

# Book Reviews

## Reviews of Fiction and Poetry

David Bergen, *The Retreat*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2008. Pp. 324. Hardcover, \$32.99.

David Bergen's latest novel, *The Retreat*, takes place on the northern shores of Lake of the Woods in 1973 and 1974. The beautiful, dangerous landscape – remote islands, wild animals, and dense forests – surrounds the town of Kenora, a community torn apart by a history of racial conflict. Within this setting, Bergen creates a drama of social injustice, family breakdown, and summer romance, as the principal characters, teenagers Raymond Seymour and Lizzy Byrd, come together and come of age. The story is told almost entirely through the eyes of the novel's teenagers and children. Occasional shifts into an adult point of view only confirm the children's suspicions that the adults don't know what they're doing.

Bergen tells this story in prose of power and grace. His style is plain and to the point, in the tradition of Hemingway, Carver, and McCarthy, and relies on action, not adjectives, for its moments of intensity or lyricism. The language of the opening pages, for example, moves straight to the heart of the conflict. Ojibwa teenager Raymond Seymour is dating Alice, the white niece of local police officer Earl Hart, and Hart doesn't like it. In an early scene, Hart warns Raymond to stay away from Alice: "As far as she's concerned, you don't exist.

Raymond Seymour no longer exists. Got it?" (6). The existence of Raymond Seymour—a major crux of the novel—is thus thrown into question almost immediately, and when Raymond keeps existing, Hart punishes him by abandoning him on an island, with no supplies, late in October. This first section is a small masterpiece, relating in cold detail a fictional incident that mirrors history, recalling Saulteaux teenager Neil Stonechild, who died of exposure in Saskatchewan in 1990, and too many other First Nations people who have died in police custody across Canada. The fictional Raymond survives, but the experience is a kind of initiation. Aware that both his identity and his physical body are at risk, he begins to ponder existential questions and makes decisions that will force the novel to its climax.

The main narrative takes place the following summer, introducing the Byrds, a white, working-class family from Calgary – parents, four children, and three kittens – in the car on their way to a healing retreat near Kenora. All seems innocent, for a couple of sentences, until we learn that pets are not allowed at the retreat. Mr. Byrd's brutal solution, which he calls "a humane act, a work of mercy" (33), traumatizes the children. But like most adults in this novel, Mr. Byrd takes little responsibility for his own actions. Mrs. Byrd is no help either. Self-absorbed, depressed, and probably embarking on an affair with the egotistical charlatan who runs the retreat, she has little time or energy for her children. The retreat's other clients are confused individuals feeding on the stale platitudes and stale bread provided by their leader, whose garbled, smarmy attempts at wisdom are truly creepy. Surrounded by these weak, ineffectual adults, seventeen-year-old Lizzy Byrd and her three younger brothers are on their own. It is little wonder, then, that when Raymond appears at the retreat, Lizzy is drawn to him.

Bergen has created two remarkable, memorable characters in Lizzy and Raymond. They are both brave young people, truth-tellers in a world of lies, who must struggle to be free. But they come from very different worlds. Lizzy tries to resist the pull of a needy family that has ensnared her in the role of homemaker. Raymond must fight for autonomy in a society that doesn't even want him to exist. His resistance requires defiance of the law and serious risk as he becomes involved in the 1974 Ojibwa occupation of Anicinabe Park. Raymond and Lizzy bond during their trials, despite the vast differences in their backgrounds. Their love, like their approach to life, is simple and direct, and what they lack in understanding of each other's worlds, they try to make up for with kindness. But history is not on their side. This is an honest story that reveals, as only a gifted novelist can reveal, hard truths about the land we live on. Without a hint of didacticism, Bergen exposes Canada's abdication in the matter of justice for First Nations citizens and the consequences of the everyday racism that still plagues

us, over thirty years after the unrest of the seventies, though perhaps, because of works like this one, we are at least better able to name it.

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Jan Guenther Braun, *Somewhere Else*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2008. Pp. 196. Softcover, \$19.95

The coming out story is one of the most popular and enduring forms of lesbian, gay and transgender storytelling, and the appeal of this genre is clearly demonstrated in Jan Guenther Braun's *Somewhere Else*. *Somewhere Else* follows in the tradition of lesbian coming-of-age narratives like Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*. Like Winterson's novel, *Somewhere Else* features a protagonist struggling to reconcile her sexuality with the conservative forces of family, faith, and community. Structured on themes of self-discovery and the struggle for acceptance, coming out stories often function as variations of the bildungsroman, the story that traces the growth and development of the protagonist who, due to a sexual, spiritual, and/or moral crisis, finds herself at odds with her community of origin.

Jess Klassen is the daughter of the president of a Mennonite college in Saskatchewan. Shortly after she begins to acknowledge that she is a lesbian, she discovers a slim volume of poetry in her father's desk drawer. The poems, written by a woman named Martha Wiens, awaken in Jess a realization that she must leave because her sexuality will not be accepted by her family or her community. She travels east to Manitoba and eventually to Ontario where she attends university. Jess's physical exile becomes symbolic of her emotional journey of self-discovery. Several characters are instrumental in this journey, most notably her manipulative and controlling first girlfriend Freya; the emotionally intuitive fisherman Halfsteinn with whom Jess shares a deep bond; and her girlfriend Shea whom she meets while attending university. Like Jess, Shea is the daughter of a Mennonite professor and Shea reflects back to Jess aspects of Jess's life and faith that she has been avoiding since leaving Saskatchewan. Jess states early in the novel, "I just couldn't walk away from being Mennonite" (42) and indeed she cannot, at least not permanently. Jess eventually returns to Saskatchewan to try to reconcile her sexuality with her faith, family, and community. Jess's return is marred by conflict with her parents, and whether they are able to reconcile their religious beliefs with their love for their daughter remains to be seen at the end of the novel. The

story does end on a hopeful note, though, powerfully demonstrating that denial, intolerance and exclusion – even if such acts are committed in the name of religion – are incompatible with a spiritual, ethical, and moral worldview that is premised on values of peace, love, and community.

