

# Book Reviews

## Reviews of Fiction and Poetry

Rudy Wiebe, *Of this Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood In The Boreal Forest*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2006. Pp. 391. Hardcover, \$34.95.

Only a master craftsman of fiction could have written this fascinating memoir of a Mennonite boy growing up in a remote, impoverished rural area of northern Saskatchewan back in the thirties and forties. It subtly illustrates that however mundane and unenviable a life may seem from the outside, it can be presented as intensely engaging and insightful seen from the inside. With his sensuous descriptive powers, Rudy Wiebe depicts his childhood world, for all its innocence, naiveté and cultural deprivation, in an artistic guise as attractive and revealing as that of a masterful novel.

Wiebe writes with fearless, unapologetic candour, never showing the slightest embarrassment or self-consciousness about his humble Mennonite background. From the macroview of Mennonite history and culture he dramatized so vividly in *Sweeter Than All The World*, he now shifts to a microview of a Mennonite boy and his family lost in the Canadian boreal wilderness. And that personal story is based on Wiebe's conviction that his life is to be seen as evolving naturally from the earth: "Standing barefoot in the turned soil behind our house, I know: Of this earth my cells are made" (367). But early on he also becomes aware of a deeply rooted spiritual dimension of life and that mystery is symbolized for him in the vast aspen forests that enclose his miniature world.

Wiebe's family settled in Canada in 1930, members of the last Mennonite group to emigrate before the Soviet Union closed its borders. Although greatly relieved to live in a free country, the family will never forget the malevolence of Stalin, whose sinister shadow will always be there. As the family struggles to establish itself on a crude log-cabin homestead in Speedwell, Saskatchewan, Rudy, the youngest child and born in Canada, begins to explore the various aspects of his world, including his own identity. Wiebe knows how to make the past come alive through verifiable facts, photos and the reliable memories of his older siblings, but he also evokes the texture of past events – their color, smell and intimate feel – and that can only be done by igniting the past with the verbal glow of fiction.

One of Wiebe's earliest and most captivating discoveries is the magic of language – in his case not one language but three: his mother tongue of Low German (*Plautdietsch*), High German, his church language, and the English he learns at school. Throughout his childhood he feels “the gathering power of words” (118). With his voracious reading, English quickly becomes his literary language, but the oral Low German he learned first remains a fertile nexus that both inspires and enriches his sense of linguistic expression. Readers who know Low German will have noticed that Wiebe's prose style has always reflected the rich “orality” of that language. Low German words, sayings and verses are strewn throughout the book, adding another dimension of authenticity to it. Wiebe credits Jack Thiessen's Low German dictionary “for making the (for me) instinctive sounds of Low German systematically visible on paper; at last” (391).

As one would expect in a Mennonite family, faith is a major theme in Wiebe's story. His mother is the family bastion of faith with her ardent prayers and her solemn hymn singing as she works. That steadfast faith is shared by her more reserved husband and passed on to the children. As Wiebe puts it: “Before I was born my mother's blood and breath formed me to know that God is everywhere. Whatever and everything ‘God’ may mean, the presence is” (122). Later, when the boy's cultural and religious horizons expand with an extended visit to Vancouver, his faith becomes less intuitive when he is exposed to aggressive evangelists preaching “the molten steel wrath of God” (303) instead of love, leaving him with a faith more wary and incipiently sceptical.

The emotional climax of the book comes as the result of Wiebe's close relationship with his adolescent sister Helen and her early death. Her suffering and eventual demise of heart disease are movingly portrayed in an early draft of a short story that would later become one of his first published stories. Indeed, the emerging writer is much in evidence here, as in other parts of the book. As Wiebe says, “When a written story ends, others are always continuing” (260). Whether it's learning about sex by watching animals and chickens copulate, describing the milking of a cow, the hoeing of sugar beets, or the Mennonite tradition of *Trajchtmoaka* (chiropractor) and countless other things, Wiebe knows how to make everything in this book seem more than it is. And that is the art of a true storyteller. For Rudy Wiebe the world of reality is given form and meaning by words – “words forged and bolted together into the living architecture of story” (387).

Al Reimer  
University of Winnipeg

Sarah Klassen, *A Curious Beatitude*. Winnipeg: J. Gordon Shillingford, 2006. Pp. 96. Soft cover, \$14.95.

Sarah Klassen's luminous sixth volume of poetry, which follows her 2000 short story collection, *The Peony Season*, takes its title from a seven-part poem that puts into words the experience of listening to Brahms's "Ein Deutsches Requiem." Klassen's lyric rendering of blessings, including the strange blessing of sorrow itself, sets up the elegiac joy of this collection, which proposes, among other things, a consideration of spiritual pragmatics. Glossing the word "curious" in both its meanings, inquisitive as well as odd, Klassen contemplates the oddness of existence on earth along with the difficult consolations of a philosophical and inquisitive faith. Klassen is a writer of such integrity and vision that she consistently and conscientiously offers a poetic view that considers morality but never moralizes, that travels but never forgets first-world complicity in poverty and hunger, that writes of political oppression without simplifying its causes and consequences. Klassen, is, in other words, a poet whose conscience leads her to consider the sorrow of the world without luxuriating in it. Like Margaret Avison's, Sarah Klassen's poetry reads like an invitation to breathe differently.

In the collection's first section, "*Requiem and Magnificat*," Klassen introduces an encounter with the sorrow offered by Brahms's Requiem, beginning with "The Saddest Music in the World," a wry reference to Guy Maddin's film of the same name. Sorrow itself becomes a double blessing with solace, and Klassen captures the ambiguous embrace of this blessing in her line breaks: neither "blues nor jazz can offer this much / sadness. It leaves you curiously / undone. It leaves you / comforted" (13). In seven sections – one fewer than the beatitudes delivered in the Sermon on the Mount – these poems capture the rise and fall of the music with the poetic imperative of their own cadence. Klassen follows this with a series of poems prompted by paintings and photographs, moving from the poetic project of pulling words from music to discussing the bewildering power of sight. Klassen pushes notions of reading the image far enough to include doubt and disturbance in viewer reception. In the poem "Fiction," for instance, concerning Edward Hopper's painting, "Hotel Room," perception is blinding rather than illuminating: "not knowing which bright panel is the window / troubles us," but we are very aware that, regardless of what we can or cannot perceive, "fiction lurks in the freshly painted corners" (25).

