

Book Reviews

Fiction and Poetry

Sandra Birdsell, *Children of the Day*. Random House Canada, 2005. Pp. 405. Hardcover, \$35.95

Children of the Day is being called a sequel to Sandra Birdsell's previous novel, *The Russländer*, a very different book. The earlier novel, the result of years of research, travel and laborious writing, moves the reader in a linear fashion slowly and inexorably toward and through a day of violence. The new novel is also fraught with struggle, but it has a lighter touch, moves nimbly back and forth in time, reads easily and, Birdsell admits, was a pleasure to write.

Katya Vogt, the main character of the *The Russländer* appears as a minor character in the new novel, while her younger sister, Sara, having emigrated to Canada with Katya and married Oliver Vandal, a Métis man she met "accidentally" in Winnipeg, takes centre stage. Readers who have followed Birdsell's writing from the start will also recognize the precursors to the Vandals in Birdsell's *Agassiz Stories*, where Mika, a Russian Mennonite, copes with a houseful of children while her Métis husband, Maurice, like Oliver, works in a hotel near the river familiar to both families.

The immediate action of the novel spans one mid-June day in 1953, a day spent variously by the members of the Vandal family: Sara, angry, chooses to remain in bed; Oliver, "intending to outdistance his shadow" (349), crosses the river to visit the French Canadian woman he's never forgotten; Alvina, the oldest of the children, finds her attempts to study for a typing test sabotaged by dreams of escaping her endless family responsibilities; the other school age children are busy keeping away from trouble or getting into it; the pre-school trio plays unattended near an uncovered cistern.

The reader, meanwhile, spends a good bit of the day revisiting the very different past lives of Sara and Oliver. In Sara's memory bank is the day of slaughter so masterfully set up and dramatized in *The Russländer*. When she and other young Mennonite immigrant women serving as domestics in Anglo Saxon Winnipeg households gathered weekly at the "Home Away From Home Club" for supervised socializing with their kind, she walked out at "sharing time," refusing to speak of the horror. She is unable to cry.

Oliver's story too is painful. "You and me, we sure as hell weren't dealt a good hand," his brother said. Growing up in a Métis culture, he lost his parents at a young age. His family's memories of the Riel

Rebellion and subsequent humiliation of the Métis are stored in old newspaper interviews with his grandmother. (These texts are based on actual writings by Birdsell's Métis great grandmother). Land once belonging to the Métis is being worked by Russian Mennonites, and the Vandal's property is occupied, ironically, by Sara's sister Katja and her husband who lost everything in Russia

When bad news about Oliver's future at the hotel is added to the tensions within the Vandal family, the crisis could potentially bring the house tumbling down. Instead, crisis becomes the occasion for the extended families, both the Métis and the Mennonite, to gather for a meeting, convened by Alvina, around the Vandal kitchen table, with both Oliver and Sara absent. The children have a hand in precipitating confusion and confrontation. Instead of exploding, the in-laws are catapulted into problem-solving mode. Things will change.

The author's attention to minor characters is a bonus. So many children underfoot, and yet the author leaves us with a clear sense of their individuality—Ruby, who figures out how to tell time and nobody cares; defiant Emilie, who encounters danger on her own and gets away; George, who is known as "The Other One" because he rarely speaks. And there's the observant neighbour, Florence Dressler, a childless widow who covets the Vandal children, "who came like cats from all corners, hanging over the back of her chair, crouched beneath the table, furtive smiles tugging at their mouths as they eavesdropped" (385). "Give me just one of those monkeys [...] Any one of the four boys would do," she says (366), poignantly demonstrating both her deep need and her sympathy.

The writing is plain, direct and deft, and makes as little attempt to impress as the characters at their most honest.

Birdsell has reached once more into her dual heritage, making of it a story about the way personal and ethnic histories shape us as individuals and as generations. Without lapsing into sentimentality or avoiding the rough spots, this novel declares human goodness alive and holds out hope for vitality and even intimacy in cross-cultural interaction. Here is good news, and good reading, for our day.

Sarah Klassen

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Janice L. Dick, *Calm Before the Storm*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2002. Pp. 365. Paperback.

Janice L. Dick, *Eye of the Storm*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003. Pp. 395. Paperback.

Janice L. Dick, *Out of the Storm*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2004. Pp. 435. Paperback.

This trilogy of novels by Saskatchewan writer Janice Dick takes readers into the experiences of Mennonites in Russia during 1914 to 1924. As the titles suggest, the first (*Calm*) touches down on the end of the Mennonites' so-called "golden" years, just as World War I breaks and threats of revolution cloud their lives; the second (*Eye*) covers the 1917 Russian Revolution and its subsequent years of terror and anarchy; the third (*Out*) deals with the continuing historical aftermath of change, shifting political rule, hunger, and the efforts by many to leave.

Dick traces the fortunes of a fairly large (and growing) cast of inter-connected characters, at the heart of which is the Hildebrandt family, and most particularly, daughter Katarina. In the first book, she and the man she eventually marries, Johann Suderman, live at "Succoth," an estate in Crimea; the trilogy's ending finds them in a cabin near Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

Katarina is the plainer but wiser of widower Heinrich Hildebrandt's two older daughters, and the character in which the emotional compass of the books generally rests. She feels love for someone who does not reciprocate it, grieves the loss of father and home, fears for Johann as he is caught up in the conflicts of the period through his CO duties and village administration, wishes for a child, and undergoes anxieties and joys in leaving Russia. For all her challenges, she draws on her faith in God.

The decade Dick covers has been treated in memoirs and historical studies, and in literary fiction, notably by Rudy Wiebe, Al Reimer and Sandra Birdsell. It would not be fair, however, to compare Dick's work with theirs. She is working in a different genre – romance fiction within a historical setting (Herald Press calls the broader series into which the trilogy fits "historical fiction with a touch of romance") – and so her readers and their expectations will differ as well.

Regarding the historical nature of the work, the author's interest and research are obvious. According to an article about her in the *MB Herald* (June 10, 2005), "Dick has been captivated by the stories of the Mennonite people since she was a little girl. Her desire... was to preserve that story for her own children." Dick illuminates aspects of Mennonite life such as their endeavours with the mentally ill, tensions over *Selbstschutz*, and religious conferences, and she

incorporates historical figures like Rasputin, Machno and B.B. Janz into her fiction.

