

Book Reviews

Reviews of Fiction and Poetry

Sarah Klassen, *A Feast of Longing*. Regina: Coteau Books, 2007. Pp. vi + 280. Soft cover, \$18.95.

What he wants to do next is pull a wish from the ocean of his wanting (“Wednesday is Adoration” 81).

If I were asked to assign a title to the collected writings of Sarah Klassen, I would choose “writing home.” This simple phrase applies to her most recent work – *A Feast of Longing* – as well, though maybe the phrase is not all that simple. Klassen draws landscapes of Winnipeg and the inter-lake country, her native regions. She configures various cultural scapes in these areas, sometimes taking us far within a tiny part of them. As these parts add up, one gets the sense of a commonly inhabited place in which characters and their circumstances create both a sense of home and homelessness. Home, which we assume to be a site of social familiarity and spiritual fullness, is rarely free of the foreign, dissonant, and missing. Home, we might say, is an inner site of longing rather than fulfillment.

There’s no bronzed and botoxed world in *A Feast* and Klassen’s mode of writing home refuses “fragmented narratives” punctuated with “blatant physicality of violence and sex” (“A Perfect Location,” 215). Indeed, readers whose literary attention deficit is catered to by

publishers of MTV-like fiction, with its bizarre, outrageous, slam-bang moments upon moments, may well reject the ways that Klassen's stories gather force through a deliberate development of characters and a gradual accumulation of the mundane details that surround and sound them. The thread that binds her characters – many of them isolated, fearful, religiously-haltered, or mentally and emotionally tired or confused – is their longing for a sense of home that's free of fear, guilt, loneliness, and lovelessness: for a place to dwell that offers historical and social relationship as well as purpose to their lives.

In the three stories set abroad, Klassen presents versions of the social and national Other, and she writes home in ways that call to mind a Canadian travel writer as cultural journalist. We meet characters who find elements of home-ness in far-off places, and characters who are culturally and spiritually lost. In "Beyond the Border," we follow a bus filled with tourists, possibly Mennonite, who endure almost endless discomforts to reach their ancestral village in Eastern Europe only to discover that the idyllic homecoming they felt upon arrival is quickly unsettled by tension and bewilderment and the absence of the traces they'd expected to find.

In short, quite ordinary characters, places, and circumstances become the canvas on which interior domains of desires, anxieties, resentments, sorrows, loneliness and compassion are painted. One of Klassen's characters, a writer, offers some indirect self-revelation in this respect: "She's a writer for whom the world in all its mundane or spectacular manifestations offers up raw materials, [...] sometimes in fragments so unremarkable that they are easily overlooked. She reaches for these offerings and sets about arranging and rearranging the imperfect, incomplete bits and pieces of life. [...] Alice Munroe was her model. And Mavis Gallant. She wanted to explore the hidden lives of women and men. [...] She would write about the yearnings and struggles of the human spirit" (196-200).

Thus we find a varied and poignant feast of longing in Klassen's new book, best epitomized, perhaps, by the old widow, Dorothy Dodds, whose bus ride to the Polo Park mall for lunch with a friend and whose slow navigation to the food stalls become opportunities for rumination and insight:

What is it that I should be forgiving, she wondered? Or be forgiven for? The thought of incompleteness, of work still to be done, wearied her. [...] Taking her handbag, Dorothy made her way around crowded tables to the food stalls. It was tiring. [...] Her life had been ordinary, her achievements unremarkable. But any life could get complicated, even such a life as hers, [...] and there wasn't an easy guide to help you navigate it. [...]

You had to [...] muddle through. And catch those surprising moments of good fortune, or mercy, that were sent your way. ("The Seven Steps," 232-235)

Moments of mercy that, we might add, sometimes create a brief melody "that rises above the day's annoyances and the restlessness that plagues all humans" ("The Carpathians," 130).

Some years ago, after reading the proofs of a detailed, negative, smart-ass review I'd written of a young author's work, I turned regret into the vow that henceforth I would review only writers and books I respected. Sarah Klassen is such a writer and *A Feast of Longing* is such a book.

Leonard Neufeldt
Gig Harbor, WA

Patrick Friesen & Marilyn Lerner, with Peggy Lee and Niko Friesen, *calling the dog home: a cycle of poems with music*. Recorded March 13th and 14th, 2005 at the Western Front, Vancouver, BC.

Patrick Friesen is that rare author whose poems gain depth when he speaks them aloud, a writer for whom a reading is also a performance, an interpretation. The established poet and former Winnipegger brings his signature rough and knowing voice to this latest improvisational collaboration with jazz pianist Marilyn Lerner. Peggy Lee on cello and Niko Friesen on percussion add further musical texture to this collaborative effort. Lerner, also originally from Winnipeg, has worked with Friesen for more than a decade, most recently on *small rooms*, the CD they released in 2003. Friesen and Lerner find an easy rapport in *calling the dog home*, which is based on 12 poems whose themes range from death and birth to the innate wildness that the natural environment stirs in us.