The novel's adherence to the template of the coming of age novel makes *Somewhere Else* readable and compelling, but it is also arguably the book's greatest weakness. The premise of self discovery that structures coming out stories has come under criticism from within the field of queer studies in recent years as questions have been raised about whether the idea of a coherent sexual self – heterosexual or homosexual – is ever knowable or possible. The novel's "exile, self-discovery, return" plot also seems a bit too predictable and overdetermined in places. This structure is complicated, however, by the story of Jess's father and his relationship with Martha Wiens, a subplot that offers a welcome diversion. The final few pages of the novel explore Jess's father's struggle effectively humanizing him and allowing readers to see him less as a simplistic character who merely embodies and reflects the more conservative elements of church teachings, and more as a character who, like his daughter, has struggled to reconcile matters of the heart with a community's norms and expectations.

While aspects of the plot may appear formulaic to a reader familiar with coming out stories and some of the writing feels somewhat underdeveloped, the book is still moving and compelling. The originality of *Somewhere Else* is located in the fact that it is the first novel to address the issues of homophobia and queer identity from within the Mennonite faith community, and it does so bravely and powerfully. As such, *Somewhere Else* breaks new and important ground.

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Judy Clemons, *Lost Sons*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008. Pp. 290. Paperback, \$15.99.

David Waltner-Toews, *Fear of Landing*. Scottdale, AZ: Poisoned Pen Press, 2007. Pp. 223 pp. Hardcover, \$29.95.

While reading Judy Clemens's *Lost Sons* and David Waltner-Toews's *Fear of Landing*, I was reminded of a grade nine literature class some 45 years ago when my literature teacher, the late F.F. Enns, refused to accept a fellow classmate's report on a Danny Orlis novel for

a book report assignment. Mr. Enns had no issue with students reading Bernard Palmer's books, but he did not consider them to be literature. To be fair, Mr. Enns also refused to accept Spin and Marty cowboy novels for book reports, though I have a vague recollection of getting approval for *Twig the Collie*, a Christian dog story. I don't think I got much of a mark for the report and I recall my father's suggesting that the quality of the book might have had something to do with it.

Both of the novels under consideration here purport to be mysteries, the Waltner-Toews book adhering most closely to the conventions of a "crime-solving story," while the Clemens book features a police detective with no crime to solve. Both novels have strong Mennonite elements. *Fear of Landing's* sleuth is a sunflower seed chewing veterinarian from Winnipeg named Abner Dueck; *Lost Sons's* sleuth is a police department detective named Steve Windermere who takes on a short-term job of guarding an MCC warehouse in Goshen, Indiana from possible break-ins. Abner Dueck, though largely secular, carries his Mennonite mindset with him to Java and Bali on a Canadian government assignment to investigate the death of cows imported for a large dairy development project. Detective Steve Windermere's job allows him to learn more about Mennonites with whom he has had little contact even though Goshen has numerous Mennonite churches and, of course, Goshen College.

The hook for *Lost Sons* is that Steve and Ruth Windermere have a son in the U.S. Navy who has disappeared in Russia and is presumed captured. The stress of the missing son has led Ruth to quit her beauty parlour job and Steve to take a leave from the police department because he was "losing it" on the job. Barely a week into Steve's leave, the MCC contacts the Goshen police about hiring a night guard to protect an incoming shipment of relief goods. Apparently another agency has suffered break-ins and theft. Steve's chief refers MCC to Steve, for he thinks Steve needs something to distract him from dwelling on his missing son. Steve is interested, but his wife Ruth is horrified at the thought of associating with pacifists, believing they hate her son for being in the military. Despite his wife's objections, Steve checks out the job, only to turn it down when told he would not be allowed to wear his gun. Within hours, however, fearful of the mental anguish of idleness, Steve changes his mind and accepts the job.

Although the novel begins with, "Today I meet the Mennonites," Steve actually meets only a handful and those largely in passing. He is introduced to the MCC offices and warehouse, and the reader is treated to promotional brochure-like descriptions touting the good work of the MCC. Because Steve works the night shift he only occasionally encounters MCC staff. To distract himself from thoughts of his son, he becomes intrigued by a photo of Clayton Kratz, who, in

1920 disappeared in the Crimea. Using his investigation skills, Steve tracks down as much information as he can about Kratz, finding links between his son's ambitions and Kratz's. This interest in a "dead Mennonite" further strains his relationship with Ruth, who is portrayed as the extremist in a novel peopled with "nice" characters: Steve, the MCC staff, the Goshen College professor who reaches out to Ruth. This reader kept wishing that Ruth were the point of view character, for she has the attitude and emotion to drive the story and ultimately it is she who expresses her pain in public and then participates in the bridge-building that appears to be the point of the novel. Unfortunately, this crucial episode happens "off stage." By choosing a limited third person narrative strategy, the author missed out on exploiting the story's dramatic potential.

