Plotting the City: Winnipeg in Selected Fiction by David Bergen, Sandra Birdsell, Miriam Toews, David Waltner-Toews, Armin Wiebe and Rudy Wiebe

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F*or me, Winnipeg has kind of taken on not quite mythic dimensions, but it's got that quality to it. Part of it is that I grew up with this thing, that Winnipeg was the Mennonite Jerusalem; it was a sort of cliché. People came here to worship and it had more Mennonites per capita than any other city in the world and everything that was best and worst in Mennonites was concentrated here and amplified here." (David Waltner-Toews in Reimer and Tiessen, "Keeping House" 225-26)*

Winnipeg was a foreign country. I moved into the heartland, right on Central Park where I could sit by my front window and watch everyone going by and I could make up stories. (Patrick Friesen in Reimer and Tiessen, "Poetry" 245)

The Mennonite Jerusalem, The Chosen Place, A Foreign Country

In the fall of 1981 I was in a conversation that spread over a couple days in Waterloo, Ontario with Margaret Loewen Reimer and poets Patrick Friesen and David Waltner-Toews. We were talking about Mennonites and writing. Along the way, we considered the role of place in relation to story. Could a Manitoba writer find a more representative and recognizable Mennonitism, one that would connect with a broad readership in Canada, by looking to the towns and villages of southern Manitoba rather than Winnipeg, that city's many thousands of Mennonites notwithstanding? More specifically, Waltner-Toews wondered whether Friesen did not have an advantage as a writer with an early background in Steinbach rather than, as in the case of Waltner-Toews, Winnipeg: "what you write has a certain air of authenticity, a sort of solid rural Mennonitism," he suggested to Friesen. "You know what you're talking about" (Reimer and Tiessen, "Poetry" 252).

Friesen wondered whether Waltner-Toews himself – belonging, as he did, to a Mennonite culture strongly established commercially and institutionally in Winnipeg since the 1920s – might not address the urban more directly. He speculated what "a long book or a long poem" by Waltner-Toews (who in 1981 was not yet a published novelist) might feel like, if he should write about Winnipeg as only a Mennonite of such a group as his could do: "I would love to see David write about his experience in Winnipeg with that whole incredible intellectual, theological social scene that he grew up in." Friesen imagined a work in which Waltner-Toews might show the range of actors that a Winnipeg such as his might include: "I would like to see a big effort about that to show which were the real bumbling idiots and which were the manipulators. Not which – you wouldn't have to identify. But to show there were bumblers, there were town fools – city fools – and there were noble strivers" (Reimer and Tiessen, "Poetry" 249-50). Waltner-Toews pointed out later that even in his writing about Winnipeg he tended to see "a rural dimension in the urban Mennonites" (Reimer and Tiessen, "Keeping House" 226). He suggested that a residual rural quality was useful in giving colour even to urban Mennonites in his work: "Despite all the suits and the white shoes and the success, you can still smell the manure, you know, it's still there, the cow barn is still there. It's a hard thing to write about" (226). The rural invaded the urban even in his own life, he said: "I grew up in Winnipeg. And yet I ended up being a farm veterinarian" (226).

But the tendency to look to the Mennonite communities "south" of Winnipeg – what I am here calling southern Manitoba – for an authentic Mennonite identity usable in literary texts is still with us. It seeped into the poster for the October 2009 "Mennonite/s Writing:

Manitoba and Beyond" conference held at the University of Winnipeg. Waltner-Toews's 1981 presuppositions about "authenticity" in writing by Mennonites surfaced in two of the quotations – and, implicitly, the title of the conference itself – on the posters. The first quotation, from novelist Robert Kroetsch, is a summary of the stunning prominence of Mennonite writers on the national literary scene in recent decades: "Finally, in southern Manitoba, we have a landscape that is a literary text and that might be the greatest accomplishment of the Mennonite writer." The second, from poet Di Brandt, seems to reinforce the geographic presuppositions of the first: "This land that I love / this wide, wide prairie, this horizon, this / sky, this great blue overhead, / big enough to contain every dream, every longing." (The third and final epigraph on the conference poster, from writing by Rudy Wiebe, in the context of its placement on the poster affirms the focus of the first two: "Place is character. Place is something that shapes you and your understanding of yourself." Of course, Wiebe's statement might serve as a comment on my topic here, too.) Where is Winnipeg? Must it remain elusive in writing by Mennonites, as it did for novelist Malcolm Lowry who, en route by bus from Vancouver to Toronto in the 1940s, registered it as "that strange mirage of a city" (Lowry 97)?

For Mennonites in general, with so much of their cultural ground lying historically or ancestrally outside Winnipeg – in Russia or, if in Manitoba, then to the south of Winnipeg – do "southern Manitoba" and "Winnipeg" belong together, if they go together at all, primarily in some kind of ever-shifting figure/ground binary? Is Winnipeg – with many Mennonites for so many generations on the move, experiencing in their peculiar and particular ways the starkness of separateness from the world, even of isolation from the excesses of consumer worldliness publically celebrated in Winnipeg from the late 1800s onward – beyond the pale particularly for some rural or small-town Manitoba Mennonites? Is it, as it may have been historically, off limits in ways that apply vestigially even today? What are the differences in attitude toward Winnipeg between writers from the two large groups of Mennonites who came at two different times from Russia to Manitoba: during the 1870s, when they (including Friesen's forebears) settled on the East and West Reserves in "southern Manitoba"; during the 1920s, when they (including the forebears of those associated with Waltner-Toews) were quite likely to settle in Winnipeg?

