

deadly, like *actually* deadly” (49). Plett opens part 2 with a discussion of compassion, finding that “the idea of compassion as not finite—*not something to be hoarded*” helps her “expand conceptions of my communities away from insularity. Cliquishness. Suspicion towards outsiders” (105). In this turn, she stumbles upon “a stray fragment” from Michael Warner’s theory of publics and comes up with a working definition of community as “an ongoing space of encounter” (136–38). It’s not perfect, she admits, but it names both a place and a people who interact with each other in an ongoing way. The encounter is not “a one-off” (139), which is precisely why compassion can help maintain a porosity to that space of encounter. “For a community to be a healthy and nurturing place, for it to function well,” she writes, “there needs to be some kind of openness and possibility towards strangers” (145). Plett calls for “unhoarded compassion” as the most likely way to make a community work in the long term and argues that “openness and compassion” can provide “guiding lights” for our ongoing spaces of encounter (145).

Of course, that work at maintaining openness and compassion can be exhausting. It can also feel unsafe. And feeling safe is no small matter for trans people who face significant threats in the course of a given day. Helpfully, Plett lands on a careful distinction between the subjective *feeling* of belonging/not belonging to a community and the objective *actions* of community. Community is the water we swim in, whether we know it or not. But the *work* of community is done not by feeling/not feeling a sense of belonging, but by direct, concrete actions that show love, compassion, openness. Do *that*, with others, she suggests, and you’ll find yourself within community of some kind. “Don’t give up on it,” she writes at the book’s close. “Don’t give up on this stuff” (170).

Ultimately, *On Community* is a deft work of social insight, accessible in terms of its narrative voice, daring in terms of the diverse array of communities she draws together for our consideration. The cumulative effect is to point us towards decisions that lead towards better, healthier community. Which is to say, less isolation.

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Elina Penner, *Nachtbeeren*. Berlin: Aufbau, 2022.
Pp. 248. Hardcover, €22.

Elina Penner was born in the Soviet Union in 1987 and moved to Germany with her family in 1991, part of the million-plus wave of

Soviet Germans escaping the collapsing USSR. *Nachtbeeren*, her first novel, is only very loosely autobiographical, the story of “Russian” Germans who also happen to be Mennonite, some of whom are *fromm* (literally “pious,” i.e., baptized church members) but most of whom, like Penner herself, are not. Penner successfully captures the challenges, some overt but many more subtle, of leaving a native land associated with trauma and rejection but not being able to integrate into one’s imagined “homeland.”

Nachtbeeren begins in Minden, Germany, in the childhood home of its protagonist. Nelli Neufeld, thirty-five years old, wife of Kornelius and mother of Jakob (fifteen), is waiting for the weekly Sunday afternoon family gathering to end. Her parents and four older brothers, three with spouses of their own, are also present. Nelli’s family are Plautdietsch-speaking Mennonite immigrants to Germany from the former Soviet Union, part of the larger group of “Russian Germans”; they refer to each other as *Ohnse* (ours), while other Germans are *Kartoffeln* (potatoes). Nelli’s husband, Kornelius, is not at the Sunday meal. Nelli recalls the last time she saw him, on Thursday, when he told her he was in love with another woman and that he had never known what love was until he met this other woman. As we learn early in the book, he is, in fact, in one of the three large freezers in the Neufelds’ basement, carefully packaged in freezer bags.

Over the next thirty-two chapters, readers learn about the Neufeld family’s history via memories—primarily Nelli’s, but also those contained in the stories told and retold at family gatherings. The novel is divided into relatively short episodes, all precisely dated, almost all occurring on one Sunday in May and the following Monday. Several are narrated by Nelli’s son Jakob and her brother Eugen, who is gay but not out to his family. It soon becomes clear that Nelli is mentally unwell, with only a tenuous grasp on reality, and so is not a reliable narrator. Eugen thinks the cause was the death of their grandmother Öma, ten years earlier (shortly after the death of her own mother, Öle Öma). Öma had been *fromm*. The several lay preachers at her funeral used the occasion as an opportunity for evangelism, stressing that those who wished to avoid hell and see Öma again needed to convert and join the church. Nelli converts, and Kornelius converts soon after.

