

Chadwick Ginther, *Thunder Road*. Winnipeg: Ravenstone Books/Turnstone Press, 2012. Pp. 386. Softcover, \$16.00.

With Ginther's first novel the prairies, even more sparsely populated in speculative fiction circles than in life, have acquired a new voice. His story conveys a sense of space and possibility, and his characters reveal themselves through the words, silences and music picks of long road trips. He makes a nod to the eastern prairie's ethnic enclaves. The RCMP officer who tries to "get his man" has a *Mishoom*, a Cree grandfather, for example. And Ted Callan, the hero, had a Sunday School teacher named Mrs. Wiens who "always said he'd come to a bad end" (168). The dominant influence, though, is Icelandic. On his webpage Ginther (2013) describes the public library's mythology section as a childhood way station. "I always knew I'd write *something* influenced by Norse myth, the stories have been a part of my life for too long not to creep into my work." Where the apocalyptic imagination of an earlier generation of Mennonite writers might have contained a lake of fire and a rider on a pale horse, Ginther's centers on Yggdrasil, the world tree, and Sleipnir, the god Odin's eight-legged horse.

Ted Callan's marriage has ended with a whimper and his oil sands job with a bang. He and his muscle car hit the highway to Winnipeg. He is wounded, angry, and no longer sure of his world. After an encounter in a grungy, downtown bar – whose sights and smells Ginther describes with relish – Ted is transformed. His anger is focused on the *dvergar* (dwarves), and his desires on the youngest of the Norns, the three women who augur the fates of humans and gods. Loki, the trickster god, is the other main character. He helps Ted in and out of trouble, and helps readers with an unreliable appendix in which to look up the "petty gods, monsters, and fantastical locales" referenced in the story (383).

Seeing Manitoba quirks, like the Flintabbatey Flonatin statue, and its fabled Manipogo worked into a coherent story is one of this novel's charms. I found it refreshing to read the story of an angry, 40-something man whose trauma comes from an industrial accident, not combat duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. It was intriguing that when granted supernatural powers, Ted made interesting choices – he healed, as well as smote his enemies. And I relished the idea that the Alberta tar sands reveal the beginning of the end of the world. The novel was as gritty as the dust jacket promised, but the dialogue and action were not always as gripping as advertised. I found myself skimming through the big battle scene with the *jötnar* (giants), for example. In its aftermath, Ted recognized his purpose in life, another scene that engaged me less than the author must have hoped. After an explosive beginning, the book's

ending trailed off. I thought I might look out for the sequel nonetheless, and then discovered I won't have to wait. *Tombstone Blues*, the second novel in Ginther's planned trilogy, was released in fall of 2013.

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Jessica Penner, *Shaken in the Water*. Foxhead Books, 2013. Pp. 377. Softcover, \$15 U.S.

To read the fractured narrative of *Shaken in the Water* is to walk through a gallery of portraits and memories bound by blood and to examine the offshoots of this family tree. In her first novel, Jessica Penner takes up the cause of the outcasts and oddballs, sidles up next to the sideshow characters alive (and dead) in every family narrative. *Shaken in the Water* is shot through with hints of superstition and the burden of doubt, and whose hybrid spirituality is part pantheism, part deism and part Mennonite tradition. This is fiction that elevates the conversation about the family outliers, gathers the fallen branches of the family tree and curates them as art.

At the centre of this story is Agnes, born with the "Tieja Kjoaw" – the "Tiger Scar" birthmark across her back and haunted by the pain of what seems like centuries of ancestral memory. *Shaken in the Water* begins in 1923 with a brief scene of Agnes and her new husband Peter on their wedding night, a scene that sets up the loss, emotional isolation and secrets that echo through the rest of the book

This novel's cast of characters face trials, carry heavy burdens, respond with extreme actions and bear peculiar flaws. Theirs is a constant struggle to reconcile their inherited traditions and history with their own personal discoveries. When, in his later years, Peter wants to come clean before the Lord, he doesn't only shave his beard – the beard he once grew longer to please the Mennonite elders – he shaves his entire body. As a quasi-prophetic act, Peter's son Johan sets free his entire truckload of cattle to save them from slaughter. Jeffrey, Johan's son, is born with a bump on his forehead that bears the remnant of his fetal twin. While Penner doesn't romanticize the flaws of her characters, she does magnify and amplify their quirks and scars, failings and fallings.

With its multiple inter-spliced storylines, the novel's structure poses some challenges. Time shifts at the start of each chapter and often in the midst of a chapter, the narrative flipping back and then ahead and back again to various significant moments in the lives of