Of course, writers who are descendants of these two Mennonite groups do not give us a consistent picture, for Winnipeg remains in their work a variable signifier, sometimes muse, sometimes tyrant. As a cultural location it may be both generous and hostile. It is a central participant in the ongoing global Mennonite diaspora, and as a home can offer both liberation and comfort, or anxiety and entrapment. To

some it is intimate, warm, accessible in some of its kaleidoscope parts; to others it is authoritative, distant, inaccessible. Sometimes Winnipeg is a spatial, temporal, and/or psychic environment that transforms the environments that Mennonite writers' characters embody or carry with them from their most recent point of existence – perhaps Steinbach, perhaps Russia, perhaps somewhere in between – and, sometimes, it is an environment that causes them to leave. Sometimes, too, it is an environment that teaches people to forget a better world, as in the case of Sarah Klassen's "A brief history of Edison Avenue." Klassen, whose forebears arrived in Canada from Russia during the 1920s, speaks through her poetry in easy enough terms about Winnipeg, but in this poem she finds in Winnipeg only a cramped version of what had been possible in Russia. Addressing her poem to a Winnipeger who still dreams of what once was in Russia, where Mennonites were held in a "gold-bright" and grand world of what has become "the Lost Paradise," Klassen's pragmatic narrator advises: "Such dreaming must be unlearned" ([I]). It is a lesson that Katy tries to enforce on Sara in Sandra Birdsell's *Children of the Day*.

Friesen's melancholy poem, "the forks," from the 1998 book that he dedicated to "all the artists of Winnipeg," *St. Mary at Main*, has a narrator who never feels that he belongs to the Winnipeg where he dwells. The narrator refers to himself as "a traveller in my own town": "this isn't home / it's a city I've come to / without expectations / on my way home" (Friesen 34). For Friesen himself, as he said in 1981, the move from the confinement of Steinbach to the redeeming largesse of university life in Winnipeg was a life-changing revelation, "an utterly liberating experience." For him personally, Winnipeg in those early years offered a "pure air of freedom" that let him, as though released from a concentration camp, take control of his life, let him determine who he was (Reimer and Tiessen, "Poetry" 245).

Waltner-Toews, in the 1981 interview, felt that the highly institutionalized version of Winnipeg defined by Mennonites who had emigrated from Russia during the 1920s had become a prison house. He reflected on having had to free himself of the city before he began travels and university studies outside Canada. In experimenting six or seven years later with the possibility of "mov[ing] back" to Canada and to the neighbourhood, he chose to test the possibility of Saskatoon, "[a] sort of a virgin Winnipeg": "For me Saskatchewan made possible my going back to western Canada and avoiding all the serious hangups that I would have had to face in Winnipeg" (245).

Waltner-Toews, in his poem "Winnipeg," gives a graphic sense of the intense presence of Winnipeg in the lives of Mennonites he knew there. Winnipeg is embodied as a woman who exudes the sensuous materiality of place, free of the bureaucratic religiosity evident in the

organizations within Mennonites' (for him, specifically Mennonite Brethren's) institutional life: "[Think of Winnipeg,] there on her knees / rinsing her soiled hair / in the Red, the Assiniboine snaking at her skirts, she so cursing angry, / shrieking plautdietsch at Portage and Main: // To have come so far / halfway around the world / and still to have missed the Chosen Place / it must not be!" (Waltner-Toews, "Winnipeg" 62). In this poem, which reflects on the personae of his parents' generation of 1920s immigrants, Waltner-Toews could not, he has said, think of Winnipeg as a man: "Somehow Winnipeg had to be a woman; there's not this rigidity. The rigidity is an imposed rigidity, and it's an image of the church in a way. The Mennonite Brethren church and things like that, they represent an imposed order, an imposed rigidity, that I don't think matches what's going on underneath" (Reimer and Tiessen, "Keeping House" 222).

Maddin, McLuhan

Two well-known voices that isolate something of the rhetorical character of Winnipeg are those of filmmaker Guy Maddin and cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan. But – a reminder of the deep subjectivity inscribing our engagement with place – I first take note of a voice that only I hear, that of my mother. It is impossible for me to read Mennonite writers' stories of Winnipeg without placing them in conversation with stories I heard from her when I was a child: vivid stories, vignettes really – tenderly held and nourished by her – that structure and give meaning to "my Winnipeg." Not bothering with contradictions or complications or dark matters, she would tell about a generous city set in a golden period from 1926 to 1929: a city with a free heart that in turn set the heart free. Hers was a light and airy metropolis of walks across wide main streets and over long wind-swept bridges; a place of hurrying with her sisters and friends to choir practice and to Sunday morning rendezvous at church; an "English" city leading inevitably to endearing anecdotes of comical gaffes by German-speaking Mennonites making their way past malapropisms and mispronunciations among brightly-lit jobs in Eaton's mail-order department or in the homes of the established rich. My mother – a Russländer (to take Sandra Birdsell's reclaiming of that term) who came to Canada in 1926 – offered these oral recollections during the halcyon days of a materially booming Ontario of the 1950s, nostalgic portraits of a late 1920s Winnipeg punctuating a 1950s Ontario, as though those two eras were at one with each other, though for her the Winnipeg era of infinite freedom and endless prospect was preferable. They remind me of what Friesen describes as his mood upon his arrival in the city or, to

turn to fiction, of Birdsell's character Sara shopping one day in 1928 in Winnipeg in *Children of the Day*.

