Book Reviews

Literary Reviews

David Bergen, *Here the Dark: A Novella and Stories*. Windsor: Biblioasis, 2020. Pp. 215. Softcover, $22.95.

The title of David Bergen's latest collection of short fiction is also the title of its final story, an 89-page novella, and suggests that "dark" materials will be found in the entire collection. This turns out to be true, but the darkness is not unrelieved.

The "dark" in the story "Here the Dark" resides in the constitution and daily life of an ultra-conservative Anabaptist community. A conventional member, Lily Isaac, undergoes a radical feminist transformation and commits adultery. She is excommunicated, but finds in that condition a personal liberation from community norms that, paradoxically, enables her to thrive while remaining in the community. It is an unusual contribution to discussions of personal versus community identity in Mennonite literature.

The first story, "April in Snow Lake," can serve as an *ars poetica* for the stories that follow. The unnamed, conflicted narrator seems to be a stand-in for author Bergen. He is a would-be "writer of short stories" who is "attached to narrative crescendo" (2). He is compared to Ernest Hemingway (2) and reads John Steinbeck and the Bible (4). He is inclined to save the world from sin (4). He believes that there is room "for grace as well as sin in the world of novels" (2). Substitute secular kinds of "redemption" for "grace," and "despair" for "sin," and the stories in the collection will not disappoint. "April in Snow Lake" seems lighter than "Here the Dark," but

actually is darker. The nineteen-year-old man continues to live an evangelical life following his marriage, but will be forever haunted by the message he received from a parliament of wild animals while on a vision quest in the northern bush. "Can you help me? . . . I'm lost," he said to the bear. "Good to know," the bear replied.

Three stories—"How Can *n* Men Share a Bottle of Vodka?", "Leo Fell," "Never Too Late"—are riffs on a typical motif in Bergen's first book of stories, *Sitting Opposite My Brother* (1993), where, as I observed in an essay on the book (*MQR*, Oct. 2003), lost men are "saved" by good women. In *Here the Dark* many of the men are divorced or otherwise separated from their wives, in a condition of despair. Bev Wohlgemuht in "Never Too Late" has undergone a conversion to Christianity but feels unfulfilled until he experiences the "carnality" (56) offered him by Janice, who is wheelchair-bound with multiple sclerosis. In "How Can *n* Men Share a Bottle of Vodka?" an unnamed alcoholic high school math teacher is attracted to the English teacher next door, a lush woman with five children, who welcomes his sexual advances so long as he stops drinking. In "Leo Fell," Leo experiences many "falls" but he is redeemed by Girlie, a waitress who regards him as a "Gift from God."

The women in these new stories offer more vividly depicted sex experiences than those in Bergen's first collection. Yet each encounter is a saving gesture for a lost man, a "stepping stone to something greater" (54). Sex, in Bergen's fiction, may be sacramental, since Girlie insists on praying prior to sex. Some readers may object to the "use" of women in this manner, but in Bergen's fiction the women seem to need the men as much as the men need the women. The sex in "Never Too Late" may even be unique in literature, since the story gives instructions on what a man must to do have sex with a woman in a wheelchair. As Janice tells Bev, "I frightened you the other day, talking about sex" (51). Squeamish readers may also be "frightened" by the rather frank depiction of sexual activity elsewhere in this book, including in "Here the Dark" and "Saved."

The remaining stories in *Here the Dark* demonstrate the range of Bergen's interests. The odd story "Hungry" revives a different motif in *Sitting Opposite My Brother*: two brothers duking it out. Jack is the older, mean one. Sandy is the young one, whose moral nature is defined in opposition to Jack's. Sandy, schooled in violence like his brother, nevertheless chooses to become a "Good Samaritan" (42). Two postcolonial stories set in foreign lands add different materials to this collection of otherwise Canadian domestic conflicts. "Man Lost" depicts K., a wealthy, thrice-divorced, dissolute, suicidal, "lost" American in Honduras, who wonders if he is "worth it" (116). He dies on an ill-fated quest for a huge blue marlin. The

time in prison served by Quinn, the Honduran boatman wrongly held responsible, is redeemed by Quinn's learning to pray. Finally, "Saved" is set in Vietnam and focuses on an unnamed fifteen-year-old boy who is both a passive victim of middle-aged European women sex tourists and the passive object of efforts by Marcie, a young American missionary, to convert him to Christianity. The parallels are compelling. He is "converted" and later follows Marcie to a deserted beach. When she flees in fear, he unintentionally kills her with a rock, and she never learns that he only wanted to tell her "that he was a good person, and that his goodness had come from her" (72).

These bare summaries do not do justice to the complexity of each story, often enhanced by literary allusions, symbolic names, and other signifiers. For instance, Lily's forebear in "Here the Dark" is Lilith, Adam's first, rebellious wife. "April" as person and season in "April at Stone Lake" alludes to "April is the cruellest month," the opening line of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which refers to the agony of emerging from one spiritual condition to another. In "How Can *n* Men Share a Bottle of Vodka?" the math teacher gives up on math for poetry, thanks to the English teacher whose last name is Donne (i.e., John Donne, the great erotic and religious poet). In "Leo Fell" the symbolism is less clear: Leo (lion) meets Girlie at the Clio café, named after the Greek muse of history. One could also note the Hemingway style and straightforward narrations in "Hungry," "Man Lost" (an old man in the sea), "Here the Dark," and elsewhere, as well as the Mennonite contexts suggested by locations, family names, and other hints. Analysis of the "narrative crescendo" found in each story, as mentioned in the *ars poetica,* cannot be addressed in a short review but would be rewarding.

Short story collections tend to be miscellanies, but this one seems united by the author's moral and spiritual sensibilities, and the stories offer depth for considering Bergen's longer fiction. My favourite stories are "Here the Dark," "Saved," and "April in Stone Lake." But here is God's plenty for all to enjoy.

Ervin Beck
Goshen College

Andrew Unger, *Once Removed.* Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2020. Pp. 269. Softcover, $21.95.

Voltaire wrote that history is a joke we play on the dead. Andrew Unger's new novel, *Once Removed*, is a joke played on history itself.