*Fear of Landing* opens with Abner Dueck's performing an autopsy on a cow. Once Abner determines that the cow's death is suspicious, a sort of naïve, bull-in-a-china shop tenacity kicks in – a quality Mennonites have used successfully in business, union-busting, farming, and politics, as well as in relief work and peace activism. Abner soon discovers that Indonesia is not Canada and that the stakes are life and death. The novel is filled with action as Abner encounters and develops relationships with a variety of intriguing people. The story line is much more complex, yet with a clearer focus, than that of *Two Sons*, and the language is much more energetic and imaginative than the bland language of the Clemens novel, though a case could be made that the bland language serves the portrayal of Steve Windermere's numbed emotional state. Waltner-Toews's narrative achieves a comfortable balance between action, description, and rumination, and the veterinary details are mostly not overwhelming, given Waltner-Toews's expertise in this field.

Along with the unusual device of having a vet as sleuth, the novel also has the advantage being set in exotic Java and incorporating Indonesian political intrigue. Like the Mennonites in the pictures on the MCC map in the Goshen office, Abner is serving in a far away country. His best Mennonite friend, whose wife Abner still carries a torch for, is there as well, though neither is serving under a Mennonite organization. The narrative unfolds naturally through a series of cause and effect events, twists and errors, questions answered, and more questions raised. Abner Dueck is a flawed character with an ego, fleshly desires, who reaches for his sunflower seeds often enough to be somewhat annoying.

Both of these novels use Mennonite stereotypes. *Fear of Landing* uses them as part of Abner's character for entertainment and for the real dilemma of what he will write down for religion on a government form in a country where everyone is required to have a religion. *Two*

*Sons* tries to break stereotypes, such as the assumption that all Mennonites speak German, while at the same time reinforcing others such as Mennonites being “the quiet in the land.” Although Steve’s son has only been missing for two months and the story has received significant local media attention, the MCC staff doesn’t appear to be aware of the story, suggesting an inattention to what is going on in the larger community. Perhaps this is a symptom of the ‘solitudes’ that exist in our complex contemporary society.

Readers who look for an obvious ‘message’ with their fiction may find *Lost Sons* edifying; the novel certainly takes on an ambitious challenge, and the message of bridge building is essential. However, in a work of literature the ‘message’ is secondary to the ‘moral experience’ of being engaged with the darkness and light, the complications and paradoxes, the living, breathing bodies and souls of deeply imagined characters. *Fear of Landing* comes closer to delivering such an experience and as a mystery delivers a good read.

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David Elias, *Waiting for Elvis*. Regina: Coteau Books, 2008. Pp. 189. Softcover, \$21.00.

Do not read David Elias’s *Waiting for Elvis* only once. The first reading begins with such an abrupt plunge into anguished suffering and violence, through such powerful prose, that it is nearly impossible to pay sufficient attention to Elias’ control of emotional effects or to the translucent, barely there, parables of compassion and love. In the second reading, when one is no longer terrified, either for the characters and for one’s own shattered sensibilities, there is time to savour the language, examine the layers of meaning in implied metaphors, and lay hold of an achingly beautiful offer of hope.

Elias’s earlier works – short story collections *Crossing the Line* and *Places of Grace*, and the first novel, *Sunday Afternoon* – have amply displayed his gift for exploring the minds of the mindlessly cruel, the child abusers and authoritarian bullies and pious gossipers. Those earlier works also included glimpses of grace, although not in the expected places. Those who love, the fully compassionate human beings, are either disdained outsiders (the poet, the village idiot, the limping polio victim) or ordinary people with sufficient courage – found who knows how – to rise above narrow human selfishness, which leads, sooner or later, to viciousness.

In *Waiting for Elvis*, grace emerges when the marginal and the courageous ordinary meet. Sal, a mentally ill, homeless highway tramp, and Betty, an attractive, middle-aged cook in a truckers' stop café, meet as two human beings who are both "in need of something – the one to offer, the other to accept." Their relationship – odd as it is, since Sal does not speak and Betty must thus rely on her wisdom and intuition – is nevertheless the only real one in the novel. The other relationships have all gone bad in ways that range from indifferent to unbelievably cruel; individuals need alright, but cannot or will not offer or accept what's needed.

The tangle of human relationships is displayed against a background of interconnected noise and silence. Betty and her husband Arty, a former trucker himself, own and operate a small diner on an isolated stretch of highway through the Canadian Shield. The surrounding forest, which should be silent and can't be, is witness to "[a]ll those engines and tires concussing the air, pushing everything out of the way. Their inertia curses combustion at the air, swears fumes at the sky, the trees, the sun" (14). Chaos and noise are endemic in this world, as are "hard, cold words" that manipulate and dominate, or the ritual exchange of trivial phrases that passes for conversation in the diner. For Betty, frustrated by the lack of "real conversation" between her and Arty, Sal's steadfast silence initially feels like an invasion: "Something about that. The openness of it. The space. A space she'd never been inside before." Yet that silent space, born out of suffering – she is sure of that – teaches her what she needs in order to move out of the inhumanity that surrounds her.

