

## Mennonite Transgressive Literature

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*Abstract:* A “canon” of seven literary works by Mennonite authors writing about Mennonites have been regarded by many Mennonite readers as offensive in the way they depict recognizable individual Mennonites or certain Mennonite communities or Mennonites in general. This essay examines the readers, authors, and literary critics involved in the production, reception, and analysis of such texts, especially from the perspective of reader-response literary theory and the presumed communal origins and transactions found in this emerging ethnic literary community.

The “transgressive myth of origins” of Mennonite literature assumes that the remarkable development of Mennonite literature began in 1962 with the publication in Canada of Rudy Wiebe’s novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, which disturbed many Mennonite readers.<sup>1</sup> The tradition of offense has continued through other major Mennonite writings, including Rhoda Janzen’s bestselling memoir *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, published in the United States in 2009. Removed from their Mennonite communal context, these writings do not seem to be very transgressive. In fact, their transgressive nature is mostly a matter of how they have been received and interpreted by Mennonite lay readers. Professional Mennonite critics either ignore the objections of many Mennonite readers or rationalize them away by citing literary theory and using interpretive strategies instead. The literary merits of these works will certainly outlast their initial reception and ensuing reputation among Mennonite readers. Yet if a literary culture is to be “Mennonite,” it will also include and respect resistant readers’ understandings of Mennonite texts.

### TRANSGRESSIVE LITERATURE

The *topos* of “transgression” entered literary discourse through discussions by Michel Foucault and, especially, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose

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1. Julia Spicher Kasdorf, “Sunday Morning Confession,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 87 (Jan. 2012), 8.

notion of the “carnavalesque” asserted the creative renewal that “rites of reversal,” including literature and other arts, could bring to individuals and cultures.<sup>2</sup> A similar view of literature as creative transgression is part of the theo-poetics of Anabaptist scholar Scott Holland and others, who regard the arts and aesthetic experience as sources of a postmodern theology.<sup>3</sup> However, my use of the term “transgression” in this chapter is related more to the discrete genre of “transgressive fiction,” which continues in the tradition of the Marquis de Sade, William Burroughs, Henry Miller, and others by shocking, provoking, and offending many of its readers.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, what is transgressive is in the eyes of the beholder—in this case, in Mennonite readers—so it is not surprising that the offense in what we might call the canon of transgressive Mennonite literature is milder and different. In place of sadism and bodily functions, transgressive Mennonite literature most often offends through character defamation, negative stereotyping of Mennonites, or distortion of Mennonite history or theology. If such offenses are not immediately noticeable to non-Mennonite readers, they are disturbing to many Mennonites who, being deeply familiar with and invested in the history and values of the Mennonite community, are understandably concerned to find them misrepresented or held up to ridicule. It is this meaning of transgressive that both Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Di Brandt use in discussing their own early writing and that Kasdorf used in questioning the “transgressive myth of origins,” as noted above.<sup>5</sup> The first use of the term in Mennonite discourse, however, might be the comment made by Canadian writer and critic Robert Kroetsch as an observer at the first Mennonite/s Writing conference in 1990: “[T]he writer—in this culture—is, as I listen, a transgressor.”<sup>6</sup>

Since the reaction by “lay” or nonprofessional Mennonite readers has mainly defined the transgressive nature of some Mennonite literature, this essay examines the literary and cultural phenomenon of transgression from these often-ignored Mennonite readers’ perspectives.

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2. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).

3. Scott Holland, “Theology Is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theo-poetics.” *MQR* 71 (April 1997), 227-241.

4. L. Neeper, “On Teaching Transgressive Literature,” *College English Forum* 37 (Spring 2008). Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

5. Julia Spicher Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 182; Di Brandt, *Dancing Naked: Narrative Strategies for Writing Across Centuries* (Stratford, Ont.: Mercury, 1996), 36.

6. Kroetsch, Robert, et al. “Closing Panel,” in *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*, eds. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe (Waterloo, Ont.: University of Waterloo Press, 1992), 238.

## TEXTS

The canon of transgressive Mennonite literary works, as established by their reputations in Mennonite communities, consists of the following seven books.

\* *The Flamethrowers* by Gordon Friesen (1909-1996), a novel in the naturalistic protest style of Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, offended members of his Krimmer Mennonite Brethren communities in Gnadenu, Kansas, and Corn, Oklahoma, by depicting a dysfunctional Russian immigrant family as victims of the hypocrisy, individualism, and greed of fellow Mennonites and other capitalists.<sup>7</sup> Elmer Suderman, a native of the Gnadenu area, said that Friesen's book depicts Mennonites as "peculiar, stupid, ignorant, and unworthy," "brutal, deceitful, vicious, despicable, contemptible, cynical, and inhuman," "degenerate," and "repulsive, sickening, and obnoxious."<sup>8</sup>

\* *Peace Shall Destroy Many* by Rudy Wiebe, a coming-of-age novel, offended members of his Mennonite Brethren community in Saskatchewan by depicting a closed community of Russian Mennonites rife with contradictions, hypocrisies, and latent violence.<sup>9</sup> As Paul Tiessen has pointed out, even the editors at McClelland and Stewart anticipated a negative reaction to its publication.<sup>10</sup>

\* *The Shunning* by Patrick Friesen, a book-length narrative of poems and prose poems, offended his Evangelical Mennonite Conference (Kleine Gemeinde) church in Steinbach, Manitoba, by depicting the shunning, or excommunication, of a man who then committed suicide.<sup>11</sup> Many readers regarded it as a betrayal of Friesen's family history and an overly negative depiction of church discipline.