But can any of us read Mennonites' responses to Winnipeg without filtering them through the strong definitions of Winnipeg by two "non-Mennonites": Winnipeger Guy Maddin with his film *My Winnipeg* (2007) and, more distantly but still resonantly, Marshall McLuhan in *Speaking of Winnipeg* (1974), his words re-situated recently in David Arnason and Mhari Mackintosh's edition, *The Imagined City: A Literary History of Winnipeg* (2005). Maddin's hypnotic film takes us through a surrealism of near-dream, somewhere between sleep and waking, the rhythms of a night-train drowsily click-clacking toward the geographic borderline of Winnipeg, never quite to arrive at a clean break, the dreamer tossing uncomfortably in the hallucinatory interiors of the train car. The train only circles back, obsessively returning to a city of sleepwalkers gliding among an historic encyclopedia of ghosts that mingle in their cloudy inertia with Winnipegers' historic desire to obliterate the monuments and memories of their past.

Maddin's Winnipeg is yanked in a quite different direction by McLuhan who in 1915 moved from Edmonton to Winnipeg as a child with his parents and lived there for nearly twenty years. McLuhan – known for his theorizing the role of "environments" – much later came to see in Winnipeg a counter-environment that, detached from the world's better-known locations, enables a unique clarity of vision. Winnipeg, what he affirms as a "very rich cultural centre" (Arnason and Mackintosh 145; Parr 32), does not overwhelm but rather releases an inhabitant's capacity to look with a kind of objectivity outward upon the broader and distant world. "The human scale," he said, "is a very important fact about Winnipeg." In Winnipeg the individual, enjoying considerable personal freedom and identity, "still has significant dimension" (Arnason and Mackintosh 145; Parr 32-33). McLuhan insisted that Winnipeg's infinite skies and horizons stimulate a "total field of vision" not bound by a narrow or fixed point of view (Marchand 5).

Rudy Wiebe, Armin Wiebe

In 1962 Rudy Wiebe, working as editor of a national Mennonite Brethren magazine in Winnipeg, might have done well had he been forewarned by a young Mennonite artist, Woldemar Neufeld. In 1937 Neufeld, en route from Ontario to British Columbia where he was holding a one-man show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, was enjoying an envigorating encounter in Winnipeg with fellow Mennonite artist Victor Friesen. During those very days Neufeld had sombre words for the serious Mennonite writer or artist struggling to attract attention

from a broad swath of imagined Mennonite readers or art buyers: pay attention, rather, to the *Englische*, that is, the non-Mennonite world. Taking as an example the experience of his stepfather Jacob H. Janzen, who was not only a prominent Mennonite bishop but also a poet, playwright, and short story writer, he pled with Janzen to stop his romantic but hapless quest for a wide Mennonite audience: "How is your writing coming along," he had written to Janzen in 1936. "I still am not satisfied ... that you don't send your work to the larger publishing houses. Or to Germany. Our Mennonites don't value the writings if it comes from a Mennonite" (Tiessen and Tiessen 10).

A quarter century after Neufeld's visit to Winnipeg, his words of warning about Mennonite artists and audiences were dramatized in what he would have seen as a paradigmatic dust-up in Winnipeg with the publication of Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in 1962. The tension was implicitly triggered by three words that cemented the anxiety of the moment: "McClelland and Stewart." These words represented the "English" as the designated but dreaded audience. Of course, Wiebe had more than a few supporters among Mennonites in Winnipeg, just as Neufeld did. But there were people who felt that Wiebe's "peace" had not just destroyed, but, to alter the title, "de-storyed" many Mennonites. Certainly the novel "destroyed" Wiebe's immediate chances of carrying on his career in Winnipeg as editor of the magazine.

But Wiebe did, in a round-about way, return to Winnipeg – as a character in the pages of his second novel, *First and Vital Candle* (1966). There Winnipeg provided Wiebe with a means – an urban metaphor – to explore the modernist literary and cinematic trope of the lonely city. Wiebe appropriates Winnipeg in the first one-quarter of that novel to find a setting adequate to support his idea of a spiritually fragmented crowd lurching blindly within an advertisement-and-automobile-laden phantasmagoria.

Wiebe's protagonist, Abe Ross, clarifies his urban location right from the start. Sketching a map for a small boy, Abe says, pointing, "Here's where we are, Winnipeg" (6). For a few weeks one summer, seemingly around 1959, Abe spends agonized weeks in abject loneliness like a man dispossessed, bitterly carried about by the blindly functioning mechanisms of a body insensitive to ordinary pleasures; "the seeming endless strength of his body ground his mind into a curse" (3). With an agony (if without the attendant irony) recalling that of Maddin's protagonist, Abe aimlessly pounds the sidewalks along Portage Avenue and nearby gritty streets by night, a daytime crowd only irking him – "their ceaseless noisy lurching like walruses" (37) – even in the anonymous public spaces he inhabits. Abe resists any play, any give and take, within this urban environment. He is suspicious of

urban manners, uneasy about his capacity to control social situations. He will not trust himself in the city.[1]

Abe's feelings – though slightly more relaxed when spending time with an acquaintance or friend – are typically fraught: as when trailing a beautiful but untouchable woman across Assiniboine Bridge; or, after a magnificent concert of Bach's St. John's Passion, when trapped in a late-night highbrow mixture of sensuality – the "mockingly-generous breasts" (261) of Sherris Kinconnell – and crude wit at a party in the languid and "nonchalant luxuriance" (20) of a tindel-stone mansion belonging to the arrogant upper crust "reciting a damned script" only to disintegrate into what to Abe appear to be dancing skulls and skeletons (18); or the next day, when fending off an employment opportunity offered to him by one of that upper crust. At its centre Winnipeg offers to a "broken" seeker like Abe (12) only a "lonely city" (16) that dangles before him but shallow distractions, like "the spume of Winnipeg girls in tight skirts and piled-up hair" (141).

