

to lawyers' suits & business ties  
 to the freedom of a beery road  
 to handsome snake and horny toad  
     so drain the glass  
     & gullet pour  
     we beggars four  
     at god's good door (120)

Readers may sometimes feel pulled in too many directions in this collection, and may find it difficult to keep up with Marten's shifting focus and tone. But careful readers will be won over by a voice that refuses to take itself too seriously, which sees clearly and yet insists on clinging to hope:

...i'm stranded  
 in my own wordy mind. In  
 the postapocalypse of poetry  
 solitary man, migrant,  
 mumbling vain threats  
 that beauty will win in the end. (127)

Sarah Klassen  
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David Saul Bergman, *Unpardonable Sins*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021. Pp. 208. Softcover, \$21.

What is the unpardonable sin? Do ancient notions of violation and abomination have a place in contemporary North American life? These questions preoccupy John Reimer, the fifty-nine-year-old protagonist and pastor of Chicago's Lakeview Mennonite church as he seeks to unravel the circumstances behind a gruesome murder in *Unpardonable Sins*, the new novel by Daniel Born and Dale Suderman, published under the pen name of David Saul Bergman. But though themes of sin and redemption resound throughout the narrative, the novel is ultimately about a more quotidian subject: namely, how an aging Mennonite man—one who grew up speaking Low German on a farm in western Kansas—makes sense of the mores of a diverse and gentrifying Chicago, and of his progressive, intellectually engaged congregation.

*Unpardonable Sins* opens with the murder of David Talbot, a twentysomething bicycle messenger whose death is initially reported as another in a series of unsolved killings of gay men on

Chicago's North Side. John Reimer is drawn into the case by David's girlfriend, Annie Casper, who refuses to accept that David was killed while cruising, a conclusion John initially attributes to denial. Motivated in large part by his interest in Annie's "beautiful face," John interviews David's gay roommate, but when the young man insists that, despite his wishes, his relationship with David was never sexual, John decides there is more to the case that has been previously reported.

The book does a solid job hitting the marks of the thriller. John is an intelligent, consistently interesting point-of-view character, and his complicated motives—a mix of prurient interest and a pastoral commitment to the truth—feel plausible. Chicago is vividly rendered, the moments of violence are gripping, and John's ostensible commitment to pacifism establishes a compelling ongoing conflict: what exactly will he do if, which is to say *when*, he confronts the murderer? But as the denouement approaches, the plot—which includes the abusive violence of Annie's estranged husband and the uncertain motives of David's rich, reclusive Aunt Helen—begins to unravel, and the ultimate explanation for David's killing is so reliant on details tangential to John's investigation that it took this reader, at any rate, several passes to make sense of why, exactly, David ended up murdered.

The novel's conclusion takes several swings at defining unparadonable sin in contemporary life. But more interesting is what this project reveals about the status of the aging Mennonite male, today. Writers from Rudy Wiebe to Armin Wiebe to Merle Good have explored the cis, white, male, hetero, arch-patriarchal Mennonite point of view; here, Born and Suderman apply that perspective to a Chicago that feels quite contemporary, even if the novel is actually set in the late 1990s. Despite (and perhaps also because of) John's often objectifying male gaze, the depictions of urban Mennonite church politics feel accurate: John's congregation is grappling with the nature of worship—to John's dismay, the youth group eschews one Sunday service in favor of a lakeside nature walk. A debate over whether an AA group for HIV-positive men—many of whom smoke—should be granted permission to use the church basement shows the congregation contending with the limits of Mennonite prohibitions around cigarettes and alcohol. The flashbacks to John's childhood in Kansas are also compelling: the glimpses of the Kleine Gemeinde—exemplified by John's stern older brother, Andrew—lay bare the traditions of piety and patriarchal conformity that continue to shape John's character, including his attitude toward women.

Richly drawn as they are, John's traditionalist views present a problem for a novel that seeks to engage readers morally and

intellectually. In introducing the church moderator, Nancy Huefflinger, the narrative reports that she is known in “the wider Mennonite conference” as “an Amazon to watch out for”—a crude stereotype for an empowered woman. For reasons that are never explained, his physically and mentally incapacitated wife, Viola, has long been committed to a *downstate* Illinois nursing home. John’s patriarchal, often instrumental, attitude toward women is accompanied by his casual repetition of a slur for gay male sexuality that was widely considered offensive in the late 1990s—and at no point does the narrative show any awareness that these depictions are problems.

Of course, characters don’t need to be likable or sympathetic to be compelling, but what is so frustrating about *Unpardonable Sins* is that it seems to implicitly endorse John’s traditionalist attitudes. Instead of engaging with the spate of murders of gay men, the narrative uses them as window dressing. Depictions of gay life serve only to lend the book an “edge” and establish John’s unflappability. The one time he flinches is when he encounters a video in a gay bar of two cowboys from his hometown of Dodge City engaged in a sadomasochistic ritual. This moment points to a lost opportunity in the book: had John been more susceptible to temptation, his Mennonite values would have been tested more dramatically. Instead, he mostly escapes carnal temptation. His interest in Annie fades as she recedes from the narrative, her role as inciting “damsel in distress” accomplished, and over the final chapters this narrative about the apparent killing of a gay man begins to slide into a story about the gratification of the protagonist’s comfortable cis, heteropatriarchal desires. For all the grittiness of the Chicago milieu, we might as well be back in the *Kleine Gemeinde*.

Despite its implicit endorsement of the gendered and sexual mores that it ostensibly sets out to critique, *Unpardonable Sins* remains worth reading for its closely observed account of an aging Mennonite man’s urges and interests, and for its depiction of how patriarchal, traditionalist attitudes continue to shape even progressively minded Mennonite communities.

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