\* *questions i asked my mother* by Di Brandt, a book of poems, exposes the physical abuse, misogyny, and religious fundamentalism found in her Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (Rudnerweide) church community and family in Reinland, Manitoba.<sup>12</sup> She

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7. Gordon Friesen, *The Flamethrowers* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 1936).

8. Elmer Suderman, "The Mennonite Pioneer," in *From the Steppes to the Prairies*, ed. Cornelius Krahn (Newton, Kan.: Mennonite Publishing Office, 1949), 106-108.

9. Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962).

10. Paul Tiessen, "Covering the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Project," in *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America*, ed. Rob Zacharias (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, forthcoming).

11. Patrick Friesen, *The Shunning* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1980).

12. Di Brandt, *questions i asked my mother* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987).

famously observed that Mennonite literature is “one of the ways of destroying [Mennonite] separateness. . . . I’m helping to kill it.”<sup>13</sup>

\* *Sleeping Preacher* by Julia Spicher Kasdorf, a book of semi-autobiographical poems, mainly offended relatives and friends in her ancestral community of Swiss Mennonites and Amish in the Kishacoquillas (Big) Valley near Belleville, Pennsylvania, by depicting identifiable people and fictionalizing others’ experiences.<sup>14</sup>

\* *A Complicated Kindness*, a novel by Miriam Toews, offended her Evangelical Mennonite Conference (Kleine Gemeinde) church community in Steinbach, Manitoba, by dwelling on shunning and other fundamentalist practices, presenting negative stereotypes of Mennonites, and conflating experience in the Steinbach community with less fundamentalist Mennonite groups.<sup>15</sup>

\* *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* by Rhoda Janzen, a *New York Times* bestselling memoir, offended her Mennonite Brethren community in Fresno, California, by badly depicting some family members and friends and offended other Mennonite readers by conflating her Mennonite Brethren experience with that of more liberal Mennonite communities.<sup>16</sup>

## READERS

What is at stake for Mennonite readers of transgressive literature? For an individual reader, the use of Mennonite characters and milieus in fiction might seem to implicate the Mennonite reader in all generalizations about Mennonites. “But this does not represent me and my people” is a typical response to negative representations. For Mennonites as a group, transgressive fiction too often establishes negative stereotypes that can be used against them by the dominant culture. Even grave political issues might be at stake, as Paul Tiessen has argued in his analysis of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, since some Mennonite leaders feared that the negative depiction in the novel of an immigrant community might prompt the government to refuse the immigration of more Russian Mennonite refugees.<sup>17</sup> The organized church also shows

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13. Quoted in Maurice Mierau, “Rebel Mennos Move into the Arts,” *Midcontinental* 19 (1987-1988), 19.

14. Julia Spicher Kasdorf, *Sleeping Preacher* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

15. Miriam Toews, *A Complicated Kindness* (New York: Counterpoint, 2004).

16. Rhoda Janzen, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009).

17. Tiessen, “Covering the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Project.”

concern, as indicated in a blog by Melodie Davis, an employee of Mennonite Church USA in its MennoMedia office, where she expressed concern about the negative stereotypes found in *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*.<sup>18</sup> Mennonite Church USA has officially defined itself as a “missional” church, meaning that it wants to be welcoming to new members. In her *Femonite* blog, however, Hannah Heinzekehr suggested that the book is “anti-missional.”<sup>19</sup> Who would join a church that is so darkly portrayed? Much is at stake.

In this era of cultural criticism, minoritized groups regularly express similar concerns about representations of them in literary works, which they think have consequences in real life. One thinks of African-Americans, Native Americans, feminists, gays. Since those groups’ objections to fictive representations of their communities are respected and listened to, then Mennonites’ concerns about their own representations should be too.

Pinning down the specific critique by Mennonites of transgressive literature is difficult because the evidence is diffuse, ephemeral, and usually oral rather than in print. Written forms include personal letters, letters to the editors of local or church papers, and, more recently, blogs.

An example of a personal letter comes from a relative of Kasdorf who grieves not for herself but for other acquaintances exposed in *Sleeping Preacher*: “It would have hurt me, too if a relative of mine had dug all that stuff into a book even if I know it happened. I’m not saying these things aren’t true, but I am trying to point out to you that it was a bad enough hurt to have happened and then drag it into a book.”<sup>20</sup> Al Reimer cites excerpts from several similar letters sent to editors regarding *A Complicated Kindness*. “Toews denigrates a religious faith and a thinly disguised prairie town,” reads one. “The author is clearly attempting to cast out personal demons by herding them into unsuspecting people and traditional institutions,” reads another. The book is “a continuing damning vendetta before an applauding audience” and reflects the “secular cultural elites’ tortured image of Steinbach in particular, and of Bible-believing Canadian Christians generally,” reads a third.<sup>21</sup>

Mennonite book study groups often form consensus responses and repeat them to friends, who might then pass them on to others. At their

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18. Melodie Davis, “Laughing at the Images.” *Femonite*, May 10, 2013. Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

19. Hannah Heinzekehr, “On Martyr Complexes, Memoir, and Misunderstanding.” *Femonite*, May 8, 2012. Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

20. Julia Spicher Kasdorf, email message to the author, July 7, 2013. The quote comes from a letter to Kasdorf on Sept. 14, 1994.