Wiebe's protagonist becomes more complex in probing the place of military force and of the Métis in Winnipeg's history (and in effect signals some of Wiebe's interests in subsequent novels). But Winnipeg, shaped by the two "snakish rivers" (11) that Abe sees when he flies in and out of the city, only obscures its past; it is a city whose history may be a palimpsestic layering of forts and other ghosts, not least that of Louis Riel, but Riel's tombstone and bronze plaque markers do not face up to the facts of his life.

Decades later, Abe Ross's agonistic Winnipeg in *First and Vital Candle* is hilariously subverted in Armin Wiebe's *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* (1984) and coolly analyzed in David Bergen's *The Case of Lena S* (2002). It is vividly extended in David Waltner-Toews's *Fear of Landing* (2007) and pragmatically softened in Sandra Birdsell's *Children of the Day* (2005).

In the figure of Yasch Siemens, Armin Wiebe gives us a protagonist with a certain immunity to any conscious articulation of Winnipeg as defined by either a Maddin or a McLuhan. Yasch and Winnipeg provide for each other comic foils, even when Yasch does bother with the bigger picture. Winnipeg is Yasch's exotic urban – simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar – in an episode along the picaresque trajectory of Yasch's search for his place in a world he finds puzzling but oddly appealing, and about which through his nonsense he offers his own brand of insight. In Yasch, echoes of flaneurship, of a consumer in motion, ever curious in Winnipeg's public places and spaces, take on a tone opposite to that in Rudy Wiebe's *First and Vital Candle* where an unseeing Abe Ross – numbly hidden within his protective layering, rigidly separate from the city – cannot be comfortable with himself nor with the city.

Yasch, astonishingly, seems to be fully enough in the world but (compared to people around him) not exactly of it. Taking Ha Ha's truck – and pulling a Honey Wagon – into Winnipeg, the naive and gentle Yasch, as perpetual and hapless visitor dropping in on the tides of life, asks Oata Needarp, whom he has invited along, "Where want you to now?" Her reply, the linguistic signpost marking also the opening of the Armin Wiebe section of Arnason and Mackintosh's literary history of Winnipeg, resonates as myth among Mennonite readers: "Winnipeg in the cellar" (105; Arnason and Mackintosh 192). That is, "Vinnipek emm Kjalla." By this, Yasch tells the reader, "she means to Eaton's" (105).

Oata recognizes the confusion that Winnipeg can cause for a baffled and inexperienced bumpkin like Yasch; she understands how to take advantage of sites where the interface of environment and counter-environment (to draw on McLuhan) invite maximum play (the very thing, as we shall see, religious zealots fear about Winnipeg in *A Complicated Kindness* and *Children of the Day*). She sees Winnipeg as a game-changer. Before she and Yasch have left Winnipeg, Oata, revelling in the freedom that an ineffectual and passive Yasch unwittingly grants her when they are away from their rural home base in "Gutenthal," says to Yasch: "I am real happy that you asked me with to Winnipeg" (114). Oata has managed to order a Sunday suit for Yasch from a salesman at Eaton's who gains from them the admission that they are "from the country" (109). She has managed to take herself and Yasch to a motel for the night, and has teased him into an engagement that will lead to marriage. Winnipeg leaves him bodily dazed and mentally disoriented, though not unhappily so: "It was like I was dizzy then," he says (118).

David Bergen

In *The Case of Lena S* David Bergen presents the interior and exterior worlds of Mason Crowe, a sixteen-year-old would-be poet, with clean lines, often comically restrained, that are at considerable distance from the dizzy hilarity that Armin Wiebe lets loose through Yasch Siemens. Mason's tender emotions and gentle hopes play against a backdrop of strong lines made palpable through the sturdy presence of the city, including Winnipeg's streets and the places along those streets. Mason, we come to feel, has implicit faith in the permanence of existing structures that have always made up his home; driving his parents' car around Winnipeg, he takes for granted the world as it is presented to him, street by street. At the level of the city's surfaces, he takes for granted his intuitive capacity to know and to master its exterior shell. However, although he is a reflective boy, he too readily

extends his faith in existing forms from the built environment, which seems permanent, to social situations, which are fluid and often beyond his grasp. All along, the narrator speaks matter-of-factly about Mason, coolly keeping a frequently underlying sense of comedy or irony understated and at a distance.

