

# Postcolonial Literary Detection in *Fear of Landing*

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Ab, like so many visitors to tropical paradises, had seen Java in terms of the illusions he had created, the things he had wanted to believe.

—*Fear of Landing* (172)

David Waltner-Toews probably should not have had his novel *Fear of Landing* (2007) published by Poisoned Pen Press, which specializes in mystery and detective novels. The low esteem with which such “popular” books tend to be regarded by the literary establishment may account for its neglect by Mennonite literary critics. The novel is actually a serious, complex, provocative fictional account of a Mennonite service worker in a baffling postcolonial situation. It is therefore an important addition to a cluster of postcolonial fictions that have also received little critical attention from the Mennonite literary community. For good measure, it offers yet another account of the search for Mennonite identity, this time in a complex global world.

## The Literary Context—Genre

A review by Armin Wiebe<sup>1</sup> is the only serious consideration in print of the novel. Wiebe opens the review by comparing detective fiction (“mysteries”) with the pleasures found by youngsters while reading the Danny Orlis adventure novels and Spin and Marty comics, thereby eliciting the opinions of adults that they are not

“literature.” “As a mystery [*Fear of Landing*] delivers a good read,” Wiebe says. This reflects a typical attitude in literary circles toward detective fiction, nowadays categorized as “genre fiction,” which includes such types as Harlequin romance, westerns, science fiction, and others. All presumably are too bound by conventions of plot, character, setting, and theme to make them truly creative, literary texts. They are associated with easy-reading entertainment, escapism, and lack of “serious” meaning. Detective fiction normally emphasizes a plot that leads to a pat conclusion, explains all the baffling clues, and is “popular” rather than “literary” writing.<sup>2</sup> Postmodernist literary criticism, with its levelling of hierarchies, blurring of genre boundaries, and interest in popular culture, has created increased respect for detective fiction, as the anthology of essays *Sleuthing Ethnicity: The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction* makes clear.<sup>3</sup> But old attitudes remain.

*Fear of Landing* is indeed a detective story, good enough to be regarded by *Publishers Weekly* as one of the best mysteries of 2008, and called “terrific” by Margaret Cannon in *The Globe and Mail*.<sup>4</sup> It is an unusual detective novel, however, because the main character, Ab Dueck, is victim rather than agent; the mystery that obsesses him and his search for personal identity each remain unresolved. Although Armin Wiebe, on one hand, finds “Mennonite stereotypes” for purpose of “entertainment” in the novel, he does glimpse some literary qualities of the book by saying that it “comes close to delivering darkness and light, complication and paradoxes, the living, breathing souls of deeply imagined characters” and “achieves a comfortable balance between action, description, and rumination.” He makes passing reference to the novel’s “exotic” location and “political intrigue.”<sup>5</sup> But he otherwise ignores the foreign political setting of the novel, which obsesses and oppresses Ab Dueck, and gives the novel its rich postcolonial implications that go far beyond the conventions of detective fiction.

### The Political Context—Postcolonial

The idea of the “postcolonial” arose following the Second World War as formerly colonized societies around the world gained independence, beginning with Indonesia in 1945 and India in 1947 and continuing especially in the 1960s in Africa. In literature, the early postcolonial concern was with writings from those cultures that reflected colonized peoples’ responses to their history and current predicaments. These works often represented the ways in which power inequalities shaped the postcolonial present and future

through continued cultural and economic hegemony. Postcolonial critics also give critical re-readings of texts produced by colonial powers and their direct and indirect agents. They looked for evidence of “the differing responses to [colonizing] incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre- and post-independence nations and communities.”<sup>6</sup> Such incursions and legacies raise questions of representation, cross-cultural understanding and, especially, political power.