21. Al Reimer, “Look Homeward, Nomi: Misreading a Novel as Social History,” *Mennonite Life* 60, no. 2 (2005). Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

best, such responses constitute valid and critical engagements with texts; at worst, they become rumors spread by people who have not read the texts, as in this response to Jessica Baldanzi's online review of *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*: "I was excited to buy the book until I was told that the memoir might be better called fiction . . . and, at the very least, she twisted truth at others' expense. . . . I will not buy the book."<sup>22</sup> Blogs are currently the most accessible source of informal comments on Mennonite writing. In their interactive nature, they become virtual book discussion groups. One of the best examples is the blog attached to the Baldanzi review cited above. The vigorous responses include positive and negative positions, of course, but highlights of the negative reviews include the following.

[This is] a surprisingly provincial view of the Mennonite world. . . . [S]he commits one of my pet peeves which is to characterize widely shared experiences as uniquely Mennonite. . . . [H]er tendency to mock anyone or anything less sophisticated than she is (or thinks she is) often seems mean-spirited.

It's not funny and it's way too self-absorbed. . . . [I]t has the tone of a teenager who just knows that she's cool and her family isn't so it's okay to make fun of them.

Rhoda's statements concerning what a Mennonite is (or believes) should be prefaced by "in my experience a Mennonite is or believes."

Some blog entries, though highly personal responses, attain the quality of formal literary reviews, as in Heinzekehr's *Feminite* blog essay on Janzen's book. "I. HATED. This. Book," she writes in the midst of a thoughtful critique. She goes on to object to Janzen's depiction of Mennonite women ("plain and unattractive . . . ; uneducated and inept") and of Mennonites in general ("judgmental . . . ; sectarian and closed off"), as well as the way in which her generalizations about Mennonites also unfairly implicate Heinzekehr herself.<sup>23</sup>

Mennonite literary critics have largely responded to such reader objections by ignoring the perceived transgressions or by using their professional skills to explicate the artistry and socially and morally redeeming value of such literature. Critics tend to write for each other, however, not for recreational readers, which means that critics'

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22. Jessica Baldanzi, review of *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, by Rhoda Janzen. In: *Journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing* 1.5 (2009). Web. Blog responses. Accessed July 18, 2013.

23. Hannah Heinzekehr, "On Martyr Complexes, Memoir, and Misunderstanding." *Feminite*, May 8, 2012. Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

explanations do not reach the objectors. Mennonite literary critics tend to regard resistant readers as naive or reactionary. Kasdorf, for example, says that such readers illustrate a “defensive reading strategy.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet Mennonite critics also illustrate a defensive reading strategy when they object to the misrepresentation of Amish people in feature films such as *Witness* or in the television reality shows *Amish Mafia* and *Breaking Amish*. One scholarly analysis of Amish misrepresentation in fiction is Kasdorf’s book *Fixing Tradition: Joseph W. Yoder, Amish American*, which analyzes early fiction that misrepresented the Amish and inspired Yoder to correct the record by writing *Rosanna of the Amish*.<sup>25</sup> Another is Valerie Weaver-Zercher’s *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels*, a fine analysis of the representation of the Amish in the current craze for Amish-themed romances.<sup>26</sup> One might expect Mennonites, readers and critics alike, to be similarly concerned about their representation in books by Mennonite authors. After all, the meaning latent in any use of the term “Mennonite” always implies the widespread community, or communities, to which an individual Mennonite belongs. The communal ideal in Mennonite culture could, and should, assume a role in the literary enterprise for the responses of readers in addition to the creativity of authors and the criticism of professional critics.

Critics should be able to perceive that this kind of nonprofessional textual interpretation is legitimized by the reader-response school of literary criticism that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s and is still relevant in postmodern discussions. Reader-response theory denies that a literary text contains an objective meaning or that a reader should search for the author’s intention in order to understand the work. Instead, literary meaning occurs in the process of an individual’s reading of a text, and a text’s meaning comes partly, or even entirely, from the individual reader’s identity and experience. As Jane Tompkins puts it, “Literary meaning is a function of the reader’s response to a text and cannot be described accurately if that response is left out of the account.”<sup>27</sup> “The reader must act as co-creator of the work.” Just as authors impose an “identity theme” onto their writing, so too readers

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24. Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book*, 41.

25. Julia Spicher Kasdorf, *Fixing Tradition: Joseph W. Yoder, Amish American* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora/US, 2003); Joseph W. Yoder, *Rosanna of the Amish* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2008).

26. Valerie Weaver-Zercher, *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

27. Jane P. Tompkins, “An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism,” *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), xiii.

project an “identity theme” onto their reading.<sup>28</sup> According to Stanley Fish, one reader’s interpretation can become “knowledge” if it is negotiated with others’ readings and the ensuing discussion yields a kind of consensus.<sup>29</sup> Such negotiation occurs in an “interpretive community,” such as an academic classroom, a book club discussion, or, in the present case, communities of Mennonite readers. Both Kasdorf and Gundy expand on this possibility of an interpretive community, Kasdorf by regarding literary creativity as a result of conversations in a community,<sup>30</sup> Gundy by invoking Kenneth Bruffee on the community as “the prime location of all meaning and knowledge.”<sup>31</sup>

