

Hildi Froese Tiessen, ed., *11 Encounters With Mennonite Fiction*. Winnipeg: Mennonite Literary Society, 2017. Pp. 197. Softcover, \$25.00.

In this collection, Hildi Froese Tiessen has brought together eleven invited essays representing highly personal views of Mennonite Fiction offered by writers and critics from Canada or the United States who either share a Mennonite upbringing or at least a deep interest in Mennonite/s writing. While presenting many whom one would count as the “usual suspects” in this context, including several known from important recent scholarly publications such as Robert Zacharias’s monograph *Rewriting the Break Event* (2013) or the volume *After Identity* that he edited in

2015, the variety of this collection's contributions shows that Mennonite writing in America and Canada, though still informed by certain common markers, can no longer be seen as a monolithic type of literature. Widely accepted as the pioneer of Canadian Mennonite writing in English, Rudy Wiebe is still one of its most vibrant voices, but he has been joined by a rather diverse group of fellow writers not only challenging Mennonite religious views, as Wiebe himself had done in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (about which more later) in the early sixties, but also questioning "Mennonite monologism" from feminist, queer, and other perspectives, thus enriching the field of Mennonite/s writing.

In her introduction, Froese Tiessen, who for many years taught at Conrad Grebel College at the University of Waterloo and has been a central voice in the discussion of Mennonite writing, interprets the word "encounters" in the title of this collection as leaning in the direction of personal readings. Among the very personal approaches to Mennonite writing, Margaret Loewen Reimer "encounters" Armin Wiebe's classic *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*, when she reads the novel and its use of "Flat German" in relation to its real-life model of Altona, Manitoba, and its Bergthaler style of Mennonitism. Robert Zacharias (York) looks for the traces of Sandra Birdsell's *The Russländer* and his own family's history on a trip to Chortitza, the home of many Mennonites in what today is Ukraine, wondering "what happens when we experience not only our larger collective histories, but also the physical spaces of those histories, through the pages of literature." Jan Schroeder (Carleton) delivers another very personal re-reading of a key text, in her case of Dora Dueck's *This Hidden Thing*. Schroeder insists on "the sharp intake of breath that comes from recognizing these familiar and familial place names in a novel: Winkler, Morden, the West Reserve," but she goes beyond mere autobiographical connections and establishes intertextual ones, for example by reading the novel as "a neo-Victorian Menno fiction that halts and reverses the downward progress of the fallen woman via *A Room of One's Own*."

Yet another autobiographical as well as intertextual reading that, for a change, does not focus on Mennonite identity is that of Tanis MacDonald (Wilfrid Laurier) in "Who Do You Think?: Reading Sarah Klassen through Alice Munro." MacDonald's approach follows Hildi Froese Tiessen by asking, "what would it be like to examine a work of Mennonite literature in which the Mennonite identity of the author was not the primary literary designation?" She rather insists on parallels and connections in the characters and plots of Klassen's and Munro's stories.

Quite a few contributions to this collection also show that there is a strong Mennonite or Anabaptist streak in literary genres where we might not have expected them. American Mennonite poet and literary scholar Jeff Gundy (Bluffton University) points to Sofia Samatar's fantasy novels set in Olondria, in which he locates more than one instance of "an Anabaptist subtext." Daniel Shank Cruz (Utica College) focuses on yet another relatively new field of Mennonite Literature in "Archiving Queer Space in *Widows of Hamilton House*." Writing about queerness in connection with Mennonites means of course to respond to traditional trends of "Mennonite Homophobia" (104). According to Cruz, Christina Penner's novel "argues that we must look to queer ways of living, whether sexually or politically."

Another topic generally regarded as a common feature of Mennonite writing is that of trauma. In "Loss and Intimacy in David Bergen's *The Matter with Morris: Learning Mortality Through the Son and the Stranger*," Margaret Steffler (Trent) analyzes Bergen's novel as a statement "of the need to focus on potential loss, not only as a way of rehearsal and preparation, but as a way of living more intimate life." Grace Kehler (McMaster) interprets Miriam Toews's *Swing Low*, the story of Toews' father's life and suicide, through a communal reading that she and her students undertook as part of graduate English classes on "Literature as Witness" and which turned into a process of learning "to care for our own griefs and those of others."

Among the essays looking for "Mennonite Traces" in contemporary writing, Ann Hostetler (Goshen College) analyzes the fiction of Carrie Snyder, wondering if there is anything like a Mennonite marker or an instance of "auto-ethnographic announcement" (Kasdorf) in these texts. And she finds an "ethic of care": "Reading for the Mennonite trace in Snyder's fiction, I found myself connecting through and beyond it to human stories, handled with care." Julia Spicher Kasdorf (Penn State), in the last essay of the collection, reads Alayna Munce's work in a personal way, trying to find out if it is a "Mennonite text" and what, exactly, makes a text Mennonite – whether it is genealogy, genre, geography, or generation. The answers will depend on whether she responds as a poet or a mother: "The responsibility for identification then shifts from author to reader," she writes, "in a move that follows postmodern beliefs about where meaning gets made."

For me personally, the most exciting encounter described is that of Paul Tiessen (Wilfrid Laurier) with Rudy Wiebe's seminal *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in "Archival Returns: Rudy Wiebe and the Coming Back of Thom Wiens." Tiessen here discusses the chal-

lenges of the “traditional” interpretation of the conflicted character Thom Wiens in the light of his recent archival research, and especially of a side remark in Wiebe’s recent *Come Back* (2014) about Wiens’s death as a soldier.

All the approaches to Mennonite writing brought together in *11 Encounters with Mennonite Fiction* are personal in some way, and in their search for “Mennonite markers” in literary texts many of them choose perspectives that are perhaps more affect-oriented and phenomenological than a non-Mennonite reviewer – brought up in a rather more structuralist creed of literary criticism – would have expected. However, the experience of reading about these encounters is certainly an enriching one.

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