The field of postcolonial studies has expanded and diffused in critical practice and theory into the disciplines of history, politics, sociology, and economics. A good example of such diffusion in Mennonite studies is Daniel Shank Cruz’s essay “On Postcolonial Mennonite Writing: Theorizing a Queer Latinx Mennonite Life.”<sup>7</sup> The theoretical framework that lies behind most postcolonial literary and cultural criticism in North America is informed by seminal texts of Edward Said (1978) on cross-cultural stereotypes; Homi Bhabha (1984) on the cultural mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence that result from the colonized cultures coping with the powerful colonizers; and Gayatri Spivak (1988) on giving voice to “subalterns,” i.e., “third world” persons, especially those marginalized by gender and illiteracy. These writers are, in turn, influenced by European cultural theorists such as Derrida, Gramsci, Foucault, and others.<sup>8</sup>

Recent Mennonite literature reflects this influence. As Rob Zacharias points out, “the first major surge of Mennonite writing in North America came in a period [the 1980s] dominated by identity politics and postcolonial critique”<sup>9</sup>—although until recently Mennonite writers have been more interested in “identity” than “postcolonial critique.” Rudy Wiebe has been credited “in large part” with making Canadian literature “consciously postcolonial.”<sup>10</sup> His *The Temptations of Big Bear*, winner of the Governor General’s Award for Fiction in 1973, is the obvious early example of this interest. But postcolonial issues surface in his earlier works, too, notably in the chapter “Wash, This Sand and Ashes” in *The Blue Mountains of China* (1972); *First and Vital Candle* (1966); and even in his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962). That novel is a complex example of “settler colonialism” issues insofar as the Mennonite colonists, as settlers, have supplanted Indigenous peoples, and the Canadian government, in turn, has imposed the military draft and the English language on the Mennonites. Wiebe’s writings about Indigenous peoples in Canada also adopt a postcolonial lens.<sup>11</sup>

In moving beyond Canada, *Fear of Landing* also presents postcolonial issues in terms of the field’s central concerns: the continued hegemony of a colonizing entity over a formerly colonized culture. Other Mennonite fiction writers have dealt with similar power

relations in cross-cultural and international situations. Omar Eby wrote of missionaries and service workers in Somalia in *A Long, Dry Season* (1988) and other works; Rosemary Nixon explored service workers in Zaire in *The Cock's Egg* (1994). David Bergen has gained distinction with postcolonial fiction such as *The Time in Between* (2005), *The Retreat* (2008), and *Stranger* (2016). The fantasy, or “speculative,” novels by Sofia Samatar (*Stranger in Olondria*, 2013) and her husband Keith Miller (*Book of Flying*, 2004) sometimes have postcolonial implications. Even so, except for Rudy Wiebe and his (mainly non-Mennonite) interpreters, Mennonite postcolonial fiction and, especially, Mennonite literary criticism of it, is a minor stream of today's Mennonite/s Writing endeavour. Hence, the welcome achievement by David Waltner-Toews in *Fear of Landing*.<sup>12</sup>

### Whodunit?

In *Fear of Landing* Ab(ner) Dueck, a Canadian veterinarian working at The Happy Dairy Farm in Java, becomes increasingly aware of the deep historical and neo-colonial efforts in which he is implicated by working in Indonesia. The novel is set in the early 1980s during the Cold War-era military dictatorship of Suharto (1967–98), which was supported by Western powers, including the US and Canada. Suharto was preceded by Sukarno, Indonesia's first post-colonial leader whose government (1945–67) involved an uneasy coalition of Islam, the military, and the Communist Party (PKI). In the mid-1960s, Suharto, then a leading general in the Indonesian army, used a militant uprising as a pretext for mass killings targeting Indonesia's large Communist Party. This resulted in the massacre of between 500,000 and 1 million people in 1965–66 and allowed for Suharto's seizure of power in 1967.

Ab finds himself directly affected by the post-colonial histories and policies of both Sukarno and Suharto as well as preceding colonial history, including the occupation of Indonesia by Japan during the Second World War, the establishment of Indonesia as a colony of the Netherlands (1800–1945), and the economic domination of Indonesia by the Dutch East India Company from as early as 1595. Ab is oddly unaware of the several Mennonite-related churches in the Central Java area where he works, the result of long-term mission work by Mennonites from Holland, from 1847; by his own Mennonite Brethren ancestors from Ukraine, from the 1880s; and by MBs from North America, from the 1940s. However, he does realize that some early Mennonites in Holland were members of the East India Colony for a while. He is also aware that he himself is implicated in

neo-colonial activity through his work for the Canadian International Development Agency, which sponsors him.<sup>13</sup> Thus his work indirectly and unintentionally supports the Suharto dictatorship, sometimes regarded as “the most corrupt leader in modern history” for embezzling perhaps \$35 billion and for his purges of Communists surviving from Sukarno’s government.<sup>14</sup> At times, Ab fears he resembles a “secular” or “cowboy missionary” (167) “out to save the world” (168). At others, he senses that he is “part of some global trading system” (7).