Friesen's style of delivery is surprisingly varied: he brings an almost slurred forcefulness to some pieces, an intonation like that used by some slam poets, something that feels alternately compelling and uncomfortable but always intentional. There's no rushing of lines here, none of the stiltedness that attaches itself to poets less comfortable than Friesen is in front of a microphone. Friesen is that rare literary artist who also knows how to use his voice as a tool.

The poems included in the cycle are spare and simply worded. Some of the shorter, cryptic pieces feel more interconnected with the music,

while others take a more straightforward narrative approach, in one case without any musical accompaniment at all. It's a grouping best absorbed collectively and perhaps that's intentional. Many of the poems segue seamlessly from one to another (although the liner notes, which include full texts of each poem, clarify where one poem ends and the next begins). Friesen begins his poems with a pleasing forcefulness: his first lines invariably resonate in ways that echo through related poems. "there are things we need to do that will not lengthen / our lives," he writes in the unflinching first stanza of "The Unknown Child, for instance, "there are things not reasonable that drive us to the / grave / and there are things to do at 3 a.m. that move us / toward god / things that quicken our lives and are worth every / dram of death."

Lerner is also in fine form on this compilation, a skilled performer whose icy piano notes lend a haunting feel to "Since the Last Birth," and whose simple melody on "Animal Cries" winds down like a music box before Friesen begins the poem: "nothing breaks the spell." Listeners with a firm musical grounding will no doubt find more to unpack in her improvisations than those with an ear only for poetry. The same can be said for the percussion and in particular, cellist Peggy Lee's performance – Lee brings a gorgeous struggle and release in "Body of My Death," and coaxes the instrument into eerie moaning in "All Falls to Earth."

Yet for all the harmonious blending, there's an intentional discord in a number of the pieces, like the jarring collision of piano, cello, and percussion on "It Can Be Let Go" that sets the tone for the hypnotic poem that follows:

it can be let go
the thin smile and the dark suit
the memory

how easily
it can be let go
when time comes

Calling the dog home is an evocative collaboration, a pairing of music and word that's in turn melodious and dissonant. It's an introspective rumination on death and aging, on the line between primitive and domestic, and a meditation on "things that can't be explained east or west / but must be lived."

Lindsey Wiebe
Winnipeg, MB

Mary-Ann Kirkby, *I Am Hutterite: The Fascinating True Story of a Young Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Heritage*. Prince Albert: Polka Dot Press, 2007. Pp. 205. Soft cover, \$21.95.

The cover of this book lures and provokes. The author stands alone wearing Hutterite garb and gazing across a field of wheat. The "I" of the title stands similarly in bold juxtaposition to a communal society and the present-tense "am" takes a stance on the religious-or-ethnic/cultural identity question that groups like Hutterites and Mennonites wrestle with, since the back flap photo makes it clear Mary-Ann Kirkby is not currently a member of colony life. "Hutterite" carries the weight of Exotic Other and arouses curiosity, fascination, and perhaps even unease, certainly for the general reader, but probably for many Mennonites as well, in spite of our theological kinship.

Inside the book, the reader is quickly immersed in a lively narrative in which the cover's provocations unfold obliquely and with deep affection and humour. The story opens with journalist Mary-Ann Kirkby visiting Fairholme Colony in southern Manitoba to write about its garden for a magazine. At the end of the day she stops at the cemetery where she shows her five-year-old son Levi her brother's grave. "Mommy," Levi asks, "are you a Hutterite?"

That question takes the author on "a journey into the inner recesses of the heart, where our deepest secrets are kept and the truth is stored" (ix). The story she tells in response to the question begins with the marriage of her mother Mary Maendel to Ronald Dornn, then traces their life in New Rosedale Colony and later Fairholme.

Mary-Ann was the third of the couple's seven children. For her as a child, the colony was a place of delight and security. For Mary and Ronald Dornn, however, relationships with the colony leaders (who happened to be Mary's brothers) became increasingly tense. Eventually, in 1969, when Mary-Ann was ten, the family left. Life on a series of farms outside the colony was difficult and lonely. Forty-six-year-old Ronald had "never had a bank account, held a mortgage, or paid a bill" (113). The children "didn't know how to swim or skate or ride a bicycle" (133). In school, Mary-Ann encountered scorn and rejection. She discovered her culture had no value; it was, in fact, "a handicap" (193). She had to "reinvent" herself to be accepted, hiding her Hutterite self "in English clothing, melting into the mainstream and cringing at the word 'Hutterite' because of people's harsh and misinformed opinions" (193). The family embraced religious intensities of other kinds as they were re-baptized and got involved in what she calls "the revival meeting routine" (179).

The author eventually became a television reporter in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, where she met and married the city's young mayor, Gordon Kirkby. Although she doesn't say much about the actual process of reclaiming her past, Kirkby suggests that the calls to racial reconciliation and heritage pride that were being heard in Prince Albert galvanized her quest to overcome the shame she felt about her origins. Her parents also modelled forgiveness for her as they worked through the circumstances of their leaving. Kirkby came to understand that "freedom is not found on a Hutterite colony any more than it is found off the colony ... [it is] an inside job ... taking responsibility for ourselves and daring to confront and release the anger and resentment that keeps us from leading meaningful lives" (190).

