

adaptations to non-Amish society are not a new phenomenon amongst the Amish, the conveniences of and negotiations with non-Amish society are constantly changing. The encroachment of non-Amish lifestyle patterns and norms has potential implications for the future of Amish society. Johnson-Weiner notes the husband's role as breadwinner, the increasing prevalence of leisure time and family vacations, the introduction of modern conveniences, and the purchasing of goods and services changes the responsibilities of females and males in the Amish community. One would expect the divide across Amish affiliations will continue to grow as progressive groups accept change and conservative groups hold on to tradition. The impact of this growing separation on interactions across the larger Amish community poses an area for further inquiry.

Johnson-Weiner presents many illustrative examples of traditional practices in conservative groups and changing practices in more progressive groups; however, readers are left with an unclear sense of the prevalence of these activities and groups in current society. For example, one might ask how common the traditional dating practice of bundling is within the larger context of Amish society. Is bundling practiced across all conservative (Swartzentruber) groups? What percentage of the Amish population is comprised of Swartzentruber Amish? Similar questions could be asked regarding practices at weddings, births, and other gendered rituals in the Amish community. Notably, the answers to these questions would impinge on the overall readability of the text, which, as it is currently presented, is easily accessible to a wide audience. The information Johnson-Weiner provides about the complexity of gender roles across Amish affiliations presents the reader with a host of opportunities for further thought and exploration.

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## Literary Reviews

Jonathan Dyck, *Shelterbelts*. Wolfville, NS  
Conundrum Press, 2022. Pp. 248. Softcover, \$20.

Jonathan Dyck's new graphic novel *Shelterbelts* opens with an aerial view of a parking lot in a grid mirroring the panels of a comic book. A car pulling donuts whips through the next panel, heedless

of the lines marking the assigned stalls that belong to Park Valley, a metastasizing megachurch in a small southern Manitoba community. As a visual parallel to the eponymous shelterbelts, the grid suggests the rigid structures ostensibly governing the lives of *Shelterbelts*' characters. This moment of careening disruption does not last: *Shelterbelts* is, in many respects, a deeply conservative book. Thematically, it takes as its preoccupation the preservation of the old when faced with the new (or the even older). This preoccupation extends to the book's visuals, where Dyck prioritizes clear character work over formal experimentation—even a scene where a character trips (literally and figuratively) while on mushrooms cannot disrupt Dyck's artistic style or strict page construction. This is a feature and not a bug of *Shelterbelts*, however, which is a deeply felt and moving series of short stories less about escaping or exploding an enclosed system than it is about the struggles of seeking one's place within it.

Dyck's work as a comic book artist is perhaps most widely known for his contribution to "Mennonites Talking About Miriam Toews," a two-page vignette published in *The Walrus* in 2019. The comparisons to Toews are thus almost inevitable. Like Toews, Dyck plays with the boundaries of fact and fiction (keen eyes might spot the West End Cultural Centre and Weakerthans lyrics in his work). Some readers will feel that they recognize his "Hespeler" as a certain town in rural Manitoba, much as Toews's "East Village" in *A Complicated Kindness* has widely been recognized as a fictionalization of Steinbach. It is true that Dyck must have drawn extensively from his own upbringing, but if the details of *Shelterbelts* invite speculation about Dyck's own biography, to see *Shelterbelts* as a straightforward illustrated *roman à clef* ignores the careful eye with which Dyck fleshes out his characters—a quality he also shares with Toews.

*Shelterbelts* is, first and foremost, a comic book: Dyck's linework is his writerly voice. *Shelterbelts* displays Dyck's impressive skill with cartooning: the minimalist caricature, the subtle "acting" of his characters, the thoughtful specificity with which he frames static moments in sequence. Though an expansive book that is made up of ten related stories (plus a prologue and an epilogue), following the threads is never a chore. Dyck even provides a cheeky character guide, part Victorian "cast of characters" list, part Legion of Superheroes roster, part Mennonite Game. The deliberate pace, unified tone, and recurring themes bind the stories together and Dyck's illustrations make the many characters distinct and immediately recognizable.

Parts of *Shelterbelts* were first published as a series of mini-comics—"mini" both in length and size, the initial editions being only a

couple inches tall—but the full book has no feeling of inconsistency. The episodic structure is part of Dyck’s thematic engagement with the complex connections that form and fray communities. Instigated by the expansion of the Park Valley megachurch, the characters negotiate the forces of preservation and stagnation, of loss and growth. There is very little plot in *Shelterbelts*: Dyck is more interested in his characters’ small battles than in incident, the theological contradictions of Park Valley, or the struggling Jubilee Mennonite Church.

Characters are well drawn (pun intended) and given complex inner lives that Dyck mostly presents visually and allusively. A farmer tries to manage his guilt and resentment at his older brother’s developmental disabilities, his past and present overlapping. An English teacher struggles to reconcile with her grandfather’s work at a residential school, taking her to unexpected places. A closeted man approaching middle age seeks purpose in a church that will not accept him, pushing away chances at new relationships. A librarian attempts illicit communication with a stranger, perhaps as an alternative to talking with her own daughter. The intimate and relatively low stakes of their stories—a piano, a car in a ditch, a youth sponsorship, a library book—are refractions of a common search for meaning. Notably, this nuance is extended beyond the novel’s protagonists; *Shelterbelts* doesn’t paint any of its characters as villains. Despite instigating hurtful confrontations, for example, a couple that quits their church over the pastor’s support of LGBTQ2S+ communities offers and receives grace. Even the pastor of Park Valley, inspired to tear down trees and expand his church after seeing teens—gasp—smoking, is elevated beyond a trope. Not every character resonates with the same depth, but the beauty of a book this generous is that readers will be able to find multiple points of connection and familiarity within the cast.

*Shelterbelts* is also utterly and pervasively Mennonite. Dyck quotes hymns, drops Mennonite jokes (see figure 1), and presents a world where everyone *goes to church* even if they don’t attend services. Dyck foregrounds the discordance of Mennonite beliefs as well. At one point, a non-Mennonite history teacher remarks ironically that “Peace is, like, the only thing you all agree on.” But most of the characters take being Mennonite for granted. Dyck’s vision of being Mennonite is one of reckoning with the paradox of seeking value within forces that cause harm. The shelterbelts that give the book its title are, as its back cover notes, “a source of shelter from the wind” but also “a way of enabling and mitigating large-scale changes to the surrounding environment.” Dyck frames the challenges of contemporary Mennonites through characters who want to do the right thing, and who recognize that such a task is perilous.



Figure 1. *Shelterbelts*, p. 186.

*Shelterbelts* is a remarkable work, thoughtful and bittersweet and uplifting. If some threads are underdeveloped, or some characters underserved on their journeys, this, too, feels truthful: a book about seeking intangible ideals should have a few loose ends.

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