The novel begins with Ab Dueck performing an autopsy on a cow, mysteriously deceased. He is “up to his elbows in the slippery offal” (2), which he relishes.<sup>15</sup> On checking the second stomach, he finds a magnet to which is tied a small torn pouch that contains a powder residue. He guesses that it is strychnine (later confirmed). A second magnet, lacking those attachments, is also present, like those placed in all cows exported from Canada to Java. Magnets attract and hold the metal bits that cows sometimes ingest with their grazing and that might otherwise pierce the stomach and kill the cow. The extra magnet and its attachments had to have been added after the cow’s arrival in Java, by someone who intended to kill the cow and undermine the development work to which Ab is attached. As an epidemiologist, who investigates causes, Ab is immediately a successful detective. But the challenge is even more complex: he never even explores, let alone solves, the greater problem of anthrax in cows at the main station.

The search for a perpetrator and motive are different problems that force Ab, willy-nilly, to become a more conventional kind of detective, as he investigates the case of the “deadly political outbreak in cows” (94) throughout the rest of the book. The messy investigation into the cow’s innards is a preview, or metaphor, for the cultural and political investigation in the narrative that follows. He gradually understands that he is caught up in a mysterious scheme for individuals to profit from the bovine aid project. When a cow dies within six months of delivery, it is replaced by the Canadian aid program. In the supply chain, “Every step of the way—shipping, quarantine station, trucking, the distribution farm, villages—someone was making money. You could bet it wasn’t the farmers” (39). But who was it? He also realizes that his dairy project, which introduces milk consumption, is not in support of Indigenous food culture, but instead reflects a decision by foreigners regarding what they think Java “needs” (39)—and also serve to reduce surplus in the dairy sector in Canada. The Javanese clearly value the cows more as beef than for their milk products.

Before he left Canada, the project administrator in Ottawa warned Ab to, “[s]tay out of politics” (103). But this soon becomes impossible when he learns of the murdered, buried body of Susilo, the previous farm manager; of the murder of Soesanto, his best Javanese friend, co-worker, and confidant; the attack on his secretary; and, most important, the murder of his lifelong best friend George Grobowski, fellow Canadian agronomist who came with him to work in the same development project. Ab’s tentative theory is that someone in the government killed Susilo and Soesanto because they were Communists who survived into the Suharto regime, and that George’s death was accidental, collateral damage—he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. As for the dead cows, they were poisoned so that locals in the development project could sell their carcasses to butchers for meat. But how to link the dead cow and the murdered colleagues?

As in all good detective fiction, there are enough baffling clues to propel the reading. Things get even more complicated as Ab himself becomes a target of killers—once in his bedroom, once in a dilapidated fun house, once at the expatriates’ Hash House Harriers run, and once at the house of Sani Sentosa, a Chinese Christian man who may be “the richest man in the world,” and is also the grandfather of Nancy, Ab’s Chinese-Indonesian girlfriend and lover.

His encounter with Nancy’s grandparents at least clarifies that Sentosa is in some way a collaborator with Gen. Witona of Suharto’s corrupt government, reaping personal riches from the foreign aid that pays for the development project. Although Sentosa is a Chinese Christian Communist who survived Suharto’s purges—and describes himself as one of the “Jews of Indonesia” (59)—he is useful to the Suharto government because of his great wealth, his friends in high places, and all of the dark information he is privy to.

Because he knows too much, Ab is given one week to leave the country or face the consequences—prison or death. During that week, he hears explanations of the situation he is embroiled in from four different people: Sentosa, the Chinese billionaire; John Schechter, a volcanologist and American spy; Marie Wilkinson, an expatriate friend; and General Witono, Suharto’s proxy and Sentosa’s collaborator. The General’s claim that anthrax killed George is the government’s lying, obfuscating, official explanation—as fake as the stones found in place of George’s corpse when the coffin arrives in Canada. Sani Sentosa’s account is simple and slick, blaming everything on Ab’s supervisor Waluyo. Marie Wilkinson claims that Waluyo killed George. To the reader, Schechter’s account seems the most reliable, both because he is a knowing spy on Javanese affairs and because his long, complex narrative accounts for many details

that have baffled Ab. However, Ab cannot accept it because Schechter implicates Ab's beloved Nancy as part of the conspiracy to have him killed, and because it does not believably account for George's murder. Ab leaves Java not knowing what really happened.

