"There was nothing to be read about Mennonites": Rudy Wiebe and the impulse to make story

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> *When I was growing up I wanted to be a writer. . . . But of course I knew no writers, nor had ever met one; the Mennonite bush farm community in Saskatchewan where I was born and later the small Alberta town where I spent my teens certainly contained none. I read endless books, but had no idea how to go about becoming a writer in Canada. Nevertheless, there is in the human imagination that which wants more. Not merely more of the same thing, the stimulated imagination always wants more, yes, and also different.*[1]
>
> – Rudy Wiebe

> *They've claimed you, your stories, written you down, a hand pressing them into the page you've worn as a cloak for more than forty years. Time is a long time, a stairway to climbing, one glistening raspberry alone and uneaten in the garden.*[2]
>
> – Aritha van Herk

In a statement to some one hundred people gathered for the closing panel of the first conference on "Mennonite/s Writing" in May 1990,[3] Rudy Wiebe declared: "I've never thought of myself particularly as a Mennonite writer, you might be interested to know. The publication of my first book destroyed that illusion for me forever."[4] Three years earlier, in 1987, Wiebe had published in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* an essay in which he had recalled the Mennonite reception of that first book, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.[5] In that retrospective statement, he had confessed: "As some of you may know, publishing that first novel became for me both an exaltation and a trauma."[6]

It is common knowledge that the publication and reception of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the first Canadian English-language work of narrative fiction to feature Mennonites living in a Mennonite community, resonated

throughout the Canadian Mennonite world. Recently, reflecting on the impact of that novel, one of its original young Mennonite readers recalled how with that first book Wiebe "pushed us into 'the sixties' even before they had a chance to arrive with some appropriate ceremony." From the day of publication, this early reader remarked, "Wiebe has led the way, helping us to figure out how we might live, even before we knew what to brace ourselves for." Another early reader recalled that Wiebe's "portrayal of the Mennonites – perhaps better said, of creatures of flesh and blood who happened to be Mennonite – was the first one I had come across that reflected the reality which I was beginning to see but which I was too timid and confused to name."[7] Al Reimer, a young academic in 1962, and someone Wiebe had cited as one of his constant friends during the turbulent post-*Peace* period,[8] forty years later stated without equivocation: "To say that Rudy invented Canadian-Mennonite literature in English in the early sixties is no exaggeration. *Peace Shall Destroy Many* was the right novel at the right time in that it raised crucial questions and long-suppressed issues of Mennonite life and faith and dared to address them with probing honesty and creative independence. He created a Mennonite literary world that other Mennonite writers could enter and explore and make meaningful to readers in general. And that has led directly to the efflorescence of 'Mennonite' writing we enjoy today."[9]

Few people familiar with the vigorous flowering of Mennonite writing in Canada – nay, in North America – would deny Rudy Wiebe's central and persistent role as trailblazer and inspiration. Even when his influence has been indirect and diffuse, it has remained palpable. Different creative writers have given expression to it in diverse ways, each interweaving his or her own literary voice with Wiebe's. "What I remember now of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* are first impressions," Patrick Friesen recalls. "Mennonite life was given fuller expression than I had heard before. This wasn't a narrow sermon, a censored history; it was a deeply-felt, imaginative exploration of a particular community by someone who belonged but asked questions. Someone who knew the shadows had to be lit." Poet Jeff Gundy remarks on Wiebe's brilliance and delicacy, ambition, and indiscretion. Wiebe, he observes, quoting Ezra Pound on Walt Whitman, was the "pig-headed father [who] broke the new wood." For Di Brandt, "it was Rudy Wiebe who stood before me as the Man Who Had Survived Mennonite Wrath, who had risked

everything to write what he understood as the true fiction of our people, playfully, lovingly, eloquently, but with an unerring eye for the seam of contradictions running through us, our violence and our pacifism, our evangelism and our separatism, our sense of justice, of egalitarianism and our racism and sexism, our insistence on religious freedom and our communal repression of self expression, our relentless honesty and our deep deceptions for the sake of community appearances. Our humanness, in other words. Rudy Wiebe did it, I said to myself, trembling, so I can do it too."[10]