Woven into this narrative is a wealth of detail about Hutterite life, including customs of courtship, marriage, birth, education, and the community kitchen – "our center of gravity" (51). The author portrays a blunt yet warm people and an "eclectic cast" of characters in the colony, including "taskmasters, storytellers, comedians, and simpletons," all of whom bring something to the community (54). Nevertheless, some aspects of the narrative, especially the religious and power issues at the heart of the Doorns' move out of the colony, still feel veiled, perhaps because Kirkby, who is writing for a general audience, is sensitive to the fact that she has living relatives on both sides of the event.

In reclaiming her heritage, Kirkby focuses in on memories of a "near idyllic childhood" (58) and an adolescence caught between cultures. In these terms, the communal world Kirkby describes is an appealing one. Ultimately, "I am Hutterite" is a statement of pride, and the reader is convinced by Kirkby's account that the pride is justified.

Dora Dueck
Winnipeg, MB

Arthur Kroeger, *Hard Passage: A Mennonite Family's Long Journey from Russia to Canada*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2007. Pp. 269. Soft cover, \$34.95

Arthur Kroeger attended Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, worked in the Canadian embassy in Washington for a time, and spent 34 years in the federal public service, much of that as a deputy minister in six key federal departments, including Indian Affairs (1975-79); Transport Canada (1979-83); Regional Industrial Expansion (1985-

86); Energy, Mines and Resources (1986-88); and Employment and Immigration Canada (1988-92). He was such a well-respected civil servant that Carleton University named a college after him, the Arthur Kroeger College of Public Affairs. He was also named a Companion of the Order of Canada.

Not bad for a dirt-poor Mennonite kid from Alberta whose parents emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1926 with nothing but debt and disease. Kroeger, who was born in Canada after his family's arrival here, is the youngest of seven siblings, and spent his adolescence striving to "become as much like [his] peer group as possible," in other words, striving to become Canadian, not ethnic.

As a result, Kroeger learned little about his heritage from his parents or siblings. It wasn't until both his parents had died, first his mother in 1958 while he was studying at Oxford and then his father in 1971, that he began to wonder about his family history. To satisfy his curiosity, he asked his siblings if he could take charge of a box of private papers his father had carried with him from Russia. "I wanted to know about the contents of the box," Kroeger writes in the prologue to *Hard Passage*, "because of a growing curiosity about my parents' past, concerning which I realized I knew very little."

The box's contents – which included passports, transit documents, diaries, letters, postcards, and photos – were mostly written in German and Russian, which Kroeger could not read himself. After having the documents translated, he read them again and again over the next 20 years, inexorably building a picture of what his parents' lives had been like during the Russian Revolution, the birth of the Soviet Union, and their early days in Canada during the Great Depression. Kroeger supplemented those sources with research from other published Mennonite histories and eventually, upon retirement, decided to write this book.

For the many Canadians whose parents were immigrants, the Kroeger family story might not be regarded as anything special, and certainly not unique, but it is the very universality of *Hard Passage* that makes it such a compelling read. It helps that Kroeger, unlike many would-be biographers, can actually write quite well. Characters come to life vividly and sections of historical exposition are rendered compellingly under his sure hand. It takes skill to do what Kroeger has managed with seeming effortlessness: pull together research from a wide range of dry historical texts, first-hand accounts of family history, and diverse archival sources, digest it all and then re-tell it in his own voice. The result is a clear, concise, informative, and always interesting account of a typical Russian Mennonite family's flight from the Soviet Union in the 1920s and their eventual rebirth on the soil of the Canadian prairies.

Included within *Hard Passage* are pictures of some of the Kroeger family documents, as well as historical photos acquired from archives. Kroeger also does an excellent job of profiling Mennonite leaders such as David Toews, whose close relationship with Canadian Pacific Railway leaders played a key role in the successful emigration of many Russian Mennonites. All in all, *Hard Passage* is a rewarding book, much more entertaining than such an informative book might be expected to be, and certainly of interest to both Mennonite and non-Mennonite readers alike.

Joe Wiebe
Vancouver, BC

Ilse Schreiber, *Many Are the Voices of Home*. [1949] Trans. Sarah Dyck. Waterloo: Klandyck Books, 2006. Pp. 355. Soft cover.

Many Are the Voices of Home, by Ilse Schreiber and translated by Sarah Dyck, follows the journey of the Martens, a Russian Mennonite immigrant family, as they settle into farming life on the Canadian prairie at the height of the Great Depression and are forced to contend with the unknown physical and cultural landscape of their new homeland. The work speaks specifically to the struggles of Jacob Martens and his son Jake as they seek to understand their place in the foreign Canadian environment, their evolving Mennonite faith, and their changing relationship to each other as father and son.

Throughout, Schreiber uses Jake's struggle to understand the strict Mennonite beliefs of his father as a way to touch on important moments in Canadian and Mennonite history: the election of Canada's first Communist to the Saskatchewan Legislature (277); the movement of Mennonite youth from rural communities to urban centres; the adoption of business as an alternative to farming; and the practice of marrying outside the Mennonite faith are all represented here. As Nell, a non-Mennonite character who marries into the faith, describes it, the Mennonites in this novel all undergo a transformation from "the extremes" of Mennonite faith to a gradual acceptance of Canadian customs (172).