The history works best when Dick lets an omniscient narrator inform the reader. When the characters are used to convey the content of events, they can sound stilted. For example, Heinrich, telling his daughters about an upcoming conference, says, "There's always such an interesting blend of pietism, Blankenburg ideology, and Mennonite traditionalism. Lots of food for thought."

It's the central love story (Katarina's) and the secondary love stories (including triangles for added suspense), however, that carry the trilogy. Romance writer Robin Lee Hatcher says, "Romance fiction is about hope. It's about hope that one man and one woman can form a lasting, permanent bond. That's the desire of people's hearts. We want a lasting love relationship." Dick stirs up and fulfills this longing for her readers through these stories. The warmly expressed religious elements of the story are also part of the "love and hope" theme, as played out in characters' relationships with God.

Hatcher says further, "Romance is also about women winning. In the real world women often don't win." The view of women in the *Storm* books is quite traditional ("love them, yes, but understand them, never." *Out*, 287), but the women do win. They love strongly, find good men, and conquer their emotional difficulties and fears.

The writing is occasionally clichéd (time stands still, hair stands on end), but is generally competent and there are frequent indications of what Dick is capable. She describes the Juschanlee River "wander[ing] westward over the Russian steppes, collecting little villages on its meandering way" (*Calm* 17), for instance, and writes, of "the whisper of a curtain against the glass" at the window of the house where the Tsar and his family are imprisoned, that "It was portentous, that small movement of white, like a surrender to the inevitable" (*Eye* 223).

And if, at times, Katarina or other characters seem almost too "good" to be true, it must also be said that people of such suffering and such calibre have not been uncommon in the Mennonite community; the resonance for many readers will be real enough. These are books whose stance toward the past is loving and grateful, and whose intention toward matters of love and faith is inspirational.

Dora Dueck

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Victor Carl Friesen, *Forever Home: Good Old Days on the Farm*. Fifth House Ltd., 2004. Pp. xi + 228. Paperback, \$19.95.

This is one book you can certainly judge by its cover (and title): on the front of *Forever Home: Good Old Days on the Farm* is a homey watercolour of a rural scene familiar to many raised on the Canadian prairies in the early part of the 20th century. Cottony clouds float languidly above a boy on a bike, whose homestead, complete with a vaguely-Model A-ish car in front, appears behind him. On the back of the book is a picture (presumably of the author, though he is not named as such) of a young man wearing a woolen cap who seemingly emerged smiling from Sinclair Ross's Depression-era prairie. What follows, however, is more nostalgic road trip than a revisiting of "The Lamp at Noon."

The contents of this memoir reflect the earnest good nature of its cover. Friesen enjoys ruminating at length over the halcyon days of youth amidst the coal lamps, farm chores, and snow-insulation of Rosthern, Saskatchewan. The chapter headings give a clear signal of what is to come: "Where We Lived"; "Work About the Home"; "Farmyard Chores"; and "Going to Town" all point to the places in memory that Friesen will take his reader. As a memoir, the book depends on Friesen's recall of material details for its effects, and readers of a nostalgic bent might revel in Friesen's recollections of the proper stooking style, methods for filling a coal lamp, and the thrill of riding a bicycle for the first time. His description of laundry day is typical:

On a farm without electricity or running water, all preparations [for clothes washing] were manual. First water was pumped at the well and carried by pails to the summer kitchen a hundred yards away. Eight large buckets were needed, but some of the water might come from the rain barrel under the eaves of the kitchen's shack roof. Any floating insects would be skimmed off and the pails then filled by dipper. [37]

There is a clear desire for fidelity to the experience that often renders this text more descriptive journal than Proustian memoir, but, given its own modest goals, this can't be considered a flaw.

Friesen's prose style, like his subject matter, is matter-of-fact and contains few distracting flourishes (though some readers may be taken aback by his use of the term "Little Black Sambos" to describe himself and his brothers as they ate pancakes, a term rooted in its time and place perhaps, but jarring to contemporary ears). It is tempered by the undertones of a good *Kunstlerroman*, as Friesen shares at several points his early literary experiences and

influences, starting with British poet John Masefield through Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. It is the latter text that must share credit for some of the intense romanticism here, as Friesen observes that he read it every year for a decade. Overall, the prose serves the subject matter well, retaining a readable and believable voice throughout. To quote Abraham Lincoln, an author whose biography Friesen has read admiringly: people who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like.

Tom Penner

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Jeff Gundy, *Walker in the Fog. On Mennonite Writing*. Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House and Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005. Pp. 295. Paperback, \$22.95 (U.S.).

In his Introduction, Jeff Gundy, a writer and professor at Bluffton University, Ohio, remarks that he first conceived this book as a survey of "significant Mennonite literature (at least in the United States) of the last twenty years or so." He acknowledges that it has turned into a less ambitious volume, as "there are now too many fine Mennonite writers and texts" to allow him to realize his initial project, and that it contains "little or nothing about some of the better-known Mennonite writers, especially Canadian authors." Fair enough. But the omission, in a book on what he calls "significant" Mennonite writing, of writers whose works are not only "significant" but have been bombshell successes, causes one to question the appropriateness of its subtitle. The author's disclaimers are somewhat disingenuous for other reasons as well: only two of his fourteen chapters seem to have been written specifically for this volume, the rest having been previously published or presented at conferences in the 1980s and 90s.

Much of the book is devoted to trying to reconcile what the author perceives as the constraints of the "Anabaptist tradition" and the demands of serious literary writing rather than to analyzing the formal and aesthetic qualities of "Mennonite" literary works. When he does get around to actually discussing literary texts, Gundy focuses almost exclusively on poetry, almost all of which (with the notable exceptions of Di Brandt and Patrick Friesen) is of U.S. American provenance, and almost all of which Gundy treats from a purely thematic perspective.

By far the most interesting (and best-written) chapter in the book is the one devoted to the work of William Stafford, in which Gundy discusses not only Stafford's splendid poetry but also his moving

narrative, *Down in My Heart*. It is also in the Stafford chapter that he suggestively evokes the Anabaptist tenet that we are “in the world” but not “of the world” in relation to the role of the Mennonite writer. The qualification is regrettable, for this particular Anabaptist notion can be invoked to examine the role of *all* writers in illuminating the Self as opposed to the Other, recognizing the Self in the Other, and in exploring the “Otherness” in the Self. An in-depth examination of these ideas taken in convergence might have been a fruitful point of departure from which to explore the possible *specificity* of the work of Mennonite writers and writers associated with the Mennonite community within the framework of majority cultures.

