Notes

Armin Wiebe, *Grandmother, Laughing*. Winnipeg, Turnstone Press, 2017. Pp. 223. Softcover, $19.00.

Sometimes, as in *Grandmother, Laughing,* what happens in one snow-stormy night has consequences enough for several lifetimes. That pivotal night-in-the-barn scene (conception this time, not birth), evokes literary echoes from a sacred Bethlehem event to Rudy Wiebe's exploding of Mennonite masks of morality at the end of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Armin Wiebe, however, neither reverent nor theologically intense, offers us instead much "laughering" and love, amid intimations of private pain and suppressed music, against the background of a small, gossipy, conformist community. As in previous novels, such as *Murder in Gutenthal,* multiple themes and re-visioned ancient archetypes are deftly smuggled in via Mennonite peasant humour, both linguistic and farcical. It's as if he wishes to insist, one more time, that the grand potential of human endeavour, with all of its creative hunger for beauty and capacity for love, is as likely to be seen in a simple Mennonite milk maid (who becomes a muse for a pianist composer deeply scarred by tragedy) as in some courtly tragic hero.

Grandmother, Laughing expands on characters and concerns from Wiebe's previously published short stories and drama. I, for one, am grateful. Both Blatz, the pianist composer, and the young Mennonite couple who take him in—ostensibly to fix and tune their broken piano but really to shield his wounded spirit—deserved fuller development. The novel opens as Koadel, grandson of Susch (Sarah) Suderman Kehler and Obrum (Abraham) Kehler, returns to the Kehler homestead on which Susch and Obrum spent their lives. Koadel's mission is to bury Susch's ashes in the old piano, if it's still there in the "Schpikja house," next to the graves of Obrum and Blatz (her "two men"). But this opening scene is actually the first part of the conclusion of the novel's events, the rest of which appears in the concluding chapter. In between, the poignant story

of a mostly unacknowledged love triangle (Susch, Obram, and Blatz) with its painful consequences is narrated primarily by Susch, piecemeal, and often "through the flowers" (that quintessential Mennonite metaphor for using metaphors to hide the plain truth in the midst of plain speech). In the first reading, that leap back in time from Chapter 1 to the beginning of the story in Chapter 2 is bewildering, yet the final chapter, in which all the plot threads are woven together, logically and symbolically, is deeply satisfying.

The novel also sees Armin Wiebe return to his unique blend of buggered-up English and Flat German, known for its quirky humour and unexpected nuances. Here it tends to repeat, sometimes annoyingly, particular phrases, either in Flat German or in transliterated English: "for an eyeblink," "schlikjed." Turnstone Press's helpful online glossary is definitely recommended, although Wiebe translates freely, often in redundancies such as "demütig humility," in which a Flat German word and its English translation come together to mean, somehow, something more. As Susch explains, "a word can be like a stone dropped into a pond with one ring after another spreading over the water" (42). Indeed. Wiebe chooses Flat German words for their obvious meaning, their associations, and their sounds, especially in hilarious nicknames. Once plot and characters are no longer baffling mysteries, the language seems more an intricate part of the whole and less an obstacle, especially since Wiebe chooses not to italicize the non-English words, letting the mixed vocabulary function as a unity. Still, readers will inevitably feel sorted into insiders and outsiders.

As narrator, Susch does not initially inspire confidence. Beethoven Blatz, an educated survivor of the Russian Revolution, calls Susch a "peasant woman," and so she is. Uneducated, untravelled, temperamentally and geographically separated from the village, she is often frustratingly inarticulate. Her limited comprehension and her unwillingness to say too much leave both Obrum and Blatz minimally developed. Obrum's exuberant love of life and strong sense of self do individualize him, but Blatz remains at the level of stereotype, not entirely convincing in either his tragedy or his musical gifts. The few interspersed chapters narrated by her grandson Koadel, with his smooth English, self-conscious use of occasional Susch-isms, and more objective perspective act as welcome relief from Susch's struggle to express her love of the beauty and solitude of the wild prairie, her profoundly emotional responses to Blatz's music, and her feelings about both Obrum, her husband, and Blatz, their boarder.

Yet, from the beginning, Susch seems reflective and self-aware, even if sometimes evasive about matters she knows would be misunderstood by her neighbours. Baffled by theological inconsistencies and frightened by the moral dilemma she's caught in, she compares herself to the biblical Mary, who pondered the inexplicable in her heart. Finally, near the end of the novel, after her ten-year-old son Isaac—the biblical echoes are surely intended—plays Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata with greater skill and more feeling than Blatz, his resident teacher, Susch admits that she's been deliberately not seeing what she should have faced:

> I had two men who talked to me when they had things they needed to speak, but I could never make myself believe that they would hear me if I talked about the things that were pressing on my heart. Maybe it was just easier to febeizel these things at the dark edges of my brain.

By this time, she has become a complex, mature figure, ever more like her dead Grossmamuh Glootje Susch who, in a nice bit of magic realism, has appeared to her at moments of decision or revelation throughout the book.

Thus it was in my second reading of *Grandmother, Laughing* that I recognized its complex literary achievement. The plot—is it farce or tragedy or some misbegotten amalgam of both?—transforms what begins as parody of both biblical stories and the Romantic vision of the artist as tortured soul into a serious critique of religious narrow-mindedness that prefers rules to beauty and creativity. For me, the most poignant character was Isaac, caught between his suppressed creativity and his desperate desire to be accepted by his friends and the rest of the community in a way that neither of his parents even attempted to achieve. The difference was that their love for one another and their awareness of mysteries greater than mere utility gave them strength to resist the temptation to conform.

A final recommendation here: read *Grandmother, Laughing* twice, and before the second reading, listen carefully to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Then, as the shivers run up your "backstring," let the "peasant woman" Susch be translated into the laughing grandmother, the muse.

Edna Froese
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan