
Ethics in the title of this book refers not to Martha Nussbaum’s “the best way to live” (16) but to the primary moral imperative of striving to know the “Other,” as this concept is found in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1978) and, especially, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). In place of the technical term alterity, Janne Korkka prefers and uses the terms other and otherness.

In his view, the goal of ethics is to perceive the Other as separate from conventional, totalizing categories and to acknowledge and know the Other in his or her human uniqueness. In life, that quest requires the transcendence of one’s own constructed corporate identities and results also in the discovery of one’s own uniqueness. In literature, Rudy Wiebe’s task as author is to represent others in their full complexity—and mystery—and depict characters convincingly as they encounter and respond to others, whether positively or negatively. Korkka gives Wiebe high marks for his insightful depictions of such experiences.

No matter that, as cultural theorists and critics agree, it is virtually impossible in life or in literature to fully understand and embrace the Other. Nevertheless, the ethical imperative is to honestly pursue the project. Perhaps the best outcome to be expected is to recognize the Other as other and move toward greater self-understanding of oneself and one’s relationship to the Other.

Korkka presents an exhaustive analysis of characters’ encounters with others in a wide range of selected writings by Wiebe, applying the same criteria and understandings to both Wiebe’s writings about Mennonites and his writings about aborigines. Over half of the book is devoted to Wiebe’s concern for encountering the otherness of the Canadian North as a physical place and presence. In fact, Korkka says that that project is the most “dramatic ethical problem in Wiebe” (10). Korkka’s special interest in the North may be related to the fact that he is from Finland, which has its own inscrutable North.

For Korkka, the key text in Wiebe’s oeuvre is the short story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” in which the would-be writer confronts only fragments of narratives regarding the person known as “Almighty Voice,” but finds it impossible to interpret them because he cannot understand the “voice”—a “wordless cry”—that lies behind them. The would-be writer’s admirable restraint is evidence of his “refusal to impose on the other’s subjectivity” (108).

In considering the encounters of Mennonite characters within their own Mennonite communities, Korkka sees in Thom of Peace Shall Destroy Many a young man who, by the end of the novel, has taken the first step in Levinas’s sequence by seeing through the “monologic” narrative of Deacon Block and by
beginning the “remoulding” of his self. In *The Blue Mountains of China* Frieda Friesen’s radical hospitality to the Other has its origin in the excruciating pain of her cancer treatment, which leads her into an unfathomable experience for which her Mennonite piety has not prepared her. Her silence and self-effacement actually represent “agency,” since they are her way of coping with her new self-understanding in the context of community norms. Finally, in *Sweeter Than All the World*, Adam Wiebe differentiates himself from the totalizing community when his wife leaves him and his daughter disappears. He reconstitutes himself through exposure to the multiple narratives of other contemporary and historical Mennonites.

Korkka sees in Wiebe’s early writings, namely *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) and *First and Vital Candle* (1966), a “colonizing” tendency, even “epistemic violence” (110), toward First Nations people, since Wiebe initially presents them as candidates for Christianization. Thom is shocked into a contrary awareness when he uncovers the buffalo skull, which leads him to perceive the otherness of Big Bear. A similar realization comes to evangelist Abe in *First and Vital Candle* when he turns silent upon discovering the bones of cannibalized native children. In the Wiebe chronology, such discovery culminates in “Where Is the Voice Coming From” (1971) and then reaches its positive fruition in the nonfiction *Stolen Life* (1998), where Wiebe becomes the empathetic instrument for giving voice to a hitherto voiceless native woman in all her human complexity.

Chapters 4 to 6 are devoted to Wiebe’s exploration of the otherness of space, the negative narrative examples being the stories of European travelers and settlers in Canada who try to conquer the wilderness West and the inhospitable North of Canada. Korkka says that Wiebe’s work illustrates “exceptionally accomplished engagements with alterity” of space in his “Where Is the Voice Coming From?”; *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973); and *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic* (1989).

Korkka sees “agency” in the North in its constantly changing skies, weather, and shorelines. Yet he denies that such agency is the same as “Nature,” and the North’s presence is certainly not Wordsworth’s sense of a spiritual presence in nature. Other movement, such as that of animals and even humans like Albert Johnson, contribute to the presence of the North. But ultimately Korkka resorts to saying that “the North” is always a construct that exists beyond any totalizing concept. The North exists in discoveries related to particular motions and its continuous flux, and its meaning lies in the way it alters the self-understanding of the individual confronting it.

The negative example is Sir John Franklin, whose three expeditions to find the Northwest Passage were characterized by his imposition of European constructs upon the North. He named areas that had already been given names by natives and he ignored Yellowknife knowledge that might have prevented his ultimate tragedy. The most positive example is Albert Johnson, who became so immersed in the North that he ultimately lost even his name. In regard to prairie space, the success stories are Big Bear through his immersion in native culture, and even Frieda Friesen and Adam Wiebe. Frieda discovered the otherness of place while cultivating the prairie. Adam (“of the ground”) Wiebe never lost his childhood
connection to the land. Even in adulthood he hears it speaking to him in Low German.

Two quibbles. Korkka assumes that the Mennonites of western Canada are “the” Mennonites, failing to differentiate them from many “other” North American Mennonites. He also claims that in writing Peace Shall Destroy Many, Wiebe wrote the first Mennonite novel, failing to acknowledge other novels published earlier in the U.S.

I confess to not well understanding or appreciating Korkke’s large concern for the North as an Other of place, of geography, of a presence devoid of being. Of what ultimate, humane value is “knowing” rocks, stones, trees, water, and animals if no reciprocity is even conceivable? True, one might revise one’s self-understanding as a result of encountering the North. But might not the true, successful enquirer also be expected to revere and commit himself to preserving the awesome presence of the North—as Rudy Wiebe himself does, in life, in his environmental activism, but to which Korkka makes no reference?

A literary question is why Korkka makes only scattered references to Wiebe’s A Discovery of Strangers (1994), which won Wiebe his second Governor-General’s award and which, in its extreme setting and thematic title statement, is head-on relevant to Korkka’s concerns in this book? The puzzling, audacious opening chapter of that book, where the landscape is seen and responded to by the consciousness of caribou and wolves, possibly adds a First Nations intellectual and spiritual dimension to the North as place that is not considered in Korkka’s discussion.