The chapter titled “What Is It I Know?” Notes Toward An Embodied Gnosis” also offers intriguing possibilities to develop a sort of poetics of Mennonite writing along the lines Gundy suggests when he alludes, in the Stafford chapter, to Mennonites not being “of the world.” Yet he glosses over some of the implications of Gnostic thought in this regard. For Gnostics, people who do not know themselves do not understand the universe: they are strangers in the world, and only by exploring the most profound depths of the Self can they discover the “spark,” the divine fragment, that links them to the cosmos and to their own origins. The discovery (or recognition) of the *pneuma* or divine spark in the Self combined with the ability to transmit its insights in the creation of an “other” world (of literature) confers upon the writer the role of *alter deus*, creator of an *altera natura*. While Gundy’s discussion of Gnostic principles in a work on Mennonite writing is courageous, he stops short of pointing out their implications for writers and he refrains from presenting Gnostic positions that would be all too difficult to reconcile with the beliefs and practises of Anabaptism.

For Canadian readers, one merit of the book is that it gives a sense of the kind of work being produced by U.S. Mennonite writers, not only Stafford’s (Stafford, actually, is associated with the Brethern) but also authors such as Julia Kasdorf and Jean Janzen. The book also eloquently, if inadvertently, reveals many of the differences between Canadian and U.S. American Mennonite societies as a whole and it illuminates how these differences are reflected in the literatures that have emerged from these two distinct groups. Judging from Gundy’s book, U.S. Mennonites overall seem to be far more church-centred than their Canadian counterparts and preoccupied with the conflict between the secular and the religious, a conflict which is virtually a non-issue to the (Canadian) Mennonite writers I know. While the latter group may thematize the deficiencies and constraints in their Mennonite upbringing (Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt) or problematize certain aspects of Mennonite history and identity (Sandra Birdsell and Rudy Wiebe), they do so resolutely and with the kind of emancipatory

insight typical of classic coming-of-age texts. In this sense, these different manifestations of Mennonite identity, both literary and non-literary, reveal themselves as microcosms of the larger societies of which they are, respectively, a part.

It must be said that, for the most part, Gundy's book lacks the rigour and discipline one would expect from a scholarly work, or even a critical work targeting a general readership. While the discourse at times suggests that this book is intended for scholarly readers (it uses terms like "master narrative" and includes perfunctory references to literary theorists like Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida), the overall tone is so personal, confessional and anecdotal as to verge on the self-indulgent, an effect exacerbated by the copious use of the first-person singular. Critical terms of reference remain undefined throughout the book: although Gundy makes a pretence of explaining what he means by "Mennonite" literature, he manages thoroughly to confuse the issue without ever offering a coherent definition.

The book's pervasive theme of Mennonite "repression," moreover, is undermined by the fact that Gundy makes no attempt to differentiate between doctrinally determined constraints imposed on writers and the constraints that are typical of small-town or rural communities everywhere. "Repression" as Gundy describes it can hardly be called a Mennonite "Ur myth," but is rather a theme common to many if not most non-Mennonite writers as well.

The book's most serious problem is the absence, at crucial junctures, of documentation. Gundy tends to build up straw men without citing sources: "I have heard it suggested quite openly that control of 'the' Mennonite narrative belongs with historians and theologians, who can be trusted to get the story right" (162). The absence of documentation is even more serious if not irresponsible when Gundy makes unsubstantiated accusations that there is a sort of Mennonite *fatwa* at work against Mennonite writers. Referring to Rudy Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt and Julia Kasdorf, Gundy maintains that "all faced the fear of being scorned, chastised, shunned, *even killed* by their own people" (my italics).

Walker in the Fog would have benefited greatly from competent editing. This would have eliminated usage and syntax errors as well as some of the repetitive accounts of Gundy's personal experience and rambling stories of various Mennonite congregations, many of which contribute little to the author's subject.

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Ray Dirks, *In God's Image: A Global Anabaptist Family*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003. Pp. 144. Hardcover, \$34.99; Paperback, \$29.99.

Tracing the paths of our ancestors on the old maps of Russia, Poland, and the Ukraine has been a favourite pastime of mine. Ray Dirks's *In God's Image* therefore irresistibly draws my attention to the opposite ends of the world, to see Mennonite and Brethren churches as they are now, thriving in over 100 widely differing cultures. This book's maps and statistics show at a glance that the Anabaptist-related family has expanded most in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, while North American membership remains at about the same percent of the total, and a serious decline has occurred in Europe.

In the book's unusually passionate introduction and analysis of these demographics, Larry Miller, Mennonite World Conference executive secretary, writes, "The diversity in which we now live articulates the alternative offered to us by the globalization of Anabaptist-related Christianity. Shall we live our lives as if the notion of a worldwide faith family is an illusion? Or shall we take as a basic operating principle the conviction that we are, in fact and in calling, a global family?" (11).

Artist and curator Ray Dirks visited 17 countries and introduces each one with a vignette of family life. We are allowed a keyhole view as these families welcome him and let him walk alongside them – often quite literally. They share their setbacks and victories, their aspirations for their children or their church. Ray's photographs, like his own paintings, display an affection for people. We are invited into familiar scenes of loving gestures, warm skin tones, the cooking and sharing of meals, and moments of worship. Always at the core of the daily round there is the healing and liberating presence of the Spirit of Christ.

The creative gifts of each region are portrayed with striking examples of art, which were brought together by Dirks to form an exhibit for the Mennonite World Conference in Zimbabwe. The reproductions do not always shine as they might have if given a space of their own in the book.

The Winnipeg Free Press reported in July, 2005 that the travelling exhibit, also called "In God's Image," was turned back at the USA border because several pieces by Cuban artists were included. The Americans will not allow anything produced in Cuba into their country, and the exhibit was only allowed to cross the border when these paintings were removed. This event demonstrates a worldview that is the very antithesis of both the exhibit and this book; *In God's*

Image, in both the forms it has taken, strives to build connections that exist beyond politics, nationalism, or ethnicity.