Schreiber's work succeeds at revealing the hopes and difficulties of immigrants arriving in Canada in the early twentieth century, but it also falls short in some crucial areas. Many of its characters appear one-dimensional, including Jake who, after the death of a close family member, shows an almost complete lack of grief (333). Jacob's

realization that his Mennonite faith needs to evolve in the Canadian environment is similarly unconvincing; this pivotal transformation simply occurs too suddenly to be believable.

The novel, first published in German in 1949, also caricatures the behaviour of various characters, over-simplifying the complex realities of rural communities and the relationship between, for example, immigrants and Aboriginals in Canada. Some of these exaggerations, such as the greedy storekeeper in Fort Morris who exploits farmers, are overly simplistic but fairly harmless. Scenes that include Natak, the major Aboriginal character in the novel, however, are more problematic. Natak continually appears “as though blown in by the snow” (73) or as though “sprouted up from the ground” (100). Tropes that consistently identify characters directly with nature always risk dehumanizing them; moments where Natak is literally reduced to the state of an animal – such as when he runs away from a particularly tragic scene by “stooping low [...] fle[eing] on hands and feet like a wounded animal” (302) – are particularly troubling. It is, of course, unfair to judge a work from another era by contemporary literary standards, but the text’s determination to identify Natak as animalistic and an inseparable part of nature will strike readers as simplistic at best and at worst, the product of what we now recognize as racist beliefs about Aboriginal people.

Sarah Dyck’s translation is sometimes confusing, particularly when she tries to translate a German expression or figure of speech directly into English. At other times, however, it succeeds impressively well in capturing nuances of emotion. Descriptions of farmers’ unending struggles as they face year after dry year without a harvest (293), or Jacob’s realization that his strict Mennonite beliefs cannot survive without being adapted to fit the Canadian experience (254-255) are particularly moving and well-written.

Schreiber’s novel tells a poignant tale of the unending challenges immigrants face as they settle into a new physical and cultural environment and of the inter-generational tensions peculiar to immigrant families. While the novel speaks to the specific case of the Mennonites who settled on the Canadian prairie in the 1930s, its relevance extends into the 21st century, as vast numbers of newcomers – immigrants and refugees – continue to face the challenges of adapting to new places and spaces.

Andrea Dyck
Winnipeg, MB

Annie Jacobsen (with Jane Finlay-Young and Di Brandt), *Watermelon Syrup*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007. Pp. 275. Soft cover, \$24.95

Young Alexandra (Lexi) emerges from the scrabble of Mennonite poverty and piety in depression-era Saskatchewan into the wealthy Waterloo household of Dr. and Mrs. Oliver. She has allowed herself to be sent off to servitude in the east rather than be married off to one of the local losers: "Horrible old farmers like Heinrich Wilms. Over twice her age and missing a front tooth" (33). In Waterloo there are other Mennonites nearby, including Lexi's close relatives, but they are soon relegated to the sidelines in this coming-of-age story.

When sexually frustrated and alcoholic Mrs. Oliver greets pretty young Lexi at the door, she takes one look at her and utters prophetically, "You're *just* what the doctor ordered" (8), the doctor being Mrs. Oliver's portly, philandering husband. Shy, and even more attractive after she's donned Mrs. Oliver's hand-me-downs skirts and blouses, Lexi obligingly develops a crush on the good doctor, in spite of the fact that he's not exactly a specimen. It's enough for Lexi that he dresses and smells better than the men back home. She thrills whenever he's near and is soon eager to allow a few clandestine kisses. After that it's only a matter of time before things turn ugly.

Before that happens, though, Lexi's tenure with the Olivers and her dubious romance are interrupted by the trip she makes home to be with her dying mother. Once home, Lexi must face another intimidating patriarch, her unrelentingly Mennonite father, but all the while she pines for Waterloo and the possibilities of the life she glimpsed there. When she decides, after her mother's death and against her father's wishes, to go back out into the world, her father invokes a shunning and cuts all ties with her.

Back in Waterloo, things aren't the same, and it all comes crashing down the night Dr. Oliver forces himself on Lexi. Eventually, though, things turn out all right: Lexi marries a preacher's son, becomes a dedicated nurse, and later, the mother of two children. All in all, it's a bit of an Anabaptist Cinderella story, but then, so is *Anne of Green Gables* (if you take out the Anabaptist part), one of my favourite books. And if most of the men in this book behave in a uniformly despicable fashion (there's no Matthew Cuthbert in Lexi's story), at least a Prince Charming appears (more of a convenient plot element than a real character, but never mind) to take her away from it all in the end. Lexi puts me in mind of the orphaned Anne Shirley: I just want her to catch a break.

From a strictly literary standpoint the writing in this book might be called generic and unremarkable. It is supposed to be life-writing,

so much can be forgiven. On the other hand, the book also touts itself as a novel, which blurs critical and generic boundaries and forms of assessment. It helps a lot that the narrative has an unpretentious quality to it: if Lexi struggles with the fact that she's easily swayed by superficial details, there's an honest intensity to her struggle. More than once, though, I found myself wondering what her story would have sounded like if it had been written in the first person rather than the third, especially in the places where a kind of Victorian narrative glosses over the more dramatic moments.