In the movement of the story in to or out of Winnipeg, Bergen's novel at one point provides a mirror reversal of the episode we have just noted in Armin Wiebe's. Seventeen-year-old Lena, reversing, as it were, Oata's strategy of borderlines and place, drives with Mason as passenger in a delivery van onto a narrow road beyond "the edge of the city" (69). She has already picked up cartons of fresh eggs from the farmer, Mr. Koop, for the restaurant where she works as waitress. There, outside Winnipeg's boundary, she gives Mason a first lesson in sex on the floor of the van. "[S]he lay on the floor of the van. 'We can have sex,' she said. 'Just be careful of the eggs'" (68). Later in the novel we see more fully that the world beyond the Perimeter Highway that encircles Winnipeg can be a place not only of transgression but of grave danger. In a sinister night-time encounter with an older man, Steve, over whom she has no control, the enigmatic and seductive Lena is forced to drive from a downtown bar along known streets to an unknown and unnamed area south of the Perimeter Highway: "Up Kenaston and onto Grant. Down through Charleswood and then left toward the Perimeter.... They crossed the tracks and stopped at the Perimeter. 'Straight through,' Steve said" (166-67). When they reach his house, he does finally release the terrified Lena to the night, but only upon realizing how young she is.

Shortly after that harrowing night beyond the boundary of the city's well-lit spaces, Lena (whose full name is Lena Schellendal), a suicidal depressive obsessed with the need to observe herself and be observed, becomes increasingly at odds with herself. On a cold day in the middle of winter she walks away from the house where she lives with her parents and sisters to the Maryland Bridge (179-81). Bergen often places his characters on this bridge, a well-known central point in Winnipeg, or has them make reference to it (for example, 91, 115, 140, 188, 206, 230, 244). This bridge geographically and symbolically anchors the narrative, and serves as a mid-point (103) that is a connecting link between Mason's house on the south side of the Assiniboine River and Lena's to the north. On this mid-winter day, rather than crossing to get to Mason's house, Lena, sitting precariously on the edge of the bridge, feels herself lured by death, but she is yanked back to life by a man in a brown coat who approaches her and whose arms, when she "tried to slide away, ... came around tight across the front of her coat" and held her (181; see also 188). But now she enters another dark night, this of the soul, and it leads to her hospitalization in a psychiatric ward.

Bergen's narrator offers a carefully calibrated reading of Winnipeg that hints at a precise knowledge of surfaces, a knowledge echoed in the narrator's, and the characters', stark awareness of the skin of the body. The locations of shops and restaurants, schools and hospitals are treated as fact and named without ado: St. Mary's Academy, the Rehabilitation Centre for Children on Wellington Crescent, the Misericordia Hospital, Charleswood, Highway 3 at the Perimeter, Polo Park, Portage Avenue, Bannatyne Avenue, Sherbrook Street at Westminster Avenue, Corydon Avenue, and time and again, the Maryland Bridge. Mason's parents' house on Academy Road (near Stafford Street) backs onto the blind Professor Ferry's house on Wellington Crescent, for example, where Mason is paid to read to the old man. Some readers might figure out the identity of a church – Portage Avenue Mennonite Brethren church, it would seem – by the signposts that Bergen's narrator provides. The presence of this otherwise unnamed and unidentified church, one that Lena Schellendal's German-speaking family attends and where her baptism by immersion takes place, can be plotted from the exact signage that Bergen provides: "the church ... was on Portage Avenue, across from Rae and Jerry's Steak House, at the edge of Omand's Creek" (224).

Bergen's persistent and casual use of actual names and locations produces a version of Winnipeg where the subtle connotations of place – the subjectivities of inner worlds, of their tensions and torments – are elusive and unspoken, all the more haunting for their relative absence. Mason Crowe – his name itself suggesting structural soundness and straight lines – makes his way through a world that seems solid enough when he is walking along or driving through the streets of the city. But he seems a naif when the vicissitudes of life take away what has seemed permanent – his parents' marriage, his understanding of a woman's character, his understanding of himself. He seems to exist in a universe where to name a place is to presuppose its fixity – like the mathematically exact (and, in effect, often comic) footnotes that Bergen scatters throughout the book. Indeed, at times (in point of view, if not in temper and spirit and experience) he seems not entirely unlike Armin Wiebe's Yasch, acted upon by the world around him. Although he openly "loved the Winnipeg sky" which seemed like a "wide clean blanket laid out over a flat sprawling city" so that there was "more sky than earth" (236), this sky only reinforces Mason's detachment from the deeply personal, and suggests that Mason shared little of the complexity of meaning that (as we have seen) McLuhan brought to that sky. In the end, he has no sense of mastery over Winnipeg, or his life there, and this lack seems not to matter to him all that much. He is, as Lena tenderly writes on a watercolour of a Winnipeg scene that she buys for him, her "'local boy'" (160), and for most of the novel Winnipeg

seems but a "flat sprawling city" to him, all too free of contradiction and complexity.

Near the end of the novel, when he spends some private moments in her apartment (in Winnipeg's "the Gates") with his literature teacher, Liliane Abendschade, he seems to sense a potential for a nuanced and sophisticated response to his world (244-49). Ms. Abendschade, at ease within the cultural life of Winnipeg, bestows a kind of blessing upon their conversation by giving him a gift of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. Mason comes to the end of their cup of hot chocolate with a sense that his teacher, as audience and conversationist, might very well provide him with the space in which to ask the questions that he wants to ask: about Lena and her near-suicide experience on the Maryland Bridge, about his and Lena's responses to each other, about himself. But he is unable to find language that matches his confusing emotions. We already know that he too naively believes that there might be "right" or "wrong" answers to things in life and in relationships and that he is too insecure and too young, perhaps, to understand depths that go beyond a welter of surface meanings (22, 67, 207, 262, 282). When he returns to his own empty house, he seems to have some sense of his limitations, and searches for the word "swainish" in the dictionary (249).