Korkka’s book is a remarkable achievement, ranging equally as it does over so many of Wiebe’s writings about Mennonites and aborigines, the prairie and the North. Yet reading the book cover to cover, for me, became a bit of a chore, with the theory and thesis being so hard driven and the explication so detailed. The book will probably be most useful to scholars who, as the need arises, will dip into its shrewd understandings of individual characters and writings.

Goshen College

ERVIN BECK


Rudy Wiebe’s newest novel is a study in grief, hope, loss, memory, and a father’s intense love for his son. To read Come Back as a parent is heartbreaking, so accurately does Wiebe depict the mystery and longing and ache that colors our relationship to our children; those who have lost a child—or, for that matter a friend, a parent, a sibling—to suicide, must find reading Come Back an even more emotionally wrenching experience, though perhaps a hopeful one as well.

Come Back traces the story of Hal Wiens, a retired professor living in Edmonton, contending with the death of his wife, Yo. Or perhaps not contending: Hal is so paralyzed by grief, he makes no changes in his household since her death, and relies on well-established routines to get him through,
including daily ventures to a nearby coffee shop to visit with a Dene friend named Owl.

Hal’s now-predictable life is thrown into chaos when, during one of his meetings with Owl, Hal sees his son Gabe walk by the coffee shop window. At least Hal thinks he sees Gabe, wearing a distinct Orange Downfill coat and with a stride similar to that of his son—the same son who had, twenty-five years earlier, committed suicide. Hal attempts to find the Orange Downfill specter and then, when that fails, to discover more of the son he lost: now twice, it seems.

Seeing the Orange Downfill coat changes Hal irrevocably, his years of carefully controlled emotions and a carefully controlled life disrupted by the memory of Gabe’s coat and his suicide. Wiebe writes, “The Orange Downfill had ripped open what he locked down so carefully every day, every minute . . . a violent chasm torn through the eroded mountains of his life” (32). Seeking somehow to fill that chasm, Hal turns to his basement, and to the boxes of Gabe’s effects—papers, journals, the eulogy Hal had himself written—to divine who Gabe had become in the time leading up to his death.

Thus a majority of the novel focuses on Hal’s journey toward finding his son, in the literal sense of wandering through Edmonton with Owl, trying to find the Orange Downfill coat; but more significantly in the figurative sense, as Hal reads what Gabe has written. Excerpts from Gabe’s journal are woven together with Hal’s reflections on his son and his memories of the past. Here, Wiebe masterfully contrasts Gabe’s voice with Hal’s, replicating well Hal’s struggle to know who his son was becoming in the journals, and Gabe’s increasingly fragmented, obsessed, and self-destructive tendencies.

At the center of Gabe’s obsession is a 13-year-old girl, the daughter of family friends who, during a family vacation in Europe, briefly holds his hand. This momentary affection seems Gabe’s undoing, and thoughts of the girl, named Ailsa, fill pages and pages of his journals, where he also drafts letters to her, some sent, none reciprocated. Although somewhat discomfiting—as a 24-year-old man’s romantic thoughts of a barely-teenaged girl might be—Wiebe replicates well the chaotic stirrings of a clearly disordered mind, and Gabe’s obsessive musings evoke empathy and sadness far more than disdain, a sense that Gabe is tortured by thoughts he cannot control, no matter his attempts to try.

Hal’s reflections on what he’s read are woven throughout Gabe’s journal entries, as are his memories of his son. The portrayal of Hal is wholly sympathetic, despite what seems to become his own obsession of knowing his son: we are drawn to this grieved parent and can fully understand Hal’s impulse to chase after Gabe—through the Edmonton streets, through the pages of Gabe’s journal. As Gabe’s writing becomes more and more fractured, his musings less cogent, we recognize that Hal will never comprehend his son’s life and death, a realization that is in its own way heartbreaking, for Hal and for the reader.

Heartbreaking, but also a reflection of what we are asked to acknowledge as true: that we can never fully know another person, even those we know most intimately; and that sometimes, the most painful events in our lives will remain shrouded in mystery. For although Hal may have uncovered more of his son’s story, he never conclusively answers the question of why Gabe decided to end
his life, nor does Hal discover what might have been done to change Gabe’s desire to live.

“We all live alone,” Hal decides, “beyond comprehension alone within whatever secrets we cannot forget. Years of talk, so much secret . . . our words—they mirror some thoughts if we dare to speak a few out loud—our words pass each other somewhere” (211).

Despite the sadness with which Come Back is freighted, Wiebe threads a sense of hope through the narrative—a sense that although our relationships may be compromised by the secrets we do not tell, although they will be tainted with grief, we still seek out others. Hal continues to meet with Owl and also talks with his other children by phone, halting conversations that reach toward a depth he cannot yet plumb. And when he finally articulates to himself all his unanswerable questions about Gabe, he goes also to Scripture, recognizing there a potential answer to what he seeks.

Come Back is a beautifully written novel, manifesting Wiebe’s immense skill with the written word. Those unfamiliar with Wiebe’s style might find Come Back a more difficult read; the lack of a straightforward narrative and the intertwining of various voices may cause too much dissonance for some readers. Yet, as a two-time winner of Canada’s Governor General’s Award (in 1973 and 1994), Wiebe clearly understands his craft, and his place in English letters has already been well established. Come Back adds to his esteem as perhaps the preeminent voice in Mennonite literature. The heartbreaking struggle of Hal Wiens—and of his son, Gabe—will linger with readers long after they have finished Come Back, as will the longing we all have to be fully known and loved by another.

George Fox University

MELANIE SPRINGER MOCK

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A reader could be excused for thinking that this, Miriam Toews’s sixth novel, is about dying.

Three hundred pages in, we have been following first-person narrator Yolandi’s (Yoli’s) exhausting struggle to keep her brilliantly gifted and terminally depressed older sister Elfrieda (Elf) alive, while also experiencing, through flashbacks, their father’s suicide years earlier and, in the present, their beloved aunt’s unexpected death following surgery. Yoli and her mother are together on Christmas Eve, when Yoli suddenly realizes: “My mother was making odd noises. . . . She was dying” (303).