The dimensions of evil are finely drawn in prose so sensuous and precise and dense with meaning that the reader is trapped until the end. When breath returns, it's possible to begin the reflection that opens up new understanding. *Waiting for Elvis* is not an overtly religious book (no churches, no direct references to God except in profanity) or even an obviously psychological one with spiritual or rational explanations for brutal behaviour. Clothespin Harry, the most frightening character Elias has ever created, is given no background and no motivation. He just is. But he is not a monster. Any of the truckers in the diner, with their focus on their own needs and their inability to tolerate otherness, could become just as cruel. Without compassion and without willingness to listen, people lose their humanity and turn their peevish anger against themselves or others. There's an inevitability about these characters and their feeble capitulation to circumstances that is close to myth. The novel goes that deep – if we have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to feel.

It is no surprise to discover kinship between this modern depiction of sordid human dilemmas and ancient stories that have always taught



us to manage our desires and to find beauty in the darkest places. As a tarot card reader tells Betty, "Light comes from dark." Indeed it does.

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Gilbert Hofer and Victor Kleinsasser (illustrator), *Jewell Adventure*. MacGregor, MB: Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, 2008. Pp. 38. Softcover.

*Jewell Adventure* tells the story of three Hutterite boys who take a trip to a neighbouring farm on a winter's afternoon. The narrator, Gilbert, has made a Christmas gift – a pastoral scene mounted on a block of wood – for the Jewell family, who live nearby, and buy hay and straw from the colony, which the boys help to load. Gilbert has planned the trip with his friends Sol and Chris, knowing all along that if they are caught they will be harshly punished. In spite of the good relations between the Jewells and the colony, the world-at-large is off limits: "Do you know how bad the world is?" asks the boys' *Schullehrer* (German school teacher). "Watch out that you don't yield to it!" (Hofer 34).

There is an accident along the way: a pedal breaks off of Gilbert's bike, but in spite of the mishap, the boys continue their journey to see the Jewell family. The Jewells are friendly people; the first image of them situates them on their farm, surrounded by happy animals, beneath a colourful sky. Eventually the boys' *Schullehrer* comes to retrieve the boys – they've been caught.

*Jewell Adventure* flirts with escape: nearly every illustration contains a door or a window, often with someone standing in or leaning out of it. The image that Gilbert chooses to mount for the Jewells depicts a mountain, and introduces the possibility that, for Gilbert, the world outside of the colony is not only beautiful, but desirable. And although no character verbalizes an intention or a desire to leave the colony permanently, the afternoon escapade gestures to the fact that for these boys, the pull is irresistible, and the strong possibility of a negative outcome does not outweigh the appeal.

Although the boys' crimes are few, they are deliberate: they own contraband bicycles, which they have found and repaired themselves, and they frequently use them for secret trips off of the colony. All of these warrant disciplinary action. Yet while the punishment and its surrounding events are prominent, taking up nearly half of the story, there is a degree of excitement that slips into the story as the thrashing draws near. This is emphasized in part by the number of exclamations:

“there is no getting out of this one!” announces the narrator gleefully (Hofer 20); “You’re going to get it!” tease the other boys at dinner (Hofer 28). Yet the punishment itself is almost unnoticeable – it’s all rising and falling action. If the first half of the story is about breaking the rules, and the second half is about being punished for it (without expressing any resentment about this fact), then why does the punishment itself almost disappear from the page?

*Jewell Adventure* doesn’t ruffle any feathers. It encourages the reader to take a sentimental view of the disciplinary systems that bind the Hutterite community together by waxing over the difficulties of community life and dwelling on the details that make it feel worthwhile, such as a sense of kinship with nature, the order of daily life, and the structure and importance this order gives to each life. This sentimentality is reinforced by the illustrations. A charming mix of ink and watercolour, the images depict the boys as happy with their station in life, unlikely to leave the colony or to register any complaint against the way the community’s limitations affect them. The final image in the book shows the boys having just been dismissed by their *Schullehrer* after the thrashing: they are welcomed back to the embrace of the community, surrounded by other children who look at them with admiration. Each boy looks directly out of the page with confidence, and in the background the *Schullehrer* and two women from the community look on with approval, as though the system has run its course, and order has been restored.

In keeping with the sentimental depiction of Hutterite life, the writing is upbeat and the illustrations are jaunty. Everyone is always smiling: clearly, the community doesn’t restrict the boys’ behaviour in a way that troubles them. In *Jewell Adventure* Hofer introduces a world in which the rules by which a community establishes itself as a unified body (keeping some things out and some things in) create a joyful, supportive environment in which each person is included, at any cost.

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Maurice Mierau, *Fear Not*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2008. Pp. 82. Soft cover, \$16.95.

Maurice Mierau’s third collection of poetry draws its formal and thematic inspiration from the Gideon Bible, specifically from its introductory self-help section. The physical shape of *Fear Not*, its use of verse numbers to mark the poems’ progression, as well as the

section titles themselves create a kind of ironic mirror for the poet to hold up against its biblical source. At the end of Mierau's book, you'll find a concordance called "Where to Find Help When ...," followed by an alphabetized list that mimics the Gideon edition. Perhaps you're "Considering divorce" (30) or "Tempted to abuse credit" (40)? While you won't find comfort for your spiritual woes in these poems, you will find company, voices to join you in the hymn of the weary and heavy-laden.

What binds *Fear Not* together is the multiplicity of voices and patterns. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Divine, the skeptic, and even the tongue-in-cheek prophet with one foot in the fire all come to speak, sometimes in the context of the poet's family history, sometimes in traditional form and Biblical language. Television shows, product brand names, and celebrities like Tony Robbins and Britney Spears come to stand before the funhouse mirror Mierau creates. What's intriguing is how pathetic and disfigured contemporary culture appears in these poems, especially when the sacred tags along. When read in unity, these poems form an honest question that abounds in musicality and admits a post-modern despondency.

