

Casey Plett, *A Dream of a Woman: Stories*.
Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021. Pp. 279.
Softcover, \$21.95.

A Dream of a Woman is Casey Plett's second story collection and third book overall. It contains six short stories and a novella, "Obsolution," that is broken into five parts throughout the collection. The stories' main characters are generally trans women in their mid-thirties who live in one of Plett's usual locales: in small-Mennonite-town Manitoba; Winnipeg; Portland, Oregon; and New York City; or a new one, Windsor, Ontario. The clear and shifting sense of place as a background for each story is one of the collection's highlights because there are so few examples of Mennonite literature that take place binationally. Unlike the characters in Plett's previous books, most of *A Dream of a Woman*'s characters are at a reasonably stable stage of life (decent jobs, addiction issues mostly under control in some way or other), and trying to figure out what this stability means for their future. Is it just North American middle-class conformity from here on out, or is there something more?

This is not to say Plett's characters have settled down. The book's overarching argument is that North American society is broken, partly because of its transphobia, partly because of its love affair with capitalism, partly because of its overdependence on technology—and of course these three things are interrelated. How are the characters to survive emotionally in our technodystopian climate change hellscape? Plett offers portrayals of characters trying to navigate this brokenness without any effective solutions in sight. One story, "Rose City, City of Roses," is explicitly set during the pandemic as a way of emphasizing this dystopian vibe (155), but the vibe is there even in the stories that take place pre-2020.

Unlike the other stories, "Obsolution" describes the full arc of its protagonist Vera's adult life through to her thirties. The novella begins in Portland in 2008 as Vera is trying to figure out whether she is trans, shifts to New York for a decade as she transitions and navigates how to have relationships (familial and romantic) as a woman, and ends in Minnesota with her living in a queer commune and dating a partner who is good for her for the first time. An obsolution, Plett explains, is "an old media format that is no longer popular or easily accessible, such as floppy disks, VHS tapes, or stone tablets" (182). The novella's title signifies both Vera's pre-transition life and the old ways of living that all of *A Dream of a Woman*'s characters are trying to leave behind.

Aside from “Obsolution,” “Enough Trouble” is the book’s other major work, lengthwise and in terms of emotional force. It is the collection’s most “Mennonite” story (e.g., there is a hilarious description of “Winklerites sneaking” out of town to buy alcohol and a detailed description of how to make Wareniki [201, 241–43]), and makes an explicit foray into theological discourse. Its protagonist, Gemma, is an exception to the collection’s larger focus on “characters who have their lives mostly together.” She wants to be the “dream of a woman” of the book’s title (186), but is broke and couch-surfing, and has returned to her hometown in Manitoba as a last resort. (The town isn’t named, but it seems likely to be Morden, given all of the story’s anti-Winkler trash talk.) The story’s title references Gemma’s tenuous existence by quoting the story’s epigraph, Matthew 6:34: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (185). Some of this trouble comes from Gemma’s blackout drinking, and some of it comes from her troubled relationship with Mennonite theology. When Olive, her non-Mennonite host, asks her about Mennonites, Gemma describes our wish for separation from the world as “a childish desire. Not to mention an impossible one,” and goes on to describe why this is the case (246–47). Non-Mennonite readers will probably gloss over this conversation as Plett engaging in her weird Mennonite obsession again, but for me it is the centre of the book. Mennonites must find some way to make our peace with the world, if only to acknowledge the role we play in systemic violences such as transphobia or the degradation of the environment. This is not a new idea in Mennonite literature, but the continuing failures of the larger Mennonite community mean that the statement remains necessary.

“Obsolution” and “Enough Trouble” each have happy, or at least hopeful, endings, as do most of the stories, and in many ways *A Dream of a Woman* is Plett’s most hopeful book. This hope is balanced against the sense of existential despair that runs throughout the collection, however, which is not simply a result of the transphobia the characters are on guard against. It also reflects the book being written at our particular moment in history. I think all fiction that wants to be spiritually true from here on out will need to have this element. *A Dream of a Woman* exemplifies how to include it without being pedantic.

A Dream of a Woman is Plett’s most accomplished book aesthetically and politically. It feels very of our moment in a way that will last. People fifty years from now will look back on it when they want

to see what life, and especially trans life, was like in the 2020s. Read it posthaste.

Daniel Shank Cruz

Hunter College, City University of New York

S. L. Klassen, *Menno-Nightcaps: Cocktails Inspired by that Odd Ethno-Religious Group You Keep Mistaking for the Amish, Quakers or Mormons*. Victoria, BC: Touchwood Editions, 2021. Pp. 176. Hardcover, \$26.

“Mom, have you heard of Michter’s Distillery?” my thirty-something son asked me after a recent trip to Louisville, Kentucky. “It was founded by Mennonites.”

Michter didn’t sound like a familiar Mennonite name, but a little research turned traced the business back to founder John Shenk, who started a distillery in Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania, in 1753. Shenk’s whiskey reportedly warmed George Washington’s troops during the Revolutionary War. In the mid-1800s it was purchased by an Abraham Bomberger and thrived until prohibition curbed its profits. In the 1950s, owner Lou Forman combined the names of his two sons—Michael and Peter—to name the current Michter’s brand. After the company’s bankruptcy in 1989, during a lull in American whiskey sales, the brand was revived by its current owners in Louisville, Kentucky.

My own Mennonite parents grew up during prohibition, which put a damper on alcohol production of the legal kind, and profoundly changed Mennonites’ relationship to their distilling heritage as they rushed to join other evangelical groups in eschewing the evils of alcohol. This transformation was so thorough that I just assumed teetotaling was one of the teachings of Menno Simons. Not true. A few generations later, Mennonites have returned to their roots—imbibing cocktails in private, while most still serve unfermented grape juice in their communion services.

Little do many “worldly” drinking Mennonites realize that their foray into alcoholic beverages is actually a return to their roots. S. L. Klassen’s *Menno-Nightcaps* is the perfect hybrid genre book to help contemporary imbibing Mennonites connect to their past. Or, in my case, a great way to distill some Mennonite lore into one’s thirty-something offspring, while trying out cocktail recipes together.