



The Conrad Grebel Review

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Cover photograph of Sandra Birdsell by Jennifer Konkle, Conrad Grebel University College.*

Foreword

We are pleased to devote this issue to the theme of Mennonite/s Writing, and we thank guest editor Hildi Froese Tiessen for shepherding the various components through the production process. This issue marks the second time we have offered a special number on Mennonite writers and writing; the previous occasion was Spring 2004 (“Rudy Wiebe and the Mennonites: Forty Years On”). Most of the articles and other pieces in these special issues originated in two of the four conferences on Mennonite/s Writing that have been held in Canada and the US since 1990. The fifth conference is being planned for October 2009 – see ad in this issue.

The Spring 2008 issue, on the theme of Mennonites and Policing, will consist of professional and academic responses to “The Gospel or a Glock? Mennonites and the Police?” (see our Spring 2007 issue), as well as articles on related issues.

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Complete CGR issues from Winter 1998 to Winter 2007 are available online. Visit www.grebel.uwaterloo.ca/academic/cgreview. Please note that book reviews are posted to the site as they become available.

C. Arnold Snyder, *Academic Editor* Stephen A. Jones, *Managing Editor*

CORRECTIONS

Gremlins were working overtime as we prepared the Fall 2007 issue. We apologize to Justin Klassen for a grammatical error made by the editor in the last sentence of “Augustine’s Existentialism and Yoder’s Messianic Politics.” And we must acknowledge a mistake in the review of *Sound in the Land: Essays on Mennonites and Music*. Co-editors of this book are Carol Ann Weaver and Maureen Epp, not Marlene Epp. We apologize to Maureen Epp, the musicologist, and to Marlene Epp, the historian, for the faulty attribution. This mistake was not the fault of the reviewer. — SAJ

Introduction

This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* celebrates several significant events that have taken place in the world of Mennonite literature since fall 2006. Featured here are presentations prepared for the fourth in a series of conferences on “Mennonite/s Writing” since 1990: “Mennonite/s Writing: Across Borders,”¹ which took place at Bluffton University in Ohio in October 2006. Also foregrounded in this volume are the “Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies” presented by Sandra Birdsell at Conrad Grebel University College in March 2007.

Birdsell’s lectures entitled “The Confession of a Reluctant Mennonite” were written in response to the College’s invitation to her to reflect autobiographically on the process of writing her iconic Mennonite work *The Russländer*. Her thoughtful personal observations inform our understanding of that work and her entire oeuvre. They also speak to some of the questions that prevail in the study of Mennonite and other “ethnic” literatures in Canada – questions about identity, family relationships, the role of the artist in the community.

It is appropriate that Birdsell’s lectures share the space between these covers with a clutch of shorter pieces from the Bluffton conference, honoring other writers whose work has given shape to the Mennonite literary landscape: long-time Goshen College poet-in-residence Nick Lindsay (who strongly influenced several prominent Mennonite poets); Jean Janzen, whose powerful influence as poet is palpable in her widely adopted hymn texts, as well as in her long-standing mentoring of younger American Mennonite poets; Sarah Klassen, whose poetry and fiction evocatively chronicles family story, public and private sentiment; and Dallas Wiebe, whose distinct, edgy voice was almost lost, for a time, among the Mennonites, only to be more recently embraced for its wide range and imaginative complexity.

Also included from the Bluffton conference is the transcription of a lively conversation among three senior figures in Mennonite literature: Rudy Wiebe, John Ruth, and Jean Janzen. My own documentary account of “the state” of Mennonite writing, which also serves as a more comprehensive introduction to this volume, is accompanied by essays in a more personal

register by Jeff Gundy and Ann Hostetler. Their distinctly American perspectives on Mennonite/s writing suggest something of the texture of Mennonite/s writing in the USA as well as the ever-expanding scope of Mennonite/s writing all over this continent.² Finally, Birdsell's observations and selections from the Bluffton proceedings are nicely complemented by an interview in which Miriam Toews relates to Natasha Wiebe some recent reflections on her immensely popular novel, *A Complicated Kindness*. Anyone who wishes to be informed about the current state of Mennonite/s writing throughout North America might do well to begin with this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*.

Hildi Froese Tiessen
Conrad Grebel University College

Notes

¹ Co-sponsors of the conference included Bluffton University, Conrad Grebel University College, the Marpeck Fund and the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

² Other elements of the Bluffton conference proceedings – especially works of literary criticism – are available in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82.1 (January 2008).

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.

2007 BECHTEL LECTURES

The Confession of a Reluctant Mennonite

Sandra Birdsell

LECTURE ONE

Writing from the Outside

The most fascinating stories I read as a child usually began like this: Once upon a time, long ago and far away there lived. There lived a little girl, an old woman, a boy and his poor widowed mother, the three billy goats gruff, a cruel stepmother – the phrase “there lived” immediately evoked the presence of flesh, heart and mind, characters engaged in a struggle. Their presence raised the possibility for adventure, betrayal, strife; there would be heroic endeavors, an evil to overcome. “There lived” promised an array of characters who were infinitely more exotic than the majority of people living around me in the predictable prairie landscape.

My Mennonite grandparents and their extended family were similar to those exotic fairytale characters. They had once lived in a faraway land, long ago – twenty years ago by the time I was born – the land being what was then southern Russia; the town, Rosenthal in the colony of Chortitza. They had lived in the Byzantine land of Baba Yaga, the Frog Prince, and the little girl made of snow. A place, they often said, that was more beautiful than Manitoba. My Schroeder relatives, and my mother, twelve years old when she arrived in Canada, had lived most of their lives in the land of Fabergé eggs, where picnics were spread out on fur rugs and tea served from silver samovars. The country of the Tsars was a vastly richer experience, I imagined, than living in Morris, Manitoba, population 1,200, a town that had distinguished itself by installing a single traffic light on Main Street, and the hotel, and a neon sign: a chicken that pecked at a kernel of corn twenty-four times in a minute.

This difference was evident to me in the oversized cooking pots, pans, and kettles, the batches of noodles that were draped across chair backs and beds to dry on noodle-making day, the borscht or butter soup simmering in

a pot that was large enough to take a bath in, the heaps of buns cooling on a table, the triangles of deep-fried dough to be dusted with berry sugar and served on a hot summer day with watermelon pickles whose cool rosy flesh shone out from jars in the darkness of a cellar shelf.

The exoticness of my Mennonite relatives was evident in their periodic gathering at an uncle's place just outside of town; obviously well-to-do people, judging from the women's be-ringed fingers and their husbands' late-model cars. They came from across the country to take part in the butchering of several pigs. Their early morning preparations began before the sun had risen. The kerchiefs covering the women's hair, and their long aprons and rubber boots transformed them into peasants similar to those depicted in a painting I would come across in a book, Bruegel's "A Country Wedding." They became so-called simple people "in a state of utter contentment and gaiety," according to a caption beneath the photograph of the painting.

As the day went on, their voices rose to a shrill of excitement while they worked around a tub of water carving flesh from the pigs' heads, as they tended to the smokehouse churning out its woody odor, and rendered fat on a cook stove in a shed. I was old enough to recognize that the butchering was a ritual, a recalling of the past, the practice and passing on of what had once been necessary skills. None of my relatives looked as though they had ever missed a meal, and yet their deep hunger was palpable as they consumed crackles spread on bread. "Why don't you just buy lard at the store," I once suggested, testing the waters in my usual covert way. The comment was met with silent indignation; it was enough to have to suffer the presence of an interloper, not to speak of one who dared give voice to her own ignorance. "We use everything but the squeal," an uncle proclaimed at the end of the pig-slaughtering day, as he usually did, and then the men would gulp down a small glass of vodka.

Years later I would write a story, "The Day My Grandfather Died," in which the narrator – a teenaged girl – observes the celebration of her grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary and thinks that her grandmother, in her loose-flowing dress and with gold leaves intertwined in her white hair, looks like a fairy godmother who has the power to grant wishes. She would ask her grandmother to grant her the wish of happiness. But when the grandparents begin to fret over how much cake to cut for their guests, fearing waste, the girl's fairytale image vanishes.

It came to me how their conversations always seemed to centre on food, the growing of it, the preparing of it and the eating.... [It seemed] to me their lives had been narrow and confining; even here, now, at a celebration, they were unable to step across the limits and celebrate.

She becomes angry and suggests to her grandparents that the leftover cake will not be wasted if they feed it to the pigs.

Mennonite relatives were exotically old-fashioned in the way they spoke in their guttural-sounding language, the way they preferred to dress in their old country clothes that made them look as though they'd stepped out from another century. My great-grandmother Schroeder, at the age of 90 years, dressed all in black, a black shawl accentuating the piercing gaze of her small eyes. An embroidered sampler on her bedroom wall advised: Be not dismayed when sorrow enters; better days will follow. The optimistic message seemed lost on her, for my great-grandmother seldom smiled. Before climbing into bed at night, she poked about underneath it with a broom in the event that someone might be hiding there. She looked as though she wanted to eat children up with her eyes. Her gnarled fingers were so strong that when she grasped our arms it was impossible to pull away. It didn't take much to convince me and my sisters that our great-grandmother Schroeder was a witch.

My great-aunts were omnipresent, hovering in the corners of a room as they presided over a visit. They exuded a grim sadness and piousness that in my opinion were as outdated as their stiff and formal-looking dark tailored dresses. The dresses were sometimes trimmed with lace collars, or necklines of pleated satin from which the women's necks stretched swan-like – at least it seemed they were unnaturally long. The better to peer into your life with, my dear, I came to think. The better to listen in, to note a misbehavior, to admonish whenever I made the mistake of complaining that I was starving, or that I was so angry that I wanted to “just kill” one of my sisters. You don't know the meaning of those words, they said.

My Mennonite relatives sang beautifully in three-part harmony, grew exquisite and velvety-looking gloxinia plants on their windowsills, sighed a great deal, and slept in feather beds. In a story “The Two-Headed Calf,” Betty, the main character, would observe:

Her parents had dragged all their outdated influences with them to this country, including that “damned” clock with its blunt one-dimensional sound. They had bundled themselves, fled the Arctic, arrived in a tropical country wearing their fervent beliefs like layers of clothing they sweated in but refused to shed.

Once upon a time, my grandparents said, we lived in a land that was more beautiful than this land. Eventually they went on to explain that the climate in Russia had not been as cold as it was in Manitoba. There had been apricot and pear trees growing in their yard, and walnuts. They had grown sugar melons and cantaloupes, which my grandfather had tried in vain to cultivate in his garden beside the Red River.

At Thanksgiving they brought samples of their garden crops to church, jars of fruits and vegetables, and baking and sewing that were auctioned off and the proceeds given to charity. They thanked God for the peaceful country of Canada and its government that had opened its doors to them, but still, nothing was quite as good as it had been in Russia, not as lush, not as beautiful. The teaching we received in school was not as rigorous as it should be. Perhaps even we, the children, were not quite as good as the children had been in Russia. Especially not as good as Anna, my mother’s young sister. That little girl had nursed the entire family when they were ill with typhus, only to succumb to the disease later on. We were not as good as the infant boy who’d been buried in a garden a week before my grandparents immigrated.

“So why did you come here, then?” I once ventured to ask. “Because there were bad people,” my mother replied.

Aha! Now the story would begin, I thought. Once upon a time in a land far away, there lived bad people. “There were bad people, and that’s why we left.” And that was the end of my mother’s story. What an unsatisfying tale!

My Mennonite grandparents came from the old colony, Anna Thiessen from the town of Neuendorf, and Johann Schroeder from Rosenthal. They were married on October 4, 1903. My grandmother was a tiny, vigorous woman who would give birth to nine children, and her influence in their lives continued throughout their adult years by means of her letters and their

visits. She was as compassionate as she was strong-minded. I don't recall any outward display of affection from my grandmother, but I knew that she loved us.

My grandfather's pale blue eyes were often filled with unshed tears. He was an erect slight man who walked and talked with circumspection, and seemed to be at home only in his garden. He took particular interest in me, and the groundwork for my life was cultivated there in his garden while I followed him about, learning the attributes of silence, patience, diligence, acceptance, and the rewards to be gained by hard work.

He later came to me in the story "The Two-Headed Calf":

Sylvia watched the grandfather tap his knuckle against the side of her watermelon, his ear pressed against it, listening intently. He listened, he said, for the heartbeats of musicians. An orchestra of seeds inside the melon.

"Playing a serenade in B flat," Sylvia told him....

He shook his head. "Don't forget about the trumpets," he said. He meant there were also fluted orange-coloured blossoms in the seeds, trumpets toasting the future births of other melons....

"Did you know that seeds have memories?" he asked, as though it had only occurred to him. "They can remember every garden they came from. Even the garden of Eden," he said, with reverence. "Seeds are the Alpha and Omega," he went on to say. "The beginning and end of every garden."

My grandparents had lived in the town of Arkadak, where my grandfather taught school until his father became too ill to manage the farm. Arkadak was north of his family home and colder, near the forests, and sometimes they heard wolves howling in the night. My grandfather returned to Rosenthal with his young family just in time to be in the center of, and to experience first hand, the ugly repercussions of the revolution and the ensuing civil war. In Canada they spent an unproductive year on a farm east of the Red River, and several years in Winnipeg, where they operated a boarding house on William Avenue. My grandfather attempted to eke out a living by selling encyclopedias and Bibles door to door. Then they settled in

Morris, Manitoba, supported partly by their working unmarried daughters and partly by my grandfather's work as a janitor at the local hotel.

Morris was a town whose people were mostly of British descent, the exception being several families from eastern European countries and Germany, a Métis family, a Japanese man, and my family, the Roger Bartlette family. My father had anglicized his name from Berthelet and claimed to be part French, Scottish, Cree, and Ojibwa, a heritage of mixed blood that in the 1940s and '50s was more often denied than claimed.

There were Mennonites, other than my grandparents' family, living in the town who had known one another while living in that long ago time and place in Russia. I was related to most of them. I began to tell my friends that I was Russian, until I once heard my mother tell someone that she was not Russian, but Dutch. Her German accent was thick then, and so the man she was speaking with had assumed that she was from Germany. "Russia," she had corrected. Then she added, "But I'm not Russian. I'm Dutch." That was news to me. "Did you wear wooden shoes?" I later asked. "No, of course not," she said. "We wore regular shoes."

I soon realized that my curiosity about my Mennonite heritage would not be satisfied. I wanted to "be" something. It was important to be able to say where you had come from in the way my friends were able to do. My father spoke French, but he was only part French. My mother spoke German, but she wasn't German. She'd been born in Russia, but she was not Russian. She was Dutch, and although she did get down on her hands and knees and scrub the back steps and sidewalk as Dutch women were known to do, she had not worn wooden shoes. Being Mennonite, I thought, was complicated.

If I was to learn anything about my Mennonite relatives, I would need to study them when they weren't looking. I observed that my mother discouraged the expression of strong emotions; looking into a mirror for longer than it was necessary to determine whether or not you were presentable was frowned upon. There were many cousins and second cousins living in Winnipeg, Edmonton, and California, but most of them lived on farms east of the Red River where I sometimes spent my summer vacations pursued by a flock of cranky geese. My cousins, when playing baseball, were fiercely competitive, but in a restrained and quiet way. They liked to tease, to play

jokes on one another, and when we went to town on a Saturday night, they had a way of looking at town life with wry humor, which caused me to think how some people in Morris pronounced “Mennonite” as “Minnanite” and called them *Knacksote* eaters, Low German speakers, square heads. The Morris kids sometimes mimicked the Low German accents of the boys from the nearby towns of Lowe Farm and Rosenort as a way to show their superiority.

Then the husband of one of my great-aunts died, and another opportunity to learn what it meant to be Mennonite presented itself. Uncle Jacob had been my great-aunt’s second husband, her first husband having died as a young man in Russia; their child, a girl, had also died, both of causes that were talked about in hushed tones and in German so the “big ears” in the room could not understand.

My great-aunt had married in Canada and late in life, the second time. The honeymoon was barely over when Uncle Jacob passed away. I overheard a woman comment, rather wryly, that perhaps if she’d been married for a longer time her grief would not have been quite as severe. The comment reflected on what some took to be her rather dramatic display of bereavement over her husband’s body before the funeral (when my sisters and I had been encouraged, and refused, to kiss him goodbye), and during the service and burial. In the following days my great-aunt became fearful of sleeping alone, so I was sent to keep her company. Upon my arrival from the skating rink, shivering with cold, I found hot cocoa waiting and a plate of buttered buns. She hovered over me as though she expected I might run for home. I felt a bit like Hansel in the story “Hansel and Gretel” – as if I was being fattened up for the cooking pot.

For several nights I lay beside my great-aunt in the darkness, the clock ticking loudly as she wept and whispered prayers, sighed, and called out. As the night wore on, her ample body sank deeper and deeper into the feather mattress, dragging me along with it. I hung onto the pillow, afraid that I would smother, and fearing what I thought she feared – that we would be visited by the ghost of Uncle Jacob.

I had learned that Mennonite funerals were very large. People came from far and wide to attend them, and many photographs were taken of various individuals posing with the dead. Afterwards, they ate dill pickles,

cheddar cheese, and buns, and told rambling stories about the departed. I had heard that my great-uncle Jacob had been a good man and therefore he had likely gained his reward. My great-aunt expected to join him one day, yet she carried on as though this was not the case. In retrospect, I remember Uncle Jacob had been a handsome silver-haired gentleman with gentle ways. There's no doubt that his unexpected courtship, and so late in life, had rekindled hope, and there's no doubt that yet again my aunt's heart had been broken. But what I recalled then was that she had often sung the song "Faith is the Victory," and I concluded with my black and white, legalistic, twelve-year-old way of reasoning that my great-aunt's excessive display of grief over her husband's body and her fear of sleeping alone made her faith somewhat less than victorious. Was this, too, another attribute of being Mennonite?

I would learn one day that my great-aunties' lives had been shaped and dictated to by their close-knit community in what was then southern Russia, and by its church. They'd once lived in towns and villages surrounded by Ukrainians and Russians. They'd hired these people as farm laborers and household servants, yet they were content to know little about them, just as they chose to remain uninformed about their non-Mennonite neighbors in Morris, Manitoba, the world in which they now found themselves. They had strong advice on how my mother ought to raise her children. They hoped to compensate, I surmised, for the fact that my mother had committed the unthinkable and married out of her religion and culture.

My sisters and I strenuously resisted being taught how to embroider and to speak German, but our attendance at church was not negotiable. We had been baptized Roman Catholic in deference to the wishes of our paternal Roman Catholic grandmother, but attended a small white Mennonite church that had been hauled into town from the country and set onto a vacant lot beside the Morris Hospital. For a time it was presided over by my grandfather, then by Uncle Jacob and, when he died, by various lay preachers until membership dwindled and it became financially unfeasible to keep the church open. My grandparents had been Old Church members in Russia, and although several of their relatives had become Mennonite Brethren after arriving in Canada, I believe we received Old Church teaching. We were taught that how we lived spoke louder than words. We learned to do unto

others as we would have them do unto us, to not seek to draw attention to ourselves, and above all, when others harmed us, to turn the other cheek. There would be no boisterous play on Sundays. As I became a teen I learned that being beautiful meant having a clean heart, groomed fingernails, shining hair, and a complexion enhanced by face cream and not cosmetics. I was not allowed to go to movies and school dances. Being Mennonite, in my opinion, meant not having any fun.

In an early story, “The Day My Grandfather Died,” the young narrator, Lureen, says,

“Being French meant being flashy and demonstrative, traits that I didn’t see in my mother or my grandparents, who were Mennonite, a fact I detested. Being Mennonite was like having acne. It was shameful, dreary. No one invited you out.”

With the exception of my grandparents, whom I had grown to respect and deeply love, the opinion I’d formed of Mennonites in general was unflattering, biased, and, I would one day learn, sometimes just plain wrong. The story “Flowers for Weddings and Funerals” ends like this:

I can see Oma bending in the garden, cutting flowers for weddings and funerals. I can see her rising to search the way I take and she will not find me there.

I had decided that I was most definitely not a Mennonite.

In the early 1980s I was a newly-published writer, living and working in Winnipeg. There was a literary conference, and I was startled to find myself invited to take part in a panel discussion on what it meant to be a Mennonite writer. The auspiciousness of the occasion, that I was to be included in a discussion along with the literary giant Rudy Wiebe, was not lost on me. Being a newly published author meant that several of my stories had appeared in small literary magazines. Wiebe had published one of those first short stories in an anthology, *More Stories From Western Canada* [1980]. In doing so he had firmly established me as a storyteller of note among other western Canadian storytellers such as Sinclair Ross, Gabrielle Roy, Margaret Laurence, Frederick Philip Grove, Wallace Stegner, and Robert Kroetsch, whose creative writing course I had attended at the University

of Manitoba. In that course I had met, and became close friends with, the writers Armin Wiebe and Victor Enns. Kroetsch had been instrumental in bringing my stories to the attention of Turnstone Press. I was in very good company.

Rudy Wiebe and I had corresponded only briefly in an exchange of notes over the short story he had chosen to publish in the anthology. I had read his novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), and more recently had fallen under the spell of *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977), a novel that had affected me deeply and fueled my interest in my father's ancestry. I wanted to write about my Métis heritage and to explore the possibility that I might be related to Louis Riel.

I was aware of Wiebe's earlier books, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and *The Blue Mountains of China*, but I hadn't read them. It had been difficult not to be aware of them and the controversy aroused by their publication. I confess that I didn't understand the reason for it, and it didn't concern me. "I'm not Mennonite," I would tell anyone who would listen, just as I would proclaim I am not a feminist writer, woman writer, Manitoba writer, prairie writer. It behooved me now on the occasion of the panel discussion to accept being identified as a western Canadian writer, and to try and pass myself off, for this occasion at least, as being somewhat Mennonite.

The moderator was Robert Enright of the CBC. Rudy Wiebe sat on one side of me in the studio, and on the other side was Patrick Friesen; and perhaps Di Brandt was there, or it may have been Ralph Friesen, who within several years would become the editor of my first collection of short fiction, *Night Travellers* (1982). Ralph was on the board of Turnstone Press, and when it looked as though my book would be published without the benefit of having been edited, I prevailed upon him for help and he responded by taking his vacation and spending it working on my stories. During the late 1970s and early '80s there was an enclave of up-and-coming Manitoba authors who had been dubbed "The Mennonite Mafia." I found myself among members of the Menno Mafiosi, about to take part in a panel discussion, and feeling very much a fraud.

Before the taping began, I felt the need to substantiate my presence. I leaned over and whispered in Rudy's ear. I told him about my dual heritage. That was when he said, "You should write about Mennonites. You'd be a

good person to do it.” He went on to say that I had one foot in and the other out, which gave me a good perspective.

Years later when I reminded him, and I would do so on several occasions, he couldn’t recall having made the comment. But I can recall as though it was yesterday that my mind immediately churned with objections. He couldn’t have known that several of my new stories were riddled with references to my Mennonite connection. I was writing about them, yet I objected to the suggestion that someone thought I should.

Stories such as “Judgement” questioned the inconsistencies of what I thought was a legalistic faith. An old man, Mr. Thiessen, dies in the night of lung cancer, and his widow waits for the sun to rise. She expects the doctor to come in the morning as usual, to administer a shot of morphine, and while she waits, she and her dead husband have a talk. The husband asks her to roll him a cigarette, and the wife refuses. She berates him for having smoked and harmed his body, and declares that consequently he will not go to heaven. He counter-argues that she eats too much. She’s obese, which, in his opinion, is just as harmful as smoking. After the doctor leaves, the dead husband appears to his wife in the potting shed where he’s gone to get his tobacco and papers, which he takes with him as he goes off down the road to heaven. His wife, Mrs. Thiessen, tries to run after him, but she can’t keep up because she is too fat.

In another story, I had given a woman the name Mrs. Brawn, when I really had meant “Braun.” She’s the leader of a group of women who meet for Bible study and good works in “The Wednesday Circle.” A young girl seeks out the women, hoping for guidance and comfort, to confess a “sin” and find her way to redemption. She overhears a woman among them relate an account of the suicide of a young girl who, during a war, had been captured by soldiers and brutalized many times. The women argue about whether or not God would forgive the girl for having taken her own life. Mrs. Brawn ends the dangerous discussion by quoting scripture. The woman who had told the story about the raped girl sums up their reaction to it when she says, “We obey because we fear punishment, not because we love.”

As part of the literary conference, Rudy Wiebe had agreed to meet with writers and critique their stories. “The Wednesday Circle” was one of them. “This is theological,” Rudy said, which was only one of several comments he’d made about my story, but the one that stuck. I recognized

that, indeed, stories such as “The Wednesday Circle,” “Judgment,” and “Night Travellers” were an attempt to achieve religious significance.

My evolution from being an over-achieving homemaker and mother, community volunteer, member of a church choir, Sunday School teacher, leader of a girls’ club in an inner-city neighborhood, to becoming a writer of fiction had been fraught with indecision, self-doubt, and fear. And yet, when I had “discovered” literature and when I began to write fiction, I felt as though all of my life I’d been a duck waddling about on dry land and suddenly I had found the pond. This seemed to be what I was meant to do. However, my mother had taught me that telling stories was tantamount to telling lies. If my stories contained a theological element, I might somehow redeem myself in the eyes of those whose opinions mattered, such as my mother, my relatives, and my church.

The question of whether telling stories was an honorable, or even a moral, thing to do haunted me. When we talked about writing, Mennonite writers immediately understood the very real risk of being ostracized by their family and community. They seemed more willing to take that risk than I was. Indeed, some of them seemed eager to free themselves of who and what they were, which was impossible for me to do even if I’d wanted to. I would need to write my way toward that kind of understanding.

The urge to write stories eventually took precedence over my fear, and I convinced myself that honesty meant no subject could be taboo. It meant portraying the world the way I saw it to be, and not the way that I wished it to be. I had decided that I could bring honor to my grandparents’ name and to my name if, in my writing, I practiced all the attributes I’d learned from them: patience, acceptance for what came, and willingness to pay attention to the smallest details and to work hard. I had read Rudy Wiebe’s preface to the anthology *More Stories From Western Canada*, where he had written,

Stories must be told and re-told, and the retelling of stories about a place, a person, an act is so much more important than recounting the original facts because the so-called lies—the accretions and deletions of each new telling—are more humanly significant than literal facts can ever be. The “lies” of good stories are always, perversely, truer than, “facts.”

Rudy was a Mennonite, it was quite possible that we were related, and his

words were good enough for me.

Ladies of the House (1984), my second collection of short stories, pointedly stayed away from my Mennonite connections and was followed by two novels. In the first, *The Missing Child* (1989), the Mennonite community is centered on a small church and is depicted in a rather strong way. The Mennonites in the novel are among the minority in the community, just as they had been in Morris, Manitoba: a kind of sub-culture existing on the edges of the predominant culture, which is British. The gentle pastor, Jacob Friesen, presides over his unruly and trying flock, and his teaching somewhat reflects the teaching of the Mennonite Brethren whose influence among my General Conference Mennonite relatives had at some point taken over. They were influenced, too, by American evangelists who, in the late 1950s and '60s, had set up their tents in rural Manitoba. When Jacob Friesen dies, his flock comes to mourn him and to tell stories about his life, including Hendrick Schultz, a young boy whose life has been inordinately influenced by the minister and his wife. The pastor's widow, thinking to finish the work Jacob had started to ensure the salvation of Hendrick's soul, requests that he stay the night to keep her company.