Throughout *Fear Not*, Mierau plays with traditional forms like the sonnet, pantoum, and sestina (both of the latter forms rely on patterned repetition of words or phrases), and alters familiar passages of scripture in wordplay and subversion. His poetic morphings are more than unsettling. In "Drug Abuse," subtitled "a love Psalm," the addict sings to the Divine: "1 With your hands weaving me *in / utero* / 2 knowing my thin arm tracks, / intimate [...] 8 since the body's after all a temple" (62). This tension between known structures and jarring content gives these poems edge and energy. The versified form employed by the poet works most beautifully when the sentence rhythms coincide with the numbered breaks. "Victimized" begins with Psalm 37:11 as an epigraph, and then proceeds with poetic lines that spin off that iambic-leaning, anaphoric Biblical music:

1 The wicked are insecure and  
they drive in high vehicles. Selah.

2 Do not fret for it leads to  
evildoing, and evildoers will be cut  
off, yea, starting with their lower limbs.

3 Or they'll be vaporized by an  
IED so fast their blood burns before  
hitting the ground. Do not fret. (54)

There is humour here, too, but laughter is cut with anxiety, like the feeling one has while standing in a carnival line for some wild coaster called “Demon’s Revenge.” It’s hard not to read a ‘verse’ like, “How I lift my eyes to the / hairless extremities of pornography / and askjolene. com . . .” (52) and not feel disconcerted.

In this ride through the twisted pathos of media-saturated consumer culture, moments of tenderness and beauty shimmer with relief. Poems like “Advice on Being a Man” provide a tonal counterpoint to the dominant irony:

6 Remember that the crow in the  
tree watches the cat.

7 Never be the crow.

8 Remember seeing your first  
love getting out of bed and how the  
light plays over you both.

9 Always stare at the moon after  
you have sex. (19)

Mierau precedes his collection with a quote by Wittgenstein (“the deepest problems are actually *not* problems” Tractatus, 4.003) and ends *Fear Not* with Jesus dreaming of “black rats / running in the street after rain” (72). The poems that fall between the genius philosopher and the Son of God wrestle in the flesh, and come up singing through a maelstrom of spiritual angst. These are hard poems, muscular poems. As the poet writes in “Desperate (At Your Wits’ End)”:

7 The pain from which  
confession springs is always true.

8 And the object of war is to  
increase suffering. (52)

*Fear Not* churns with this unrelenting duality, shifting from vulnerability to blunt force, contemplation to cynicism. Mierau’s cunning poems cut through our contemporary debris and flash some eerie trick mirrors, ones that shine with a fractured but persistent light.

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Leonard Neufeldt, *The Coat is Thin*. Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008. Dreamseeker Poetry Series, Vol. 5. Pp. 100. Softcover, \$12.95.

The poems in *The Coat is Thin*, Leonard Neufeldt's fifth book of poetry, are the harvest of a life-long attentiveness to language and the ways it shapes our relationships to nature, the world, the past, and each other. As he has in his past, Neufeldt pays attention here to place and the natural world, but he focuses too on how we think about the world and our place in it, and how we pass on the stories we have heard and lived. In 2004, Neufeldt framed an essay for *Mennonite Life* as extended author's notes, and riffed there on Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous question in his essay *Experience*:

"Where do we find ourselves?" For each of us that question balances on a point cut keen by our relation to our world. So do our career, on-going work, and, yes, our very identity. Unfold Emerson's query and we find at least three questions: "Where am I?" "Who am I?" and "How do I find myself?" The last of these might be rephrased, "How and where, in the endlessly diverse, unsorted world about me, do I define myself?"

For Neufeldt, the poetic "I" emerges from the intersections of multiple times and places and it weaves webs of language in answer to these ontological questions; the resulting network of relations with community, environment, time, and place is the nexus of what we call the self. For Neufeldt, the nexus includes a lifelong scholarly passion for Emerson and Thoreau and a commitment to bringing Mennonite stories forward into contemporary moments. Add to this his participation in the Jewish Studies program at Purdue University, his connections to Holland, Russia, the U.S., and Canada, and sojourns to Turkey, Germany, India, and China, and you have an idea of the rich networks that inform his thinking.

The Emersonian questions that Neufeldt poses shape the four-part structure of *The Coat is Thin*. The first section, "West of Time is Place," answers the query "Where am I?" with a grouping of poems that are rooted in particular places and moments of being. The second section, "The Coat is Thin," entertains the query "Who am I?" in its focus on Mennonite subject matter. The third section, "The Cold War and After," responds to Emerson's question, "Where do we find ourselves?" with respect to historical time. The final section restates the question in positive terms, with poems that playfully suggest some of the contemporary dilemmas of defining self, including Halloween

disguises, email conversations with church elders, and reflections on plagiarism and being out of print.

