Darcie Friesen Hossack, *Stillwater.* New Westminster, BC: Tidewater, 2023. Pp. 296. Softcover, $22.95.

People may wish to live in a black-and-white world, but real life is messy. *Stillwater* is first and foremost about that messiness. Friesen Hossack writes a story that simmers with conflict from start to finish, abating only at the very end.

Outwardly, the primary conflict revolves around the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) worldview and the Mennonite worldview. But inside the lives of the people who populate these worlds courses hot blood, which adds layers to this festering tension. Further to that, embedded within these various worldviews are binaries that necessarily create conflict unless everyone toes the line, and that does not happen in this story. Binaries like male versus female, science deniers versus vaccine takers, straight versus gay: all of these take a toll on the players in this story.

Stillwater centers around a family of four: Lizzy, a seventeen-year-old, her younger brother Zach, and their mother Marie and father Daniel. And all of these characters, with the exception of Zach, are angry. Lizzy has good reason: when her father looked at her "he . . . only [saw] . . . someone who never needed to be born" (242). Daniel is angry because Lizzy's birth prevented him from training to become a doctor, and Marie is angry because she doesn't know how to extricate herself from her troubled life.

The narrative is framed by a prologue and an epilogue, both in Lizzy's voice and taking place at the bedside of her dying father. But while the prologue oozes with pain—"sometimes I go home and sit in my empty bathtub" (1)—the epilogue offers fragments of hope: "I'll keep the slippers instead of my *Messages to Young People* so I have something better of yours to remember you" (281). The story between these two bookends takes us first to the conservative SDA community of Stillwater, and then to the Mennonite home of Lizzy's farming aunt and uncle in Maple Creek, Saskatchewan. The chapter titles serve to reinforce these two cultures: the first half of the book includes names of SDA foods, and the latter half Mennonite dishes.

Traditional gender roles are assumed at Stillwater, and Lizzy's desire to learn and her propensity to react honestly to any given situation predictably cause conflict. But it is not only the usual examples of patriarchy on display in this story; more obscure assumptions are also revealed. After the car accident in which Marie is badly injured and then hospitalized, Daniel is offered a cigarette from his neighbour: "he hated how much he needed this, but it was

hard to be a man and not have a vice. Harder than it was for women, which was why he never let Marie or Lizzy badger him about it" (44). The ambiguity of Daniel's presumed authority and subsequent strength are called into question time and time again, and he often sounds more like the child than the parent. Daniel himself says to Lizzy, during a particularly difficult conversation, "I don't know if you know this, Lizzy, but I'm the father in this family. Or is everyone here mixed up about that?" (276). And Zach says of his father, "I think he wants to be [good] . . . He just has no idea how" (235).

Both parents, in fact, are often portrayed as somewhat juvenile. Marie, who develops an addiction to painkillers after the accident, seems often unsure of her own desires. She moves between wanting to support her children and being unable to come to terms with her childhood trauma. She wants to "protect . . . herself from knowing" certain painful things (271), and chooses to rely on the traditional life of Stillwater for at least a modicum of support.

Many secrets lie at the heart of this story. Marie and Daniel keep Marie's Mennonite past from their children: "[they] had long ago agreed not to confuse the kids with ideas from a different time in her life" (27). Daniel is not to be told of Lizzy's job at the butcher shop, and Lizzy and Zach secrete candy they buy clandestinely so that Daniel won't find it. Pivotal to the story, too, is the "secret" behind what really happened the day of the accident. Perhaps Lizzy's obsession with dissecting animals, peering at them through her beloved microscope, is her effort to see, firsthand, things as they really are.

That desire to know what is, in fact, real and impervious to cultural demands is also the reason Lizzy asks Zach if he wouldn't prefer that their father physically hurt them, rather than abuse them psychologically: "Haven't you ever wished he would, though? . . . You know, so the bruises would be real? . . . Because . . . if I had bruises, I'd make him look at them the next day and maybe he'd see how much it hurt" (260). Secretive lives, and people who are too afraid to confront their pasts, can only result in trauma for both generations.

Stillwater is a tragic story, but not without hope. While Marie and Zach find it difficult to break free of the passivity that has become their way of dealing with conflict and Daniel seemingly cannot relinquish the masculine control that Stillwater affords him, Lizzy finds the courage to make decisions that will ultimately liberate her from her painful past. So while much of this story is heart-wrenching, the last image offered the reader is a hopeful one.

The writing in *Stillwater* is lucid and highly accessible. Although I found an occasional segment a little muddling at times, on the

whole Friesen Hossack writes with a simplicity that, coupled with a consistent momentum, carries this sad story cogently to its slightly hopeful end. And the grit with which this story is presented is especially laudable given the author's familiarity with much of its premise. Real life is messy, after all, and Friesen Hossack tells it like it is.

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Robert G. Penner, *Strange Labour*. Regina: Radiant Press, 2020. Pp. 194. Softcover, $22.

Apocalyptic science fiction, including its post-apocalyptic subgenre, comes in a variety of forms. For example, texts can be distinguished by the cause of the apocalypse, such as natural forces or, more commonly in the past century and more, technology and human stupidity, in what are designed to be cautionary tales. Works in the genre also differ according to the degree to which the end of the world depicted is intended to be taken literally or symbolically. In some cases, the apocalypse is almost entirely metaphorical, its cause treated as less important than the "revelation" it is designed to convey. That is certainly the case with Robert Penner's *Strange Labour*, a post-apocalyptic novel dealing with broad philosophical, social, and ethical issues rather than how the human race might come to a total or near-total end.

In fact, we never learn the cause of the strange phenomenon that is at the heart of Penner's enigmatic novel. Most Americans (and perhaps others, although that is not made clear) have been struck by a condition that transforms them into benign zombie-like "diggers," emotionless drones who drop everything in order to work themselves to death constructing tunnels and trenches that lead nowhere. The vast majority of children start out unaffected but turn into diggers when they reach puberty. The only people immune to this change are those who are neurodivergent: the protagonist, Miranda, suffers from migraines, while Dave, whom she meets and befriends and whose truck carries her over much of her journey across the United States, has epilepsy. They are called "regular" people now, raising the question of how we define "normal."

Miranda and Dave are travelling without much of a sense of urgency. Miranda's motivation for going west is to find her parents in Minnesota, but she has little hope they are still at home or even alive and so makes her way toward them quite slowly. In fact, one