Hendrick Schultz lay in bed that night beneath the feather quilt, eyes closed, feigning sleep as from the foot of the bed came the sound of Lena drawing her funeral dress up over her head and shaking the creases from it.... She had not turned on the light...but Hendrick saw her anyway, in the sounds she made.... The room contained the smell of Jacob.... something moist and round, an unpleasant clean odour which said nothing of its owner, except that he was clean.

... He opened one eye and saw the clock—a pinwheel of green light—as she wound it.... Hendrick clutched at the side of the bed as she pulled back the feather quilt, sat down, and the whole mattress tilted...

“Oh, God, oh God,” Lena whispered. “Why did you have to take Jacob away from me so soon? Why did you have to go and do that?”

... He pretended that he'd fallen asleep instantly and began to snore, but the wool socks she'd given him to wear to bed prickled against the soles of his feet. He felt like kicking out..., rising up suddenly in a scream....

[During the night] he rose to the surface gradually, aware immediately that the darkness of the night had reached its fullest point.... when there was a loud pounding on the door....

"What is it, oh Lord?" Lena said, awake instantly....

"It's me, Elizabeth." The door flew open... [as Hendrick's mother] strode... into the bedroom.... Hendrick saw her hair,... rippling in silver streams across her breasts.

"Get out of bed," Elizabeth said [to him].

She... climbed into bed beside Lena. "I'll take his place," she said. "For tonight only. And then you're on your own."

...Hendrick tore the wool socks free, felt the shock of the cold linoleum against the soles of his feet, and entered the world.

My second novel, *The Chrome Suite* (1992), went off in an entirely different direction. But my literary connection to my mother's heritage would not go away, thanks in part to Hildi Froese Tiessen, a professor of literature at Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo. Very early in my literary life, Hildi sought me out and we became friends. She was influential in my being invited to be writer-in-residence at the University of Waterloo in 1987 and 1988, and in 1989 she published several of my stories in *Liars and Rascals*, an anthology of fiction by Mennonite writers. I was invited to speak to her students and to give public readings, and on these occasions, graciously invited also to attend "community suppers" at the College. There I found myself surrounded, and a bit overwhelmed, by the Mennonite-ness of a hoard of good-natured, clear-eyed, energetic, and gregarious students. They were so like my cousins. I felt a strong kinship towards them, and towards Hildi and her husband Paul Tiessen, as I did to other Mennonites I met throughout my literary life wherever I traveled.

Immediately upon hearing the names such as Bergen, Dyck, Toews, Friesen, Wiebe, Enns, I felt an affinity with these persons and was drawn to engage them in conversation, or to just stand beside them in a crowd of people and feel sheltered.

Before one of the several readings I have given at Conrad Grebel since the 1980s, Hildi gave me a book to look through while she attended to last-minute arrangements. She and Paul ran a small publishing company named Sand Hills Books, and they had published a collection of photographs called *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday: Peter Gerhard Rempel's Photographs of Mennonites in Russia, 1890-1917* (1981). In the book was a photograph of a group of women and children sitting on the steps at the entrance of a graceful-looking house, a flower bed of petunias in the foreground, the veranda trellis covered in ivy. The women were all dressed in lightly-colored clothing, white dresses perhaps, such as I had often seen the Tsarina and the beautiful Romanov princesses wearing in photographs. In another picture, children paused in their game of croquet in a yard; beyond them stood a hedge and a tree. Young men sat round a table playing chess; a group of people posed with the carcass of a pig following a butchering, their long aprons and their pride of achievement at the end of the day a replica of the scene I had witnessed as a child.

I was astounded when, as I leafed through the volume of pictures, the familiar faces of my great-aunts leapt out from among a group of women, two young and beautiful women with enigmatic smiles and smoky dark eyes and hair. I recognized my oldest daughter in their features and hair. In another picture I saw my grandparents' children – my mother and her siblings as youngsters, the very young great-aunties with them looking hauntingly shy. The woman who had lain beside me in the dark grieving the loss of her husband may have been about fifteen or sixteen years old. She held an infant niece on her lap, one hand curled gently across the baby's stomach, while her other hand was tucked up under the arm of an older child to hold her in place on a stool. My great-aunt looked vulnerable and uncertain as to how she should arrange her features for the picture-taking. It was easy to imagine her going down a Russian street in the town of Rosenthal in winter with that same tentative look, her back straight, her long skirt brushing the tips of her shoes as she made her way along the wooden sidewalk, leaving a trail of

footprints in the snow. That imagined description would appear in my next novel, *The Russländer* (2001).

Winter was taking its time ending, and the town looked dismal, dark tree branches set against a grey woolen sky, the street deeply rutted and icy, wooden sidewalks criss-crossed with the slushy footprints, mostly small ones of the children who had gone to school earlier.

I would see my great-aunt as I wrote about my young protagonist, Katya:

A crisp wind tugged at Katya's skirt, and she felt the bite of it at her ankles. . . . [Once again she counted her steps,] [noting] how many it took for her to reach her grandparents' house. When viewed from across the street, the Schroeder house looked small. Pots of African violets and gloxinia lined the windowsills, their blossoms magenta and pink jewels. Her grandmother was known to have a hand with gloxinia, and hers were always in bloom.

The world of that long ago and faraway place portrayed in *Forever Summer*, *Forever Sunday* became real. My Mennonite relatives had attended school and church, shopped at stores, gone on picnics and for walks among a grove of walnuts. They'd been flesh, heart, and mind engaged in the daily struggle of life. Why had they been so reluctant to tell their stories?

I returned home realizing that I didn't know anything about my Mennonite heritage. I had one foot in and one out, but so far, most of what I had written about them had been from an outside point of view. In my few attempts to write from the inside, such as in the novel *The Missing Child*, the Mennonites – like all the characters – were somewhat larger than life.

My mother feasted for days on the photographs in *Forever Summer*, *Forever Sunday*, as though she couldn't get enough. She recalled the large oak tree in the town of Chortitza which had been central to a legend of the Zaporizhzhyan Cossack, Hetman of Ukraine, Bogdan Khmelnytsky, who in the mid-1600s had assembled his troops around the tree to inspire valor before going to battle with the Poles. My mother knew only that the tree was very old and very large, and that it had been a meeting place. She had sat in the shade of its branches, just as the children in the photo were doing. She

claimed to be able to find her house in the photograph of Rosenthal in the winter. The picket fence had a hole in it, she said. She had crawled through that hole when the “bad men” had come and she’d been sent running to tell her grandparents. Other stories, often dark, began to emerge.

I made arrangements to travel to the Vistula Delta region of Poland, and to Ukraine. I finally took the time to read my great-uncle Gerhard Schroeder’s memoir, *Miracles of Grace and Judgement*, an account of those very terrifying years when my grandparents’ world had come apart. Now I was going to go over there and, finally, “find” them. The narrative in the book of photographs *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday* had provided enough information for me to realize just how much I didn’t know. I worried that there was too much for me to learn in too short a time. It would prove to take seven years in all to fill in the gaps and write from the inside of the Russian Mennonite world in the novel *The Russländer*.

While I researched, I wrote another short story collection, *The Two-Headed Calf* (1997). Several of the stories reflect the efforts of that early research, and touch on the subject of my grandparents’ tragic past – in particular, the story “The Two-Headed Calf,” which I referred to earlier. Sylvia is a child born out of wedlock to Betty, a Mennonite young woman. She’s in the garden with her grandfather when she asks him if he might know who her father is. He replies in this way, in the way that came to me in a dream just before I departed on my first trip to Ukraine:

The grandfather jabbed the earth with a finger and then drew a vertical line through it. “This is the beginning,” he said. Then he drew another vertical line, a wide space between it and the first one. “And this is the end. Watch,” he said, as he drew a horizontal line between the two lines, his finger stopping midway between them. “See? That’s you.” Finally, he drew an ellipse the shape of a melon seed, and enclosed all the lines. “And that’s the almighty God, your father. He already knows your beginning and your end. Do you think that when he sees you, he sees your mother and your father, too? No, He sees only you. So just be who you are. Be you.”

Whomever and whatever that would prove to be.

2007 BECHTEL LECTURES
The Confession of a Reluctant Mennonite

Sandra Birdsell

LECTURE TWO
Writing from the Inside

My mother, along with many Canadians during World War II, had experienced discrimination because of her German accent, and years later she would still speak of it with indignation. I wonder now if she had ever recalled hearing stories during her childhood while living in Rosenthal, Russia, of fellow Mennonites having suffered repercussions for seeming to identify too strongly with Germany during World War I. In any event, I recall a moment in my own childhood when she seemed to be offended by the assumption that she was German. She told a stranger who made this assumption that she was Dutch. My mother had been born in Russia, which, in my mind, made her Russian. I had claimed the nationality as being part of my own, only to hear her say she was Dutch.

Many years later I would learn that my mother's ancestry does indeed lead back to Holland. The Schroeders had lived in Holland until the middle of the sixteenth century, and then moved, or perhaps fled, to the Danzig-Elbing area of what is now Poland, an area shadowed by the sweeping red castles of the Teutonic knights and whose landscape so resembles the floodplain land east of the Red River.

While growing up in a town that had been established and populated by people of mostly British descent, I remained puzzled about what it meant to be Mennonite. On occasion families from nearby villages came to Morris to shop, the women and girls wearing long dark print skirts and a small cup at the back of their heads into which they tucked their hair. They were not Hutterites but Mennonites, I was told. There were Mennonites who painted the chrome on their brand-new cars black, as the shininess of chrome was a sign of pride. I'd heard of Mennonites in Mexico who wore identical straw hats and dark clothing, and removed the rubber from their tractor tires to

keep their children from straying off the colony.

There were modern-looking Mennonites, such as my Mennonite cousins and the young people who sometimes came out to Morris from a Mennonite school in Winnipeg to minister in music to our dwindling church congregation: a small choir, a quartet of handsome young men. My mother hoped I would notice them and that they might notice me. Many years later I was asked by a perplexed *Toronto Star* reporter, what do Mennonites look like? Perhaps he had been imagining the Old Order Mennonites, their horses and buggies. “Like you,” I told him, which, I’m sure, he found even more perplexing.

By the time I’d reached my teens, I had decided that most definitely I was not a Mennonite. Years later, as a newly-published author I found myself being asked to speak about what it meant to be a Mennonite writer. While my stories sometimes did have Mennonite characters, I realized that for the most part I had written about them from the outside, looking in at what I perceived to be their world: narrow, bleak, and out of touch. Then a book of photographs, *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday: Peter Gerhard Rempel’s Photographs of Mennonites in Russia, 1890-1917*, landed in my lap. Several of the photographs were of people posing while engaged in various everyday activities, the landscape and season unfurling around them, and for the first time the long ago and faraway place of my exotic Mennonite relatives became real. The idea came to me that I might one day write a novel set in the pleasant-looking quaintness of their time, and to write from a Russian Mennonite’s point of view. A romance, perhaps, about a man such as the photographer Peter Gerhard Rempel, an artist out of sync with his element. His wife, I mused, would operate a baking school in her home.

For a fiction writer, what is imagined is infinitely more captivating than facts. Before beginning to write any story, I fill pages in a notebook creating a fictional history for my fictional characters, outlining the particular events of their lives that brought them to the time and place of the story – events that make it necessary for the narrative to be told. After several trips to a Mennonite bookstore, where I was astounded and overwhelmed by the large number of books that had been published about Mennonites, I came to realize that the life of my proposed character, a photographer, had been

shaped by the collective history of Mennonites of which I knew nothing; by Russian history, of which I knew little; and by the events of the revolution and civil war that had exploded around these people and brought an end to a way of living they had known for over a century. I began what proved to be seven years of rather indiscriminate, voracious reading.

My research skills had not been honed by formal training, and therefore I brought things home from the bookstores and libraries, and copied in the archives everything and anything that caught my eye, beginning with self-published personal accounts of life in the Russian colonies, diaries, novels, and stories. Those first-person and fictional accounts then led to reading about German industry in the south Russian colonies; reading and re-reading Russian novels and poetry; analyses and histories of World War I; and histories of Europe, Russia, and Mennonites. I had set off on a long, arduous, and sometimes tedious journey, bolstered by a quote by Goethe pinned to my bulletin board: “One never goes so far as when one doesn’t know where one is going.”

The floor in my small writing room was covered with stacks of essays, files, photographs, and correspondence. There was more than enough information to bury me. After several failed attempts at writing, I knew that the novel would need to be much more far-reaching than a story about a man who would rather take photographs than work in his father’s factory. I set it aside, and for the next three years wrote stories and a novel for children. The novel was about a girl, Virginia Potts, whose idyllic, perfect, and smoothly run town suddenly and mysteriously floods. It breaks free from the ground and with everyone on board, including Virginia’s over-protective parents, it floats away, leaving Virginia stranded on a foreign shore. I was feeling a bit like the protagonist, watching helplessly as all that is familiar disappears into the horizon.

In 1992 my brother John had toured Ukraine with a choir, and he went to the area where our mother had grown up. He returned having been profoundly affected by the experience, and he urged me to go. And so, in September 1994 I was on a train heading toward Zaporizhzhya from Kiev. The coach swayed like a cradle, and I imagined rather romantically that it was carrying me into my grandmother’s lap. As we left the city behind and the sun began to set,

the countryside was bathed in a crimson gold light and the several people walking along a ridge of land beside the train tracks became silhouettes.

So far, what I had seen of the country of my ancestors had been unsettling. The misery of the people at the train station in Kiev was haunting. I couldn't shake the impression of a sea of gray bundles that turned out to be people lying on the floor, propped up along the walls, row upon row of the elderly, sick, women and children, taking shelter in the heated station. So many people I'd met had open sores and boils on their faces and hands. There were warnings of cholera posted everywhere.

I had met up with a friend in Poland, Jan Zarzycki, who traveled with me to Ukraine, and upon boarding the train he'd been persuaded by the conductor to part with a few American dollars to ensure both that we'd be served a pot of tea during our trip and that the price of our tickets would not increase once the train was underway. Beyond the window the night descended, and the countryside that my relatives had extolled as so beautiful was cast in darkness.

Familiar music filled the train compartment from the speaker above the window, swelling with passion and melancholy, and I thought of an audio tape I had happened upon while living in Waterloo in 1988 – a mix of classical music from various sources. The particular piece was by Mozart, a movement that I have since been unable to recall precisely enough to track down. The music had the effect of putting me in a trance-like state, and for fleeting moments I imagined that I was experiencing the time and place where my grandfather had lived as a young man.

I often used music to help evoke the setting I was writing. When I think of it now, the Mozart piece was the beginning of *The Russländer*, even though I was writing my first novel when it entered my consciousness and would go on to write another before, prompted by my brother's travels and with a sense that this was a chore that could no longer be avoided, I decided it was time to take another look at my Mennonite heritage. I made plans to travel to Holland, Poland, and Ukraine.

And now I was on the last leg of that journey in October 1994, going into the heart of what had once been the Mennonite colonies, on an overnight train from Kiev. Our coach companions, a young woman and a train engineer, Nikolai, had lain completely still from the moment they

slid under the covers of their berths, and I wondered if this was some kind of train etiquette to lie quietly, hardly breathing and hardly present, out of deference to those around you.

That night I dreamed that Nikolai was snoring and that in the morning the efficient porter came to the doorway of our compartment with a clipboard. She had recorded the amount of time Nikolai had snored and for how many kilometers, and had multiplied the time by the distance and by a certain amount of money, the sum being the amount Nikolai must pay for having snored. The Kafkaesque quality of the dream had no doubt been brought about by the discombobulating events of my travels so far.

The train pulled into Zaporizhzhya in the morning to brilliant sunshine, to lively band music, to the smiling faces of Olga, our guide, and of our host, Yuri, an energetic and intelligent man, brimming with good humor. At his apartment we were greeted with an embrace by his mother-in-law, Rita Alexandrovna, and a table spread with a breakfast of stuffed peppers and paprika carrots, cheese, sausages, and bread – an elaborate spread which we later realized must have been difficult and costly for Rita to find and to purchase. That morning we first experienced Yuri's extraordinary hospitality, the kind of hospitality we would encounter wherever we went in Ukraine.

We began the tour in what had been the village of Chortitza, at the site of "the old oak tree," as my mother had referred to it when she recalled having picnics in its shade. I had promised I would telephone her and give a report. The oak tree was almost dead now; only one limb remained green, although, Olga explained, the entire crown had been green in spring only years ago. "It's a bad sign when an oak tree dies," said Yuri. It was a sign of poison in the environment, a sign of a poisoned country, a poisoned soul, he said. The tree was actually drowning, Olga hastened to explain. The Dnieper hydro-electric dam had raised the water table and the tree's roots were drowning, she said. It was just one of several explanations for the demise of the mythic tree that I would eventually hear. I walked around it, touching it, so as to be able to tell my mother that I had, and tucked a leaf in my notebook.

I was eager to walk down what had been Main Street in Rosenthal, to follow in the footsteps of my great-uncle. I had recently read his memoir, and he sounded confident when describing how the town was laid out. He'd

described a river and called it “Chortitza River,” and there was a creek he’d driven across on a bridge so wildly with his horses. Later, when his horses had been requisitioned several times during the civil war, each time by a different army, he drove across the creek with camels. That allowed him an interlude of humor, when he wrote:

On this particular day I was driving down Main Street. We called this section of the street “brake hill,” because our loaded wagons had to be hemmed or braked by tying a board to the rear of the wagon on which someone stood to brake the vehicle. As my camels slowly moved up the hill, a farmer was coming down it with a load of pumpkins. My camels made their peculiar noise, and the horse started to buck and pull to the side of the street. Well, wouldn’t you know it! The pumpkins fell off his wagon and bounced down the street. I could scarcely suppress my laughter.

As I found it, “Brake Hill” proved not to be a hill any longer, but a slight incline in the road. There was a small bridge, and the creek he’d referred to frequently in his memoir was a shallow gully of wild grasses. Our guide Olga could not recall there having been a “Chortitza River.” But my great-uncle’s description of the village being in a valley, the escarpment, was there to see, as was the onion dome of the Orthodox church.

Armed with my uncle’s account and with maps, I very soon reached the location of my grandparents’ property and the purpose of my trip: to hold up to the light of reality what I had imagined all my young life. Car garages had been built on most of my grandparents’ small estate, and where there were no garages I walked among ruins, rusting metal, and garbage. The property was covered in tall weeds, and there were several stunted trees that were too young to have been trees in my grandfather’s garden a hundred years ago.

I found a slight ridge of earth, what may have been the rectangular foundation of a building, and uncovered broken pieces of red brick, the building material for many of the Mennonite houses. I stood for a moment listening, as it seemed that the wind had risen and I was hearing the rustle of cottonwood leaves. What sounded like wind stirring leaves proved to be the sound of electricity in the power lines strung from giant towers across

the valley. It was here my grandfather had buried an infant son only days before leaving for Canada. In that final resting place there were thousands of nail polish bottles, the remains of a failed enterprise lying in glass puddles among the twisted shapes of rusting metal, bits of wire, and refuse.

Throughout the remainder of the week I continued the tour of various places I'd been reading about, growing ever more disenchanted. The girls' school that my great-aunts had attended remained intact, as did the volost building mentioned by my great-uncle, the boys' school, the teacher training institute, and many of the houses, which was a testament to their sturdiness, the quality of material, and the way the Mennonites had built them, Olga said. It was like visiting a nursing care home, trying to imagine the vitality and youthfulness of the elderly despite their aged appearance and failing bodies. Perhaps it might have been better not to have come, I thought; better to allow the town to remain the idyllic place of photographs, the picket fences intact. If I were to write about this place, I would need to imagine the streets alive with children, horses, and wagons; a sky clean of power lines, apartment buildings, and smog. I would need to crawl inside the hearts and minds of people governed by their faith, and into a way of living that was not my own. A growing sense of the enormity of such a task was disquieting.

On the last day of the journey we returned to the giant oak tree, as I wanted a final impression of the place more positive than the rubble of my grandparents' property. The scene at the oak tree was pleasant, a respite of greenery surrounded by small cottage-type houses; goats grazed near a narrow creek. It was a scene that years later I would describe in *The Russländer*, when the passage of time allowed memory to grant it a more pastoral ambience:

Soon they came to a quiet stream, next to which goats on tethers were grazing. Lydia pointed out a pair of swans that were coming into view round a small island in the center of the stream. The girls went onto a footbridge and waited for the swans to reach them, stood in a row at its railing, looking down, their faces given back to them in the sepia-coloured water; the stream a shallow one, Katya noticed.... She held the notebook against her chest, fearing she might drop it, listened as children playing near the water called to one another, a fish, a fish, they

had just seen a fish. A woman pushing a baby buggy hurried to them and stooped over the water to look.

...When [Katya] looked up, the children and woman were gone, Greta, Lydia, and the girls were not on the bridge, and for a moment the silence held her in place, and her legs began to tremble; it was as though everyone, the town itself, had vanished.

I ended the scene in this way, thinking of their future.

While at the oak tree on that last day, I became aware of a woman out in a yard of one of the houses near the tree, sweeping a path. When she was done, she stood with hands at her hips, looking at me. Within moments she was coming towards me, her hair covered by a white scarf, her face broad and tanned, a wide smile revealing a row of gold fillings in her teeth. She asked through Yuri, if I was “one of them.” “One of them” meant Mennonites, Yuri explained. My mother is Mennonite, I told her.

She went on to say that often she would visit with Mennonite tourists who, like me, came to view the tree. Moments later, with worry now creasing her face, she said that the tree was dying. A free enterpriser had wanted to turn it into a tourist attraction, and had built a restaurant nearby, poured concrete, and pounded iron rods into the ground all around the tree to fence it off. The rods had leaked iron into the soil. That, and the weight of the concrete, and too many people coming to see the oak tree, had killed it, she said. The tree is dying because of greed. I thought about what I would and would not tell my mother.

Sensing that I was about to leave, the woman began emptying her pockets of walnuts, tucking them into my pockets and then into my hands when my pockets were full. A gift, she said. Then she wrapped her large warm hands around mine and looked straight into my eyes, her eyes as pale blue as my own. She was not one of those, she said. But her grandmother had taught her a song which she wanted to sing to me. In a high and quavering voice, she began to sing “Gott ist die Liebe.” I recognized the song instantly as one my grandfather had often sung in his rich bass voice, and I found myself singing along with her, my voice wobbly, surprised to find that my eyes were wet with tears.

Weeks earlier, when I was about to leave on this trip, I dreamed of my grandfather who, in a way, had sent me off to his homeland with a blessing. Now I was leaving his homeland, thinking that I had found my grandmother and that she was sending me back to Canada with her blessing.

That evening Jan and I walked in the neighborhood of Yuri's apartment. Dusk came so quickly and by five o'clock it was already dark. Weary-looking people waited quietly for trams. A young boy ran behind a bus, caught a ride on its bumper and, with the universal courage of the very young, hung on and disappeared into the darkness of the street. Two little girls passed us by, giggling, wearing the traditional pompons on their heads, on their backs the latest fad: Jurassic Park knapsacks. I thought of the young boys who earlier in the day had come running in the street to show us the puppies they carried in their arms, their joy and affection for the animals so very obvious. Their mothers didn't know they were bringing the pups home, they said in reply to Olga's question, and we all had a good laugh. I thought of the woman who had given me the gift of walnuts. Although much had changed since my grandparents' time, emotions such as love, and the ways of expressing it, remained the same.

I was aware by now of the tragedy that had struck the colonies during the revolution and civil war, irrevocably changing the lives of people, including my grandfather. He'd been arrested and imprisoned, and faced death along with other men who had also been incarcerated on the strength of innuendo or on a whim – they had been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. I would leave the archives or library after reading the accounts of massacres, the killing of individuals, the deaths from disease and hunger, with an unpleasant, heavy taste on my tongue. In *The Russländer* Katya Vogt described the taste as equivalent to having eaten too much blood sausage. There came a time when I would need to go swimming after writing and rewriting such a scene, hoping to cleanse my body and mind with water and exercise. I feared that carrying those brutal images around with me might well be cause for an illness. The images and the writing of them certainly did bring on months of depression. After reading those accounts, I no longer wondered whose story I would tell, but rather I knew that the entire story of the Russian Mennonites' loss should be told. What I needed was a voice to tell it.

Once I had decided to tell the whole story, my research became more particular. I began to read about the silkworm industry, the fauna and flora of the steppe, steam-powered engines. I read sermons and hymnals and folklore, studied cookbooks and home remedies, made myself familiar with sewing patterns and the Low German language. To my dismay, I would come to recognize *Plautdietsch* expressions and words only to discover that they were said in different ways in different colonies. Russian, German, and Ukrainian words and names for things were often used interchangeably and lumped in with *Plautdietsch*. I cooked and baked Mennonite foods, using recipes that had crossed the ocean with my grandmother, and my mother would declare that of all her six daughters, I had made my peppermint cookies and *Lebkuchen* almost as they should be.

If anyone had suggested to me that I was writing a historical novel, I would not have agreed, although I was having to take historical events into account, and to account for the way the period determined how people lived physically, how they thought and acted, not to mention how the Mennonites viewed their world, which was an anachronism from the days of the Reformation.

It wasn't until after *The Russländer* was published and referred to as a historical novel in a review that I realized that of course that's what it was. Around this time, during the International Festival of Authors in Toronto, I was seated beside an author whose novel was set in a desert during the time of Christ. I marveled about its many details that so vividly evoked the time and place, and was surprised when the author told me that he hadn't done any research; the details had been imagined. "I made them up," he said. He went on to say that he realized, given the political era of *The Russländer*, that it had been necessary for those events to be factual. In my mind, although the characters and what happened to them in my novel were fiction, out of a sense of responsibility and respect for the subject it had also been necessary not to stray from the facts of the larger Mennonite story.

My frequent visits to the Mennonite museum in Steinbach, attendance at Mennonite church services, and listening to oral tapes all provided opportunities to hear Mennonites speaking. It had seemed from my reading that the storytellers and writers often used identical phrases, expressions, and words to describe an action or reaction to something. There was a similarity

in the stories told of celebrations of various holidays. There didn't appear to be a lack of humor and ways of expressing it, as my great-uncle did so adroitly in his memoir. But there seemed to be a lack of words, or perhaps a reticence, to express other emotions, even happiness, and I wondered, was this another characteristic of Mennonites. I answered my own question in *The Russländer*, in this way:

All right, then. She would come to need personal care, and to live among other survivors of that time in Russia, women mostly, who had stories to tell, but no words to tell them. Just as their recipes had lacked concise instructions and measure, their Plautdietsch language lacked the necessary words to give shape to the colours, to describe the nuances, the interior shadows of their stories.

