

**“It almost always begins with these kinds of living stories”:  
An Interview with Rudy Wiebe**

*Janne Korkka*

*In the same way that – say, the Frieda Friesen stories in The Blue Mountains of China are based on an actual living person, I think my way of telling stories is to start with literal things somehow, whether I know them actually or they’re somewhere sitting in my head. Somewhere. And out of this grows something that’s intriguing and interesting to me. And then hopefully it’s interesting to others. But it begins with these – it almost always begins with these kinds of living stories of past human beings. You know, in some form or another. Like Almighty Voice. Almost all my stories are like that, some way.<sup>1</sup>*

**JK:** You really seem to be intrigued by scarcity of information and facts, or just their contradictory nature. I’m thinking of Big Bear, Almighty Voice in “Where is the Voice Coming from?”, Albert Johnson in *The Mad Trapper*, the now extinct Yellowknife nation in *A Discovery of Strangers*, and Yvonne Johnson again. How important is this when you become interested in a subject and decide to go deeper and deeper, eventually turning it into fiction?

**RW:** Well, there are two things. The interest in the story is obviously triggered by the facts that are there. The more contradictory they appear, or if they seem to clash with our understanding of human nature, the more interesting they are. But I’ve learned to trust my instinctive response. Whatever intrigues me is what I should follow. That clearly began with Big Bear, because that story opened up more and more.

The story of Almighty Voice illustrates that. It was actually written in the middle of the process of writing *The Temptations of Big Bear*, but I had been thinking about Almighty Voice’s story for a long time, 15 or 16 years before I wrote it. So I knew that basic story, the same way I knew Albert Johnson’s story. I had listened to it as a child, a cowboy ballad sung on the radio. If that kind of thing sticks in the mind of a certain kind of imaginative person, you have to keep digging as there is something numinous, something loaded there that’s good.

Then you start looking at what history has to tell you, since it is an historical event. When it gets even more complicated, as it probably does, or contradictory, as it often does, you really start getting intrigued. The fiction writer is always happy when facts don't work out any more, because then you can make it up. But make it up in such a way that the mystery expands, right? You don't want to solve these things, you want to plumb their mysteriousness.

**JK:** I have always liked "Where Is the Voice Coming from?" because it is at least as much about the process of telling the story – or *making* the story – as about the events themselves.

**RW:** As I look at that story again, it seems that at every turn where the reader feels that you're starting to get somewhere, something else that doesn't quite work appears. That's the mystery of human behavior, and stories should never try to resolve that. That's why stories often end in deaths, because death somehow seems to finish the whole issue. But death doesn't end anything for the people who surround the corpse. It makes it all the more complicated, and sometimes it makes it all the more devastating. There is a convention in fiction: when you die, that's it. There was a time when you got near that, then that was the end of the story. Nowadays it isn't; many of our stories start at death.

**JK:** Especially in the native stories you have dealt with there is often little information, the information is contradictory, or you can't use the common western approach and access the information by reading a book. Big Bear was forgotten by most people for a long time, and Almighty Voice's motivations weren't noticed nearly as much as the actions of the people who were pursuing him. Also, hardly anybody in Yvonne Johnson's life was genuinely interested in her problems before she herself became a problem for the judicial system. Would not being listened to at all be a primary feature of potential stories for you? Or is it just common in the stories of a marginalized people?

**RW:** I think it partly reflects my own growing up as the child of refugee parents who do not make up a particular race or group of people, who do not constitute a very large part of Canadian society, and who certainly at that

time were a quite powerless part of society. You've read the stories of the two solitudes, right? They are the French and English facts of Canada. In my case, these two solitudes make no difference to you. Your particular world is in no way reflected by that, if you grew up in a bush farm or a homestead in Northern Saskatchewan, in a small Mennonite community that's just been created there because of the depression, and which speaks Low German all the time. So, a part of what I'm doing as a writer is telling the stories out of this particular world.

If you think in terms of my first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, or Big Bear, who was born within 40 kilometers of where I was born, then this was what really electrified me. He existed before cars, before electricity, before telephones. I did, too. For the first 12 years of my life I lived in a log cabin in somewhat the same way that the native people lived on reserves. So the world of, say, the 1880s was closer to me than the world of telephones and television. It should not surprise anyone that a kid growing up under such circumstances is intrigued by the people that lived in his landscape before he was there, by the way your world was before you were born.