According to Neufeldt's 2004 *Mennonite Life* essay, place can refer "to time as much as to space and needs to be understood both as particular space and as transmitted, yet personalized, experience in time. We can be cut off from our space and time; we can become persons of plenty through them; we can be victimized, indeed imprisoned, by either." He explores this idea in the collection's longest poem, "Why Passing Our Stories On is More Than Addition: A Verse Essay." Consisting of three parts, this poem asks how sacred and secular Mennonite stories from the Fraser Valley can be translated and brought into a multi-cultural world. The sequence begins with a Fraser Valley evangelist of Neufeldt's youth, moves to the story of a Turkish Jew in 1990, and concludes with a 2004 conversation in which a friend asks: "Did you press/the words of Jesus on this Jew?" The best answer, for Neufeldt, is the most complete synthesis possible of one's own multiple experiences, while acknowledging the limits of a single perspective:

And passing stories on when we're not  
at home in the language may help little to  
find each other because of our words  
threaded and tied like sutures to close the gaps  
large as wounds, the story made over  
and over and left to heal itself.

Leonard Neufeldt is clearly at home in the language of poetry. The poems of this volume offer at least a temporary shelter to readers who seek the intersections of multiple stories. Whether he is remembering his days as a boyishly enthusiastic violin student, or wryly reflecting on poetry as plagiarism of divine creation, Neufeldt offers a scintillating synthesis, in *The Coat is Thin*, on "place" as he discovers it in the present moment.

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**Christina Penner, *Widows of Hamilton House*. Winnipeg: Enfield & Wizenty, 2008. Pp. 299. Hard cover, \$29.95.**

In her first novel, *Widows of Hamilton House*, Christina Penner stakes out Winnipeg as her fictional landscape. In 1995 Ruth Reimer

moves into the rental space above the gift shop that occupies the main floor of a stately white house located on the corner of Henderson Highway and Hespeler Avenue, not far from the Elmwood Cemetery. The house (an actual Winnipeg landmark) was built by Dr. T.G. Hamilton who practiced medicine, raised his family, and famously conducted séances in it during the 1920s and 30s.

Two narrative strands are intertwined: the first deals with the physical and sexual realities of Ruth's life. She moves into the upstairs apartment, meets Lon Lambert, a medical student, they become lovers, marry, live in Hamilton House and then Lon dies very suddenly. Grief-stricken, Ruth struggles to reclaim her place in life and reexamine her sexual identity. She and Lon's mother Naomi, also a widow, become lovers.

The second plot line, historically based and developed mainly through Ruth's journal entries, delves into T.G. Hamilton's interest in paranormal phenomena, an interest heightened by his wife's strong desire to be assured that their son Arthur, who died young, is alive and well in the next world. Spiritualism was an interest the Hamiltons shared with prominent Winnipeggers of that time as well as with luminaries such as Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Ruth fills page after page with her research discoveries, often writing dramatic scenes that recreate incidents of Hamilton family life and the séances as she imagines them. At other times she describes and attempts to interpret photos taken with rigorous attention to scientific methods by T.G.

"Death makes you desperate," Ruth says, longing for Lon and beginning to understand the Hamiltons as the two story strands move closer together. Just as the Hamiltons' spiritualism, with its obvious potential for hoax, pushed at the orthodoxy of traditional science, so Ruth's personal journey – especially her shifting sexuality and her intimate relationship with Naomi – pushes at orthodox Mennonite beliefs and values.

The author has set herself an ambitious agenda. Besides exploring physical and spiritual realities surrounding the nature of love and loss and presenting a revised version of the biblical Ruth/Naomi story, she touches on issues like feminism (did T.G.'s wife really do most of the writing for him, as Nabokov's wife did for him?) and language theory (can words be trusted? How do we read what's not on the page?). It's almost too much for a debut novel.

Many of the story's side roads, however promising, remain undeveloped and tend to diffuse the novel's narrative focus. Details like the smell of long-ago cats, and later the appearance of a stray cat, a smashed truck window, vehicle failure in a rough part of the city, and a fallen bookcase, all tend to raise expectations in the light of the

Hamilton story. But too often these details only serve to slow the story with distractions, blurring its focus. The many references to Winnipeg landmarks and to the flood of 1997 may be mildly interesting to Winnipeggers, but rarely lend power to the story. A 'cleaning up' process would have been a good idea.

The protagonist, Ruth Reimer, is likable enough but never quite achieves the force a central character should have. Her Mennonite family – her father is a pastor – could potentially become the source of significant conflict that would reveal, even shape, the protagonist's character, but the author side-steps this opportunity, preferring to relegate the family to the sidelines.

The author endows many of the scenes with vivid sensual details: the old cat and beeswax odours of the house; Lon's voice, "low, lyrical and textured somewhere between gravelly and raspy"; the medium Mary Marshall entering the parlor, "her skin damp, the edges of her dress soggy." At other times the writing is a pedestrian recounting of the action, and the long dialogues, when weighed down with the task of relaying information to the reader, don't always escape tedium. The tone of the writing is generally serious but the scene where Lon describes Moyamoya disease during a love scene is perhaps meant to be humorous.

Still, the book shows promise. Penner is a bold writer, taking on both flesh and spirit. Her revised version of the Ruth/Naomi story evidences her willingness to venture into territory that Mennonite fiction is only beginning to enter.

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Al Reimer, *When War Came to Kleindarp and more Kleindarp Stories*. Winnipeg: Rosetta Projects, 2008. Pp. 190. Softcover, \$16.95.