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David Bergen, *The Time In Between*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005. Pp. 273. Hardcover, \$34.99.

The Time in Between, Winnipeg writer David Bergen's Giller Prize-winning novel, treats memory and loss. The book is divided into two sections, roughly separated by the death of one of the main characters, an American veteran of the Vietnam War named Charles Boatman. The novel's perspective is also divided, between Charles and his elder daughter Ada. When the novel opens, Charles has returned to Vietnam, ostensibly as a tourist, and disappeared. Ada and her younger brother Jon travel to Danang in hopes of finding him. The narrative oscillates between the text's present, Ada and Jon in Vietnam, and Charles's past: how he returned from Vietnam to start a new life in America; how he cannot stop thinking about having shot a young Vietnamese boy; how he discovers a novel by a North Vietnamese soldier that calls him back to Vietnam; and how he ultimately dies there.

Much of the novel focuses on Ada's attempts to make sense of her father's disappearance; a lot of her life has been spent looking after Charles in various ways. After Charles's death, Ada becomes sexually involved with Hoang Vu, a Vietnamese artist. Their relationship is marked both by closeness and incomprehension, as his life and context remains foreign to her in important ways. Ultimately, this partial understanding seems to echo her recognition that she will only ever know Charles partially; that her claim on him as his daughter has limits. Reading the same North Vietnamese novel that drew Charles back to Vietnam, "Ada imagined the complexity of her father's response and how he might have seen himself in the story. The war had touched so many lives, even her own now. Here she was, huddled in a chair as small grey moths struck the overhead light, delving into a story that her father had also read, but understanding that even this would not allow her to see how her father saw" (245).

The relationships that Bergen develops between family members are complex and unsettling. Ada is both daughter and surrogate wife to Charles. Del, Charles's younger daughter, begins a sexual relationship with a much older artist when she is still 16. Ada's relationship with Jon conveys undertones of desire: the siblings share

a physical closeness that borders on the erotic. Though much of the narrative is focalized through Ada, the text distinguishes between the relationships that the siblings have with their father. Their differing “knowledge” of Charles and the differing family roles they inhabit are seen, for example, in their response to their father’s post-traumatic insistence that they periodically hide in a bunker he has built on their property: “By the age of seventeen Del refused to go into the bunker with her father. Jon still went. He was less stubborn than Del and he hoped that his going would please his father. Ada went because she believed that each successive story was like a piece of thread, and she was collecting those pieces” (39).

Some of the most interesting questions the text poses are about the relationships between parents and children. What rights do children have to their parents’ lives? How can children know—or accept—their parents as individuals separate from themselves? What are parents’ responsibilities in the matter? By constructing the complex family relationships that he does, Bergen invites an extended meditation on the ethics of parent-child interactions.

The text also points to the unknowability of the past. When Charles returns to Vietnam, he believes he will find there what he seeks: some understanding of his past and some recognition of himself. Instead, he faces a culture that he does not understand and to which he remains an outsider. The Vietnam he remembers is a creation of his own memory, a foreign space that bears little relation to the present-day city he moves through. Place is not equivalent to time. Late in the text, Vu and Ada speculate whether Charles returned to Vietnam to visit a village, “or find people he once knew, or to uncover the same country that he had experienced thirty years ago, or to find this, or discover that.” When Ada says “but it *was* all those things,” Vu replies “But suppose that all those things weren’t enough” (241).

Bergen is sometimes categorized as a bleak writer, but his austere style works well here. Each sentence is pared down to its bare essentials. In a way, very little happens in this novel: the characters hang out waiting to hear from Charles, occasionally paying one another visits, and taking short trips out of Danang. Bergen’s tight prose, however, keeps the energy moving: this is a text that works through understatement, raising questions that linger long after the narrative ends.

Alison Calder

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Elsie K. Neufeld, Robert Martens, Leonard Neufeldt, guest editors, *Rhubarb: A Magazine of New Mennonite Art and Writing*. "Special Issue: Words From the West Coast." 11 (2005). Winnipeg: The Mennonite Literary Society. Pp. 48. \$7.

This new issue of *Rhubarb* again demonstrates its important role as a self-proclaimed "outlet for the (loosely defined) Mennonite voice, reflecting the changing face of the Mennonite community, promoting dialogue and encouraging the Anabaptist tradition of reformation and protest." The issue is devoted entirely to BC Mennonite writers, who are clearly adding a strong new wave to the surging tide of Mennonite writing in Canada. As Andreas Schroeder concludes in his enthusiastic Introduction: "One thing is certain. This collection ends the collective invisibility of BC's Mennonite writers in a very decisive way."

Rhubarb was born when Victor Enns took over the Mennonite Literary Society after the *Mennonite Mirror* ceased publication in 1991. The late Roy Vogt had established the Society as a non-profit umbrella organization for the *Mirror* and for publishing Mennonite books. During my tenure as editor of the *Mirror* I was tempted to turn it into a literary journal, but it was obvious at the time that our readers were more interested in news stories than in fiction and poetry. Victor Enns, already a well-known poet, faced no such problem in establishing *Rhubarb*. It started in 1998 as a quarterly magazine concentrating exclusively on Mennonite fiction, poetry, and art. Appropriately, the first issue focused on "Peace" and featured the work of such prominent writers as Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, Jean Janzen, Jeff Gundy, and others. However, Enns's plan to publish four issues a year foundered, largely for financial and staff reasons. Typically, there have been two issues per year, each issue artfully planned with an impressive display of Mennonite writing illustrating such broad themes as "Immigration," "Romance," "Death," "Humor," "Silence," and now "BC writers." *Rhubarb* has drawn on the talents of both well-established writers and exciting new writers who continue to expand the definition of "Mennonite" writing by exploring new vistas of experience, "Mennonite" and otherwise.

And that is precisely what this impressive array of BC writers is doing. There is talent galore here and, as Schroeder points out, changing attitudes towards Mennonitism: "The preoccupations of these writers have become more secular—though no less moral or spiritual. The focus has become less parochial, more universal." The collection includes poems and short fiction by over two dozen writers, some exploiting specific Mennonite themes and settings while others

make no specific references to Mennonitism but nevertheless reveal Mennonite attitudes and values.