I was writing now, a hundred pages, over and over, while waiting for the voice of the storyteller to speak. On one of my visits to the museum in Steinbach, I sat on a bench outside a period store, feeling rather downhearted that the voice of the novel eluded me. I thought to ask the museum people if I might be able to sleep overnight in one of the period houses; perhaps the silence, the odors, something, might trigger a response. A woman, a volunteer, came over and introduced herself, and then she sat down beside me, both of us in silence for a moment. No doubt she was motivated by my obvious downcast appearance when she said, "I'll pray for you." I left the museum feeling more optimistic, bolstered by the woman's apparent empathy and good will.

Indeed, finding a voice for the *The Russländer* took years. It proved to be the most vexing and troubling aspect of writing the novel. I won't take the time here to chart the many early drafts when the voice was, I thought, distinctly male and authoritative, a ponderous pulpit voice, as I referred to it, and thought that perhaps I had been too influenced by my great-uncle's writing. It wasn't until the final draft and the year of publication in 2001 that the voice of Katya Vogt as an old woman stepped out from behind the scenery and more or less said, "All right, you've done your work, now it's time to let me tell you the way it was."

By that time I had made some important decisions; the first was that I

would try to tell the whole of the Russländer story. Another decision was that I wasn't writing the novel with Mennonite readers in mind. I reasoned, incorrectly, that Mennonites already knew their history and their stories, even though they were reluctant to tell them. Rather, I was writing for readers such as the *Toronto Star* reporter and for myself, who had known nothing about Mennonites and the Russian Mennonite story.

Another decision was made while watching television newscasts filled with accounts of the war in Bosnia. I watched people fleeing for borders, carrying babies and children on their backs, pushing the elderly along in wheelbarrows; a people fleeing with their possessions, all that they could manage to carry in bundles as they ran from a place they had for generations called home. One night there was a brief image of a truckload of young Muslim girls, rape victims, being spirited away from the public eye, a similar situation to one that had been alluded to in my great-uncle's memoir. He wrote:

Just take a look at the street in Rosenthal in the morning! Who are those women? They are wearing light home-sewn caps to over their heads because they have clipped their hair short. All these fine young women and girls are going north to the doctor. Do you know why? What a sad picture! How we felt for them and how our prayers went up for them.

Like the Muslim women, Mennonite women had grown up sheltered in a relatively closed community that had protected them from such knowledge, where chastity and fidelity were unquestionably highly esteemed and the norm. A deep sense of shame would keep them silent about what had happened to them. I thought of my great-aunts, whose home had been invaded several times by the anarchist hooligans who sometimes moved in and lived with them for weeks.

I decided that the voice of the novel would be female, for several reasons, one of which was that the women had felt the need to remain silent about their grief, and about their many acts of courage and sacrifice committed during the years of revolution and civil war. Those who could recall the events of that time were aged now, in their nineties or near to it, as was my mother, and I wanted them to at last be given the chance to speak through Katya Vogt, and then, finally, through the voice of an aged Katya Vogt.

Another reason for a female point of view was that I believed the privileged and protected society afforded the Mennonites, when measured against the hardship and vulnerability of the peasant farmers, was somewhat like the point of view of the majority of women who had been born, married, and buried without ever having ventured beyond the parameters of their physical and cultural borders. Mennonites had been spared loss and injury during times of war in exchange for service in the forests and on the roads while living in camps that had been established for, and managed by, their own people. Theirs seemed to be a collective, restricted point of view on the world at large. Mennonites who did venture out into the world, and who were informed about the harsh reality of the Ukrainian and Russian workers and the political events unfolding around them, had been, for the most part, male and well educated. They were the exception and not the rule. Hence, I decided on a female point of view with all its attendant domestic concerns and details.

I had returned home from that first trip to Ukraine in 1994, knowing that I would write a large sweeping saga about the Russian Mennonites' loss, a universal story of displacement through violence that had been occurring since the beginning of time and was presently going on in Bosnia. I would need to take the time to rebuild their pastoral paradise, in order to emphasize their loss. I finished writing the children's novel and the collection of short stories.

Around this time I was living in Vancouver and had gone to a hairdressing salon for a haircut. The hairdresser and I were chatting, when a car backfired in the street beyond the window. I was shocked when she suddenly dropped to the floor. Moments later she got up, and with a pained smile explained that she was a refugee from Beirut and had experienced its bombing. What she had experienced to cause such a reflex reaction to something that should have been entirely normal, gave me cause to think about my great-grandmother Schroeder poking about under her bed each night with a broom, the piousness of my great-aunties, my grandfather's inherent sadness. In one way or another, they too had been dropping to the floor.

I returned to Ukraine in the autumn of 1998, this time in the company of Mennonites and on what was known as the Heritage Cruise, and with a

clear agenda of what I needed to see and with a cooler eye. The stories my fellow travelers told as they visited the home sites of their relatives were often stories of suffering and loss, and although the stories were told with sadness and grief, they were without bitterness or anger. Instead, as I put it in *The Russländer*:

They came to pay homage to the stories their grandparents and parents had told them, and to refurbish the operating room in the Chortitza hospital with more modern equipment. In another village Mennonites had rebuilt an Orthodox church which had lapsed into ruin. They brought suitcases filled with antibiotics and aspirin, clothing, hard currency and forgiveness.

Was this spirit of forgiveness, I wondered, the reason why Mennonites had been able to move on and to prosper in their adopted land? They had not only survived but had gone on to create something new from their loss.

Upon returning from the Heritage Cruise, ten years after my grandfather's world had been evoked through the music of Mozart, I wondered while writing in a notebook, "What is the colour, shape, the sound of mercy, grace and love?" I took the one hundred pages of my manuscript and went into seclusion in East End, Saskatchewan, in February 1999, to stay at the Wallace Stegner house. In the early morning coyotes called to one another in the hills beyond the window. I often came upon the footprints of deer on Main Street and on the path where I walked. Sometimes days passed before I would need to speak. A month into my stay, the peace and quiet was shattered by the sudden and untimely death of a beloved sister. Weeks later I returned to the Stegner house and to the manuscript spread about on the dining room table, a rather shabby, manufactured attempt at imagining the shape and color of grief.

The novel was finished in February of 2001 and published in September of the same year, not allowing time for any sober second thoughts. Off it went, out into the world, for better or for worse – and to a great silence, as the novel was published immediately following 9/11 and the day-to-day concerns of life had ground to a halt. The author Alistair McLeod once said that a writer sends letters out to the world and hopes the reader will be affected in some way. Affected, I hoped, by the evidence of charity and forgiveness I had witnessed while on the Heritage Cruise. Reminded, perhaps, in the

months and years following 9/11, that there were other ways of responding to acts of aggression and hatred rather than fighting fire with fire. That *The Russländer* was a universal story was underlined by the large amount of correspondence I would receive from people who were not Mennonite but recognized their own stories in the book.

Eventually I went off on the book tour, but before leaving there was one last trip to make to the cemetery in Morris, Manitoba, and the gravesites of my Russian-born relatives. A brisk autumn wind was blowing and swishing through the dried grasses alongside the Morris River, a sound I had imagined so often while writing, the wind running through the tall grass on the steppe. I stood back from the graves to take them all in at once, and it seemed to me that my relatives suddenly all rose up, like a choir preparing to sing. Among them were my great-grandmother dressed all in black, my great-aunties, my mother's youngest sister, Frieda, who had died too young of lupus. My grandfather assumed his usual circumspect and quiet manner; the wind flipped the hem of my grandmother's apron. My favorite aunt, Frieda, waved to me, and with a wide grin that had always displayed the fetching space between her two front top teeth, she said with obvious pleasure, "Oh Sandra, we haven't seen you in such a long time." I had been away, I thought. I told them the novel was finished. "I've done it," I said, aloud. I had told their story, and with those words I felt an immense burden leave my body.

The following spring I went walking with Rudy Wiebe after an event at the Steinbach Mennonite Museum, where we had read from our novels. There had been a late snowfall and the land was freshly covered in wet snow, the air crisp, and the long and sometimes bleak journey into the story of loss and redemption of *The Russländer* seemed only a vague memory. I had planned to bring the surviving Vogt family members to Canada halfway through the novel and follow their settlement here, but the novel grew too long and I abandoned the idea. I had already decided, during the writing of it, that Sara Vogt would meet a man in Canada who had the other half of my dual heritage, and she would marry him. It was a story I felt I had in my back pocket, and I was anxious to begin. At Rudy's request, Victor Enns took our picture as we posed in front of a billboard announcing the reading we'd just given. Rudy Wiebe and Sandra Birdsell: it was a moment to think about, seeing our names up there together.

As we resumed our walk, Rudy said in a matter-of-fact voice, “So, Sandra, now you’ll become a Mennonite.” I laughed, and wanted to object, which is my nature to do. But I didn’t object, nor did I reply. I had found much to admire and emulate during my journey inside the Mennonite voice, and had recognized that the Mennonite attributes of my mixed-culture heritage were mostly positive. I had inherited and learned traits that had stood me well throughout what was sometimes a difficult, precarious, and often lonely life.

I like to show people a card I carry in my handbag that attests to my Métis heritage. I like to say that if Mennonites gave out a card, I would gladly carry it around with me, too.

Sandra Birdsell has published four novels: Children of the Day (2005), The Russländer (2001), The Chrome Suite (1992), and The Missing Child (1989). Her short story collections include The Two-Headed Calf (1997) and Agassiz Stories (1987).

THE BECHTEL LECTURES

The Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies were established at Conrad Grebel University College in 2000, through the generosity of Lester Bechtel, a devoted churchman actively interested in Mennonite history. Lester Bechtel’s dream was to make the academic world of research and study accessible to a broader constituency, and to build bridges of understanding between the school and the church. The lectures, held annually and open to the public, offer noted scholars and church leaders the opportunity to explore and discuss topics representing the breadth and depth of Mennonite history and identity. Previous lecturers in this distinguished series were Terry Martin, Stanley Hauerwas, Rudy Wiebe, Nancy Heisey, Fernando Enns, and James Urry.

MENNONITE/S WRITING: ACROSS BORDERS

Conference at Bluffton University, Bluffton, Ohio

October 2006

Mennonite/s Writing: State of the Art?

Hildi Froese Tiessen

The debates are ongoing. One thing, however, has already become clear: a society's dealings with the past can no longer be happily divided into 'history proper,' identified with the work of professional historians, and 'nonhistory' or 'improper history,' identified with all the rest.

– Ann Rigney

It was Jeff Gundy, convener of “Mennonite/s Writing: Across Borders,” who suggested to co-panelists Ann Hostetler and me the focus of our plenary session at the October 2006 Bluffton conference on Mennonite/s Writing – the fourth conference since the inaugural (Waterloo/Grebel) convention of 1990, entitled “Mennonite/s Writing in Canada.” Jeff issued the theme: “State of the Art?” At the conference some months later he went on, as he was to confess in his inimitably exuberant way, to “make some wild generalizations and utter some perhaps contentious personal opinions” about writing. Ann Hostetler explored “the grace of confession,” asserting with hope that Mennonite literature might create a matrix “in which the wild yeasts of dissenters and the shunned can be kneaded back into the community to provide new flavors that can nourish us all.” Poets both, Jeff and Ann composed, for that panel, the evocative personal essays included here, about the writer’s impact upon the world.

My own prevailing scholarly interest in literary communities compelled me – the sole Canadian and the “Russian” Mennonite among the three of us – to reflect, especially in the context of a mostly American audience, on the world of Mennonite literature north of the border, especially among Russian Mennonites. I chose to focus my remarks on Mennonite literature that fairly explicitly engages Mennonite experience and, as is my

wont, to foreground the constantly shifting relationship between Mennonite writers and Mennonite communities. I began with some general comments, and closed with a few observations about something of singular interest to me: the emerging role of literature in the construction of Mennonite cultural memory.

* * *

So, what shall I say? That I am elated that the interest in Mennonite literature persists, in spite of Al Reimer's observation at the first "Mennonite/s Writing" conference, at Conrad Grebel University College, that by the end of that May weekend in 1990 we would have said all there was to be said on the subject and that the whole phenomenon of Mennonite writing was likely to fade away in any case. We'd do best, he suggested then, to fold up our tents and move on to other things.

Well, Mennonites certainly didn't stop writing after that first convention. Rather, they persisted in finding their voices and telling their stories. Seven years later, in 1997, inspired and emboldened by the conference on Mennonite/s Writing in Canada, the indomitable Ervin Beck convened a second conference, focused on American Mennonite writers in particular, at Goshen College. Five years after that, in 2002, the third conference, and the first explicitly international gathering, was sponsored jointly by Goshen and Grebel, and once more efficiently and artfully organized by Ervin Beck at Goshen. And in 2006 we were together once more, thanks to the vision, efficiency, and untiring good will of Jeff Gundy and the Bluffton team. The Bluffton conference revealed that, insofar as Mennonite/s writing was concerned, we were richer than ever.

I and others have often enough remarked that Mennonite literature as we know it today was inaugurated – on our side of the border at least – with the publication of Rudy Wiebe's first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in 1962. Unlike earlier Mennonite literary efforts in Canada (and there were some – most notably by Arnold Dyck, who wrote gently and humorously, in German or Low German, of the Mennonites he knew), Rudy Wiebe had the temerity to write in English; moreover, he was published by McClelland and Stewart, at the time and for some years to come Canada's premier publisher of literary work. And much to the chagrin of many members of

the Mennonite community, Wiebe's landmark first novel was reviewed in periodicals across the country, and read from coast to coast.

If the first conference gathered together Rudy Wiebe and the mostly Winnipeg-based writers who followed in his wake – Canada's first generation of Mennonite writers – the one in Bluffton in October 2006 foregrounded an emerging new generation. Back in the day, as my son would say, I wrote a brief piece in the *Canadian Mennonite* called "The Writers are Coming, the Writers are Coming." Hurrah! Almost forty-five years after *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, new writers continue to appear in the ever more readily discernible Canadian Mennonite literary landscape – as well as in the United States. Indeed, Mennonite writers north of the increasingly conflicted Canada/U.S. border have, particularly over the past twenty years or so, poured out – often to national acclaim – fiction and poetry and life writing and essays that have appeared in all the major literary magazines of the country and with the imprint of the now many Canadian publishers that function as the support network of this remarkable literary phenomenon.

"Mennonites sells," Sandra Birdsell's Random House promoter declared to a public audience in Waterloo not long ago. A few months later, a popular national Sunday morning radio show on Canada's premier broadcaster, the CBC, hosted a panel focusing for half an hour on what the show's host, the respected journalist Michael Enright, referred to as "the Mennonite Miracle." Enright was quoting *Prairie Fire* editor Andris Taskans, who had so named what he called "the largely Manitoban explosion of writers that started with Patrick Friesen and Sandra Birdsell and also includes Di Brandt, Miriam Toews, and Armin Wiebe." This "blossoming of largely secular Mennonite writers," Taskans went on, is "[w]hat people will remember about writing in Manitoba during the final quarter of the 20th century."¹

Saying this, Taskans echoed an observation made by the influential Canadian writer and critic Robert Kroetsch – friend and mentor to a number of Mennonite writers – when he convened the closing panel at the first conference on Mennonite writing, in 1990. There Kroetsch observed that when he toured England's Lake Country it seemed every rock had been sat on by "a Wordsworth or a Dorothy, at least." He had been struck by "all of this heavy inscription." He felt that when he toured southern Manitoba there too "everything had been inscribed," adding that "in Canada finally

we have a landscape that is a literary text and *that* might be the greatest accomplishment of the Mennonite writer so far as that vast text that is southern Manitoba is concerned.”² It’s worth remarking, in this context, that Mennonite writers have begun to inscribe other Canadian landscapes as well, most notably the West Coast. Just two weeks before the Bluffton conference, a new anthology of Mennonite writing by West Coast writers, *Half in the Sun*, was published. About the same time *Rhubarb* magazine devoted a special issue to this compelling new group of writers. And an issue of *Rhubarb* featuring the literature and visual art of Mennonites from Ontario appeared in the fall of 2007.

So, Mennonite writing is more than alive and well in Canada. Between the Goshen conference in 2002 and the Bluffton conference in 2006, Rudy Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, David Waltner-Toews, David Elias, Sarah Klassen, Armin Wiebe, Victor Enns, Barbara Nickel, Sandra Birdsell, Di Brandt, Vern Thiessen, Miriam Toews, and David Bergen – and others: a younger generation of writers like Melanie Cameron and Carrie Snyder, for example (both of whom read from their work at Bluffton) – published new work. Several are recipients of – or have been short-listed for – major regional and national literary awards. Most notable, perhaps, are dramatist Vern Thiessen and novelists Miriam Toews and David Bergen, who were respectively – and in sequential years, beginning in 2003 – recipients of Canada’s most significant national literary prizes.

Breakthroughs such as these contribute to the announcement of a “Mennonite Miracle.” One of the most provocative elements of this striking epithet is that it has been invoked specifically to denote, as Taskins remarked, “secular” Mennonite writers. At the risk of evoking a stormy protest from people I know and people I don’t, who insist that there can be no such thing as a secular Mennonite, that the term is an oxymoron, I might remark that each of David Bergen and Sandra Birdsell and Miriam Toews, all agreeable enough to be spokespeople for the “Mennonite miracle,” declared themselves on national radio to be reasonably comfortable with that “secular Mennonite” nomenclature. As am I.

For in Canada at least, Mennonite literature has tended to be more an ethnic or cultural phenomenon than a religious one. I would argue, for example, that unlike my Portuguese Catholic or Iranian Muslim students, or

my Bosnian Orthodox or Indian Hindu friends, all of whom claim separate (though often intricately connected) cultural and religious identities, I am – in the language of the diversity of Canada’s heritage groups – Mennonite Mennonite: Mennonite (religious denomination) Mennonite (cultural heritage designation). My religion is Mennonite. My heritage designation is not “Russian,” even though my ancestors occupied a “Russian” landscape for some two hundred years. Nor is it Dutch or German, even though the languages I learned in my Canadian home originated in the Dutch and German regions of Europe. Culturally and religiously I am Mennonite, but the two identical-sounding terms I invoke when I say this do not mean the same thing.

* * *

Some years ago, Di Brandt, at a conference in Millerstown, Pennsylvania, declared that she couldn’t become a writer until her father died, for, as she put it then, “he owned all the words.” Questions related to the ownership of language have troubled Mennonite writers at least since Deacon Block, in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, berated Joseph Dueck for speaking out in the presence of outsiders. We know that even in our day, “not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything” (Foucault, 216). But many of the writers among the Mennonites are fairly blithely challenging that notion. If Di Brandt’s father owned the language of her Mennonite home, so too did patriarchs for centuries claim proprietorial rights to the language of Mennonite communities. Included among them were confessional historians and theologians. It should come as no surprise – though it sometimes leaves me bemused – that a course offered at Conrad Grebel University College called “Contemporary Mennonite Thought” should focus on theology alone – suggesting that among Mennonites only theologians have thoughts worth remarking upon.

Like post-colonial writers writing back to their imperial centers, demanding that they have a right to tell their own stories – to describe life as *they* have experienced it – Mennonite writers are in effect writing back as well, and declaring that the *official* stories of Mennonite communities and congregations are not the only stories to be told. And in Canada, where

Mennonite writers have gained access to national and international publishers as well as to the national media, all sorts of people are listening. In 2006, in a national cultural project called “Canada Reads,” Miriam Toews’s *A Complicated Kindness* was chosen as the one novel that the whole country should read and talk about. During the “Canada Reads” campaign (a kind of “American Idol” for books), many sets of eyes read and many ears heard (on national public radio) this passage, spoken near the front of Toews’ novel by the teenaged narrator Nomi Nickel:

We’re Mennonites. As far as I know, we are the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you’re a teenager. Five hundred years ago in Europe a man named Menno Simons set off to do his own peculiar religious thing and he and his followers were beaten up and killed or forced to conform all over Holland, Poland and Russia until they, at least some of them, landed right here where I sit. . . . Imagine the least well-adjusted kid in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock ’n’ roll, having sex for fun, swimming, make-up, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o’clock. That was Menno all over. Thanks a lot, Menno. (Toews, 5)

Some months ago I was at a weekend strategic planning session at Grebel. Foremost on the agenda was the question about where the College should find itself, say, three or five years from now. A committed Grebel alumnus, now a young professor at the University of Toronto, spoke up forcefully and often. We must support the research activities of the Grebel faculty, he demanded; these, after all, are the scholars who will tell the Mennonites who they are, where they’re from, and where they might steer the Mennonite enterprise for decades to come. That he was referring exclusively to historians and theologians soon became evident. We must support and encourage those academics who are committed to the task of telling our story, he urged, adding, without an ounce of humor, “otherwise Miriam Toews will have the last word.”

I’m not sure Miriam Toews would want the last word. In fact, although her comments about Mennonites (as she experienced them in her smallish

rural city of Steinbach, Manitoba) have been almost as controversial, it could be argued, as the early work of Rudy Wiebe, she actually remains remarkably positive about these people and the “complicated kindnesses” she has observed among them. In fact, the remarks of the young scholar at that weekend meeting say much more about a Mennonite community’s conflicted sensibility, its ambivalence about the fiction writer and the projects of literature, than they do about the vision articulated by any individual writer. Every new Mennonite writer who addresses matters related to the Mennonites reveals the power of literature both to shape and bring into circulation characters and images that are shared across generations, and to “‘de-stabilise’ memories by provocatively opening up cracks in the consensus” (Erll and Rigney, 114). The Mennonite community expressed shock at the appearance of Rudy Wiebe as a writer of fiction in 1962. Today, members of the community are bewildered that there are so many Mennonite writers and that, unlike Joseph Dueck, Wiebe’s dissenting mouthpiece in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, they have come to stay.

* * *

A quick survey of the past several years’ worth of Mennonite periodicals, both popular and scholarly, will reveal that Russian Mennonites in particular have begun to memorialize – with cairns and other physical monuments – their experience in the former Soviet Union. In the context of a flourishing interest throughout the wider culture in archives, monuments, nostalgia, and memory, Mennonites have become actively engaged in questions concerning who will preserve their past, who will construct the cultural memory of their people.

In an August 2006 special issue of the *European Journal of English Studies* entitled “Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory,” editors Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney assert that “Over the last decade, ‘cultural memory’ has emerged as a useful umbrella term to describe the complex ways in which societies remember their past using a variety of media.” They go on: “[A]ttention has been shifting in recent years to the cultural processes by which memories become shared in the first place. It has become increasingly apparent that the memories that are shared within generations and across

different generations are the products of public acts of remembrance using a variety of media. Stories, both oral and written, images, museums, monuments: these all work together in creating and sustaining ‘sites of memory’” (Eril and Rigney, 111). Literary texts “play a variety of roles in the formation of cultural memory,” Rigney has observed elsewhere,³ not least as media by means of which “disparate local memories” are channeled and framed (Rigney, 374). By communicating and sharing among members of a community images of the past,⁴ cultural memory serves to “stabilize and convey” a society’s “self-image” (Kansteiner, 182). Literature, it could be argued, plays a significant role in the production of cultural memory, and so also in the construction of community, offering the reader of a literary text “the possibility of adhering to a community, as an outsider, without laying down particular criteria that have to be met” (Culler, 37). That is, a novel may offer a kind of homeland to those who have been deemed community outsiders, alongside “the insider’s view” readily available to adherents to community norms.

So, what do we observe when we speak of the state of Mennonite writing in Canada in the first decade of the twenty-first century? That we have a veritable choir of voices, and that several of the more prominent ones have an audience that stretches well beyond the borders of any Mennonite community. That the Mennonite audience as a whole remains conflicted about its writers, even as elements in the larger world celebrate their achievement. That the writers among us are as often embraced – almost as trophies – by theologians, historians, musicians who recognize the particular impact and resonance of their work, as they are dismissed by others who also recognize that same impact and resonance. Here lies the crux of the matter. When we started to talk in conference settings about the writers among us – the conferences on Mennonite/s writing since 1990 – we spoke often of the relationship between the writer and the Mennonite community, which was more often than not resistant to what the writer had to say. The ground has shifted, I think. The cat is out of the bag. The conserving community is losing ground. Miriam Toews and others are not demanding the last word; but it is their words, I am suggesting here, that are in large measure shaping – in this age of monuments and monumentalizing – the new cultural memory of the Mennonites.

Notes

- ¹ See http://www.quillandquire.com/authors/profile.cfm?article_id=6741 (accessed Sept. 22, 2006).
- ² See "Closing Panel," in Tiessen and Hinchcliffe, 224.
- ³ See Rigney, "Portable Monuments."
- ⁴ See Rigney, "Portable Monuments."

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Playing the Sacred Harp: Mennonite Literature as Confession

Ann Hostetler

Borrowed hymnal in hand, I walk into the one-room white clapboard church that vibrates with loud singing, past dozens of onlookers and would-be participants hovering at the doors like honeybees. My daughter and her partner and their two-week-old baby, and a friend of theirs, follow me as we squeeze into the standing room at the back of the sanctuary next to a row of Old Order Mennonites. Sacred Harp music is sung a cappella and needs a body of singers to come to life in a corporeal act of worship, creating what an alternative healer might call a highly-charged energy field. One of my more worldly friends who is a Sacred Harp devotee describes it as a form of yoga, centered on breathing. Surrounded by the fierce organ of many voices, I have visions of seraphim and cherubim vibrating with the music of the spheres. Someone less inclined to ecstatic merger might recall Huck Finn's opinions of Aunt Polly's heaven – that if the saints were singing for eternity, he would rather spend his time elsewhere. We have chosen to stay for the day.

Sacred Harp singers travel. They come from many places, denominations, even faiths to gather at conventions or at singings in many parts of the country. They hold local sings and long-distance sings. The only rule is respect for the music and each other. The content of the songs, sung first by rural Southerners and then Midwestern pioneers during the nineteenth-century singing school movement, is profoundly religious, focusing on death and salvation. Now, at the rising of the twenty-first century, we gather on a Saturday to sing for hours and to share at noon a delectable potluck meal based on the bounty of summer's harvest.

Throughout the crowd people in coverings and suspenders stand shoulder to shoulder with those in July casual – tank tops and t-shirts, make-up, jewelry, and even nose rings. I notice a group of women in blue cotton dresses and nun-like headscarves in the same robin's egg hue, the clothing of a sect I can't place. My granddaughter, who loves heat and noise,

sleeps blissfully through it all in her plastic car seat with its basket handle. Beneath our varied costumes, we are all sweating – and most are singing the ornamented fourths of the four-part harmony lines at the top of their lungs with utmost concentration.

“Most” are singing, I say, because I cannot open my mouth. The music of the hive is so blended, so earnest, so engulfing that it moves me in some deep place to fear and trembling, to a kind of grief and ecstasy all at once. I cannot make a sound, because if I try I will release instead of music a shriek or a moan or uncontrollable sobbing. Somewhere deep in my bones the pain of my paternal grandparents’ shunning from the Amish Church, a vestigial ache I am rarely aware of carrying, awakes. A family systems therapist might describe it as a pattern on my genogram. Lines from poet Julia Kasdorf resonate in my ears, “Sins hidden so deep in our organs that they might damn us unawares.”¹ The mere fact that I can stand in a church, singing about salvation and death, about the end of time and the promise of resurrection, next to people who dress like my grandparents, even after they were told not to come back to their Amish church in Iowa, the one where they moved to get away from the shunning in Pennsylvania, seems like a divine miracle.

