

Kathleen Venema, *Bird-Bent Grass: A Memoir, in Pieces*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018. Pp. 354. Softcover, \$24.99.

Near the end of Kathleen Venema's *Bird-Bent Grass*, the author describes a 2009 conversation she had with her mother, Geeske Venema-de Jong, about how to create a memoir based on Geeske's recollections of the past. Her mother, who is suffering from Alzheimer's, struggles to relay a story, saying, "What I can tell you are just bits, and you have to make of it what you can." Venema responds by saying, "'if I have only fragments, I'm going to have to piece them together with something. People will read this story if it's a *story*, but I'll have to make up the pieces in between the fragments.'" *Bird-Bent Grass* is a memoir that is largely made up of fragments, mostly pulled from the correspondence between mother and daughter during Venema's stay in Ndejje, Uganda from 1986 to 1989, where she worked as a teacher with the Mennonite Central Committee after Ndejje had been decimated by civil war. Venema began her project a few years after her mother's diagnosis in 2005, when both parent and child revisited their correspondence from twenty years earlier and discussed Geeske's fascinating and sometimes troubling life. In the final memoir, these letters are interspersed with Venema's own contemporary writing that, at times, gives context to the letters and, at other times, uses the letters as a launching pad to reflect on the project as a whole.

A central concern of the book is broken communication. Letters sent between mother in Manitoba and daughter in Uganda occasionally go missing, or contain information that is already outdated by the time it is received. In a different example of broken communication, Venema points out how in Ndejje she never "perfect[ed] meaningful connection across linguistic and cultural barriers" (3). She notes the "rich parallels" between her communi-

cation difficulties in Ndejje and her own mother's illness, many years later, when Geeske struggles to recall vital information and is eventually unable to communicate at all. Venema chooses to emphasize rather than disguise these broken communications: she presents the book in fragments of different times, voices, and modes of communication, and resists placing them in linear order. Yet, Venema tells us, we can build important connections to others despite (or maybe because of) such fragments.

Venema's memoir is an example of the kind of relational life writing that critics often associate with women authors who, according to Susan Stanford Friedman, resist individualistic narratives of unique personalities, and instead construct identities that are "very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community." *Bird-Bent Grass* does an excellent job of foregrounding such interdependence. As Venema herself puts it, "I tell an Alzheimer's story in this memoir and I tell a story about my life as it's been intertwined with my mother's." As such, the book is also a vital contribution to the subgenre that G. Thomas Couser has termed "matriography" – namely, autobiographical stories about the author's relationship with her mother. However, Venema does not only demonstrate an intertwined relationship with her mother. She also discusses her own struggles with post-viral fatigue syndrome, and—quite tragically—details the illness and eventual far-too premature death of her nephew, Harry. Consequently, the book is a unique contribution to the autobiographic illness narrative genre, because it not only addresses the highly personal lived experiences of illness but it also highlights the interdependence of different illness experiences, while never equating the suffering.

Given that the book discusses both the fragility of interpersonal connection and the importance of relationality, Venema appropriately forges connections with Mennonites despite not being Mennonite herself. She works with the MCC, and subsequently marries a Mennonite, affirming a statement that she repeats with variation throughout the book: "I'm kind of hoping I won't ever be finished with the Mennonites!" Venema forges fragile but indelible connections to Mennonite communities and, intriguingly, to Mennonite writing. As a memoir, the text recalls Connie Braun's *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia*, Miriam Toews's *Swing Low*, and Rudy Wiebe's *Of This Earth*. All four books make creative use of historical/archival material to explore the relationship between the authors and their families. As such, this book would nicely complement the kind of discussions fostered by the recent Mennonite/s Writing conference, which was devoted specifically to personal

narratives, especially for scholars of Mennonite literature who look beyond texts as expressions of Mennonite identity and instead, examine them as works which, in Di Brandt's words, "practice fluid multiculti hybrid po/mo relations."

Throughout her memoir, Venema refers repeatedly to an ephemeral and fleeting moment that, by its very nature, cannot be pinned down. She infers there is value in examining our personal archives even if we are left only with fragments, for they ultimately provide us with brief glimpses into a past that we can recover enough to provide us with some comfort or solace. She both models and compels the reader to experience the "fleeting business of being alive and loving others in the long or very short time they're ours to hold." *Bird-Bent Grass* is a compelling memoir precisely because it demonstrates to us the value in appreciating these moments of connection before they disappear.

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