The reader becomes aware of still one more, very mystical, explanation. The murders and the attempted murder of Ab were all committed with a rare, antique *kris*, a traditional dagger with a curving, highly incised, damascened, decorated blade—this one coveted by the main figures in the novel. The expatriates regard them as merely “cultural artefacts” (44). Through varied exchanges, the *kris* ends up in Ab's possession, without his wanting it. According to a book that Soesanto consults, this particular *kris* was made in the thirteenth century in the local village of Gandringan by an expert metalworker who pronounced a curse of death on anyone who owned it. Used properly, it could fatally stab a person without leaving a trace of blood, which is how George, Susilo, and Soesanto died, and Ab almost did.

Among other traits and uses, a *kris* is regarded in Java as a talisman, that is, an implement endowed with a “charm to avert evil and bring good fortune” through its “magical or mysterious effects.”<sup>16</sup> As art, it stands for Indonesian “refinement, art and beauty,” while as a weapon it implies “violence, death and bloodshed,” as in Ab's experience.<sup>17</sup> Because of the *kris*'s ubiquity in Indonesian history and culture it has become a potent symbol of Javanese culture. The *kris* was placed by UNESCO on its “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” in 2008. It is “both weapon and spiritual object” and in Java it is used in public displays, dances, and ceremonies, including weddings, on flags and money, and as an indicator of social status.<sup>18</sup>

UNESCO also recognizes the *kris* for the important “mythology” that has developed around the dagger. Indeed, three main historical legends in Java revolve around the *kris* of their legendary owners or makers: *Kris Empu Gandring* (1200s), *Kris Taming Sari* (1400s), and *Kris Setan Kober* (1500s).<sup>19</sup> As Soesanto explains to Ab, the coveted *kris* is indeed the one made by Empu Gandring in the thirteenth century, and can move or kill of its own volition. (68–70). Soesanto narrates the traditional tragic romance of Ken Arok and Ken Dedes associated with the *kris* of Empu Gandring. Insofar as Waltner-Toews incorporates Gandring's actual *kris* as a motivating element in *Fear of Landing*, he is adding to its legend and thereby, in a modest way, situating his work within Java's literary tradition.<sup>20</sup>

Knowing that the *kris* is a symbol of Java, the mystical explanation for Ab's experience is that he was a victim of Java's history and culture. As he realized early in the story, “Every time he thought he

understood this culture, he was brought low” (56). Besides the fatal kris, other unfathomable aspects of the culture, for Ab, are the intricate batik work, the Ramayana shadow puppet play, the gamelan—especially the gamelan—and the mysteries that surround almost every Javanese that he knows, including his best friend Soesanto and his girlfriend Nancy.

Ab Dueck is well aware of the postcolonial cultural-political situation he is in. He compares it to his home country of Canada, which is “still fighting stupid proxy wars for the British and French imperialists, the endless post-colonial quarrels parading as new nationalisms.” (42) He apparently alludes to the Québécois sovereignty movement, especially as exacerbated by de Gaulle’s controversial visit to Quebec in 1967. *Neo-colonialism*, a term introduced by Ghanaian independence leader Kwame Nkrumah, is a more pertinent concept from postcolonial discourse that fits Ab’s situation in Java. That condition exists in three different aspects of *Fear of Landing*.

The most concrete example of neo-colonialism lies in the group of American, Canadian, English, and Australian expatriates that Ab, affiliates with, even if reluctantly. They are a microcosm of the new colonialism. They live in European-style houses, have parties during Ramadan, run their Hash Bash (an international colonialist custom begun by the British) among historic Hindu temples, and work for foreign governments, especially as spies. Marie Wilkinson even worked for the British Colonial Service in her earlier years. They regard Java as “an elaborate parlor game” (41). Like their colonialist predecessors, they earn huge salaries and lack altruism. Ab also earns a large salary but has more altruism—although he frequently wonders why he is “trying to change a complex culture I don’t understand” (28). Most important, the expatriates are agents in the Cold War, now serving foreign “democratic” interests under Suharto, having replaced foreign “communist” agents under Sukarno. Indonesia may be technically independent but it remains subservient to these external forces in a neo-colonial relationship.