Subsequent sections, "The Far Country" and "The Stripped Garden," perform other feats of poetic balance. Klassen's travel poems deftly refuse literary recolonization of the land through which the

traveller passes. Two longer poem series stand out here as clear-eyed examinations of the historical texture of Christianized cultures. In “Postcards from the Andes,” Klassen invokes the violence of Spanish colonialism and complicates the notion of pilgrimage. “Wilderness Wandering,” an exploration of the Old Testament desert, includes the voice of Isaac narrating Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of the boy to God, and eventually locates the desert as a site of rigorous spiritual cleansing that becomes an artistic conundrum: “Think of the desert as the book of grief in which you write / everything that you have broken, that has broken you ... // Think of the wind / obliterating overnight the lengthy lines in sand” (47). The setting of the Carberry Spirit Sands at the conclusion of “Wilderness Wandering” suggests a walk on the Canadian prairie as a contemplative sojourn, demonstrated by Klassen’s final witty enjambment: “Do not hesitate / and do not hurry” (48). Her skill with the multi-sectioned lyric is evident in the final two poems of the collection, “German Lessons in the Interlake” and “Rewinding Time,” for which she won a National Magazine Gold Award in 2000. Too often poems about childhood memory and elegiac odes flounder in sentimentality, but Klassen rewrites family as a space between languages as well as between large bodies of water, using Goethe’s “Wanderers Nachtlied” to shift to the call to mourning in “Rewinding Time.” Books like *A Curious Beatitude*, with its beautiful ambiguities of lyricism and its sense of social responsibility, deserve readership and respect, not the least for the way these poems quietly insist, as Klassen does, that “thought when it lights in the brain is a bird” (51).

Tanis MacDonald  
Wilfrid Laurier University

Carla Funk, *The Sewing Room*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2006. Pp. vi + 111. Soft cover, \$15.95.

If the remarkably talented and prolific Carla Funk can be said to have a mission, that mission is to return poetry and the poet to the public. “The Blue Spruce Café,” one of many memorable poems in *The Sewing Room*, Funk’s third collection of poems, imagines the speaker’s father drinking coffee and smoking with the blue-collar men in a slow-talking truck stop. Then, with, “shut up, fellas, listen to this,” he stuns them into silence, powerful emotion, even into writing on scraps of paper and understanding something quite new about themselves because of a poem by his daughter that he reads to them:

“Their mugs cooling, / . . . All of them holding up their cups / thirsty for the bottomless drink.” “Is it too much to imagine?” (53-54).

Well, no one denies the tough odds. But as official poet-laureate of the capital city of BC, the thirty-two-year-old Funk takes seriously her role of serving as Victoria’s cultural ambassador while teaching writing at the University of Victoria. Just as importantly, she publishes poems that, like the work of the late William Stafford, speak to and for us all in words that shun *Chatelaine* elegance and the academic trappings of her home base:

Take away those table napkins folded into swans  
and reception servers who carry silver trays  
to our guests. Strip down their black slacks  
and white shirts. Dress them in tights, velvet  
frocks and brocade tunics, soft plumed hats  
or better yet – just strip them down.

. . .

Let us eat fat slices of bread hot from the oven.

(“Retrospect” 110)

No doubt Funk’s original home base, Vanderhoof, one of the earliest Mennonite settlements in BC, plays a role in her mission, her magical way with ordinary words and her choice of subjects, including the Mennonite, Biblical, and theological subjects in all three of her volumes.

The banishment of poetry from the republic is an old story. What is most interesting in Funk’s versions of this banishment are the kinds of marginalization of poetic work she specifies and the kinds of recovery she imagines. The crazy and sometimes deadly excesses of youth, for example, including the droll God-talk of a small-town’s Pentecostal preacher’s drunken son, divides “who I am from who I am” (“The Burning Bush” 12). In “The Banning of Beauty,” set in China’s notorious Cultural Revolution, art goes underground to carry on a stealthy, widespread insurgency (59-60). In the opening poem, “Noah,” the only viable redemptive move is to accept the ruined flesh of old Noah’s nakedness (5). In a number of other poems in the volume, returning to one’s imperfect body, freely admitting others’ bodies and accepting the body of the world with its gifts, bewilderments, and tragedies are crucial to poetry’s mission. And in poem after poem, memory, openness to imagination, fueling of one’s visionary ability, and what Robert Frost referred to as the fun “in how you say the thing” are the word’s passports into the republic. As for the fun, good metaphors are part of it: “Like an explorer, a good metaphor sets out / holding one half of the torn map, / and comes back treasure-laden” (“Metaphor” 72). Uninhibited memory and a native sense of humour and irony are

also part of the fun. Anxiety over the influence of great writers before us can silence the poet, but it can also grant her words permission by signing off on her lines (“Permission” 64-65).

Fun and hard work. The poem “Excess” reminds us that the day, the work, and the poem are rich in the number of things they can do without. Such disciplined paring down is quietly dramatized in this poem, which opens: “You begin each day feeling the alphabet has grown / overnight, your mouth too full of words.” By the last four lines the poet’s discipline has wrought simple wonders:

With a key carved from bone, you unlock the door  
and bend low to enter; strike a match to find

a place you call relief; that green and simple valley,  
the sky unhinging its white ramp of clouds.

(76)

To paraphrase Coleridge, more than usual imagination requires more than usual control.

*The Sewing Room* is impressive for its abundance of finished and mature poems, an unusually high-percentage achievement. Carla Funk will soon be acknowledged as one of the foremost Mennonite poets in North America and one of the truly important young poets in Canada.

Leonard Neufeldt  
Gig Harbor, Washington

Elsie K. Neufeld et al., eds., *Half in the Sun: Anthology of Mennonite Writing*. Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2006. Pp. 253. Soft cover, \$21.95.

