

David Bergen, ed., *9 Mennonite Stories*. Winnipeg: Mennonite Literary Society, 2017. Pp. 170. Softcover, \$25.00.

This anthology offers an opportunity to consider the development of Canadian Mennonite fiction-writing over two generations, from 1974 to 2014, the years of publication of the nine stories it contains. It also contributes to currently contested ideas about Mennonite literature and about Mennonite identity as it appears in literature.

One somewhat disguised element of Mennonite identity herein emerges not so much from the contents of the stories but from a formal literary element. Eight of the nine stories are narrated from the point of view of a pre-teen or teenage character. The six first-person narrators are Nomi Nickel, 15, in Miriam Toews's "A Complicated Kindness"; Lureen Lafreniere, 12, in Sandra Birdsell's "The Rock Garden"; Yasch Siemens, 15, in Armin Wiebe's "The Salvation of Yasch Siemens"; the 14-year old daughter of Molly and Charlie in Dora Dueck's "Mask"; Grandy's granddaughter Violet in Lois Braun's "The Pumpkin-Eaters"; and Steve, 15, in David Elias's "How I Crossed Over." Two third-person narrators also focus on young people: Juliet Friesen, 10, in Carrie Snyder's "The Borrowers," and the Vietnamese boy, 15, in David Bergen's "Saved." Only Rudy Wiebe's canonical "Where Is the Voice Coming From" has an adult narrator for a very adult subject. I'm not sure it is a "story," as such, but its investigation of Canadian Indigenous history may be in the voice of a "colonial official," as Mierau suggests, or perhaps an academic historian, or maybe Wiebe himself (as "poet," 70), who discovers that the unreliability of oral tradition forces him to write historical fiction rather than history.

What to make of this consistent perspective of and on adolescents? Whether this unifying element was accidental or deliberate, I'm tempted to suggest that it reveals Mennonite culture as, archetypally, an in-between, adolescent entity that observes, or joins, or moves toward a more mature, if fallen, mainstream identity. It seems clear, at least, that many Mennonite authors prefer coming-of-age stories. Musings like that run counter to the current understanding that essentialist generalizations of communities lack authority, and that "identity" cannot be corporate, and cannot be stable, even for an individual.

Mennonite literary critics have suggested that the obsession with identity in early Mennonite literature is fading, and that Mennonite writers no longer necessarily write about Mennonite subjects. That discussion began with Hildi Froese Tiessen's essay in *MQR* (Jan. 2013), "Homelands, Identity Politics, and the Trace: What Remains for the Mennonite Reader?" and was extensively developed in the anthology of critical essays, *After Identity*, edited by Robert Zacharias (2015). Indeed, while the authors anthologized in this latest collection are all well known in Mennonite literary circles, the stories chosen do not immediately emphasize this shared context: only two of the stories incorporate the word "Mennonite" in their texts—in "A Complicated Kindness," Nomi famously defines Mennonites as "the most embarrassing sub-set of people to belong to if you're a teen-ager," and in Elias's "How I

Crossed Over,” Steve hears an outsider observe that the racist Mennonites just “sit and spit”—and even the author bios provide no such information. Except for the title of the book, non-Mennonite readers might not realize that they are reading “Mennonite” literature.

Even Mennonite readers will need to look closely in this collection for what Froese Tiessen calls “traces,” or the bits of naming or actions or attitudes that verify a Mennonite context and thus “identify the Mennonite reader to herself.” Such traces can be found in the family name of Friesen in Snyder’s story, the “thousands of jars of canning in the pantry” in Braun’s story, and the pacifist theme in Dueck’s story about a British Methodist family. Indeed, I suspect that Bergen’s “Saved” (2009)—about a Vietnamese boy, himself a victim of sex tourists, who kills a young Christian missionary woman—was placed last climactically: the stories by Snyder and Dueck are more recent, and concluding with Bergen emphasizes the “post-identity” nature of current fiction by Mennonites. If there is a Mennonite “trace” to be found in Bergen’s story, it is probably the culturally botched evangelism by Protestant missionaries.

At the same time, if one assumes that “post-identity” writing is a recent development in Mennonite fiction, one must notice the inclusion of Wiebe’s early (1974) story, “Where Is the Voice Coming From,” which has nothing to do with Mennonites. That is generally true of his writings about Indigenous Canadians, except for *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) and perhaps *First and Vital Candle* (1966). If there is a Mennonite “trace” in them, it might be a subtext interest in nonviolence. Similarly, while Bergen’s story, and several others, reflects the recent interest in *postcolonial* writing—i.e., about political oppression of one national or cultural group by another—Wiebe’s story reminds us that this, too, is not entirely new to the field. From early on, it seems, Wiebe set an example for all of these “recent” developments.

This rather idiosyncratic anthology raises a few questions. Given that David Bergen selected the stories but Maurice Mierau wrote the introduction, for example, one is left wondering who determined the sequence of stories, and on what basis. They are not chronological according to their original publication dates, after all, and the logic of their order is not immediately clear. Similarly, one wonders if Bergen agrees with Mierau’s polemical introduction, or the comments he provides on individual stories.

Also, what was the reason behind the number of stories selected? If there are nine stories, why not ten? For a tenth, I would recommend including something by Rosemary Deckert Nixon, a

much-neglected Canadian (Swiss) Mennonite writer; maybe “Taking Boardwalk” or “The Thief.” Or fiction by any American Mennonite writer, whose absence is especially notable here because American Mennonite authors and critics are included in the volumes of poems (*29 Mennonite Poets*, 2016) and criticism (*11 Encounters with Mennonite Fiction*, 2017) that were published by the Mennonite Literary Society as companions to this book of stories.

Finally, there is the matter of genre. The story “A Complicated Kindness” is actually an excerpt from the opening pages of the novel of that name, and the absent context is important: the reader cannot know, for example, who “The Mouth” is, or why the mother and sister have left home, and the selection lacks the sense of ending that its narrator, Nomi, reminds us to expect from fiction. Similarly, while Birdsell’s “The Stone Circle” does have an ending, it lacks the complex conclusion, and fulfilment, that the story “Night Travellers” gives it in her novel-in-stories, *Night Travellers*. With so many strong short stories available, the choice to include sections of novels in an anthology of short stories is surprising.

Any anthology will reflect the anthologist’s personal taste and judgment, and will disappoint authors and readers with different preferences. *9 Mennonite Stories* offers a provocative version of the state of Canadian Mennonite fiction in 2017, and an aid in considering how that endeavour has developed since Hildi Froese Tiessen published 22 “Mennonite Short Stories” in her 1989 anthology, *Liars and Rascals*.

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