Lexi's sense of self-worth is a fragile thing, and she allows herself only occasional glimpses at her own intelligence and attractiveness and courage. She strives for self-reliance but isn't sure how to go about achieving it; maybe surprisingly in a Mennonite coming-of-age account, the role of religion doesn't feature predominantly in her search. God has little more than a cameo role in this tale. There are times when Lexi appears to be on the threshold of a post-Mennonite future, but in the end she chooses a safer option. I didn't think she needed to get into a car and find herself a man before she could get on with her life, and it seemed a little overly convenient that she manages to land a job AND a place to live on same trip! Children and a nursing career follow promptly, though they're relegated to the epilogue. The perfunctory tone of the last few pages may be an understandable effect of the collaborative nature of the book, but readers may feel like they're being hurried out the door.

Finally, because we're dealing here with a story of Russlander Mennonites, there are the usual flashbacks to marauding Russian rapists, memories of lost wealth, and longing for the fertile and abundant land left behind – the Mennonite version of the displaced landed gentry arriving to scratch and claw their way back to respectability among the backward relatives who sponsored them over. The hardship, according to Lexi, is only made worse by the fact that “[t]he Mennonites who had come to Canada in the 1800s were of peasant stock, they had been poor forever, they suffered the depression so much more robustly. But those that came in 1925, they were softer, more educated, used to an easier life” (3). Which is all a bit too condescending for my (Kanadier) taste.

David Elias
Winnipeg, MB

Di Brandt, *So this is the world & here I am in it*. Edmonton: NeWest, 2007. Pp. 244. Soft cover, \$24.95.

Although Di Brandt and I are separated by a generation, I grew up just a few miles west of her and left my small-town Mennonite roots for a literary education and academic career in “the city.” I’ve always felt grateful to Brandt for giving voice to the feelings of cultural displacement that she described so passionately in her first book of poems, *questions i asked my mother*. In *So this is the world & here I am in it*, her latest collection of essays, Brandt adds both a longer historical perspective and environmental criticism to her personal account of the rural-urban division. Most Mennonite readers who grew up in rural communities will probably find much here that resonates; for me, reading Brandt’s essays on Mennonite experience, like reading Miriam Toews’ work, always tends to the uncanny: ‘Yes,’ I find myself thinking, ‘I remember this too, but that’s not how it was!’ What this experience reveals to me is perhaps what I’ve “known” all along – the infinite, fascinating variety and transformation of rural Mennonite life in Canada (even just in south-central Manitoba), in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

What Brandt is so good at documenting, in both her poetry and essays, is the psychic and emotional dimensions of women’s experience of a separatist, patriarchal, Christian settler culture. Here, in essays that mingle personal confession with archival research, literary criticism with lyric poetry, Brandt brilliantly historicizes “Mennonite feelings” of connectedness to the land, of cultural and linguistic particularity, and of irrevocable loss. In one of the most challenging essays, for example, “*Je jeliada, je vechieda*: Canadian Mennonite (Alter)Identifications,” Brandt speculates that “[p]erhaps my personal sense of scattered shatteredness, passing liminally over the threshold of this particular communal identity, had to do with re-encountering, on my way out, the violent founding moment that marked our way in” (107). Such personal reflections prompt a set of fascinating genealogies. Across several chapters, Brandt connects her memory of the rural landscape and village culture of her childhood, to that which is often forgotten or overlooked in both official and folk histories of Mennonite experience, including the similarities between the extermination of the early Anabaptists, witches, and First Nations peoples; the “carnavalesque celebration of the body” and bawdy humour that inheres in Mennonite communal life and Plautdiestch; the displacement of First Nations people from their ancestral lands in the wake of Mennonite settlement after Confederation; and the unacknowledged love of “wildness” in Mennonite emigration patterns. “[D]id we, do we really hate and fear wildness, we Mennonites, haven’t we in fact

loved it, haven't we located ourselves geographically on the edge of it [...] Isn't that where we have been most comfortable, balancing on the precarious edge between so-called 'civilization' and 'wildness?'" (83). Indeed, balancing between erudition and unruliness, despair and hope, Brandt's multi-voiced book is a remarkable performance on a precarious edge.

As in *Now You Care*, Brandt reminds us how to remember, often by making links between seemingly separate or contradictory processes, and in the process, she writes what Anne Hostetler has called a new ecology of Mennonite relationships to the land. Why, Brandt asks in one chapter, was Mennonite separatism on the post-war prairie enforced so stringently in matters of female conduct, but so easily abandoned in farming methods "through intense and rapid mechanization and chemicalization and corporatization" (82)? In another chapter, Brandt meditates on her collaboration with Aganetha Dyck and on the beauty and wisdom of honeybees; what kinds of historical connections might we draw, Brandt asks, between the secrets in our past and those of the beehive. "Do they worry, the elders of the hive, watching the progress of history around them, about losing their ancient arts, their lavish folk customs, so carefully preserved over time?" (183).