In their migrations across the globe, Mennonites have taken on some of the habits and customs of the peoples amongst whom they have settled, while retaining features of religious cultural identity. As agriculturalists, they have also cultivated strong ties to the land in whatever home they have chosen. Thus in several ways, Mennonite writing is a literature of place. Natural imagery and agricultural metaphors pervade sermons and theology, linking Biblical imagery with contemporary life, and they seep into poems, stories and essays written in contemporary urban contexts. When Mennonite literature began to flourish and gain widespread recognition during the 1970s

and 80s in Canada, it was associated with the prairie landscape, with its hub in that most Mennonite of Canadian cities, Winnipeg. Since then, the Mennonite farms and prairies of Manitoba and Saskatchewan have become part of the literary landscape of Canada, but the literary movement has spread like wildfire from its birthplace. Thus it is no surprise that an anthology of Mennonite writing has emerged with a focus on a geographical region, but the region itself is the surprise: British Columbia, an area where Mennonite immigrants have lived for generations, and a place to which Mennonite writers have migrated or returned to live, write, and teach.

*Half in the Sun: Anthology of Mennonite Writing*, edited by Elsie K. Neufeld and a quartet of co-editors, gathers together literature in three genres – fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction – by 24 writers who all currently make their home in British Columbia and environs. With a nod to the transitory nature of attachment to place and the shifting of peoples in contemporary life, slightly less than half of the writers in this anthology were actually born in BC; almost as many are prairie “transplants” from Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Some, like Barbara Nickel and Leonard Neufeldt, while born in B.C. have spent substantial time elsewhere, before returning to the Northwest, and Neufeldt, who now lives in Washington State, symbolizes the power of regional and ethnic identity over national identity in this anthology. Nonetheless, the anthology creates a new nexus for the Mennonite literary identity. Only a few of the writers included have been recognized in major anthologies of Mennonite writing, among them poets Patrick Friesen (represented by his creative nonfiction; his poetry is notably absent), Barbara Nickel, and Leonard Neufeldt, whose poems also appear in *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry* (2003). Andreas Schroeder is the only fiction writer in this volume whose work was also anthologized in Hildi Froese Tiessen’s seminal collection of Mennonite short fiction, *Liars and Rascals*. Major Canadian Mennonite voices not associated with the region are also absent – Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, David Waltner-Toews – creating space for new voices to emerge into the sunlight of literary publication.

The writing in *Half in the Sun* is varied, fresh, original and engaging. Although the editorial apparatus is slender and the arrangement of works within the sections follows no discernible rubric, the text as a whole invites readers in and allows them to make their own connections and draw their own conclusions. The volume opens with short fiction, beginning with a heart-breakingly funny story, “Renovating Heaven,” by Andreas Schroeder, that shows a family in cultural transition and reveals an intimate familiarity with what one might call euphemistically “Mennonite perfectionism.” Alongside the work of the well-known Schroeder, the finely crafted stories of emerging

fiction writers such as Darcie Friesen Hossack and Joe Wiebe hold their own. Some, such as Wiebe's "Sunlight + Coloured Glass," have no reference to Mennonites, while others, such as co-editor Louise Bergen Price's poignant "Katja," are steeped in Russian Mennonite history, making for a reading experience that displays the wide range of contemporary Mennonite experience. These stories create a threshold for the anthology, framing a context in which to read the poetry and creative nonfiction.

Poetry makes up the largest section of the anthology, with 71 poems by a dozen writers, including three of the five co-editors of this volume, Robert Martens, Elsie Neufeld, and Leonard Neufeldt. Some of the selections are generous, offering an in-depth glimpse of a poet's repertoire and styles; others are minimal, offering just a brief sampling. The title of the anthology, from a line in a poem by Leonard Neufeldt, suggests that only part of what emerges in these poems can be readily perceived by the reader's eye. It also suggests that the lighthearted survival humor and the moments of illumination and gratitude in the poems are only part of a larger and more complex experience that includes suffering, hardship, and rigorous commitment, hidden from all but the most discerning eye. Indeed, the editorial selection features a healthy dose of Mennonite humor, from Carla Funk's "Bums" to Robert Martens' "a little mennonite goes a long way" and "mittagschlaf." The presence of such poems alone may prompt some readers to buy this anthology, in order to savor and share these poems with others. But there is much more to this anthology. Carla Funk, whose distinctively wry voice and crisp imagery have gained her a recent following among readers of contemporary poetry, opens this section with a generous nine poems. Barbara Nickel's poems suggest the "shadowed" half of Mennonite experience – the depth and pull of history – in her evocative poems, particularly in "My Brother's Wedding Ring." "Moving" evokes the anguish of uprooting, which is echoed in her eloquent essay, "Moving Homes," in the nonfiction section. Themes of migration and displacement are registered in such poems as Melanie Siebert's "Memoir," Elsie Neufeld's "The Whole Steppe before the Fall" and Leonard Neufeldt's "Jacob Peter Neufeldt, 1890." Neufeldt's "Why Our Town is Replacing Silver Maples with Better Trees" explores the theme of displacement and change as it is enacted in contemporary urban landscapes. The traces of previous peoples in the landscape emerge in poems by Siebert; the forest is evoked in poems by Al Rempel; and the coast in the experimental forms of Leanne Boschman. K. Louise Vincent's poems register the tension between urban contexts and rural images, between the realities of pollution and the longing for nature. Jeff Derksen's poems take on a political edge as they delineate



forces at work in shaping the landscape – capitalism, neoliberalism, transnationalism, and the neologism “glocal.” Such an admixture of styles and approaches offers a multi-vocal artistic dialogue that reveals the complexity of place.

