

Daniel Shank Cruz. *Queering Mennonite Literature: Archives, Activism, and the Search for Community*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019.

Queering Mennonite Literature is both entirely new and long overdue in the field of Mennonite literary studies. It is the first collection of literary criticism that analyzes the small but burgeoning field of queer Mennonite creative writing. This book feels new because the major works it discusses (mostly novels) are all recent, published between 2008 and 2017. It also feels long overdue because, as the author notes, there have been queer people and queer impulses in Mennonite spaces forever, and it is past time to bring these perspectives into the wider conversation in Mennonite literary and theological circles.

To start, Cruz helpfully defines both “queer” and “Mennonite.” Queer does not simply mean that the books he discusses have LGBTQ characters, although all of them do. Queerness “is not just about sexual orientation; it is about how one views the world,” and it is activist in nature (3). He also notes the general consensus in the Mennonite literary field that Mennonite literature is writing “by an author who is a theological or ethnic Mennonite whether it includes explicitly Mennonite subject matter or not” (6). Cruz suggests that Mennonitism itself is queer, in that it is peculiar and countercultural, although the institutional Mennonite church has struggled with homophobia and exclusion (11-12).

Cruz uses close reading, personal anecdotes, and broad analysis to serve the goals of his project. One of those goals is fulfilling the need for an archive, a gathering of and greater awareness for queer Mennonite literature. He focuses on the mostly fictional work of nine authors, although he refers to several other authors and essays. The texts he writes about are queer in multiple ways. They include a book about a gay Mennonite zombie (by Corey Redekop) and a novel published as a series of cards in a box (by Miriam Suzanne)! Other authors whose work he discusses at length include Jan Guenther Braun, Christina Penner, Wes Funk, Jessica Penner, Stephen Beachy, and Casey Plett. I found his close readings fairly easy to follow, even though I had read work by only one of the authors discussed (Sofia Samatar, mentioned in the Epilogue). Cruz’s treatment of them is strengthened by his

personal voice, as he comments at several points about the texts' impact on his own life but never strays too far away from the book under consideration.

Although Cruz is writing primarily for a literary audience and not a theological one, he says that the book can be read theologically if desired—which, since I am a theology teacher/campus minister and active member of a Mennonite congregation, I do. I found myself a bit uncomfortable with some of the more sexually adventurous practices mentioned. This includes Cruz's discussion of BDSM (which involves role-playing dominance and submission in the sexual act). Cruz portrays the practice as having some connections to the Mennonite ideal of self-surrender, which to me seems potentially problematic but also intriguing to consider.

Overall, the book explores several important theological themes beyond sex and sexual orientation. These include the issue of Otherness more broadly, discernment about community and when it might be necessary to leave a community, dealing with the legacy of martyrdom, and disability. All these themes deserve ongoing engagement from multiple perspectives in the Mennonite theological world.

The biggest difficulties I had with this book were practical. While Cruz's notes are often helpful and informative, I would have preferred some of the information to be in the body of the text or as footnotes rather than endnotes. The cost of the 172-page print copy of the book is prohibitive (\$60-\$80, although only \$20 for the Kindle version), which may limit the reach of this valuable work.

The epilogue to *Queer Mennonite Literature* is perhaps the most important part of the book from a Mennonite literary perspective. It explores the call for a postcolonial shift in the field of Mennonite literature, incorporating writers of different racial and national backgrounds as well as sexual identities. This is the kind of writing and analysis that Cruz both advocates and embodies, making his work important for the future of Mennonite writing and literary criticism. He concludes that the works he discusses insist that "better, queerer futures are possible" (129). Indeed. In the broadest sense of the word "queer," may it be so.

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