Throughout the novel, the world beyond Winnipeg is also quite detachedly laid out, places named laconically, dispassionately, with little private emotion attached. Characters in the novel might go to or return from Paris, Montreal, Vancouver, or Barbados, but little new life stirs them in any of these places. Closer to home, when Lena's mother wants to get Lena away from the psychiatric ward of the hospital and "'out of town for a few days, just the two of us'" (192), a retreat at Gimli almost provides a tentative reprieve for Lena, but her brief feeling of a "sudden lightness" there (199) is followed by further inner darkness.

When Lena steals Mr. Ferry's car near the end of the novel (275-76), her young sister encounters her and asks where she is going. "'Away,' she says, 'but you can't say anything'" (276). Lena drives west with suicide in mind, along streets that might at other times have seemed so benign and steady in the novel: down Portage, toward the Perimeter; then to Portage la Prairie and via Russell to a motel in Yorkton. Some days later in Winnipeg – on the second-last page of the novel – Mason meets Lena's mother "on the street" at what is on this occasion an unnamed corner. "'We lost her,'" Mrs. Schellendal cries out to Mason (285). Mason, after this meeting, sits during late autumn afternoons on the twelfth-floor balcony of the Wellington Crescent apartment above the Assiniboine River where his mother now lives with a man who is not his father. He watches as the world goes on, Winnipeg again a place of cleanly objective lines, of precise entries and exits, as the novel ends: "Geese and ducks flew in from the north and used the river as their

runway.... For several weeks they made this their home. And then they were gone" (286).

Sandra Birdsell, David Waltner-Toews

Winnipeg, with its explosive and showy growth from the 1880s to the 1920s, was a fully-developed, major, modern city by the time the Russländer arrived in the mid-1920s, and certainly by the time that Sara Vogt went to work in the luxurious Anglo-Canadian Ashburn household on "Crescent Road" in 1928. Wealth, institutions, neighbourhoods, ethnic and class distinctions, the great commercial establishments of the downtown, the legislative building, Assiniboine Park: these and much more were in place, and contributed to defining my mother's understanding of the Winnipeg of 1926-29.[2] Of course, the Russian Mennonite immigrants of the 1920s were to add their own dynamic local, regional, and national institutions: churches and schools (such as those eventually experienced by David Waltner-Toews), as well as colleges and other national agencies such as the Mennonite church journal headquarters where Rudy Wiebe became editor. For respective Mennonite characters in Sandra Birdsell's *Children of the Day*, the Winnipeg of the late 1920s embodies opposites – it is both religious and secular, ethnic and mainstream, homeland and place of exile, a home base and a dangerous threat.

In Canada, Sara Vogt, whom readers of Birdsell's *The Russländer* have already met, feels culturally disoriented, at loose ends, upon having been wrenched out of her richly endowed Russian environment that she remembers from the 1910s. In Canada she finds herself in a new world, whether inside or outside of Winnipeg, where rural and urban environment and counter-environment are in ongoing and fluctuating relationship. Configurations and structures, meanings and identities of her Russian past continue to haunt the present, if only in depleted forms, and give awkward and alarming shape to its meanings.

For Sara, Winnipeg with its enticements and tensions leads to her accidental encounter with – and falling in love with and marriage to – Oliver Vandal. He is the Métis taxi driver who nearly runs his car into her when she is carelessly crossing a Winnipeg street, not attentive to traffic. In her relationship with Oliver, Sara finds her overflow of joyous passion turn to a dry sternness when she feels forced to cling to the framework of a world now reductively enunciated through the shallow and rigid moralizing of her sisters. They marry Mennonite men who prefer to stay away from Winnipeg; Sara has married a man whom she tries in vain to remake in terms of erratically remembered images of her past, and reinforced by the will of her sisters.

But when Sara is on her own in Winnipeg, past and present mingle so that her memories of Russia – memories that steady her gaze, and also stimulate it – are stirred up, prompting in her a sympathetic reading of well-heeled Canadians' material and worldly ways. She is energized by Winnipeg. When she walks from the Bay to Eaton's to make a purchase, the throngs of people on the busy street excite her; she finds "her heart quickening with the sight and energy of the motor traffic" so that "[f]or whole moments she forgot who she was, and where she had come from" (118). Sara, though an alien here, an exile, a stranger, is open to this new/old world. She is unlike the closed-in Abe Ross who, walking along Portage Avenue at the same spot, "walked ... under the five tiers of flags dangling in motionless air against the drab pile of [Eaton's?]store, seepage marks tracing the edges of its bricks.... [T]he wainscotting at the very top, beneath a solitary pole hidden limp with flag, pealed in tags under the wear of the weather" (37). Sara's mood follows McLuhan's; Abe's follows that of Maddin's protagonist.

Sara's older sister Katy (Katya of *The Russländer*) responds vehemently, prohibiting memories of nostalgia and desire, of pleasure and class-standing. In her paranoia about the flux of life itself, Katy demands that Sara give up Winnipeg, with its alien signs of a life that she, Katy, cannot master, just as she wants Sara to give up memory itself. Sara's handling of memory from a golden age in Russia, when brushed up against the allurements of Winnipeg, would only lead her astray, according to Katy. The relaxed play of memory, space, and time, of environment and counter-environment, would, in Katy's view, tarnish Sara. In that historic moment of 1928 in Canada, it would lead Sara to a new stage of self-understanding, identity, and expression, a rich, but unpredictable, assemblage of old and new parts. She would be following no fixed routes. Perception and subjectivity would be forever altered. And that is what Katy fears.