Perhaps I am, for a few moments, in heaven standing next to a variety of people who join voices from disparate bodies of belief to sing the essentials of faith. I let the sobs shake me. My daughter and her partner join in the singing and the sweet, resonant tenor of their friend Erich bodies forth the wisdom of generations of singers, making things whole. The songs themselves are a confession and absolution, a repentance and a reconciliation. And then I realize what is so moving for me about this moment. Sinners are welcome, to borrow the title of Mary Karr’s most recent book of poetry. Could we say as much for our Mennonite churches?

Confession has had a grim history among Plain People, as it is often connected with excommunication, shunning, ostracism. Instead of forgiveness and reconciliation, it has often brought hurt, stigma, a continued “othering” of the few among the many who share the same heritage and faith. In the 1930s, rather than confess for the deed that produced a child after seven months of marriage to her seminary student husband, poet Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr never returned to a Mennonite congregation. As a young

adolescent she had been forced by her father to attend a church meeting at which a young woman of the congregation had to stand alone in front of the gathered body and confess her sin. She determined that she would never place herself in a position of such humiliation, and conspired instead with her mother and sister to have her father, unaware of the pregnancy, marry her to her fiancé in a home wedding before they both left for Chicago and her husband's seminary career. But many years later, from her adult home in Long Island, New York, she wrote about a rich history of experiences with the Cheyenne and her Mennonite missionary parents, experiences that had indelibly shaped her. Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, a poet whose work is represented in *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, which I edited several years ago, considered herself a Mennonite all of her life. She lived her Mennonite life outside of the church partly because of geography but also because she did not feel welcome within the confines of the congregational life she had experienced. She did not live to see her work included in the virtual community of Mennonite poetry, but her family assured me that she would have been delighted to know it had found a home among the poems of other Mennonite writers.²

In editing *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*³ I tried to bring together the voices of the strongest Mennonite poets I could find at the time, with an emphasis on those who had received some sort of literary recognition. The poets in the anthology include those who were involved with congregations as well as those estranged or distanced from them. Since it was published a few years after the institutional merger of the MC and GC Mennonite families, I like to point out that the poets in the anthology are far more diverse than the new membership of the Mennonite Church USA. It includes Canadians, as well as those who have grown up Mennonite, those who have discovered Mennonites as adults, those whose imaginations have been deeply shaped by Mennonite faith and practice in many different ways.

Like a Sacred Harp singing, the anthology created a structure in which saints and sinners could commingle – sometimes even within the same poem. Also, like a Sacred Harp gathering, this anthology is a gathering at a particular place and time, but it is certainly not meant to be the only one. It is a pin on a map of the Mennonite literary landscape next to Hildi Froese

Tiessen's short fiction anthology, *Liars and Rascals*, and special issues of *New Quarterly* and *Prairie Fire* devoted to Mennonite writing; I hope the map will fill up with many others, such as the newly released *Half in the Sun*, edited by Elsie Neufeld, which gathers Canadian Mennonite writing from British Columbia.

A book is open to the heart of any reader willing to receive it. "Only connect" was the mantra of English novelist E.M. Forster. And the confessions we make in books, or dare to read about, are also offers for the reader to make a silent, sympathetic confession as well. These confessions are often far safer than the ones we might make in our own churches, for both the teller and the listener. This is less true, of course, for writers than for readers. And yet, though a writer may find her critics, she is also certain to find those who greet her confession with gratitude and a sense of connection. Books may transform us and our minds, but they will not shun us, ostracize us, scapegoat us to protect a sense of their own righteousness. They stand as testimony to our common humanity. Good fiction and poetry invites us to discover the particular situatedness of our own truths. A human reflection of the divine love for creation, such writing is rooted in a love of human beings in all of their bodily splendor and glaring blind spots. The confessions it invites prompt our laughter as well as our tears, till we lay down our own defensive shields of righteousness and acknowledge our membership in the community of confessed and forgiven sinners.

Once ritual confession was lost in England with the Reformation,⁴ the personal lyric flourished, perhaps as a substitute for confession. Rather than ritual confession, in which church members weekly acknowledge their failings, Mennonite congregations singled out certain sins and certain persons for public shame, which tended to mark the sinner in the community for life. And sometimes, as is human, the subject of the confession simply served as a distraction from a larger unconfessed sin, as the public strafing of Herman Paetkau and Madeline Moosomin in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* is a distraction from the larger unconfessed sin of that church – its prejudice against the aboriginal peoples of Canada who were their neighbors. In such a system, rather than confess, sinners hide their transgressions. Or leave the church.

The human need for absolution persists, and contemporary

Mennonites have discovered, with the disappearance of confession in their churches, the grace of confession on the page. Such confession is still a risky business. We still know each other so well that literary confession among Mennonite writers is hardly an anonymous thing. Thus creative nonfiction is still a fledgling Mennonite genre. Swiss Mennonites, after all, are even reluctant to give testimonies. And literary confession is hard work. I well remember Paul West, one of my fiction writing professors, telling me that my stories' narrators were entirely too well-behaved. Nor am I suggesting that confessions truly tell all. They're more like a striptease, revealing some things while concealing others. But the fragments of truth they reveal may suggest a hidden whole. So while the publishing world at the moment is full of tell-all memoirs, and confessional poetry has become somewhat suspect among the worldly, Mennonite writers have only begun to confess in literature our faith, our shortcomings, our doubts, our flaws.

In her slender but generous book, *Elements of Faithful Writing*, which reminds us that the writer's terrain is as broad as the four elements – earth, water, wind, and fire – poet Jean Janzen quotes Garrison Keillor on confession: “True confession is extremely rare in poetry, as in life. When a poet pretends to confess, usually he does it in a pretty heroic manner.... You seldom hear someone cop to the real basic stuff, ‘Forgive me, Lord, for being this self-righteous prick and walking around with a mirror held up in front of my face.... I am of less real use in this world than any good cleaning lady.’ Scripture tells us to confess our sins to each other, and I wish that the poets I know would do this more often. They could use a little more humility, frankly. We humorists can’t do the whole job alone.”⁵ Garrison, let me introduce you to a few more Mennonite writers.

When I first put together *A Cappella*, it was my primary aim to gather a collection of poetry writers whom I had only recently discovered, and who had immeasurably enriched my own life as a Mennonite poet, so that students and other readers could benefit, too. But I also wanted, if at all possible, to find a niche within the American literary landscape for Mennonite writers who in the US, in contrast to Canada, are little known or recognized as an ethnic group whose literature might have broader interest. I was gratified that it was published by one of the university presses most widely known for its poetry publications, particularly its anthologies. And it was a great pleasure to do a series of readings with a number of the writers

represented in this book in college and university settings, literary settings, and in Mennonite congregations.

Now, after eight years of living in a Mennonite community and teaching at a Mennonite college, I am more concerned that poetry and fiction become better known among Mennonites as a resource for the church. We need writers who show us at our worst as well as at our best, who can probe the secrets we fear to confess, and can offer us the grace of lovingly portraying whole human beings in all of their mixed glory. Like the artistic structure offered by Sacred Harp singing, literature makes a place for diverse voices to resonate with each other. And like the network of Sacred Harp singing groups, Mennonite literature and its repeated conferences throughout the past decade and a half have created a virtual community that is far more flexible, tolerant, and open than the older models of community based on a rural agricultural patriarchy. Some of the writers who read with me at readings for *A Cappella* thanked me for giving them a Mennonite “home” – something they felt they had had to relinquish by the act of becoming a writer in the first place. But even though the energy of a gathering like this conference suggests otherwise, Mennonite literature is still too little known among Mennonites.

This fall I have had the privilege of teaching Mennonite literature for the first time, attempting to put my feet into the large footprints left behind by Ervin Beck upon his retirement from Goshen College. Frankly, in August of this year, I didn’t feel up to the task. But it has been a delight, and the seventeen students in my class have been the best part of the treat. All seventeen are Mennonite, few had read much Mennonite literature, but all are passionately drawn to the church in various ways.

These students have little in common with the childhoods of such writers as Di Brandt and Patrick Friesen; they have grown up amidst material abundance and benevolent pedagogy. They have been encouraged to ask questions and to use their voices. They are horrified and saddened by tales of Mennonites who were sanctioned for being involved in the arts, who were beaten into submission in a distortion of the biblical injunction to spare the rod and spoil the child. They are repulsed by the residue of patriarchy they see in literary representations of historic Mennonite communities. They love the churches that have nourished them, and in some cases have even chosen to embrace a Mennonite church which their families, for various

reasons, have left. Having learned to love the church through the embrace of a congregation, they are now learning to know it through texts – history, theology, and even literature. Some of these students had a tough choice to make this weekend – between attending this conference, required for my course, and attending the “church of my dreams” youth ministry conference at Hesston College.

Some of the students at first recoiled from the criticism of Mennonites they sensed in the fiction and poetry of Mennonite writers. But when we began, through deeper reading and discussion to discover, in the dilemmas of a Thom Wiens or a young Di Brandt, reflections of their own choices, they began to sense the connections of our humanity that runs like deep water beneath the boundaries erected by time, place, and ideology. We have begun to understand together the Peter Blocks and Katya Vogts trapped by secret sins they have been unwilling to confess – the sins hidden so deep they might damn us unawares. For much of Mennonite literature, especially fiction, has been about the perils of a life lived out in a rigid righteousness inspired by the need to cover an unconfessed sin. This theme occurs so often in Mennonite literature, from Rudy Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many* to Sandra Birdsell’s *The Russländer* to Miriam Toews’s *A Complicated Kindness*. It informs the plot of an independent film, *Pearl Diver*, made by a recent Goshen College graduate, Sidney King. This fear of falling is echoed in a recent play, *Fear/Falling*, just premiered in Goshen, by Mennonite playwright Michelle Milne.

In fact, the fear of falling, the perils of confession, and the inner violence of a peace-loving community have obsessed North American Mennonite literature far more than the peace position, a much-needed witness in our own times. Yorifumi Yaguchi, who visited Goshen College and my Mennonite literature class this week, asked my students, what is Mennonite literature? They were stumped. Into their silence, he slipped a seed. “If it is Mennonite literature, it should be about one thing: peace,” said this Japanese Mennonite convert who survived Hiroshima. Especially now. Especially in the time of unjust wars in which we have not even been conscripted to fight.

But in North America, literary work has more often addressed the inner violence of a people of peace, the sins we hide from each other in order to maintain an appearance of righteousness. I believe that such

repentance and exploration of our own humanity is a necessary step in the creation of Mennonite literature which is leading to a renewed interest in speaking to issues of peace and justice, as demonstrated by so many of our writers who have extended the scope of their work to the environment, the conflict in the Middle East, the war in Iraq – Di Brandt’s Gaza and Windsor, Julia Kasdorf’s Western Pennsylvania coal mines, Rudy Wiebe’s aboriginal Canada, David Bergen’s Vietnam – as well as by those who focus on conflict closer to home, between parent and child, husband and wife, neighbor and neighbor.

Excommunications in my family and in my husband’s family have cleared the way for cultural transition, enabling the development of artists and writers, theologians and pastors, anthropologists, psychologists, musicians, historians, and teachers. But they have also irrevocably divided parts of our family from each other for several generations. At our wedding we served the food cafeteria style, so that my Amish relatives would not have to fear the embarrassment of being seated at a table with my husband’s shunned grandmother. But when I mentioned my grandfather’s excommunication from the Amish in my father’s obituary, I offended some of these relatives deeply for even naming the situation more than sixty years after it had occurred.

Over and over, Mennonites, and the Amish, the people of peace, have been scarred by such internal divisions – divisions that look rather silly when viewed from a distance. The Amish I know in Indiana laugh when I tell them that my Amish relatives belong to the one-suspender Amish in Big Valley. How do they keep their pants up if the one suspender breaks, they ask. Our obsession with identity boundaries is also, at this time in our country’s history, a sinful distraction from the larger issues of peace and justice that call out for a witness from a Mennonite people of peace.

Perhaps we should read Jeff Gundy’s “Cookie” poem regularly in our Sunday morning worship services, a poem in which the Cookies of the Amish Division commingle with cookies from Nairobi, Djakarta, Winnipeg, Goshen ... in the mouth of a giant cookie monster God.⁶ For the metaphor of this poem to work, the cookies must be individual enough to be recognizable, but broken enough to commingle. And most certainly we should take a lesson from Jean Janzen’s father, who in her poem, “Learning to Sing in Parts,” teaches peace by teaching singing – training students to hear their

own voices amidst the sounds of other pitches. “This is the world’s secret, he confides/ to enter and be close, yet separate.”⁷

Back on that hot July day, in the German Baptist frame church, the gathered body became an instrument. The rhythms and the harmonies of the Sacred Harp music provided a structure that joined the voices of participating singers into a great machine of sound. And as the music built throughout the morning, singers began to move their right forearms up and down with the rhythm, as though pumping an organ. It was a single organ created of diverse parts, centered in an act of worship, of ritual confession, of art – an offering to God of those willing to be shattered and made whole again. The bread of communion must be broken to nourish. Mennonite literature creates the possibility of a larger dough, in which the wild yeasts of dissenters and shunned can be kneaded back into the community to provide new flavors that can nourish us all.

Notes

¹ This phrase is from Julia Kasdorf’s poem “Mennonites,” in *Sleeping Preacher* (Pittsburgh, PA: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

² This material has been gathered from personal interviews with Ediger Baehr’s family members and from her papers in the Archives of the Mennonite Church, and is part of a work in progress tentatively entitled “White Buffalo Woman: The Cheyenne and Mennonite Life of Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr.”

³ *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, ed. Ann Hostetler (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2003).

⁴ Conversation with Robert J. Meyer-Lee, October 24, 2006.

⁵ *The Elements of Faithful Writing* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005).

⁶ “The Cookie Poem” from *Rhapsody with Dark Matter* (Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press, 2000).

⁷ “Learning to Sing in Parts” from *Piano in the Vineyard* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004).

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**The Marriage of the *Martyrs Mirror* and the Open Road,
or,
Why I Love Poetry Despite the Suspicion
That It Won't Save Anybody**

Jeff Gundy

On this auspicious occasion it would be good to make some sober, measured and objective observations about the condition of Mennonite Literature, and I wish I were capable of that. I have tried to think systematically and categorically about Mennonite writers and writing, subjects that have fascinated me for more than twenty years, but sooner or later all my schemes come to resemble Jorge Luis Borges's imaginary Chinese encyclopedia, which classifies animals into these remarkable categories: "1. those that belong to the Emperor, 2. embalmed ones, 3. those that are trained, 4. suckling pigs, 5. mermaids, 6. fabulous ones, 7. stray dogs, 8. those included in the present classification, 9. those that tremble as if they were mad, 10. innumerable ones, 11. those drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, 12. others, 13. those that have just broken a flower vase, 14. those that from a long way off look like flies."¹ Instead, I will make some wild generalizations and utter some perhaps contentious personal opinions and speculations about narrative, poetry, writing, souls, and such matters, drawing freely on the work of some of my illustrious forebears and fellow travelers both within and without the various Mennonite enclaves and entourages.

1. I love poetry because it does not have to be narrative. The longer I live, the more often I feel weary and sick of stories, all of them: not only the old master narratives but the new and allegedly hip and humble substitutes too, including my own. All right, I have a secret fondness for my own, but I don't trust them. Donald Barthelme once proclaimed, "Fragments are the only forms I trust."² Many days I think he was onto something.

As Scott Holland points out, narratives and narrative theology can be instruments of oppression as well as liberation.³ Hitler told a clear story, and so do the neoconservatives and the so-called Christian right. They are

all false stories, but the attraction of clear, simple, and false versions of the world seems to be more or less eternal. W.H. Auden said of the tyrant whose epitaph he wrote, “The poetry he invented was easy to understand.”⁴ He did not mean this as a compliment.

Immediately I must hedge. Yes, this is too strong. How could we live without story? As Barry Lopez pointed out lately, storytelling is crucial to resistance, and resistance is crucial to us all.⁵ I believe him. It’s *bad* stories, wrong-headed stories, alluringly simple stories, especially those insinuating that violence of various sorts is a sometimes unpleasant but efficient and reliable way of solving human difficulties, that must be resisted. But indulge me a little.

The key difference between the kind of narratives that trouble me and what I will loosely call “poetic” approaches to the great questions is that poetry resists spurious clarity. “The poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully,” wrote Wallace Stevens, one of the most exacting, if perplexing, religious poets of the last century. Stevens claimed that once it became impossible (as it did for him) to believe in the old ways, we would need to *make up* something we could believe in, even though we knew we had made it up. His “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” as the title suggests, talks around this subject for 28 pages without anything resembling a definition, though there are many statements like “Perhaps / the truth depends on a walk around a lake . . .” and “The poem goes from the poet’s gibberish to / The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.”⁶ Frustrating, yes; yet such circumlocutions and obscurities have an appeal to me that the clear and relentless alternatives just do not match.

Mennonites of a certain bent, or twist, might notice some affinities between Stevens’ exploration of the “supreme fiction” and Gordon Kaufman’s claim that theology is a “constructive activity of the imagination,”⁷ not a deductive process of sorting around through canonical texts and ideas in search of the perfect synthesis of what has already been said and done. But more on this in a moment.

2. Even when they’re telling stories left and right, poets often can’t keep them straight, either internally or externally. As frustrating as this slop, mess, and contradiction may be to those who yearn for order and reason, it reminds

us just how much our lives elude our desire to make them into satisfactory narratives. Here I would modestly propose that the idea that one coherent, all-encompassing story subsumes the entire universe *and* is simple enough for human beings to wrap our petty little minds around is – at least slightly and more likely insanely – presumptuous anyway. Find a dark spot some night, if you can, and contemplate the stars. Think about their distances, and how far and long all that brilliant light must travel to reach us so dimly, and how it scatters in all directions.

I had a memorable conversation once with an aspiring evangelical science fiction writer, who told me that he had this problem all figured out: “Earth is the Jerusalem of the universe!” I wanted to say something like, “Surely God isn’t that stupid or that small.” I didn’t then, though I guess I am [saying that] now. We all have the right and the need to carry our own stories, and to offer them to others. But come on.

3. Here are some stories:

A. My great-grandfather George, a gentle and brave Mennonite pastor, preached earnestly in favor of total abstinence.

B. One stalwart of his congregation would rise after such sermons and declaim, “A little wine never hurt anybody!”

C. As we all know, Jesus’ first miracle was to change water into wine, almost certainly so people could drink it. It seems hard to evade the idea that he was drinking himself.

D. George had a habit of going down to the tavern on Sunday afternoons to visit with the men, and sometimes he’d convince one to go home to his wife instead of drinking up all his wages.

These *all* seem like good stories, don’t they? But how do they fit together? What do we *do* with them?

4. Compare the Gospel of Thomas to the canonical gospels. It disregards Jesus’ life almost entirely, and consists entirely of sayings and the fragmentary parabolic stories Jesus tells. If Thomas were the only gospel we had, we would be impoverished, but as a supplement to the others, its compendium of enigmatic proclamations and cryptic narratives complicates and enriches our lives. There is something liberating in the nearly arbitrary,

seemingly disorganized catalog Thomas offers, as if its author had been an anachronistic imitator of Walt Whitman.

5. Consider the book of poems as text: who reads one all the way through, front to back? You can browse, skip, start in the middle or at the end, and it might even be *better* that way, despite the author having labored mightily to make it some sort of linear whole. You can read one or two poems, put the book down, and ponder them for a while.

6. Although I do like fragments, my purpose here is not to make more of them than they will bear. Nor am I expressing more than personal skepticism about the impulses to grand, epic constructions that have yielded so much wonderful Mennonite writing. I am speaking, personally and eccentrically, in praise of small wholes that may or may not tell stories directly or indirectly, modest artifacts whose small compasses open onto large landscapes or contain impossibly many rooms, like Dr. Who's phone booth. I'm speaking in favor of many such pieces, in many voices, one after another, as diverse and polyphonic as possible, holding in abeyance our urge to rectify, unify, organize, rationalize. If I have a vision for Mennonite/s writing, that's it.

7. Among the fundamental tools of even the largest narrative are omission and excision: whatever fits into the story matters, all the rest must be placed outside. If you think about it carefully, the percentage of exclusion even the most generous narrative requires is astonishing. It's a rough business. And narratives that claim universality, as all the good ones do ("Yes, this is our story, but it's your story too, even if you were born in the Lesser Magellenic Cloud, photosynthesize instead of eating, and will change genders twice before you find the two others you will need to reproduce"), are the kindest and the cruelest of all in the way that they seek to bend all realities and identities to our own definitions. We can try to convince a good outside midfielder that baseball is the *real* game and she's really meant to be a second baseman: it might even work, until she has to turn the double play.

8. But as this rather strained athletic analogy may or may not suggest, I really mean less to critique narrative than to speak for metaphor, for both reckless

adventures into it and for more careful attention to it. To start at the top, surely *all* of our talk about God is metaphorical, almost by definition. Yet we often behave as though it's ordinary, instrumental language, as though we have the sort of reliable information about God that we do about how much rain we got yesterday or whether the mail has arrived. Or we slide into various embarrassing, even painful metaphors. While writing this very paragraph, I heard this in a song: "Jesus built a bridge to Heaven, with three nails and two cross ties." Try to picture *that*.

Gordon Kaufman writes of the risks of reification, of

taking the content of a symbol ... to be a proper description or exact representation of a particular reality or being; in Kant's apt phrase, it is 'treating our thoughts as things.' We reify the symbols "creator" and "lord" and "father" when we take them to mean that God *really is* a creator/lord/father.... "This religious symbolism has had repressive and oppressive power ... not so much because of its particular content as because that content was reified: God was taken to be *in actual fact* a kind of creator/lord/father "out there" who really established—consciously willed and deliberately created—the patterns of order governing life here on earth.⁸

Whether or not we accept the rest of Kaufman's argument that God is more accurately described as the "spontaneous creativity" at play in the universe than as creator/lord/father – a long discussion, I know – surely he is right about reification and its repressive and oppressive force. But we can hardly do without metaphor either.

9. Poetry is of use, then, as a way of thinking and working in metaphor with some rigor, and of letting the imagination do the work it was, apparently, made to do. Metaphor and metaphorical thinking are absolutely essential to human life, especially spiritual life. Poetry – art, really – defamiliarizes metaphors that have gone dull and stale and brings new metaphors into being. Robert Frost claimed that unless we become "at home in the metaphor," we are not safe anywhere: "Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with

you. You are not safe with science; you are not safe in history.”⁹

10. I believe, with some others, that metaphorical language used in this way is essential. Far from being the opponent of religion, metaphor may even be, as Marion Woodman puts it, “the literal language of the soul.”¹⁰ Patrick Friesen puts it a little differently: “Poetry as the childish immediacy in apprehending earth and self. Poetry as a genuinely spiritual activity, probably opposite to institutional religion.”¹¹ Walt Whitman’s great innovation, the first great flowering of poetry in America, lay in his trust of the imagination as the necessary servant of the soul rather than the enemy of faithfulness. And it was in the encounter with the physical world, he thought, that the soul grew: “Wisdom is of the soul,” he writes, “is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof . . . / Is the certainty of the reality and immortality of things, and the excellence of things; / Something there is in the float of the sight of things that provokes it out of the soul.”¹²

11. In an even more famous but endlessly suggestive passage, Whitman improvises answers for the child who asks him, “What is the grass?”

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is, any
more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful
green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer, designedly dropt.
Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we
may see and remark, and say, *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe
of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic....
And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves....
I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young
men and women,

And the hints about old men and mothers, and the
offspring taken soon out of their laps....¹³

Whitman is famous, especially among his skeptics, for his “imperial

ego” and his naïve optimism. But notice how provisional and improvisatory his answers are here, though they gradually become more confident. “I wish I could translate the hints,” he writes, and then proceeds to do just that; but only a victim of the fallacy of reification could mistake these images for a creed or a dogma.

He does puzzle. Like most Americans of his day, Whitman was steeped in Christian ideas of the afterlife, so what can he mean when he says that to die is *luckier* than any one supposed? What could be luckier than eternity in Heaven? Can it be “luckier” to slide into the earth and be translated into some other form of life, to become a spear of summer grass, the uncut hair of a grave? Perhaps even more beautiful, and equally strange, is the passage in which he describes an uncanny physical encounter with his soul:

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself
to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture,
not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d
over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your
tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach’d till you felt my beard, and reach’d till you held my
feet.¹⁴

Donald Revell remarks on the oddly *absolute* quality of this passage: “The pace is uncontrollable: not a poem, but a world; and not another world, but *this* one.... In the embrace of Self and Soul, poetry is present at the creation of the world, an instance that happens never to end.”¹⁵ Whitman has in mind nothing less than a revolutionary revision of our notions of physicality and transcendence, the profane and the sacred, and of the very meanings of time and life, as D.H. Lawrence noticed: “His morality was

no morality of salvation. His was a morality of the soul living her life, not saving herself.... The soul living her life along the incarnate mystery of the open road.”¹⁶

12. Compare another great gay poet, Oscar Wilde. His late *De Profundis*, written after his years spent in prison, is a long meditation on suffering that he knows he *deserves* in some sense. The laws against “sodomy” make no sense to him, but he knows that he has done wrong: “I became the spendthrift of my own genius.... Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others.... I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility.”¹⁷

We might notice, first, how different Wilde’s situation is from that Anabaptist suffering which is felt to be undeserved, inflicted from outside by The World upon the pure and faithful. Wilde’s humility is driven by his realization that he *has* done wrong, and is far different from the ideological humility that Mennonites have so earnestly demanded of themselves, or mostly, really, of others within the tribe. If you believe that you suffer because you are pure and holy, how can you be truly humble? Perhaps because of the clarity his ordeal has provided, Wilde’s reflections on Christ and the imagination are still fresh and rigorous:

the very basis of Christ’s nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist—an intense and flamelike imagination. He realized in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of art is the sole secret of creation. He understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind, the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich....

Christ’s place indeed is with the poets. His whole conception of Humanity sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realized by it.¹⁸

13. But wait, you say, the imagination makes narratives, is indispensable to narrative. Even this essay is constructing its own story as it goes, recasting and appropriating others at every step. Granted – and a beautiful thing a good story is, surely. Let me register my own love for the wildest and

weirdest of narratives – for a Mennonite example, Keith Miller’s *The Book of Flying*, a beautifully written and conceived “fantasy” novel.¹⁹ It is about a young man who goes on a journey and eventually gets wings and learns to fly, but that is like saying *Moby-Dick* is about a whale hunt. What I love in *The Book of Flying* is what I love, really, about literature: that its textures of language and turns of plot and the characters it creates, fallible and lovable and frightening as they are, feed my soul. I come away from it convinced that hidden but necessary parts of my being have been nourished and have grown. This is the place, I think, where poetry and religion meet: in the care and feeding of souls.