In regard to Mennonite literature, the type of reader response that I am interested in here might be better described by the term “folk literary criticism” since it is performed by the particular religious-ethnic community of Mennonites. The term is a variation of Alan Dundes’s “oral literary criticism,” which denotes interpretations, often conflicting, given to folk tales, songs, and customs by folk performers and audiences.<sup>32</sup> These community-oriented interpretations often differ radically from the meanings perceived in the folk materials by “objective” outsiders, such as professional folklorists who collect and study them. “Oral” might suffice for peasant cultures, but “folk” is better for Mennonite culture, intertwined with academic and pop culture in a high-tech society. Folk literary criticism circulates not only by word of mouth but also in writing, as in the letters and blogs noted above. Those media, like oral/aural, are not vetted by authorities and represent unofficial culture that circulates informally and conforms to the broader current understanding of folk culture in a high-tech society. The conservative nature of many Mennonite readers’ understanding of literature also conforms to the culture-conserving function of most folklore.

## AUTHORS

Authors respond to folk literary criticism in various ways, including silence, but often by citing the autonomy of the author from communal

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28. *Ibid.*, xv.

29. *Ibid.*, xxi.

30. Julia Spicher Kasdorf, “Genius and the Verbal Dance: A Conversation About Language, Writing, and Community with John Ruth,” in *The Measure of My Days: Engaging the Life and Thought of John L. Ruth*, ed. Reuben Z. Miller and Joseph S. Miller (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia, 2004), 287.

31. Jeff Gundy, *Walker in the Fog: On Mennonite Writing* (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia, 2005), 50.

32. Alan Dundes, “Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism,” in *The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2007), 77-87.



restraints or the autonomy of the story, memoir, or poem that, during its writing, fulfills its own natural, almost compulsive, course of development, seemingly beyond the author's control. As Miriam Toews puts it, "Serve your story and you are doing your proper business."<sup>33</sup>

Mennonite authors might sympathize with Philip Roth, the Jewish writer who was much taken to task by Jewish readers who objected to negative stereotypes of them in his *Portnoy's Complaint* and other early writings. "I write to a Jewish audience, not for it," he has said.<sup>34</sup> That defense, however, poses several problems. First, an author does not control either the audience of a literary work or the meanings that readers find in it. Second, an author like Roth is read more by non-Jews than by Jews. And when readers from mainstream culture read literature by minority writers depicting minority experiences, they commonly regard it as a true depiction of that minority's experience. Here again arises the minority's dread of receiving a bad reputation in public discourse because of transgressive literature.

The production of canonical transgressive texts by Mennonite writers might be understood in a number of ways. Most of the texts represent the first books published by their young authors (for Patrick Friesen, Toews, and Janzen, their first Mennonite-themed books). As Paul Tiessen emphasizes, Wiebe, at 28 years of age, was hailed as a "young theologian" on the first cover of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.<sup>35</sup> All of the books in question (except perhaps *Peace Shall Destroy Many*) are creative renderings of autobiographical experiences of their authors when they were teenagers or late teenagers. That includes Janzen's background account of leaving home as a young woman. Wiebe's book is presented from the point of view of a teenage boy. The books might reflect the process of individuation by their authors as they wrestle with questions of personal identity in relation to more traditional claims laid on them by their Mennonite communities. As is the case with Gordon Friesen, they might also spring from their young authors' shattered ideals regarding what a Mennonite community could become.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, most of the books seem to arise from experiences in dysfunctional families or from some other personally traumatic experiences of their authors, whether explicitly stated (Brandt, Janzen) or

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33. Miriam Toews, "Is There Such a Thing as a National Literature?" *Guardian*, Nov. 16, 2012. Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

34. Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 168.

35. Tiessen, "Covering the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Project."

36. Brad S. Born, "Writing Out from the Mennonite Family Farm: Gordon Friesen's Homegrown Grapes of Wrath," *MQR* 82 (Jan. 2008), 118.

implied (Gordon Friesen, Toews). For them, writing the books might have been one way to creatively process and move beyond such traumas. The most sensational case in point is that of *The Flamethrowers* by Gordon Friesen. A grandson of Mennonites from the 1874 emigration from Ukraine, he grew up in a dysfunctional, destitute family, with a bitter mother and a feckless father. He wrote *The Flamethrowers* and the unpublished novel *Unrest* while “totally bedridden”<sup>37</sup> during a two- or three-year bout with anxiety disorder and severe depression<sup>38</sup>—to the extent that his cousin had to trick him into driving away from home and moving to Oklahoma City.

Authors of transgressive literature from minority groups fit into a more general sociological framework. Kurt Lewin, founder of the discipline of social psychology, in considering his fellow Jews who strive for assimilation into mainstream society, said that they “will dislike everything specifically Jewish, for [they] will see in it that which keeps [them] away from the majority for which [they are] longing. [They] will show dislike for those Jews who are outspokenly so.”<sup>39</sup> He added that this phenomenon in Jewish culture “has its parallel in many underprivileged groups” and cited African-Americans as one of the “better known and most extreme cases.” But it can also be found “among the second generation of Greek, Italian, Polish, and other immigrants.”<sup>40</sup> Mennonites also seem to be a clear parallel with Jews since both are religious ethnic groups who historically have maintained a separatist stance toward mainstream culture. Although Wiebe is the only second-generation immigrant author, he and Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, and Gordon Friesen learned Plattdeutsch as a native language. Their movement into English-language culture might have had the same effect as with the assimilating immigrants referred to by Lewin. This is not to claim that the assimilative process and a resulting transgressive literature come from deliberate choices made by Mennonite writers—that is, to reject their Mennonite community in order to attain acceptance by the dominant culture—though this might have been the case with Gordon Friesen, who moved to New York City, became a blacklisted communist, and never returned to his home community. But to some degree, it might be inevitable that, when Mennonite authors write for a nondenominational press, hoping to attract mainstream attention, they

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37. Allan Teichrow, “Gordon Friesen: Writer, Radical, and Ex-Mennonite,” *Mennonite Life* 36 (1983), 12.

