

Casey Plett, *Little Fish*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018. Pp. 295. Softcover, \$19.95.

Casey Plett's novel, *Little Fish*, tells the story of Wendy Reimer, with a focus on transgender women and their relationship with sexuality, gender, and community. It begins with a group of transgender women at a bar in Winnipeg, the night before Wendy's grandmother dies. At the funeral and back in the Mennonite small town of her grandparents, Wendy learns a secret about her grandfather Henry. Anna, an old friend of the family, reveals that she has letters that suggest Henry may have been transgender. Wendy decides to keep this a secret even from her family, who have largely ignored her after she had surgery, and even omitted her name from Henry's obituary. The revelation that her own grandfather, who was a God-fearing, conservative and strict Mennonite, may have also been transgender, sets Wendy on an unsettling process of (self-) discovery.

As the story proceeds, Wendy's already difficult life unravels further: she begins to take illegal hormones with strange side-effects; learns that will lose her job and her housing; loses one of her closest friends, Sophie, who also has a Mennonite background; and reluctantly returns to prostitution. Many of these destructive experiences are suffered in isolation, and are numbed with a steady stream of alcohol and painkillers that leave Wendy ever more vulnerable. This downward spiral further lowers her self-esteem, and blinds Wendy to the increasingly dangerous circumstances she enters with clients, including one that leaves her on the outskirts of Winnipeg during a freezing cold winter night.

At the centre of *Little Fish's* account of Wendy's unravelling is a nuanced portrait of gender transformation, which is presented less as a goal to be accomplished than as a constant state of being. While surgery initially seems to be the final step for Wendy and her friends towards their desired gender identity, they soon realize that the outside world perceives them differently. Post-surgery, Wendy repeatedly meets men who are confused to the point of aggression by her appearance; otherwise intimate encounters turn violently disrespectful when men learn that she had once been a man herself. Wendy, too, is sometimes confused, suffering from nightmares of being a man again, and frustrated by how her own sexual preferences keep changing. "Her own desire felt milky, like silt, something in a river," Plett writes, "something she could see until she tried to hold it and make it function, and it ran through her fingers like nothing." *Little Fish* shows both the vulnerabilities and possibilities that come with such shifting desires.

It is only when Wendy meets her grandfather's friend, Anna, and learns more about her grandfather that she starts to gain a broader perspective on her experiences. The knowledge that her grandfather was queer and may have been transsexual—as well as the realization that Anna, a strict Mennonite herself, loves women—becomes a turning point in Wendy's life. Although there are no easy answers in this novel, Wendy acknowledges that despite the fact that she is not fully accepted within her Mennonite community or large parts of the broader society, she has the chance to live her life as a woman. She seems to come to terms with the instability of her own identity, appreciating that she enjoys more freedom to realize her transgender identity than her grandfather did.

Casey Plett's novel *Little Fish* is part of a flourishing queer Mennonite literature that has become ever more visible, as is witnessed by the *Journal of Mennonite Writing's* recent issue on queer Mennonite literature. The novel succeeds in presenting queer and particularly transgender characters as increasingly visible within Mennonite and non-Mennonite communities. Significantly, it emphasizes that transgenderism does not only present issues within a Mennonite setting, but within Canadian society at large. Although readers will enjoy *Little Fish* without any knowledge of the Mennonite community, the juxtaposition of traditional Mennonite culture and queerness is an important aspect of the novel. Indeed, Mennonite culture underlies the story and surfaces time again throughout the novel, both through individual characters as well as with references to Low German expressions, the "Mennonite game" of looking for relatives, intertextual references to Mennonite literature, as well as the choice of setting – Winnipeg during the winter. The use of words like "cis" may require some readers to do some basic research in queer terminology, and the novel's explicit and sometimes detailed portrayal of sexuality may not be well received by all, but *Little Fish* is a powerful story and important chapter in a growing field of writing.

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