Standouts among the prose pieces include Connie Braun's "The Basket," which traces an old hand-woven family laundry basket all the way back to Mennonite Russia, turning it into a striking symbol of Mennonite faith and culture through several generations. "Haircuts," by Patrick Friesen, has the grace and compactness of a prose poem. This story combines an old-fashioned (unwanted) boy's haircut by a strict father with cogent reflections on the symbolic aspects of hair and explores, from the boy's perspective, the primitive ritual of Halloween juxtaposed with the bleak Christian rituals of a Mennonite environment. Roxanne Willems-Snopek's "Two Steps Forward" depicts a young, single mother's self-analysis as she struggles to raise her little son, who has been driven into autistic silence by her feud with her parents. In spite of its brevity, this tightly woven story reveals a rich nexus of underlying meaning.

The poetry is equally impressive. K. Louise Vincent is represented here by some intriguing excerpts from her first volume of poetry *Hannah and the Holy Fire*, which is also reviewed in the issue. Carla Funk is another fine poet whose "Bundling" has a bold Amish setting: "if I could climb back inside the life of a young Amish/girl, I would spend the night with you/ in the attic bedroom of my ancestors." Elsie K. Neufeld, a prominent poet and teacher, weaves some beautiful imagery into her poems "Morning" and "This is the Crack." Jeff Derksen, whose latest volume is reviewed in the issue, brings a unique voice and style to his work: a steely tone suitable for the wide range of technical and historical imagery and a voice that engages the present as a visionary prelude to the future. Leonard Neufeldt is another well-known Mennonite poet whose deft touch is evident in "The Fraser Valley As Historical Subject." Other poets featured are Melanie Siebert, Larry Nightingale, Barbara Nickel, Robert Martens, Walter Neufeld, and Melody Goetz. The issue also contains several works of art—paintings by Edward Epp and Hilda Goertzen and two ink drawings by Werner Friesen.

This impressive, trend-setting collection of Mennonite writing raises recurring questions: How much longer can "Mennonite" writing expect to be identified as such before it simply becomes Canadian writing? Why are Mennonite writers still regarded as a distinct ethnic group in the Canadian literary world? Is it because they have appeared on the literary scene in recent decades as a unified group with their Mennonite identity intact as they shape their artistic visions? Is the unique blending of ethnic culture and religious faith that stamps Mennonite writers recognized by non-Mennonites as well? Sadly, the Mennonite ethos may fade with time, but even if there is no longer "Mennonite" writing there will still be

Mennonite writers. As Sarah Klassen has pointed out: “The current fascination with *Mennonite* will pass [...] while the appreciation for good *writing* will not.” And good writing is exactly what these BC writers demonstrate with such confidence.

Al Reimer

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Melanie Cameron, *Holding the Dark*. The Muses Company, 1999. Pp. 111. \$15.95.

Melanie Cameron, *Wake*. The Muses Company, 2003. Pp. 111. \$17.95.

Melanie Cameron made an impressive debut with her first book of poems, *Holding the Dark*, in 1999. For such a young poet, she displays a mature understanding of her craft: beautiful cadence, meaningful line endings, and memorable, clinched endings. Rather than publishing a collection of miscellaneous poems, Cameron applies her craft to a single theme. She explores the idea of actual and metaphorical darkness, presenting us with a coherent and intuitive journey.

In the first section, Cameron’s speaker is recovering from retinal surgery. Her experience of blindness helps her to internalize a world which sight tends to externalize:

the sky
 you thought was out there, is
 also around
 and inside
 you. And the wall. And the willow. (11)

Through these very lyrical poems, the speaker explores this unified, interiorized world, without strict boundaries of subject/object. The poems are expressions of newly discovered connections: erotic connection, empathetic connection to other people, and oneness with nature. Darkness is a shared space, causing the speaker to question the meaning of personal identity. For this reason also, darkness represents a fearsome death of the known:

The darkness is a handshake.
 Some kind of agreement
 between
 nothing and nothing. (25)

In part II, this same speaker explores childhood memory. These are “visions” of the past, a time when “everything I look at rushes

into me” (35). Yet, these visual experiences are deeply felt in the “darkness” of memory:

she keeps everything
she loves in her body. (41)

In part III, Cameron explores the darkness of a lover’s absence and of desire. In part IV she applies her interiorizing, empathetic sensibility to the world of the poor and mistreated. It is as if her earlier experience of empathetic imagination brings her to a point where she doesn’t even distinguish between herself and her subjects:

Convince me that you didn’t mean to
rip our insides out. (81)

The final section is a meditation on myth and identity. Throughout this section, the speaker’s cherished sense of a singular self is called into question. In one poem, while momentarily preoccupied with her superficial image, she says,

I could hear
night’s deeper body
calling. (101)

From the first sequence on the literal darkness of blindness, through poems on the “darkness” of desire and separation, memory, empathy, death, and myth, this is a remarkably unified, tender, and compelling book.

In her more recent book, *Wake*, Melanie Cameron is more daring with line breaks and metaphors. She seems to have mastered line endings which look back, completing the grammatical sense of a phrase, and forward toward new, and often counter meanings. Seldom does she use this technique lightly, but in order to highlight dual, sometimes contradictory truths. For instance,

we want
to believe words
might reveal what has been
erased. (43)

As with her earlier book, *Wake* is unified thematically. The poems revolve around the three closely connected denotations of the word “wake”: a return to consciousness, the rippling trace left when a pebble is dropped in water, and commemoration of the dead. These poems are all concerned with memory. The book itself is a wake, commemorating the past, revealing the “ripples” cast by both personal and public events, and helping the speaker and the reader thus return to consciousness.

Like the theme of darkness in the earlier book, memory tends to blur the speaker’s definition of self. Memories are within us, but we

are also within memories. That is, personal identity is constructed from unreliable, shifting, and shared memories. Cameron illustrates this beautifully in one of my favourite poems of the book:

Within ourselves,
stone
-like memories lie
breathing
riverbeds, riverbanks. Beneath riverbanks, riverbeds
breathing
lie memories, like
stone
ourselves within. (33)

The subjects of the speaker's memories are her own childhood, tepee rings, her great great grandparents, Louis Riel, a woman's fear before being murdered (from a story in the newspaper). Memory is both personal and public. Through a profusion of metaphors, Cameron characterizes the phenomenon of memory itself. Memory is a frightening gulf which the present moment falls into (21), it is a naughty rendezvous "cuckolding the present" (42). Memory is a tide, which

returns
to return
those places
to you, at least
pieces
of them. (36)

Memory is a skin with pockets, gathering stones of event until, heavy with them, one wades into death (30).

