

A Retrospective Look at CGR's "Literary Refractions"

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In his editorial for the Fall 1996 volume of *The Conrad Grebel Review*, Arnold Snyder remarked that the journal was adding "a noteworthy new feature" dedicated to "creative non-fiction": a space for poets and writers of fiction to open fresh perspectives and so expand "the interdisciplinary mandate with which the journal began." Arnold and I had decided to name the new feature "Literary Refractions." In my own introduction to this feature, I noted that stories of Mennonite experience "have in large measure been provided by historians and theologians who have functioned as the self-appointed guardians of the Mennonite master-narrative"; I went on to observe that the creative pieces we were planning to publish in this series, insofar as they "have the power to objectify, refine, recreate, and redefine identity," would "contribute to the negotiation of meaning and the modification and construction of tradition in the Mennonite world." I added that the site we had chosen to call "Literary Refractions" was "intended to evoke and embody" the sort of "creative intersection" Stuart Hall referred to when he declared that identity "is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture."¹

Possibly most noteworthy about the advent of the "Literary Refractions" feature in the CGR was the fact that it was driven by our recognition of the emerging state of a new literary phenomenon that would come to embrace the signature "brand": "Mennonite/s Writing." Much has been written over the past several decades about the flourishing of Mennonite writers in North America, especially, initially, the ascendance of a number of mostly young-ish authors (the generation after Rudy Wiebe) who began publishing work for regional and national audiences during the 1980s. These writers—among them Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, Sandra Birdsell, Victor Enns, Sarah Klassen, and David Waltner-Toews—were published early in their careers by one of Canada's premier literary publishers: Winnipeg's Turnstone Press. These early Mennonite writers were Canadian. Later identified by Andris Taskans, the editor of Manitoba's influential literary magazine *Prairie Fire*, as comprising a "Mennonite miracle," they established a tradition that would soon subsume, also, American writers who, unlike these mostly Manitobans,

1 Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," in *The Real Me: Post-modernism and the Question of Identity*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), 44.

were dispersed throughout diverse regions of their country: Julia Kasdorf in Pennsylvania, Jeff Gundy and Dallas Wiebe in Ohio, Jean Janzen in California, and Raylene Hinz-Penner in Kansas, for example.

In 1990, what was then known as Conrad Grebel College (where I had been teaching a course in Mennonite literature and art since the late 1980s) was the site of the first of nine (soon ten) international conferences on Mennonite/s Writing. At the College, I hosted many readings every year by Mennonite writers from across North America. I had edited the first collection of modern Mennonite short stories (*Liars & Rascals*, University of Waterloo Press) in 1989 and, the following year, I edited special “new Mennonite writing” issues of *The New Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 1990) and *Prairie Fire* (Summer 1990). In 1992, I edited *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada* with co-editor Peter Hinchcliffe (University of Waterloo Press). These exercises in locating new Mennonite writers, soliciting new writing, and editing texts, augmented by my own writing in literary history and literary criticism, prepared me to take on the new literary task of curating the “Literary Refractions” for the *Review*.

The “Literary Refractions” featured between 1996 and 2003 were all invited. They were wide-ranging in genre (including fiction and poetry, letters and personal essays) and were intended to introduce the *Review*’s readers to fresh perspectives and innovative ways to express the experiences of Mennonites in North America in the late twentieth century. I wrote introductions for each piece, to offer some context and to inform readers generally about how various people and texts were poised to contribute to the expanding literary landscape to which Mennonite writers were giving shape. Many of the works I solicited were published in subsequent volumes of the writers’ work. Together, they made up a collection of literary gems many readers a short step away from the heart of Mennonite literary activity might not otherwise encounter. I hesitate to name any of them, since I loved them all. Nevertheless, I would cite as most memorable for me a work as preciously humorous as Rosemary Deckert Nixon’s short story “Mennonite Your Way” (Winter/Spring 1997). Or as provocative as Dallas Wiebe’s personal essay, offered in his inimitably serious, probing, and mocking tone: “Can a Mennonite Be an Atheist?” (Fall 1998). Among classic texts now widely read is Rudy Wiebe’s “Living on the Iceberg: ‘The Artist as Critic and Witness’ 36 Years Later” (Spring 2000). Among pieces still vitally rewarding for any reader are the evocative works of fiction by Sarah Klassen and Andreas Schroeder, and the accessible and inspiring work by poets Raylene Hinz Penner, Jeff Gundy, Julia Kasdorf, David Waltner-Toews, and Di Brandt.

I can't recall exactly why this project within the *Review* came to an end. I think I was simply giving priority, then, to other facets of the larger Mennonite/s writing adventure, including writing papers on the development of the field and using some of the tools offered by post-colonialism and postmodernism, for example, as prisms through which to observe and comment upon what we then called "the state of the art," especially as Mennonite writers settled into more broadly-based literary worlds. I had begun to conduct interviews with Mennonite writers in 1992. Around the turn of the century, I published two of these: "'Where I Come From': An Interview with David Bergen," *Prairie Fire* (Winter 1997), and "'A Place You Can't Go Home To': A Conversation with Miriam Toews," *Prairie Fire* (Autumn 2000). In 2003 I responded to an invitation to write the "Program Notes" for Anne Chislette's *Quiet in the Land* at the Stratford Festival, Stratford, ON. I co-chaired Mennonite/s Writing conferences with Ervin Beck at Goshen College in 2002 and with Jeff Gundy at Bluffton College in 2006 while bringing to light, alongside co-editor Paul Tiessen, the work of a little-known Swiss Mennonite writer, Ephraim Weber, whose letters and unpublished novel "Aunt Rachel's Nieces" are held in the National Archives of Canada. (*Ephraim Weber's Letters Home 1902-1955: Letters from Ephraim Weber to Leslie Staebler of Waterloo County*. (MLR Editions Canada, 1996) and *After Green Gables: LM Montgomery's Letters to Ephraim Weber, 1916-1941* (University of Toronto Press, 2006)). In 2002 I curated/edited a chapbook, *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute* (Sand Hills Books and Pinchpenny Press) and, two years later, guest edited *The Conrad Grebel Review's* special issue "Rudy Wiebe and the Mennonites – forty years on" (Spring 2004).

By the time the CGR's regular feature called "Literary Refractions" that Arnold Snyder and I had envisioned came to a close, many other venues had become available for foregrounding and assessing the innovative literary work of Mennonite writers— most recently, my own *On Mennonite/s Writing: Selected Essays* (CMU press, 2023). It's gratifying that the CGR, based at Grebel, which by the late 1980s was becoming an acknowledged centre of Mennonite literary activity, should have played so rich a role in the emergence of this ever-burgeoning field.

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