David Bergen, *Leaving Tomorrow.* Toronto: HarperCollins, 2014. Pp. 273. Hardcover, $27.99.

David Bergen's most recent novel, *Leaving Tomorrow*, is the personal and artistic coming-of-age tale of Arthur Wohlgemuht, whose dramatic birth on a fishing boat on Canada's West coast opens the narrative. The youngest of three children born to Doreen

Wohlgemuht, a conservative Mennonite woman, and her rancher husband, James Walker, Arthur grows up in counterpoint to his older brother Bev in the little Alberta town of Tomorrow, where the family moves after the tragic drowning of their sister Em. Tomorrow constitutes the setting of the first half of the novel, entitled *I am telling you this,* and forms the backdrop for Arthur's development during his formative years. Like Doreen's name, which is taken on by the family after she emerges victorious from a milking contest with her husband, "the solidity and meaning of her Russian-German-Mennonite heritage" (14) dominate Arthur's childhood and adolescence. In his usual taut prose, Bergen evokes, with an almost brutal precision, the stifling environment of the fundamentalist Christian tradition in which he, like his protagonist, grew up, and against which, inevitably, both rebel.

And what better place in which to sow one's wild oats than Paris? The French capital serves as the setting of the second half of the novel, entitled *Leaving,* and becomes well and truly the City of Love for Arthur, who discovers that he "cannot reconcile [his] life as a sexual being with this fantastic diversion of Christ's body and blood. He want[s] the real body and the real blood. Renée's body and blood, the solidity of lust and sex and the frenzy of love." He pities Christ, "who never knew a woman." (180) But Arthur's journey to the other side of the ocean has another purpose; he would like to become an artist, and to do that, he needs to move to a country "where a different language [is] spoken" (129). During a carnal encounter with a waitress named Aniane, Arthur, whose nickname Art betrays his true passion, confesses that "he want[s] experience and adventure. That is the only way to become a writer. Then the world will see [him]. They will see Arthur Wohlgemuht." (197) It is only the appearance of his plain-speaking first love, his double cousin Isobel, and the disappointing realisation that he is "a fucking cliché. A writer who wasn't a writer who ended up in Paris wanting to write" (238), that drives him to return to Alberta, where he finds some kind of atonement among the good people of Tomorrow, "so different from those in Paris, where [he] was ignored." (252)

One of the strengths of *Leaving Tomorrow* is Bergen's portrayal of his Mennonite roots, which have formed the backdrop of so much of his fiction, and have arguably constituted the single most important source of tension in the lives of his very human and beautifully developed characters. Among the more significant historical facts evoked in *Leaving Tomorrow* are the seizing of Mennonite property by the Reds during the Russian Revolution, the random violence of the bandit Makhno in the Mennonite colonies

and the subsequent exodus of Mennonites to Canada in the twenties. In addition, the careful attention Bergen pays to explaining the basic tenets of the Mennonite faith betrays a more than passing interest in the subject. Adult baptism, pacifism, and the priesthood of all believers are just a few of the ideas that are explored in some detail in this novel. Unsurprisingly, it is Bergen's acute depiction of the cultural practices and mores of the evangelical wing of the Mennonite church that adds the most colour to his narrative, which is peppered with Biblical references and stories, before-meal prayers, Back-to-the-Bible broadcasts, church-planting missionaries, romantically-involved double cousins, Sunday School classes, youth groups, altar calls, the rededication of lives to Jesus, full immersion baptism "which was the right way" (13), and the ubiquitous tension between sin and forgiveness. The flash of recognition this novel evokes in anyone with any knowledge of the Mennonite community and its traditions bears testament to Bergen's wonderful gift for cutting observation and description.