Strangely, at this point comes the realization that, in fact, All My Puny Sorrows is about living, and that no book can tell the truth if it ignores the inescapable reality of death as a part of life.

About 285 pages before this, Yoli is in Winnipeg, having left behind in Toronto her teenage daughter Nora in the care of Nora’s college-student brother,
Will, after Elf has been placed in a psychiatric hospital following yet another unsuccessful suicide attempt. Their mother, Lottie, is still away on a cruise that Yoli and Elf’s husband, Nic, insisted she take despite Elf’s fragile mental state. The narrative follows Elf’s stay in this hospital (she took pills); her release and brief effort toward preparing for an upcoming concert tour in Europe—Elf is a world-renowned pianist; and her second hospitalization after she cuts her wrists and drinks bleach on the eve of the tour.

As this unfolds, Yoli recalls their childhood in East Village, a fictional small Mennonite community in southern Manitoba in which Toews has placed her novels before (notably her fourth, *A Complicated Kindness*); her failed relationships with Nora’s and Will’s fathers; her equally doomed current relationships with several different men; and her and Elf’s father’s ultimately fruitless struggle to be “a good Christian” and fit into the closed, conservative world of East Village.

Yoli, like Nomi in *A Complicated Kindness*, has a voice that is searingly honest and funny in a way that produces a reader’s wince more than once. For example, as Yoli is preparing to return to Toronto after Elf’s discharge from the hospital:

> I drive my mother’s car like it’s a Panzer and the streets are my enemy. . . . I think about setting up an appointment with a therapist when I get back to Toronto but tell myself I can’t afford it. . . . Besides, what would I talk about with a therapist? When my father killed himself, I went to see one and he suggested I write my father a letter. It wasn’t clear what I was supposed to say in the letter. I thanked the therapist and left thinking but my father is dead now. He won’t receive this letter. What’s the point? Can I just have my one hundred and fifty-five dollars back to buy some Chardonnay and a bag of weed? (113)

Or, when Elf has been hospitalized the second time and Elf and Yoli’s aunt Tina has been admitted to the same hospital after fainting and breaking her arm:

> Just then my mother came into the [waiting] room looking as weary as a human being can look and not be dead. She greeted these people in a friendly, wary manner. They spoke in Plautdietsch for a while. They told her they were sorry about Tina. Thanks, my mom said, she’ll be all right. . . . Then Nic came into the room. He’d just heard about Tina. . . . Good grief, he said, and gave us each a hug. How is she? My mother explained again. Yikes, he said. I’m really sorry. Elf’s still in ICU, said my mom. Yeah, said Nic, I was just there. Wait, said the East Village people, Elfrieda is in the ICU? What happened to her? She cut her wrists and drank poison, said my mom. Nic and I stared at my mother. Her throat closed but she didn’t die, said my mom. Not this time. She’ll probably be okay too. Everyone will survive eventually. And what brings you here this evening? (182-183)

And as with Nomi, Yoli’s voice is her defense against the world, perhaps the shelter she hides behind, her way of coping with the depth of her loss and her grief. She recalls a time before either of the two suicide attempts detailed in *All My Puny Sorrows*, when Elf “tried to kill herself . . . by slowly evaporating into space” (38)—that is, by self-starvation.
I [was] standing next to Elf’s stretcher in the emergency room. . . . Elf took my hand, weakly, like an old dying person, and looked deeply into my eyes.

Yoli, she said, I hate you.

I bent to kiss her and whispered that I knew that, I was aware of it. I hate you too, I said.

It was the first time that we had sort of articulated our major problem. She wanted to die and I wanted her to live and we were enemies who loved each other (39).

How, after all, does a still-young-but-almost-on-the-cusp-of-middle-age woman—or any human being—survive and find happiness in the world when the person she loves most doesn’t want to be in that world, is not able to be happy, and most certainly has no desire to survive herself? How do you keep someone alive when all she wants is to die?

And how is this a story about living?

Although this is not a work as deeply critical of a Mennonite community turned inward so tightly it seems to be strangling itself, as is A Complicated Kindness (the only other one of Toews’s books I’ve read, though I’m now motivated to read more, especially her memoir Swing Low), neither does it hold up that community as a place of refuge and healing. So that’s not the answer.

Is this even “a Mennonite novel,” or is Toews a “Mennonite writer”? Scholars will be arguing that as long as Toews is alive and writing. Certainly, Yoli and Elf’s Mennonite background plays a role in who they have become (though neither seems to blame East Village for how their own lives have turned out, or for their father’s death). And Lottie, their mother, is an endearing combination of “a good Mennonite woman” and a free spirit.

In the end (literally and figuratively), there is Yoli still making her way, the middle generation of a household with her mother and her daughter, the sister of a woman who blazed as brightly as any dying star, the mother of two children who have turned out to be both sensible and kind, the best friend of a woman (Julie, in Winnipeg) as tough and funny and as determined to live the best she can as is Yoli herself.

Life is hard, and then you die—but what comes in the spaces between can really be worth the ride.

Bethel College, North Newton, Kan. MELANIE ZUERCHER


Anthropologists have often hesitated to use literary analysis to examine and characterize culture. This may be due to the fact that anthropology, among
scholars in the United States, at least, was traditionally more focused on nonliterary cultures. In Europe, where the term “ethnology”—that is, a focus on cultures with a considerable history of written traditions—is preferred, an approach to cultural description via this route seems to commend itself more readily. Lilli Gebhard illustrates this broader approach in her study of the Russian Mennonite experience.

The growth of a literary corpus among Russian Mennonites has been sporadic and seems to follow the ups and downs of social and economic conditions. As long as the colonizing process goes on (historically speaking), with its pioneering, backbreaking work and its community-building process, there is very little literary activity. With the acquisition of wealth, hired labor, and the possibility of retirement, literary activity typically sets in. Another motivational drive has been immigration itself, with moves into new contexts, with different ways of life, different surroundings, and the possibility (or threat, depending on how it is perceived) of integration into new societies. This set of conditions, which Gebhard considers for Russian Mennonites in Canada, Paraguay, and Germany, seems to be the driving force for literary productivity. Within the genre of literature there are striking parallelisms among Low-German speaking Mennonites in these countries, with personal memoirs and family histories, or history of “one’s own people,” leading the way. Following in popularity are religious poetry and novels.