Following the vigorous juxtaposition of voices in the poetry section, the short nonfiction section offers an integration of themes and a reflective coda. Each one of these essays is a focused, meditative gem. As Patrick Friesen writes in his opening essay, “Limoncino Road,” “The art is in writing less, in underwriting, but in underwriting with such skill that the listener will not only be able to fill the space but, more importantly, yearn to fill it. And, in filling that created space, the listener reaches his or her own experience beyond enough” (216). From Angelika Dawson’s longing for her stillborn child, to Deborah Campbell’s longing for her grandfather’s books, from Campbell’s recognition of the resistance and life-force in a Russian orphan in a blue snowsuit, to Connie Braun’s exegesis of her father’s basket-making skills, these essays close a rich and varied volume, leaving us hungry enough to return to read again in the future.

Ann Hostetler  
Goshen College

Patrick Friesen, *Interim: Essays & Mediations*. Regina: Hagios, 2006. Pp. 143. Softcover, \$17.95.

Patrick Friesen, *Earth’s Crude Gravities*. Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 2007. Pp. 104. Softcover, \$16.95.

I write the first draft of this review blindly. Eyes closed as words line the screen like forget-me-nots pressed between a book’s pages. Flowers sundered from plant and garden; in death, receiving new life. How to compress into two pages a book fifty-nine years in the making and the collection of poems that has followed it? Essays and poems wrought in, then wrung from, the soul of a man who has learned, by going, through experiences, observations and feelings, that “walking away from your life you walk into it ... who cannot be still on a bench or alone on a stone / spins among stories uneasy at the pulse” (*Earth’s Crude Gravities* 70). “To go forward (as a spiritual man),” wrote Theodore Roethke in a letter, “it is necessary first to go back.” Friesen has come to the same realization: “Sometimes you need to stop and sit on a rock for fifty-nine years or more” (*Earth’s Crude Gravities* 53).

*Interim: Essays & Mediations* does just that. It's a look backwards and forwards, from the vantage of now.

What remains of the dried, once-vibrant, flower is one-dimensional, something a mere breath could destroy. And yet it exists; its beauty is in its being, and its being is grace. "What remains of any of this?" Friesen asks, recalling his young adult years. "In the end it was simply about being alive in our bodies as our thinking went where it needed to go" (*Interim* 65). He recalls turning forty and realizing that his past now has a name: history, "fact and memory and story woven into a shadow" (*Interim* 9).

In his sixtieth year, Friesen released that history. But why, after thirteen books of poetry, as essays? "Form is regarded not as a neat mould to be filled, but rather as a sieve to catch certain kinds of material," said Roethke. The material in *Interim*, though poetically written, could not be rendered in poetic forms. This is no mere sprig, this is the entire plant, and we are graced with Friesen's first collection of non-fiction prose, something Friesen calls, in his introduction, "a history of how the adult ... sometimes finds a way back" (9). In many ways, the book is the equivalent of a front-row seat to the making of a poet and his craft, a vicarious experience of life-long apprenticeship. As such, *Interim* should be mandatory reading for every student of poetry and every novice poet, with instructions to read slowly, essay by essay, pausing long enough in between to mediate the layers and the silences in, around, and under every word.

"Everything keeps going" – a recurring thread in *Interim* – brings "epitaph" to mind, though we can be grateful *Interim* is not that. On its heels comes *Earth's Crude Gravities*, poems again this time, some of which echo earlier poems in lines like: "looking for a story ... / someone else's story / you're choking / on the one you've been given" ("j & a lunch" 18). It is evident from the start, though, that something has changed, the undercurrent is calmer, a pact has been made with uncertainty, and it's been made with acceptance. In "cold as stars," for instance, the speaker assures us that "this doesn't need to be anything but the ordinary late night reconnoiter with all that I do / not know" (60).

As in *Interim*, there is an awareness here that time is running out: "The boy is held aloft for moments / only to descend as a man" ("mockingbird" 77). In a subsequent poem, "this body is / ... releasing / something borne / the way fire breaks open / the pine cone's seeds" ("the rain I can't speak" 97). And yet, something of what was remains. Movement remains: "You walk quickly. Always walking" ("still as nothing" 77) and the old rhythm, lines that lift off the pages in a child-like song, a chant: "horse ... whose horse ... what horse ... a riderless horse / whose horse" ("horse" 92). There is impatience here too, a

restlessness that comes from wanting what still eludes the speaker: “I can’t gather it”; “I can’t gather”; “I can’t gather it all”; “I can’t gather all the facts ... and I sit there breathing in / and I can’t gather any of it” (“stone forgets and lasts” 57-58). There is also acceptance, of being “at home in need ... that dark direction” (“nothing but what’s there” 51), and in places the chant becomes a mantra: “it can be let go ... the memory ... it can be let go ... at dawn ... at noon ... in the evening ... it can be let go during ... the dream ... in a moment / it can be let go / in a breath” (“it can be let go” 93).

These poems convey a sense of breath and of breathing, not like someone in labour or someone dying, though this breathing has certainly slowed. It’s easier breathing, it’s a breathing toward, it’s the sound of liberation and of prayer, although, “entering as a prayer, you don’t know you have prayed” (“quartet in july” 15). Carolyn Forché once said that “poetry is the voice of the soul, whispering, celebrating, singing even,” and that is the voice we have here. *Earth’s Crude Gravities* is the story of a soul, “shaped by an ear attuned to the full range of sound, human and divine” (Janice Kulyk Keefer).

Here’s a “sprig” that fell from the pages of this story: “Once you were wild I mean born human matter and spirit you were born hungry / that first want and almost the last looking for a place to breathe ... / there is glory everywhere and there are dark windows” (“quartet in july” 14). Listen. “Your ears know nighthawks the death rattle and on the roof first drops of rain” (“fifty-nine years or more” 65); “and the rain / the rain I can’t speak” (“intersection” 69); “listen to the rain ... on a Thursday night / it’s wild” (“a history of the body” 75).

I recommend both these books, for both, as the back cover of *Interim* notes, are “essential to a fresh understanding of Patrick Friesen as one of Canada’s most important and influential literary artists.”

Elsie K. Neufeld  
Abbotsford, British Columbia

Alayna Munce, *When I Was Young & In My Prime*. Roberts Creek, B.C.: Nightwood Editions, 2005. Pp. 249. Softcover, \$18.95.