Attempting, through a broken combination of acknowledgement and denial, to cope with their golden but tragic past, Birdsell's Mennonite characters in *Children of the Day* are lost in contradictions as they try vaguely and clumsily to simultaneously affirm and disavow, honour and deny, their own history. Unable to find the language – or the audience – that they intuitively desire, they remain largely inarticulate as they eke out a living in a cultural hinterland of "the large Mennonite town of Steinbach" (156-57; see also 153, 196). Winnipeg, dangerous, seductive, alluring, a reminder of successes visible everywhere in a Russia now long gone for them, is taboo, off limits.

Sara, bewildered by her uneasiness in seeking what might comprise "her own belief," finds herself blocked by a "see-saw of ambivalence [tying] her tongue" (115) when she is in Winnipeg. In conversation with the downstairs maid and the cook at the grand house in Winnipeg,

Sara's efforts to find an expressive language had, as Birdsell's narrator so frankly puts it, "been buried beneath the Canadian soil" (116), and she mustered only an "unsatisfying reply" (123) when questions about her identity are put to her. Sara is filled with uncertainties with respect to her place in Winnipeg's class system, different as she felt from the Mennonite girls in the Home Away from Home Club boarding house on William Avenue, and from the *Canadiere* Mennonites (descendants of the immigrants of the 1870s) who lived on farms south of Winnipeg. Only Coral, a Trinidadian woman who is a cleaning lady at a Winnipeg bus depot, embodies the capacity as another outsider to briefly make Sara comfortable as a teller of her own "Mennonite" story.

In moving about in the city, Sara comprehended various of Winnipeg's districts only in fragments. It is at first a "strange city," "shapeless," "an idea," but with her old-country memory guiding and goading her on, a city to which she knows she could be attracted (116). But she is forced to return, under the pressure of her controlling sisters, to rural Manitoba, and there she tries without great success to make do with not only her material existence but also her spiritual identity.

For Sara (in 1928) Winnipeg is a place of imminent, but largely unrealized, social options, simultaneously humiliating and exhilarating. The presence of so many challenges stirred in her more desire than fear. Still – if only under her sister's bullying tactics – she lashes out even against Winnipeg where, she suddenly says, "I was made to empty piss-pots for the rich" (195). She senses that the torment fomented by Katy reflected Katy's anxiety that Sara's identity might take root amidst the appreciative Ashburns (197). If for Katy Winnipeg is a place of false pleasures and barren pretensions that comprise a moral wasteland, it is so out of a reactionary fear related to her capacity, and need, to control her environment. She suppresses its riot of opportunities that Sara is prepared to explore.

In David-Waltner Toews's *Fear of Landing* we jump onward by over half-a-century, and to a protagonist who might have grown up in the sort of household that in 1928 Sara (had she had the power to look ahead to a Winnipeg of the early 1980s) might have imagined someday having been established in Winnipeg by any number of the Mennonite girls in the Home Away from Home Club boarding house on William Avenue. Veterinarian Abner (Ab) Dueck, a native of Winnipeg, now "'a kind of secular missionary'" (167), is entangled in a murder mystery while on government assignment on the islands of Java and Bali.

Ab's Mennonite past carries the markers of a Mennonite Brethren world that evolved in Winnipeg from the 1920s to the 1980s, indeed, some of the markers talked about by Waltner-Toews in the 1981 conversation noted above. Ab remembers his Winnipeg as a world

where he spoke high German but not "Flat German" – a dialect more commonly spoken among Mennonites in southern Manitoba. Flat, or Low, German, he reflects, was "the Mennonite tongue of everyday life, of jokes, the one in which God isn't supposed to be listening" (12). He remembers his Winnipeg as a world where he had at least one friend among the "*Englische*" – a Greek Orthodox kid with the surname Grobowski (12, 84). When flashes of his Winnipeg past enter Ab's mind, they are accompanied by feelings of the suffocation and claustrophia that he once endured in the stiff and constraining religiosity of his people. Winnipeg is now for Ab the city where his father has passed away, a father unable throughout his life "to make that risky leap beyond his own bounds, no strings attached, which might make communication between people possible" (184). Ab – here bringing to mind Rudy Wiebe's Abe Ross – fears that he now is like his own father had been, afraid to embrace the world "for fear it might forsake him" (184).

Ab is conflicted about his rejection of his past, too. Physically and metaphorically in flight away from his home, Ab (pondering this aboard an airplane) anxiously wonders if the thrill of flight might finally lead to nought, that he might end up in a secular cul-de-sac parallel to that of his religious kin in Winnipeg: "Like his Mennonite forbears, who had fled over the centuries from country to country and around the world, maybe he would run out of places to fly to" (166).