38. Born, “Writing Out from the Mennonite Family Farm,” 118-119.

39. Kurt Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics*, ed. Gertrud Lewin (New York: Harper, 1948), 164.

40. *Ibid.*, 189.

consciously or unconsciously offer the exotic or sensational content that mainstream readers expect to find in minority literature.

Reader-response theory assumes that reading is “transactional”: that is, a give-and-take process involving author, text, and reader, each contributing to the meaning of a text.<sup>41</sup> The transaction sometimes goes one step further, when the reader’s response prompts a response, in turn, from the author. Without claiming cause and effect, one can observe steps in some of the Mennonite authors’ careers that perhaps were influenced by readers’ reception of their writings.

Both Wiebe and Patrick Friesen have been generally silent in public about Mennonites’ negative responses. As Friesen told Kasdorf, “Goes with the territory, doesn’t it?”<sup>42</sup> In Wiebe’s second published novel, *First and Vital Candle*, the protagonist is named a Presbyterian, though he could as well be a Mennonite. Wiebe might have missed a chance to please his community with this decision, since that novel has a strongly Christian evangelical appeal.<sup>43</sup> In Wiebe’s 1983 novel, *My Lovely Enemy*, James Dyck, the Mennonite professor protagonist, is unrepentant about committing adultery, and in one of a number of magic-realist scenes Jesus converses with Dyck, postcoitus, about sex and love.<sup>44</sup> Negative Mennonite reaction was defused when his home congregation, Lendrum Mennonite Brethren in Edmonton, sponsored a program for release of the novel.

Negative criticism of their first books has served as the sand that generates a pearl for Kasdorf and Brandt, who have published elegant essays that respond to their Mennonite critics—especially “Bringing Home the Book” by Kasdorf<sup>45</sup> and “Letting the Silence Speak” by Brandt,<sup>46</sup> as well as other essays in both books. Kasdorf has since written few poems about Mennonites and Amish, but she has become a prominent scholar of historical Mennonite culture with her books and essays on Yoder, *Martyrs Mirror*, and other Mennonite-related subjects. In recent years, Brandt has moved closer to her home community, both in geography and in appreciating the culture that she fled and that is now disappearing, especially as found in chapters 6, 8, and 12 in *So This Is the World and Here I Am in It*.<sup>47</sup> For both Kasdorf and Brandt, a kind of

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41. R. E. Probst, “Transactional Theory in the Teaching of Literature,” *ERIC Digest* (1987). Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

42. Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book*, 40.

43. Rudy Wiebe, *First and Vital Candle* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966).

44. Rudy Wiebe, *My Lovely Enemy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983).

45. Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book*, 39-47.

46. Brandt, *Dancing Naked*, 18-31.

47. Di Brandt, *So this is the world & here I am in it* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2007).

transaction between readers and authors, in the authors' minds, was present even prior to publication of their first books. Having recently completed a course on reader-response theory, Kasdorf suffered from migraine headaches as she imagined the possible consequences of publishing *Sleeping Preacher*.<sup>48</sup> Brandt withheld publication of her first book of poems because she feared her community's reaction, even to the extent of writing, several times, that she thought someone from the community might come and kill her.<sup>49</sup>

Janzen and Toews have responded to their critics mainly in interviews. Janzen says that she will not write again about family members,<sup>50</sup> while Toews says that, in the "middle of promoting" *A Complicated Kindness*, she decided that she would not write again about Mennonites. She changed her mind, though, calling it a "silly" decision,<sup>51</sup> and wrote the novel *Irma Voth*, set in an Old Colony Mennonite community in northern Mexico—a Plattdeutsch community whose members will probably never read it or respond to their representation in it.<sup>52</sup> Most recently, in a high-profile address to the International Festival of Authors in Toronto, Toews said that she understands why Mennonites might object to her books but goes on to say that such criticism reflects "arrogance and embarrassment. And self-image."<sup>53</sup>

### LITERARY CRITICS

The preceding discussion of Mennonite readers' informally stated reception of transgressive literature is complemented by a small but continuing discussion of that problem, in print, by professional Mennonite literary critics, usually academics with advanced degrees in literary studies from major universities. The main examples are Elmer Suderman (Ph.D., Kansas), John Ruth (Ph.D., Harvard), and Al Reimer (Ph.D., Yale).

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48. Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book*, 39.

49. Brandt, *Dancing Naked*, 10.

50. Rhoda Janzen, "Interview: Rhoda Janzen, Author of *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*," by Laurel Rhame, *Smith Magazine*, April 22, 2010. Web. Accessed Aug. 16, 2013.

