REVIEW

Making Believe: Questions about Mennonites and Art. By Magdalene Redekop. University of Manitoba Press. 2020. Pp. 424. ISBN: 978-0-88755-857-3.

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Magdalene Redekop's *Making Believe: Questions About Mennonites and Art* is a rollicking ride through literature, music, and the visual arts. The book is a feast for the mind and eyes. Alongside its many literary examples it includes some three dozen illustrations – from Mennonite playing cards, to woodcuts, to photographs of paintings, mixed media projects, and sculptures. Two clown interludes involving Low German and masks add levity.

The time is right for Redekop's book. Especially since the 1980s, Canada has seen a "flowering of Mennonite art" (xiv). To provide three examples from my bookshelf: Miriam Toews's well-received 2018 novel *Women Talking* is about a series of rapes committed in an isolated Mennonite colony in Bolivia; Armin Wiebe's hilarious *Grandmother, Laughing* (2017) thrives on the "Flat German" spoken by many Mennonites in Manitoba; and David Bergen's *The Time in Between*, about a soldier's return to Vietnam, won him the Giller Prize in 2005. Three very different authors, staging their work on three different continents. The point of a flourishing is precisely this: there's a variety of different writing and it takes "diverse forms" (xvi) – and not until I read *Making Believe* was I aware of Bergen's roots.

An insider/outsider tension sizzles through *Making Believe*. Redekop admits in her clear and witty Apologia that "the majority of […] readers will be Mennonite" (xiv). However, she also expresses her "need" to counter the "perpetual provocation of stereotypes about Mennonites in North American culture" (xvi). Not all Mennonites are fundamentalists of the type invented and described in Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* (2004).

Outsiders like me will appreciate Redekop's swift, helpful overview of Mennonite history. Most Canadian Mennonite artists "are from that portion of the Dutch/German/Polish ethnic branch that immigrated to Russia and then, almost

a century later, to North America" (15); they are not the Swiss Mennonites who came to Ontario by way of the United States between "1786 and 1825" (15). But even in Manitoba there are "the *Kanadier*, who came as immigrants in the 1870s, and the *Russländer*, who came as refugees in the 1920s. These groups, in turn, split into a multitude of subgroups that resist generalization" (15). In short, it is complicated. The student looking for the quiddity of Mennonite identity will be disappointed, which is Redekop's point.

Redekop detests generalizations. Though she refers to a "Mennonite sensibility" again and again, she declares "there is no such thing as Mennonite art" (xiv–xv). This is honesty, not evasion. She further thwarts identity concerns by wondering who, after all, counts as a Mennonite. How do urban, secular Mennonites stack up against their rural brethren? Born on a farm in Manitoba, Redekop remembers that "plain-style Swiss Mennonites seemed more pure, more authentically Mennonite, than our mixed bunch on the prairie" (232) – but she *nots* that assessment in the next sentence: "Of course, this was a stereotype" (232).

By collapsing the outsider-insider frame, Redekop displays the trickster spirit she lauds. "The best art," she states, "happens at the crossing places where tricksters are active and where different visions of community are contested" (153). *Making Believe* reminds us that art arises in contact zones, when individuals and cultures rub up against each other. "The 'Mennonite miracle' has not happened in some Mennonite ghetto" (4) but through "cross fertilizing" (7) with other artists and traditions.

Redekop invites many theorists, critics, and philosophers along for the ride, among them Kwame Anthony Appiah, Aristotle, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Homi Bhabha, Walter Benjamin, John Berger, Harold Bloom, Michel de Certeau, Northrop Frye, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Erving Goffman, Johan Huizinga, Linda Hutcheon, Frederic Jameson, Plato, Edward Said, Charles Taylor, and Alfred Matthew ("Weird Al") Yankovic. This is an imposing list, but one made manageable and palatable by Redekop's trim quoting and avoidance of the roads most travelled. *Making Believe* is surely the first book to use Bakhtin and *not* bring up the "carnivalesque", or to use Frye in a CanLit context without rehashing his "garrison mentality" or "Where is here?".

At least twice Redekop rails against those of us who storm into identity generalizations without paying "close attention to the text" (138). Placing Mennonite literature within CanLit, she scourges critics who have "leaped to make absurd generalizations" about Canadian literature being "rural and claustrophobic"; she also condemns the recent "hasty rush to judgement [that] is now often followed by the shunning of an author but seldom by the careful reading of literary texts" (167).

Making Believe is "autoethnographic" (xx) in tone and outlook. Redekop notes that "it has not been possible […] to set aside the personal" (xii). Thank goodness. For who would be better placed to lead the rest of us through this varied artistic territory than a Mennonite farm kid and professor emerita of the University of Toronto? She is aware of the facile expectations many students bring to texts written by Mennonites – visions of horses and buggies, organic chicken, and traditional and purchasable "dolls without faces" (73) – but at the same time she can identify with writers who have "raged creatively against an experience of fundamentalism" (30).

The book's dedication reads "To all my former students with gratitude", and it is perhaps in the classroom that Redekop acquired her knack for the deft and necessary explanation. In many ways, *Making Believe* is an act of translation and mediation. Much of the joy I had while reading this was watching English converse with Plautdietsch. Redekop lets us see the shift between languages. Rhymes of childhood in High and Low German lead off many chapters, and these have been translated into English by poet Jay Macpherson (1931–2012).

"*Liesche, Liesche, drei dee*" becomes "Lizzie, Lizzie, turn ye roon", as Macpherson shrewdly borrows from "Scottish oral culture" (21) to evoke a shift from High to Low German. Such "direct oversetting" (131) (from the German *übersetzen*) lets us appreciate differences between languages and social worlds – an apt poetic metaphor for *Making Believe* and for Redekop's hopeful view of art.

References

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