

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.

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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.

The story follows Timothy Heppner, a Mennonite millennial who aspires to ghostwriting the life stories of the elderly but who makes a living working for his town's parks and recreation department, assisting in the demolition of trees and old buildings. The villain of the tale is the mayor, BLT Wiens, who is intent on bringing big box stores and strip malls to a small Manitoba town named Edenfeld. The plot sees Heppner struggling to hold onto clients, to work with his fellow preservationists to fight the destruction of the town's heritage buildings, and to build up enough courage to write a book chronicling the town's history. It is a story writ small; key plot points include an excursion to straighten the sign in front of one of the town's derelict historical sites, and a trip to a mall's food court in the nearby city. Without the humour, the mood would have bordered on despair as Timothy's life circumstances move from mediocre to desperate until a final turn near the end of the novel. But, thankfully, there is humour throughout to lighten the mood.

Mennonites are not known for casting aside history in favour of progress. Quite the opposite. Between our penchant for writing memoirs, lionizing Anabaptist martyrs, tracing genealogies, and holding onto odd family heirlooms (let us not forget the tongue screw that was retrieved from the ashes after Hans Bret was executed in 1577 and has lovingly been kept as a keepsake ever since), so many of us are amateur historians that this proclivity ought to have worked its way into a Mennonite stereotype ages ago. It is also a theme ripe for humour. Andrew Unger does not disappoint. The novel is peppered as generously with clever bon mots as a Russian Mennonite Oma's borscht pot is peppered with dill and parsley. Particularly amusing are the Mennonite documentary film and book titles that are nonchalantly dropped into the text at regular intervals—titles like "The Plane People: A History of Mennonite Aviation" and "Longing for Housebarns: Blueprints and Poems." Open for mockery also is a stubborn belief in our own mythology of persecution; one of Heppner's tasks as a ghostwriter is to convince one of his clients that the Bolsheviks from whom Mennonites fled in the 1920s were distinct from the people who persecuted Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. Indeed, Heppner sees "fact-checking" as part of his role as a ghost writer—a task which could have provided many, many more humorous anecdotes than a single book can accommodate.

The humour turns on history itself when it shines a light on our somewhat irrational urge to preserve. This is lampooned early on with an elderly client of Heppner's boasting about having the largest private collection in existence of photos of a famous oak tree that had once stood and thrived at the centre of the Chortitza village in

Russia, the place of this client's ancestry. Likewise, there is something humorous about the town naming one of its parks the BLT Wiens Memorial Park, though the man being memorialized was still very much alive. The heroes of *Once Removed* set their sights on preserving the few remaining housebarns of the town and the childhood home of the one famous author who was born and raised in Edenfeld. They take as their motto "Buildings of the Past, Values of the Future" (in direct opposition to the mayor's campaign slogan, "Values of the Past, Strip Malls of the Future"), though it is uncertain how preserving housebarns and a 1950s residence will further their progressive values. One of the preservation society members claims that housebarns were worth preserving because they embodied the Mennonite values of "pragmatism, [our] work ethic and [our] connection to the land," but it is clear that no one really feels that the worth of the buildings resides in these values. Once the height of practicality (sharing heating and also guarding the livestock from thievery by attaching house and barn like a duplex), by the twenty-first century the housebarn is merely a domicile for nostalgia. Even in *Once Removed*, no one wants to live in one. They lack central heating and, apparently, often carry with them a lingering aroma of livestock. But the lack of practicality makes them a piece of the past, something threatening to disappear with every tick of a Krueger clock.

Given the gentle sort of humour Unger deploys, it is not entirely surprising that *Once Removed* touches on none of the true unpleasantness that rigorously produced local history often uncovers. Though Timothy is nervous about the negative reception that his local history could provoke, this is more out of fear of the mayor than because he knows that an honest history would bring to light some unwelcome truths about the townspeople's parents and grandparents. His goal, however, is not to bring uncomfortable truths to light. Heppner is very much a hapless amateur historian, playing his jokes on the dead like so many before him in futile attempts to clutch tight the sands of time. Unger doesn't mock the desire to preserve and memorialize a curated past. *Once Removed* is the sort of joke that mixes laughter with a kind appreciation for the human need to connect to those who came before us.

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