The theoretical framework on which Gebhard draws is based on Michel Foucault’s theory of discourse, as well as on Clifford Geertz’s essay “Thick Description.” The German version of Geertz’s work is “Dichte Beschreibung,” which literally means “dense description,” a term perhaps better suited to signify the method Gebhard employs. Following Foucault, she considers discourse—be it literary or not, public or private—as a process of identity-construction, presenting the world as seen by one’s own cultural group, making sense of it, and justifying actions, perspectives, and values (65ff). Gebhard clearly outlines the structure of the literary discourse that puts the “believing and pious Christian in the center,” and in the Russian Mennonite tradition, she finds, “the more believing s/he is, the closer to the center” (71).

The first three chapters of the book present Gebhard’s theoretical framework, together with her methodology. The lengthy fourth chapter, which forms the bulk of the book, provides a literary analysis of fifty-two authors, including a number who are not widely known or published. The fifth chapter represents a summary of the collective symbolism uncovered in the research, including village life, family, church, faith, and sets of dualistically styled concepts of heaven and the world, home and homelessness, one’s own people and the stranger. The ideals of secluded village life, a pious upbringing, a sense of belonging, and of home (Heimat) in the circle of fellow believers stand out in this investigation. The motifs of unjust suffering and of separation from one’s loved ones at the hand of an evil world are common and not surprising given the facts of the Russian Mennonite experience.

In her concluding critique, Gebhard briefly comments on a series of interviews, conducted in order to compare values and ideals found in the
literature with what readers today say and believe. The divergences that surface here are noteworthy since they indicate a measure of idealized language within written texts. Gebhard suggests that authors operate within a fairly strict frame of reference defined by an understood, internalized cultural code.

By way of conclusion, the author briefly mentions literary sources in the poetry of Russian Mennonites. This feature might have been elaborated upon and placed in the introduction. It seems to me that poetry, as produced among this group, was inspired to a considerable degree by nineteenth-century German romantic and Pietist poetry. Russian Mennonite schooling involved memorizing many poems, such as Schiller’s “Bell,” and even today it is common in Paraguay to find elderly people who can recite entire poems that they learned in school sixty years ago. Authors such as Friederich Schiller, Ludwig Uhland, Emanuel Geibel, Karl Gerok, and Josef Eichendorff were among the favorites. The dependency on this tradition of poetry is evident. To what extent this blueprint determined what can or should or must be said—the internalized cultural code—is a subject worthy to be researched. The pedagogical method focused on memorizing may also account for the minimal degree of originality or creativity seen in so many of the poems, which in Mennonite circles were usually written for weddings, anniversaries, and other special occasions, as Gebhard explains.

To summarize, this study is an original contribution and its conclusions accurately reflect cultural traits common among Russian Mennonites, be they in Canada, Paraguay, Germany, or Bolivia. A literary corpus, adequately analyzed, may indeed reveal cultural characteristics not equally accessible to analysis through common investigative methods of the social sciences.

Fernheim Colony Archives, Paraguay

GUNDOLF NIEBUHR


During his lifetime and beyond, the poet William Stafford was known for a commitment to peace and nonviolence, an early morning writing practice that gave birth to more than fifteen volumes of poetry, and teaching methods that included listening and assigning neither praise nor blame to his students’ work. Editor Becca J. R. Lachmann pays tribute to this rich legacy by celebrating what would have been Stafford’s 100th birthday in an anthology called A Ritual to Read Together: Poems in Conversation with William Stafford. Written by people who knew Stafford personally and others who know him only through his work, this anthology of poems is like a festschrift that honors the spirit of William Stafford. Yet this collection celebrates not simply the person or figure of William Stafford, but also the impact he has had on others. A Ritual to Read Together is an artistic, community-minded anthology-memoir that brings together memories of William Stafford, meditations on place and connection, questions about peace and war, and the practice of writing in way that honors a variety of experiences.
A Ritual to Read Together is divided into four sections. The first section serves as an introduction to Stafford, with poems that evoke his native Kansas, connection to place and nature, and spiritual commitments. The next section turns to poems of peace, war, and (non)violence. The third section focuses on Stafford’s philosophies on teaching, writing, and the writing process. It includes poems on writing advice (“When you can’t find the poem”); frustration (“This Morning I want to kick Bill Stafford in the Shins”); and Stafford’s tendency to listen, rather than critique, when his students shared their work (“After his death, I talk about Bill Stafford’s teaching methods”). The final section is a study guide that encourages readers to respond to the poems in A Ritual to Read Together through a series of writing prompts. Readers unfamiliar with Stafford’s work can also get a sense of which poems in A Ritual to Read Together were inspired by a particular poem by Stafford, thanks to information provided by the editor.

A conscientious objector, Stafford served in Civilian Public Service camps in Arkansas and California during World War II. He also had Church of the Brethren connections through his wife’s family, although it is unclear whether or not Stafford himself ever held membership in the Brethren church. He taught briefly at Manchester College, a Brethren-affiliated college in Indiana. His poetry resonated with American college students during the Vietnam War era, and his pacifist commitments continue to inspire other writers today, including writers from peace church traditions. At least eight poets included in the anthology have known connections to Mennonites, Old Order River Brethren, and Church of the Brethren. Yet A Ritual to Read Together also includes a poem (“From My Daddy, Who Could Not Be Here Today”) about a man who was in the armed services during World War II. The anthology brings in differing individual voices and includes them as part of the whole.