These are absorbing, sometimes dreamy poems. Cameron has done more than compile collections of her well-crafted lyric poetry; she has written two organic, thematically consistent books.

Randy Plett
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Joanne Lehman, *Morning Song*. Kent State University Press, 2005. Pp. ix + 38. Paperback, no price.

“Teach me the mysteries and/ where to look” (3); “This/ storm is our life. Here we are” (6), “[...] old elms struck by lightning,/ weed-whacked thistles wanting to bloom purple” (11); “hungry hearts” (17); “how to make peace” (26).

I sat in an Adirondack chair on a deck beside a small river and read those words aloud. Morning mist rose off the slow water, the far banks veiled, and autumn’s last flowers and the birch stands spotting the land copper and yellow. Ducks landed, dipped and dove under, ascended and flew overhead, dangerously close, feathered oars folding, unfolding. An eerie, familiar sound – like a funeral congregation rising, unbidden, in unified motion, at the sound of a casket’s approach, the family travelling behind, towards reserved front-seat rows. *Ruhe Sanft*. Rest in peace.

Joanne Lehman’s poems invite us into the landscape of her grief and lamentation, to witness her entry into “the broth of our loss” (7), that salty soup of regrets we can’t refuse, to accept the finality of death and the changes it brings: “I’ll never go back/ to live childhood over. Here, in this memory I stand forever [...]” (5) and “[...] I’m/ somebody else – not the one/ they all know” (26).

Life is messy, it’s “Tear Soup” & “Morning Song.” Stirring the soup, over and over, while singing the song, in the key of E flat, though you’re reading a score written in D major – that’s how it feels after a loved one dies.

But if you walk through what is, the grief will slowly recede and make room for a reverent awareness of all that remains. Lehman takes us through that process, her tear-stricken eyes open outward to see “a strand of crystal rain pearls...along the hydrangea stalk” (9). The beauty, however, both comforts and cuts, and though she has turned again towards life, “I still lose my way [...] feel lost – travel-weary” (10). “Some of it we get used to,” she acknowledges, but “the heart will never – distances, heavy skies” (12). What’s more, “Prayers with the mourning doves don’t get you over it” (11).

As bleak as this sounds, in “Hymn Sing” (16) the hymnal becomes a source of comfort, and “Morning Song” (17) notes an awakening of gratitude. With healing, the eye learns to draw life from what is, and seeing awakens other senses: “feeling again [...] lusting for a ripe tomato [...] high on a glimpse of garden – larkspur and cockscomb [...]” (23) and hearing “the wood thrush call my name” (12). There is the “hum of harvest” (3), when emptiness is fullness and absence becomes presence. “What was I so busy doing?” she asks, surprised by this awakening and its wisdom.

“Twin Speakers” (19), about identical male twins, is a clever metaphor for the paradox of what Lehman has discovered: that losing is finding, and solitude is communion. But still, and always, her pain ebbs and flows. “Your poems come,” she writes, “as if ripped/ from my center and sift back through/ to my hollow core” (26). On the other hand, “every sunrise a movement to/ swell these bare branches,/ [...] a promise – of one green shoot/ on a bare tree” (31) and “this feast at the bottom of memory” (33).

“Listen to your life/ it will speak [...] from the echo” (34). We are directed to a “star reaching out/ from the hole in the night”, then to “strawberries on/ the windowsill [...] a red onion [...] beauty before dinner” (35), “crickets, locusts and tree frogs [...] singing [...] for all creation in exuberant, erotic, exotic night song [...]” (37), and barn swallows, “arching toward the vaulted sky, the reservoir/ of all that matters” (38).

Thus ends the book, and I was left wanting more.

Elsie K. Neufeld

Abbotsford, British Columbia

David Waltner-Toews, *The Complete Tante Tina: Mennonite Blues and Recipes*. Waterloo ON, Pandora Press, 2004. Pp. 129. Paperback.

Epitaph? “In his cold salty bosom/the Lord will hold me,/ so quiet so warm,/ so still” (66).

The Complete Tante Tina reads like a posthumous collection of a writer’s works. Its structure, however, brings to mind a eulogy: speaking last words in praise of a loved one. The book begins with a poem about family roots and ends with the section “Papers found [...] after she died [...]” The poems in Tante Tina’s voice have an end-of-life mood as she reviews her childhood, passage to Canada, marrying *Doft*, motherhood, community involvement, widowhood, and old age. Her children’s voices and perspectives are also registered in several poems, as is the voice of Little Haenschen, the grandson who witnessed her death and who speaks in “Postscript.” And appropriately interspersed throughout, Tante Tina’s recipes, that treasured legacy all “good” women of Tante Tina’s generation leave behind.

“So geht das Leben” (78), concludes Tante Tina. The double entendre is poignant: that’s how life goes, and that’s how life goes away. “Was ist zu sagen?” She’s right: what’s to say?

For twenty-five years, Tante Tina has been with us and critics aplenty have commented on her. Readers, not surprisingly, have loved her; she is, after all, a composite of everyone’s Tante Tina. (I

had three, of various sizes, with razor-sharp tongues, their heads full of recipes and stories galore, told in High German and Low, with English tossed in like scraps into borscht.) So, what's to say? Lots. I say thanks. Thanks to the Universal Russian Mennonite Tante Tina, "her life, a grace" (92).

Thanks for your memorable, child-like way with words, for demonstrating the magic in marrying ordinary, unrelated objects to create one fresh, extraordinary image: "his heart is tight as a Pfeffernuss" (18); "His words are like sour cream" (17); "fat Mrs. Peter Warkentin/ in her stiff Sunday dress/ like pillows full of prickly wet feathers me hugging"(68); "stingy as a wooden clothes-pin" (70); "heart like a mad goose is uprising/ snapping and hissing [...] so much hurt there is" (25). And there are "dust storms/ like whale ghosts, hungry in the sky" (69).

