

Mary Ann Loewen, ed., *Sons and Mothers: Stories from Mennonite Men*. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2014. Pp. 144. Softcover, \$21.95.

In her introduction to *Sons and Mothers: Stories from Mennonite Men*, editor Mary Ann Loewen states that “everyone has a story. Everyone has a mother.” This is an intense, personal, intimate claim that the contributors make good on. They write boldly and honestly but with tender hands, sharing stories of themselves and their mothers. There is a good deal of pain in what they write – bereavement, misunderstanding, rigidity, conflict, anger, censor, and loss. But there is also happiness, forgiveness, comfort, love, and a few moments of joy.

In this review I take to heart Loewen’s claim that “writers and readers need each other if stories are to make a difference in our lives.” After all, much of what is written in this volume is familiar

to me – geography, personalities, church histories, the wanderings away, the reachings back, and perhaps most of all, the insistence that we can understand. I also come to this book as a scholar of religion. I look for, and notice, moments of ritual, meaning making, history, peoplehood, alienation, decorum, forgiveness, and wandering that make up what it means to be “Mennonite.” This is an unconventional way to write a book review – part personal reflection, part academic reflection – but *Sons and Mothers* itself invites such a comingling. How can I not but write about these encounters that touched me in their familiarity?

I notice the suggestion made by Paul Tiessen that his mother was sustained by her memories of a lost and beautiful Molotschna rather than by participation in church life. I notice a different kind of memory at work in John Rempel’s description of his mother, a memory of ritual that ordered the span of her life from the chaos of her revolutionary childhood to her death in a senior’s home. I tremble with unease as I read Nathan Klippenstein’s description of his mother as “a stony wall impenetrable to the sins of materialism and self-indulgence,” and Josiah Neufeld’s words: “my mother believes she has failed in her most important calling” because she has not been able to teach her children, most specifically Josiah, “to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and mind.” I cry for my own mother when Lloyd Ratzlaff shares his words of farewell to his dying mother in a Saskatoon hospital: “When the queen of clout reaches out the one semi-functional arm in a crook to ‘hug’ her son, it’s a benediction no old-time religion ever gave.” Patrick Friesen tells a story of reciprocal forgiveness, his mother meaningfully touching his hair and then his shoulder. I read another story of forgiveness in Andy Martin’s circling back – through a painful childhood – to a religiosity that engendered his parents but went beyond them as well: “My academic research has brought me back to my roots,” he notes, “focused on my Old Order Mennonite spiritual heritage with its quiet yet fervent, earthy and pragmatic simplicity and humility.” I can only laugh at the whole new perspective on women in the church Byron Rempel proposes as he “rechristens” his mother’s church (cosmetics and all): “you forgive me for thinking at one time that her church was named after her, the Evangeline Mennonite Brethren.”

Reading *Sons and Mothers* brings me back to the familiar time and again – there are very few contributions that do not touch me deeply and personally. That familiarity becomes an opportunity to reflect on what brings together the contributors: their Mennoniteness (whatever that may mean to them), their embrace of it,

their rejection of it, their return to it. To reconfigure “Mennonite” as story, as these contributions do, is to give it a different space to breath in. No contrived lines are drawn between faith and culture, no theology dictates belief versus unbelief. We are handed instead a chameleonizing conglomerate of accounts about Mennonite relationships – memory, ritual, judgement, sin, forgiveness, church, God, responsibility, family, the past, goddesses, the present, sons and mothers – and invited to remember our own story. This is an invitation we would do well to accept.

Kerry Fast
Toronto, Ontario