

Maurice Mierau, *Detachment: An Adoption Memoir*.
Calgary: Freehand Books, 2014. 234 Pp. Softcover,
\$21.95.

Maurice Mierau's recent memoir *Detachment* attests to the increasingly complex task of telling a family story. This is hardly a new topic, as Western culture has both exalted whatever we thought the family *was* as well as bemoaned its loss. Mierau's contribution is able to resist both the distanced cynicism and

delusional piety that often comes with the contemporary struggle to understand our place in a family.

Mierau and his second wife Betsy are unable to have their own children, and when considering adoption, they looked to the Ukraine because of Mierau's interest in his paternal family's story of having fled the Ukraine in the 1940s. There is an acknowledged narcissism in this decision to adopt Ukrainian children that plays out in the book. In many ways this ethnically determined approach to adoption is about him and his desire to understand what his father has not been able to speak about in his experiences during the war. While Mierau knows the basic facts of these traumatic events, his father is both unwilling and at times unable to elaborate any further on them. This largely untold story begins to mirror that of Mierau and his wife's two adopted sons, Peter and Bodhan, who themselves experienced the trauma of being abandoned by their parents and sent to a dismal orphanage. Bodhan, the younger, does not have clear memories from that time but the older brother Peter remembers, although he is often unable to talk about his experiences. Mierau, out of a personal desire and professional interest (as a writer), tries to record the two stories he is now caught up in. Here Mierau is at his most vulnerable, acknowledging to the reader that his interest in *writing* a book about these things often gets in the way of actively *living* his family life. The book reveals that what is of most interest to Mierau is often – conveniently – what is most inaccessible, whether it involves the past and present of the Ukraine or whether it is the elusive story that always has him retreat. This gives Mierau an out, often fleeing his family in order to pursue these two narratives on his terms.

In light of Mierau's internal tension, the title *Detachment* is deliberately ambiguous. It explicitly references the attachment disorder Peter develops after a short time in Canada. Maurice and Betsy are told that there is no *cure* to his condition because his experiences and memories have become hardwired in his thinking. The resulting mnemonic pattern cannot simply be undone, but can be coped with in different ways. Mierau himself is constantly shifting his own patterns of attachment and detachment. In order to keep his detachment from making him emotionally and often physically unavailable to his family, Mierau must first break a previous "attachment." He learns to detach himself from the quest to learn his father's full story, and from the belief that somehow his yearning for that full story could be satisfied, that perhaps one more insight could be recovered so that what is only *felt* from the past could be rendered intelligible, articulated, or even somehow complete. This detachment comes when he no longer tries to

recover the truth of the past but simply tries to *imagine* it. As Mierau puts it, “Somehow the act of imagining my grandfather’s horrific death, the brutality of his end, had laid something to rest in me. I sent a copy [of the book] to my father and he had nothing to say about it. But his silence no longer frustrated me. Dad didn’t want this shit on his mind. I didn’t either. Now that the words lay like black grave makers on the white paper, I could leave the museum of the past.” (210)

Through images representing attachment and detachment, Mierau is able to navigate and give voice to elements of life that are embedded but intangible as well those which we are able to grasp and take responsibility for. As literary non-fiction, *Detachment* reveals the vulnerabilities of its author. It is also funny, insightful and unapologetically cathartic. *Detachment* demonstrates the hallmarks of a writing that is both mature and promising. This book should be of interest to readers concerned with the ongoing construction of identity of Russian Mennonites and their descendants as well as to anyone willing to struggle to disentangle the web of attachments that make us human.

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