At the closing banquet of the 2002 conference on Mennonite/s writing – a gathering of writers, readers and critics where Rudy Wiebe's forty-year career (1962-2002) was celebrated – I drew attention to Wiebe's success as an author of national and international stature, particularly well known in Canada and abroad for his historical metafictions set in the Native communities of Canada. I said that Wiebe has been "a formidable force" in ensuring "the well-being of [Canada's] national literary culture," in shaping Canadians' perceptions of themselves as well as of "the prairie, the north and the indigenous peoples who occupied our land long before the Europeans arrived." Big Bear, I observed then, was "already there . . . in 1962 in the pages of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, a novel in which the natives and Mennonites lived side by side."[11] Nevertheless, I insisted, in spite of his efforts at denial, Wiebe has always had a committed audience among the Mennonites, especially for his "Mennonite" texts. There have always been Mennonites who have laid claim to him as a writer who speaks their language, a writer who, to paraphrase critic Clara Thomas,[12] has the power to identify them to themselves.

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What Al Reimer refers to as the "'Mennonite' writing we enjoy today" has been the focus of three conferences in recent years: "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada" (1990)[13]; "Mennonite/s Writing in the U.S.," held at Goshen College in 1997; and "Mennonite/s Writing: An International Conference," also at Goshen College, in 2002.[14] Like the first event of this kind in 1990, the third conference called together most of the prominent Mennonite writers of Canada and the United States (as well as the Japanese Mennonite poet Yorifumi

Yaguchi, in 2002). Among the writers present at Goshen in 2002 were Canadians Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, Victor Jerrett Enns, Maurice Mierau, David Waltner-Toews, Rosemary Nixon, Barbara Nickel, Patrick Friesen, Sarah Klassen, Armin Wiebe, and Sandra Birdsell, and Americans Jeff Gundy, Dallas Wiebe, Julia Kasdorf, Raylene Hinz-Penner, Todd Davis, Ann Hostetler, Omar Eby, Keith Ratzlaff, and Jean Janzen. The conference comprised a wonderful festival of readings and academic papers. It served as an occasion to observe the burgeoning of Mennonite literary production in North America (we celebrated the publication of seven new titles by Mennonite writers there).[15] At the same time it provided an occasion to recognize the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Rudy Wiebe's first novel and his subsequent four decades of literary activity. The conference proceedings were divided to reflect the dual focus of the event (Mennonite writing today and the watershed appearance of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*), between the October 2003 volume of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* (appropriately dedicated to Ervin Beck of Goshen College, whose patient, steady hand, creative energy, and quiet persistence guided both the1997 and 2002 conferences) and the present volume of *The Conrad Grebel Review*.

Most of the material concerning Rudy Wiebe has been reserved for this special issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*[16] which contains, also, some new material by and about Wiebe. Edna Froese's thoughtful and illuminating survey of Wiebe's Mennonite protagonists, J.D. Mininger's probing analysis of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Jane Robinett and Maryann Jantzen's enlightening explorations of dominant themes in *Sweeter Than All the World*, and Maurice Mierau's playful yet instructive musings on why Rudy Wiebe may or may not be "the last Mennonite writer" – these essays, prepared for the 2002 conference, form the core of this volume. They are accompanied by excerpts from an interview with Rudy Wiebe – excerpts that focus in particular on Wiebe as writer of "Mennonite" material – by Janne Korkka, and by a review essay that foregrounds one example of the substantial amount of collaborative work Wiebe has undertaken throughout his career, by Paul Tiessen. These critical works are augmented by the transcript of a compelling talk – a personal statement about the work of the fiction writer – Rudy Wiebe delivered at the University of Calgary this past spring.[17]

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Rudy Wiebe's persistence in claiming not to think of himself as a Mennonite writer is matched by his insistence that the writer must sustain some detachment from his work. Quoting from an essay Wiebe published in 1965, J.M. Kertzer, in his engaging and illuminating "Biocritical Essay" which serves as an introduction to the Rudy Wiebe collection at the University of Calgary archives, observes: "Rudy Wiebe has mocked the 'personal fallacy' in literary criticism, which 'sees every work of art as arising directly out of the artist's experience' and sanctions 'a great deal of snooping'" into his life. "In contrast," Kertzer continues, "Wiebe insists that novels 'acquire a life and character of their own, independent of and quite beyond the artist himself."[18] At the Mennonite/s writing conference in Waterloo in 1990, Wiebe maintained his insistence on the artist's detached perspective; "navel-gazing is no good to anyone," he said. "The world of story and of fiction for me is all around me, and the world where I find my imagination stimulated is not necessarily found by sitting and looking in a mirror. It may start there. I know . . . [that] literature often begins with autobiography: this is *my* story, I have *this* story to tell. But if you're a writer, it goes beyond that and, after a while, you're not writing your own story at all. Of course you are, but you're not really. It goes beyond that. . . . We'd better get on with writing the world of our imagination in such a way that nobody will forget it, whether they know that we existed personally or not."[19]

