she cultivates a detached, stoical stance. The older Juliet maintains that distance, although more emotion is now obliquely revealed through selection of details and dialogue. Childhood experiences are re-imagined, even relived by the adult Juliet, her use of the present tense throughout additionally emphasizing Juliet's adult efforts to re-interpret childish perceptions, much as the young Juliet attempted to understand the adults, those bewildering, self-preoccupied, sexual beings who cannot be predicted, who too often "unburden themselves" on children, "telling [them] things [they] didn't want to know" (230-231). The crucial discovery for Juliet is not only that grown-ups don't know the answers but that they are also unable to offer security: "Tell me, asks Juliet, what could you hold in your hands to prevent anything bad from happening ever? . . . . [T]o what god could you pray, what could you burn, what could you promise? And if you knew, would you?" (155). Stories begin in that "gap" between thrill and terror.

The Juliet Stories is strikingly rich thematically and psychologically, exploring justice, death, love, bullying, keeping secrets. In the first reading, readers are likely to focus on Juliet reaching for maturity, "running down to the shore to throw stones, stirring up the waters; Juliet, standing an inch too close to demand answers to questions that have none, or that, answered, cause pain, burn like a lit coal she will hold in her hand, deliberately wounding herself" (289). The second reading, for me, revealed a powerful exploration of motherhood mostly from a daughter's point of view, but also from a mother's point of view (Gloria and Juliet's Oma), with all the love and bafflement and secrets that exist between mothers and daughters. It concerns protection and lack of protection, about staying with one's children or leaving, about performing the role if nothing else is possible.

The Juliet Stories is not an emotionally easy read, nor is Juliet particularly likeable, especially not in the second half of the novel. Nevertheless, she articulates, unforgettably, what it means to be human, to live intensely and courageously in a world in which the garden itself offers no guarantees.

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Sarah Klassen, *The Wittenbergs*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 2013. Pp. 404. Softcover, $21.

As alarming news from abroad reaches Alice and Brian, the narrator of *The Wittenbergs* remarks that they seem to have been "tricked

. . . into re-enacting the Job story." Indeed, the remark might well be taken as a general comment on Sarah Klassen's first novel, in which one tragic event follows another in quick succession.

Set in Winnipeg during the beginning of the Gulf War and the fall of the Soviet Union, *The Wittenbergs* is a chronicle of a family's tumultuous present, interlaced with inset narratives of its past retold by the central character, seventeen-year-old Mia Wittenberg. Mia's sister Alice has just given birth to a second son with a serious genetic disorder known as Fragile X. Meanwhile, their mother, Millicent, is quietly enduring severe depression, emotional neglect, and substance abuse. Joseph Wittenberg, shockingly oblivious to his family's needs, becomes involved with the new English teacher at the high school where, as vice principal, he harbors ambitions to move higher up the administrative chain of command. Danny, one of Mia's closest friends, manipulates her into enabling his drug addiction, and is eventually expelled from school. Rumours of the impending war, inner-city poverty, gang violence, and the danger of sexual violation constitute a threatening backdrop to the main story.

Mia Wittenberg is astonishingly resilient throughout all these upheavals. In the first scene of the novel we learn that she is a serious reader, and later an aspiring writer. She convinces her English teacher to adapt an assignment that will allow her to interview her grandmother, Marie Wittenberg, about her Mennonite ancestors' experience of village life in Russia, and their flight to Canada – the "Promised Land" – after the Revolution. The eight written "assignments" resulting from the interviews are woven into the contemporary plot and are some of the strongest moments in the novel. Mia's written versions of "GranMarie's" oral memories capture a family's past – and a piece of the broader Russian Mennonite story – using the language and techniques of narrative fiction.

The Russian stories belong to both Marie and Mia, and give rise to the key theme of the novel – the gift of the inherited story, and of storytelling itself. This theme is conveyed in a number of ways. The novel's frequent references to other works of fiction and drama – *Pride and Prejudice*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Hamlet* – alert us to the novel's awareness of itself as construct, as artifice. Verses from scripture and sacred hymns roll easily off the tongues of many characters. The novel is a kind of compilation of literary, biblical, and musical influences and inheritances; at times it almost seems to sing itself.