So, in the tradition of both Walt Whitman and Keith Miller, let me say a few more reckless things about souls. In the classic Mennonite human/psychological economy (and I think this is the prevailing Christian one as well), the standard metaphor for the soul is as a precious, delicate, and helpless thing whose main function is to be saved, the way peaches exist only to be canned, never eaten fresh, in Jean Janzen’s wonderfully metaphorical “Peaches in Minnesota.”²⁰ In this scheme the ego is a sort of Christian soldier who must be clothed in the armor of God in order to resist the blows of the world and the snares of the flesh, though it must also submit to the community (“Gelassenheit”) and do its work without question.

14. But this is deeply unhealthy. Bottled up or canned, deprived of challenge and exercise, the soul withers and sickens, even becomes insane, like the captive narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Notice that she is confined to an upstairs room, where she rattles around like a marble in a gourd, or a soul in a body. Pressed to control everything within and without and to submit at the same time, the ego grows muscle bound, anxious, and weary, prone to injury and ill-equipped to deal with the inevitable reverses of life.²¹ Thwarted and denied, the body seeks paths around the blockages, as water tests every possible way through or under or around a levee.

15. When the old song said “Feed your heads,” it was onto something. The soul is meant to be fed, to grow, to sustain the ego, to stretch and explore, to learn and to teach. And this is why poetry and art are not frivolities but

essentials. Art, at least real art, contends with the great mysteries without retreating nervously into formulas and postures. Poems, at least real poems, do not pretend to know more than human beings can truly know, but explore and investigate everything in their tentative, necessary ways. And the food they offer grows in this vast and frightening realm that begins where our desire to know surpasses our knowledge. “The purpose of art,” wrote James Baldwin, “is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.”²²

16. One of the great guides to this arena of interior and exterior exploration was William Blake. I am still trying to unpack his visionary “Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” thirty years after Nick Lindsay introduced me to it. Blake wrote in opposition to the windy, sentimental mysticism of Emmanuel Swedenborg, who (Blake thought) was far too enamored of angels and of legalism. Energy, Blake insisted, was not evil, but “eternal delight.” “Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained,” he claimed, “and the restrainer or reason usurps its place and governs the unwilling. And being restrained, it by degrees becomes passive till it is only the shadow of desire.”²³

I cannot give Blake the attention he deserves here. But I think now that we need a new marriage, not of heaven and hell, but of a whole series of necessary contraries. We are already making our way, surely, and this is good. Writers bring things into being by imagining them, in mysterious but palpable ways. I know, myself, not only of “imaginary gardens with real toads in them”²⁴ but of imaginary villages with real Mennonites in them, beings of weight and depth who breathe and speak, argue and make love, transgress and repent, witness and worship and bear their kind. Saying does not just make it so, but it is a start.

So let us imagine – deeply and calmly and wildly – the marriage of Anabaptism and surrealism. The marriages of truth and desire, of the blessed community and the lonely wanderer, of Demut [...] and Hochmut [...], Gelassenheit and Pride, the Will and the Imagination. Let us wed the Farmer and the Cheerleader, the Bishop and the Movie Star, the Sublime and the Funky. Let us wed the stories of simple, faithful people and of obnoxious rebels, and of obnoxious simpletons and faithful rebels.

In a good marriage, both partners become more themselves, not less, so we will want no simple dualistic fusion. Living under the sign and specter of postmodernism, we need not and cannot think that whatever oppositions we may construct are either simple or essential. So let us have marriages more transgressively multiplex than we can yet imagine: the marriage of gay and straight and transgendered, of smart, educated, crafty, ignorant, and just plain dumb. Let us have the marriage of all the beasts Borges cataloged so erratically in his imaginary encyclopedia, the marriage of Borges himself and his various imaginary beloveds, and his famous double “Borges,” and the double’s double, who has no name in this world. Let us have the marriage, or at least the happy mingling, of all the illogical and un-namable and astonishing beings of this universe that God has so improbably imagined into existence.

Let us imagine and proclaim the marriage of the *Martyrs Mirror* and the Open Road and the Anabaptist Vision and the Supreme Fiction. Of the Hidden Church and the Mansion of Many Apartments and the Cave of the Anabaptists and the Room of One’s Own. Of the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas and the gospels of John Howard Yoder and Gordon Kaufman. Of the precious and precarious visions of Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Di Brandt and Miriam Toews and Jean Janzen with those of Rudy Wiebe and Scott Holland and Patrick Friesen and Gerald Biesecker-Mast, and all the other names I know but do not have time to add, and all the names I do not know. And may they all live long and prosper or blaze out gloriously, and be priests and servants of each other and of the whole sad and beautiful world, and contend together about the good and the right and the true and the holy.

For there is much that has been hidden, and it is our work as poets and writers to dig it up. Much has been lost, and our work is recovery. Much has not yet been imagined, and our work is discovery. Much has been misunderstood, abandoned, or ignored, and our work is to grasp and polish and return all that to the world, in its truth and depth and weight, its misery and joy, its beauty and trouble. This is the work that is play, that is profane, that is holy, that is fallen and recovered, captive and free. I do not know much about God, but I believe that this is the work that God would have us do.

Notes

¹ “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, Tr. Eliot Weinberger, Esther Allen, and Suzanne Jill Levine (New York: Penguin, 2000).

² “See the Moon,” *Sixty Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1982), 98.

³ “Some expressions of narrative theology can be quite conservative, colonizing, and chauvinistic,” Holland writes. “The variety of narrative theology practiced by Karl Barth, Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas, and some enthusiastic Mennonite disciples unapologetically asserts that the church’s story must swallow up the world’s story and that the disciple’s narrative must eclipse the human narrative.” “Response to Gordon Kaufman,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 14.1 (Winter 1996): 51.

⁴ “Epitaph on a Tyrant” in *Selected Poetry of W.H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1970), 51.

⁵ Christian Martin, “On Resistance: An Interview with Barry Lopez,” *Georgia Review* 60.1 (Spring 2006):13-30. “The theme of resistance, of course, is very old in the arts, perhaps clichéd, but many people still believe the most important thing for an artist is to resist. If a certain order is in place, and you never question that order, then there’s very little for your imagination to do. If your imagination is not alive, part of your interior atrophies. You wake up later in your life and remain angry for years, because you didn’t act” (15).

⁶ *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage, 1972), 212, 222.

⁷ *In the Beginning... Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 120.

⁸ *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), 330, 334.

⁹ “Education by Poetry,” <http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/edbypo.html>. October 16, 2006.

¹⁰ “Men Are from Earth, and So Are Women: Marion Woodman on the Inner Marriage of the True Masculine and the True Feminine,” Interview by James Kullander, *The Sun* 368 (August 2006), 13.

¹¹ *Interim: Essays & Meditations* (Regina: Hagios Press, 2006), 96.

¹² *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*, ed. John A. Kouwenhoven (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 121.

¹³ *Leaves of Grass*, 27-28.

¹⁴ *Leaves of Grass*.

¹⁵ *Invisible Green: Selected Prose* (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2005), 99.

¹⁶ “Whitman,” *Studies in Classic American Literature*. (Reprinted in Karl Jay Shapiro, *Prose Keys to Modern Poetry* (Evanston: Row, Peterson, 1962), 247). <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/LAWRENCE/lawrence.html>>. October 16, 2006.

¹⁷ *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 927.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 937.

¹⁹ *The Book of Flying* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

²⁰ *The Upside-Down Tree* (Winnipeg: Henderson Books, 1992), 21.

²¹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper* [1892] (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications,

1998). Cf. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. Eric L. Santner (New York: Continuum, 1990): “Reason without beauty of spirit and heart is like an overseer whom the master of the house has set over the servants; he knows as little as they do what will come of all their endless toil, he only shouts: ‘Get busy,’ and is almost sorry to find the work being accomplished, for in the end he would have nothing more to oversee, and his part would be played” (68).

²² *Creative Process* (New York: Ridge Press, 1962), 17.

²³ *Jerusalem, Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 124, 125.

²⁴ Marianne Moore, “Poetry,” *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, Third Edition, Vol. 1, ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellman, and Robert O’Clair (New York: Norton, 2003), 439.

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**Literature, Place, Language, and Faith:
A Conversation between
Jean Janzen, John Ruth, and Rudy Wiebe**

Three accomplished authors who come from different locations in the US and Canada, and from different Mennonite groups, here discuss their work. Their conversation, which introduces issues common to many who write from Mennonite and other faith backgrounds, was staged as a plenary session of the conference “Mennonite/s Writing: Across Borders” at Bluffton University on October 27, 2006. Jeff Gundy transcribed the tapes. Julia Spicher Kasdorf moderated the panel and edited the transcript. She began by introducing the panelists.

Jean Janzen was born in 1933 in Saskatchewan. She grew up in Minnesota and Kansas, the daughter of an Evangelical Mennonite Brethren pastor. She received her BA from Fresno Pacific College, and as the mother of four children in her late forties completed her master’s degree in creative writing at Fresno State. Jean has lived for many years in Fresno. She has published six collections of poetry. Her work has appeared in numerous distinguished journals, and received a National Endowment for the Arts award in 1995. Jean has taught at Fresno Pacific and Eastern Mennonite universities. Her hymn texts are sung by members of at least eight denominations in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, and China.

John Ruth was born in 1930 and later raised in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, where he lives today. He attended Lancaster Mennonite High School and Eastern Mennonite College, and received his degree from Eastern Baptist College in 1956. He was ordained to the pastorate by lot in 1950. In 1968 he received his PhD in English from Harvard. John has taught at Eastern College and the University of Hamburg, but mostly has worked as a pastor, master storyteller, and tour guide of European Anabaptist sites. He has published eight books, although *The Earth is the Lord’s* might count as four or five volumes in itself; he has written and produced more than 25 films and videos; published at least 20 substantial articles, written texts for

several musical productions, and published at least one poem – all dealing with some aspect of Anabaptist culture or heritage.

Rudy Wiebe was born in 1934 in Fairholme, Saskatchewan in a settlement that no longer exists. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Alberta in 1956, and thereafter received a bachelor of theology from the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, and studied creative writing at the University of Iowa. He was founding editor of the *MB Herald*, and has taught creative writing briefly at Goshen College, and mostly at the University of Alberta; he lives in Edmonton. He has published nine novels, three collections of short stories, seven books of non-fiction, including a collaboration with a Cree woman on her biography, and edited seven collections of short stories. His work has been adapted for film and television and translated into many languages. He is twice the recipient of Canada's highest prize for writers: the Governor General's Award, and he is an Officer of the Order of Canada.

All of these writers were born in the early 1930s; all three partook of some kind of Mennonite higher education. All earned graduate degrees and taught at the college level. Two, the men, have worked for other church institutions in paid positions; all three have worked for the church in unpaid positions, and all preach sermons. All three belong to Mennonite churches today: John, the Mennonite Church/US; and Jean and Rudy, the Mennonite Brethren Church. All three grew up in homes where oral Mennonite languages were spoken – Low German and Pennsylvania Dutch; all three have written extensively about Mennonite history. All three have delivered, or will deliver, the Menno Simons Lectures at Bethel College, where John Ruth first started the Mennonite Literature Industry in America with his lecture "Mennonite Identity and Literary Art," back in 1976.

JK: Given all the similarities among the three of you, perhaps we would start by talking about difference. All three of you have chosen to work in different genres. So Jean, I'll ask you to start talking about that.

JJ: Genre. I was trying to think, why poetry? I know I wrote a little book of poetry when I was eight years old – five poems that I copied into a little

book of folded paper. And then it was very spasmodic, a poem here and there. I didn't expect to become a poet, and didn't until I was really almost fifty, when I started work on a master's degree, and that's when I started writing seriously.

I thought about stories – I was encouraged to write stories. We *need* good stories, professor Wilfred Martens said, and I didn't have ideas. I wanted to work around smaller things, I didn't have the big space to move toward maybe. And I thought a little harder about it, and when I was in my forties and it looked like I might have time to develop something besides being a mother and wife, I thought, should I go to seminary, or should I go to Fresno State and study writing? I was very interested in theology. I'd been reading the *Gospel Herald* since I was a child to find out whether I was going to heaven or hell, and went through a lot of grief to figure it out. I really had looked for fresh language about what it was like to be a Christian. And I found very few writers in the sixties when I was at home, lonely sometimes but busy with the children, and needing nourishment. I thought that if I ever would write I would want to be a nourishing writer, one who had something to say that hadn't been said many times. That's what I look for.

So the poem. I think I've figured it out. Sermons are so often over-explaining, and I wanted something smaller that would allow mystery. I really think that was part of it. Plus the hymns and the scriptures, which I'd grown up with both in German and the King James Version. So I think it was the music and the desire for mystery.

JR: In my case – I have no strategy, and no particular genre – early in my life and for a time, I thought it might be fiction. But I found nonfiction more interesting than anything I could invent, I think. I went to college wanting to study history. I went to this infant college at the recommendation of Paul N. Kraybill, who had just been there. Tony Campolo and I made up about 10 percent of the class, and he made up 90 percent of the noise. He's never changed in that way. His memory of those days is sharp. I had him preach for me in our mission station there, and I asked him the other year if he remembered that. I asked, "Do you remember I gave you five dollars?" "And a meal!" he replied, and that made me feel real good, because my wife is a good cook, and we had done the Mennonite thing there. Nowadays after

you preach they take you to the Red Lobster, with a big macadam parking lot, and it's not the same.

Anyway, there was only one history teacher there, and he was younger than I was, so I went into English, where they had two teachers. The main teacher there really did a great deal for me. He was a very frustrated teacher, and when he got a coherent paper back, it made his week. So he followed me up, and I went on to graduate school. There I experienced a key moment. I was studying English, trying to write a paper, and I was in the Widener Library. They had more than a million books there – more books on Shakespeare than we had in our whole library at Eastern Baptist College. I had pulled a book off the shelf, by a man named Hartzler. A little red book about this big, and not too thick, with a one-word title. And I thought, “Oh, the Mennonites have already been there, done that.” It sort of took the wind out of my sails. I thought, “So, is that what I want to accomplish in life – to have written six books on literature on the library shelves?”

Around the same time I pulled another book off the shelf, when I was reading books that weren't on the syllabi. It was a book about George Whitefield, the famous preacher-friend of John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards. It said that he had come to my home community back in 1740. He had noted in his journal that the people came in the thousands to hear him – the roads were black with people. Of course they all spoke German, whereas he preached in English, helped by a German-speaking Moravian. He noted that “Few of these people could understand English. I never saw more simplicity.” That grabbed me more than anything else I was reading at the moment. I mean, I was reading Shakespeare, Spenser, and grooving on them. But I never recovered from seeing that little note. I took a piece of paper and wrote the date 1740 on the top – first the year, then the month, then the day – and that was the beginning of a lifelong collection (I soon went to 4 x 6 cards – this was pre-computer). And this file built, and after a while began to tell its own story. Why should I make anything up, when the mere actuality is so fascinating? And the material as salacious as anything [turning to Rudy Wiebe] you've ever put into a novel. It's all in the selectivity. [Laughter throughout what follows]

RW: But you leave everything salacious out!

JR: How do you know that? That's an assumption by a successful Canadian Mennonite author. I need to expose that for what it is!

RW: These OM's have got it in for the rest of us! I was going to talk about a seminal moment too. I was 18 years old, and of course as a good Mennonite I was going to study medicine because you could do really good things in the world, and you could also make a lot of money. But after one year of pre-med I couldn't take it any more and I shifted to English, because I had been intrigued with literature all my life, and in the Alberta Mennonite High School we had a remarkable English teacher who encouraged wide reading in good literature. And the astonishing thing was, when I got to the University of Alberta, I just happened to come to the one university in Canada that had a creative writing course. It had been established in 1939 by Professor F. M. Salter, a medieval drama expert who taught Shakespeare at the University. But the wonderful thing was that there was a creative writing course there, and I took it. I wrote, with his permission, after I'd taken the Shakespeare course and been shaken down properly. In my last year I took his writing course. One of the stories that I wrote, a story which is republished in *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest*, won the Canada-wide prize for student writing that year and was published in a national magazine in Toronto.

This was a kick in the pants for me. I went off to study theology in Winnipeg and studied literature at a university in Germany for a year, and then I came back to do an MA, with Salter of course. I meant to do a study of Shakespeare and war. I was going to let Shakespeare have it, right, in terms of Henry the Fifth and so forth, "Once more into the breach, dear friends....," everybody covered in blood and a lot of enemies.

I remember talking to Salter about my thesis. The interesting thing was, through a big push at the University of Alberta, Salter had been able to establish that somebody could write a creative MA thesis, either a collection of stories or a novel or a collection of poetry, if they wanted to, in place of a critical thesis. In fact, a woman named Christine van der Mark had written a novel thesis under his supervision, and it had been published by Oxford University Press in 1947. Anyway, when I talked with Salter about doing a thesis on Shakespeare and war, he kept nodding his head (he was a good

professor). “I’m sure you could write a good thesis about Shakespeare,” he said, “Thousands of people could write a good thesis about Shakespeare. But perhaps only you can write a good novel about Mennonites.”

Ooh. Here was what a good Mennonite needs, right? You can get an MA degree by writing a novel. It’s a double whammy, what more do you need? Here was this brilliant man of great scholarship, who liked what I’d been writing and encouraged me very much whenever he wasn’t absolutely caustic, tearing my stuff apart with red fountain pen comments in the margins. When I was being extra literary, he would write, “Mr. Wiebe, you are exuding. Poplar trees exude sap. Writers write.” That was the kind of critic he was.

After I’d done my novel thesis with him and the degree was finished, I said, “What do I do with it now?” He said, “Here’s what you do. You make a list of all the publishers in Canada with the best ones at the top. You send it to the first one, and when they reject it then you send it to the second one, and so forth.” So I made a list and sent it to the top publisher. A few months later I got a letter back, and that was *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.

JR: And the rest is history!

RW: Not quite, but . . .

JJ: I’d like to connect with Rudy’s story at this point. I was interested in poems, but I was interested first of all in trying to write my own people’s story, and I didn’t know what form it would take. But I got really interested after I read *The Blue Mountains of China*. This beginning that Rudy had, with that kind of writing cost and encouragement, connects directly to this. As did John Ruth’s set of lectures. These were the two people in the Mennonite world I knew who had written, and who inspired me to do something artistic. And I want to thank you for that. Also, I had a teacher like Salter, and his name is Philip Levine. He said that we all had to develop “shit detectors” to be good writers. And for a nice Mennonite girl, it was important to learn that.

JR: But you were used to diapers!

JJ: Yes. I was already there. And I learned to write about the dirty diapers.

JK: Thinking about Rudy's novel, *The Blue Mountains of China*, in which characters roam and migrate in various locations in North and South America, Canada, Asia.... I wonder if all of you would respond to a question about "place" in your work, whether place is connected to geography, the geography of the landscape, or if place is more strongly connected to people, or also associated with language, or languages? John?

JR: I remember lying in bed as a kid, ten, twelve years old, and wondering. I was right next to the wall, and it was made of plaster. Now plaster is not interesting; it's white, it's inert, and you don't know who put it there. I began to wonder who did put it there, and why, and why was I there, along that creek, that farm, with people who spoke two languages. I began to conclude that unless you're asking why, you're not awake. And therefore whatever place it is, it becomes a kind of sacred journey to encounter it.

Pennsylvania in the 1930s was a beautiful place. It was not "developed"; many of the roads didn't have much blacktop on them. As I review the scene there, looking back, I'm sure that it's much more than nostalgia to realize it was pretty. And that helped to form an outlook. Same thing when you drove out to Lancaster – that was a bucolic scene. It was *there*. That helped. Now, people tell me all the time that their experience is either that they kept moving from place to place all the time, or the place ain't there no more. It's gone. That's what they find if they go back. But that is not my experience – the homestead is still physically there.

When I began my teaching career, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania advised me – after I told him I had sort of worked with my community: that they had ordained me, and I had come back to them. He warned me, "Just remember, when the community's finished with you they'll kick you in the teeth." He said that with an air of wisdom. Well,... no comment. What eventually happened in my case was that when the farm I was raised on was finally developed, the thought of moving into the old buildings occurred to us. Our congregation was encouraging, saying, "Move in there." I said, "We couldn't afford it," and they said, "Just move in there,

we'll help you." So since the age of fifty-seven I live in the house I was born in. And our nine grandchildren grew up all around us. And now they write essays about the Branch Creek for English classes at the Christopher Dock High School.

So, we can't generalize about it how people deal with the *place* of their origin. They say "you can't go home again." Well, we went home again. You know you can make poetry about anything, including that. And you do it with the sense that it's pure grace. You haven't earned it, or anything like that, and it's not necessarily a model for anyone else. You know, there's all kinds of ecstasy....

JJ: When I think "place," there's been some sense of ecstasy. The places I've lived have come to mean something much larger than myself. That started with Saskatchewan, then Minnesota, this mix of fear and awe which has really been important in how I decided to write, and what to write, and how to notice life. The thing that's so plain about the plains is that they're overshadowed by the sky, where the Hand can reach down any time from a tornado and remove you. So there was this amazing sky, which is nowhere else like that. Then the movement to the cities: Chicago was quite a city to get used to right after marriage, and that brought language and also adjustment, many cultures. So, place is really important.

You asked about language. I think that is really confusing to me, how that comes out and how I maybe have an accent and don't notice it, but it's much more than that. There's something primal that comes out when I hear the Bible read in German, or I hear Rudy's Low German in my head; as I read it I can hear it, and it brings powerful images of where I've lived and smelled. And California has been a huge adjustment for me. How can I live with these mountains, and this ocean? How can you deal with mountains, and the possible loss of your children in the mountains? So that I think in the poems I'm learning to trust something much bigger than that, and that's really what I try to do.

RW: I grew up in the boreal forests of Saskatchewan, where my parents were doing that ultimate kind of change of civilization thing, clearing hunting-and-gathering land and trying to make agricultural land out of it. That's

a massive change in human civilization in a couple of years. Of course as a child I wasn't aware of that; I was just aware of the world of the forest, the aspen, spruce, muskegs, creeks. That particular world had an enormous effect on me, so that with time I was trying to write novels that had nothing much to do with Mennonites at all, but were about the people who had lived in the place before Europeans arrived.

The character that really inspired me to write that kind of novel was a historical Cree chief named Big Bear, who refused to sign the peace treaties with the Canadian government in 1876, and then the complications that developed from that refusal. When the other chiefs were compliant with the government, he refused, because there was something going on here that was too massive a change for his people. And of course he was proven historically correct. He died in 1888, but the results of his wisdom are still discernable everywhere in the disastrous treaties. But in any case, the person that inspired me to write that kind of novel was this kind of character, who had been born in the same boreal forest that I had, barely thirty miles away.

When I was writing that novel, and this is a complicated statement about place, it occurred to me that I had to see the whole world that Big Bear had seen. So I bought an old school bus and converted it for camping and our family drove around for a couple of years. We drove to every single place that history told me Big Bear had been, beginning with Jackfish Lake where he was born, and Frog Lake where the 1885 massacre took place. And all the way down to the border between Alberta and Saskatchewan and the sand hills, all the way down to the Missouri River. Traveling everywhere.

It's amazing how much of that landscape still looks exactly the same as it did in Big Bear's day. Because it's basically cattle country and ranch country, and you can easily imagine away the human construct on the landscape. And there it is, there's the landscape, there's Bull's Fork Hill, where he had the vision of the bear which gave him his power. And there's Missouri River, where he hunted his last buffalo in Montana. So it became essential to me in writing that novel to see every place. Because place is more than just scenery. Place is character. Place is something that shapes you and your understanding of yourself, the way you live your life.

By the time that I was writing another novel about people who had nothing to do with Mennonites, the Arctic book *A Discovery of Strangers*,

it was important for me to experience that Canadian tundra land as the first Franklin expedition had, to travel by canoe as they had. To see the landscape from the rivers, the tortured rocky rivers, working at paddling a canoe as you're traveling across the tundra, carrying all your supplies across the long portages, stumbling through vistas of rock. Only then can you begin to understand what these people were doing when they encountered that land, what kind of aboriginal people had lived there for hundreds of generations.

So place becomes for me the root, the basis of every fiction that I ever wrote. So when I'm wandering around Paraguay, or Russia, or the Ukraine or somewhere, I want to see it in order to imagine it.

JR: "Boreal," that's an evocative term – is it in common use? It's not a poetic term?

RW: No, it's a scientific term. I like the rhyme of "Oreo" and "boreal." It comes from *Boreas*, the Greek god of the North Wind.

JR: To me it's poetic. Now, right around where you live, say a radius of fifty miles, do you look at that physical ambience, because you have been born and shaped within it, do you look at it with any affection now? Is it not beautiful?

RW: Of course it is . . .

JR: Are there ridges?

RW: Yes, of course, there are eskers – you know what eskers are?

JR: That's a very poetic word to me too . . . so is muskeg . . . in your book you talk about eskers over and over.

RW: Yes, eskers are hills laid down by the glaciers. Eskers occur when water runs under the glaciers, it carries rocks, and it melts, so that actually a heap of rock is formed under the melting glacier. And when the glacier is completely melted away, what remains is a ridge of rock. You see these all

over the arctic, sometimes a hundred kilometers long. Like a level highway, winding.

JR: Do you love that?

RW: It's marvelous!

JR: Do you love it?

RW: Yes, of course I love it! [laughter] I thought this was obvious, John. But it's true. That landscape, which I left at age 12, I keep going back to again, even though now it's changed and the settlement is now a cattle pasture. The houses and church and stores and school, everything is gone and the cattle graze on it, because it was not arable enough for farming. But at the same time, it remains a place, and I'm rooted in that place. And the cemetery of our church remains, fenced in, right beside the chutes where they unload cattle.

JR: That raises another question. Do you plan to be buried there, your body, or in some other method? You and your wife... I mean, are you going to contribute to that cemetery?

RW: All that I was going to say, before you so rudely interrupted me, is that my sister is buried there. The first death that I truly experienced. I've seen a lot of people buried.

JR: Is it a sacred place?

RW: Yes, of course it is.

JR: Because there are people here [in the audience] who will have to make decisions about where their bodies will be buried.

RW: We all do.

JR: And because of how that was sacred for you, do you think it would be better for those that come after us if they had a [physical] place to visit [where we've been interred]?

RW: Well, it was important for me. It's fundamental to me. And if you read my writing, I think, whether you like it or not, you'll at least see that a major part of my understanding of the world of human beings was shaped by those first twelve years that I lived there. And I didn't know much about the outside world, but the poplar trees taught me a lot. There's a marvelous story about the poplar trees. It's in the book. Buy the book.

JK: John, would you want to say something about language?

JR: Language? Well, I'll tell a little story that maybe I have told a few of you at one time. One time I was out in the Big Valley – that Julia needs to deal with in memory. I was with the Nebrasker Amish, the White-top Amish. I was at a wedding, and there was singing all afternoon. The bridal couple was sitting in a corner, and we joshed them, and put money in on the table in front of them. We were singing out of the *Ausbund*. And you could almost recognize the tunes in the attenuated, long drawn-out phrasing – you could almost identify the classic chorales.... Anyway, by four o'clock I had consumed enough coffee that I needed to use the facilities, which were the barn. I went out there – after about 4:30 it was pitch dark already (in the early wintertime). So I was able to find some relief out there, when all of a sudden, Whomp! a huge horse stomped in the pitch dark right in front of me, and I realized that I needed to adjust my location fast.