**JK:** In one of the earlier interviews that you've given (Juneja et al., 8)<sup>2</sup>, you commented on the parallel experiences of dispossessed minority peoples – Native Americans, Mennonites, and so on. You basically said that these parallel experiences make it easier to access and formulate at least some kind of an understanding of the other peoples' experiences. How much would you say this sensitivity guides the actual process of writing?

**RW:** Well, writing is an exploration of the human spirit. You try to be sensitive to other people, even though their sensitivities are not yours. But there has to be something that draws you to them, or you wouldn't even use them as a character, right? The kind of existential questions that Big Bear faces are intriguing to me. If you do believe, as he believed, that the world is created by the creator and it's given to us as a great gift, how do you then explain, in the light of what you've always believed, the fact that all of a sudden these almost thoughtless beings come into this world believing it's theirs, and they seem to destroy your world? To me, that is a profoundly Christian – a profoundly religious and spiritual – question. That's what intrigues me, not so much the fact that he's eventually sentenced and sent to prison and punished

by a system that he has never lived by and has no concept of. No more than he has a concept of the Crown and the King or the Queen. Of course he understands authority; he's not stupid. But he's never lived his life according to the white practice. That is what drives me to explore that kind of person, and try to tell that story.

**JK:** My personal favorite of your works is maybe *The Blue Mountains of China*. What I enjoy most is how it brings together different Mennonite voices who come from very different backgrounds. Most of them still shared what has been thought of as a very homogeneous religious background. However, as the novel advances, and the vastly different experiences shape the characters, the end result is anything but homogeneous. So, characters are disillusioned with their faith. Some keep it up, but end up realizing that the world they live in is very different from certain parts of Russia, or wherever you think that your ancestors came from. And then there's John Reimer, who combines all this into what he sees as a need for a new approach to religion and life. What this makes you wonder is whether such a homogeneous background has ever really existed at all, for Mennonites or any other group.

**RW:** Well, I think it does to some extent in terms of the idea that animates their life. Not that it's possible to live it in the same way in any given place. The point is, if you really take seriously (and this is what Anabaptism was always about, taking seriously the kinds of things that Jesus says) the core of things that Jesus says in his teaching, it's basically the Sermon on the Mount. Live peaceably with your neighbor, you know, love God. Live at peace with all creation, especially with your fellow man. And when you say something like "How blessed are the peacemakers, for the kingdom of God is theirs," if you live at peace, and if you are a peacemaker, that kingdom, that world, is yours. That's an incredible statement. So then that is one of the basic things that Anabaptism is based on. It takes those kinds of things seriously: trying to be a peacemaker in a violent world. The Reformation world was extremely violent, as was the experience of the Russian Mennonites between the First and Second World Wars. This is what *The Blue Mountains of China* explores: the world situation the Mennonites were in in Russia and in South America and in Canada. That novel explores the possibilities there are to be explored.

There were very different responses to the forms of violence the Mennonites encountered. You cannot have, in Russia, somebody walking along the highway with a cross; you couldn't do it. You'd be out of there fast – the police would pick you up so fast, and you would be gone. In Canada, you could do this. It's a place where you can express what you believe in such a goofy way. In Russia you'd have to express it in other ways. But the basic ideas I think are there, and that's partly what I'm trying to explore. Maybe there's a problem in trying to pull it together too much in the end, I don't know. But I still like those two guys, sitting by the side of the road at night, and they're talking, the one presumably completely disillusioned, while the other one is living this crazy illusion. And there they are in the bush, beside a Canadian highway, listening to the sounds of cars going by. I still think that's not a bad way to end a book.

**JK:** There's been, of course, quite an extensive debate on whether that ending clashes with the mosaic in the main part of the novel. I don't think it necessarily does. It starts heading in a different direction, of course, but maybe it just opens a new path.

**RW:** It goes north, it goes north.

**JK:** That may be the new path. It's of course based on the main body of the novel, and it's not followed very far, this new path, because the narrative just stops. It doesn't develop this new idea.