Internal politics are also neo-colonialist. The successors of the colonial order have retained the government and economic structures of the colonial administrators, but use them for their gain. The new native elites also imitate their former overlords by manipulating and exploiting internal ethnic conflicts to retain power.

A more subtle kind of neo-colonialism in Java—because its sources are so nebulous—is globalization, which expanded in the post-colonial context and has only increased since the 1990s when the concept and term became popular. Ab experiences it in Japanese vehicles, American country and western music, the Lake Louise poster, the Florida T-shirt, a Hong Kong movie, Christmas



decorations in a Muslim country, Apple, IBM, Abba, Michael Jordan, Superman, and a Ferris wheel. Globalization is the “increasing connectedness and interdependence of world cultures and economies.”<sup>21</sup> It encompasses economic (e.g., IMF), cultural (Facebook), and political (UN) developments, all of which aspects were present in the 1980s of *Fear of Landing* and have increased exponentially ever since. Global capitalism is its driving force. Ab bemoans “the invisible hand directing the market economy” (34) and sees the Indonesians in “slavery to large capitalist enterprises” (37).

Ab Dueck is an exception to the traditional depiction of a former colonialist in a postcolonial culture. He came to work with and on behalf of native Javanese. Subordinate to Javanese superiors, he seeks no power, only the truth. He is not even an aggressive searcher after the truth. Clues and incidents come to him. He is an humble servant, not unlike the development worker Homer Akins, the title character of the early postcolonial novel *The Ugly American* (1958), who just goes about his business, expecting no recognition. Most of all, Ab does not impose his native culture onto his situation. He tries to figure out what is going on and, ultimately, admits his failure to do so. Among his fellow expatriates, he is known as the one who has best entered into the local culture, partly because he speaks the local language. He has met the “Other,” and, in a show of cultural humility, admits they are unfathomable to him. His final, most personal, puzzlement concerns his girlfriend Nancy, who may be a double agent, seeking his death—like the kris.

### Who Am I?

Intertwined with these cultural and political issues is the narrative thread of Ab Dueck’s identity crisis. Postcolonial fiction with one or more major protagonists almost inevitably includes the theme of challenged identity. A foreigner being exposed to a culture of the “Other” naturally has their sense of self challenged by the unfamiliar, exotic, even threatening new culture. The classic example is Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, but Mennonite literary examples include the main characters in the works by Eby, Nixon, and Bergen cited above. In fact, Bergen’s *The Time in Between* seems to be more about the search for personal identity in Vietnam by three members of a dysfunctional Canadian family than it is about cultural immersion and challenge.<sup>22</sup>

For Ab, his life in this new postcolonial context also complicates his pre-existing, conflicted self-understanding. This is evident in the title “Fear of Landing.” Literally, he dislikes the landing moments

of airplane flight. Figuratively, the phrase refers to his condition as a thirty-five-year old, unmarried, global citizen who finds it impossible to commit to any person, community, or ideology. He is at loose ends while nursing the existential crisis of “Who am I?” He is committed to veterinary medicine, but that is not enough to sustain a life. The phrase “fear of landing” and the word “landing” recur often in the book. The first such statement clarifies Ab’s perspective:

He knew deep down that this fear was not about flying at all; it had something to do with his life, the fleeing from the religious traps of his childhood, the fear of landing somewhere and finding himself ensnared in some deathly, prefabricated, unquestioning mental and physical routine. Not being able to clearly articulate the question, he was no longer sure he would recognize the answer even if it stalked him, caught him with claws and teeth, wounded him. (20)

The identity Ab wrestles with is the legacy of his younger years as a baptized member of his rural, conservative Mennonite Brethren community. He is haunted by its history, morality, and sociology. He feels trapped by “four hundred years of Mennonite history [which] couldn’t, after all, be overcome in a lifetime” (23). He both invokes and dismisses that identity. For instance, when required to declare his religion on an official form, he hesitates, but writes “Mennonite” (6). Usually, thoughts of being Mennonite appear in the book when he is confronted by something new or baffling in Javanese culture, and he needs to fall back on what he knows from his own experience to handle it. If Ab does not fully impose his personal history upon the new context, he often uses it to try to understand things better. The strategy does not work.