In a burst of reckless abandon reversing the angst about the Winnipeg/Steinbach relationship that Friesen has described (as we saw earlier), and that we encounter in Birdsell's *Children of the Day* and in, as we shall see, Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*, and chucking the taboo Maddin identified as an unreachable Winnipeg boundary, Ab at the end of the novel returns to Winnipeg only to tear himself out of the city and head directly to Steinbach. Cheerily transforming himself to Abraham van Dyck (220; see also 6), Ab rents a sports car in the last two pages of the novel. Speeding away from the metropolis along the Winnipeg bypass, he heads to Steinbach where he will visit his old mother who lives in a retirement home there. And, too, he will drive to Altona, "to pick up some genuine sunflower seeds ... to save for a special occasion" (220). Travelling across the prairie, he lays claim to McLuhan's infinite horizon and the prairie sun "exploding in red and gold and pink shreds and fragments against the clouds at the horizon. That vast, expansive, freeing prairie horizon" (221), a horizon that lets him encounter the great moment of illumination with which the novel ends – a moment of grasping light made all the more brilliant by the "hard darkness" of his vision.

Miriam Toews and the Magical Kingdom

Nomi Nickel, the protagonist of Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*, yearns to go to Winnipeg, but never gets there. Although Winnipeg is her "magical kingdom" (74), she must remain content to glimpse it only from afar, from her home in "East Village," a town with a New York name but that represents Steinbach.

Astonishingly, for a reader of the novel, Nomi never actually uses the word "Winnipeg." Its absence is not only striking, but also (at least for me, upon considering in this essay some of the ways in which Winnipeg looms in the imagination of writers) chilling. After all, Nomi as narrator does name plenty of other actual places, both near to and far from her "East Village." Certainly, as in *Children of the Day*, Winnipeg represents a place used as a point of fear by petty Mennonite tyrants. Powerful forces – treated satirically, to be sure – patrol the border leading to Winnipeg, as though they dread entry to a city that carries a glorious life-altering power. But why does, or can, Nomi not name it?

As a missing signifier, a word that cannot be uttered, does the word "Winnipeg," by its absence, magnify the meanings of the place – either for Nomi or for the reader? Or would naming it carry a reduction of its meaning for Toews? Or, on the other hand, would naming it set in motion an overloaded, uncontrollable, excessive series of meanings? Perhaps, too, the word, if uncontrollable, is too controlling. Does Winnipeg, relative to what it might connote should Nomi say it, already belong in too many ways to too many other writers, Mennonite and non-Mennonite alike (as we have seen)?

Nomi intuitively wishes for herself the kind of liberation that Friesen spoke of in identifying Winnipeg as a "foreign country." By day Nomi, as she says, likes "to ride my bike to the border and stare at America" (56). By night she can, from the hill near her home, see across municipal borders the lights of the unnamed city. "I walked to Abe's Hill, the big pile of dirt on the edge of town named after the mayor, ... and watched the dusk move in and the lights come on in the faraway city. The magical kingdom" (74). Nomi cannot get to that "faraway city" by bus or train. These have been banned, because people used them only to leave town, never to return (151), and all that did come in were worldly influences (167). She likes to hear herself tell people that she is going to "the city," even though she isn't: "The city was the dark side.... It flickered off and on in the distance like pain. It was the worst thing that could happen to you. If you go for any length of time you don't come back, and if you don't come back you forfeit your place in heaven's lineup" (58).

Could this city represent the world where her dear mother and sister – who are, as she puts it, "missing" (1) – have gone? They have

left behind their Mennonite community and Nomi and her dad and have disappeared into an unknown, a void, somewhere beyond communicating distance with anyone. Because they don't fit easily into the definition of ideal citizen in East Village, they seem simply to have been written off by their local community, written into invisibility, into a place with no name, as it were – and Nomi cannot find a way to reach them.

Toews suggests that a kind of shunning, one that incorporates a self-shunning, has occurred, and that there can be no conversation, no communion, with someone beyond the borderline of East Village. Nomi's sister and mom have entered a "Mennochasm," a non-place for exiled Mennonites about whom no trace exists within the Mennonites' sanctioned status quo, a shrouded void containing a desolate entombment. The people in the unnamed city cannot be known or named; they become, in effect, dematerialized, disembodied.[3]

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Winnipeg, as Arnason and Mackintosh put it, is "city upon city laid over the palimpsest of earlier cities, a kind of living archive of the mix of cultures that made this place" (ix). My random and selected travels around Winnipeg – giving all too little sense of the brilliant overall achievement of these six novels – hint at the various and often contradictory locations of Winnipeg in works by writers who can be associated with Mennonite society and culture. If we were to follow their paths through Winnipeg more systematically and more thoroughly than I have, we would create an intensely inscribed map – a complicated Mennonite imaginary – evoking the geographically and temporally diverse Mennonite literary visions and versions of this imagined city.

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Notes

[1] Abe Ross might very well be some version of a "Mennonite" character. In pointing out in 2006 in his memoir *of this earth* that his school-mates used to call him "Barnyard" (379), just as Abe Ross's school-mates in *First and Vital Candle* called Abe (44, 46), Wiebe tips us off that Abe Ross might be a fictional surrogate for Wiebe himself, and that he is not simply and straightforwardly, as he is called in the novel, a Scottish-Manitoban Presbyterian!

[2] Certainly by 1935, when the elegant gentleman from Canada at the opening of the British film, *The 39 Steps*, three times shouts out the question to Mr. Memory at the London music hall – "How far is Winnipeg from Montreal?" – Hitchcock was able to count on an international audience's knowledge not only of Montreal's but also of Winnipeg's stature.

[3] For an earlier discussion of the "Mennochasm" see Tiessen, "Revisiting Home," especially pages 143-46.