At times the conversation in A Ritual to Read Together can be hard to follow. To fully appreciate this volume, one needs a familiarity with Stafford’s work, or with Stafford himself. Otherwise, it may seem like showing up to the birthday party of a friend of a friend—one has an enjoyable time, but misses the inside jokes. Kim Stafford, William Stafford’s son and literary executor, points out in the introduction: Stafford “was not really an ‘easy’ poet” (14) and as an example, refers to the famous poem “Ask Me,” which invites the reader to listen to the river speak for Stafford. The conversation in this book may be hard to understand sometimes because Stafford himself was complex. One poet addresses Stafford in this regard: “And quite frankly, / I don’t understand your meaning in words sometimes” (80). Another poem describes an experience of a woman resisting Stafford’s famous river-speak in “Ask Me”: “It was clear she’d had enough comings / and goings, alibis, evasions” (77-78). Yet editor Lachmann is a helpful guide, and offers clarifying footnotes as well as good closing questions that allow readers to continue a conversation with William Stafford’s work. A list for further reading on Stafford would have been a helpful addition to the book, although Lachmann does refer readers to the website of the William Stafford Archives.
A Ritual to Read Together is a well-structured anthology-memoir. The poems in each section are well placed, and they flow easily from one to another. The conversation in the poems is open and respectful, even as there are questions about Stafford’s legacy, or differing commitments on the part of the readers. The conversation creates worthy company in honor of Stafford, a worthy writer.

Quarryville, Pa.

EILEEN R. KINCH

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Leonard Neufeldt writes with keen attentiveness and clear-eyed affection toward the places where he’s lived and traveled. In this, his seventh poetry collection, that sensibility combines with an equally keen consciousness of time—of human mortality, the movement of days and seasons, and the interweaving of history with the present. In his previous collections he has written extensively about his Mennonite roots and particularly about his hometown of Yarrow in southern British Columbia. That background comes up in occasional allusive references here, but the main subject matter ventures farther from home.

“Portraits in Different Voices,” the opening section, depicts moments in the lives (in one case, the afterlife) of an eclectic assortment of people. These are mostly artists or thinkers—Plato, Lenin, American journalist Margaret Fuller, Canadian poet Earle Birney, among others—but we also meet an unnamed woman with Alzheimer’s in a portrait that stands out for its compassionate appreciation of her peculiar understanding of the world. Some of these poems are intimate close-ups, while others stand further back and frame the portrait within a larger scene. One of the close-ups, “The End of Plato,” imagines a day near the end of the philosopher’s life, weaving allusions to his ideas seamlessly with sensory details. “Shabbat in Vienna” takes a wider view, placing sketches of Yiddish writer Dovid Bergelson amid memories of travel in Soviet-era Eastern Europe.

Neufeldt tends to write in long breaths, one clause rolling into another, bringing in new threads of association. Some of the single-page poems consist of only one or two sentences. This doesn’t always work; at times the connection between the beginning and end of a passage becomes tenuous, with pronouns losing sight of their antecedents. When it does work, though, as in “Shabbat,” this sweeping rhythm builds a slow but powerful momentum that holds to the main thread of the poem amid its digressions.

The title section, the most substantial of the book’s three, immerses the reader in scenes of Turkey, where Neufeldt regularly spends time. “Olive Harvest on the Terraces,” one of the strongest pieces in this section, is one of two long poems that combine lyric elements with narrative. It exemplifies Neufeldt’s characteristic tone and pacing, taking its time bringing the setting into focus, moving slowly through its narrative, digressing here and there. Neufeldt skillfully evokes color, movement, and sensation with unexpected and lively
imagery. In the orchard “An apparition of white butterflies / veers as one from
tree to tree” (34). A woman sorts through olives, “cupped hand / sweeping
redness back and forth, fingers / alive like a pianist” (36).

The theme of time comes out in particular ways in the Turkey poems. “Traditions and the New Near Mardin” observes the sometimes absurd juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary: “Roads are modern here until they stop, / defer without argument to cart / tracks” (62). The new appears less
durable:

Listen, friend, foot-wrenching
paths and two hundred miles of plain
will forget a new hotel, artless imitations
of modernity, two dead goats
and me . . . (66)

Another of the long poems, “Archaeology in Knidos, 1991,” intersperses its
narrative with reflections on aging and change, on what survives and what does not. While the ruins of Knidos will likely be there for another visit in the future, the ramshackle boat dock may be gone. There’s a strong sense that the old stories are very much alive in the present moment:

The storm died
abruptly as it had come, like Jesus quieting
the Galilean waters, you said, but the captain
pointed west to where Aeneas lost
his bearings and most of his men. (43)

Other poems in this section are predominantly descriptive. “Painting with Reds in Eastern Turkey” connects a diverse series of impressions by references to shades of red. These vignettes—a sunset over a “rose-stone house,” clothes on a line, a pair of sunburned foreigners—show Neufeldt’s skill at evoking an atmosphere with color and texture.

“Think of This Earth, My Love,” the last and shortest section, returns to North America and particularly the West Coast with several meditations on times and seasons. A sense of belonging to the natural world comes through in poems like “Raccoons After Dark,” where the speaker declares that “the earth can claim me / as a tree no longer visible / can claim a bird on a slip of branch” (82), or in “Winter Solstice,” where you feel “the wind lightly cuffing your ears / like a mother reaching out beyond/ her anger” (76). The final poem, “What the Fraser Valley Left Unsaid,” situates itself on Neufeldt’s home ground. Here the sense of belonging mingles with an equally strong consciousness of mortality, of one day having to leave this place: “One day I will offer our children this poem / as love letter, ears ringing with pressure / from the other side of time” (85).

Human experience and the natural world blend together in vivid, sometimes synesthetic imagery: “The sky’s blue full as lungs with the morning’s / chill” (81); “the fresh-wrapped sound / of water near the black pier” (79). Occasionally there are lines whose sound or imagery is interesting, but whose sense feels opaque. These seem like the kind of moments when what is going on is perfectly clear in the writer’s own mind, but does not quite get across to the reader.
What does come across consistently in this collection is a reflective voice that acknowledges suffering and mortality while still seeing the world as a gift, a wonder that you can fall in love with over and over.