Toronto writer Alayna Munce’s debut novel, *When I Was Young & In My Prime*, is a moving account of an octogenarian couple’s decline towards death told from the perspective of their twenty-something granddaughter. This seemingly straightforward story is told in a fresh way: short narrative scenes are interspersed with poems, lists,

journal entries, letters, and other literary devices, even an auctioneer's repetitive monologue, all of which combine to form a more potent and original story than might be expected from its almost-clichéd plot.

At the start of the book, Peter Friesen, the protagonist's grandfather, is an able-bodied, healthy curmudgeon taking care of his wife Mary, who suffers from Alzheimer's. Peter has a strong connection with his never-named granddaughter, a poet and bartender who lives in the Toronto neighbourhood of Parkdale more than an hour away from her grandparents' rural home. She likes to visit and ask him about his childhood in Ukraine or his life as a young man in Manitoba, to learn the old ways of doing things like making sauerkraut, even to borrow some of his old clothing to wear. Clearly, their bond is a particularly close one.

Mennonite readers will immediately recognize the grandfather by his surname, but apart from his childhood memories of murder and mayhem in the anarchy of post-revolutionary Russia, there is little else for us to connect with on that level. Mary Friesen is not a Mennonite, and her husband joins the United Church while wooing her. The young protagonist seems non-religious herself, but she describes her husband, James, as a practicing Catholic – though also as an anarchist who reads Nietzsche. Beyond that, religious themes do not play a significant role in this novel.

At first, readers might anticipate the tragedy in the background of this book to be the grandmother's deterioration and eventual death, but Munce artfully flips this expectation on its head. As the story progresses, Peter's physical health declines more and more rapidly. First, Mary is moved into a rest home because he can no longer take care of her, and then he himself must give up their old house for a smaller apartment. He's barely settled in there when a fall lands him in the hospital with a cracked hip. He never makes it back to his new apartment. One short chapter in the middle of the book stands out for the way it depicts a turning point in Peter's final summer. "He's always pictured himself dying on his own two feet – keeling over in his garden, falling back into the raspberry bushes with a hat on his head and a hoe in his hand. [...] Now, suddenly, he's afraid he won't manage it. That he'll end up in the Home like the others. Not for me, he's always told himself. Now it strikes him for the first time that it's not for him to decide" (128). He makes a poignant choice next: to clear out those overgrown raspberry bushes even if it kills him – and it nearly does.

The protagonist married young, at 19, and, now seven years later, she and her philosopher-musician husband are fighting more than ever before. As she explains, "We don't really fight – we freeze each other out. [...] It never lasts long. Neither of us can stand it. Always the

gradual thaw and before you know it we're lovers again. It occurred to me the other day though that the thaw hasn't been going quite through before the next freeze sets in, resulting in a kind of underground permafrost that you wouldn't notice unless you were digging" (187). Are their domestic difficulties related to her grandfather's failing health? Perhaps.

Munce explores this story by examining it from all angles. A published poet, she inserts short poems here and there, often in the form of lists with titles like "things buried with us" (138-140), "things that still have not left her" (111), or "things that might survive a lifetime" (45-47). Neither superfluous or showy, these poems always contain an important detail about the characters' lives, or at the very least, a nugget of truth about the protagonist herself.

As with many first novels, this one seems autobiographical, but Munce never lets the story meander or stumble. She possesses surprising poise, transitioning from character to character without warning, confidently demanding her readers keep up with her wherever she takes them. These narrative risks pay great dividends, adding a fresh authenticity to what might otherwise have become a maudlin story.

Joe Wiebe  
Vancouver, British Columbia

Victor Enns, *Lucky Man*. Regina: Hagios, 2005. Pp. 87. Softcover, \$13.95.

Employing a confessional but not sentimental tone, this five section poetry volume determinedly negotiates the disappointments and perplexities of mid-life. Author Victor Enns' often short, frequently perceptive, and always tactile poems immerse us in what Di Brandt describes on the back cover as the "particular heroism of modern life," the courage to make beauty out of broken dreams and fragmented identities.

Though the volume is stylistically varied, many poems employ short one-to-three word lines, tight two- and three-line stanzas and intricate visual spacing. At times this strategy creates a sense of transience and motion, but at other points it invites the eye to linger – this is poetry to be visually savoured. In other poems, more extended line and stanza constructions allow for the fuller development of images that evoke emotive truths. Strong word pictures also frequently create a specific sense of space, a father's rural garden, for example, with its "heap of orange crescents / among the thistle and faded grass"

(“World War II Bayonet” 22) or the streets of Winnipeg where “Louis Riel and the Golden Boy shiver / in the early winter dark” (“Portage & Main” 48).

The first section, “My Father’s Garden,” explores connections between the speaker’s rural roots and his contemporary urban life. Glimpses of his father’s love for gardening and appetite for life – “Left to his own devices, / he would gorge on the fruit / of the orchard” (10) – are juxtaposed with death, as his father’s “heart escapes, bursts / through his once muscled chest” (“A Poem of Pears” 16). At times, edenic imagery hints of the speaker’s longing for a more innocent time when life seemed simpler and perhaps more certain. But the long “A Poem of Pears,” which celebrates the sensual beauty of this “fair fall fruit/ best eaten fresh off the tree” (14) as well as the universe within it – “this pear is / world / in my son’s hands” (9)<sup>1</sup> – also introduces the theme of mid-life reflection: “This is about / what I don’t know / and finding out / about father/ about mother / about pears / about how long it takes to grow a poem / of pears” (10).<sup>2</sup>

The middle sections explore experiences of marriage and family framed in the context of an all-too-pervasive urban environment. Many poems in section two, “Lucky Man,” capture luminescent but transient moments of connectedness, from the deep desire of “In the Blue Room,” where “Naked / this tensile / afternoon / shimmers” (34) or “The Night Opens,” where we “see the sky, naked / full and promising / hold on to what we / have, and are happy” as I “lay hands on your belly / full baby moving” (39), to the simple celebration of a family breakfast, where “[t]he smell of coffee / fills the kitchen” (“The Breakfast Table” 42) and the chatter of children fills the room.

