

Greg Bechtel. *Boundary Problems: Stories*. Calgary: Freehand, 2014. Pp.231. Softcover, \$19.95.

Mennonites appear on just one page of Greg Bechtel's debut collection, near the title-story's conclusion, where a limited omniscient narrator reflects on the protagonist's sexual relationship with one of the other counsellors at summer camp. "[...] Erin finally explains why she needs to stop like that. It's not because [...] she's a Nice Mennonite Girl (though she is this as well). It's because not so long ago, on a date with a Nice Mennonite Boy [...] the Nice Mennonite Boy wouldn't stop. By the time she fought him off and got herself out of the car, her underwear was around her knees, and Nice Mennonite Boy was driving away, leaving her to walk [home] [...] alone in the dark." (135) While the protagonist, 19-year-old Matthew, honours the boundaries Erin establishes here, he finds himself compulsively imagining the scene she's sketched, "comparing himself to Nice Mennonite Boy" (135) and "wonder[ing] if the Boy knew he had that in him [...]. [...] Now, Michael worries about those times when he doesn't want to stop, when he can imagine not stopping so *vividly*." (136)

Though these comprise the only references to Mennonites (or any other ethnicity), the collection's fascination with boundary problems persists. Over the course of ten stylistically lithe, often explicitly mind-bending tales, Bechtel regularly invites his readers well past the conventional borders of three-dimensional time and space in order to implicitly and explicitly explore the limits of consciousness, perception, existence, connection, and – as in the very strong “Boundary Problems” – bodily autonomy and gendered difference. Bechtel ensures that few readers will refuse the invitation by opening the collection with “Blackbird Shuffle,” a narrative and conceptual experiment that signals the universe of the tarot in its subtitle, “The Major Arcana.” Every one of the story's 24, tarot-card-titled, and narratively truncated episodes dazzles, as if a world has been briefly illuminated, but it's a deeply strange and strangely rewarding world that flashes into being each time, one a first-time reader will spend considerable time piecing through in search of metaphysical closure.

Several of the other distinctly experimental stories, “Junk Mail,” for instance, or “The Everett-Wheeler Hypothesis,” don't manage the balance of quantum experience, mystical illumination, and non-normative cognitive function as powerfully as “Blackbird Shuffle” does, but the collection's standout story makes up for minor weaknesses elsewhere. “The Mysterious East” is speculative fiction at its dense, allusive, perplexing best. Set in a readily recognizable contemporary Fredericton, New Brunswick, the story begins in the midst of what may be the reclusive protagonist's cabbie-run of his life. Non-linear narrative episodes are interspersed with brief exchanges between cab drivers and their dispatcher, and a fuzzy picture develops of protagonist Andrew, a first-time cabbie apparently immersed in the Taoist philosophy of Lao Tsu. We learn almost nothing about Andrew, through the skeletal back-stories he invents for himself (144) and his encounters in the noir-tinged world of his fares, but satisfyingly bizarre dimensions of existence emerge nonetheless. The dazzlingly laconic account ends before we can piece together the significance of Andrew's final, clearly Odyssean quest, but our simple understanding appears to be peripheral to this brilliant story's subtle arc.

According to his publisher's website, Bechtel, while originally from Kitchener-Waterloo, has also lived in Toronto, Deep River, Jamaica, Ottawa, Quebec City, and Fredericton, and has worked at a range of occupations, including lifeguard, technical writer, mover, visual basic programmer, camp counsellor, semiconductor laser lab tech, cab driver, tutor, and teacher. Luckily, all we have to

do is enjoy prose that dazzles – and demands the reader’s active engagement in making sense of it all.

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