same dichotomy that Amish novels themselves delineate for their protagonists and their readership: "the hungers of the flesh and the attainments of the spirit" (159). The book takes for granted the "excessively modern and immoderately sexualized" (233) character of modern culture. This allows, on the one hand, Weaver-Zercher to enter into the frame of reference of Amish romance readers, primarily evangelical Christians who long for "clean" narratives that are devotionally inspiring and morally instructive. On the other hand, Weaver-Zercher's book risks reinforcing the ideology it proposes to critically examine: that of a "chaste fiction" which operates counter-culturally. In other words, by taking the yearning to escape from modern life and modern culture as a starting point, Weaver-Zercher's study suggests that to a large readership, Amish romance does not present an alternative to modern life, but rather reinforces normative values that continue to characterize the twenty-first century.

Weaver-Zercher's methodical approach is "'narrative scholarship,'" an "amalgam of story and academic writing" (xiii). Although a careful analysis of the Amish novels themselves is, largely, absent from this study, Weaver-Zercher's writing is supremely readable and academically informed: scholarship mingles with anecdote, which makes this a type of "armchair study." Even if one has little interest in the subject matter or experience reading academic writing, this book is unfailingly engaging.

Weaver-Zercher makes a compelling case for the cultural significance of Amish romance novels and for their enduring popularity.

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Carrie Snyder, *The Juliet Stories*. Toronto: Anansi, 2012. Pp 324. Softcover, $22.95.

Like most coming-of-age narratives, *The Juliet Stories* is bittersweet. Leaving the garden of innocence always entails some loss along with the acquisition of forbidden knowledge. In this version of the ancient myth, however, the "garden" is no idyllic world but Nicaragua of the 1980s, in the midst of civil strife. Although the protagonist Juliet, only ten years old upon arrival, sees more horror and faces more danger in her year and a half there than during her previous life in Indiana and the rest of her life in Canada, Nicaragua ever after remains her Shangri-La, a place that offered her astonishing freedom, beauty such as she had

never known before, and experiences of danger and profound cultural differences that she embraced with reckless courage.

The Juliet Stories, a "novel-in-stories" (back cover), begins as the Friesen family, Bram and Gloria and their three children, arrive in Nicaragua, their bags having gone missing en route. That image, like many others, will gather metaphorical richness, as Juliet attempts to sort out what baggage she can leave behind, what will follow her even against her will, and what has been lost beyond recall. Their mission, under the auspices of the Roots of Justice, is non-violent political protest against US involvement with the Contras. Mostly it is Bram who is involved, organizing and leading rotating groups of volunteers, while Gloria remains in Managua with the children, where she copes, not always well, with a variety of emergencies and cultural confusions, including a bomb threat and illness. Just over half the stories take place in Nicaragua. The remaining stories, not quite as compelling, depict selected episodes in Juliet's subsequent journey toward adulthood. In the final story, Juliet is herself a mother, now at the point where, having spent her childhood "not telling" for fear of the consequences, she is now ready to "*tell,* in her own way, wearing the sheerest of disguises, quite remorseless. And none of it will be true; and all of it will be. And even that is not true, because there is nothing absolute about telling: there are only fragments, shards, the rare object retained whole, ciphers removed from the original context, hoarded by shifty, impecunious memory" (24).

The above quotation illustrates the strengths of the novel: a highly nuanced exploration of the process of story-telling, and a subversive, shifting narrative voice. Young Juliet is a voracious reader of whatever she can find – legitimately or secretively –, including documents in the Roots of Justice office (detailing atrocities of war) and novels such as *The Diviners* and *Lives of Girls and Women* from her mother's dressing table. She is fascinated by stories, and words, conscious always that she is participating in narrative, shaping it in her mind even as she lives it. Her firm belief that a "story must mean something" (132) undergirds her efforts to make sense of "the little pieces that do not fit" (317). Making meaning through story is her security blanket, her shield against the growing conviction that love is confusing and uncertain, that family is not forever, that identity is unstable, contingent, and that there are no definite answers.

Appropriately, Snyder develops a very complex narrative voice. The point of view, in almost all of the stories, is unmistakably Juliet's, although we scarcely know which Juliet. The child Juliet is a keen observer, occasionally even a compulsive snooper, deliberately entering spaces clearly out of bounds. Often cast into a marginal role as listener in an adult world, or as simply too different among other children,

she cultivates a detached, stoical stance. The older Juliet maintains that distance, although more emotion is now obliquely revealed through selection of details and dialogue. Childhood experiences are re-imagined, even relived by the adult Juliet, her use of the present tense throughout additionally emphasizing Juliet's adult efforts to re-interpret childish perceptions, much as the young Juliet attempted to understand the adults, those bewildering, self-preoccupied, sexual beings who cannot be predicted, who too often "unburden themselves" on children, "telling [them] things [they] didn't want to know" (230-231). The crucial discovery for Juliet is not only that grown-ups don't know the answers but that they are also unable to offer security: "Tell me, asks Juliet, what could you hold in your hands to prevent anything bad from happening ever? . . . . [T]o what god could you pray, what could you burn, what could you promise? And if you knew, would you?" (155). Stories begin in that "gap" between thrill and terror.

The Juliet Stories is strikingly rich thematically and psychologically, exploring justice, death, love, bullying, keeping secrets. In the first reading, readers are likely to focus on Juliet reaching for maturity, "running down to the shore to throw stones, stirring up the waters; Juliet, standing an inch too close to demand answers to questions that have none, or that, answered, cause pain, burn like a lit coal she will hold in her hand, deliberately wounding herself" (289). The second reading, for me, revealed a powerful exploration of motherhood mostly from a daughter's point of view, but also from a mother's point of view (Gloria and Juliet's Oma), with all the love and bafflement and secrets that exist between mothers and daughters. It concerns protection and lack of protection, about staying with one's children or leaving, about performing the role if nothing else is possible.

The Juliet Stories is not an emotionally easy read, nor is Juliet particularly likeable, especially not in the second half of the novel. Nevertheless, she articulates, unforgettably, what it means to be human, to live intensely and courageously in a world in which the garden itself offers no guarantees.

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Sarah Klassen, *The Wittenbergs*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 2013. Pp. 404. Softcover, $21.

As alarming news from abroad reaches Alice and Brian, the narrator of *The Wittenbergs* remarks that they seem to have been "tricked