

Jean Janzen, Dallas Wiebe, Elmer
Suderman, Julia Kasdorf, Jeff Gundy
(Bender conference, Goshen, 1996)



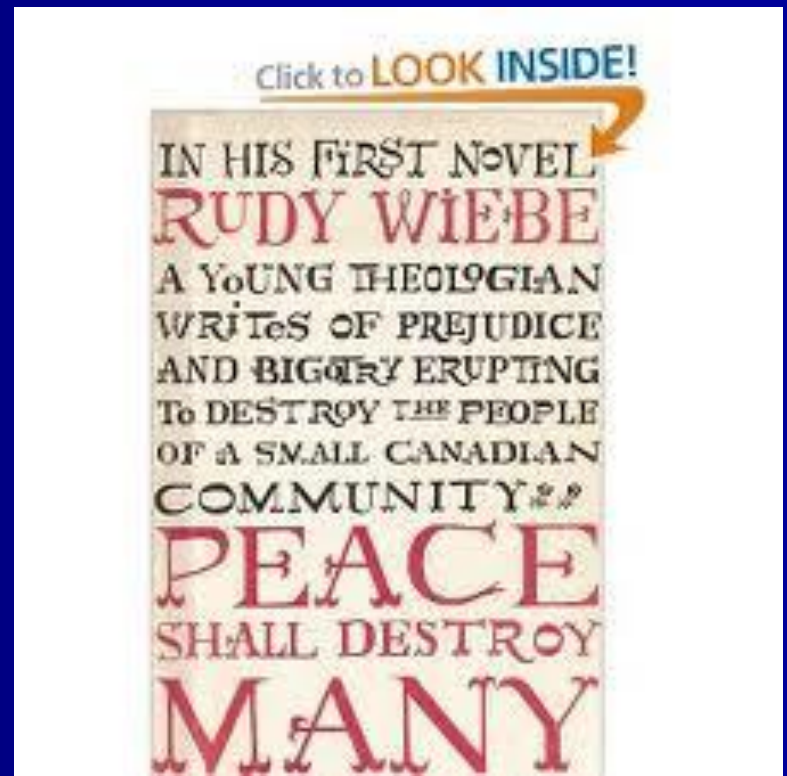
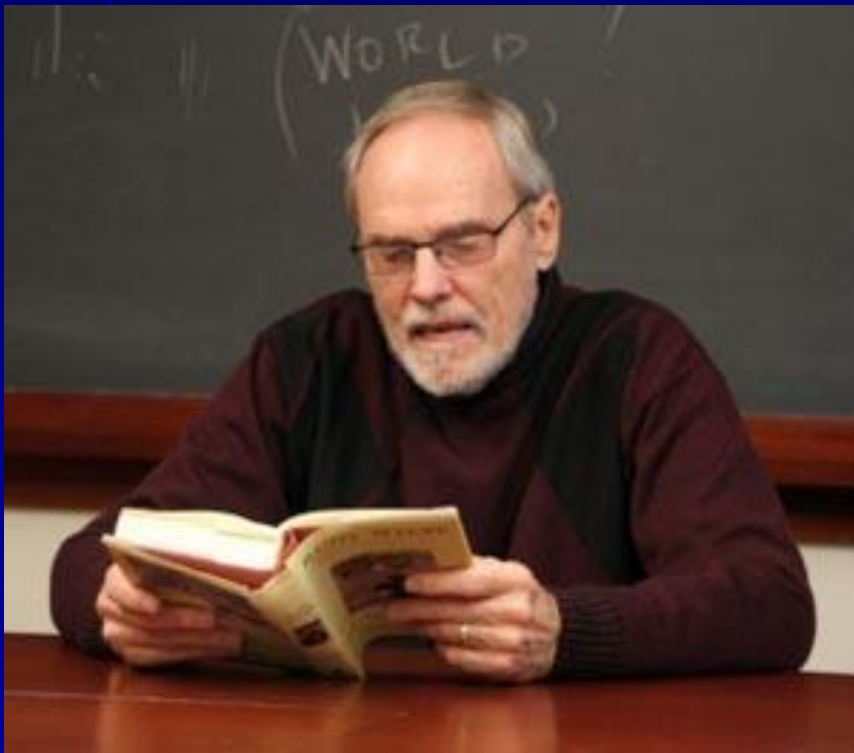
Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Ann Hostetler, Mennonite/s Writing, 2006



Rudy Wiebe--The “young theologian”? The “rascal”?

Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962)

Many more books (by Rudy and others) have followed...



“Giant fiction”

- “A poem, a lyric, will not do. You must lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design and ... Build giant artifact. No song can do that; it must be giant fiction.”

– Rudy Wiebe, *River of Stone*

Some Possible (but imprecise and overlapping) Categories

- Epics of the Tribe (Rudy Wiebe, Al Reimer, Dallas Wiebe, Sandra Birdsell, John Ruth)
- Acts of Resistance (Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, et al.)
- Lyrical Explorations (Jean Janzen, Julia Kasdorf, Keith Ratzlaff, et al.)
- Spectacular Successes (Miriam Toews, Rhoda Janzen)
- “Others”: fantasists, memoirists, LGBTQs, lions, tigers, bears...

