

## Review Article

# “A Land Beyond Words”

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Rudy Wiebe, *A Discovery of Strangers* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1994). Hardcover; 317pp.

For the second time in his illustrious career Rudy Wiebe has won the Governor-General's Award for Fiction for his 1994 novel *A Discovery of Strangers*, set in Canada's Far North during the first Franklin expedition in the 1820s. The first time the Mennonite novelist won the honor was in 1973 for his superb novel *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Both winning novels faced strong competition and both fully deserved the honor.

And yet, I wonder whether the literary awards committees and the respectful, if rarely enthusiastic, critics of Wiebe's work have always honored and praised him for the right reasons. Wiebe has never been a popular novelist (although his latest novel was on the best-seller lists for several months), but he is a novelist of rare power and integrity, a novelist who has never catered to the casual reader who simply wants a good "read." All too often, however, Wiebe has been hailed as a publicist for lost historical causes, an off-beat historian and trail-breaking propagandist for traditionally despised minorities like the "Indians" and "Eskimoes" (to say nothing of those queer "Mennonites").

Even in interviews Wiebe is often treated more like a social historian or moral philosopher than as the visionary story teller he really is. And reviewers, critics and literary historians seem uncertain about his place on the Canadian

literary scene: they respect him for his serious literary intentions but tend to see him as on the periphery of a literary establishment dominated by more accessible writers like Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler and a few other “stars” recognized internationally.

Part of the problem is, of course, Wiebe’s prose style, which in his mature novels has become ever richer and denser, but also more subtly allusive and syntactically complex. Many casual readers probably give up as they lose themselves in his labyrinthine pages, or find them boring even while retaining a general respect for the authentically researched settings and characters. Wiebe has always refused to compromise his fictive vision and is willing to wait for readers to catch up with him.

As his latest novel again demonstrates so impressively, Wiebe is a literary artist with a profound, passionate spiritual vision which has grown more coherent and compelling as his novelistic resources have matured. From the first his creative concern has been to penetrate to the heart of the human mystery, to find ways of seeing the unseeable, to develop strategies to say the unsayable. I suspect that Rudy Wiebe would, if he could, write himself right out of language, to leave behind the opaque facade built up with words which no matter how seemingly apt or suggestive tend to obscure and absorb the truth more than they reveal or reflect it. He would identify with the poet Keats, who once complained that words kept getting in the way of what he was trying to say.

Which is why I think Wiebe is at his best when he explores the uncluttered minds and spirits of what, in our arrogance, we used to call “primitive” people like Canada’s aborigines living in remote areas like the prairie frontier or the Far North. Dealing with such elemental and pre-literate characters, Wiebe is able to get at their sensitive, teeming inner lives directly, lyrically, intuitionally, without finding himself locked into the amorphous, irrelevant or merely ceremonial social language of our own devious, self-centered and needlessly complex society. Not having had their rational minds artificially detached from their psyche, a process we blithely accept as a legacy of our Western civilization and culture, Wiebe’s “primitives” remain in contact with their deeper inner resources, their “visionary” selves, just as, at a practical level, they remain completely at home in their physical environment and with all living creatures within it.

It is precisely this vision of psychic wholeness, of creative organicity, this ability to create in his fiction both a convincing, concrete “real” world while simultaneously illuminating it as a visionary moral landscape, a pre-lapsarian imaginative world which significantly transcends the physical, that for me makes Rudy Wiebe the quintessential “Mennonite” writer. Along with their simple, trusting sense of practicality and “this-worldness,” Anabaptist-Mennonites have over the centuries kept alive their passionate yearning for “the Way” of spiritual purity, their sense of themselves as fulfilling a special role in God’s Kingdom, of keeping themselves apart and intact in a sort of spiritual virginity

for the coming of the Bridegroom. That, at least, has been the traditional Mennonite "dream."

Spiritual purity and moral wholeness form the master theme of *A Discovery of Strangers* as the Yellowknife aborigines of the Far North come into abrupt and dismaying contact with the "civilized" team of English explorers led by the stern young Lt. John Franklin. The wise Keskarrah, husband of the dying but prescient Birdseye and father of the beautiful, fifteen-year-old Greenstocking, is at first puzzled by the ruthlessly exploitative traits that drive the "mud-faces" (there are marvelously suggestive naming puns in the novel); but he soon learns what makes these foreigners, so disrespectful of the land and its inhabitants, tick. He sees that they are detached from their environment with their maps and measuring instruments, that their European technology blinds them to the subtle interrelationships of land and living creatures. Keskarrah says: "Again and again Thick English [Franklin] talks about the Soul Everywhere, but he himself never looks for the sun. He and his men always stare at it through something else, and I think the sun uses their instruments to blind them. To make them think living things are always the same."

In place of linear technology and rational thought, the aborigines have dream and story. "Story permits no lie," Keskarrah says, even as Birdseye is already "dreaming" the terrible fate that will overtake the explorers in their arrogant disregard for the realities of their situation. But in the end the Yellowknives also know the stark realities of their own situation vis-a-vis the mud-faces. They know that in the long run they cannot stop the white invaders from overwhelming them with their "long canoes" filled with seductive goods from Europe. As Greenstocking comes to understand, "These English will always, eventually, find whatever it is they want, though it may require centuries, however many of them die."

And yet, the emotional and symbolic heart of the novel is the love story of Greenstocking and the delicate, artistically sensitive young officer Robert Hood, whose child she later bears after his tragic death. As Hood sketches her, they speak tenderly to each other, each in a language the other can't understand. Indeed, the growing intimacy of their love is brilliantly evoked through images of food and eating and other wordless communication, and is all the more moving for being set in such bleak and ill-fated surroundings. Again, Wiebe illustrates in a remarkable way how vision and feeling must move beyond mere words to reveal their full meaning and potency.

In this beautifully written novel, with its superb natural description, always both vivid and numinous, even Wiebe's style takes on an incandescence and clarity that makes it a joy to read. To write with such passion and grace is possible only for a novelist of deep commitment and confident maturity. It may be useful to recall here that Rudy Wiebe began as a rather awkward, though always sincere, didactic writer; but he has long since discarded didacticism as a method, as a style of writing fiction. What we now have is an artist who has significant things to say and knows how to say them. He is also

wise enough to know that he will never be able to say it all no matter how skilfully he “dreams” reality into story.

During a canoe trip in the Arctic which led directly to the writing of *A Discovery of Strangers*, Wiebe and his fellow canoeists raised a cairn with the inscription “A Land Beyond Words.” How fitting these words also are for the mystical fictional landscape this fine novelist has always hidden behind his realistically conceived fictional foreground, a mystical landscape that has been visible only to his most empathetic readers. It is indeed a land beyond words; but like all hard-to-reach literary places it requires the vehicle of finely crafted language and the compass of inspired vision to get us there. And Rudy Wiebe knows how to provide both.