Well, Rudy Wiebe does exist, and, his claims to objectivity notwithstanding, I would venture to say that some of his most sharply conceived work arises directly out of his own experience (the short fictions "Chinook Christmas" and "Sailing to Danzig," for example). And he continues to function actively within the Mennonite community to which these stories relate (most recently team-teaching a Sunday School course on the Bible as literature for his home congregation of Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church in Edmonton). Rudy Wiebe and his fictions are shaped, among other things, by the communities (Canadian, Albertan, Mennonite) in which the author has chosen to live. Like Wiebe, younger Mennonite writers continue to find their own voices – as he has, throughout his career – both within the context of the diverse Mennonite communities of Canada and the US, and beyond.

It is noteworthy that as the remarkably productive Mennonite writing community of Winnipeg has begun to disperse over the past decade or so,

with Patrick Friesen's move to Vancouver, Sandra Birdsell's to Regina, and Di Brandt's to Windsor, for example, another group of writers – self-identified as Mennonites – has begun to gather on the lower mainland of British Columbia, where in February 2004 nineteen Mennonite writers (including Andreas Schroeder, Barbara Nickel, Melody Goetz, Leonard Neufeldt, and others) met "to interact and connect with other writers, and to hear what other writers are writing." The spirit of censure that drove Rudy Wiebe out of his job as editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* after the publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* no longer persists for them, these writers have taken pleasure in observing. Andreas Schroeder, in fact, remarked subsequent to their meeting that the west coast Mennonite writers seem "very comfortable with their Mennonite upbringing, far more inclined to include it in their work in a productive and even fond manner. It seemed we weren't any longer threatened or imprisoned by it," he remarked; "we could afford to acknowledge its many advantages and strengths as well as its failings without feeling we had to buy into the faith or the lifestyle uncritically."[20]

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Much of the work published in this volume deals in some way with the intersections between the individual Mennonite and his community, the writer and "home" – subjects that have never been far from the heart of Mennonite writing as it has taken shape over the past forty years. Is it most fitting, then, that Rudy Wiebe's informal piece "Climbing Mountains That Do Not Exist: The Fiction Writer at Work" should be given the last word here. In this most engaging piece, Wiebe speaks as warmly and personally as ever he has about his childhood and the advent of story in his life. Here he remembers his mother, "deeply troubled" that her last child, Rudy, "should grow up to have the overweening pride to write stories he expected other people to print and read." And yet, he writes, inimitably, "from my point of view, it was exactly the powerful stories she told me in that isolated bush world, not only stories from the Bible but far more of her childhood in incomprehensible Russia, the village life in Orenburg Mennonite Colony, the brutal physical punishments of her father, her mother's death when she was six and enduring two step-mothers – the last her own age and once her best friend – and

particularly the stories of the family escape from the Communists, the escape over Moscow with a chronically ill baby Helen who was always, as by a miracle, strong and healthy whenever the Canadian immigration doctors examined her – it was all a miracle, and the greatest was not being forced to settle in Paraguay: these stories heard in bits and pieces over and over were far too powerful for me ever to forget, as was the pioneer farm life we lived. And all the more powerful," Wiebe continues, alluding, as is his wont, to the blatant and persistent chauvinism of the imperialist political and cultural centers of power in Canada, "because, in the books we read in school, there was never a hint that refugee bush homesteaders in Canadian boreal forests existed, fumigating lice and swatting mosquitoes and trudging through snowdrifts while their hands and faces froze. And most certainly in our school readers and tiny library there was nothing readable about bohunk Mennonites, speaking Low German. . . ."[21]

When I visited Edmonton earlier this year, the face of Rudy Wiebe stared out at me every time I passed a newsstand. It was on the cover of the spring 2004 issue of *Legacy*, a glossy "Heritage, Arts and Culture" magazine published in Alberta. Here was Rudy Wiebe being acknowledged as a cultural treasure of a province rich in writers. Wiebe's large readership in Canada and around the world, the hundreds of articles and reviews written about his work, his countless invitations to read and to deliver public lectures on diverse subjects of national, regional, or personal concern – all confirm the significance of his artist's voice.[22] Along with his prominent role on the literary landscapes of Canada and abroad, Wiebe is unmatched in representing and probing the experience of Mennonites – whether in contemporary or historical settings. He has written about Mennonites with immense scope and tenacity, vision and complexity, with a cooly skeptical eye and a warmly affectionate heart. This volume of *The Conrad Grebel Review* has been prepared in celebration of narrative and story-telling in the Mennonite world where, thanks to Rudy Wiebe (and to the "powerful" tales his mother told him), it is increasingly true that – as Wiebe himself once remarked – "[t]he impulse to make story needs no defence."[23]