In contrast, “Working Man,” the third section, exposes the disjointedness and discontent lurking behind the surface of everyday routines – when, for example, missing one’s bus stop prompts the treadmill litany, “[d]idn’t want to stay at the office, / didn’t want to go home, no place to go, / no place to be alone / . . . the end / of the line” (“On the Bus” 46-7). The fourth section, “Love Walks On,” continues to explore the worm in the garden, tracing both the crises of marital discord and a son’s serious illness, and increasing dislocation between the past and the present. While making a slingshot for his children, for example, the speaker realizes that this skill, learned in his rural childhood, is now perceived as “incorrect / and as useless in the mess of modern life / as all the other nostalgia I’ve learned / this old, far from home” (54). Here in “the chaos of the city” (“Gifts” 54), the pleasures of the past where “we could love / with open doors, / open mouths, howls / with the Aurora Borealis / swirling outside the farmhouse windows” have been superseded by doors that “shut, slam” and “lock before / we can approach / each other” (“Once Upon a Time” 57).

The final section, “The Walnut Cupboard,” returns the reader to the volume’s bookends: the deaths of the speaker’s parents. The poems exploring the death of his mother effectively capture the inevitable self-diminishment generated by the loss of a parent or a marriage. But many also assert that these losses do not negate the gifts of the past, even if they live on only in memory. Finally, the epilogue, with its reprisal of the “lucky man” theme, articulates a surprising reversal of the past. In the final poem, “Lucky Man,” memories of a broken friendship, a “brotherhood” lost “in a drunken rage / . . . a momentary blindness” and its ensuing estrangement are erased as “[f]inally, today / alone as a suicide / I get your forgiving note.” Once more Enns looks to “the garden, since “[f]or a moment / we stand free / to begin again” (87). Although many of this volume’s poems trace the relinquishments that come with broken dreams, they are also bittersweet reflections on the midlife process of “remaking self in a new song” (Brandt).

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See the text for the original vertical spacing of these lines.
- <sup>2</sup> See the original text for the spacing of these lines, which run alongside the right side of the main stanza, functioning as a complement to the speaker’s memories of his father.

Maryann Tjart Jantzen  
Trinity Western University

Lloyd Ratzlaff, *Backwater Mystic Blues*. Saskatoon: Thistledown, 2006. Pp. 112. \$15.95

The back cover of *Backwater Mystic Blues* describes Ratzlaff’s second book of creative non-fiction as “a suite of intimate essays,” as if the essays were a musical composition with repeated themes and tonalities, which, in a way, they are. Appropriately, the two book launches in Saskatoon, Ratzlaff’s home city, featured readings by Ratzlaff and selections by local jazz and blues pianist Don Griffith. As the title suggests, the essays sing the blues, touching readers as music does, not through linear development or logical exposition but through scenes that resonate emotionally: past reverberates with present and ordinary stuff is transposed into mystical keys.

Apt as the music analogy is, for me, the metaphor of refraction best describes the effect of Ratzlaff’s writing. In this second installment

of reflective, irreverent, worshipful essays (*The Crow Who Tampered with Time* is the first), Ratzlaff bends our usual angles of vision and sheds light and color on religious experiences of one kind or another. Often that requires first exposing the grey cruelty of the fundamentalism that shaped his childhood and much of his adulthood; more frequently, Ratzlaff's tender gaze brushes the dust off the ordinariness of life and death to "re-sacralize" the world (80). At the final sentence of each essay, the reader, too, can barely "continue to read, for glory [fills] the house" (64).

That recovery of the numinous occurs in the midst of human blunderings. The tone is both gentle and wry; forgiveness has been hard won. Ratzlaff is vulnerable in his honesty; he mounts no pedestal of wisdom. Readers are conscious throughout that the author was once a minister of a Mennonite church and is no longer. There's no groveling over mistakes – that would be unendurable in a book so autobiographical, so honest – just unflinching awareness that human beings often fail in their short-sightedness, but just as often show compassion and courage.

The illuminating inner vision that "sees [all] in a sacred manner" (50) has first been refracted through the lens of other writings: poems, psychology texts, new translations of Scriptures, biographies, songs – whatever Ratzlaff's eye lights on becomes a medium for his rearranging imagination. His numerous quotations from and allusions to other texts are not, however, superficial re-renderings of borrowed wisdom. George Steiner, in *Real Presences*, observes that just as the real interpreters of a musical score are the performers, so real readers of texts are those who learn the words "by heart," who permit a "shaping reciprocity" between themselves and "that which the heart knows" (Steiner 9), or as Ratzlaff would put it, "what the soul knows" (112). Steiner is not one of the writers that Ratzlaff quotes, but the persistent interweaving of quotations with personal experience makes it clear that Ratzlaff understands from within what "shaping reciprocity" means – and demands the same from his readers. Unless we likewise are willing to permit repeated refraction of words into and through our hearts, these essays can seem self-indulgent. The book should have a warning label: ingest slowly, in small portions.

In fact, a too-hasty first reading can leave a vague unease: "Is that all there is?" This is especially the case, I suspect, for readers of Ratzlaff's first book, *The Crow Who Tampered with Time*. There the mystic reveling in life seemed more obvious, perhaps because its very newness of tone and style was enchanting. *Backwater Mystic Blues*, in a similar tone and style, covers some of the same territory as the first book, which can be disappointing initially, until Ratzlaff wisely reminds us that the important issues in life require many re-cyclings of and through thought



and soul. As Ratzlaff says in the Epilogue: “We are back-and-forth creatures, *in caro*, carnivorous, eating up the world for the sake of word” (140). While the comment refers to the “communion of words” in which “Word becomes flesh, and flesh re-creates words” (140), it applies also to the process by which Ratzlaff has once more pushed back into words the journey out of fundamentalism and into joyful worship that he first examined in *The Crow*. Such intensity of refraction invites an inner quietness and receptivity that can be especially healing for evangelicals recovering from too much literalism and legalism.

