

Dallas Wiebe. *On the Cross: Devotional Poems*. Line drawings by John Leon, based on crosses by Paul Friesen. DreamSeeker Books (Cascadia Publishing House), co-published with Herald Press, 2005.

Throughout his long career, Dallas Wiebe – poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist – has been both serious and playful, sacred and profane. He has enjoyed creating literary parodies; at the same time, he has produced work that is deeply moving and spiritually invigorating. His work manifests sometimes a tender lyricism, sometimes a delicate – or a rough – piety.

Born in Kansas in 1930, Wiebe graduated from Bethel College in 1954. In 1960 he received a PhD in literature from the University of Michigan, and from 1963 until retiring in 1995 he taught at the University of Cincinnati. Recently, he has taken a significant place in the expanding world of “Mennonite” literary figures. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, little on the surface of his work linked him with either Mennonites or Christians in general. By the late ’80s, however, audiences such as those developing through the Mennonite/s Writing conferences – at Conrad Grebel University College (1990), Goshen College (1997, 2002), and Bluffton University (forthcoming, 2006) – began to recognize him as an “elder statesman” among American-Mennonite writers. *Mennonite Life* and *The New Quarterly* published lengthy pieces of his “Mennonite” fiction beginning in 1989 and the early 1990s.

*On the Cross* is both devotional and disturbing. The topic – the cross in our culture – offers an opportunity for Wiebe to express his religious sensibility. His emotional and intellectual register moves in and out of the deeply personal, his poetic language encompassing a ready bluntness and a gentle piety. In the first of his opening poems, “Going to the Cross,” the initial sentence, responding to the poem’s title, puts it simply: “It’s not easy to find.” “The Anabaptist Radiance” suggests comic bemusement with its opening image, “We are marching, marching upward / into the afterglow of our ancestors.” In “Christmas Eve, 1998,” we enter a tender, yet ever so slightly ironically observed, moment: “It’s a first for us; / Christmas Eve alone. My wife and I sit / and wonder / What to do / To greet a savior’s birth / by ourselves / in silence and old age.” In “Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me,” the speaker seems at first brazen, even sacrilegious, when he asks in response to the command: “How is that possible? / Who could bear the weight, / And

who knows how to follow?" We soon learn that the voice belongs to an authentic quester. The plain-spoken narrator in the end takes up the cross, "no matter how heavy, / and how far." In "Lift High the Cross," as elsewhere, the narrator carries the wrenching, startling, political punch of Dylan Thomas's narrator in poems such as "Do Not Go Gentle."

One of Wiebe's concerns is the spiritual and intellectual dullness by which North American society pushes and drifts along. In "On a Hill Far Away" he stingingly rebukes society's preference for commodifying its icons, for turning the cross into a fashion statement. Some poems ("Punch Lines," "Gladly the Cross I'd Bear," "On a Hill Faraway") start with or hint at bad jokes, silly rhymes, popular songs; but they progress to searing looks into the human heart, and the body that contains it.

Wiebe boldly makes the speaker's body a site for the cross in one series of four poems (31-37). Here he projects the body under a surgeon's knife and, without blasphemy, observes that an operation "left upon my chest / a scar in the shape of the cross." The scar becomes a sign not just of physical healing but of spiritual rebirth: "My cross that will not / let me forget / That moment God tried / to save us all." But the narrator's scar also invites sardonic humor, as in the opening lines of "My Pectoral Cross": "It's not much of a cross / but it will have to do"!

This collection not only plays with various themes but foregrounds a range of sources. For example, one sequence of poems responds to El Greco, Dali, and Grünewald (24-28), another to Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams (62-63). In "A Note to Paul Friesen" Wiebe addresses the Kansas-based artist, visual adaptations of whose sculptures of the cross punctuate the text. Cincinnati-based artist and sculptor John Leon has used a line-drawing technique to present images of Friesen's crosses – sculpted from wood and installed in a number of Mennonite and Methodist churches in the United States. The images are rivetting in their elegance, simplicity, and understated passion.

There are over forty poems in the collection, which Wiebe has dedicated to his wife, Virginia (Schroeder) Wiebe, who died in 2002. Here celebrations of Christ, life, the body, and the soul offer contemplative material for worship, meditation, and encouragement. The final poem, its shape recalling a cross, offers a poignant closing:

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In his hands  
the iron nails.

In his side  
the iron spear.

On his head  
a crown of thorns.

In his arid mouth the final words.

In his longsuffering the first offering.

In his slow death the first redemption.

In his sight  
the standing mother.

In his nostrils  
the whiff of Rome.

In his ears  
the babbling mob.

In his mouth  
the sour drink.

In his dying  
the wind of eternity.

In his burial  
the promise of life.

In his resurrection the sign we all awaited.

In his ascension the rising of our souls.

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