Winnipeg, Manitoba

JOANNE EPP

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Eigenheim, Joanne Epp’s first full-length poetry collection, is an impressive debut. Eigenheim’s seventy-two poems are divided into eight named, rather than numbered, sections with each section including seven to eleven poems. Each section contains poems on a similar theme. For instance, “Catherine” contains poems about the eponymous character; “This stone, and this” is about deceased ancestors; and “Listen” consists of poems inspired by music. However, the theme of place runs throughout the book, and this is the collection’s primary strength because it reminds us that we are always from somewhere—that even though we may not want to be of the world, we must be in it. The book’s title is the name of Epp’s childhood community in Saskatchewan and is defined in the book’s epigraph as “one’s own home.” This sense of place is present on a number of levels, as there are poems examining apartments and houses, towns and cities, and emotional spaces within relationships. One poem begins “I tried to tell you the power of that place” (94), and this line is a fitting description of the task that Eigenheim attempts to accomplish. Eigenheim’s theme is reinforced by its cover (whose designer is frustratingly not named in any of the book’s paratext, a flaw in the collection’s otherwise pristine status as an object, as it meets Turnstone Press’s usual high standards), which depicts a layering of the lines from three different building blueprints, causing the illustration to look somewhat like a roadmap.

The theme of place has always been an important one in Mennonite literature, and especially in the Canadian stream of the tradition as writers reflect on the community’s roots in Russia. Therefore, Eigenheim fits neatly into the field. It is an overtly Mennonite book, as its blurb mentions Epp’s “rural Mennonite roots,” and there are section epigraphs from three Mennonite writers: Patrick Friesen (17), Barbara Nickel (31), and Jean Janzen (71). Explicitly Mennonite elements in the poems themselves are rare, though. The title character from “Elisabeth” is from “Chortitza” (26), a handful of poems include some German, and there are a few church scenes, though these could be in any Protestant worship space. This light Mennonite touch works well. The collection does a strong job of being in the world as mainstream literature, but it is also comfortably rooted in Epp’s Mennonite background for those who know how to read the signs. The collection, though it includes various speakers, has a clear trajectory from Mennonite-themed poems toward more worldly-themed ones, from the rural to the urban and urbane.
Eigenheim’s most memorable poems are the ones that straddle this liminal space between the Mennonite country and the worldly city. “Wu’s Café,” which ends the section about Eigenheim memories called “The known world,” depicts the speaker’s first road trip across “Nine hours / of highway” into the city. She and her friends get Chinese food, and she saves her cryptically-written fortune afterward “just in case it really is for” her (47). The rules are different in this new place, so one must find whatever talismans for survival are available. In “Snowstorm,” the speaker observes the quiet city after a large overnight snowfall from her lover’s apartment. Here nature’s reminder that it can still overpower the most human-stamped of places helps the speaker remember the bigness of the world as she “watche[s] the city disappear” (74). In “First night,” the speaker moves into her new apartment in the “foreign country” of “Ontario” and reflects on “how places forget you after / you leave” (51). The secret to finding happiness in one’s new place is to not make this mistake of forgetting. There is both homage to and lament for lost places throughout the book, but never a loss of memory.

The last two sections of the book are less compelling than the rest. Seventy-two works is on the long side for a book of poems; thus it is not surprising that the collection loses some steam toward the end. But two of the poems in the final section are also two of Eigenheim’s most poignant. In the one, “In search,” the speaker has always had a need to keep moving since childhood; she cannot stay in one place because something is missing (97). The tone is reminiscent of Hank Williams’s song “Ramblin’ Man,” but better. Similarly, “Sometimes this highway,” while returning to Eigenheim as its setting, does so only to acknowledge how tempting it is to explore the rest of the world. It asks “why / is this landscape so flat / unless to lure you outward / to where the road disappears?” (102). The longing expressed in these two poems for something new, even though the speaker does not know what that newness will be, is akin to Eigenheim’s entrance onto the Mennonite literary scene. We may not have known we were looking for it, but once we have found it, it feels just right.

Utica College

DANIEL SHANK CRUZ


The poet Shari Wagner is well known in Mennonite circles. One of her poems provided the title for A Cappella (Iowa, 2003), Ann Hostetler’s groundbreaking anthology of Mennonite poetry, and she has long been a fixture in the poetry scene of her native Indiana. Somewhat surprisingly, The Harmonist at Nightfall is only her second book of poems, after Evening Chore (Cascadia, 2005), although she also co-wrote her father Gerald Miller’s memoir, A Hundred Camels: A Mission Doctor’s Sojourn and Murder Trial in Somalia (Cascadia, 2009) and edited a book of stories by Indiana seniors; and she has published widely in journals like Christian Century, North American Review, and Shenandoah.
The Harmonist is a substantial and carefully worked collection, befitting its long gestation, with over seventy poems in six distinct sections. As the subtitle suggests, these are very much poems of place, almost all of them grounded very specifically in some Indiana location. The rationale for this approach, described in some detail in Susan Neville’s introduction, is captured in brief by the epigraph, from Thich Nhat Hanh: “This spot where you sit is your own spot. . . . You don’t have to sit beneath a special tree in a distant land.” Another kindred spirit, Henry David Thoreau, wrote: “I have traveled much in Concord.” Wagner’s landscape is not quite so local as Walden Pond, but like Thoreau she trusts that the universal and archetypal may be found within any place one truly inhabits.

Such “inhabiting,” however, requires a great deal of precise, patient attention and contemplation. For Wagner, “place” does not generally mean suburban streets, strip malls, and cornfields, and she chooses unobtrusively but decisively not to chronicle the surfaces of contemporary life. The Indiana of these poems exists within, below, or behind its surfaces, in history, in people, and in stories that are not immediately visible but still may be discovered by an alert explorer.

The first section, “Circling Back,” offers poems located among Native American mounds, state parks, cliffs, and waterfalls—so much for the image of flat, bland Indiana fields. “Clifton Falls” opens up into an evocation of geological time: “A million years rushed over us / in the froth of a dream / almost remembered, / stone after stone carrying us / home through the dusk” (20). Not only the time scale but the romantic sense of the natural world as fundamentally sustaining is typical of Wagner’s poetics, though in “Shades of Death State Park” the “icy mud” and “haunted foliage” temper and toughen this basic comfort considerably (the official name is the less daunting “Shades State Park”).

