

mystics as the result of an assignment given to her by the *Hymnal: A Worship Book* committee in 1989, and the hymn texts they inspired, fulfilling a hunger for the divine feminine Janzen did not realize she had.

The further I read into the collection, the more deeply it held me, as Janzen proffered tastes of the “wildness” that compels her writing journey. Her evocation of Emily Dickinson as muse is apt, as both poets offer immensity in miniature, in poems of surface beauty and puzzling depths. Janzen’s own spiritual and artistic unfolding – from the pious preacher’s daughter fearful of imperfections to the bold middle-aged Master of Fine Arts student in a cutting edge program at Fresno State University, where she studied with Peter Everwine and Phillip Levine, then to the creator of hymn texts that have shaped and enriched the worship experiences of hundreds of thousands of contemporary Mennonite and Brethren and Mennonite Brethren Christians – is breathtaking.

This book is an important work in Janzen’s oeuvre and a valuable contribution to Mennonite literary studies, not only for its record of a remarkable and path breaking literary career, but also for its reflection on a major cultural transition in two generations of the twentieth-century Mennonite immigrant experience. It tells how the deprivations of Stalinist Russia came to be transformed through immigration, education, and exposure to the arts in an America of abundance and possibility, but also how Mennonite worship, faith, and practice have been transformed in North America, even as Mennonites have also sought a connection to the past through story, travel, and art. Janzen tells these stories with discretion, honesty and grace. Above all, these essays invite us to return to Janzen’s poetry and to read it in the light of the rich insights they offer.

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Rhoda Janzen, *Does this Church Make Me Look Fat?* New York: Grand Central, 2012. Pp. 272. Hardcover, \$27.99.

Rhoda Janzen’s *Does this Church Make Me Look Fat?* (recently retitled *Mennonite Meets Mr. Right* by her publisher) is a sequel to her popular 2009 memoir *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, a book which saw the divorced and unhappy Michigan English professor and poet revisit what she likes to call her “Mennonite community of origin.” These books are a somewhat uneasy blend of genres: part faith story,

part comic entertainment, part chirpy crisis tell-all of the type that reminds us ultimately to embrace gratitude. In the new book Janzen embarks on a second marriage, to Mitch, a manly, working class, born-again Christian. He loves to hunt, and his use of “ain’t” surprisingly does not bother Janzen, a self-confessed grammar obsessive. This unlikely couple becomes endearing and plausible, for the most part; Janzen is ready to grant religion a more prominent role in her life, and Mitch, a former lawbreaker, has robustly committed himself to God and is a supportive mate. Also, Mitch’s manliness (a word I hesitate to use, but Janzen deploys it proudly) means that he has large helpings of passion to offer, and said manliness does not get in the way of his love of intimacy or skill with babies. This romance feels almost too good to be true, but one thing that Janzen’s book demonstrates is that we should be willing to take risks and expect surprises, even miracles, in the most unlikely places. Janzen’s introduction to her new church community is refreshing; the Mennonite in her, she says, was once inclined to treat worship like a serious job interview, but she now rejoices in the Pentecostal “willingness to improvise, to be sidetracked by the Spirit.”

I approached this book cautiously for several reasons. The covers of this book (under either of its titles) and Janzen’s previous one, with their stylized and glossily droll illustrations, gesture toward “chick lit.” The use of Mennonite in the titles seems gratuitous, banking on the non-Mennonite fascination with quaint Anabaptist weirdness and on the considerable appetite Mennonites seem to have for reading about themselves. Although she grew up in the family of a prominent Mennonite pastor, Janzen’s presentation of the denomination is simplistic, ignoring distinctions between Mennonite strains. *Does this Church Make Me Look Fat?* is not always fair to the Mennonite church; while disparaging (with apparent affection) her former community because of gendered “patterns of passive-aggressive communication” (201), Janzen demonstrates herself quite capable of passive aggression. Finally, I am similar enough to Rhoda Janzen for this book to make me wary: I am about her age, have a PhD in English, write poetry, and also teach in a small Christian university. When I saw that the second chapter was entitled “Lady Problems,” I was embarrassed for both of us. She unabashedly and perhaps unwisely states on the book’s first page that she is an “egghead intellectual” – but that does not mean that she always avoids vulgar gags or clichés, and some of the episodes are distractingly random.

My embarrassment about “Lady Problems” turned out to be premature; it was my favourite chapter. At her best, Janzen has a wonderful comic voice, one with a distinct and colourful cadence. This cheerful personality is needed when she is diagnosed with breast cancer just four months into her relationship with Mitch. The book takes

a turn for the serious, although Janzen is reluctant to let it make the turn. Determined not to be self-pitying, she insists on breezy optimism throughout this illness. Some readers will be uneasy about the fun she insists on having throughout the cancer treatments, but Janzen's irreverence is an indissoluble part of her character. There is beauty and strength amidst the occasionally strained humour of the latter part of the book; these aspects sometimes work together, sometimes not.

The book ends with an account of Janzen's rebaptism, having passed through discussions of varying seriousness about the Holy Spirit, tithing, diarrhea, faith healing, abstinence, friendship, and padded underpants. Despite Janzen's jaunty tone, many of the subjects and events she treats are difficult, and on occasion I seem to have found them more moving than she did. Her tone and themes can be at odds, rather like the way many of her characters have voices that sound like hers and thus seem at odds with themselves. Yes, I did say "characters." Although Janzen's book is a memoir, the deliberately shaped and selective nature of this story moves it, at times, close to fiction. Janzen's style is reminiscent of Anne Lamott's work, which gives a similar impression of both fiction and memoir, but she does not have Lamott's theological depth or ability to communicate suffering. The rebaptism in the final chapter is accompanied by a quick overview of Mennonite understandings of baptismal commitment, but (although I am not a Mennonite myself) I found her treatment of baptism thin and rather self-absorbed. Self-absorption is a sin from which Janzen is aware she needs to be liberated, but at the end of this book I was not convinced she had arrived where she needed to go. Although this memoir is uneven, the author is a clever woman with worthy things to tell about her lively, unpredictable journey toward a firmer faith.

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Reviews of History and Social Sciences

John N. Klassen, *Jesus Christus leben und verkündigen. 150 Jahre Mennoniten Brüdergemeinden*. Lage, Germany: Licht-Zeichen Verlag, 2010. Pp. 238. Softcover.

This book, written in German by John N. Klassen, a long-time Canadian church worker, pastor, and Bible teacher in Germany, deals with 150 years of Mennonite Brethren (MB) history, but with a focus