It is not a reviewer’s task to speculate on future books, but I can’t help worrying lest the possibilities of this rare genre of translation – experience into meditation – be too soon exhausted. Ratzlaff’s lyric vision and vocabulary suggest possible poetry, but his impressive story-telling craft could become robust fiction to exorcise those ghosts that resist the slanted light of *Backwater Mystic Blues*. Then again, the creator of such delicate, yet dangerous, wisdom literature can surely be trusted to offer more invitations to see anew.

Edna Froese  
St. Thomas More College

Anita Horrocks, *Almost Eden*. Toronto: Tundra Books, 2006. Pp. 284. Softcover, \$14.99.

Award-winning author Anita Horrocks’s fourth novel tells the touching story of twelve-year-old Elsie Redekop and her attempts to make sense of her Mennonite heritage – in terms of both her personal faith and the central presence of church community in her life – as she struggles to accept her parents as flawed and fragile human beings in the fictional town of Hopefield, Manitoba, in the summer of 1970. The middle child in a family of three daughters, Elsie blames herself for her mother’s mental breakdown and subsequent hospitalization. Elsie prays for understanding as a coping mechanism, and her prayers concern both her perceived responsibility for her mother’s mental health and the smaller, everyday troubles that seem insurmountable to her: sibling rivalry, competition between friends, boys she likes or doesn’t like. Her initial attempts to fix relationships and situations prove disastrous, in spite of her good intentions, but as she gains a broader understanding of herself and of those around her, her perceptions and actions likewise evolve and mature.

The links between protagonist and author are difficult to miss, given that Horrocks was born in 1958 and was raised as a Mennonite

in southern Manitoba. But the text itself suggests further links to two specific but very different texts: Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, published in 1970 and concerned with a twelve-year-old girl's crisis of faith and identity as the child of a Jewish father and a Christian mother; and Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*, about jaded sixteen-year-old Nomi Nickel's coming-of-age in the fictional Mennonite town of East Village, Manitoba, in the 1970s. Like Margaret and Nomi, Elsie has regular conversations with God that reveal the thoughts and anxieties she cannot voice to anybody else. Both Nomi's friend in *Kindness*, moreover, and Elsie's mother in *Eden* are hospitalized in mental institutions named Eden. And much in the way that it does in *Kindness*, riding a bicycle without holding onto the handlebars is a central symbol in *Almost Eden* of perseverance and the ability to balance the conflicting forces in one's life.

It is not likely a coincidence that Horrocks's and Toews's texts are set in the same decade, in Mennonite towns modeled on real places in Manitoba roughly 130 km apart: the city of Steinbach has been identified as the source for Toews's East Village and Horrocks's Hopetown appears to be modeled on her hometown of Winkler, home of Eden Health Care Services, a faith-based organization devoted to mental health. It would be overly simplistic, though, to presume that Horrocks has simply borrowed a little too freely from such a well-known recent novel as Toews's (which did, after all, win the Governor General's Award for fiction in 2004 and was shortlisted for the Giller Prize). Instead, given that Elsie's perspective on her environment is so radically different from Nomi's, *Almost Eden* offers an alternative to the depiction of Mennonite communities that's currently popular in Canadian literature. And so, while Nomi experiments with drugs, alcohol, and sex as she daydreams of befriending Lou Reed in East Village, New York, Elsie ultimately embraces her community and renegotiates a personal relationship with God. Moreover, in a subplot involving a sexual predator who targets children, the community in Horrocks's novel rallies together to ensure the continued safety of every young person who might be at risk. Such changes, no doubt, have something to do with the requirements of texts for middle readers, but both the parallels to *Kindness* and the departures from *Kindness* remind readers that Nomi Nickel's is not the only perspective available on growing up as a Mennonite-Canadian. By offering Elsie as an alternative, *Almost Eden* reveals the complex relationship between representation and public perception; together, the two novels make for an interesting and complicated likeness.

Benjamin Lefebvre  
University of Winnipeg

Byron Rempel, *Truth is Naked, All Others Pay Cash: An Autobiographical Exaggeration*. Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2005. Softcover, \$19.95.

As I read this book I felt a continual sense of sympathy for the publisher (and ultimately the bookseller) who would be called upon to categorize it. Is it autobiography? History? Comedy? Some meta-category of all of the above? The answer to all of these questions is a qualified yes, because it is all of them at once, written in a style that is as picaresque and self-assured as that of a fictional ancestor: Lawrence Sterne's venerable *Tristram Shandy*. Like Shandy, Rempel tells his story obliquely, in a narrative that is so full of "asides" to the "content" that they are finally indistinguishable from one another. Also like Shandy, Rempel isn't afraid to indulge in self-mockery and gratuitous punning to get a cheap laugh out of the reader: he certainly elicited a fair number of them from me. Unlike Shandy, however, Rempel's version of his life history is intertwined with a series of anecdotes about those whom he (mostly) affectionately refers to as "My People": the Mennonites, their history, their diasporic wandering, their settling in southern Manitoba and South America, and their fascination with food fried in butter.

No doubt Rempel is familiar with the picaresque form, claiming "I am no Cervantes," the writer of "the first modern novel, a quixotic [!] series of adventures rich in metaphor and paradox" (11). Rempel's love of the genre is similarly reflected in the hybrid nature of these so-called memoirs: "If, as the literal Mennonites claim, the truth shall make you free, who's [sic] truth are we talking about? I can solve this conundrum the only way I know how: by lying" (10). One example of this paradoxical tone, from among many, must sadly suffice, though it seems almost wrong to tear a brief selection from the organic whole that helps to frame it. Tracing the origins of the Rempel name takes our intrepid narrator back the Dark Ages, where

in Germany, the Thuringians, Saxons, Bavarians, Frankfurters, Hamburgers and Friars have all come to see Christianity as more interesting than worshipping trees and stones, convinced by logical argument, leaps of faith, and the alternative of impalement on wooden stakes. They quickly used this knowledge to shave, establish a German Empire, and take over Rome. Unfortunately, this is not a good time to visit Europe, as it is already overrun by tourists who have even fewer manners and do more damage than Americans: boorish Vikings from

the north, spilling wine everywhere . . . and Arabs and Berbers from the south, who have finally figured out their religion and are inspired to push it on everyone else. (74)

Whenever Rempel turns his lens onto historical lineage, the scope is invariably mock-epic and the tone deceptively lighthearted: he has a storyteller's knack for ironic reversal. In this he reflects the basic principles of Rohinton Mistry's Nariman, the storytelling figure at the heart of *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, who "sometimes told a funny incident in a very serious way, or expressed a serious matter in a light and playful manner" (154). Readers should not, then, be put off by Rempel's tone when describing horrific events in Mennonite history, such as the torture and murder of early martyrs: the tone serves to underscore the horror, not to make light of human suffering.