Part two, “House of the Singing Winds,” introduces another main element: poems on historical characters, especially women, including the author and naturalist Gene Stratton-Porter, the Wright brothers, James Dean, and others famous and obscure. Without being strident, the poems often question and critique patriarchal power structures and assumptions. In the title poem, set in the New Harmony colony founded in the early nineteenth century by George Rapp, a female member of the colony asks (with a hint of skepticism), “what if God hummed / in the cacophony we cut to lay straight streets, / to plumb brick walls?” (41). We know, of course, that Rapp’s utopian dreams are doomed to fail, and Wagner seems more sympathetic to John Chapman, Johnny Appleseed, whose quest for harmony is less patriarchal and domineering. After hearing him speak enthusiastically if obscurely, a woman in “John Chapman’s Eden” has her own vision of natural supernaturalism: “[she] saw that the hornet was holy, / the sinuous snake fashioned / the first letter of a psalm” (43).

“Maconaquah’s Portrait,” the third section, deals with the history of Native Americans in the area. As one might expect, many of these poems are rather bleak. “Trade Route” introduces Mekinges, “a Lenape chief’s daughter,” who is married to the trader William Conner. After she bears him six children, he leaves her for “the neighbor’s / blue-eyed daughter,” and builds her “a fine brick house.” In “Mekinges’s Story” she muses, “In the wilderness of his dreams, / did
The Harmonist at Nightfall is quite a “worldly” book, in the best sense of that term. Among its main accomplishments is to trace in compelling detail, and to both celebrate and mourn, the complications that come from living in a material, physical, historical world that is also infused with the spiritual. And it insists that, no matter how much we may yearn to be otherwise, in crucial ways we are indeed both in and of this world, though we are not limited to its surfaces nor compelled to align ourselves with the many blunders and disasters of its human inhabitants. Shari Wagner is no apologist for secularism, and remains in many ways firmly within the Mennonite tradition. But she has traveled much in her own Concord, spent long enough in the Indiana that is her “spot” to speak intimately and eloquently of its secrets and depths. She is an excellent guide for those of us still pursuing our own enlightenment.

Becca Lachman is a poet, professor, and musician with roots in the Mennonite community of southeastern Ohio. Her collection of poems, Other Acreage, is pieced together like a quilt of images depicting rural Ohio landscapes, hymnal pages, and memories of a farm that sustained the family for generations.

Instead of traditional chapter breaks, the volume is punctuated by pauses numbered “Figure 1.1” through “Figure 1.8.” These segments are brief prose poems that give us close-up glimpses of moments after which things are not going to be the same. “Figure 1.1” begins “February 1, 65 degrees in SE Ohio” and ends with a straight-faced flash of humor: “No one checks the 10-day forecast. We don’t want to know” (3). The author’s life as a docent is a theme in the figures. “Could my students spend a whole day in silence?” (41) Lachman muses in “Figure 1.6,” and in “Figure 1.7” acknowledges, “I may never know what my students learn from me” (45).

There is a lost family farm in Other Acreage—lost in present time and to future generations, but vital for understanding origins. We first come across the lost farm in the introductory poem, “Preparation.” “What color should a family wear to show a farm is dead to them?” (xi) Lachman asks. There is grief between the lines of this matter-of-fact question, and a quiet sense of loss surrounds the missing farm in “Joinery”:

Up north, some other family
will count triangle mud nests, catch kittens
on the silo’s foundation, prime the pump to taste
our family’s spring. (12)

There are fields to be crossed in the world of these poems, and a sister with children who isn’t too close, but isn’t too far.

Images of barns are pieced, with obvious affection, into Lachman’s pages. She takes us zooming by them in her poem “Bypass,” barns that “resemble a refrigerator box left too long in the rain,” characterized by “ancient paint” and “patient sturdiness” (10). Barns speak in this poem. “Stop, the barns bark at my rusting Toyota” (10). “Their decay,” she explains, “feels sweet, too tender, too tied to what took us a long time to shake” (10). The poem “Refurbished” pays homage to the life of barns. After naming various historical uses of barns besides “herd and harvest” (36)—housing hobos, hanging tobacco or possibly selves, billboard advertising for politicians and chew—Lachman describes the experience of driving past an Amish church service being held in a barn:

... I wanted
the world to go on, as is. Not all of the leaning
will be taken down to make photo frames, fruit crates,
Long Island mudrooms. Some of it will be
reborn standing...
We’ll walk into a bookstore by the Pennsylvania turnpike, knowing well and good what it’s been before. (36-37)

Reappearing through this collection, along with the ghost of grandfather Ivan and some unnamed nieces and nephews, is a Mennonite grandmother preparing pies. Each day of the week owns a poem and a type of pie. Monday’s pie is peach; Tuesday, rhubarb with a lattice crust; Wednesday, lemon meringue; Thursday, a playful mud pie; Friday, a walnut pie that passes for pecan; and Saturday’s pie poem is named “Animated Cherry.” Sunday, of course, in good Mennonite fashion, is a day of rest.

St. Francis of Assisi receives six incarnations in poems named after the forms he takes, and a seventh as the title image of the poem “Icon.” His first appearance is in “St. Francis Works at the Columbus Zoo.” In this poem, St. Francis speaks to us in first person, telling us of the night he calmed the disturbed polar bears in order to save the lives of mischievous high school boys who snuck into the animals’ pond. He comes to us also as a young prodigal who has wandered far from home and purchased a burrito buggy, then as a bystander at a nightmarish accident involving a car and a horse, as an Amish boy selling strawberries by the road, as a hospital chaplain, and as the presenter of a children’s sermon. The speaker tells us in the poem “Icon” that an image of St. Francis stares across her kitchen, apparently looking somewhere distant, and that the only words he has ever spoken to her are, “Come: put down the weapon of your choice” (39).

Lachman’s poetry is clear and accessible, a delightful blend of the familiar with the unexpected. Self-aware, often melancholy, and stitched together with a muted thread of humor, Other Acreage bears beautiful witness to life in the world beyond the safety of the farm, which, we sense, isn’t all that far away.

Moses Lake, Wash.  