Notes

[1] Rudy Wiebe, "The Invention of Truth," typescript manuscript. This essay, presented in a plenary session at a conference in Grainau, Germany, in February 2002, was subsequently published in *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*, NR 1-2, 2002: 20-25.
[2] Aritha van Herk, [a letter to Rudy Wiebe], in *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute*, compiled by Hildi Froese Tiessen (Kitchener, ON and Goshen, IN: Sand Hills Books and Pinchpenny Press, 2002).
[3] The conference, "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada," was organized by *The New Quarterly*. It took place at Conrad Grebel College, University of Waterloo.
[4] Rudy Wiebe, "Closing Panel," in *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*. Ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe. (Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo Press, 1992), 229-30.
[5] Rudy Wiebe, "The Skull in the Swamp," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): [8]-20. The essay was first prepared as the 1987 Marjorie Ward Lecture at St. John's College, University of Manitoba.
[6] *Ibid*., [8].
[7] Tributes by Paul Tiessen and John Rempel, respectively, in *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute*, n.p.
[8] See Wiebe, in "Closing Panel," 230.
[9] Al Reimer, in *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute*, n.p.
[10] Patrick Friesen, Jeff Gundy, and Di Brandt, respectively, in *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute*, n.p.
[11] In an oral tribute later published as "Rudy Wiebe: A Tribute," in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77.4 (October 2003): 690.
[12] Clara Thomas, "Western Women's Writing of 'The Childhood' and Anne Konrad's *The Blue Jar*," in *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*. Ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe (Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo Press, 1992), 130. Here Thomas remarks: "I agree with Bill Keith that *The Blue Mountains [of China]* is a magnificent epic and religious novel, but it does not and cannot identify me to myself as does, for instance, *The Stone Angel* or *The Diviners*, both of them written from a background so close to my own that Hagar is my mother, myself, as Morag is my sister, myself."
[13] See Note 3.
[14] This last conference, like the other Goshen conference, was organized by Ervin Beck; co-sponsor of the third conference was Conrad Grebel University College, represented by Hildi Froese Tiessen.
[15] See a list of these in John D. Roth and Ervin Beck, "In This Issue," in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77:503-504. Absent from this list of six new books is David Bergen's *The Case of Lena S.*, which was being actively promoted in Canada while the conference took place. Roth and Beck remark that four more titles appeared in the year following the Goshen conference (and others have appeared since, including collections of poetry by Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, John Weier, and Melanie Cameron; a collection of short fiction by a new writer, Carrie Snyder; and a new novel by Miriam Toews).

[16] *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* issue includes one essay on Wiebe's work, focusing on his use of photographs in his most recent novel: Hildi Froese Tiessen's "Between Memory and Longing: Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World*," 619-36.
[17] The lecture, one in a series of two given by Wiebe early in February 2004, was sponsored by the Chair of Christian Thought at the University of Calgary.
[18] J.M. Kertzer, "Rudy Wiebe: Biocritical Essay," <www.ucalgary.ca/library/SpecColl/wiebebioc.htm> , citing Wiebe in *A Voice in the Land*, 40.
[19] Wiebe, in "Closing Panel," 230-31.
[20] Andreas Schroeder, quoted by Angelika Dawson, "BC Mennonite Writers Gather," typescript press release forwarded to me by Elsie K. Neufeld, who hosted the writers' meeting. See also Angelika Dawson, "Writers inspired at B.C. gathering," *Canadian Mennonite* 8.6 (March 22, 2004): 10.
[21] Wiebe, "Climbing Mountains That Do Not Exist: the fiction writer at work," published in this volume.
[22] The most recent translation of Wiebe's fiction is a German edition of *The Blue Mountains of China*, translated by Joachim Utz as *Wie Pappeln im Wind* (Eichborn AG, 2004.)
[23] Rudy Wiebe, "Introduction," *The Story-Makers: A Selection of Modern Short Stories*, ed. Rudy Wiebe (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1970), ix.