From *Walker in the Fog*, Jeff Gundy

Do we all imagine that we have the clarity others lack, when in truth we are all just walkers in the same fog? We might then determine to listen to others' reports of the weather and the landscape very carefully, to learn of that which is obscured in the fog from where we walk, but clearer from another point of view. We might be wary of taking our local clarities—and those of others, as well—as global visions or master narratives. We might gather as many of these local truths as we can, brace and balance them together, take more from some and less from others, using all the resources that we have to find our way forward.

From *Songs from an Empty Cage*, Jeff Gundy (some proposals)

- Our most cherished traditions—religious, poetic, and other—all have their origins in transgression, opposition to received wisdom, rebellion...
- These rebellions eventually become themselves ensconced and often stultifying traditions...
- The glints and gleams of the best are distributed widely and irregularly amongst the vast human enterprise, but often to be found in the particularly charged language-products we call poetry [fiction/essay]....
- As we search for what will allow the project of life to persist and to thrive, reason and evidence are utterly essential and yet not enough. We cannot pursue truth without beauty.

More Authors and Texts, well-known and not

Dallas Wiebe, *Skyblue
the Badass* (1969)

Our Asian Journey (1997)

Sandra Birdsell, *The
Russländer (aka Katya)* (2002)



From the Manitoba Villages

- Patrick Friesen, *The Shunning* (1980)
- Di Brandt, *questions i asked my mother* (1987)

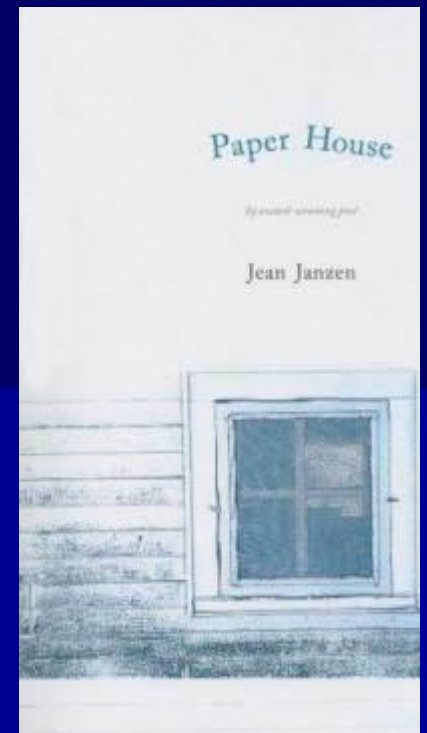


Di Brandt, “nonresistance, or love Mennonite style”

you understand how love is like
a knife & a daughter is not a son & the
only way you will be saved is by
submitting quietly in your grandfather's
house your flesh smouldering in the
darkened room as you love your enemy
deeply unwillingly & full of shame (39)

American Poets

- Jean Janzen, *Paper House* (2008)



- Julia Spicher Kasdorf, *Poetry in America* (2011)



My Mother in Venice

by Jean Janzen

She had another life,
not only the vast expanse
of prairie, but this island
adrift and shimmering.

here she is, in the Frari Church
holding the Child.
Centuries ago Bellini
saw her at the fish market

shivering in the rain,
brought her to the small

fire of his studio
and began brushing her round

face into glow, dressing her
in blue silk—my mother
in this city of mirrors
where the centuries swirl

together, where she still holds
the Child, my Brother,
where she doesn't hold me.

Julia Spicher Kasdorf reads “Bat Boy, Break a Leg”



Bat Boy, Break a Leg by Julia Kasdorf - YouTube.flv

Bat Boy, Break a Leg

The student with two studs in his nose
and a dragon tattoo crawling from his collar,
who seems always ready to swoon
from bliss or despair, now flits
at my office door. I will look at his poem
drawn onto a music score and find nothing
to say about chance or HIV.

Only later I'll think to tell him
the night before I left home, I slept
sadly in our old house until a wing
touched my cheek, tenderly as a breeze.
I woke to black fluttering at my feet,
and a mind fresh from the other side
said don't turn on the light, don't
wake the man, don't scream or speak.
Go back to sleep. The next morning
I remembered that people upstate
whack them with tennis rackets, that
the Chinese character for good luck
resembles the character for bat—
both so unsettling and erratic—

but it's bad luck to say good luck
in China, as on stage where they say
Break a leg, so delicate bats
must be woven into silk brocade
and glazed onto porcelain plates.
Next morning, I found a big-eared mouse
with leather folded over his shoulders
hanging from claws stuck in a screen.
All day, my work made me forget, but
then I'd remember, passing the window
where he slept, shaded under the eaves.
He was fine. I was fine. Then at dusk,
he was gone, suddenly. Pale boy dressed in black,
maybe the best that can be said for any of us is that
once we were angelic enough to sleep with
strangers.

