

Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast, eds. *Mothering Mennonite*. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2013.

*Mothering Mennonite* is a laudable first step in examining in a concentrated way the profound influence of mothers on Mennonite identity. This aspect of Mennonite life has not received adequate attention, but this book vividly details how mothering, especially in relationship to daughters and granddaughters, affects, and is shaped by, faith and culture. The collection of sixteen essays is only a first step, because it deals almost exclusively with Mennonites of European descent living in Canada and the US; only two essays explore mothering in other settings—Mexico and Colombia.

The editors chose an interdisciplinary approach and encouraged personal storytelling in the context of scholarly awareness and integrity. As a result the essays are both accessible and appropriately researched. Chapters range from good-humored ruminations on milking cows with a mother-in-law to poignant reflections on a mother's abandonment through death by suicide, and from considering the ethics learned from a mother's meals based on the *More With Less Cookbook* to proposing that "Mennonite mothering" can include the healing work of a congregation in Bogotá, Colombia in response to those suffering from the trauma of political violence. Of special note are two chapters on being a "not-yet-mother," one an ethnographic account of the hidden pain of infertility and another on "Creative (M)othering" by a writer, pregnant with poetry.

This approach also made room for the differing personalities, styles, and expertise of the authors to shine through. The first chapter, by Magdelene Redekop, introduces an informal photo of her parents at the time of their marriage in 1932. Engaging this picture, she reflects on the philosophy of photography, memory and nostalgia, women's exercise of power in a Mennonite culture that repressed creativity, surrogate mothering, the clothing of women's bodies at weddings, and the humanity of mothers. Connie T. Braun offers poems exploring maternal subjectivity based on her experience "as a first-generation Canadian daughter and granddaughter of post-World War II Mennonite refugees from Ukraine and Poland" (85). And Cory Anderson, who joined an Amish-Mennonite Beachy Church after high school, writes a straightforward historical essay on the evangelical

orientation of mothers in his church tradition.

The editors' helpful introduction outlines earlier publications on women in Mennonite history, Mennonite literary arts, and feminist studies, noting that this collection takes seriously what previous work has uncovered: "that Mennonite women are mothers at the nexus of the personal, patriarchal communities, historical particularities, and the cultural and religious identity of Mennonites, and that they are at the heart of perpetuating and determining Mennonite identity" (7). The editors recognize, too, the limitations of the volume—lack of attention to family models within Mennonite communities that differ from traditional marriage, and the need for more work on step-mothering, adoption, and mothering across cultures. They are aware that the changing demographics of the Mennonite Church in North America and globally require additional research and a much fuller picture of Mennonite mothering than what is available in this volume.

About twice as many essays reflect on Canadian experiences of mothering as on US experiences, and most of the chapters address mothering in fairly conservative Mennonite church cultures. Although I am now 67 years old, as a young person from Swiss Mennonite background growing up in a college town in Ohio, I did not see many mothers struggling with the degree of tensions caused by church culture identified in a number of the essays.

The editors tried to note both the integral connection between culture and religion and their distinction. However, given the way various writers refer to "Mennonite culture" and ethnicity, it appears that there is not a singular culture but a wide variety of cultures, plural, within which Mennonite religious life and mothering are embedded. Like Susie Fisher Stoesz, I am less interested in the efforts of Mennonite women "in the passing on of material culture such as food-making, clothing styles, artistic talent, or their participation in church—than in tracing the central role of memory, motherhood and storytelling about Mennonite history in the shaping of Mennonite women's identities" (107). That history is not limited to European American migrant experience but includes a far richer mix of memory and motherhood.

*Mothering Mennonite* would be a valuable addition to congregational, college, and seminary libraries. Some of the chapters could stimulate

significant sharing by groups of women or help pastors and teachers see the relationship of culture, faith, and mothering in new ways. Certainly this volume nudges Mennonite mothers and daughters to consider more deeply the fraught-with-dangers-and-possibilities nature of this strong and vulnerable relationship.

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Robert Zacharias. *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian Literature*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2013.

[T]hese texts are worth gathering together not because they succeed in repeating a shared past but precisely because they fail to do so. Their departures from their predecessors make it possible to talk of different texts (i.e., of *rewritings* rather than simply *replications*) and reveal the competing motives animating their reorganizations of the history that they simultaneously reflect and construct. Each retelling, each strain of the larger narrative, affirms the importance of the Mennonites' dispersal while rewriting it in significant ways. (Page 25, emphasis original)

Combining literary criticism and diaspora studies, Robert Zacharias's ambitious book looks at four Canadian Mennonite novels as "*rewritings*" of the Mennonite "break event," or conscious attempts to re-narrate the formative and traumatic Mennonite escape from Russia to Canada in the 1920s. Strikingly, as Zacharias indicates, this event has overflowed direct experiential, geographic, and generational links to become *the* determinative experience shaping Mennonite identity ("a process of imagining a community")—as well as marking "the 'birth' of Mennonite literature in Canada" (5, 11, 14). Yet, as the opening quotation suggests, the author's examination of the differences between four widely-read re-narrations interrogates the very notion of a monolithic Russian Mennonite migration experience.