The often unexpected but wholly welcome connections Brandt draws in individual chapters extend to the book as a whole. Mingled with essays on Mennonite history and experience are subtle readings of the work of Adele Wiseman, Dorothy Livesay, David Arnason, and James Reaney, writers who have had both a professional and personal impact on Brandt and on the evolving literary scene in Winnipeg that nurtured Brandt's early years as a writer. Their writing enables Brandt to loop back frequently to one of the principal themes of the book, the prairie landscape that surrounds and infiltrates Winnipeg, in spite of ongoing efforts to subdue it with agrochemicals and sprawl. *So this is the world & here I am in it* has an organic quality to it, remarkable for a collection whose individual pieces were produced across a span of at least ten years, and expresses throughout the passionate search for wholeness that makes Brandt such an important voice in Canadian Mennonite writing.

Janice Schroeder
Carleton University

Corey Redekop, *Shelf Monkey*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2007. Pp. 258. Soft cover, \$18.95.

Thomas Friesen hates bad writers. And bad writing. And he has fallen in with a cabal of like-minded individuals who call themselves “Shelf Monkeys” and who dedicate themselves to wreaking revenge against the homogenizing anti-literary tendencies abroad in the land. Friesen, the protagonist of this most self-referential of postmodern texts, thus enters a spiral of Dantean descent, the outcome of which is both inevitable and surprising.

First-time novelist Corey Redekop has created a central character whose world is a disturbing mirror image of the one outside the window – albeit one densely saturated with literary texts and references. It is no surprise that Friesen adopts the pseudonym Yossarian when he joins the Shelf Monkeys: Redekop’s broadly epistolary novel is an extended development of, and tribute to, Joseph Heller’s classic meditation on the politics of insanity in *Catch-22*. The tribute is stylistic as well as referential: Friesen’s voice is a sardonic echo of Heller’s protagonist, as he faces a hall of mirrors in which what is sane and what insane become dangerously refracted. Like Yossarian, Friesen, too, experiences an epiphany, though his is a satiric indictment of industrialized book-selling.

Stylistically, the book – a rant disguised as an epistolary detective story – derives a great deal of its effect from its seemingly endless parade of cultural allusions, many of them literary, others simply pop-cultural in-jokes. Together, they develop a sense of Friesen’s inner-chaos as his frenetic monologue emerges in a series of fictitious emails to the (real world) author Eric McCormack. The effect is alternately amusing – the reader “gets” one after another of the references – and paranoia-inducing, as we increasingly suspect that we might be missing the joke. No doubt, this is a deliberate strategy on Redekop’s part; our loss of equilibrium neatly parallels Friesen’s. The near-continual name dropping might seem pompous in other hands, but it fits perfectly in this book’s overall tone and theme of this book; Redekop provokes laughter when the references hit their mark, which is often.

Like many good detective stories, the crime from which Friesen is a fugitive remains unknown until the end of the novel. The novel’s central action is propelled by the desire for vengeance against a talk show host who, like Oprah Winfrey, has a book club that sponsors novels the Shelf Monkeys rightly consider utter dreck, novels drenched in bathetic sentiment and composed of unprintably banal prose. While Friesen and his Monkey cohorts might occasionally seem insufferable bores, they are acutely aware of the dangers of elitist taste-prescription: one gets Friesen to admit that they are “not snobs.

We're dieticians" (118). Redekop uses the Monkeys' self-conscious geekiness to sustain interest in what might otherwise be a dubious premise: Friesen and his friends are *admittedly* anti-social types who derive more pleasure from the written word than they do from the social world.

The novel's epistolary structure is in many ways perfectly suited to the drawn-out revelation that occurs. Redekop, though, can't resist moving into the immediacy of reported action, an immediacy that epistolary fiction can't, by definition, provide. Thus the interpolations of external voices (police reports, newspaper articles, television transcripts, etc.) become fewer as the novel proceeds and the narrative focuses increasingly on Friesen's development as a character. Eventually, the epistolary structure is more or less discarded as the drama of Friesen's backstory demands more sustained narrative focus. I'm hesitant to describe this as a flaw, though, since it may simply be one more device to disturb my generic expectations, is this yet another post-structuralist transgression tweaking my readerly nose.

Overall, *Shelf Monkeys* is a strong first outing by Redekop and hopefully the first of many to come. Perhaps Thomas Friesen has potential as a franchise character? Who knows, with the right agent and distribution deal, some network exposure might be in the cards ...

Tom Penner
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Lois Braun, *The Penance Drummer and Other Stories*.
Winnipeg: Turnstone, 2007. Pp. 246. Soft cover, \$19.95.

Manitoba writer Lois Braun's short stories suggest crucial events that may – or may not – be just around the corner. In "Sturgis," an older woman sheltering a runaway miscreant is left on the final page with her arms around the boy, either about to get her throat cut or to take a valiant and quixotic stand against the police. In "Laundry Day" and "The Penance Drummer" we seem to be on the verge of finding out about a husband's infidelity, but we never know for certain. These borderline moments are testing grounds for character – how forgiving or courageous can individuals be in moments of trial or revelation – and Braun brings skillful attention to bear on them.