One of the most bizarre scenes related to his identity comes early on when Ab and George attend a party for international expatriates living near their station, even though Ab and George don’t feel close to that “family” (44). Ab regards these expatriates as “world citizens, misfits and screw-ups everywhere. Citizens, really, nowhere” (42). Among them are “ideological Americans and gullible Canadians” (80). Some are spies for England, America, and Australia.

It is a masquerade party, a “Muslim Mardi Gras” (45) held during Ramadan. The most active members of the group are disguised as Black Madonna, the Pope, an explorer, Paloma Picasso, Queen Elizabeth, Gandhi, Davy Crockett, and Tinkerbelle. One can interpret their costumes as representing the wistful, aspirational, fantasy projections of each person’s alter-ego. All of the costumes project popular or powerful Western figures.

George, on the other hand, is dressed as farm boy, which fits his actual role. Bearded Ab wears a black coat with broad-rimmed black

hat, which leads one of his friends to call him a “black Leprechaun” (45). His costume is “an Old Order Mennonite uniform from Waterloo County, Ontario, or Lancaster County” (42). How bizarre! The question of where he obtained his Swiss Mennonite costume, considering that Ab is a Mennonite Brethren from Manitoba and Saskatchewan, is less important than why he would ever bring such a coat and hat with him to Java. It clearly is a symbolic statement by the author. But does it project Ab’s true identity, as with modest George? Ab’s aspirational identity? His conflicted identity?

A similar puzzle emerges when Ab tries to explain what being “Mennonite” means to Nancy. He views the movie *Witness* with her and describes the people in it as “Old Order Mennonites.” But, of course, they are Old Order Amish. That error may be the author’s and editor’s, but it belongs to Ab in the text. Do these strange references to the Old Orders indicate Ab’s confusion about Mennonites? Or his obsession with the most conservative Mennonite options, hence his negative feelings?

Ab’s Canadian and Mennonite identity is symbolized in his normal costume and personal habits. Along with his cotton pants and batik Indonesian overshirt, he always wears a baseball cap with the bill at the back, to shield his neck from the sun. Ab is addicted to chewing and spitting the sunflower seeds he brought with him from Canada. Both cap and seeds call attention to his foreignness in Java. The seeds are also Mennonite signifiers. He tells Soesanto that chewing and spitting sunflower seeds “in southern Manitoba . . . is the equivalent to smoking. At least for the religious group I belong to” (35). As his sense of self disintegrates, he loses both cultural signifiers of his foreign identity. He loses his cap during the expatriates’ “Hash Bash.” He runs out of seeds from Canada, begins using inferior seeds from Java, and finally gives up sunflower seeds after Nancy lets him know that she finds them repulsive. (86)

A fascinating element in his ruminations on Mennonite identity is his excursions into early Mennonite/Anabaptist history and the implications of his name: the change of his family name from Abraham Van Dyck or Dijk to Dueck, presumably by “ignorant immigrant officials” (6); the clipping of his first name of Abner to Ab; and the problematic pronunciation of “Dueck,” which sometimes degenerates into a vulgar pun (51–52). Oddly, the only Javanese person who gives his family name the “correct” pronunciation is Sani Sentosa, which eerily reveals the wealth of personal knowledge he has unearthed about Ab.

Like the mysteries in his investigation of the cow’s poisoning and of George’s death, Ab’s struggle with identity is not resolved in the book. He has a sense of “never being at home” (87). He is “a man

without a country . . . doomed to wander the globe for the rest of his life” (124). He feels at home in the novel only at times when he is with Nancy, as when he experiences an “eternal moment . . . of quiet peace” (180–81) with her. He proposes marriage to her and invites her to leave Java with him for Canada. As the only heir of the Sentosas, and a possible double agent manipulating Ab, she cannot. Nor can Ab expect to stay in Java with his life at stake. The relationship remains a tragic wound for both of them.

In Java, the person closest to his Mennonite history is Sarah Grobowski, a biologist who grew up Mennonite in Plumstein, Alberta. She was Ab’s childhood sweetheart, whom he always expected to marry, but Ab lost Sarah for courting too slow. She is now married to his agronomist colleague and his best childhood friend, George, a Greek Orthodox, and they are the parents of two daughters. Working closely with George in Java, he continues to see and socially interact with Sarah and finds that he retains a strong physical and romantic yearning for her. After George’s murder, she returns to Canada with her daughters. With a life with Nancy being tragically impossible, with Sarah now widowed, and with Ab forced to fly back to Canada, the book leaves open the possibility that he might finally “land” happily back in the Mennonite community by marrying Sarah and possibly embracing some kind of Mennonite identity. But he never expresses that thought.