Thanks for reminding us to honour our elders, for "no one listens to an old lady/ anymore, ja?" (61). For clarifying the importance of stories: "God is in that story [...] that is why [...] even some Christians/ do not like stories so much/ because they think maybe God is in the story hiding" (55).

Thanks for reminding us that life is not at all simple: "Up and down are we on the grey water heaving" (66), but "So bad the world can't be/ there's no hope" (46); and "Our paradise is not a place to be going/ Our paradise is in the wandering" (90).

Thanks for reminding us of generosity: "Always Mutti has soup gemade/ for everyone, no matter what colour" (76); to "do unto others" because "This could somewhere be your Papa [...] Mutti and I are washing a man who could be like Papa who was taken away" (74).

Thanks for keeping one eye on the borscht and one eye on the world, and for sharing your insights. On leaders who go to war, for instance: "They want to look strong, because they are cowards/ they are killing men like Papa [...] always there are reasons to kill" (75). Or on the power-hungry: "they are small/ people, with visions like a rooster" (61).

The solace of grief, the comfort of laughter. I entered these two places in my reading, but their essence is similar. The poems of these two volumes are what Emerson refers to as "a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees; by sharing the path or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others."

Elsie K Neufeld

Abbotsford, British Columbia

Cheryl Denise. *I Saw God Dancing*. Telford, PA: DreamSeeker Books, 2005. Pp. 90. Paperback, \$18.95.

Shari Wagner. *Evening Chore*. Telford, PA: DreamSeeker Books, 2005. Pp.108. Paperback, \$18.95.

Dallas Wiebe. *On the Cross: Devotional Poems*. Telford, PA: DreamSeeker Books, 2005. Pp. 96. Paperback, \$18.95.

DreamSeeker Books of Pennsylvania has inaugurated an exciting new poetry series under the editorship of poet and scholar Jean Janzen. The first three offerings, featuring American Mennonite writers at various stages in their careers, establish the ambitious tone of the series. While they represent a broad range of style and subject, all of these poets grapple with matters of faith and, in varying degrees, their Mennonite heritage.

The first book in the series is *On the Cross: Devotional Poems* by Dallas Wiebe, a major figure in Mennonite writing. Barbed and gentle by turns, it is a deeply moving collection of spiritual verse that, as the double-meaning of its title might suggest, meditates on the cross as both icon and emblem of the believer's "crucified" condition. Cast in traditional poetic forms and drawing on biblical image and cadence, *On the Cross* emphatically underscores the breathtaking distance Wiebe has traveled in the course of his writing career. It is one that stretches from his rebellious tone and avant-garde style in the 1960s and 70s (exemplified by his iconoclastic novel *Skyblue the Badass* in which the protagonist flees his Mennonite community) to the quieter, contemplative work of the last ten years such as *Our Asian Journey*, a postmodern novel about 1880s Mennonites drawn to Central Asia by apocalyptic visions. In a sense, Wiebe has come full circle.

On the Cross presents profound readings of the biblical crucifixion as well as contending with how that event has been rendered artistically in hymns and paintings. While the second poem of the collection, "Anabaptist Radiance," speaks to the spiritual reverberations of the Mennonite past ("We are marching, marching upward/into the afterglow of our ancestors [...] They are marching on in us/in our squabbling,/in our schisms [...]") (16) the rest of the book speaks to a Christianity shorn of ethnicity and denominationalism. The voice treads softly here, pounds with a hard, rasping gait there. Looking out a plane window, Wiebe writes, "the cross is as present/as the small rain/that wavers across the wing" (51), while elsewhere, in "E.D. on the Cross," the language has become jagged and muscular to devastating effect: "His deathly Stare—Assured my Eyes—/His Pain—would never Cease—/Until I Wrapped—my Own soft Lips—/Around —the crooked Nail— /To let Him Know—that he had Died—/To

save Us all from Hell” (62). Most of the poems in *On the Cross* have an austere, under-aestheticized form that sharpens their “spontaneous” and introspective quality. The spirit of self-examination extends to four astonishing poems that look at the scar left by Wiebe’s heart surgery: “The hand of the surgeon/became like the hand of God/ When the surgeon cut/the sign of salvation/into my chest” (36).

Wiebe brings a stylistic richness to the collection that extends to their graphic design. A number of poems assume a sort of cruciform structure across the page break, which, far from arbitrary, is accompanied by a sonnet-like shift in the poetic voice. Similarly, the dialogue between word and image – various crosses by Kansas artist Paul A. Friesen break up the body of the text – mirrors the interplay between symbol and faith. Wiebe’s collection looks squarely and unflinchingly at the iconic and theological weight of the Christian cross (so central, yet so often so peripheral), and its power to break into and transform our understandings of ourselves and our world. All told, it is a brilliant and utterly unique collection that combines fearless self-examination with a surging wonder at grace, even joy.

Cheryl Denise’s *I Saw God Dancing* is a poignant, often humorous first collection that finds an improbable balance between the certainties of belief and worldly skepticism. Over the course of the collection, Denise moves from recollections of an Old Order childhood in Elmira, Ontario, to chaffing against its restrictive social order, and finally the affirmation of belief within a new understanding.

Many poems speak to traditions like quilt making or the rituals of baking and canning. “[My people] read Bibles and think a lot/but would never tell you their thoughts/ unless asked,/and even then/ they would speak quietly/with a slow strong sense/of who God is./ They ask what you believe/and listen” (27). But there is also the shattering of illusions, like a babysitter’s discovery of pornographic magazines in a Mennonite elder’s bathroom. Other poems offer blunt critiques of the evangelical yoking of belief and material prosperity or the patriarchal nature of church life. “God (according to Pastor Smucker)” rejects the narrative of silent, “Maybelline women/who make Jello salads/for carry-ins” (80). One is reminded of Di Brandt’s early writing, though the tone here is more tender.

I Saw God Dancing ranges from Mennonites’ awkwardness in their bodies to God’s particular affection for farmers – “I bet He doesn’t watch us much/in offices/over spreadsheets and lawyer briefs,/He gets bored”(40) – and the quiet agony of nursing homes. Denise has a informal, plain-spoken style that is by no means simplistic and occasionally breaks into high lyric mode: “I want the feel of you/to slide down me/sudden, forever/like you could drop from the stars,/ or saunter out of the woods,/or be standing at the side of the road/ waiting for my ride.”