DIANA R. ZIMMMERMAN


Remnants is a collection of personal reflections, stories, and poetry by and about the amazing life and legacy of Rosemarie Freeney Harding, an elder in the freedom struggle. The book weaves together the narratives and relationships that were central to the life and witness of Freeney Harding, be it with her great grandmother, grandfather, parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, husband, children, spiritual teachers, or the many children of God she nurtured in the struggle for human rights. The stories take root with Freeney Harding’s memories of her family and growing up on the South Side of Chicago. It continues with her life during the height of the freedom movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The book also includes several poems and fictional essays. The last part of Remnants is a mixture of reflections about her own spiritual path, the work yet to be done, and the end of her life.
The book reveals Freeney Harding’s spiritual gifts for making connections and fostering relationships. According to her daughter and co-author, Rachel Elizabeth Harding,

Mama, even more so than Daddy, had a way of understanding the world that looked injustice squarely in the face, but was always able to locate a redemptive remnant in even the most horrific circumstance. And she wasn’t making it up. She just had the capacity, like a master chemist, to isolate that quality of hope and compassion that, for her, existed at the heart of every living thing in the universe (251).

The many stories, poems, and essays in Remnants are testimonials to Freeney Harding’s way of understanding and her connection to an engaged spirituality.

Remnants contains the wisdom of the spirit and being that is Rosemarie Freeney Harding, who was the embodiment of a great womanist soul. Freeney Harding tells the story of “a group of women, they are women, and they are also spirits.” She later continues:

The women carry a knowledge and tradition of protection. A wisdom of transformation. It is not a spoken knowledge. It is in the body. . . . These women are vessels. And founts. They are a source. The ones who remember what it is to be human in the world. They preserve wisdom in the art of their lives, cultivating it in stories, in the way they move, in the paintings and posts they sculpt. In the fearlessness of their fighting. They carry the knowledge in their bodies as they go about their tasks and the encounters of their days. And they pass it on. Quietly. Their children, all of their children, have a bit of inheritance. It is like a seed. But it won’t bloom until they, too, are older. And it is the female line that passes the wisdom on (233).

Reflected in this story is a way of thinking and functioning in the world which Freeney Harding attributes to her family. In other words, it was in her bones. It is a womanist way taking from the wisdom passed down by generations of black women. The stories contained in Remnants not only share Freeney Harding’s own inheritance, but also demonstrate the ways she shared her knowledge, spirituality, and healing abilities with others. Throughout the book her stories are about the importance of relationships, remembering where we come from, and encouraging us to be fully human.

Remnants will appeal to those who are interested in religion and social transformation. Social change advocates, justice seekers, grassroots organizers, nonviolent revolutionaries, race critical theorists, theologians, clergy, historians, womanists, ethicists, and educators will all find gems within Remnants. It will enrich any conversation about the history of race relations in the United States. It is a book that is a clear example of how wisdom and knowledge have been passed down through generations of black elders. Most importantly, the book demonstrates the need for spiritual and theological roots as a part of movement making. For example, Freeney Harding had this to say about the freedom movement:

One of the most exciting things for me about being in the freedom movement was discovering other people who were compelled by the Spirit
at the heart of our organizing work, and who were also interested in the mysticism that can be nurtured in social justice activism. We experienced something extraordinary in the freedom movement, something that hinted at a tremendous potential for love and community and transformation that exists here in this scarred, spectacular country. For many of us that “something” touched us in the deepest part of our selves and challenged us in ways both personal and political (168).

Rosemarie Freeney Harding and her partner, Vincent, encountered many of these Spirit-led movement people during their work at the Mennonite House in Atlanta in the 1960s. Part of the Freeney Hardings’ organizing work was to provide a place for movement folks to rest. It was in this restful space that deep conversations and connections took place with people such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, to name just a few. Rosemarie also reflects on the role she and Vincent played in making connections across racial lines, which led to deep lifelong relationships with people like Anne and Carl Braden and Clarence and Florence Jordan.

Remnants provides an example of “transformative presence” in a time when racial tensions are once again running high. According to Freeney Harding, ”Being constantly in the presence of people who lived so fervently in the power of nonviolence, who believed and acted from the understanding that love and forgiveness were essential tools for social justice; being surrounded by people like that fed those commitments in me, in many of us” (170). Remnants and the words of Rosemarie and Rachel Harding impart a transformative presence.

Our challenge is to create new ways to keep building on what we’ve gone through, building on all the things we’ve learned. There is so much good work to be done to bring us together. We have to find another way of walking this road…. We have to let these young people know that we are not abandoned, that their elders love and trust them. That we are going to keep working with them to bring more humanity, more integrity, more compassion into our nation. (169-170).

Remnants provides hope for a better humanity.

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

DEAN J. JOHNSON
Book Reviews

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It has been twenty years since the watershed conference “The Quiet in the Land? Women of Anabaptist Traditions in Historical Perspective” took place in 1995. New topics, approaches, and viewpoints invite further examination of the constructions of gendered experience within groups in the Anabaptist tradition. Crossing boundaries and borders can and should encompass a wide range of disciplines, approaches and topics, and we seek submissions from scholars, students, activists, and literary, performing and visual artists.

Crossing might entail traversing the lines between

- public and private spaces
- church/community and “the world”
- quietism and activism
- expected decorum/silence and speaking out
- gender constructions
- sexualities and gender self-identities
- race, ethnicity and class
- religious and theological belief systems
- nation states in the making of transnationalism
- disciplinary expressions.

Conference participants are encouraged to think creatively about how Anabaptists, Mennonites, Amish and related groups have crossed and continue to cross lines, borders and boundaries. Please submit a one-page CV and a 250-word abstract for a paper, a creative performance or presentation, or a complete panel/workshop session (with presenters indicated).

Proposals should be submitted to awcrossingtheline@gmail.com by Sept. 1, 2016. The program committee will send out its decisions of acceptance by January 15, 2017.

Program Committee: Rachel Epp Buller (Bethel College); Marlene Epp, (Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo); Kerry Fast (Independent Scholar); Luann Good Gingrich (York University); Rachel Waltner Goossen (Washburn University); Julia Spicher Kasdorf (Pennsylvania State University); Kimberly Schmidt (Eastern Mennonite University); Jan Bender Shetler (Goshen College); Mary Sprunger (Eastern Mennonite University).