In the final pages, the novel gives one concrete hint as to Ab’s acceptance of his Mennonite self when he decides that, once back in Canada, he will change his family name to Van Dyck, in order to “reclaim [his] roots” (220). Such re-naming by historical precedent may suggest his desire to be a Mennonite who escapes the Mennonite ethnic trap, but the reference to reclaiming his roots suggests something more profound but yet to be defined. The name change and the fact that the cursed kris that he buried in his back yard is still there, deprived for now of its evil powers, are the only true achievements of his time in Java.<sup>23</sup>

Fans of crime fiction may not like the open-ended conclusion of *Fear of Landing*, and they may become annoyed by Ab’s intrusive musings on his Mennonite experience. But they will enjoy the complicated, quick-moving plot, as well as its range of intriguing characters. Most of all, they will be rewarded by immersion in a foreign culture of a certain time and place, and caught up in the evocative, complex world that Waltner-Toews reveals through his postcolonial sensitivity. That postcolonial element elevates the novel to high stature in the canon of recent Mennonite fiction.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Armin Wiebe, review of *Fear of Landing*, by David Waltner-Toews, *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 27 (2009): 252–55. *Publishers Weekly*, Dec. 24, 2007, 32, calls it a “compelling debut” that is “powerful and highly original.” A “New Books” note in *Rhubarb* 15 (Fall 2007): 46, cites its “playful style” and “vivid evocation of Indonesia—its smells and tastes, its beauties and its burdens.”
- <sup>2</sup> Armin Wiebe’s review is a double one, including *Lost Sons* by Judy Clemens, which is only mildly a “mystery.” Ironically, the book was published by Herald Press, whereas Clemens’s series of very successful “popular” mystery novels, now totalling twelve, have all been published by Poisoned Pen Press, which published Waltner-Toews’s *Fear of Landing*. Despite Clemens’s success in her field—consisting of two series, Stella Crown and Grim Reaper—her work has not been studied by Mennonite critics, although her detective novels sometimes have Mennonite themes.
- <sup>3</sup> Dorothy Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller, eds., *Sleuthing Ethnicity: The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh-Dickinson University Press, 2003). “During the last two decades, detective fiction has emerged as a field worthy of academic attention. Ethnic detective novels . . . reflect the importance of the ethnic community for the particular detective” (12).
- <sup>4</sup> Louisa Ermelino, “PW’s Best Books of the Year,” *Publishers Weekly* 255:44 (Nov. 3, 2008), 27; Margaret Cannon, “Crime Books,” *The Globe and Mail*, Oct. 6, 2007, D17.
- <sup>5</sup> Wiebe, review, 254–55.
- <sup>6</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 187. Pp. 186–92 give a concise, comprehensive, and readable introduction to the field, which is notorious for its use of intimidating, specialized jargon.
- <sup>7</sup> Daniel Shank Cruz, “On Postcolonial Mennonite Writing: Theorizing a Queer Latinx Mennonite Life,” *Journal of Mennonite Writing* 9:4 (2017), <https://mennonitewriting.org/journal/9/4/postcolonial-mennonite-writing-theorizing-queer-la/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Examples of seminal, early writings by these very prolific postcolonial theorists: Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Homi K. Babha, “Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism,” in *The Theory of Reading*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1984); Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Nelson Cary and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1988). For a readable survey of postcolonial theory, see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin.
- <sup>9</sup> Robert Zacharias, “Introduction,” in *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America*. ed. Robert Zacharias (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 6; also 16n11 and 120n2.
- <sup>10</sup> Tony Tremblay, “Piracy, Penance, and Other Penal Codes: A Morphology of Postcolonial Revision in Three Recent Texts by Rudy Wiebe, John Steffler, and Joan Clark,” *English Studies in Canada* 23:2 (1997): 159.
- <sup>11</sup> See my “Postcolonial Complexity in the Writings of Rudy Wiebe,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 47:4 (2001): 855–86, and “Rudy Wiebe and W. B. Yeats: Sailing to Danzig and Byzantium,” *ARIEL* 32:4 (2001): 7–20. Also see my “Introduction: Postcolonial Studies (After Identity)” for the “Postcolonial