**RW:** You could pick up that story – you could start that story where it ends. It's 1967. You could bring it up to the present if you wanted to. I've never been interested in doing it, but . . . A book is not a life, you know. A book is something made with words; a life is not made with words. But it can be helpful in living a life, I suppose, or intriguing or interesting for a few moments.

**JK:** This ties up partly with *My Lovely Enemy*. Not that many critics have discussed the book in length –

**RW:** No.

**JK:** – and the Mennonite response was very mixed when it was published. Maybe the most conservative readers read the book as a suggestion of Jesus' sexuality, or as a story where adultery goes unpunished. Perhaps the less conservative readers saw beyond these details, but still may have had a great problem with the almost complete lack of definitive resolutions in the book. It's really inconclusive in quite a number of ways. Even the resolutions that are suggested don't take place on a realistic level. The affair doesn't seem to end, there's no guilt or remorse, no one is punished, and the difference between the real world and the experiences on a mythic or a mystical plane just become blurred, even irrelevant in a sense. I see signs of this lack of resolution and really accentuated open-endedness in most of your works since *The Blue Mountains of China*. But why does it surface as a great problem only in some of the works?

**RW:** Well, I don't know, I don't want to theorize really about *My Lovely Enemy*, because – in terms of response to it, it was probably the least successful of my books. It was published once, and it's never been republished, never – no one's ever been interested in it, presumably; I don't know. Actually, I think in many ways it's still one of my most interesting books; at least I'm still most interested in the ideas that it explores, the character possibilities that it explores. But somehow we think, even though in life this doesn't often happen, that in books or in the movies there should be some kind of justice. If you're a bastard, you get dealt with, you get your comeuppance, or whatever, right? But this, too, is a convention, of course. It doesn't happen in real life. The people in the book are going to die just like everybody else, right? It's just the book doesn't go to that point. But these kinds of things are worth exploring in every conceivable way, every way you can imagine. One of the things I was trying to do with that book was stretch my imagination beyond the usual things that always happen in stories. Push it, push it, push it. And the core story in there, of course, is the Maskepetoon story. Push that whole idea of what you do with your enemy, and the usual thing is you take revenge, you take revenge in the same way. If he kills you, you kill him back, you know, always that way, always that way. Of course, I didn't make up that story, because that's literally recorded by John McDougall, the Methodist missionary, about Maskepetoon, how he dealt with his father's killer. So,

that was really the trigger. The question would be, how to deal with adultery, which is, of all things, presumably one of the most serious problems of our social world. (In another sense it isn't, of course, at all. If we have people marrying four or five or six or seven times, how can adultery be a problem?) But in one sense, you know, we have this crazy notion still that somehow, constancy in love is the great thing, right? Even if nothing in our society reflects that. And I'm just trying to explore some of those things. . . .

I think fiction is, in one sense, an exploration. It's an exploration of human behavior and ideas. Things that intrigue me perhaps take a more religious and spiritual turn than they take a social turn. To me, those kinds of values and drives are more basic than, for example, getting married or not. It's just the way I was brought up and the way I think. To me, religious and spiritual values are often more important than social or economic ones. Some people are interested in exploring social and economic implications of what human beings do, but I'm not terribly interested in that. I suppose this lines me up with Native people – who are more structured by their values, the spiritual feelings and apprehensions that they get out of their world, especially out of the natural world – than many urban people today. Of course the social and the economic elements are important, but you don't have to restrict your thinking to those things. Many novels are not at all interested in exploring religious – Christian religious or any kind of other religious – structures, which is the way the majority of people structure their lives, I think.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>This epigraph, and what follows, are from an interview Janne Korkka conducted with Rudy Wiebe at Wiebe's Strawberry Creek lodge south of Edmonton. The conversation took place after Wiebe gave Korkka a tour of the handiwork of beavers who regularly fell trees on the Wiebe property. The interview was conducted with the assistance of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, with additional financial support from the Emil Aaltonen Foundation in Finland. Parts of this interview were published in the journal *World Literature Written in English* 38.1. We are grateful for WLWE's permission to reprint excerpts.

<sup>2</sup>Om P. Juneja, M. F. Salat, and Chandra Moran. "'Looking at our particular world': an interview with Rudy Wiebe." *World Literature Written in English* 31.2 (1991): 1-18.