Mennonites Don't Dance." It took two more years, but the book was released in September 2010. And by October, before a single review had been printed, *Mennonites Don't Dance* was quietly banned by a public library in a Mennonite community. Looking back, I probably should have taken this as a good omen. At the

time, though, I'd never felt so far from home. Advice included everything from "Don't let it get to you" to "Quick! Call the CBC and Right to Read Foundation! This could be your ticket!" I can tell you that it did get to me. I didn't make those calls, although I did keep the very book which that library sent back, and it's the one I've been reading from tonight.

In time reviews followed, and shortlists, including one for the Commonwealth Prize. My name began to appear alongside Mennonite authors who had, though shamefully recently, become my heroes. Last May the Writers' Union announced *Mennonites Don't Dance* as a runner-up for the Danuta Gleed Literary Award, and although I wasn't able to attend the presentation myself, I was later told that Andreas Schroeder and David Waltner-Toews made up my cheering section.

This and other reactions from the Mennonite literary and scholarly community have been a homecoming of a kind. And while this is only the second time I've been anywhere in Ontario, tonight has been a homecoming also, and one of the things I will treasure in my heart and remember when I find myself far from home.

Darcie Friesen Hossack, a longtime food columnist for print newspapers, is at work on her first novel, "What Looks In." For more information, go to darciefriesenhossack.wordpress.com.