One cannot help wondering, however, about the aftermath of these key moments. The distance between reader and character is both tantalizing and frustrating. Braun never, for instance, uses first person narration in these stories, so we are allowed to know her people, but

not intimately. While not every writer needs to experiment with point of view, Braun is a fine enough artist to take more chances: she has several story collections and important award nominations to her credit, and her work is assured and well crafted.

Although she presents protagonists at different stages of life (children, widows and widowers, young male ne'er-do-wells), Braun's characters are ultimately rather similar in temperament: lonely and isolated, they wonder about the people around them but are either hesitant about real involvement or incapable of reaching out to the right people. Braun gives them all quirks so that they are neither so nice nor so predictable that they're boring, but some readers may long for more danger. The stories' shared attitude toward death is telling: death is a presence here – many of Braun's people have been left behind by the people who gave their lives meaning – but death is not a disaster or source of anguish. We encounter death only after the pain has eased off.

The stories collected here are sparsely populated but amply detailed and sometimes almost too carefully detailed. Witness the cooking that goes on in the final story, "Rape Flower Tea House," a story that, despite the slightly menacing title, stubbornly refuses to tip over into a hinted-at darkness. The author crafts bold and vivid openings located just off the main action: a woman lifts a heavy stone cemetery angel out of her car trunk; two strangers comfort each other after a car crash. The opening line of "Bill's Girls," in which apples are thrown at a man's car, is mysterious and memorable: "Green they flew, through air the colour of delphiniums in old village gardens" (3). This works better than the opening paragraph of "Goldie," which is self-consciously enigmatic:

In the morning, they saw that the mouse-killing stick had moved. A straight-line wind had come upon them the evening before, after a day of rain. First the stormy skies had begun to clear, followed by fits and blusters of restless air. The sun was about to set brilliant red among purplish clouds when the hemming and hawing of the wind changed to a roar, a steady roar out of the west that lasted minutes. Leaves and willow shoots tumbled across the yard, birds shrieked in the sky. (57)

Lois Braun is good at depicting a certain kind of family life, one suffused with loss or missed opportunity. Her people know about passion but appear not to have experienced it very often; a crackling spiritual crisis or an erotic episode would add much to their experience. Braun has a clarity of vision that could be used to probe deeper:

in the title story, for instance, a wife believes that her husband is seeking penance, but what he really needs remains ambiguous. To my mind, it would not hurt if Braun looked straight at the hard facts of sin a little more often, and allowed an outburst or two to blast a hole in the action.

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Barbara Nickel, *Domain*. Toronto: Anansi, 2007. Pp. 93. Soft cover, \$18.95

Barbara Nickel's second poetry collection, *Domain*, confirms her proficiency, already evident in her first collection, *The Gladys Elegies*, in working with traditional forms, especially the sonnet which she has mastered like few Canadian poets. In *Domain*, seven related sonnets, each named for a room – kitchen, storage room, bedroom, etc. – divide the book into sections the way rooms divide our houses into areas with specific functions. Webster defines 'domain' as: "the territory over which dominion is exerted; hence, sphere of action, thought, influence etc." The sphere Nickel stakes out for poetic exploration is a domestic one. Living spaces remembered from childhood and revisited as an adult confront the narrator with change, decay, transience and ambiguity. In the process, what begins as personal may open up to a broader history.

In "House" – not a sonnet but a carefully structured poem with regular eight-line stanzas – the narrator not only recalls the child guided "home from school" by the "Gentle/ Cyclops with its attic eye" but also imagines the genesis of the house, the men who "dug, whistled, followed long trains / of thought – the war and wheat and cigarettes – / wiped sweat, shovelled clay into carts hauled / by mule to the yard." The kiln where the red bricks were made is described in terms that lend the process a mythic quality: "a dozen fires. Degrees unbearable," "Dark work, shovelling coal and ash, / like fuelling hell" (2-3).

Recurring images of a mirror – a cracked mirror that "resembled thorns" (1) – stress the difficulty encountered by human memory in trying to pin down what 'home' was like, who lived there and who ruled. The narrator of these poems, having left childhood behind and acquired a widening point of view, endeavours to understand the past. And herself. "What have I become?" the narrator asks, and answers, "The house would know" (33). A return to a physical place inevitably also becomes a journey into inner space.

Sometimes the poet captures the fraught lives of girls by commenting on photos or art. In "Acrobats at the Circus Fernando," a daughter/acrobat speaks these resonant lines: "For our contractions: oranges / I gather as Sister begs more. / Who held these orbs / in his pocket as we torqued / ourselves into hoops? / Bored" (16).

Another recurring domestic image is the wedding band. In "My brother's wedding ring" (7), the clink of gold on the steering wheel prompts the sister to recount the history of the ring which once belonging to their grandfather. The poem traces the ring's journey from post-revolutionary Russia to Saskatchewan where it glints from the patriarch's finger as he labours and as he preaches. But once again the mirror is cracked: witnesses insist the grandfather never wore a ring. So, which version do we trust? In the meantime, a poem about a honeymoon has become a brief history of a Mennonite migration.

