

Book Reviews

Reviews of Fiction and Poetry

Rudy Wiebe, *Come Back*. Toronto: Knopf, 2014.
Pp.268. Hardcover, \$26.95.

Rudy Wiebe's latest novel tells the story of Hal Wiens, a retired and recently widowed English professor in Edmonton, who one day in 2010, sitting in a coffee shop with his First Nations friend Owl, is struck by seeing, or thinking he sees, his son who had committed suicide 25 years earlier. His son, Gabriel, suffering from depression, had poisoned himself with exhaust fumes at the family's cottage. This visual impression of Gabriel that Hal perceives through the coffee shop's glass window affects him so viscerally that he storms out of the restaurant trying to follow his "son," who is wearing his typical orange downfill parka. Trying to catch up with the apparition of his son, the professor, a Mennonite whom Wiebe's readers may remember from his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, where Hal was a young boy, causes several traffic accidents as he crosses Whyte Avenue without paying attention to traffic lights or oncoming cars.

Not only is Hal trying to reflect and work through the causes that had led to his son's suicide, this being at the forefront of his four or five days of ruminations that constitute the timeframe of the

novel; he also feels the guilt of having caused harm and injury to others by storming out of the coffee shop into the oncoming traffic. Thus, he is in constant fear of being apprehended by the police for this impulsive behaviour.

Hal's remembering and coming to terms with his son's suicide is reminiscent of the hermeneutic work he had been committed to in his active days of teaching literature at the University of Alberta. It involves an interpretational working through his son's diaries of the years leading up to his suicide and also a re-reading of parts of his own diary, which had been duly gathered, packed and stored in the basement of the family home by Hal's now deceased wife, Yolanda.

Of central importance in the events leading up to Gabriel's suicide, at least in the sources given to the reader (and presumably selected by Hal), is Gabriel's infatuation with Ailsa, the young daughter of his parents' friends, a couple belonging to the same Mennonite church and academic community as Hal. Gabriel feels emotionally attracted to young beautiful "angelic" girls, "the child become woman." Gabriel's infatuation with much younger girls had started with a crush on Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci during the 1976 Olympics and also finds its expression in his fascination with actresses playing seductive virginal characters, such as Nastassja Kinski in Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas*. Although Gabriel is aware that a thirteen-year old is unable to respond to the intellectual needs of a man in his twenties, his diaries show that he tends to misinterpret the rather innocent moves on Ailsa's part – such as touching his arm or leg – as signals indicating her interest in him. Ailsa's second Christian name, Helen, adds a further mythical connotation to her role.

The ruminations, definitions and word lists in the stream of consciousness and freely associative style of Gabriel's journal indicate that he is well aware that his interest in Ailsa is an obsession, but his fixation on her turns into a depression from which he cannot escape. Much of his journal deals with a trip to Europe, a part of which he spent together with his parents, their friends and their daughter Ailsa in Germany. His university career is stalled, and his interest in film gives him only intermittent and low-paid employment. Among his literary models and references is the German-language poet Rainer Maria Rilke, whose lines about beauty turning into terror seem to be the intertextual source of Gabriel's fear of the terror of arrival in foreign cities. Gabriel follows Rilke's biographical traces as far as Duino, where the latter had written his famous elegies. Other intertextual references are, for example, to Kafka, Joyce, Nabokov (*Lolita* being mentioned by both Hal and Gabriel) and the Bible. Additional important

intertexts are the innumerable films that Gabriel watches during his trip to Europe, replacing real-life experience with movie versions, and as part of his work as a film curator for the Edmonton National Film Theatre. Rather than “working through” the film experiences, he submits his body and spirit to marathon film showings, so that it is no real surprise that he is not given a job as a film censor for the provincial government (whatever one may think of an institution like a film censoring board).

Hal blames his son for not having understood and done justice to the role of Jesus in Christian religion, a message of salvation that perhaps might have prevented Gabriel from succumbing to depression. Hal’s intertextual references in the parts of the novel reflecting his point of view include the Bible, but also many other literary sources including Leonard Cohen’s statement in “Anthem” about the crack in everything that lets the light get in: “The Orange Downfall had ripped open what he locked down so carefully every day, every minute.”

Whereas the son ran away from the difficulties and complexities of becoming an adult, the father – who thinks that the police are closing in on him in their search for the person who had caused the pileup of cars on Whyte Avenue and 104th Street – also runs away from the city. He flees to the very family cottage at Aspen Creek where Gabriel had committed suicide.

The novel is preceded or introduced by two epigraphs – verses from the New Testament, thus texts related to the Jesus that Hal thinks had not found a place in Gabriel’s life. The first one is Mark 9,9 and rather enigmatically deals with the purgation of sin: “For everyone will be salted with fire.” Might this be depressed Gabriel’s justification of his own suicide? The second verse is from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (13,12): “For now we look through a mirror into an enigma, but then face to face.” Another translation of this verse that we probably know even better is from the King James Bible: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.” This biblical quotation is nicely literalized not only in Hal imagining Gabriel through the coffee shop’s glass windows but also in Gabriel’s own distorted vision of an idealized Ailsa Helen, into whom he projects all kinds of idealistic views he had gathered while reading and travelling. These are of course views of which she herself would not be aware in any way.

Rudy Wiebe’s novels have always been known for their polyvocal and heteroglot style, integrating the voices of different personalities and languages, and this stylistic characteristic manifests itself not only in quotations of – and allusions to – other writers but also in biblical texts and hymns, cited in German. We

have the voices of father and son, both fighting with their own guilt and depression. Gabriel can only speak from his journals and letters. Most of the letters are unsent and presented in the process of writing, re-writing and unwriting. One may well wonder to what extent Gabriel here succumbs to and indulges in his own fascination with depression. Hal comments on his son's writing, but he has also has to confront his own journal from the time of Gabriel's suicide.

Of course, anybody who knows even the bare facts of Rudy Wiebe's biography is aware that the fateful event described in the novel, the suicide of a son, is a fate that has also left its shadow on Wiebe's own life, but in this review I do not want to start drawing parallels between author and main character. The novel as a work of art provides a fascinating reading experience offering some of Wiebe's most poetic prose, and its intertextual references in Gabriel's fight against the angel of despair and Hal's attempt to face the terrors of the past will provide many rewarding re-readings.

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