Introduction to Sandra Birdsell's "The Confession of a Reluctant Mennonite"

In 1982 Sandra Birdsell's first collection of short fiction, *Night Travellers*, appeared in print. Birdsell's first book featured stories about teenaged sisters Betty, Lureen and Truda, about their Mennonite mother Mika and their Métis father Maurice. Prominent also among the fictional characters were the girls' maternal grandparents, Oma and Opa Thiessen. It was these Mennonite grandparents who made the greatest impression on me. I was taken by the complex challenges of their lives as immigrants; their conflicted concern both for each other and for their wayward daughter Mika, who had married outside the faith; and their touching commitment to their rebellious teenaged granddaughters, especially Betty and Lureen, whom they observed being lured into the worldly world beyond their influence. As Birdsell has since remarked, the people who inspired these particular fictional characters – I speak here of Birdsell's Mennonite forebears – continued to interest her and to engage her writer's imagination, especially relative to works like *The Russländer*, the award-winning novel about which Birdsell's lectures, printed here, have much to say.

Sandra Birdsell's Bechtel Lectures speak to something that has often troubled, certainly intrigued, writers and readers of literary texts. Like artists and audiences representative of almost any heritage group, Mennonites and the writers who have emerged among them have been conflicted about the relationship between their communities and the literary artists they have spawned. I heard Rudy Wiebe remark recently that writers who grow up among Mennonites, in a Mennonite home, a Mennonite church and community, are invariably, indelibly marked by that experience – for good or ill. There's always, he observed – in the depths of your understanding, and inevitably informing your sense of things – that religious and sectarian world you knew, even when you've moved beyond it into another cultural environment altogether.

In the unique color and texture of Birdsell's own encounters with Mennonites documented in these lectures, we recognize the singular nature of any one person's experience of the culture that shaped her, the degree to

which, for example, no two Mennonite families or communities are alike. "How does 'a disaffected daughter of the faith' tell the Mennonite story?" Margaret Loewen Reimer of the *Canadian Mennonite* asked Sandra Birdsell shortly after her novel *The Russländer* came out in the fall of 2001. "'I am not disaffected,'" Birdsell protested, acknowledging that her experience was "'totally different'" from that of others who had told stories set among Mennonites; the fact of her difference might set her apart, she implied, but it did not set her entirely outside (*Canadian Mennonite* 6. 2 [Jan. 28, 2002]). Rudy Wiebe has remarked to Sandra Birdsell, and she has assented, that perhaps she is the ideal recorder of the Mennonites' most iconic stories – precisely because of her peculiar perch between the inside and the outside of the Mennonite world. In these lectures, which are, implicitly, a tribute to every particular story told by any particular writer, Birdsell allows us a rich view of this peculiar perch.

Excerpted from Hildi Froese Tiessen's formal introductions to Sandra Birdsell's Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies, presented at Conrad Grebel University College on March 15 and 16, 2007.