## Armin Wiebe, *Armin's Shorts: Little Fictions by Armin Wiebe.* Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2015. Pp. 289. Softcover, $19.00.

Anyone familiar with Mennonite Canadian writing primarily through the work of authors such as Di Brandt, Rudy Wiebe, and David Bergen would be forgiven for assuming it to be a thoroughly earnest affair, and for their surprise at coming across *Armin's Shorts: Little Fictions by Armin Wiebe*. A different tradition of Mennonite writing exists, however, and it is traceable back at least to Arnold Dyck's early "Koop and Bua" short stories and Paul Hiebert's *faux* biography *Sarah Binks*, up through David Waltner-Toews' Tanta Tina poems and into Miriam Toews' celebrated East Village novels. It is in this, the surprisingly robust tradition of comedic Mennonite writing, that Armin Wiebe stands as a towering but lonely figure.

*Armin's Shorts* collects many of the short stories that Wiebe has published throughout his forty-year career, along with several new pieces. Separated into six sections, the twenty-five stories vary widely not only in length—the longest is 27 pages, the shortest is a single page—but also in tone and subject. The eleven stories under the headings "From the Gutenthal Galaxy" and "The Moonlight Sonata of Beethoven Blatz," for example, are firmly situated in the style and rural world of Wiebe's best-known writings, while the others are located in Canada's north ("The Subarctic Stories"), a sci-fi Winnipeg ("Olfert"), or in less readily identifiable times and places ("Beginnings," "Hearing it Ring"). If the result is a bumpy reading experience and a somewhat uneven collection, it is also a revealing cross section of Wiebe's admirably wide range of interests and a strong testament to his flexibility as a writer.

Readers of this journal are likely to be most interested in the book's Mennonite stories, but some of the most compelling writing is to be found in the section titled "The Subarctic Stories." Wiebe has explored similar territory in his award-winning novel *Tatsea*, but while these stories surely draw on the years he spent living in the Northwest Territories, a note at the close of the section indicates they are "adapted" from other sources. It is interesting, in this case, that the section's strong final story, "Whaèhdǫǫ̀ Godıì: Old Time Stories," directly thematizes the racialized dynamics of

white authors telling indigenous people's stories in a settler colony like Canada. The visiting missionary's response to the indigenous stories being told in retort to his own Christian narrative—he is confused and frustrated, the narrator explains, because he "had not bothered to learn" their languages—evokes the powerful ending of Rudy Wiebe's well-known consideration of settler-indigenous politics, "Where is the Voice Coming From?" As in the case of Rudy Wiebe's story, the writing in this section is able to stand on its own terms, but is strengthened by its self-awareness of the challenges of writing over and across cultural divides.

Still, as the lines of cartoon underwear that grace the cover of the book will attest, most readers are likely to come to the collection looking for humour, and it is in the comedic stories that Wiebe's considerable talents are most evident. Wiebe is still best known for his first book, *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*, and many of the stories in this collection offer a welcome return to the world of that novel. Wiebe's distinctive voice, born of his blending of Low German and English words and syntax, makes his sharp eye for detail, keen sense of pacing, and carefully crafted stories a joy to read—and even more fun to hear. The stories "And Besides, God Made Poison Ivy" and "Mouse Lake," are equal to the best work of Wiebe's career, at once tightly structured and laugh-out-loud hilarious.

Even at its funniest, however, Wiebe's writing maintains a weightiness born of the fact that it is asking us to laugh at the limitations of what it means to be human. Much like Miriam Toews, Wiebe brings laughter and regret, comedy and tragedy, into such close quarters that it is difficult to see where one begins and the other ends. In "Mouse Lake," for example, Yasch's enjoyment of life with his irrepressible fiancé, Ota, is disturbed by a surprisingly aggressive regret for roads not taken. In "The 'Moonlight Sonata' of Beethoven Blatz," a grandmother's lively remembrances betray serious doubts that have haunted her for a lifetime—doubts that Wiebe memorably describes as a "twievelling wonder in the back part of [her] brain about what had really happened." And in "Barn Dance," perhaps the strongest story in the collection, a young man's frustrated desire for his second cousin gives way to a suddenly earnest adventure in the countryside. The Mennonite villages' class and gender roles are held up for generous ridicule, and the biblical parallels are invoked (mostly) without heavy-handed moralizing, but there is always a sense that there is a cost to living beneath rigid social mores and legalistic codes. It is funny when the tarp flies off the haystack, to be sure, but it is also a reminder of how tightly packed a haystack can be.

Readers are sure to be impressed by the range of Wiebe's writing, which covers a surprisingly large cast of characters and settings, presented in an array of genres and voices. More immediately, however, *Armin's Shorts* is an opportunity for readers to return to Wiebe's warm, nostalgic vision of a Mennonite world that is all but gone. The generosity of Wiebe's flustered love for these disappearing rural villages makes him a lonely figure in the landscape of contemporary Mennonite writing; his clearest parallel would be Arnold Dyck, who warmly chronicled the foibles of this same community several generations ago. What luck, then, to have this collection, the best of which affirms the late Robert Kroestch's judgment in naming Wiebe "a comic storyteller without equal in Canada," and further extends the tradition of Mennonite comedic writing.

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