Then not far to the side I saw a bunch of red dots that would intensify and then wane again. I realized that it was obviously a bunch of Amish young fellows, smoking their cigars out there before they would go back in and sing again. I walked over to them, and in the pitch darkness, where you couldn't see anything, where you couldn't see who you were talking to, we talked in the Pennsylvania German language, basically the Bernese – we talked in our *Muttersprach*. Talking there in that forgotten language in that a-historical crevice, I revisited something very basic in my own thought-patterns. So the current book I'm writing, *Listening to Salconia*,

is sprinkled with Pennsylvania German phrases, just like Rudy's books are with Low German. I'm not sure whether I'm going to put the explanations in the margins or the footnotes or whatever, but that *Sprach* has to be there, I have no other option, it's got to go in there.

RW: One of the things about language is that if you grow up with several languages you really begin in one sense to understand the serious things that language can do. I was fortunate to grow up with three. Speaking Low German at home to my parents. I never spoke anything with them except that. And High German of course in church, because that's the language of the Luther Bible and sermons are preached in that. Then of course when I went to school I had to speak English. The marvelous thing for me is that I can't remember learning any single one of them. It's just a child is immersed in it, and you instantly know. You speak a certain language to your mother, you speak a certain language to your teacher, and the preacher speaks a certain language to you. It's instinctive. And it's wonderful.

JR: You learn your *Muttersprach* with one side of the brain, and the language which you figure out, after going to school – the one you learn by analyzing it – is handled by the other side of the brain. That's why, if you have a stroke, it sometimes turns out that you can speak only one of your two languages. That's how it was with my neighbor; she was so Dutch you could cut it with a knife, but after she had a stroke she only spoke English.

RW: Also, I had three sisters, who were older than I. They went to school before I went to school. They would bring their readers home, and then not only could you hear English, you could see it. And I remember my sister Helen reading to me, her finger leading me across Christina Rossetti's poem:

If the moon came from heaven,
Talking all the way
What could she have to tell us,
and what could she say?

Now that's a revelation to a kid, right? You not only see the words, and then you hear them, but you look up in the sky and literally see the moon, all at the same time. The unbelievable mystery and the exaltation of language.

JJ: I have a little story about language. I taught piano for about a dozen years to about a dozen children. This was before I became a poet. During this time there were many who didn't practice. There was one who hardly ever practiced yet she always wanted to come. This was seventh grade. Her mother finally asked her, "Why do you keep wanting to go if you never practice?" And she said, "Well, I just like the way Mrs. Janzen says the word 'Bach.'" [laughter] I think that's the power of language! She returned the next year to get the "hhah" sound. There was something about that, and the whole ambience of our living room.

JK: I'm curious about theology. I'm thinking that all of you in your ways have dealt with theological questions. I'm curious to hear you reflect on that.

JR: What's the question?

JK: Do you think of your work as a theological practice? Do you think that what you write is a kind of theology?

RW: Well, I've written quite a few books about people who are not Christians, who don't even want to be Christians. Basically about the Aboriginal people of Canada. Some of them, like Big Bear, deliberately rejected Christianity, because of the specimens of Christianity that he saw around him and the way they behaved. On the other hand, Big Bear was a very powerful shamanistic kind of person. That's the way his people had talked about him. For me he had a very powerful spiritual connection. That spiritual connection was there in the landscape, and the understanding of the creation and the Creator, and what the Creator had put into the visible world, and into the invisible world that he inhabits.

I found that in many things Big Bear taught me how to understand the stories of Jesus. When Jesus talks about Our Father who cares for us, who has given the world to us to care for, who loves us and cares for us. Seeing it from a completely different angle, from a man who rejects classic 19th-century imperialist Christianity but at the same time understands the creation as a marvelous gift of the Creator whom we must serve, and to

whom we relate, and pray daily, even though we pray in different languages and using different postures. So that, if anything, helped me to write more about the human perception of how we understand what Jesus talks about, perhaps more than if I'd never written any stories about people who were non-Christian.

JJ: I have purposely tried to avoid churchly language and even language of faith, because when I started to write I really felt like I tried to get a new language about simply being alive. And I think it was good for me, because of all the clichés! Because I was almost fifty when I started to do this writing, and I had long heard those familiar phrases. I was looking for new things to say. Then I thought I was sounding like “anybody.” But my classmates said, “Oh, everything you write is Christian, Jean!” So I think there is no way that you can really resist it, that in some ways I was being theological by the choice of being a writer, and being open. It is only recently that I have felt interested in being sort of plain with theological terms, and to start to be kind of brave. I've written a catechism, are you interested in it? It's kind of interesting for me, to think that I'm doing theology as I write, and I'm not sure how it's going but I do get responses of appreciation for it.

JR: You discover what your *métier* is, what your calling is, as you go along and make a bunch of mistakes, and you feel bad enough about any particular mistake that you're not likely to make that one again. By a process of elimination you find what it is you want to do. I remember as a boy telling a story to my preacher, and the story ran away with me. It was so good that I was swept into saying things that hadn't happened. I found myself asking myself afterward with dismay, “Why did I *do* that?” I needed to go to communion soon afterwards, so I was, you know, feeling bad about [stretching the truth].

I also find myself remembering another time, in 1967, when I was asked to talk at a family reunion about what our grandfather was like. I started telling a story about him – to illustrate the fact that he was a remarkably gentle man, you might say a remarkably gentle soul, to the point that his memory sticks in the neighbors' minds. I told this story about how, when he once hauled a calf to our farm, he had taken me along with him. I started

telling this story and, well, unfortunately, it included how the calf in the back of our little truck had gotten discombobulated, and backed around in the truck and deposited the contents of his bowels down my grandfather's shirt. I had set out to illustrate what a gentle and temperate man our grandfather was, when just at that climactic point I realized that I probably remembered the moment because Grampop had been loudly disgusted with the poor calf. Here I was using this story in which he was angrily out of sorts – to prove he was such a nice calm fellow. I panicked, but quickly thought, I can't stop and tell all these dear people that my story is all wrong, and spoil the atmosphere of our family reunion.

And so as I went home and lived with this fiasco. I thought, you know, I told a false story but I made a true point. [laughter]. Shakespeare said that "the truest poetry is the most feigning."

What I mean to say is that, you know, when you take your calling home – I don't know, you're modern – I say a prayer before I go to sleep. The last thing before I give up on the day. That is, I want to give utterance. When there's life lived in a place, it's been the gift of God, and you have to give utterance to it. And you don't always have serious people in your audience. You always have the knowing laughter from the ninth row – like with Garrison Keillor or David Letterman or someone of that sort. Not everybody is getting [what you are *really* saying]. Just as with Jesus' disciples. But you always have *somebody* in your audience who gets it.

A woman once told me that she loved a sermon she heard, even though the preacher totally misinterpreted the scriptural story he told. She still "got" the story. So, I simply want to give utterance. Sure, there's a dimension of entertainment, and there's the dimension of craft and all that. But ultimately what I want to do in writing is to give witness to the presence of God in community as I've known it. Is that theology or what?

JJ: There's something related to that term I read recently that feels really true to me. I think it's Marcus Borg who said, "Belief of the mind does not transform." I think that's what we're hearing from you, John. It's something deeper than what is thought rationally that we're getting at. A transformation. That's what we're looking for, I think.

JK: We have a few minutes, and I'm wondering if there are any questions.

J. Daniel Hess [to John Ruth]: Why did you spend all that time and energy writing the story of a conference other than your own? Why did you write those six books that are now under one cover?

JR: Setting up the question like that, you're implying that I had a plan or a strategy or an intention of doing it like that. What happened is that it just happened.

DH: Fifteen years just happened? [laughter]

RW: John, you are slow! [laughter]

JR: You know, when you talk to a Bernese farmer ... he comes up over the hill, pulling out a weed here, a weed there, and when you dare to talk to him and he doesn't answer you right away, you think, Oh-oh. I've done something wrong. But after a while he does answer, and you answer him. And another pause. You think, Maybe I'd better clear out now. But no, no, he talks. Just like Joe Byler the Lancaster Amish minister, who says about a visitor from the city, "I can't foller that man, he talks too fast." So it's no insult to me to be called slow. [laughter]

Why did I write that book? To be perfectly honest, they were thinking of getting a certain man to write it, and it scared me. I thought, there is not going to be enough non-sacerdotal reality in it. I myself didn't want to write it and I told them that. But then they wrote back to me, and in fact the man who asked me to write it, Noah Good, when I was a young student of his, thought I was rather an unsatisfactory fellow. In fact a lot of times you recognize a call only in retrospect. I certainly did not intend to take up that Lancaster history. I wouldn't have touched it with a twenty-foot pole if I had realized the size of what I was getting into.

RW: This of course is one of the things that has intrigued me about John's career. Am I wrong to say that this is what you did all your life?

JR: You're right.

RW: You did something that you hadn't intended to do, and somebody asked you to do it, and you did it?

JR: Yes, you're exactly right. [laughter] And there are worse lives than that.

RW: But this, in a sense, indicates a great deal about community. Because some of us don't have communities like that. There's no way that the communities in which we live could authentically ask us that kind of question, nor would they ever even think of asking us. Nor would we give doing it a second thought.

JR: Now, Rudy, there's something to say about that. There are two sides to that equation. When a community detects someone whom, for whatever reason, they can trust, they will advance them, even if they're women sometimes. It's not always likely, but it happens. Now your community – the one that you exposed in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* – needed that shot. We all may need such an approach. But there are other approaches that you could have taken. You can seduce people, a community, in the right way, trusting you.

RW: So I have to ask this question. John, can you tell me that in Franconia Conference there has never been a woman who has had an illegitimate child?

JR: Where did *that* come from? [laughter]

RW: Straight out of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* – which was what in effect got me in trouble with my church brethren and sisters.

JR: I think it was your acerbic style! Not the subject.

RW: Many people who were reading that book knew nothing about style! [laughter] Most of them couldn't read English very well. The ones that really

wrangled with me had at most read certain sentences and paragraphs.

JR: OK, if [the community] was that sick, I can see...

JJ: Concerning the question about community – I think that neither Rudy nor I are considered to be spokesmen for the Mennonite Brethren conference, or for our Mennonite Brethren people. Yes, some of you who are here, and some of you who will read, will allow yourselves to hear this work we do. But I don't think we are speakers for the community.

JR: Apparently, then, that produces better art than our way!

At this point the moderator brought the conversation to a close, as time was up.

Julia Spicher Kasdorf is the author of The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life, 1991-1999 (2001). Her books of poetry include Eve's Striptease (1998) and Sleeping Preacher (1992).

Tribute to Nicholas C. Lindsay, Sr.

Jeff Gundy

Nicholas C. Lindsay, Sr., was for thirty years associated with Goshen College, as poet-in-residence and full-time teacher for most of a decade, and then for many more years as a regular visitor, workshop leader, and poetic inspiration even in absentia. Like many others, I first learned what a poet might be, do, and say from Nick Lindsay, and his image and voice will never leave me – a lean, restless figure, abruptly entering a room wearing a hooded sweatshirt and bearing a perilously balanced stack of books, tossing them down to launch into an impassioned disquisition on the holiness of the sonnet form or the mating habits of songbirds.

Among a bunch of Mennonite academics and students who, at least in those days, prided themselves on being “countercultural,” Nick provided a sometimes confounding example of what it might mean to be *really* independent of the trends and fads of the time. He had very little truck with the poetic movements of his day. He loved formal verse, and writers like William Blake, William Butler Yeats, and Feodor Dostoyevsky. His own poems were like no one else’s, though they showed the influence of these writers and others, including his famous father Vachel Lindsay. They were unabashedly Christian and mythic, often formalist, celebrating the pleasures of sex and work, with a deep if unconventional sense of his allegiances and debts to both poetic and historical traditions. Sometimes they were playful, often they were surprising; always they were, underneath, the product of a deeply serious engagement with the problem of living faithfully and artfully in this difficult, beautiful world.

Lindsay lived and taught among Mennonites, it seems to me now, in a kind of perplexed fascination and bemusement. Students like me, who thought we were so radical, baffled him sometimes – once he told me that what I personally was about was “avoiding normalcy at minimal cost,” a charge that I ruefully accepted as mostly true. Yet he undertook with great energy and commitment the challenge of being a public poet, and a voice for the Goshen community. He wrote many fine poems for public occasions and

ceremonies – a special challenge for a mystical Presbyterian at a place so insistently Anabaptist. The particulars are open to dispute, but I believe Nick was the source of the subversive notion that began to circulate in Goshen during those years: that by their own lights, the only good Mennonite was a dead Mennonite.

For me, my compatriots at Goshen, and many who followed, Nick Lindsay was crucial: Don Yost, David Waltner-Toews, Elizabeth Wenger, Rich Meyer, Shari Wagner, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, and too many others to name would still count him as a formative influence. Some became writers themselves, and many found other ways of working toward a better world. He helped to found and sustain PinchPenny Press, which continues to give many young writers crucial experience at shaping their work into publishable form.

Lindsay's full-time years at Goshen ended rather abruptly in the mid-1970s. (He explained his departure this way in *The Record*: "Goshen College was unusual when I first came. Now it's trying hard to be ordinary, a little Harvard. I can only hold my breath so long.") Yet for many years he returned to teach intensive poetry workshops and to draw new groups of students into passionate engagement with poetry and with life.

With his wife of over sixty years, DuBose, Nick has made his home for many years on Edisto Island, South Carolina. He remains a passionate Christian, a devoted husband and family man now father and grandfather to a whole tribe, a master carpenter and boat-builder, a lover of this world, a craftsman of word, song, and line, a dedicated local historian, a brilliantly innovative performer and teacher. He is a permanent figure in my imagination, and in the imaginations of many of those he has taught and inspired. DuBose's ill health prevented the Lindsays from being with us tonight, but I will close by reading a few of his poems, as a reminder of his work to those who know him and an introduction to it for those who do not.

"Song of Opposites"

"The Crying Tree"

"The Three-Toed Tree Toad"

Jeff Gundy's biographical note appears on page 71.

For a sampling of Nick Lindsay's poems, readers may wish to consult Magnificent Storm: Collected Poems of Nick Lindsay 1960-2000 (Goshen, IN: PinchPenny Press, 2000). – Editor

Tribute to Sarah Klassen

Hildi Froese Tiessen

Among the richest formative periods in the emergence of Mennonite literature in Canada was the decade of the 1980s, the beginning of which was marked by the publication of Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*. The remarkable first fictions of both Sandra Birdsell and Armin Wiebe followed (*Night Travellers* in 1982; *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* in 1984). Then the first volumes of poetry by Di Brandt (*questions I asked my mother* in 1987) and Sarah Klassen (*Journey to Yalta* in 1988). Those of us who had found the pioneering work of Rudy Wiebe and Patrick Friesen and David Waltner-Toews throughout the preceding decade compelling and inspiring, were truly overwhelmed with the amazing breadth and depth – and resonance – of this new work. In spite of the few who had begun to speak of what we Mennonite readers knew intimately, we had not grown used to seeing the familiar markers of our identity recorded in print, never mind made available for anyone to read.

Each voice was distinctive. Each attracted reading audiences both within the Mennonite community and without. All found within the Mennonite communities they evoked things to flee or resist – and things to embrace. That is, each of the new volumes published in the 1980s evinced ambivalence. And diverse layers of ambivalence were registered over and over in Mennonite literary texts in the years that followed, and sometimes featured in book titles like Miriam Toews's infamous *A Complicated Kindness* (2004) or Sarah Klassen's suggestive *a curious beatitude* (2006).

Some of these authors of the '80s foregrounded in their work their own experiences or those of their contemporaries, and so revealed the texture of the Mennonite worlds they knew. Sarah Klassen often invoked, with sensitivity, insight, and grace, the environment and sensibilities of people who had gone before. In a goodly number of her poems she records compelling personal memories – memories she has assembled from others, as well as her own – and, by force of her wonderful poetic voice, she transcribes the past and inscribes it with a palpable force of emotion.

Klassen's first volume of verse, *Journey to Yalta*, was honored with the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award (bestowed by the League of Canadian Poets on the best volume of poems published by a first-time poet); three of her works of poetry since then have been short-listed for the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award, administered by the Manitoba Writers' Guild. *Journey to Yalta* foregrounded family history, among other things, and confirmed the role of poetry as a language of memory among the Mennonites. But Klassen's subject matter has never been confined to her Mennonite experience. Her second collection of poetry, *Violence and Mercy* (1991), as well as her third, *Borderwatch* (1993), offered insightful commentaries on how we are shaped, challenged, and circumscribed by the diverse worlds that call for our attention.

Klassen, whose first volume of verse was published when she was well into her fifth decade, turned her attention, after three books of poetry, to the world of teaching that had been her first career. In 1995 she collaborated with fellow poet Betsy Struthers on a compendium of essays by members of the League of Canadian Poets on conducting poetry workshops in schools. Their book was entitled *Poets in the Classroom*.

By the mid-nineties, Klassen's interests ranged from sixteenth-century Christian martyrs to the first Canadian woman in space. When an exhibition of Jan Luyken's engravings from *The Martyrs Mirror* toured North America, Klassen composed a suite of poems in response to these images of faith in the face of sure and awful death. A full-length musical composition entitled *Singing At The Fire*, inspired by the same exhibition and by Klassen's martyr poems, was composed by Brent Weaver in 1996, and performed by organist Shirley Sprunger King as the 1997 C. Henry Smith annual peace lectureship. In June 1996, a suite of Klassen's poems

inspired by Canadian astronaut Roberta Bondar's experience aboard the space shuttle, set to music by Linda Schwartz and entitled *Born Again*, was premiered at the "Anabaptist Women Doing Theology Conference" at Concord College in Winnipeg.

Klassen's fourth volume of poems, *Dangerous Elements* (1998), included the suite of martyr poems. It was followed in 1999 by a collection of poems that spoke in the voice of another kind of martyr: Simone Weil, the renowned French activist who in 1943, at age 34, starved herself to death. Of *Simone Weil: Songs for Hunger and Love* Klassen remarked: "I was intrigued by this woman who, in the midst of her intellectual and political activities, experienced mystery and turned her attention to God." There was much critical praise for this "moving and brilliantly realized lyrical work."

By the turn of the century, a workshop encounter with Robert Kroetsch, mentor also to Sandra Birdsell, Armin Wiebe, and others, led Klassen to experiment with prose. Her wonderful stories were published in 2000, in a collection entitled *The Peony Season*. The fine narrative texture of these works of short fiction is enriched by her lyrical sensibility.

Sarah Klassen's most recent work is a collection of stories called *A Feast of Longing* (2007). Her most recent collection of poems, entitled *A Curious Beatitude*, was published in 2006. It includes the poem "Rewinding Time," which won a National Magazine Award for Poetry. This poem closes with these lines:

Before he died, our father
told us, by heart, stories of another country. Spoke of going home.
He didn't mean the wind-whipped shack at Beechy,
Farm house in Niverville, the white suburban bungalow in Winnipeg.
And not that unexpected home across the ocean. Nor was this planet,
in his mind, his only home.

The pewter clouds have opened up a slit to let light through:
blood dappling the sullen sky. The coffee's cold. In future as in past
the wind blows where it chooses. We also must go home.
We are waiting for the snow, another camouflage. For music to ring out
the old, summon the new. As if our father's hand had once again

raised the harmonica, his warm lips breathed a new song into it.

A scene such as this, so intimately and evocatively suggestive of particular human lives remembered, represents only one of the great many directions and subjects Sarah Klassen's poet voice has explored. In her work we find not only the chronicler of family stories but also the teacher and the traveler, the lover of music and visual art, the ready collaborator, the peace activist, the philosopher, and the mystic. Klassen said of Simone Weil, "Committed to the quest, she never closed her mind around some aspect of truth, but kept it always open for more light."

Thank you, Sarah, for keeping your eyes to the light so that we all can see, for raising your warm lips to the harmonica, so that we all might hear. For enriching all of our lives with your wonderful work.

Hildi Froese Tiessen's biographical note appears on page 49.

Tribute to Dallas Wiebe

Paul Tiessen

*For Dallas Wiebe, who has been to all the earlier Mennonite/s
Writing conferences, and who sends his blessings from his
home in Cincinnati to this conference in Bluffton, on what
happens to mark the 50th anniversary of his career as an
actively publishing writer.*

A few years ago, Jeff Gundy, writing about Dallas Wiebe as an American poet and novelist, referred to him as one of Mennonite writers' "elder statesmen." It was not always like that. For most of the fifty years that Wiebe has so far published poetry and fiction, he certainly was not called, nor did

he think of himself as, a “Mennonite” writer. For a long time there was little on the surface of his work to identify it as Mennonite, and for years there were few hints of a serious reading community interested in writers who were Mennonite.

Even in 1975, when he began writing his explicitly Mennonite novel, *Our Asian Journey* (Waterloo, ON: MLR Editions Canada, 1997), Dallas Wiebe assumed his readers, if he were to have any, would have to be non-Mennonite. It was only in 1989, when Bethel College historian James C. Juhnke introduced Wiebe’s work to readers of *Mennonite Life*, and when that was followed up by public endorsement from Raylene Hinz-Penner and Warren Kliever in the United States, and from Hildi Froese Tiessen (who published his work in the 1990 special Mennonite issue of *The New Quarterly*) in Canada, that Wiebe by the early 1990s found himself encircled by a sympathetic body of Mennonite readers.

Dallas Wiebe was born in Newton, Kansas in 1930. He graduated from Bethel College in 1954 with a degree in English. His M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in English were from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1955 and 1960; his dissertation was on the work of twentieth-century novelist Wyndham Lewis. Wiebe taught briefly at the University of Wisconsin and then, until his retirement in 1995, at the University of Cincinnati. He gave courses in the creative writing program of the English Department at Cincinnati, where he also founded and edited the *Cincinnati Poetry Review*. Through his editorial work on the *Poetry Review*, and later through his work on the Cincinnati Mennonite Festival, he came into contact with a number of the major American Mennonite poets active today, including Jeff Gundy, Jean Janzen, and Julia Kasdorf.

Wiebe’s first novel, *Skyblue the Badass*, which Gundy has described as dealing semi-autobiographically with the author’s “Kansas boyhood and subsequent flight from the Mennonite community,” was published in 1969 by Doubleday/Paris Review Editions. His short stories have appeared in many influential journals, and in 1978 he won the Aga Khan Fiction Prize from *Paris Review* and, in 1979, a Pushcart Prize. Burning Deck Press has published four volumes of his short stories: *The Transparent Eye-ball* (1982), *Going to the Mountain* (1988), *Skyblue’s Essays* (1995), and *The Vox Populi Street Stories* (2003).

If you have read these works, you will know how Wiebe dares simply to assert little, self-contained worlds of extremes in these often mysterious stories, and to separate his readers from their usual range of everyday emotions. In these minimalist worlds his characters, through repetition of ritual and gesture, develop some predictable patterns of behavior so that they can begin to imagine a degree of control over, and even some small victories in, their sparsely defined lives. We have the decrepit movie theatre offering a kind of sheltering family home in “Omega 1.” We have the wicker laundry basket offering solace to the famous writer’s living and breathing torso in “Night Flight to Stockholm.” We have the counter-narrative that joyously develops in “Skyblue’s Essay on Confession,” when the protagonist becomes, of all things, the state shepherd for Ohio. In such stories family romance meets a banal, or hilarious, or monstrous, absurdism.

In the most recent collection, *The Vox Populi Street Stories*, the fourteen stories actually act something like a novel. They are filled with an acting up, and an acting out, by the straight-faced narrator, who can be erudite and hilarious, silly and sentimental, pretty much all at once. These stories remind us that Wiebe is an inventive author who plays his medium brilliantly and deliberately. They continue his habit of providing us with tonal variations that enrich his range of satire and parody. They all the while keep us aware of their surprisingly humane and humanistic subtext.

And Wiebe has written poetry, too. In 1987 the Cincinnati Poetry Review Press published *The Kansas Poems*, and in 2005 he made his way very much into the “Mennonite” fold when Cascadia Publishing House’s DreamSeeker Books, in collaboration with Herald Press, published his *On the Cross: Devotional Poems*, a collection of deeply poignant religious statements. There are over forty poems in this collection, which Dallas dedicated to his wife, Virginia (Schroeder) Wiebe, who died of a sudden illness in 2002. This work breaks through encrusted truths to find re-readings of what we have grown accustomed to. Readers find joy in sifting through these poems – celebrations of Christ, of life, of the body and the soul – and in finding among them those that work well for worship, for meditation, for reflection, for encouragement. The closing poem, its shape recalling a cross, offers a poignant end to this tribute:

INRI

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.

Paul Tiessen teaches Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. He is the co-editor of After Green Gables: L. M. Montgomery's Letters to Ephraim Weber, 1916-1941 (2006) and of Dallas Wiebe's Monument: poems on aging and dying (2008).

Tribute to Jean Janzen

Julia Kasdorf

I first met Jean Janzen at her home in Fresno. A bouquet of flowers in hand, I knocked on the door of that imposing house, built to copy someone's ancestral manor in Britain, purchased by the Janzens as a real estate white elephant. In those days, 1986 or '87, if you were living in New York, as I was, you had to go all the way to California to find a serious (by that I mean university-trained and actively publishing) Mennonite poet who was also a woman and an American.

Later I'd learn that Jean was born in Canada, naturally – in Saskatchewan in 1933, the daughter of Henry and Anna Schultz Wiebe. Her father was a country school teacher. The family moved to Mountain Lake, Minnesota in 1939, when her father became the pastor of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church there.

In addition to Mountain Lake, Jean lived in Hillsboro, Kansas, and Meade, Kansas, as a girl. For her undergraduate education, she attended Tabor College, Grace College, and Northwestern University in Chicago – in part following her husband Louis Janzen and his medical training. She completed her BA in English at Fresno Pacific College. Mostly in Fresno, she raised four children. Two of the children became artists and two became doctors, which seems about right, given the balance in the Janzen household.

Jean supported her husband's career, working in the doctor's office in the early years, and also extended hospitality to the arts and culture from their home. Their large house and gardens have long been the site of musical concerts, art exhibits, gracious feasts, and lodging for visiting artists. Jean once confessed a chronic weakness for elegant table linens – and I say that to show that her aesthetic sense is equally rooted in domestic life. She has managed to run a complicated household and write some fine poems, although she frankly admits a tension; both kinds of work take time, one robbing the other.

In mid-life, Jean returned to graduate school and earned a master's

degree in creative writing from California State University in Fresno. At Fresno State, she studied with Philip Levine, and you can see traces of his grittiness and the material world in Jean's work, but her poems seek a kind of transcendence that Levine hasn't accomplished.

Jean and Louis Janzen were charter members of the College Community Mennonite Brethren Church in Clovis, a kind of progressive alternative to the local MB establishment. Since 1961, she served that congregation in many capacities, including church council, worship planning, and education commission; she sang in the choir for forty years. She has also served on the boards of Fresno Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, where she used her influence to remind the Evangelical-tending MBs of their Anabaptist roots.

