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

problem for the reader is that she is very passive; she experiences things but does not make much happen. She encounters an old man who, she learns, is being cared for by a religious woman, Esther, in an ad hoc residence for those with dementia. Miranda agrees to work for Esther for a while, then leaves her charges without much thought for their fate. Dave, meanwhile, is seeking a community of "regulars" in Montana, whom he learned about in a brochure. He is thoughtful and provides Miranda insights into whether their quests and even their lives have any meaning, but he is not really more active than she is. At times their lack of desire, if only to achieve something, can be wearing on the reader.

The novel offers vivid scenes of urban destruction and abandonment, and run-ins with people who are odd, mad, and sometimes threatening, particularly for a woman travelling alone, as Miranda does for a fair bit of the novel. The text features many of the usual tropes one finds in post-apocalyptic fiction: abandoned cars, looted stores, feral dogs and children, violent gangs, and groups trying desperately to hold onto some remnant of social order, usually through religious fanaticism—like the people living in the apartment building run by the dystopian Big Echo Mine community Dave has sought, who are led by the evangelical Albert. Yet Penner is entirely aware of what he is doing, and makes constant allusions to earlier apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic texts. Among the books Miranda finds and carries around are science fiction disaster and satirical novels like John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) and Pierre Boulle's *Monkey Planet* (1963, the source of the film *Planet of the Apes*), and one of the chapters is entitled "The Road." Even more overtly metafictional are Dave's status as a storyteller and some of the stories he tells, including "tales of all the various Post-Apocalyptic Tribes that populated the wastelands of his imagination" (179). Penner thus archly employs and at the same time subverts the conventions of his genre, challenging his readers to recognize how they are being manipulated not only by a society that gives their lives spurious meaning but also by a kind of fiction that in some ways does the same.

The conversations between Miranda and Dave feature explicit questioning of what life is for, and the individuals and groups they meet illustrate less-than-satisfying options for ways and reasons to live. Meanwhile, the diggers keep working, accomplishing nothing after all and yet oblivious to the futility of their efforts. As such, this post-apocalyptic landscape and its denizens are little different from contemporary America. The "strange labour" is what most people are currently engaged in, joining the capitalist system as adults to spend their lives doing meaningless work. To be "normal" is to be

without clear purpose or direction, or even passion; the "regulars" are ourselves, while only the outsiders are able to gain any sort of understanding of the real world. Read symbolically, then, the novel is a rich, profound, and evocative allegory of modern life: directionless people seeking and usually lacking purpose in an environment that offers little more than bare survival. In some ways, it is a bleak novel, showing us metaphorically and through the fantastic what reality is. In other ways, however, it suggests that even hollow meanings, and certainly human relationships, can supply road maps through the wasteland.

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Sarah Klassen, *The Russian Daughter: A Novel.* Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2022. Pp. 272. Softcover, $22.

The tradition of Mennonite historical fiction about the Russian Mennonite experience is robust. In her latest novel, *The Russian Daughter*, Sarah Klassen tells the story of the Albrecht family and their beloved village of Friedental, in present-day Ukraine, in the early decades of the twentieth century. With rumours of war and revolutionary fervour swirling in the background, Amalia and Isaak, a prosperous young farming couple, find they have everything they need but a child. Acting on a tip from a neighbour, they seek out and adopt an infant girl they name Sofia, born to an unmarried Russian woman from Kharkov. While Friedental warily accepts Sofia as one of the Albrechts, the family's happiness is marred by Sofia's and Amalia's ambivalent attachment to each other. As she grows up, Sofia is bullied at school for a physical difference caused by an injury she sustained as an infant prior to her adoption. Eventually Amalia and Isaak also adopt the children of Amalia's sister and ne'er-do-well brother-in-law—twins named Hannah and Boris—and the family settles into a precarious happiness. When news of the Romanovs' execution arrives followed by reports of looting, rape, and murder in neighbouring villages, however, the Albrechts must make a series of painful decisions if they are to survive.

Klassen deftly braids together the personal struggles and longings of one Mennonite family with the rhythms of agrarian life and the broader geopolitical convulsions of the period. While Sofia, the Russian daughter of the book's title, is the primary character, the novel is very much a group portrait of a family whose experience is typical of the Russian Mennonite exile narrative. This composite