The life of Catherine the Great, considered a benefactress by most Mennonites, inspires the sequence, "Empress," which consists of five glosas, another traditional form. The four lines around which each glosa is constructed are, in this case, borrowed from prose texts about the empress. Readers expecting a full story of Catherine will find instead that these poems move easily from the eighteenth century to the present, from Russia to Saskatchewan. The fifth glosa becomes a tribute to Mary Oyer, who taught music and conducted choirs in Mennonite churches and colleges south of the border. She had "perfect pitch" and was

applauded but not worshipped on the stage,
hair knotted under the net prayer covering
her elders insist upon. Yet never caged. (41)

While 'house' and 'room' images organize and unify this volume, the figures who inhabit these spaces, or did at one time, are by no means caged within four walls. They travel, usually by car, in Saskatchewan, visiting remembered dwellings, or on the Atlantic coast, exploring less familiar territory. Human travel leads inexorably to that other domain, the cemetery. At the Tiefengrund, Saskatchewan burial ground the narrator/poet mourns her grandmother:

A few months ago you
who'd nursed my mother,
watched me nurse.
He's thirsty now,
Crying in the back seat. (83)

But while the subjects of these poems are permitted to travel, the poet's accounts of them are always carefully controlled. Readers may want these poems to break out of their constraints and kick up their heels more often than they do, but they will not be able to deny that Nickel's second book upholds and surpasses the high standard she set in her first. *Domain* is a notable and lovely achievement.

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Yorifumi Yaguchi, *The Poetry of Yorifumi Yaguchi: A Japanese Voice in English*. Ed. Wilbur J. Birky. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006. Pp. 155. Soft cover, \$9.95, US.

The poetry of Yorifumi Yaguchi – an internationally-recognized Japanese poet, literature professor, peace activist, and Mennonite pastor in Sapporo, Japan – is remarkable within the small sphere of Mennonite writing, in part because it bears witness to an exceptionally rich linguistic, cultural, and religious cross-pollination.

Yaguchi was born north of Tokyo in 1932, to a Shinto nationalist father (whose practice included emperor worship) and a grandfather who followed Buddhism. It was his mother's strong interest in Christianity and the poetry of T.S. Eliot that led him to baptism in 1958 and to study for a Bachelor of Divinity at Goshen Biblical Seminary in Indiana from 1962-65. It was at Goshen that Yaguchi wrote many of the poems in English that would appear in his first collection, *A Shadow* (1966). Thereafter his poetic output seems to have moved fluidly between Japanese and English. When he returned to Japan to teach poetry and Bible literature at Hokusei University in Sapporo, he maintained friendships with such American poets as William Stafford, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov.

This new collection, edited by Goshen professor Wilbur J. Birky, presents in one place and for the first time, the remarkable breadth and coherence of Yaguchi's oeuvre. Nearly half of his approximately 300 poems in English are gathered here, alongside 13 translated poems. Taken as a whole, the poems are brief and mostly narrative in character, but one is struck by the range of subtle formal experimentation that Yaguchi has undertaken over the course of his career.

The first section, "Silence," contains some of the most quietly exhilarating poetry in the collection. With the merest of brush-strokes, Yaguchi invokes the tensions of the natural world: "A withered leaf / hanging on a twig / heavy as the earth" (20) or "Smoke is going up – / A white thread hanging from the heavens" (26). Elsewhere he captures

the transformation of a narrator, a converted Christian, when he encounters stone Buddha statues in a museum and begins involuntarily chanting the Zen sutras of his youth.

But perhaps the most moving section is “Child of War.” Here Yaguchi explores his childhood in post-war Japan. There is horror – a teacher is raped in front of her students; terrified families huddle in a coal mine during an air raid – but there is also tenderness: “The enemy planes passed / Our street like a summer shower just now. / [...] I forgot the danger and / Was standing in front of the hut, / Listening to the beautiful and / Calm music / Which was far from this world” (46).

The third section, “Beyond the Horizon,” is a collection of largely existential poems that explore the lurking sense of an otherworldly presence. There is the recurring image of arrival here, whether as a knock at the door or a shadow slowly stretching around the curve of the earth. “From afar / a big foot / comes quietly / The grass ceases its rustling / Among the startled creatures / a silence / spreads / I close my eyes / and wait” (82).

Concluding the collection are poems that show how language can take on a terrifying tangibility. Words pinned down as text writhe and groan in agony, “but gradually their wings stopped convulsing / and they were changed into gravestones” (106). Others enter into the dissonances of Christian practice – “We trap God / Hand Him / In stained glass”(115) – and the macabre absurdity of militarism: “You, who once were missionaries to us / now attack us” (135). Yaguchi creates intriguing rhythms in this section with line breaks and vernacular forms of speech.

Birky has done an excellent job of contextualizing Yaguchi’s writing and provides a wealth of background material. Yet while there are about a dozen of Yaguchi’s translated poems represented here, it would have been beneficial to have greater interplay between the English and Japanese dimensions of his writing. All told, however, this valuable collection reveals fresh facets of a poet whose work embodies a rare and potent cultural dialogue.

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