51. Miriam Toews, interview by Rosmarin Heidenreich. *Rhubarb* 31 (2012), 43.

52. Miriam Toews, *Irma Voth* (Toronto: Knopf, 2011).

53. Miriam Toews, "A National Literature [abridged]." International Festival of Authors, Toronto, Oct. 25, 2012. Web. Accessed July 18, 2013. Ironically, the photo that illustrates the abridged version of Toews's address is apparently of Beachy Amish women wearing their distinctive garb rather than the very different group of Mennonites who are the subject of Toews's book. It illustrates again popular stereotypes of Mennonites in mass media and the inability of reporters and researchers to "get it right" regarding the differences among Mennonite groups.

Such reviewing began in 1949 with a critique of *The Flamethrowers* by Elmer Suderman (1920–2003), whose list of negative descriptors of Mennonites in that novel was cited earlier. He added that “it is poor taste to use any particular religious, cultural, racial, or ethnic group for themes of this nature.”<sup>54</sup> In 1967, he called Friesen’s novel an “anti-Mennonite” work.<sup>55</sup> Suderman was apparently the first professional Mennonite literary critic in North America. Brad S. Born, a more generous critic of *The Flamethrowers*, nevertheless wrote recently that Friesen seems to “denounce his Mennonite community” and is “certainly bitter and perhaps unfair” (113). With the publication of Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in 1962, Suderman found that his judgment of *The Flamethrowers* had mellowed: “Let the Mennonite writers write and not worry too much about their audience, either Mennonite or Non-Mennonite, whether they will approve or object, but speak the truth in love—or, if need be, in anger—to all.”<sup>56</sup>

A long, complex discussion of transgressive Mennonite literature is the 1998 forum in the journal *Preservings*, sponsored by its editor, Delbert Plett (1948-2004), a lawyer (QC) and historian who wrote voluminously on his people, the Kleine Gemeinde, in order to rehabilitate their reputation in Mennonite historiography. The forum derives from Plett’s sense that “the Russian Mennonite literary tradition [is] unique among the world’s literature for being mainly obsessed with negating the validity of its own spiritual ethos and historical tradition as a culture of significance and worth.”<sup>57</sup> The forum consists of his concluding essay, preceded by discussions by Ralph Friesen, a historian; Douglas Reimer, a lecturer at the University of Winnipeg and eventual author of *Surplus at the Border: Mennonite Writing in Canada* (2002); and my own review of Al Reimer’s book *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present* (1993).<sup>58</sup> Plett, Friesen, and Reimer were all from the Kleine Gemeinde tradition (now the Evangelical Mennonite Conference church). Patrick Friesen (Kleine Gemeinde) and Di Brandt were the main authors discussed in the forum.

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54. Suderman, “The Mennonite Pioneer,” 109.

55. Elmer Suderman, “The Mennonite Character in American Fiction,” *Mennonite Life* 22 (1967), 127.

56. Elmer Suderman, “Mennonites, the Mennonite Community, and Mennonite Writers,” *Mennonite Life* 47, no. 3 (1992), 25.

57. “Russian Mennonite Literature, a Great Tradition? [symposium],” ed. Delbert Plett, *Preservings* 12 (1998), 110.

58. Ralph Friesen, review of *Rosanna of the Amish*, by John W. Yoder. In: Plett, *Russian Mennonite Literature*, 111-112; Douglas Reimer, review of *Rosanna of the Amish*, by John W. Yoder. In: Plett, *Russian Mennonite Literature*, 114; and Ervin Beck, review of *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present*, by Al Reimer. In: Plett, *Russian Mennonite Literature*, 110.

Although Friesen criticizes Plett for desiring a historiography that idealizes too much the Kleine Gemeinde tradition, he admits that “the positive aspect of our ancestors’ lives remains, in terms of fiction or poetry, largely hidden in the shadows” (111). Reimer’s discussion of Friesen and Brandt is nuanced and sympathetic, but Reimer makes shrewd observations about them as minority writers in English-dominant culture: “It does not surprise me that early Mennonite artists like Friesen and Brandt played to the powerful major group and in the process seemed to revile the communities which raised them. They did this partly because they felt rejected by their own non-literary communities, and partly because of their own vain desire to be heard by as large and important an audience as possible” (review 114). He adds that “A major group commonly makes sport of minor groups. The major group finds minor groups queer, crazy, or even stupid, and by making this sort of sport they manage to get to look pretty good to themselves” (114). Plett, citing “the racist aspects of Anglo-conformity” in Canadian culture, claims that *The Shunning* catered to “audiences pleased to affirm their ‘Anglo-conformist’ view of minority and ethnic groups.”<sup>59</sup> He thinks that the transgressive elements in Friesen’s and Brandt’s works were brought about by their reactions to their church communities’ pursuit in the 1950s and 1960s of the theology of “Fundamentalists, Pietists and Revivalists” in order to proselytize outsiders, in the process moving away from, even condemning, their Mennonite heritage.<sup>60</sup>

The thoughtful work most often invoked in discussions of transgressive Mennonite literature is John Ruth’s early pamphlet *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*.<sup>61</sup> Ruth speaks from the Swiss Mennonite community in the United States, a perspective that sometimes marginalizes him in discussions of Canadian Mennonite literature. Mentioning only authors Rudy Wiebe and Warren Kliewer, Ruth worries about “the multifarious North American process of acculturation, the individual or communal abandonment of our identity, the absorption of our story by another story, so that we have no story.”<sup>62</sup> He warns against the “suburban, socially and professionally upward-mobile Mennonites who find the peculiarities of their tradition embarrassing.” That cultural embarrassment, he writes, “pretends to be sophistication.” He is confident that Mennonite authors can match the creative imagination of

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59. Delbert Plett, “Zen and the Art of Literary Portrayal,” in Plett, *Russian Mennonite Literature*, 114.

