

Ken Yoder Reed, *Both My Sons*. Morgantown: Masthof Press, 2016. Pp. 408. Softcover, \$19.95 (USD)

Ken Yoder Reed's novel *Both My Sons* is a compelling examination of Mennonite life in colonial Pennsylvania. As a work of historical fiction, it occupies a significant gap in the "Mennonite/s writing" sphere; it is, to my knowledge, the first sustained imaginative work of scope and quality that investigates the Swiss Mennonite migration narrative to Pennsylvania and considers the intersections that narrative had with others, such as the Scots-Irish protestant settlers also seeking stability through Penn's project, and the Quaker administrators involved in distributing the land parcels Mennonites inhabited. These intersections, preluded by Yoder Reed's account of tensions between Palatine Anabaptists and politically powerful Catholics, Calvinists, and Lutherans, illuminate the economics of religion, culture, and immigration in eighteenth century Pennsylvania, all set against the increasing pressures and violence of the escalating French and Indian War.

The novel follows Klaus Grünewald, whom Yoder Reed describes as a "composite of several Pennsylvania pioneers," and opens *in media res* with Grünewald being presented the slain body of his eldest, illegitimate son Ichabod, born to Grünewald's Scots-Irish indentured servant. (The novel switches between the German "Grünewald" and the anglicised "Greenywalt," a move attending to linguistic boundaries of the "New World.") The novel then flashes back to trace the events leading to this opening scene, moving from young Klaus's introduction to Mennonites in the Kraichgau region of Southern Germany, through his apprenticeship to a Mennonite miller and subsequent conversion after a mystical experience at a secret Mennonite church meeting, to the seminal Mennonite foray into America at the Pequea Settlement (in what is now Lancaster County).

In a novel attempting to balance several motivating principles, the central narrative action hinges on Grünewald's relationships with two women: his wife Maudlin, mother of his legitimate son Benjamin, and Jane Cameron (the orphaned Scots-Irish immigrant whom Grünewald takes on as an indentured servant after her Atlantic crossing), with whom he carries on a passionate affair. The affair is less adulterous than it sounds, as Grünewald presumed Maudlin and her family dead after hearing they'd been "sent to the galleys" as religious heretics before having the chance to flee to America. The tension created by this triangle once Maudlin re-appears sets the scene for Maudlin to drive Jane and Ichabod out of the settlement, precipitating the series of events that lead to Ichabod's death as a commander of the Paxton Boys vigilante force.

Like his earlier novel, *Mennonite Soldier*, Yoder Reed's *Both My Sons* is informed by a guiding biblical allusion – in this instance the Abrahamic migration, complete with competing lovers and anxieties of primogeniture. Grünewald (qua Abraham) responds to the voice of God and leaves his Germanic Ur in an ur-Mennonite migration narrative; Jane (qua Hagar) finds herself a servant in the camp of a benevolent master, mother of a talented son loved by his father; Maudlin (qua Sarah) struggles with dependency and pride comingled with a period of barrenness. The allusion is clearly identifiable, though it functions primarily as a creative device. At times, in fact, an abundance of biblical allusions overwhelms the Abrahamic one, disrupting and potentially undermining the more compelling, sustained exploration of the psychological tensions inherent in the central conceit.

As fiction, the novel provides a colourful and rich perspective on Mennonite flourishing and suffering in both the "Old" and "New" Worlds, and Yoder Reed brings the historical qualities of the text to life through vibrant landscapes. The way he marks time and location through minute observations of flora and fauna provides an especially nuanced perspective on the Mennonite worlds he describes. This is a world in which seasons are marked by what's escaping and retreating into the ground, and time is marked by how many pipes one can smoke while reading a book. Yoder Reed also creates a rich soundscape, sensing the world with eye and ear. When Maudlin first views the Grünewald homestead, for example:

The forest gave way on our right to a field of barley ready to thresh, with glow-worms bobbing up and down across the whole field. It was towards dusk and beyond the barley as one came down the trail out of

the woods a log bridge crossed you over to the spot where a lane hooked off to a gristmill, with a pond up behind it, a millrace connecting them, and the big wheel rotating real slow, groaning a high-pitched and regular “MmmMmmMmmMmm,” and dripping water and the millstones were making a kind of steady roar. (We’d been listening to locusts for two days, and that’s a sound you don’t forget. Even at night when they’re asleep, I can’t rinse their singing out of my head).

These lush environments demonstrate Yoder Reed’s keen senses and keep the subtle sights, sounds, and smells of the landscape tightly woven into the fabric of the story.

One issue with the novel is a problematic warble in narrative perspective, especially in the sections focalized through Grünewald. The book is divided into eight parts, each employing different narrative perspectives as the story is told through Grünewald, Jane, Maudlin, and Benjamin. Narrative mood is tightest and most consistent with the latter three, while the parts focalized on Grünewald struggle with diegetic shifts that don’t serve the narrative well. Another issue is weak internal character development, especially Maudlin, who narrates the middle section of the story and who instigates the major rift in the narrative. Her significance to the main action warrants a more rounded psyche, and her inability to demonstrate any type of empathy until the final pages makes it hard to truly empathize with her.

The whole novel is, fortunately, greater than the sum of its parts. It’s an impressive work and I’m looking forward to sharing my copy with others and discussing it. *Both My Sons* bears similarity – with narrower temporal scope – to works like *Sweeter Than All the World*, *The Blue Mountains of China*, and *The Russländer*, though Yoder Reed, to my eye, does not have quite the narrative voice or diegetic control of Wiebe and Birdsell. For those from the Swiss Mennonite tradition, it provides what Sofia Samatar identifies as a detective-like thrill of discovery or recognition of familiar places, names and linguistic nuances, and it harmonizes well with recent scholarship like Laureen Harder-Gissing’s work on the complexity of Mennonite genealogy. Perhaps more significantly, the shifting perspectives of the novel invites readers to consider Mennonites from both the centre and the margin, and to consider what it means to be a Mennonite and be among Mennonites—an exploration of the tensions of the past of real value amidst the tensions of the present.

Kyle Gerber
University of Waterloo