The stories in this collection are drawn from the patchwork of life in a Manitoba Mennonite town around World War II. The fictional town of Kleindarp is based on the actual town of Steinbach where Al Reimer grew up and where, presumably, he met people much like the motley group of characters in this book: the "deliciously vulgar" old Eva, the cocky young soldier, the violent town drunk, and the "Jewish" tent revivalist. Here also are the more conventional members of the community: the church leaders and the children, and those who are facing the ambiguities of old age. Having grown up in a similar town



myself, I know that one can hardly exaggerate the diversity and drama in a small community, even a Mennonite one. Comedy and tragedy trip over one another in such a place, and truth is often stranger than fiction.

I found it interesting that in his Preface, Reimer compares his fictional Steinbach to Miriam Toews's in her novel, *A Complicated Kindness*. These two works have little in common, in my opinion, for Toews's novel is a self-contained literary creation based incidentally on her Mennonite experience, while Reimer's collection functions more as memoir, as documentary, with imaginative scenes drawn from a Mennonite past. Reimer's ability to bring history to life, which we saw in his 1985 novel, *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*, is also evident in this collection, most overtly in the story of the midwife whose life parallels that of Steinbach midwife Aganetha Barkman Reimer, and in the final story which brings to mind pioneer author and editor Arnold Dyck.

Reimer, who has come to see his Mennonite heritage as a "precious possession," wants his stories to portray both "the struggles and rewards" of that heritage. He accomplishes that exceptionally well with his sympathetic and non-judgmental portrayal of each character, no matter how pious or nasty, how faithful or "fallen off." Thus the young man who flaunts his military uniform in church and the minister who confronts him are both left troubled by the encounter. And the rebellious son who returns for a funeral finds the present urbanity of the place less appealing than the traditional past. Reimer obviously has a soft spot for the mischief-makers and those who live at the edge of town, so to speak. Perhaps this sympathy for all sides is explained by Reimer's dual ancestry, which he describes in the dedication as "the sober Reimers and the hilarious Kehlers."

Reimer smoothly blends Low German expressions into the narrative by including unobtrusive translations. The name Kleindarp (small village) is a clever choice for his Mennonite town – it blends the High German language of the church with the Low German of everyday life (darp). I worried, however, that English speakers would read "Pape" as one (harsh) syllable; "Papa" might have been a better phonetic choice. And I was puzzled why Reimer mentions the Chortitza church in town but never names his own Kleingemeinde heritage, presumably lodged in the "South End church."

While each story stands on its own, implied connections and transitions between stories are sometimes unclear. For example, young Danny is the narrator in a number of stories, but I found the switch between first and third person confusing. I also wondered whether the shift between past and present tense was deliberate or simply the result of the stories having been written at different times.

Introducing the Russian Mennonite experience in the last two stories felt awkward. Although this later immigrant group became part of the Kleindarp/Steinbach mosaic, these two stories take on a different tone from the rest of the book, leaving behind the Kleindarp of the earlier stories.

In this collection, Reimer shapes some wonderful stories out of his early memories and experiences. I once heard him say, “Steinbach is not a place but a state of mind,” but you won’t want to miss his wonderful summary of the place, past and present, real and fictional, in “A Pocketful of Sugar Cubes” (124-25).

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Andreas Schroeder, *Renovating Heaven*. Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 2008. Pp. 218. Soft cover, \$18.95.

The first time I read this book I was a little frustrated, mildly entertained, and somewhat confused. The second time I became grudgingly engrossed, eventually intrigued, and finally moved to tears. This novel is better the second time around, largely because of information in the last section of the triptych that explains the first two sections. The first time I noticed mainly the “trees” and became frustrated at the lack of contextual detail; the second time I sensed the “forest” and responded with understanding and empathy.

Schroeder tells the story of Peter Niebuhr’s years growing up in British Columbia, first in several rural spots and then in urban Vancouver. Niebuhr’s story is unabashedly a Mennonite story, both in its physical description and its desire to work out personal issues: “Mennonites didn’t do much of anything that was any fun” (132); “like most Mennonites of his generation, Father had the gravest doubts about writers” (108). While it deals with the narrator’s need to break free from tradition to follow his artistic dreams, its themes are, in fact, more widely ranging than that. Schroeder writes about coming to terms with a rejection of traditional faith, about the clash of cultures as ethnic immigrants live at first sheltered, and then more assimilated, lives amongst “the English,” and, most significantly, about the father-son relationship.

Indeed, this story almost shouts: “I want(ed) my father to love me!” Peter’s frequent remarks about his father deteriorate from, “I glowed at the way he’d said ‘we’” (40), to “Father rarely trusted me to tackle anything on my own” (108), to finally: “By now, Father and I were often

at loggerheads” (109). The reader increasingly feels privy to a private grieving session, so raw and palpable is the emotional undercurrent.

Schroeder writes this story sometimes with humour, sometimes with traces of bitterness, and almost always with compassion. The narrator recalls painful memories – like the day two entire herds of brucellosis-infected cows had to be eliminated – with simultaneous directness and pathos: “According to the Department of Agriculture regulations, both herds had to be destroyed at once [...]. Mother took us children to spend the day with our Aunt Hildegard [...]. When we returned, [...] fifty-six cows, twelve heifers and fourteen calves – had been shot and buried under layers of lime” (61). The event is described, physically, in a sparse and vivid manner, and is also explored for its psychological significance: “I remember walking around our suddenly empty barn in amazement, trying to come to terms with such a stunning turn of events [...] it was beginning to dawn on me that adults weren’t really as powerful as I’d thought” (61).