An additional source of interest is Bergen's examination of the role of the artist in society, and more specifically, in the context of the Mennonite community. His protagonist, who bears the very name Art, loves school as a child, "especially the subject of art" (36) and falls in love with his art teacher, whom he invites home to dinner one day. When he gets thrown from his horse and breaks his leg, the town librarian keeps him supplied with a steady supply of literary classics and suggests that he will become a writer, although his mother is anxious to keep him away from books and occupy him with "something useful." His wealthy neighbours' library is likened to "heaven" (66); his expulsion from it, after having been caught kissing their daughter, is akin to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. Because of his obsession with books, Art is reviled by his brother and bullied in the school yard. His subsequent flight to Paris is motivated in part by the realisation that "believers have no use for art and so the modern artist must descend into the camp of the doubter, (39) and in part by a romantic desire to "spend [his] days as a *flâneur*, drinking vermouth in small bars and wandering the streets, and then returning to [his] garret where [he] would write poetry." (111) His respect for French authors Camus, Sartre, and de Beauvoir leads him to frequent their favourite cafés; his admiration for Flaubert is equated to a love affair, and his veneration of Stendhal's masterpiece *Le rouge et le noir* creates in him "a longing for the skill to tell a story in that manner: plainly, with force and consequence." (87) Bergen quotes many of these celebrated authors extensively, and their views on art become an integral part of his

narrative: "I would be modern, and like Baudelaire strolling through this same city, I would pursue *the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent which make up one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable*." (156)

Despite his lengthy list of acknowledgments, Bergen omits citing one French writer whose work seems to have influenced him the most. Contemporary author Pascal Quignard, who shares Bergen's belief in the Freudian idea that repressed sexuality constitutes one of the driving forces of human existence, wrote a novel in 1992 entitled *Le nom sur le bout de la langue*, which features many of the same elements present in the opening pages of *Leaving Tomorrow*: fish imagery, spawning salmon returning to the place of their conception to die, foreign nurses with whom young children fall in love, and childhood aphasia as a response to the withdrawal of that love. Is the uncanny resemblance of these two works mere coincidence, or does Bergen, like his character Arthur, simply borrow this element of his story, realising that he "[has] nothing to say, that [his] small world provide[s] little material for a tale that might make the reader *feel* something?" (61)

One difficulty with Bergen's work is related to his literary obsession with *Eros* as the be all and end all of existence. While Arthur may personally view himself "like the honey-bee that gorges itself on the sweet flowers in spring, this one, no that one, and there, over there…" (234), the endless string of sexual conquests which form the substance of Bergen's work is sometimes fatiguing to wade through as a reader. Through his character, Arthur, he does himself admit that "there is a madness that grips the one who has been suppressed and then, all in one moment, has been set free." (224) What is refreshing about *Leaving Tomorrow* is that Bergen seems to be conscious of the problems inherent in this *Weltanschauung*. Paris, for Arthur, does not hold "The Most Valuable Thing". In fact, it is in the City of Love that Arthur realises "that money and education will give you many things, many pleasures and conveniences, and it may even give you a longer life, but that does not mean that you will not live a disappointed life." (240) It is his spurned and definitely plebeian lover Aniane who exhorts him to return home to what he knows if he wants to be successful: "If you want to be true to yourself, Arthur, if you want to tell a true story, it is not the story of a young artist who comes to Paris and finds a lover and visits the haunts of famous dead writers. That is trite. Your story is back home. Those are your facts." (213). And it is back home, among the people of Tomorrow, in the forgiveness of his brother, in his reconciliation

with whom and what he comes from, that Arthur finds atonement. He concludes:

> To be an individual was of the essence. To make one's way, to shape and form oneself in a unique manner, to strive but to appear to not be striving too wilfully to find one's ideas in the bedrock of civilization, to stand on the shoulders of great thinkers and then alter the thinking slightly so that one can shape a singular and novel greatness, to live forever, to love and be loved, to rise and then fall and then rise again. […] Not to be too grand. (272-73)

To paraphrase Bergen's closing sentence: I am convinced that the world has room for him.

Ingrid Riesen
Winnipeg, Manitoba