Most significant to the storytelling theme, however, is the device of the central character as emerging author. Mia's self-consciousness about her stories, her craving for an audience, her relationship with her "source" – a grandmother whose memory is becoming increasingly fragmented – all contribute to an engaging metafictional commentary

on the challenge of writing history and/as story. "What GranMarie told her over several Saturday mornings was a bare-bones story, sparse details that were offered, retracted, replaced by other details. What Mia received could be summarized in a few paragraphs, not a proper story at all. . . . She has had to fill in the gaps." In a brief afterword, Klassen calls her novel a "receptacle" for stories she received from her own mother. The challenge Mia sets for herself – of "filling in the gaps" of Marie's skittish memory with the inventions of imaginative fiction – must surely describe Klassen's own.

Another challenge of writing family history is that of silence, and the novel – like many a family – is rife with it. Elements of Marie's past are hidden from all but the reader; Joseph and Millicent's failing marriage is never openly discussed; Alice's cries for support and dialogue about Fragile X are met with uncomfortable, almost hostile silence at the dinner table; Joseph's father, the elder Wittenberg, is a shadowy and largely forgotten figure whom Marie never loved. Until late in the novel, both Joseph and Millicent actively resist being the audience for Mia's writing; Joseph acknowledges that he cares little about either his family's past or his Mennonite roots; his weekly visits to his mother are merely courtesy calls. (The passion for stories, like other inherited traits, sometimes skips a generation, it seems.) In addition, Millicent, who is not a Mennonite by birth, is overwhelmed by the "narratives of escape and loss" that characterize so many Mennonite histories: "they were not *her* stories. . . . No one asked for her stories." Indeed, not once does Mia, who at one point calls herself a "hybrid," inquire about her mother's family – a curious omission. Millicent herself admits "she knew little of her family background and assumed it was not particularly interesting." One wonders whether this is also the narrator's attitude; is Klassen perhaps trying to make a point about the politics of preserving some stories, even as others are willfully forgotten?

Klassen hangs the contemporary plot on Mia's historical curiosity and literary connection with her grandmother. The idea is that Marie's memories, refracted through Mia's stories, will rescue the family members from the very separate realities each inhabits. Joseph's moral awakening to his family's suffering is linked to his emerging willingness to receive stories. Yet this resolution is only partially convincing, because the narrator retains such a tight grip on the inner worlds of the characters, who sometimes seem to function as figures for ideas more than people a reader might warm to. There are key moments in which the reader longs to be included, such as the scene in which Marie and Joseph have their only moment of authentic connection. By this point in the novel we know the substance of their conversation, but their dialogue is not shared with us. The narrator, rather like Marie

herself, is oddly dispassionate, given the series of tragedies and life crises that befall this family within the space of a year. The narrator's almost grim determination to chronicle the Wittenbergs' misfortunes overpowers the few moments of warmth shared among the characters towards the end of the novel. In successfully avoiding sentimentality, Klassen's third-person storyteller sacrifices narrative intimacy.

Lush descriptions of Joseph's garden, or a startling display of the northern lights, or a lovingly detailed account of a church Christmas pageant lend Klassen's prose welcome notes of intimacy and care, familiar to readers from her lyric poetry. Many of Mia's stories are deeply moving and vivid, in particular her imagined account of the train as it leaves Moscow with Maria and her surviving family members on board, or the description of family portraits by the bodies of dead children. At other times, Klassen allows a cliché to slip in ("winds of change"), or tries to teach the reader about Mennonite history or pacifism. The highlighting of Russian Mennonite vocabulary – *Zwieback* – is both distracting and unnecessary, even to readers unfamiliar with the diction. These are minor missteps. *The Wittenbergs* is a Mennonite family epic that embeds the key themes of Russian-Canadian Mennonite experience in the language and structure of both historical and contemporary fiction. Klassen, unlike her heroine, is sure to find a receptive audience.

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Dora Dueck, *What You Get at Home*, Winnipeg: Turnstone, 2012. Pp. 179. Softcover, $19.00.

As a Mennonite writer, there is something refreshingly different about Dora Dueck. The secret to success for many talented Mennonite novelists and short-story writers has been their audacity or shock value. Best-selling Mennonite fiction is often outrageously funny, pointedly critical and irreverent, infused with pathos, and heavily punctuated with sexual content. Perhaps the appeal, in part, is because this is in such contrast to what is generally expected of a people stereotypically known for their quiet modesty, mysterious apartness, and staunch religiosity. Dueck's writing is not within this genre. It is not at all outrageous, and is notably devoid of indignation or reproach. Rather than amusing or shocking us to attention, her strategy involves layers of perspective, with which she lures us to a place of empathy and new understanding. Her characters are so authentically portrayed that