For twelve years, she has taught poetry writing and literature at Fresno Pacific University and poetry writing at Eastern Mennonite University – showing up, like Nick Lindsay used to at Goshen, the itinerant poet met with great expectation. She has published six poetry collections: *Words for the Silence*, 1984; *Three Mennonite Poets*, 1986; *The Upside-Down Tree*, 1992; *Snake in the Parsonage*, 1995; *Tasting the Dust*, 2000; *Piano in the Vineyard*, 2004; and *Elements of Faithful Writing*, 2004. (We have Good Books to thank for most of these volumes.) Jean's work has been included in numerous anthologies and prestigious journals, including *Poetry*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Image*, and *Christian Century*. In 1995, her poetry was recognized by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. She also serves as poetry editor for the DreamSeeker series of Cascadia Press, and thereby mentors and nurtures the coming generation of Mennonite poets.

In addition to poetry, she writes hymn texts, eight of which appear in *The Hymnal*, the current Mennonite worship book. They have been reprinted in hymnals and song books used by Lutherans, Catholics, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, Methodists, Canadian Presbyterians, the United Church of Canada – and in Scotland, China, and Germany. Several commissioned poems were incorporated into Alice Parker's oratorio, "That Sturdy Vine."

Jean is older than my mother, though she never seemed so to me. And I used to wonder how she did it, without getting mad (crazy or angry)

– all those traditional forms of nurture and service – while still finding time to write in her tiny office, a pantry really, off that enormous kitchen. Now I see that it could not have been otherwise, given all the loves in her life. And there's more to Jean than meets the eye.

Rudy may be a Wiebe, but Jean is a “Wee-bee” (the American voicing of her name), a fact which she stresses by collecting small broaches and ornaments fashioned in the form of honey bees. Jean is a bee – think of hard work and efficient organization; think of sweetness, how she produces it, and how she is drawn to it through her unabashed love of beauty. But cross her, and you'll find that behind that sweet smile, Jean is not without a certain sting. Recently we talked about her church's decision to relegate gay members to associate status. She smiled sadly, then with ambiguity said something like, “Oh, what does any of our membership mean, anyway? Maybe we all could live without it.”

Jean, we celebrate the ways you have changed in your life, and for the ways you have remained faithful – to relationships, to belief, to communities, and, especially, to your own work – we thank you.

Julia Spicher Kasdorf's biographical note appears on page 90.

“It gets under the skin and settles in”: A Conversation with Miriam Toews

Natasha G. Wiebe

On the warm evening of July 16, 2007, I knocked (a little nervously) on the door of Miriam Toews’s hotel room in Toronto. Miriam had flown in from Winnipeg to teach a writers’ workshop at Humber College. Although we had e-mailed several times to set up this interview – part of my doctoral research on her writing – this would be our first meeting. Miriam immediately put me at ease. She showed me to a comfortable armchair, offered me a glass of red wine (I accepted), and took up the chair next to me. For the next hour, we talked. We talked about the ways that Miriam’s Mennonite background expresses itself in her writing. We talked about how her upbringing compares to my childhood experiences in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. And we talked about *A Complicated Kindness* and how writing this story helped temper the view that Miriam – and her writer-protagonist Nomi Nickel – once had of the Mennonites.

Wiebe: A few years ago, I found myself taking a course on Canadian Mennonite writers. *A Complicated Kindness* had just come out, so I started by reading it. It shook my world, Miriam, and it *wasn’t* because of its Mennonite setting; it was because of the way you described the Christian fundamentalist community. Because I was raised – my dad grew up Mennonite, but my mom didn’t – in a Pentecostal church. I always thought I was going to be a Pentecostal preacher’s wife. My husband went to Pentecostal Bible school....

Toews: Wow. Yeah.

Wiebe: *A Complicated Kindness* was the first book I’ve read that was set in a world that reminded me, in some ways, of the one that my husband and I grew up in. I was talking about the book with my husband in the car on the

way here, and he said, yeah, she got it right....

Toews: Oh, that's nice to hear.

Wiebe: I remember when I was reading the book.... Poor guy, he was trying to read his own book or work on the computer, or whatever, and I kept running into the room every ten minutes to read him a passage, because it was so similar to what we had experienced, and I *had* to share it with him. It captured how that sort of atmosphere can be stifling, but also how there are people there who are lively and...

Toews: Good.

Wiebe: ...authentic, and, doing the best they can. I started to write my own "mennocostal" poems in response to some of those episodes, and I was surprised to find how joyful they were. I expected the poems to express some gentle criticism, but I was surprised by the joyfulness in them. Your novel is, for me, very joyful.

Toews: Oh that's very nice to hear; I appreciate that, because not a lot of people comment on that aspect of it. I like to think that it is, too, that it's not an indictment or a criticism of the faith or of the Mennonite people, but of the fundamentalism.

Wiebe: The second time I read the book was after spending some time reading some Mennonite history and some other Mennonite literature, and I found myself feeling a little bit more protective of the Mennonites. Not that your book made me feel as though I *needed* to be –

Toews: Yeah, yeah.

Wiebe: ...but I could appreciate what some Mennonite readers might have seen in it that I hadn't seen before. But, the book just rocked my world. So I am really pleased to be able to talk with you.

Toews: That's so cool. Thank you!

Wiebe: Now, I should let you talk!

Toews: No, no, no! I've been talking all day. I'm used to being by myself in a room, so it's nice to hear you talk.

Wiebe: So, I have some questions for you.... I'm interested in how your Mennonite background influences your writing. I'm interested in how people's stories reflect their culture. I'm also interested in you as a *writer* (a writer whose work really moves me). I'm interested in the idea of how writing can be an act of discovery...

Toews: It's true.

Wiebe: ...how you can write yourself to a different understanding of your topic, or the audience you're writing for, or the people you're writing about, and how you can come to a new perspective of who *you* – the writer – are. I'm curious about the act of writing, the process of writing, and how it relates to self-awareness. That's roughly the thread that ties all of my questions together.

Toews: That's very interesting; that'll be good! I'll like talking about that. Yeah, that'll make me think...

Wiebe: So having said all that, the very first question I have for you seems to have nothing to do with, you know, what I just talked about for a million years.

Toews: [Laughs]

Wiebe: There's a passage near the end of *A Complicated Kindness* where Nomi starts talking to her high school English teacher Mr. Quiring. It seems as though she's been *writing* all along to him; she's been writing her final assignment for him. The book – can you see the book as her final assignment

for Mr. Quiring, her “Flight of Our People” assignment?

Toews: Absolutely, yeah.

Wiebe: So Nomi is a *writer*.

Toews: Yeah, yeah.

Wiebe: Why did you choose to structure the novel that way, or why do you think the novel structured itself that way?

Toews: When I write, I have to be writing *to* somebody. I have to be writing to someone; my main character, my narrator, has to be writing *to* somebody. I just find it easier to write that way. It just seems to make more sense in terms of the reason for writing. So in this case, I just started writing, and I didn’t know the book was going to be an assignment. I didn’t know that it was going to be directly written to Mr. Quiring until it got to a certain point. I don’t even know exactly at what point it became clear. It makes sense because he was her English teacher, and she was supposed to be writing about the topic “The Flight of Our People,” which would mean one thing from *his* point of view in terms of the migration of the Mennonites, but for Nomi, she takes it to a more *personal* end.

Wiebe: So, the “Flight of Our People” for Nomi means the flight of her sister Tash and her mom – and her own intended flight – from East Village.

Toews: Exactly. Yeah, the flight of *her* people, you know, *very* specifically; yeah, it’s just sort of a twist on that, on that theme.

Wiebe: That reminds me of an interview you did with Hildi Froese Tiessen for *Prairie Fire* (2000).

Toews: Okay, yeah.

Wiebe: This would have been just before *Swing Low* came out. In the

interview, you said that, unfortunately, you had negative feelings towards the Mennonite community, the Mennonite church, Mennonites in general, and you were trying to work through that, because you knew not all Mennonites were bad.

Toews: Mm hmm.

Wiebe: Then five years later, flash forward, you're sitting down with Di Brandt, and she's interviewing you for *Herizons*. And you're talking about *A Complicated Kindness* with her. You said there were things you really were proud of in your Mennonite heritage, and things you really liked about them, like their wacky sense of humor...

Toews: Mm hmm, yeah.

Wiebe: ...and at the same time, there were things that drove you crazy about them.

Toews: Mm hmm.

Wiebe: So, in that five-year period, your perspective shifted. You went from struggling with your view of the Mennonites to a more balanced view. Did writing have anything to do with that shift?

Toews: Writing, certainly, and time passing. I think when I was talking to Hildi....When was that?

Wiebe: 2000. Right before *Swing Low* was published.

Toews: Back then I was very angry, because of all of the circumstances surrounding my dad's death, his suicide, and everything that played out in the community, before and after and surrounding that. I *was* very angry, you know; I was very bitter. I think I in part blamed the Mennonite community and church – to a certain extent, not entirely, obviously, it wasn't the whole picture in terms of my father's mental illness and suicide. But certainly, that

kind of repression, and his own guilt and the pressure that *he* felt to play a certain role in a community, in the church, just this *very* constricted life that he had that was all tied up with religious fundamentalism. And then, some of the responses from some of the people in the community in the terms of their *denial* of his illness and suicide, or the rumors that were spread that were not true. To a certain degree, I blamed the Mennonite community and Mennonite fundamentalism for contributing to my dad's mental illness and death. But I *think* that over the years it's *imperative* that you move away from anger and bitterness and blaming. I didn't want to get caught in that. I also did come to the realization that to a large degree the community did *sustain* him in some ways. Who *knows* what kind of a person he would be, would have been, outside of that community, what he would have felt or how he would have been different, *if* at all.

Yeah, I think certainly the passing of time after his death and beginning *A Complicated Kindness*, where I could see, where I could remember and I could go further back, where I wasn't blinded by my own grief and anger and cynicism allowed me to see the Mennonites differently. I still have huge problems with fundamentalism, and with the religious aspect of the Mennonites, but I can see that there is a difference between the community of *faith* itself, and the way the church and powers-that-be have interpreted it, you know, the way *they* have affected individuals' lives, you know, so I think I did come to that awareness.

Wiebe: Through the process of writing *A Complicated Kindness*?

Toews: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I realized that I didn't want to be judgmental, or carried away with my own kind of like, okay, Mennonites are, you know,... I realized that there are good Mennonites and there are bad Mennonites like there are good and bad people in any other community, and there are problems within the Mennonite community that are specific to the Mennonites, and there are problems that every other community shares.... So I think I became more open after a certain amount of time had passed *and* because of the writing, realizing that in order for people to sympathize with Nomi, or to understand the Mennonite community, that *A Complicated*

Kindness couldn't be, like, this constant diatribe, you know, this *scathing* indictment of an entire community. I was really, really careful about making sure that I didn't do that and that that didn't come across, because first of all I didn't believe it, and secondly, I realized that that would be off-putting for readers. When *A Complicated Kindness* was published, I was nervous about people's reactions. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I also felt quite confident that I had been fair to the Mennonites and that my main character was true to herself. Of course, Nomi's 16, she's going to exaggerate some things and downplay others. Sometimes she's sarcastic and sometimes she's very earnest.

Wiebe: Yeah, she speaks in these sweeping exaggerations.

Toews: Exactly, the way that teenagers do, and she has some insights as well, the way that teenagers do. She assesses things in a way that I wouldn't – I'm 43 and she's 16. Some people have said, "Oh, well, sometimes she sounds very optimistic and sometimes she sounds very negative." I think that's normal. And her opinion on a lot of things changes from day to day, like a lot of 16-year-olds, and very much like anyone's. She's dealing with a certain set of circumstances and reacting to them in different ways. Throughout the story she's trying, subconsciously or consciously, to find a place for herself. And it's always shifting. She's my protagonist; she's 16 years old; these are the circumstances in her life. I'm a fiction writer; a novelist. It's not my job to create something that's entirely historically accurate. But going back to your original question, for sure I was angry at the Mennonites for a while, but because of time passing after my dad's death, and also the writing of *A Complicated Kindness*, I could come to take a more measured view....

Wiebe: I went to the Mennonite/s Writing conference in Bluffton, Ohio, in October. There were a few sessions on *A Complicated Kindness*, and a number of people who commented on the book seemed really... ambivalent about it.

Toews: Mm hmm.

Wiebe: I was surprised because the book really inspired me, and I saw it as more about religious fundamentalism than about the Mennonites. But some people at the conference seemed concerned about how the book represented the Mennonites. They seemed concerned that outsiders wouldn't know that the book was caricature, and that outsiders would accept the book as literally true right down to its last jot and tittle, rather than recognizing that some parts were more emotionally than literally true. And other people there thought the book was bleak (not everyone, of course; but some of them). I didn't see it as bleak. Because at the end, Nomi goes from – this mirrors the shift in your own view of the Mennonites – she goes from seeing East Village as “Shitville” to this place where.... Well, there's this lovely paragraph in the last chapter of the book, where she's lying on the grass with the neighbor kid. And she's running through in her mind all the things she loves about the town and her life there.

Toews: Absolutely.

Wiebe: She finds that “measured view” – is that the phrase you used earlier?

Toews: Mm hmm. Yeah.

Wiebe: It's an inner freedom Nomi comes to, and whether she leaves East Village or not at the end of the book doesn't matter to me....

Toews: Yeah – and she understands that to a certain degree – I mean, she's still young, and things are up in the air, but, she understands that she can't necessarily be herself in that community but that community has shaped her and will continue to.

Wiebe: Yeah.

Toews: What you said earlier about caricature, I don't really see *A Complicated Kindness* as a caricature. I do see it as written from a 16-year-old's point of view. Nomi describes her community in the exaggerated way that teenagers I

know, and once was, do. But in terms of the impact of that type of discipline and judgment – I don’t find the book to be hyperbole or caricature at all. In fact, so many people who are still living in those Mennonite communities have told me that it could have been far more harsh in terms of what happens to some of those individuals who find themselves outside of the structure, breaking the rules as it were. In terms of the destructiveness, the damage, that that kind of fundamentalism, with its adherence to ridiculous rules that have nothing to do with Christianity and love and goodness and beneficence, can cause human beings.

Wiebe: I mentioned earlier that I grew up in a Pentecostal community. And, your work has caused me to look back at those experiences and to pay attention to the kind of discourse we used to ... well, I guess, “story” ourselves. How we described ourselves. How there were certain metaphors that recurred in the songs that we sang, and in the Bible verses that we quoted, and so on. For example, we often talked about ourselves as being Christian soldiers, as God’s soldiers.

Toews: Mm hmm.

Wiebe: I was even part of a kids’ group called Crusaders.

Toews: Crusaders.

Wiebe: Can you believe it? Like in the Middle Ages.... We had uniforms, with the horse, and the knight, on the crest.

Toews: [Laughs]

Wiebe: And we marched in rallies, with other Crusaders from across the province of Ontario. We had sword drills – I was one of the best at those. You’d hold up your “sword of the spirit” – the Bible – and the commander would yell out, say, “Ephesians 6:13. Charge!!”

Toews: [Laughs]

Wiebe: You would race to find the verse, and whoever stood up and began to read it first would win.

Toews: There's *so* much comedy there, you know –

Wiebe: Yeah, yeah.

Toews: ...it's sad, but it's funny, too.

Wiebe: *Shades of A Complicated Kindness.*

Toews: Yeah, absolutely. I would have used that had I known. I was a Pioneer Girl. There was a Boys' Brigade. I don't know if you had that. That was in my day.

Wiebe: Noooo. But we Crusaders had squads of knights and ladies, and maids and squires. Now, "pioneers" fits these wandering Mennonites, breaking new territory, and –

Toews: Exactly.

Wiebe: This is leading toward my next question.... I know that pacifism is one of the doctrines that Mennonites are most associated with. They self-identify with it, and other people identify the Mennonites as being pacifist.

Toews: Mm hmm.

Wiebe: So, I suspect that the Bible verses about being God's soldiers wouldn't have had a major place in your church's sermons and songs.

Toews: Mm hmm.

Wiebe: How did you story yourselves instead? How did you describe your Christian walk instead?

Toews: That's a good question. There was certainly, you know, kind of military undertones, you know, like paramilitary – but, um...you mean as a kid growing up.

Wiebe: Or looking back on it as an adult, like however you want to answer that. What kind of metaphors did your church use?

Toews: There were *so* many, and so many of them I've ... almost absorbed and forgotten, you know, in the same way that you take algebra, or geometry, or calculus inside and then forget about it.... So, I haven't really, you know, writing *A Complicated Kindness*, I, you know, I still read the Bible and I'm using verses, um....

Wiebe: You know, it's interesting that we're reading it again, and under different circumstances.

Toews: And as a kid I was so outside of that whole religious thing; it didn't *take* with me. I never felt like Nomi. Nomi feels the pressures of hell and judgment when she's younger, and I didn't. I never believed that after I died I was going to go to some fiery thing, or heaven for that matter. It never washed; it was like this story, this fiction, that was so pervasive, but it was a part of our lives. So in terms of the Bible, and how we defined ourselves in those terms ... *sheep*.

Wiebe: Sheep? [Laughs]

Toews: Yeah, I think that was probably the biggest image. You know, like Jesus was our shepherd –

Wiebe: Yeah.

Toews: It always *bothered* me because it seemed so passive.

Wiebe: *Baa*-thered? [Laughs]

Toews: What? Oh, *baa*-thered, *baa*-thered. [Laughs]. Yeah, but it did bother me, because it seemed so passive. *Sheep* just follow the shepherd around, but that's what was *expected* of us, you know, like we were a little *flock*. So Jesus was presented as quite a loving, caring individual. And, as his followers – which would have been, or should have been, us kids and everybody else in the community – you follow, and you serve. And then Jesus will return, and protect, and

Wiebe: And once in a while you're going to get *sheared*, but you know

Toews: [Laughs] Yeah, exactly. And a few of us are going to be *slaughtered*.

Wiebe: [Laughs]

Toews: Various rites of passage. So, yeah. I think that the Mennonites as sheep is the most predominant image that I have.

Wiebe: You're making me think of a quotation from Patrick Friesen. He said....

Toews: That's another friend of mine. Patrick is from Steinbach, where I grew up....

Wiebe: Patrick said, "Where I grew up, I rarely thought of pacifism as meaning that you didn't fight; I knew that was true. Pacifism meant that you didn't argue or confront each other very often, either, and so you found all kinds of other subtle ways of getting around that. And I think that's where a lot of Mennonites learned how to write" (in Tiessen, 1992, 18).

Toews: That's really interesting; I hadn't read that. You know, I believe that. I agree with him. Yeah...there was so much emphasis on toeing the line in my Mennonite community. My parents were always quite open-minded, liberal, tolerant; they were a weird little island of ... liberalism in that conservative community. But my dad was so passive, too. He *hated*

confrontation, he wouldn't argue, he wouldn't stand up for himself. He was often kicked around in his work or in the community because he was such a doormat in so many ways. It would drive my mom crazy. I obviously would have absorbed that. I don't know what the home situations were of some of the other Mennonite writers – it sounds like Patrick's was maybe something similar. Anger is something you're not supposed to show as a Mennonite because everything that happens in this day and age is God's will, supposedly, so how can you be angry if something really horrible happens to you or someone treats you like crap? You *pray* for them, you forgive them. But that still doesn't really address the anger you might feel inside. It may or may not be justified, but it's there.

Wiebe: Those feelings have to go somewhere....

Toews: All of those real healing feelings, like anger, and hurt, and feeling abused.... Generally, there's nowhere to put all those feelings. So, Patrick's probably right. You put it in your writing, you attach those feelings to your characters.

Wiebe: I've noticed that about your characters. The character of your father in *Swing Low* chooses silence as a life strategy...

Toews: Exactly.

Wiebe: ...but his autobiography is written in his *voice*.

Toews: Yeah, yeah!

Wiebe: And Nomi and her dad exchange notes rather than talking face to face, because she's trying to get at why her mother left – it's very indirect, their correspondence.

Toews: Yeah, it is.

Wiebe: Nomi doesn't challenge *anyone* about community hypocrisy face

to face; she does it in her written assignments. And eventually, when she confronts Mr. Quiring about his affair with her mother, she does that in writing, too.

Toews: Yeah, that's a good point.

Wiebe: I was curious about why your characters tended to confront others primarily in writing, rather than face to face.

Toews: It's like what Patrick says....My characters do it and *I* do it; I mean I do it through my characters, and my characters do it through their....
[Laughs]

Wiebe: ...through their writing, too. You create writers who write.

Toews: Yeah, yeah.

Wiebe: I have another quote for you, Miriam.

Toews: These are interesting.

Wiebe: It's taken from Di Brandt's foreword to her first book of essays, *Dancing Naked* (1996). She's writing about what it was like to become a published writer:

I was surprised to find, looking back over these essays, how often the Mennonite question came up: how long it took me to recover from the trauma of breaking through the strict codes of separatism and public silence I grew up with in the Mennonite community of south-central Manitoba, and how difficult it was to actually break centuries-old taboos against self-expression and art-making and public speech, as I inherited them in the farming village of Reinland. Not only did this act of rebellion and subversion shatter my identity as I knew it at that time – having to recognize in myself the ‘rebel traitor thief,’ willing to sell out, blow up, throw away the family stories and the official

narratives of the culture for art – but also it scared the bejesus out of me: what if the Mennonites came after me? What if they killed me for this act of utter betrayal? (9-10)

How does your experience of writing about the Mennonites compare to the one that Di describes here?

Toews: She and I talked about that very thing. I felt very ... nervous, when *A Complicated Kindness* came out. On one hand, I felt confident that I had been ... fair. Not that that's the job of the novelist. But I felt that I had been fair to the Mennonite people. I knew that there was going to be disapproval from some camps, but not from all. But I *was* nervous. I was looking outside – I remember Di telling me that she would look outside her window, which would face the same way mine was, her house was just a few doors down, and she would imagine that she would see, or she would be waiting for, these black cars of the Kommittee – you know, the elders from the church – showing up to basically ... come and get her. Paranoid thoughts, but –

Wiebe: That's an image straight out of communist Russia.

Toews: Yeah, it is! Exactly. Which neither she nor I lived through, but of course we heard stories about it all the time. There would be these men – always men, older men – “Who do these young women think they are? How can they say ...? That's not fair.” You know, expressing real, real, *rage*. I know it's out there, you can read stuff online probably, things that are really critical of me – and of Di, I'm sure – but what are you going to do? That's what we do, that's what we do, that's the risk that you take, that's the fear that you live with –

Wiebe: So you felt that fear, too?

Toews: I *did*!

Wiebe: I wondered if it might be different for you because you published *A Complicated Kindness* (2004), well, almost 20 years after Di's first book was published (*questions i asked my mother*, 1987).

Toews: There's still that kind of underlying whatever it is. Something that is engrained as a young girl. The rule of girls and women in those communities and in the church.

Wiebe: You know, my mom was the first woman to speak from the pulpit on Mother's Day.

Toews: Wow. [Laughs]

Wiebe: In 1991. In the Pentecostal church we were attending at the time.

Toews: That's amazing. I can't think of any woman who ever, ever, ever got up to speak during the main service. We had our little girls' groups, and my high school teacher would speak now and again, but Never in the main sanctuary during the main service.

Wiebe: So, you felt some of the same nervousness and apprehension as Di. But what *was* the response, in general, overall, to *A Complicated Kindness*?

Toews: In general, it was *amazing*, amazing, supportive. There were angry people who said it's all lies, she's exaggerating, blah blah blah. This is what I expected to happen. What I didn't expect to happen was the incredible support that was out there. I *hoped* that this would come from the liberal, more progressive Mennonites who are all over the place....

Wiebe: [Sotto voce] You could walk right by one and never know.

Toews: [Laughs] Yeah, exactly. They're relatively open-minded. The congregation that my mother belongs to, for instance, had a female minister and all that stuff, but.... But I wasn't expecting that amount of support, from the small conservative Mennonite communities themselves, which I did get. Not from all of them, obviously. But I would get letters from the ministers of conservative Bible-belt churches in the Fraser Valley or something, saying these are harsh words, this is a harsh story to read, but here are true elements

that we have to look at, we have to deal with, we have to look at what we're doing as a community and grow.... So that was very, very rewarding.

Wiebe: Oh, yeah.

Toews: ...and *surprising*. But there was obviously negative criticism, too.

Wiebe: Di has talked about the affirmative responses she received – and Rudy Wiebe, too, who was one of the first Mennonites to write in English, as of course you know. But I have the sense that there was more negative than positive response for their first books about the Mennonites.

Toews: I think it *is* true, I mean, from what I've heard them say.

Wiebe: So, is the fact that you've had more positive reaction than they did because so much time has passed since they first wrote? Is it because the Mennonites are now *used* to there being Mennonite writing? Is it because most of the Mennonites are now assimilated –

Toews: I think that is a big part of it, absolutely. Times change, people change. I don't know if you've noticed, but there is a kind of weird conservative vibe thing happening. It's part of the old American religious right, and it's affected a lot of the Canadian religious communities, this kind of blind, "anti this, anti that" –

Wiebe: That's one reason why *A Complicated Kindness* is so powerful.

Toews: Yeah, it was timely, I think, in that way. But certainly there's criticism towards me, still is, but not as much as [what] Rudy and Di suffered. I don't know what the difference is necessarily. I remember Rudy Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, being banned –

Wiebe: Banned?

Toews: Oh, yeah. My mother was telling me about it. I was just a kid, but she would say that there was this huge scandal.... And it's so *sad*, because the Mennonites have so much to offer and, you know, any group of faith does, if it can get around the prejudices and the narrow-mindedness and the fear, that leaning in, that immediate condemnation that so many, but not all, obviously, but there's that reaction within some communities. It's really unfortunate.

Wiebe: You know, we've been talking so much about the Mennonites.... It's just reminded me of an interview that was done with David Bergen.

Toews: Another friend of mine.

Wiebe: Yeah?

Toews: A second cousin. [Laughs]

Wiebe: [Laughs] Well, you know, my Opa used to talk about "the red-headed Toews," so maybe we're related, too. Do you have any red-haired Toews in your family?

Toews: My son has red hair!

Wiebe: Well, there you go!

Toews: He has like *amazing* red hair.

Wiebe: My Oma's sister married a Toews, and I guess all of their kids had red hair, so....

Toews: That's *hilarious*. I thought my son got his hair from the Loewens, but, who knows....

Wiebe: Well, David seemed uncomfortable being "pigeonholed" as a "Mennonite writer" (Walker, 2005). Do you relate to that?

Toews: Yeah, I do. I don't mind, I mean we all do that, "Miriam Toews, oh yeah, she wrote that book about Mennonites"....

Wiebe: You wrote two other fine works, no, *three* other fine works, before *A Complicated Kindness* – one was in a Mennonite setting, and two others weren't.

Toews: Yeah, exactly. I'm trying not to write about the Mennonites again because I think I said what I needed to say. I've been cleansed, purged of those demons – not demons; you know what I mean – but.... Yeah, I wouldn't want to be known as a Mennonite writer. Or as a prairie writer. Or as a ... "lady" writer, that whole outdated expression.

Wiebe: How would you like to be known?