- Literature” issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Writing* 9:2 (May 2017), <https://mennonitewriting.org/journal/9/2/introduction-postcolonial-studies-after-identity/>.
- 12 The neglect may be because David Waltner-Toews’s literary reputation is not so much for fiction as it is for poetry—especially his Tante Tina dialect poems—and his many very literate writings on epidemiology, his professional expertise. But in 2006 his novel of stories, *One Foot in Heaven* (Regina: Coteau, 2005), won a prize for “Best Regional Fiction” in the Independent Publishers Book Awards. A few of his comic Tante Tina poems take up post-colonial issues, as in “A Request from Tante Tina to the Mennonite Women’s Missionary Society to Put Salman Rushdie on the Prayer List” (54) and “Tante Tina Puts the 1991 Gulf War into Perspective” (73) in his *The Complete Tante Tina: Mennonite Blues and Recipes* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004). Little has been written by Mennonite critics on his literary work. But see essays by Hildi Froese-Tiessen: “Literary Refractions,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 20:1 (2002): 102–11 and “Portrait of an Epidemiologist as a Young Man,” *Hamilton Arts and Letters* 13:2 (2020).
  - 13 In 1985–87, Waltner-Toews worked in Java on a Canadian government project to build a veterinary diagnostic lab for Java and Madura. See his “Letters from Indonesia” in *Conrad Grebel Review* 15:1/2 (1997): 153–61. Also, the poem “Postcards from Java: The Subtext” in *The Impossible Uprooting: Poems* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995): 16–19.
  - 14 “Suharto Tops Corruption Rankings,” *BBC News*, Mar. 25, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3567745.stm>. That judgment needs to be seen in light of Sukarno’s reputation, which includes his ordered killing of 500,000 to 1,000,000 Indonesians in 1965–66.
  - 15 See Waltner-Toews’s nonfiction *The Origin of Feces: What Excrement Tells Us About Evolution, Ecology, and a Sustainable Society* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2013), which was a finalist for the Canadian Science Book Award in 2014. Waltner-Toews has published six other highly regarded books based on his expertise as a vet.
  - 16 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “talisman,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/talisman>.
  - 17 Alchetron, the Free Social Encyclopedia, s.v. “kris,” <https://alchetron.com/Kris>. The book that Soestano probably consults is the *Pararaton* (Book of Kings) from the 1200s. In the “Acknowledgements,” for his information on the kris Waltner-Toews credits Edward Frey, *The Kris: Mystic Weapon of the Malay World* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988).
  - 18 “Indonesian Kris,” UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, accessed Jan. 18, 2021, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/indonesian-kris-00112>.
  - 19 Alchetron, “kris.”
  - 20 One famous historic kris has played both a literal and a symbolic role in Java’s colonial history. The kris owned by Prince Diponegoro, who led the failed revolt against the Dutch in the “Java War” of 1830, disappeared in the hands of the Dutch and was lost for many years. However, it was discovered in a Dutch collection and returned, ceremonially, to the Indonesian government in March 2020. “Prince’s Dagger Returned to Indonesia after 45 Years Lost,” *The Guardian*, Mar. 5, 2020.
  - 21 National Geographic Resource Library, s.v. “Globalization,” <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/globalization/>.

- <sup>22</sup> The father returns to seek out the place where he murdered a young boy during the war, while his daughter and son come to Vietnam to find him after he disappears, all the while working on their own personal crises. See: Vitchi Visvis, "Postcolonial Trauma in David Bergen's *The Time in Between*," *ARIEL* 44:2-3 (2013): 169-94.
- <sup>23</sup> Two stories published by David Waltner-Toews prior to *Fear of Landing* (2008) are related to this novel: "Fear of Landing (excerpts from a work in progress)" in Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe, eds., *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada* (Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo Press, 1992), 76-84, depicts Ab in an airplane on his way to Indonesia. "Animal Doctor" in Waltner-Toews's novel of stories *One Foot in Heaven* (Regina: Couteau, 2005), 209-38, depicts Ab returned to Canada from Indonesia.