60. *Ibid.*, 115.

61. John Ruth, *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1978).

62. *Ibid.*, 20.

Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder in “releas[ing] the depth-meaning of what to some is an outworn traditional testimony.”<sup>63</sup>

Ruth and the *Preservings* critics try to describe what a desirable Mennonite literature would be like. Ruth calls for Mennonite literature that “strikes a creative balance between critique and advocacy” and is “an aesthetically serious representation of our ethos in its classic issues—obedience, simplicity, humility, defenselessness, the questioning of progress, the maintenance of identity.”<sup>64</sup> Plett finds his model for a “more inclusive and holistic” literature in *Mirror of a People: Canadian Jewish Experience in Poetry and Prose*,<sup>65</sup> which, he suggests, presents prominent Jewish writers who are “confident enough in their minor voice to also portray the positive elements of their own culture (and by definition their own being).”<sup>66</sup> Douglas Reimer says that “What we Mennonites need now is a deliberate, more mature art which understands the conventions of major literature but which subverts those conventions in order to show its support of the communities which raised them. We need artists who will take leadership roles in their communities, artists who will be thinkers within, not outside the community.”<sup>67</sup>

In critiquing *A Complicated Kindness* in *Queen’s Quarterly*, James Neufeld faults Toews for reducing “the complexities of faith to the simplicities of its prohibitions” and contenting “herself with superficial satire instead of sustained social commentary.”<sup>68</sup> Most recently, Valerie Weaver-Zercher wrote a negative review of *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* in *Christian Century*, criticizing the memoir for giving a reductive view of Mennonites by “treasuring their eccentricities and pointing out their provinciality.”<sup>69</sup>

Opposing these writers and, I think, contributing to the production of transgressive Mennonite literature is the position of Al Reimer, as articulated in his influential set of lectures *Mennonite Literary Voices* (1993). His is the stream of thought most often invoked in discussions of Canadian Mennonite literature, to the extent that Plett regards it as the

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63. *Ibid.*, 64, 22, 56.

64. *Ibid.*, 63, 23.

65. *Mirror of a People: Canadian Jewish Experience in Poetry and Prose*, ed. Sheldon Oberman and Elaine Newton (Winnipeg: Jewish Educational Publishers, 1985).

66. Plett, “Zen and the Art of Literary Portrayal,” 116.

67. Douglas Reimer, *Surplus at the Border: Mennonite Writing in Canada* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2002), 114.

68. James Neufeld, “A Complicated Contract: Young Rebels of Literature and Dance,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 112.1 (2005), 101.

69. Valerie Weaver-Zercher, review of *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, by Rhoda Janzen. In: *Christian Century*, Oct. 20, 2009, 54.

“politically correct” position in Mennonite literary circles.<sup>70</sup> As I characterize it in my 1993 review of Reimer’s book, “[Reimer] defends . . . writers in their seeming battle with the Mennonite community, which they criticize and which, in turn, rejects them—to their dismay. . . . Reimer [gives] an impassioned plea for accepting the literary artist as a visionary prophet standing free at the edge of the community and speaking words that the community needs to hear in order to correct itself.”<sup>71</sup> Just as Ruth gave a list of positive aspects of Mennonite experience that should be affirmed, so too Reimer gave a list of negative aspects of Mennonite reality that should be exposed: “religious traditions and long-accepted prejudices and practices, . . . pressures to conform, . . . ethnic complacency and a whole host of other issues.”<sup>72</sup> In taking on the role of prophet, Mennonite writers of “the cultural elite” should confront the “dead weight” of Mennonite tradition, expose it to Mennonites and the world, and take the risk of “themselves contributing to the already ongoing disintegration of ethnic identity.”<sup>73</sup>

Most recently, Reimer rose to the defense of *A Complicated Kindness* during the initial Mennonite reaction to the novel. The thesis of his defense is stated in the subtitle of his essay, “Look Homeward, Nomi: Misreading a Novel as Social History.” Reimer defends Toews’s book by stating a classic defense of fiction:

A novel makes an imagined world come alive as a fictionalized reality that deals with human experiences we all share. And because fiction sets up this alternative world of reality, controlled and directed by a creator who understands that fictive world, a novel can provide meanings and truths mythologized beyond the reach of history. But the reader can only enter that fictive world through “a willing suspension of disbelief,” that is, by accepting that world as real in its own right and not as a falsification of the literal world.

Reimer admits that it is difficult to persuade recreational readers: “The temptation to misread a novel from a historical perspective is almost irresistible when the reader is personally familiar with its

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70. Plett, “Zen and the Art of Literary Portrayal,” 115.

71. Ervin Beck, review of *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present*, by Al Reimer. In: Plett, *Russian Mennonite Literature*, 110.

