

Rudy Wiebe, *Where the Truth Lies*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2016. Pp. 311. Softcover, \$24.95.

In this newest collection of his essays, with its waves of thoughtful and thought-provoking prose, Rudy Wiebe confirms that he is a master of poetic/oral expression. A number of the twenty-one essays have their roots in Wiebe's live performances, first given as conversational presentations in front of rapt audiences. Others have been published earlier, as far back as 1974. Often the essays echo the voices of biblical storytellers, who, as Wiebe writes, "we could really only call [...] 'poets'." With many of the pieces, we can easily imagine Wiebe delighting audiences with his self-deprecating humour, dazzling them with his unique wit and sweeping erudition, moving them with his interpretations of power, injustice, and resilience.

In these essays – written, of course, in English – we can feel the pleasure Wiebe takes in extending the cacophonies and harmonies of the languages he has heard from childhood on: Low German, German, English. In these essays, too, we observe his having fun with images that make patterns along the vistas of this volume: flowers; circles; light; the prairie; the archive; and many more. Present also are recurring homages: to F.M. Salter, the mentor who dared him to think of himself as a Mennonite writer; to his mother and father, who fled Stalin's Russia and settled in the boreal forest in Saskatchewan; to Canada itself, endlessly bountiful toward his grateful parents, toward his people the Mennonites who immigrated from 1920s Europe, toward Wiebe himself as a writer with limitless freedom to write.

Wiebe's essays, often produced for special occasions, are filled with a sense of intellectual and ethical urgency. His attention to immediate details and to historical landscapes produces a sense

not only of drama and expectation but also of moral vision and exhortation. In the oldest essay, "On the Trail of Big Bear," which he read in 1974 to an academic conference in Calgary, Wiebe describes the relentless determination with which he has pursued his story-making, using multiple tools – archives, published accounts, his own five senses, and many more – to get beyond the "giant slagheap left by ... heroic white history" and hear the voice of Big Bear. The essay echoes the structure and tone of his famous early short story, "Where is the Voice Coming From?" In the newest essay, "Hold your peace," which he read in 2012 to a "Mennonite Historical Society" audience of nearly 400 people in Abbotsford, he momentarily shifts the balance in how he has understood the turbulence among Canadian Mennonites that affected their reception of his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962). Here he performs an astonishing re-reading of letters from two senior members of his religious community, and acknowledges a oneness of denominational spirit and collaborative sensibility of which he himself had been a part fifty years before, but which he had long suppressed. These two essays, though written nearly forty years apart, reveal the freshness and energy and inventiveness Wiebe brings to all the pieces in this collection.

The volume is laden with Wiebe's densely-packed attention to Mennonites, with extended passages or entire essays devoted to: Mennonites and their relation to the physicality of the body; Anabaptist martyrs; Mennonites in Ukraine, past and present; and other spiritual and historical reference points. His attention to the history, both recent and distant, of Mennonite/s Writing emerges in his discussion of: Mennonite (especially women) writers' - rather than theologians' - capacity to bring together theology and the imperatives of everyday living; that great "monument of Mennonite writing," *The Martyrs Mirror*; and the problem of a Mennonite writer having to make "Steinbach, Manitoba" (106) interesting to readers in central Canada. Of course, this last essay was written in 1993, well before Miriam Toews had done just that!

A writer, says Wiebe, has to be unrelenting (even shamelessly so!) in his/her search for material, for the "facts" that lead to the writer's "fictions": "I have questions, always endless questions of the kind only writers have who, since they always need to know more, will persist with in a kind of indefatigable and shameless ignorance." Wiebe's endless pursuits – his struggles for and with words, words, words – have led to the kind of brilliantly jagged intellectual probes embedded throughout these essays, probes offering surprising perspectives and unusual presuppositions, vivid fictions spun out of facts. Indeed, the sub-heading to Wiebe's

shrewdly titled central essay, “Where the Truth Lies,” is “Exploring the Nature of Fact and Fiction.” In this richly textured piece, Wiebe plays with relationships of fact and fiction in their multiple guises, demonstrating his arguments with excerpts from: Genesis 11; a maddeningly comical mock interview in which he claims he is British not Mennonite; the Gospel of Luke; the Creation story as once told by the Yellowknife Dene people, a people “now gone”; and Wiebe’s own autobiography, *Of this earth*. He juggles questions of: experience and memory; fact, fiction, and creative non-fiction; truth – even The Truth – and fantasy; words and The Word.

In closing, Wiebe revisits *The Martyrs Mirror*, drawing attention to the “profound” Latin motto of his Anabaptist/Mennonite forbears on the title page, alongside a picture of a man digging with a shovel: “*Fac et Spera*,” which he translates as “Work and Hope.” What Wiebe can do as a writer searching for truth is “dig for it with words,” or (to return to the delicious ambiguities of his title) “dig for it wherever it may lie: work and hope” (101). These words, as he says in another essay, were also the words of his mother, who, living her modest life in Low German, would recite: “*Awbeid enn Hohp*’ (“Work and Hope,” both as nouns and verbs).” This latter essay was first written for the Mennonite literary magazine based in Winnipeg, *Rhubarb* – itself in 2017 ending an invigorating nineteen year, 42-issue run under the inspired editorship of Victor Enns – in response to a request that Wiebe list the top ten influences that had shaped him. There, he lists his mother among influences that range from the deeply religious (Jesus Christ) to the gift of studying overseas as an undergraduate (West Germany in 1957-58).

Wiebe claims that he does not know now many essays he has written, though many others have already been published in three earlier collections, *A Voice in the Land* (1981), *Playing Dead* (1989, 2003), and *River of Stone* (1995). Musing on the large number of essays he has written in his “lengthening lifetime,” Wiebe concludes on this stimulating note, in effect shedding insight on this wonderful and warm collection, *Where the Truth Lies*: “The problem with writer longevity can be a complicating, even contradictory oeuvre. Hopefully.”

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