Toews: As just a writer. Absolutely. You know, women, Mennonites, prairie writers – we all bring our own little sensibilities into our writing, but if we're doing a decent job, the stories are universal. So all that other stuff is irrelevant. It's *interesting* to people. It's the sort of thing that I like to know about the writers that I meet, you know, what is this person's background. I think it's a valid thing for people to want to know, but I certainly don't want to be known as a "Mennonite" writer.

Wiebe: [Sheepishly] Yeah, well, but nonetheless, for my doctoral research, I'm looking at you and Di, as "Mennonite" writers. [Laughs]

Toews: That's it. Well, there is that sensibility that we bring to it. It's not the only thing, obviously, but writers for the most part write about what they know, so it's inevitable. For the longest time I didn't think that all that Mennonite stuff affected me the way that it did. I felt I could somehow just move away from the community and escape and be fine. And then I realized that it gets under the skin and settles in there. I don't know what movie it was – "Magnolia" or something – one of the characters says, "You may be finished with the past, but the past isn't finished with you." [Laughs] I thought, well, that's true.

Wiebe: Has your view of whether you are Mennonite shifted over the years?

Toews: No, it hasn't really. I consider myself to be a Mennonite, I'm a secular Mennonite.

Wiebe: I think you can be. Being Mennonite is like being Jewish, right? There's a whole continuum.

Toews: Absolutely, you can be Hassidic, or Orthodox, or secular, non-practicing.... I don't know how else to.... I'm this, this, this, but yeah, I'm also that. You know, I'm Mennonite. I don't have a problem with that. I don't attend a Mennonite church – or any church for that matter – right now. It's not something that I want or need at this point in my life anyway, but yeah, I do certainly think of myself as a Mennonite.

Wiebe: You know, Gertrude Stein was asked a number of times to write her autobiography, but she never did. But after her partner Alice Toklas died, she wrote her partner's biography. But she wrote it in Alice's voice. Like *you* did, for your father with *Swing Low*.

Toews: Interesting ...I wasn't aware of that.

Wiebe: Some people think that Stein was telling her own story as much as Alice's, but in a way that she was comfortable with, through the distancing provided by using another person's voice (cf. Smith and Watson, 2001).

Toews: Mm hmm. Interesting.

Wiebe: I was wondering how much of *Swing Low*, if at all, is your own story. It's *obviously* your father's story – and it's beautifully told – but is it yours as well?

Toews: Well.... That's a good question. I don't know. Maybe in some small way. But not overall, because... I'm sure you read the reason why I wrote it

from his point of view, you know, because of his experience in hospital and how eventually I had to write things from his point of view for him to read so that they would make sense to him because he was so confused. And as I said, I do like writing in first person, becoming characters that I write about. I think to think of *Swing Low* as non-fiction even though obviously it is in this grey area, and it's hard to slot or label, but... Yeah, I think of it as his story. I was very careful to write it in his voice, and everything that happens in the book really did happen. *Every* single thing. His thoughts at any given time are based on what people *told* me about that he had said about what he was thinking. So in the book when I say *he's* thinking this or that, it's based on something that somebody had told me he had said. There hasn't been one single individual who has said that it's not true, that that didn't happen. I made absolutely sure of that and ran it past a whole bunch of people before I published it, which isn't what I normally do.

Wiebe: You're describing the biographer's work.

Toews: Yeah, yeah! I made absolutely positive that everything was accurate.... So, no I don't think of it as my story except for the fact that he was my father and so, you know, I'm in the book....

Wiebe: [Laughs] That had to be weird.

Toews: [Laughs] It felt kind of.... I don't think I was doing the same thing that Gertrude Stein may, or may not, have been doing. But it is an interesting theory, and I think that there's an element of that, for sure. Her situation could be a little bit more ... true than mine. Yeah.

Miriam Toews is currently at work on her next novel (which isn't about Mennonites). This interview is one of two that I have conducted for my doctoral thesis. I wish to thank the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, and the Graduate Program and Research Office at the University of Western Ontario's Faculty of Education, for making this project possible. – NGW

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Paul J. Griffiths, *The Vice of Curiosity: An Essay on Intellectual Appetite* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2006). Norman Klassen and Jens Zimmermann, *The Passionate Intellect: Incarnational Humanism and the Future of University Education* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

Although their style, purposes, and intended audiences are very different, these wise books pursue the same goal of healing the subject/object dichotomy that catalyzed the Enlightenment and is now questioned by postmodernism.

The more unusual effort is provided by Griffiths, who, through treating “the vice of curiosity,” provides a fresh take on timely matters, useful as almost a meditative resource for anyone interested in rethinking the Western style of organizing scholarship and academia. Griffiths, offering the 2005 J.J. Thiessen Lectures on which the book is based, draws on Augustine to provide a lens to see how troubling are the effects of the modern faith that humans can separate themselves as knowing subjects from the objects they claim to know. As he observes, in contrast to the Enlightenment/modernist valuing of curiosity often uncritically assumed in Western culture, “Curiosity for Augustine is nothing other than the ownership of new knowledge” (7).

Throughout Griffiths’s short yet deep tome, the problem with curiosity turns out to be the quest for ownership and the consequences flowing from it. Curiosity’s drive for ownership of knowledge yields people “bent on living according to themselves and thus also upon hugging the knowledge to themselves, delighting in knowing themselves as knowers, embracing as their own what can only properly be loved as God’s” (12). We who are curious in this way are responsible for setting up the modern university as a site valuing discipline, mastery, and novelty. Griffiths summarizes the effects of this unholy trinity:

Students and scholars ... are disciplined into thinking of their studies as a device whose principal purpose is to provide them ownership and mastery of their chosen fields [disciplines]. Novelty is sought and rewarded and the display of the mastered and sequestered object of knowledge is undertaken when the reputation of the one doing the displaying will be most enhanced....(59)

The antidote? Studiosusness. Studiosusness involves grateful and delighted participation in the gift of what is being studied, which is ultimately God's world. Studiosusness is not anti-intellectualism but redeemed use of intellect.

Though the language is different, the above view is approximately the starting point for *The Passionate Intellect*, whose authors follow a path overlapping with that of Griffiths. Their core strategy is to show the fatal flaws in the subject/object split, then to sketch out the intellectual credibility that Christian thought can reclaim once thinking is defined not in subject/object but in embodied humanistic terms. Their path is indebted to the postmodern critique of Enlightenment tendencies. They show how figures like Heidegger, Gadamer, Levinas, Foucault, and Lyotard have helped clear a space for a recovery of the human through the awareness that no one of us can think as a disembodied observer above what we study, and that we are already enmeshed in Being, or tradition, or bodies and their desires, before we begin to study. At the same time, Klassen and Zimmerman make helpful distinctions between the more humanist (Gadamer, Levinas) and more antihumanist (Heidegger, Foucault, Lyotard) postmoderns, and how such figures complement and critique each other.

Their intent is to make room for Christian faith as part of the humanist project, and their name for this is "incarnational humanism." If no one can start to think from any fully disembodied, objective perspective, then starting from within Christian faith is no less legitimate than starting from other vantage points. In addition, incarnational humanism solves problems not otherwise solved in either Enlightenment or postmodernist thought, because

[H]uman dignity, the dignity of nature, and the interpretive nature of truth become possible without fragmentation or totalization. Thus incarnational humanism allows for considerable common ground with postmodern scholarship even as it maintains a distinctively Christian orientation. (147)

The Passionate Life risks giving short shrift to nearly any topic it addresses. But that is in the nature of a resource intended as a guidebook for Christian university students beginning to wrestle with intellectual currents

of the day and seeking to understand how they can both learn from and address such currents with integrity. Within that context, the book does its job well.

My main discomfort with both books is that each risks hiding its light under a bushel by making it a gift primarily for the Christian community. In Griffiths this happens in startling comments that seem too stingy to match the generosity of thought surrounding them. In seeing the implementation of his vision as perhaps requiring alternative institutions of education – itself a potentially stingy approach – Griffiths suggests that “every student and every teacher would be encouraged to find his or her primary and most direct audience in the community of the baptized” (78). I’d have little problem with wording along the lines of “encouraged to include the community of the baptized as *one* significant audience.” It saddens me, however, that precisely when postmodernism is making Western intellectual currents more receptive to such a vision than has perhaps been true for centuries, Griffiths urges that the baptized community, rather than *any* community wounded by the subject/object split, become the primary audience.

The overlapping move made by Klassen and Zimmerman is this: They contend that “only the incarnation enables a recovery of humanism as the heart of university education because the incarnation allows us to retain the best elements of the greater humanist tradition *and* of its postmodern critics without repeating their shortcomings” (147). This is not a thoughtlessly stingy move; they stress that “common grace” enables persons of different or no faiths to nurture each other (181-82). They make a good case for their perspective, and as a Christian I say yes, such incarnation-based wisdom *is* a gift my faith offers.

Yet I feel the same sorrow on reading this as I do whenever encountering similar moves. After all the wrestling with alternate perspectives is over, it is explained that, amidst all we can learn from others, we must congratulate ourselves: *We* are those who know the truth. Maybe there is no way fully to embrace what I’d wish to: the ability simultaneously to hold passionate Christian convictions yet to acknowledge in radical humility that any truth entered with conviction tends to look convincing to its holder. But I do wish it were possible to speak of the incarnation in a way that does not make

its persuasive power so dependent on belonging to the Christian in-group. Even stated ever so gently, as in Klassen and Zimmerman, such arguments are still rooted in control: We Christians control the truth. Might we model our argumentation more radically on the Incarnate One – who died rather than exercise control, relinquishing to God the next moves?

I raise such concerns not to denigrate these valuable projects. Rather, I hope their light radiates to far corners. Amid polarizations, our era does provide avenues for rejoining subject and object, for thinking “within” and “through” and not just “above” our traditions, biases, bodies, faith commitments, or objects of study. Christian *and* not-Christian, we need such books to help us conceptualize, critique, and share in this moment of opportunity.

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Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007.

With popular interest in Jesus fanned by recent epic films, bestselling novels, and announcements about the discovery of ancient gospels and artifacts, one is not surprised by the appearance of yet another book on Jesus. However, in the bewildering mix of sensationalizing declarations and novelistic embellishments of the story of Jesus, *Recovering Jesus* comes as a refreshing resource. As the sub-title indicates, this book intends to facilitate serious encounter with the New Testament witnesses to Jesus.

Yoder Neufeld wrote this book having in mind students in his college classroom, who come with a range of prior attitudes toward Jesus “whether religiously indifferent, highly skeptical, or passionately Christian” (9). He writes as a scholar and teacher eager to guide students in their study of Jesus and the various first-century claims made about him. He also writes within

a confessional faith commitment to Jesus as Lord. Both the scholar and the believer are everywhere evidenced in what the author communicates. A foundational hermeneutic of trust in the scriptural sources does not deter him from asking the tough historical questions, nor does his scholarly enterprise cause him to refrain from theological reflection and exploration of ethical implications.

The title of the introductory chapter asks, “One Jesus or Many Jesuses?” In chapter 2 Yoder Neufeld turns to the field of archeology for an evocative metaphor. As 21st-century readers we are invited to “dig through the layers” of developing traditions from the present through the Enlightenment, the Reformation era, the creeds, the NT canon, and eventually the individual writings themselves. The third chapter on “One Jesus – Four Gospels” profiles each of the four canonical gospels and their respective portraits of Jesus. Chapter 4 provides a sweeping overview of the historical, geographical, political, and cultural dimensions of the world into which Jesus was born and in which his life and ministry unfolded.

Having dealt with these introductory matters, Yoder Neufeld proceeds to focus on Jesus’ beginnings, public ministry, and death and resurrection. He devotes chapter 5 to a consideration of the nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke. In chapter 6 he returns to background issues in a treatment of the Kingdom of God theme within the Hebrew Scriptures and in Jewish literature contemporary with Jesus. The rubric of “Kingdom” continues in chapters 7 through 10 in a survey of how the NT witnesses depict Jesus’ proclamation, teaching, ministries of compassion, and ethical instruction. In chapters 11 and 12 the focus is on Jesus’ death and the resurrection. Chapter 13, “Jesus – Christ and Lord,” moves into the realm of Christology, an exploration of the phenomenon whereby Jesus became the object of religious devotion.

Several features of the book are self-consciously pedagogical in their intent, obviously constructed to facilitate student exploration and learning. Each chapter includes an inset listing but not defining some “Key Terms and Concepts” pertaining to its primary subject. Brief bibliographies at the conclusion of each chapter point students to resources for further reading. Helpful charts and diagrams appear throughout the book.

Recovering Jesus will potentially have an audience beyond the college students for whom it was written. Scholars may wish for more documentation of the grounds for Yoder Neufeld’s conclusions, or they might find his

hermeneutic of “humility and awe” (122) before the witness of the NT writers lacking in precision, but they will find in this volume a remarkably comprehensive discussion of interpretive issues in current debates about Jesus. Interested and motivated youth and adults in congregational study groups will find this to be a compelling guidebook to help them sort through the maze of competing interpretations currently promoted by scholars and the media. Pastors and teachers can also benefit from consulting this book, especially because of the breadth of its scope in discussing Jesus and his world.

The index could have been constructed in ways more beneficial for readers. In particular, an index of ancient sources would assist teachers, pastors, and other interested readers to locate the many treasures buried in the book’s pages.

In sum, Yoder Neufeld models a remarkable integration of scholarly clarity and Christian conviction. His model has the potential of furthering a recovery of Jesus and his vision of liberation in our fractured world.

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Albert Borgmann. *Real American Ethics: Taking Responsibility for Our Country*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Since his landmark *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* was published in 1984, philosopher Albert Borgmann has been frequently cited in discussions about technology not only among philosophers but among sociologists, environmentalists, and even theologians. Borgmann has continued to publish widely on the topic, and at first glance his most recent book may appear out of place. The title suggests a political platform or manifesto, an impression reinforced by the opening line of the preface:

“This book is my attempt to come to terms with the country I love” (ix). Connections with the rest of Borgmann’s corpus soon become apparent, however, and I think this book is an attempt to unpack the broader political significance of his philosophical reflections on technology and culture.

Borgmann does clearly situate himself within a particular political context. One of his overarching arguments is that there must be a renewal of distinctively American virtues, such as generosity and resourcefulness, if the United States is to flourish. This renewal requires the “concentration and illumination” of dispersed movements of reform through a vision that is national in scope (197). As someone who has written much about households and local communities, this does seem to be new terrain for Borgmann. Yet the more basic argument he develops here is that his nation is in need of renewal because its citizens have been disengaged by consumerism and modern technology – by the commodification of both private and public goods. In short, moral conduct not only governs, but is governed by our “tangible environment” (30). To underline this point, Borgmann repeatedly quotes Winston Churchill, a surprising choice for a book on *American* ethics: “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us” (5). Nonetheless, “Churchill’s principle” echoes and encapsulates much of Borgmann’s earlier work on technology, and buildings come to serve as a metaphor for common structures that are social and political as well as physical.

This book can also be viewed as a significant work in philosophical ethics. Indeed, it is because of the complex relationship between ideas, actions, and the tangible environment that Borgmann is convinced Americans need to reconsider their understanding of ethics. Thus: “Theoretical ethics, practical ethics, and real ethics should be thought of not as rivals but as complements of one another” (30), and this book is structured around three parts focusing on these three dimensions. Part one engages philosophers such as Kant and Mill in the course of discussing “The Charms of Principles” (47) and “The Dark Sides of Utilitarianism” (55). Part two is informed by virtue ethics, as Borgmann moves on to consider practices. Along the way he considers personal virtues such as wisdom, courage, and friendship, and political virtues such as justice, stewardship, and design. Part three focuses on his own contribution to ethical discourse, what he calls “real” ethics. As

he says in an introductory chapter:

Ethics has to become real as well as theoretical and practical. It has to become a making as well as a doing. Real means tangible; real ethics is taking responsibility for the tangible setting of life. Real also means relevant, and real ethics is grounding theoretical and practical ethics in contemporary culture and making them thrive again. (11)

After linking the contours of real ethics with both “The Economy of the Household” (ch. 13) and “The Design of Public Space” (ch. 14), Borgmann concludes by revisiting his earlier discussion of Thomas Jefferson. What makes Jefferson so compelling is how he exemplifies the ideal of centering our lives in our households in ways that “can give us the courage to join with our neighbors in the design of a public realm” (201).

There is much to commend in this volume, not least of which is Borgmann’s accessible writing style. Newcomers to both philosophy and Borgmann’s work will also appreciate his penchant for moving beyond diagnosing the ills of contemporary culture to offering a prescription for its renewal. However, his interest in framing ethics within his own political context will be less helpful for those not sharing this context or not agreeing that the nation “provides a fair scope for ethics” (3). No doubt Canadians are shaped by the same kind of commodification as their neighbors to the south, and no doubt Mennonites and other Anabaptists have much to learn from the attention Borgmann pays to the environment that shapes our daily lives. But in my view those who find themselves in these categories have more to gain by starting with one of his earlier works.

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Reta Halteman Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.

This study illumines the early church's practice of commensality (fellowship at the table) within a community of goods, arguing against much of scholarship that careful attention to Acts 2:41-47 and 6:1-6, and to recent literary and social scientific research, shows that the practice was real and important to Jesus' early followers. Moreover, the widows mentioned in Acts 6 were not simply the most destitute and vulnerable among the poor of the early believers, but more than likely exercised an important role in the ministry (*diakonia*) of preparing and serving the daily common meals. Their marginalization from this function occasioned the crisis that resulted in choosing the Seven to augment the ministry of the word as practiced by the Twelve.

Finger undertakes a thorough critique of scholarship that has too often approached the texts with unwarranted historical skepticism, inadequate literary and anthropological sophistication, and outright sexism. By means of painstaking dissection of scholarship and sophisticated reconstruction of the social world, aided by a feminist alertness to the reality of women within a patriarchal world as recorded in androcentric texts, she provides a rich introduction to the social world of early believers, particularly those residing in Jerusalem.

Finger's book consists of four parts, each subdivided into chapters, for a total of fifteen, and it provides clear introductions, summaries, and prospects. An introduction offers an overview of the contents and a preview of the methodology. Part I (chapters 1 - 4) lays the groundwork, outlining the "interpretive presuppositions" and critiquing the history of scholarship. Part II (chapters 5 - 8) provides a social history of the early Jerusalem community of Jesus believers, employing the social sciences, including cultural anthropology. Relying heavily on Harmut Stegemann, Finger draws a close connection between Essene patterns of shared life and those of Jesus' early followers, claiming that Jesus' eating practices drew heavily from Essene practice.

Part III argues that the commensality reflected in Acts has its origins and inspiration in Jesus' own practices of eating. In relation to the marginalized Hellenistic widows (Acts 6:1), Finger explores the role of

women in preparing and serving meals in the Mediterranean world, arguing that in the Jerusalem church they were not merely the neglected poor but were denied their traditional honorific female roles of participating in meal preparation and serving. The fourth Part offers a careful word-by-word exegesis of Acts 2:41-47 and 6:1-6.

In addition to meticulous textual exegesis, this volume is a mine of information on the social world of Jesus' early followers, ranging well beyond the immediate concerns of whether they practiced commensality or what role the widows played. We learn much about the social conditions in Judea, the life of urban poor, the meaning and practice of eating, and the role of women, particularly widows. Provocative are the close connections Finger sees between Jesus and his followers and the practices of the Essenes, even if very different notions of purity make easy parallels difficult to draw. This will no doubt be subject to further testing as Qumran scholarship continues to evolve.

More provocative and illuminating is the way Finger shows how Jesus and his early followers took on traditional female roles in providing and serving food, thus representing a radical alternative to patriarchal assumptions about male roles. As important as this insight is, it left me wondering what happened to the widows once the Seven were chosen. They do not reappear in Acts. Did this subverting of gender roles lead ironically to the displacement of women (widows) from the place they had called their own and in which they could exercise a degree of authority and autonomy? No effort is made to draw on 1 Tim. 5 to further illumine the role of widows in the church's ongoing development.

There are some minor irritants that closer proofreading should have caught, but they should not be allowed to distract from the study's overall excellence. For example, the dative plural is too often allowed to serve as the plural on Greek words such as *trapezai(s)* (81, 257) and *agapai(s)* (61-2); the *xi* should be replaced with a *chi* in *psychē* and *psychai* (221-24); Leitzman should be Lietzman (57-8), Leinhard should be Lienhard (86), and Stephen Neil should be William Neil (87).

In a final chapter Finger argues forcefully that with all the distance between present North American reality and the largely agrarian reality reflected in Acts, the practice of Jesus' early followers eating together has

found an echo in such diverse communities as the Casa San Diego Catholic Worker House in Houston, Texas, and the Open Door community in Atlanta, Georgia. She aims to instill in readers a sense of urgency and creativity in realizing the practical dimension of following Jesus in terms of eating together, in particular with the poor, and to do so in a way that makes real the presence of the reign of God. That, as Luke 24 reminds her and us, is how Jesus will be recognized.

I could not help but place the implicit and explicit challenge of Finger's study in direct relation to the present urging among Mennonites to discover what it means to be a global community of faith. What does this "fictive kin group" demand of those having too much in relation to "sisters and brothers" having much too little? Finger would insist that Acts 2:41-47 and 6:1-6 have a direct bearing on contemporary faithfulness.

In addition to being a storehouse of learning, *Of Widows and Meals* is a clear prophetic challenge to practical faithfulness. It should serve equally well as a resource for study and preaching and as a textbook for graduate courses.

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M. Daniel Carroll and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds. *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2007. Robert L. Brawley, ed. *Character Ethics and the New Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2007.

Since 1996, the Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting has included sessions on Character Ethics and Biblical Interpretation. Each volume under review comprises 16 papers from these sessions. Focusing on "character ethics," they concern themselves with the way(s) Scripture may help form individuals and communities as moral agents, or may nurture certain virtues. All 28 authors represented are Christian, and most are Protestant biblical scholars. Two who fall within these categories are also Mennonites: Theodore Hiebert and Willard Swartley. Women and scholars from beyond North America are well represented.

These anthologies, comprising some 500 pages of rather fine print, make for challenging and sometimes exhilarating reading. That they were first presented at joint annual meetings of two "learned societies," the SBL and the American Academy of Religion, portends more challenge than exhilaration for readers unfamiliar with the argot of those societies. Occasionally, the argot runs away with itself. In the NT volume, Robert Brawley's four-page flight across an intellectual landscape extending from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Levinas, Ricoeur, and Charles Taylor, in an essay on Galatians, leaves one breathless. However, many chapters in both volumes do cross boundaries in an instructive way – boundaries between biblical studies and ethics, but also between the academic guilds and normal folk seriously interested in the Bible and ethics.

All the essays relate themselves to the subtitle: "Moral Dimensions of Scripture." Almost all assume Scripture as at least a moral resource, and provide expositions of specific texts drawing on and exemplifying that assumption. Jens Herger, writing on Titus 3:3-9, and Sylvia Keesmaat on Romans 12–13 serve as prime examples, each performing a powerful, constructive exegesis of texts typically read otherwise and as counter to both Jesus and enlightened Western sensibilities.

On the OT side, the sky is cloudier. Cheryl B. Anderson, writing on

the laws, reminds us of those marginalized therein, both women and non-Israelites. The moral dimension of Scripture consists, then, in our necessary criticism of just that dimension. J.J.M. Roberts seeks to disabuse us of appealing to Isaiah 2:2-4 for peace purposes, pointing out its imperialist background. Roberts is entirely correct as regards background, so far as I know – a background that makes much of the NT intelligible. Oddly, he concludes that we now “have the power and responsibility to govern according to God’s will” (127-28). By “we” he means “modern Christians in Europe and North America” (127). Writing on Micah 4 and 6, the former parallel to Isaiah 2, and writing from experience quite different from Roberts’s, M. Daniel Carroll speaks modestly and clearly about moral formation. The differences between Roberts and Carroll include technical matters of history and exegesis, but also much more.

The “much more” comes to light also in the NT essays, and in a poignant way. Jens Herzer relates his reading of Titus 3 directly to Germany’s reunification and a former Stasi (East German State Security) informer as a member of his family. In the course of a response, Jinesong Woo describes his incarceration in South Korea. Their exchange, which is not at all about “I had it worse than you,” has the virtue of returning to the text, to Scripture, with questions about justice/justification, forgiveness, reconciliation, and also about directly or indirectly relating the Bible to these existential questions.

Obviously, no common interpretive approach governs the 32 chapters in these volumes. Some perform an almost purely historical-critical operation, while others draw biblical texts into a variety of contemporary intellectual or social matrices; some do both. Kathleen M. O’Connor on Jeremiah, and Jacqueline Lapsley on Ezekiel, relate their studies to the disaster that the Judean community experienced: Judah’s and Jerusalem’s utter destruction. By somewhat different means and to somewhat different ends, their elegant essays reach a congruent conclusion: the disaster resists understanding. In one of the most powerful and provocative sentences in either book, Lapsley writes, “Making sense of their experience is specifically disallowed” (96). The very idea that moral formation may include a proscription on making sense of a defining experience seems outrageous. Perhaps only those who

have genuinely suffered could comprehend the idea.

Along with suffering, peacemaking has a remarkably high profile in these books, even beyond contributions by Willard Swartley and Glen Stassen. Theology, on the other hand, seldom figures expressly, though several essays address matters related to atonement and salvation. L. Ann Jervis's comments on Philippians 3 and suffering "in Christ" are theologically rich. Systematic or dogmatic theological categories do appear in Swartley's chapter, by way of his quoting James Fodor and "the Trinitarian model of *perichoresis*" (233). And Theodore Hiebert, writing on creation (the subject appears prominently in the OT volume) and against *Heilsgeschichte*, concludes that "[t]he old language of 'transcendence' and 'immanence,' of 'natural revelation' and 'special revelation' will no longer work" (9). Hiebert relies entirely on the Bible for this judgment.

Allen Verhey, professor of Christian ethics at Duke, offers one of the more exhilarating chapters. Verhey, whose work has fruitfully transgressed the boundaries between biblical scholarship and ethics, here treats the Beatitudes through affirming Scripture as scripted and as script. As scripted, Scripture requires rigorous attention to what its authors did "with the words they had available to them." As script, Scripture must be performed "again and again in the rhetoric and practices of the churches, in their theology and in their worship, in their ethics and in their politics" (19, in the NT volume). In this Verhey echoes Nicholas Lash, whom he credits, but the echo is worth hearing. And he foreshadows the contribution by Elna Mouton, who points to the disorienting and reorienting, or reforming, function of Scripture in worship or liturgy. Perhaps, as regards much contemporary worship, this function has a counterfactual or eschatological character.

A brief review cannot hope to list, much less respond to, all these diverse essays. At least, I cannot hope to do so. But I can and do commend these two volumes, whose mediocre or occasionally bewildering parts set the best parts in bolder relief. Among the best and the bewildering is J. Clifton Black's chapter on Mark's gospel. Black waxes eloquent on the cross as "*the* epistemological crisis" and on suffering as "*epistemic*" (13-14). In this, Jesus is one with us and at our front. But is the cross principally about how we should or should not understand our or others' suffering? Does that begin to exhaust what Mark wants us to understand about Jesus? But these books

are all about character ethics, which defines their limitation. One breathes easier when they occasionally, but clearly, stress God's initiative.

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