Still, aspects in the narrative got in the way of the reading. While the bulk of Schroeder’s prose reads easily, at moments the flow of writing is disturbed by awkward (verbal) syntax: “‘A heaven-sent second chance, Brother Niebuhr,’ *enthused* John Hildebrand, our old church janitor who still farmed a two-acre plot with one cow” (65), or, “We all *chorused* that nobody was complaining, that we thought it was wonderful that he allowed himself to take a little time off now and then” (113). Another difficulty (or curiosity perhaps) I had with the narrative was its similarity to Miriam Toews’ *A Complicated Kindness*, in terms of description. Schroeder’s depiction of Mennonites, for example – “all I could really explain about Mennonites was a long list of things we didn’t do. No dancing, no TV, no drinking, ... no rock and roll” (132-3) – is very like Toews’ assessment: “imagine ... a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on ... dancing, smoking, ... movies, drinking, rock’n roll [...]” (Toews 5).

The title of the novel suggests that this book is about a process. The middle section (of the same title) deals with Peter’s personal trajectory as it collides with his father’s, and includes one of the book’s most poignant moments. When Peter asks his father, “[D]o you think you could ever accept me for who I am instead of [...] who you wanted me to be?” his father replies, “‘No,’ [...] ‘Because it isn’t what I want you to be. It’s what God wants you to be’” (166). A few pages later, the narrator acknowledges that “we never did resolve this issue” (172).

In the final section, Peter learns that his mother, overcome with guilt for an earlier transgression, seeks forgiveness from her husband. In the last sentences of the book, Peter’s uncle tells him that “[his father] couldn’t give it. And the next afternoon, she died” (218). Understandably, the narrator wants to “rid [...] [him]self of all this [knowledge]”

(217). Perhaps the telling of this story accomplishes just that and represents, like his father's house renovation plans, the narrator's own "triumph and absolution" (92).

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Miriam Toews, *The Flying Troutmans*. Toronto: Knopf Canada. 2008. Pp. 274. Hardcover, \$32.00

Miriam Toews has followed up on the phenomenally successful *A Complicated Kindness* with another frantically-told story of a family on the verge of a nervous breakdown. While *Kindness* was told from the perspective of manic teen Nomi Nickel, *The Flying Troutmans* offers an adult perspective on similar issues of depression, entropy, aesthetics, and chaos. This is not to say that *Troutmans* is simply a repetition of the earlier novel; *Troutmans* elaborates on the themes with a peripatetic energy that proves rewarding.

*Troutmans* takes the form of a road trip constructed as a search for the missing father. Unlike father Ray in *Kindness*, who was vanishing bit by bit despite Nomi's attempts to keep him intact, Cherkis is missing from the start, having left the young family years earlier in response to his wife Min's depression. Min is in the process of being hospitalized as the novel begins, and her sister Hattie, the novel's narrator, is taking Min's two children under her wing in the kind of unscripted decision-making in which Toews' characters seem to revel. Hattie makes a similarly impromptu decision to take the children to their father, a rootless artist who may or may not be living in South Dakota; the episodic structure that results follows Hattie's and the children's lurch across the U.S. and allows for many of the keenly etched set pieces at which Toews excels.

Thebes and Logan, Min's two children, respond to the threatened dissolution of their family in fits of artistic expression: the pair's boundless creative energy is both symptom and reaction to the chaos within which they find themselves. Thebes (a nod, perhaps, to that Sophoclean centre of wholesome family values) keeps a journal, creates giant novelty cheques, and reads etymologies from the back of the van. She also creates stories based on her grandmother's philosophy of Scrabble, a philosophy that may be the novel's guiding aesthetic:

*In Scrabble you've got a certain amount of time to make sense of your randomly picked letters, to make words, not necessarily*

*to know what they mean, but to score points, to bluff, to bingo, to win.* (63, italics in text)

Logan is more introspective: he is seldom not listening via headphones to the angst-ridden music that more than hints at his inner turmoil. Like Nomi's, his writing has been dismissed by an English teacher; unlike Nomi, he makes art by defacing whatever surface presents itself, gouging teen nihilist slogans like "Fear Yourself" and "If I was a band I'd be breaking up" with his hunting knife.

The novel's frenetic narrative style reflects the children's grappling with chaos and fragmentation, but Hattie, too, is confronted with irreconcilable paradoxes. She is particularly haunted by her sister's plea to "just let me die":

Love is . . . killing your sister when she asks you to? Love is . . . refusing to kill your sister when she asks you to? I had trouble deciding between leaded and unleaded at the gas station and skim or 2% at the 7-Eleven, how was I supposed to choose the definition of my love for Min? (216; ellipses in text)

Hattie is also given the novel's most lyrical expressiveness in her descriptions of Min: "She was a strange unsettled planet that had once sustained life. She was a language that I had thought I almost understood even though I couldn't speak it" (12).

The novel is not entirely unproblematic: there's a romantic framing device that remains more intellectual than emotionally engaging, and some readers might tire of the frenetic pacing of the road scenes, which occur in a succession that mirrors Hattie and the children's "barely-keeping-it-all-together" approach. While a bare plot description might sound tortured and somewhat sad, though, I found that the novel was enlivened by its buoyant celebration of the creative forces of destruction and rebirth – especially as embodied in the children and Hattie. Their self-awareness – which is always more than simply ironic – helps rescue them from the dark emotional currents that swirl throughout their journey. As in *Kindness*, Toews leavens the sadness with just enough black humour and hope to balance the threat of despair.

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