There is more than enough trauma in Nelli’s family history and personal life for a mental breakdown to seem plausible. Öle Öma had been in the *Trudarmee*, or forced labour camps, and was the victim of sexual violence. Öma had Nelli’s father when she was just fifteen, followed by numerous miscarriages—Nelli too has had several miscarriages and a stillbirth. Nelli’s own parents are shadowy

figures in the novel, and they are occasionally violent. Her father spansks Nelli for throwing up at the table, for example, and her mother, who works the night shift and sleeps during the day, throws a shoe at her for using the microwave. They were not thrilled to have Nelli, an unexpected child, in middle age. When four-year-old Nelli stops eating after the move to Germany, a doctor suggests she is suffering from trauma, which the family finds amusing. Penner never explicitly connects Nelli's mental illness to her trauma, however. In fact, there are no judgments in the novel, but rather a recognition that the origins of mental illness are mysterious. Nelli's first shared thought in the novel is "I will bury you all." For Nelli, while her illness is debilitating, it is not something that will fundamentally shape her life.

Penner first made a name for herself as a blogger writing for *Hauptstadtmutti*, or "urban mothers," and it took a conversation with a literary agent to make her realize that she could write about Mennonites. *Nachtbeeren* was one of the hits of the 2022 German literary season, receiving glowing reviews in major media like the *FAZ*, *Stern*, and *Zeit*. The attention led some German Mennonites to refer to her as their Miriam Toews, and it's true that both are women and that Mennonites are somewhat "exotic" in both authors' countries. What is more interesting, perhaps, is that Penner is only one of a number of writers with immigrant backgrounds now gaining attention in Germany, part of the growing recognition of the larger community of "Russian" Germans. There is also a new museum, the Museum und Kulturreferat für russlanddeutsche Kulturgeschichte in Detmold, and a podcast, *Steppenkind*, both devoted to the history and culture of the community. Other "Russian" German authors with Mennonite connections include Irene Langemann (*Das Gedächtnis der Töchter*) and Viktor Funk (*Bienenstich; Wir verstehen nicht, was geschieht*).

Although it is tempting to read such literature for what it tells us about these communities—and the German interviews with Penner accessible on YouTube do this almost exclusively—*Nachtbeeren* can and should be read first as a work of literature. The plot and some of the characterization may not always convince, but Penner has an impressive control of her language, in several registers. The book is moving and funny, full of unobtrusive touches that will likely resonate with all those who have an immigrant background. Those interested in reading it should also buy the audiobook, read by Penner herself, to hear the Plautdietsch. Those who are unable to read

it in the original German will have to wait in hope of an English translation.

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Di Brandt, *The Sweetest Dance on Earth: New and Selected Poems*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2022. Pp.221. Softcover, \$19.

Di Brandt's latest book, *The Sweetest Dance on Earth*, revisits and adds to a nearly four-decade literary career. Reading across her work, it is clear that many of her poems relate an exodus: her intellectual, spiritual, and physical departure from her Mennonite community, in which her voice was silenced. Others showcase the "afterlife" of that young self, taking place during the many years in which Brandt experimented with her voice through various encounters with histories, communities, and selves. Full of honesty, wit, and joy, *The Sweetest Dance on Earth* is a lovely tribute to Brandt's career.

The collection includes a rich array of work, including poems about social media, loss, motherhood, travel, and various cultural communities. After all these years, however, the poems from *questions i asked my mother* still feel like Brandt's standout work. Consider these lines, first published in 1987:

another time i asked her mom i been thinking about
arithmetic & what i'm wondering is do you think arithmetic was
invented or discovered i mean it seems like it must have been
invented because all these signs numbers & things they didn't find
those lying on a rock somewhere (9)

This hurried scene perfectly captures the frenetic thoughts of a child, and the lines that follow brilliantly depict the panicked voice of a mother ill-equipped to handle her child's precociousness:

well i just don't know she says
wonderingly i've never really thought about it you sure come up
with the strangest questions really i don't know how you got to be
so smart (9)

Brandt's stream-of-consciousness writing in *questions i asked my mother* is compelling because it manages, all at once, to voice the anxiety and cleverness of a childlike voice as well as the panicked