

Lois Braun, *Peculiar Lessons: How Nature and the Material World Shaped a Prairie Childhood*.

Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2020. Pp. 205. Softcover, \$24.95.

Thirty-five years after Lois Braun's *A Stone Watermelon* was short-listed for the Governor General's Award, the collection's stories still pop off the page, as do those of Braun's award-winning fourth collection, 2007's *The Penance Drummer*. *Peculiar Lessons: How Nature and the Material World Shaped a Prairie Childhood* is Braun's first book in thirteen years and her first foray into life writing. The book's back cover calls *Peculiar Lessons* "part memoir, part social history," an ambitious description of its ten essays, each of which focuses on a material substance via Braun's memories of that substance in her childhood, provides some background on the science and history of that substance, and includes an interview with a Manitoba artist or environmentalist who works with that substance. The first essay, for example, explores Braun's childhood fascination with rocks, offers some history of southern Manitoba's geological formations, and concludes with an account of Manitoba sculptor Todd Braun.

Subsequent essays use a similar format to explore, in turn, weather, water, flowers, insects and non-human animals, paper, fabric, metal, demarcating lines, and human-made materials. Braun doesn't explain the choice of substances nor the order in which the essays appear except to note in the preface that what readers have before them are "flashbacks to the things that . . . insinuated themselves into my consciousness" and "reflections on their importance in my environment," and she acknowledges how easily recollections can be distorted by imagination, convoluted sequence, conflicting versions, dreams, daydreams, and desires (13). The collection's title remains elusive but invites the expectation these lessons will be "peculiar" in the sense of singular, memorable, invigorating. What a reader encounters more frequently, though, is "peculiar" in its less-desirable meanings: puzzling, incongruous, baffling. The essays' strongest sections are the interviews, which are especially strong when rendered in the artist's own voice. Braun's own portions, however, meander so disconcertingly that the essays devolve, one after the other, into series of only-loosely connected generalities.

Which isn't to say there aren't many lovely, tantalizing, beautifully-written sections. Early in the essay on weather, for instance, Braun introduces the mirages she would sometimes see as a child, when far distant hills and buildings and trees would suddenly

appear, clearly visible on the horizon (34). To explain the phenomenon of “looming,” which produces these mirages, though, Braun inserts more than a page of quoted material from a website called Weather Doctor (34–35), follows that with several further observations from the same website, and then inserts more quoted material, in this case, a long paragraph from the *Smithsonian Magazine* that links mirages to the sinking of the *Titanic* (36). The latter paragraph is riveting and includes the kind of rich, conceptual material on which a thoughtful memoirist might pivot in order to contemplate the crucial, lifelong work of learning to see clearly. Instead, in a pattern that will become familiar, Braun abandons the quoted material without comment and turns her attention to another phenomenon, that of air turning green after rainstorms in summer. She explains this curiosity by inserting a paragraph from a website by someone called the Weather Dude and then abruptly concludes the discussion by asserting that “these were mysteries shared among us children; our elders fumbled with explanations. They were part of the fabric of childhood secrets that belonged only to us” (37). And here, where Braun might take some time to explore children’s delicious, unsettling sense that they inhabit a world that adults can’t enter, she moves on to a next thing, specifically the smell of weather.

The pattern repeats throughout: again and again, where a reader might expect a seasoned writer like Braun to intensify her explorations, she moves laterally, to another and then another childhood memory, and additional, extended, unprocessed research gleanings. The effect, sadly, is that even the book’s strongest elements get flattened by context. Near the end of the essay on water, for instance, Braun describes the work of ecological historian and conservationist Sherry Dangerfield and Dangerfield’s expert knowledge of the ways in which human “greed to farm” (66) has contributed to waterway degradation. “Little did I know,” Braun writes at the conclusion of the section, “that being a farmer’s child in the 1950s, I was complicit in denying [Buffalo Creek] its true purpose and its value to the health of the planet. My thoughts get snagged on the word *greed* in Sherry’s story, like flotsam in cattails in late summer” (67; emphasis in text). “Flotsam” is a disappointingly apt word for what happens next: as if it had no value at all, Braun discards Dangerfield’s invitation to reflect deeply on human involvement in waterway destruction and ends the essay with a bland half page of childhood cottage memories instead.

Braun references her Mennonite heritage only infrequently: very briefly in the essay on rocks, to distinguish between the quality of farmland on the east and the west sides of the Red River (16); very briefly in the essay on water, to note the extraordinarily good

soil Mennonite farmers in Manitoba inherited from their pioneer ancestors (58); and somewhat more extensively in the essay on demarcating lines, where she reviews Mennonite history in Manitoba to support her love of order and symmetry (167–69). Up to this point, Braun has mentioned Indigenous people just once, fleetingly, in the essay on water (59), so it's perhaps not surprising that while Indigenous and Métis people make a second appearance here, in the context of Manitoba history, they vanish again after three short sentences (165). Braun seems well-pleased with her endeavours by book's end (197–98), but some of her readers may wish she'd learned weightier lessons from the work of remembering her childhood.

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Magdalene Redekop, *Making Believe: Questions About Mennonites and Art*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020. Pp. 380. Softcover, \$27.95

The appearance of *Making Believe: Questions About Mennonites and Art* by Magdalene Redekop is a major publishing event. In this wide-ranging study, Redekop puts her productive and playful mind on full display. She is erudite and eclectic. She brings images, sounds, and texts—Mennonite and non-Mennonite—into conversation with each other. She gathers insights from artists and critics addressing Mennonites and art, and adds her own stimulating and entertaining analyses. Her starting point is literature, but she also investigates music (including Glenn Gould's *The Quiet in the Land*) and visual art (including work by Gathie Falk and Wanda Koop). She is especially effective, even dazzling, when she pursues case studies. But when she theorizes some of her broader thought patterns in this sprawling volume, she sometimes gives way to repetition or clutter.

Redekop anchors her work ethnically. She does this by focusing on a Canadian Mennonite subgroup known as *Kanadier* and on their 1980s/90s art. The forbears of contemporary *Kanadier* artists such as Patrick Friesen and Di Brandt, Armin Wiebe and Miriam Toews immigrated from Russia/Ukraine to rural Manitoba during the 1870s. (A sponsor of Redekop's book, notably, is the Plett Historical Research Foundation, a supporter of studies of *Kanadier* culture.) Redekop, a *Kanadier* herself as she makes clear, is fixated on the idea that another subgroup, *Russländer*—who came from Russia/Ukraine to Ontario and the prairie provinces during the 1920s—looks down on *Kanadier*, or once did so in Manitoba. She touches