ending trailed off. I thought I might look out for the sequel nonetheless, and then discovered I won't have to wait. *Tombstone Blues*, the second novel in Ginther's planned trilogy, was released in fall of 2013.

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Jessica Penner, *Shaken in the Water*. Foxhead Books, 2013. Pp. 377. Softcover, $15 U.S.

To read the fractured narrative of *Shaken in the Water* is to walk through a gallery of portraits and memories bound by blood and to examine the offshoots of this family tree. In her first novel, Jessica Penner takes up the cause of the outcasts and oddballs, sidles up next to the sideshow characters alive (and dead) in every family narrative. *Shaken in the Water* is shot through with hints of superstition and the burden of doubt, and whose hybrid spirituality is part pantheism, part deism and part Mennonite tradition. This is fiction that elevates the conversation about the family outliers, gathers the fallen branches of the family tree and curates them as art.

At the centre of this story is Agnes, born with the "*Tieja Kjoaw*" – the "Tiger Scar" birthmark across her back and haunted by the pain of what seems like centuries of ancestral memory. *Shaken in the Water* begins in 1923 with a brief scene of Agnes and her new husband Peter on their wedding night, a scene that sets up the loss, emotional isolation and secrets that echo through the rest of the book

This novel's cast of characters face trials, carry heavy burdens, respond with extreme actions and bear peculiar flaws. Theirs is a constant struggle to reconcile their inherited traditions and history with their own personal discoveries. When, in his later years, Peter wants to come clean before the Lord, he doesn't only shave his beard – the beard he once grew longer to please the Mennonite elders – he shaves his entire body. As a quasi-prophetic act, Peter's son Johan sets free his entire truckload of cattle to save them from slaughter. Jeffrey, Johan's son, is born with a bump on his forehead that bears the remnant of his fetal twin. While Penner doesn't romanticize the flaws of her characters, she does magnify and amplify their quirks and scars, failings and fallings.

With its multiple inter-spliced storylines, the novel's structure poses some challenges. Time shifts at the start of each chapter and often in the midst of a chapter, the narrative flipping back and then ahead and back again to various significant moments in the lives of

key characters. The effect is destabilizing, which is perhaps one of Penner's aims, in light of her characters' own broken lives. Because of the myriad players, though, all of whom are connected by blood or marriage, it becomes difficult to keep one's narrative bearings. I often found myself leafing back a few pages to check what year I was in and from whose womb any given character sprang, which, at times, broke the story's spell.

The major drawback of this constant temporal fluidity is that the many scenes are not fully developed. Too often, the writing veers into summary or half-scene. The divergent narratives, panoply of characters, and the frequent flashbacks and recollective asides yield a rich choir of voices, but their harmonies too often overtake the story's melody. I longed for the novel to settle its chatter and plumb the scene for its full emotion, image and immediacy. When Penner takes her time with the fictive present moment, characters deepen, imagery brightens in the mind's eye and her writing breathes lyricism. In describing the near-death tornado experience of Huldah, Penner writes: "The moment her feet left the ground, she felt the wind press a finger to her throat and curl itself around her, growing tighter as she rose higher, until she felt the throb of her heart on the outside of her body." (17)

At its best, Penner's language illuminates her characters and their often heart-breaking trials with a simple elegance, letting the literal ordinary world shimmer quietly toward the figurative realm. A boy's "tawny hair [sticks] up like wheat stubble" (271); a young woman's "tiny nails" shine "from the clear nail polish she'd always worn so that each finger [seems] to be the slender bearer of jewels." (157) When the language roots itself in the concrete and translates the world with sensory clarity, the story more deftly lays holds of the reader.

In order to traverse a century's worth of story and its inhabitants, Penner employs a point of view that shifts its limited omniscience from protagonist to protagonist, drawing near to the thoughts of one character, then moving on to another. The effect can be frustrating at times, simply because one has the sense that not all characters are created equal. This book, after all, begins and ends with Agnes. Throughout the novel, I found myself wondering how the story might have deepened were Agnes given the spotlight and a little more room to speak.

What this limited omniscience does offer, though, is a window into the novel's theological wrestling. When Johan, Agnes' son, stands before Huldah's collection of books all red-spined (or "*knaul'root,*" as the forbidden colour is referred to in Low German), he contemplates the Divine perspective:

> He wondered if this was how God saw the people of the earth. To God they were all *knaul'root*; their individuality wiped out at

> a distance. A knot of anger at a God who chose to blur everyone together tightened in his belly. He wanted to pull each book from it shelf, rip each page from its spine, and spread everything out so that God wouldn't be able to see them as one (283).

The depiction of Johan as a man frustrated by the plight of the individual within the collective identity of Mennonite history, culture, religion and family provides an interesting contrast to the rest of the novel, in which the individuals fail to fully cohere within their collective story.

What Jessica Penner does well in *Shaken in the Water* is imagine the lives of fascinating and flawed human beings. She deeply concerns herself with the motivations of her characters and has a gift for populating the text with significant, concrete details that manifest her curiosity and care for the world she creates. While the book as a whole would have benefited from another thorough editorial polishing to mend some awkward sentence structure and clean up some pesky typos, this is a first novel that shows Penner's strength of imagination and her ability to redeem what's perceived as off-kilter and to re-cast it as beauty, but always beauty in the context of human brokenness and the blood from it which comes.

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Patrick Friesen, *Jumping in the Asylum*. Toronto: Quattro Books, 2011. Pp.60. Softcover, $16.95.

Patrick Friesen, *A Dark Boat*. Greenwich, England: Anvil Press, 2012. Pp. 119. Softcover, $16.

Both of Patrick Friesen's latest collections, *Jumping in the Asylum* and *A Dark Boat*, draw on travels in Portugal and Spain. Concerning the travels of Canadian poets, critic Carmine Starnino writes: "[...] being abroad spurs psychological auditions, try-outs of self-invention under exotic test conditions." This premise – that we are freed by not feeling at home – also extends to language: a change of scene can uncork euphoric new noises.

Though these collections do not represent startling reinventions – Friesen's work has always evolved rather than veered dramatically – travel has provided new settings with plenty of local colour, new experiences and a scattering of Spanish words that may not be