Like many writers in the genre, Rempel organizes his personal narrative around events or times that offer some broader insight into either personal development or the socio-cultural context that account for the slant of that development. Thus we move from teen baptism – which allows him to ruminate at length on the anabaptist praxis of "joining the swimming team" – to his stint in a travelling European circus and other peregrinations that allow extended commentary on his "road to becoming a "Great Writer" (17). The text's final meditation is also its most problematic: it concerns how his family copes with his father's mental decline from a disease akin to Alzheimer's. The piece is poignant and clearly engages Rempel's full powers as a writer, but its tone is somewhat jarring, despite attempts to maintain the lighthearted bantering of the previous chapters. Nevertheless, this book is a successful foray into the kaleidoscopic sensibilities of what one hopes is a newly emergent talent.

Tom Penner  
University of Winnipeg

**Maureen Epp and Carol Ann Weaver, *Sound in the Land: Essays on Mennonites and Music*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005. Pp. 213, paperback, \$25.00 Cdn.**

In May 2004 more than 100 persons gathered at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario, to take part in a festival and conference dedicated to exploring the diversity of music made by Mennonites. There were scholarly papers, some of which are included in *Sound in the Land*, reading sessions and concerts of a wide variety

of musical styles, ranging from the singing of hymns both old and new through classical to jazz, rock and bluegrass. Gathered into four sections, the essays in this book are representative of that diversity. The first, as one might expect, deals with hymnals, the heart of Mennonite music making over the centuries, the second with musical figures “at the edges,” and the third explores the world of Mennonite performers, composers and singer-songwriters. The fourth section returns to the theme of hymns and hymnals, this time emphasizing their place and meaning within the communities in which they are used.

There are several broad themes that emerge as one reads the collection. Until well into the last century scholars of Mennonite music were hymnologists, interested primarily in the hymns of the *Ausbund* or perhaps the denominational hymnals of Mennonites in Europe or North America. Six of the fifteen essays in *Sound in the Land* are written by researchers trained as ethnomusicologists, a discipline that has become common in Canadian universities only in the past decade and a half. The emphasis is therefore on the social context of music, music’s role in forging community and binding individuals to their communities. Stephanie Krehbiel explores the issue of hymn versus contemporary Christian music in two rural churches near Freeman, South Dakota, by means of interviews and questionnaires in a sensitive presentation of this divisive issue. Katie Graber uses a survey of her congregation’s members as the springboard for a penetrating analysis of the way in which hymn singing informs and forms the identities of congregational members. Even the essay on the hymns of the *Ausbund* by Maureen Epp goes beyond catalogues of hymn tunes and texts to explore questions of meaning and utility.

In the first sentence of this review I used the term “music made by Mennonites,” rather than “Mennonite music.” This seems only prudent in light of the diversity of musical styles reflecting influences from every corner of the surrounding society manifested at the conference and in the collection of essays. Nevertheless, the questions what is Mennonite music?, or what might make music Mennonite?, or what can music do to make one Mennonite? do arise in a number of essays. Doreen Klassen describes Ben Horch’s commissioning of a work by Victor Davies, not a Mennonite, that would use hymns sung by Mennonites and would speak to the larger community. Victor Davies presents an interesting account of the negotiations and the composition. The result was the *Mennonite Piano Concerto*, an appealing work that has become well known but does not really bring us closer to what Mennonite music might be. Anna Janacek’s essay on five Mennonite composers sheds some light on this elusive subject. Lacking a distinctive melodic repertoire or musical forms to identify as Mennonite, she discovers that the answer must be sought in more intangible things like

the shaping of a musician's tastes by early musical experiences and the effect that writing for a Mennonite community has on compositional choices. The careers of the singer-songwriters analysed in the pieces by Allison Fairbairn and Jonathan Dueck present another aspect of this problem. They may have to throw off the inflections of their musical upbringing in order to find the language that will take them into the musical mainstream. At the same time they can find sources of inspiration in their heritage and comfort in being recognized and claimed by their communities.

The last sentence of Katie Graber's essay sums up most of these issues very elegantly.

If all of the divergent aspects of identity performance, the ineffable element of the experience of musical sounds, and the embodied social actions that present and represent identity can converge with our definitions of identity, we have allowed for the broadest possibilities for musical meaning. (73)

Wesley Berg  
University of Alberta

## Reviews of History

Irmgard Epp, ed. *Constantinoplans - Escape from Bolshevism*. Victoria BC: Trafford Publishing, 2006. Pp. 370.

What did Constantinople have to do with Mennonites? How did it come about that 111 men of Mennonite origin escaped with the White Army to Constantinople? What do the historical accounts say about MCC's program in Constantinople and its role in bringing the Constantinoplans to America? This book is the result of a quest by retired teacher Irmgard Epp of Kelowna, B.C. to learn the story of her father, C. H. Epp. In doing so she collected oral histories or interviews, and built them around a 52 page diary by Peter H. Gerz. It turned out to be an uneven read, but increasingly fascinating since the short documents of remembering have the reader piecing together individual lives into a composite picture that elicits the above questions.

To tell the story it may be helpful to keep in mind that the later years of World War I, then Civil War and Revolution, placed much