72. Al Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present* (North Newton, Kan.: Bethel College, 1993), 70.

73. *Ibid.*, 65, 57, 58. Rudy Wiebe’s novel *Sweeter Than All the World* seems to satisfy the desiderata of both Ruth and Reimer. See their respective reviews of the novel.—Al Reimer, review of *Sweeter Than All the World*, by Rudy Wiebe. In: *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 20 (2002), 227-229; and John Ruth, review of *Sweeter Than All the World*, by Rudy Wiebe. In: *MQR* 77 (Oct. 2003), 727-730.



setting." He even admits that he had to read *A Complicated Kindness* a second time before being able to appreciate its merits.<sup>74</sup>

Reimer's position here tends to support modernist, formalist approaches to texts as "well-wrought urns" whose meanings are to be found within their formal constructs and discovered through careful explication. No reader-response theory here. His thinking might fit Toews's novel *The Flying Troutmans*, for instance, which has only a generic historical and sociological setting in contemporary popular American culture.<sup>75</sup> But it is disingenuous in regard to a text such as *A Complicated Kindness*, set in a thinly disguised Steinbach, Manitoba, with thinly disguised family and community members. As a result, the "social history" elements in it are equal to the fictive elements. *A Complicated Kindness* also becomes social history when its author discusses the novel, in frequent interviews, in relation to her historical home community and church and the historical problems that it is intended to expose. If the author thereby acknowledges the novel's "social history" relevance, then it is not surprising that Mennonite recreational readers do likewise.

As mentioned above, culturally mainstream readers typically regard works of minority literature as stereotypically representative of their authors' minority cultures—as social history, not as well-wrought urns. That includes educated literary reviewers in newspapers and other media. For instance, the interview of Toews by Terry Gross on National Public Radio in the United States did not discuss the coming of age of Nomi but the social history of Toews herself as a Mennonite. Gross especially probed excommunication, marriage of second cousins, and the banning of worldly pleasures in Mennonite culture.<sup>76</sup> Toews laments that the same thing happened to her in Italy, where reporters and audiences were more interested in her identity as a Mennonite than in the fiction of her novel.<sup>77</sup> Kasdorf reports a similar experience during her interview on National Public Radio.<sup>78</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES

Although the negative stereotyping in transgressive literature is most often applied at the level of the community, its effects are often felt at the

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74. Al Reimer, "Look Homeward, Nomi: Misreading a Novel as Social History," *Mennonite Life* 60, no. 2 (2005). Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

75. Miriam Toews, *The Flying Troutmans* (Toronto: Alfred Knopf, 2008).

76. Miriam Toews, "Fresh Air." Interview by Terry Gross. National Public Radio, Jan. 5, 2005. Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

77. Miriam Toews, "Is There Such a Thing as a National Literature?" *Guardian* Nov. 16, 2012. Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

78. Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book*, 50.

individual level. For instance, the reception in England of *A Complicated Kindness* posed a personal problem for me regarding my reputation among English friends. The *Guardian* published a long review by Zoe Williams, who visited Steinbach and interviewed Toews in Winnipeg. Williams pays tribute to the literary excellence of the book, but most of the review emphasizes the peculiar, undesirable aspects of Mennonite culture. It cites “how critical the book is of Mennonite ways” and indirectly quotes Toews as saying that, had she “been writing a factual essay about the Mennonites, she would have been far more critical and damning than her protagonist ever is.”<sup>79</sup> The *Guardian* review essay is ethnic exoticism.

Having spent three sabbaticals in England, I have friends at the universities of Warwick and Sheffield as well as in Friends Meetings in Coventry and Sheffield. They tend to be liberals who likely read the *Guardian*. The Mennonite culture depicted in the *Guardian* report absolutely does not represent me and my social history. How do my English friends now regard me? Even if I had the chance, how could I persuade them that my experience has not been like Nomi’s, whether by invoking literary theory, by explaining the differences between Russian Mennonites and Swiss Mennonites, or by outlining the differences between the Evangelical Mennonite Conference in Canada and my own Mennonite Church USA? The reception of literary works is part of their accumulated meaning, and the transgressive aspect of Mennonite literature sometimes has social consequences.

In my 1993 review of Al Reimer’s *Mennonite Literary Voices*, I said that the “adversarial, corrective and even angry” literature produced by some Mennonite authors “is so good that we would not want it to be otherwise.”<sup>80</sup> I still feel that way, even about *A Complicated Kindness*, despite my defense in this essay of the other point of view in Mennonite folk literary criticism. Books in the transgressive canon have many literary excellences, and negative reputations tend to dwindle over time.

Yes, the dominant role of the “transgressive myth of origins” in Mennonite literary discourse needs to be reconsidered, as Kasdorf has suggested.<sup>81</sup> As an alternative to “transgression” as the originating

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79. Miriam Toews, “The One that Got Away,” *Guardian*, July 23, 2004. Web. Interview by Zoe Williams. Web. Accessed July 18, 2013.

80. Ervin Beck, review of *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present*, by Al Reimer. In: Plett, *Russian Mennonite Literature*, 110.

81. Kasdorf, “Sunday Morning Confession,” 8.

impulse for Mennonite literature, Gundy suggests “desire.”<sup>82</sup> Kasdorf suggests “irony.”<sup>83</sup>

Plenty of fine Mennonite writers do not perpetuate the transgressive tradition, and it is time that we appreciate equally those writers who have offered, as Ruth suggested, “an aesthetically serious representation of our ethos in its classic issues.”<sup>84</sup> Gundy, poet and essayist, is one prominent example. As he says, “A necessary separation [from] and critique of ‘home’ has fueled much of the best Mennonite writing to emerge so far. . . . [T]he myth . . . is not *my* story.”<sup>85</sup>

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82. Gundy, *Walker in the Fog*, 40.

83. *Ibid.*, 10.

84. Ruth, *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*, 23.

85. Gundy, *Walker in the Fog*, 26.

