

Hildi Froese Tiessen, *On Mennonite/s Writing: Selected Essays by Hildi Froese Tiessen*, edited and with an introduction by Robert Zacharias. Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2023. Pp. 309. Softcover, \$34.

It is not an exaggeration to say that if you are going to buy/read only one book about the emergence of Mennonite writers in North America over the past three decades, this is the one. Not only is Hildi Froese Tiessen an intelligent, readable critic; she has been the leading scholar of Mennonite literature in Canada. A considered, accurate sense of the history and development of the field runs throughout these essays, as well as the critical edge of thinking in multicultural theories of literature. Her awareness of the diverse and complex voices that have participated in the emergence of Mennonite literary studies is remarkable. Perhaps this is because she was so actively involved, as Robert Zacharias observes in his editor's introduction to the volume. Responding to Froese Tiessen's modest remark that she "always seemed to be 'in the right place at the right time' in those early years," he notes this was "usually less a matter of simple good fortune than it was because she had organized the event herself, and was hosting it, too" (9).

As a poet and critic who waded into the Mennonite/s Writing field in the mid-1990s, I opened *On Mennonite/s Writing* with eagerness, and soon picked up a pencil to note ideas and threads I wanted to revisit. Like Zacharias, I had long wished to see an array of Froese Tiessen's work in a single place, and this volume satisfies with eighteen essays from a fifty-year span: from her first essay on Rudy Wiebe, written in 1973, to the reflective afterword composed for this volume. Until now, her own writing has appeared only in periodical form, sometimes first as talks or lectures. That she responded positively to Zacharias's continued nudges to publish such a collection of her own writing is a gift to readers and scholars alike. The ideal editor for this collection, Zacharias is deeply read in the field, and an astute critic himself. Zacharias's introduction deftly sketches the details of Froese Tiessen's life and career, helping readers appreciate the context and scope for her many contributions to the field.

Back to the pencil. Froese Tiessen has a gift for succinct and provocative synthesis, and the essays collected here engage readers with their sense of her speaking voice. This voice, with a master teacher's awareness of her listeners, provides both a contextual frame and an invitation to expansion and development. Practicing the kinds of open-ended theoretical thinking she espouses, she

questions her own thinking in a way that is both exemplary and stimulating for her readers.

As I worked my way through the early essays in this volume, I found myself underlining not only points of agreement or debate, but salient phrasings of things I'd only dimly intuited before and points that sparked my own tangents. I began my reading with "A Mighty Inner River: 'Peace' in the Early Fiction of Rudy Wiebe," the first and oldest essay in the collection. I've read and taught Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* many times, but Froese Tiessen's focus on Wiebe's articulation of "inner peace" opened this text for me in a new way. I suddenly saw the connection between the descriptions of the natural world in this novel—beginning with the scene of playing hooky to go fishing—and the creation of inner peace. When teaching this novel again, I would have students read this essay to refine their understanding of the peace that destroys and the peace that heals as represented in this book.

The next essays showcase Froese Tiessen's ability to envision Mennonite literature's relationship to a broader Mennonite community. In "The Role of Art and Literature in Mennonite Self-Understanding," she seeks to define what is meant by Mennonite art and literature and to articulate the work it does in the Mennonite culture itself. In "The Mother Tongue as Shibboleth," she focuses on the role of the layering of languages amongst writers from Russian Mennonite background that gestures towards a commonly experienced "difference" in community that no longer exists.

These early essays on markers of "ethnicity," or cultural difference, pave the way for her landmark essay "Beyond the Binary: Reinscribing Cultural Identity in the Literature of Mennonites." In this essay, Froese Tiessen explores the in-between spaces of perceived binaries, such as the Mennonite community and the "world." Drawing on cultural studies critics such as Iain Chambers and Stuart Hall, she urges Mennonite readers and critics to develop models for talking about culture and community that include internal differences and diversity, and emphasizes the need for dismantling monolithic categories that distort more than elucidate who we are and have become. For this, she reflects, they might turn to the poets. Representing multiplicity and an increasingly diversified field is challenging, as I was discovering with my editorial work with an anthology of Mennonite poetry at the time the essay was originally published (*A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, 2002). Froese Tiessen's essay resonated as I curated work from a wide swath of writers from Mennonite backgrounds, far broader than the boundaries of the "Mennonite Church USA" which was my denominational "home." It is difficult to overstate the significance of the "Beyond

the Binary” essay for the field, in that it set the tone for all subsequent criticism on Mennonite writing.

The balance of the essays in the volume might be divided into two (non-binary!) categories: those that further the articulation of what the “middle space” of lived experience might look like in all its diversity in the increasing proliferation of Mennonite/s writing, and those that feature glimpses into particular works and writers. Chapters 7, 9, 12, and 17 focus on Rudy Wiebe’s *Sweeter than All the World*, Ephraim Weber’s correspondence with L. M. Montgomery as he tried to find his voice as a writer, Dallas Wiebe’s powerful poems as a resource in worship, and the early life-writing of Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Di Brandt. The remaining essays reflect more broadly on the discourse of Mennonite literary studies. In chapter 13 Froese Tiessen introduces the conceit of a Mennonite “trace” in the field—that is, the gesture that is recognizable to Mennonite readers in an otherwise secular-seeming literary text. In chapter 14, she explores the paradox of identity; in chapter 16, she reflects on her many experiences teaching Mennonite literature at the University of Waterloo. And perhaps most notable of all is Froese Tiessen’s lengthy afterword to the volume, “‘Some Hidden Rhythm’: On Being Right There, Right Then.” This new essay is worth the price of the book alone, as she reflects on a remarkable journey in critical literary study that spans the emergence of Mennonite literature as a phenomenon through its incredible artistic and critical flourishing. My own copy is full of underlines, circled phrases, and exclamation points.

In *On Mennonite/s Writing*, CMU Press has produced a beautiful, readable volume of Hildi Froese Tiessen’s most notable works. This book is essential to any collection that includes Mennonite writers or Mennonite subjects, and any collection that features diversity in Canadian, US, or transnational literary studies.

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