Where Denise's poems gather much of their energy from the guileless candour of their poetic voice, Shari Wagner's accomplished first collection *Evening Chore* presents the reader with lush, often melancholy lyricism and the sophisticated interplay of literary allusion.

The poems in the opening section of *Evening Chore* act as a sort of biographical ground for the poems, a way of seeing that frames the thematic forking paths in the rest of the collection. There are poems about Wagner's grandfather's land, playing Rook with missionaries in Africa, even a wry look at the legacy of Mennonite bodies: "With milkshake diets/and jogging, we've tried to/exorcise them from our bodies -/to expel Holstein hips and legs/stout as Belgian horses" (20). Wagner even gives clues to the wellspring of her penetrating metaphors and emotional gravity. In "Second Language," she tells of her realization as a young poet that the circular lyrics of Somali nomads were a kind of home for the soul: "I never learned the language, but/later rustling corn leaves spoke/a tongue I hadn't heard before and carved/deep in the skin of beech were cryptic/poems I could partially decipher,/words of love or loss we carry/within us, our amulets, our houses, /as we travel through desolate spaces" (29). Wagner has the rare ability to weave the flash of insight back into the rough fabric of memory and experience, to hold the personal and the universal together in her hand.

Evening Chore goes on to examine the natural world – the stoicism of a heron draws attention to the bankruptcy of suburban life – and figures mythic and historical. It closes with a wonderful section on family memory, loss, and mementos that collapses past and present. "Teaching My Nephew To See His Own Shadow" shows with great acuity the sadness that dwells at the edges of things: "I stoop/and touch/the ground/with his finger:/ "This/is your shadow."/ But already/he's scanning the air/as if tracking/a second shadow,/ swift/as a hummingbird/tied to his wrist" (90). This is a confident and richly-textured first book that gathers together vital stories, like the grandfather in the title poem who cups his hands and calls "the cows away from the shadows/and into the field where the last light is/already sinking" (13).

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David Waltner-Toews, *One Foot in Heaven*. Coteau Books, 2005. Pp. 257. Paperback, \$18.95.

In this collection of intertwined stories, Waltner-Toews achieves something quite unparalleled: an almost-sprawling family saga fit to the modest narrative universe of prairie Mennonites. This is not to say that Waltner-Toews's world is constricted – indeed, he takes the reader on journeys through varied geographic, spiritual, and personal landscapes, but he is more interested in painting his characters' more intimate emotional canvasses of his various characters than in reproducing the broad sketches of an epoch. This lapidary concern for finely-drawn characters produces many tender, humorous, and humane moments.

The progenitor of this collection is an escapee from the Mennonite Ukraine named Prometheus Koslowski, who has come to Canada to build a new life. To him belong the first and last stories: most of what comes between features a small community built around his two children, twins Sarah and Thomas, and their friends. Like most small communities, this one is riven with sexual jealousy and attraction, petty pranks, and the ever-present challenge of living in a world that God seems to have abandoned.

Many of the stories centre around young Mennonites boys and men (specifically Thomas Koslowski and Abner Dueck) who find themselves caught between physical desire and a church that preaches physical abnegation. Abner lusts after Sarah Koslowski and a Jewish classmate named Jael Freed: the sexual tension thus created takes up most of this character's energy until later in the text. His sexuality is inextricably linked – and painfully adjudicated – through his teenaged understanding of faith, and his plight is illustrated in one of the text's most poignant observations:

Touching himself and touching God were thus to Ab emotionally symmetrical experiences, linked in never-ending cycles by ropes of guilt and despair. It was a dizzying, nauseating sense of circling from which he wanted, finally, to break free, to be Bold for Christ, to be Redeemed and Purified. (79)

Through Abner, Waltner-Toews demonstrates his willingness to grapple with human – and Christian – experience in its most complex, erotic dimensions.

It is Thomas's privilege to get the most humourously erotic passage in all Mennonite literature thus far: the story "Mennonite Baking" sees him creating *paska* with his Tante Elsie while reminiscing about a baking session with the flirty Marianne. Its conflation of the carnal with the epicurean is deftly interwoven with Elsie's back story, which contains its own eroticised loaf. After reading Thomas's odes to the

buns in Marianne's kitchen, one may never look at *zweiback* the same way again. In all seriousness, this story about making Mennonite Easter bread sees resurrection manifesting itself in many ways, with Elsie's poignant reminiscences echoing the communal escape from Ukraine and Nestor Machno's madness.

Waltner-Toews leads the reader on a quest that is spiritual as well as sexual. At one point Thomas Koslowski's questing brings him to the lush greenery of Thailand and Laos. Surrounded by American mercenaries and nearly seduced by Jael Freed, Thomas finds himself challenging the notion that fulfilment can be found in the absence of community. Waltner-Toews, like David Bergen in *The Time in Between* (reviewed in this issue), admirably avoids clichés of the exoticized East. In fact, Waltner-Toews deploys (Doubting) Thomas' journey to comment on the voyeuristic impulse that drives Westerners to search of "cultural authenticity": the journey, he suggests, is purely circular and, hence, self-defeating:

The people for whom this is identity don't want to talk about it, and they are right. Once you start to critically assess Menno Simons, Jesus, Buddha, you've lost it. You're lost. You are an outsider. (162)

Waltner-Toews thus nicely states the paradox of self-conscious faith: the moment that critical distance is achieved, "authenticity" becomes impossible.

One Foot in Heaven is not without a few blemishes. Some readers, for instance, may be troubled by the fact that no woman's breasts go unremarked. This is likely due to the narrative focus on sexually frustrated young men, but it is noticeable throughout. More importantly, some of the meetings and reunions that are necessary to provide narrative cohesion seem overly serendipitous, so much so that by the time Thomas meets a shadowy woman who turns out to be Canadian on a mercenary gunboat in Thailand it comes as little surprise that it's Jael Freed, who conveniently reveals plot details that shed ironic light on earlier events.

The novel closes with the final chapter in Prom Koslowski's own life. It is a testament to Waltner-Toews's superb grasp of novelistic pitch that Prom's words of farewell to his newly dead wife ring resonate with all the voices in the text: "Dear, dear Rachel, my lovely kite." By this time the reader finds it almost equally difficult to say farewell to the various characters who have been revealed in so many subtle ways.

Tom Penner

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