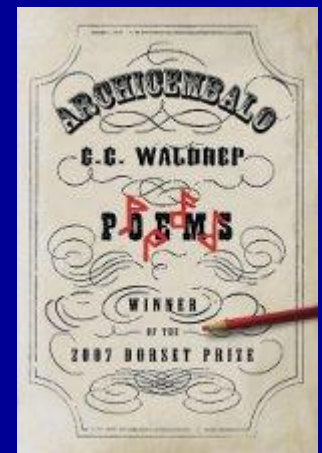
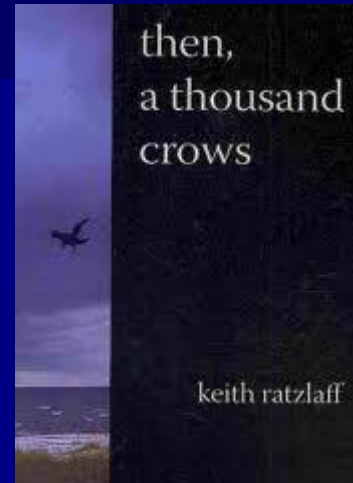
He touched my cheek. I opened the screen.
He flew in his time. We did no harm.

And more poets...

Keith Ratzlaff, *Then,
a Thousand Crows* (2009)

G.C. Waldrep,
Archicembalo (2009)

Todd Davis, Shari Miller Wagner,
Becca J.R. Lachman, David
Wright, Ann Hostetler...



Mennonite Bestsellers!?



Miriam Toews, *A Complicated Kindness* (2004)

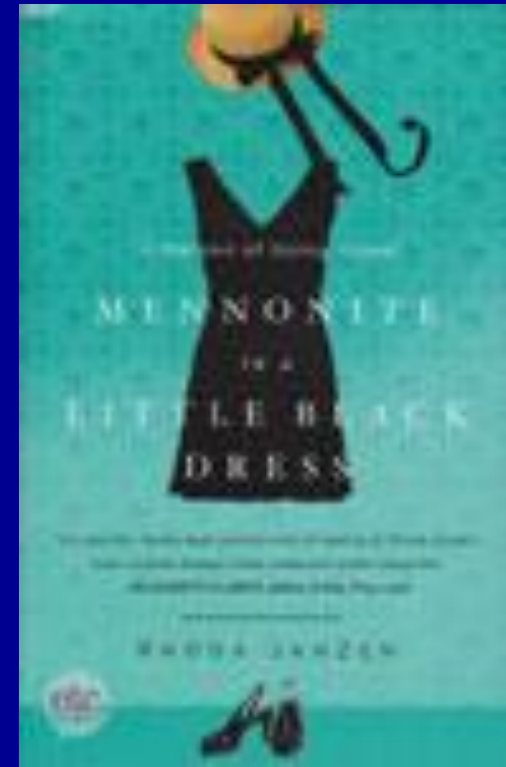
“We’re Mennonites. As far as I know, we are the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you’re a teenager... A Mennonite telephone survey might consist of questions like, would you prefer to live or die a cruel death, and if you answer ‘live’ the Menno doing the survey hangs up on you.”

Continued...

“Imagine the least well-adjusted kid in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock ‘n’ roll, having sex for fun, swimming, make-up, jewelry, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o’clock. That was Menno all over. Thanks a lot, Menno.”

Rhoda Janzen, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* (2009)

“In my opinion, sexiness comes down to three things: chemistry, sense of humor, and treatment of waitstaff at restaurants.”



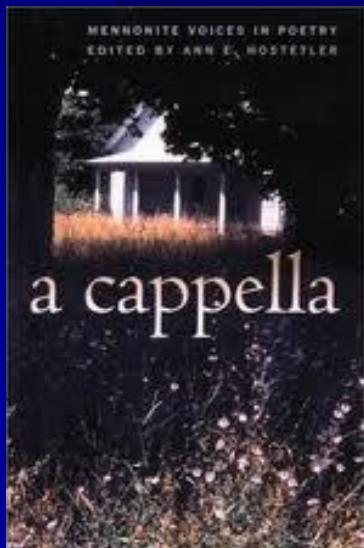
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“My father, once the head of the North American Mennonite Conference for Canada and the United States, is the Mennonite equivalent of the pope, but in plaid shorts and black dress socks pulled up snugly along the calf. In the complex moral universe that is Mennonite adulthood, a Mennonite can be good-looking and still have no sartorial taste whatsoever. My father may actually be unaware that he is good-looking. He is a theologian who believes in a loving God, a servant heart, and a senior discount.”

Anthologies

Ann Hostetler, Ed., *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry* (2003)

Kirsten Beachy, Ed., *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror* (2010)



Is Mennonite Art Possible?

Skepticism, 1

“There are those ... who doubt whether much great art can be produced in a group which has a strict standard of Christian morals and a strong sense of separation from the ‘world’ There are also those who hold ... that the autonomy of art is a danger to a truly profound religious experience and that one or the other must be sacrificed.”

-Harold S. Bender, *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*

Skepticism, 2

“A central dilemma of Mennonite society ... is that self-conscious reflection—by way of the arts and through giving free and creative rein to the intellectual impulse—eats at the very heart of the sectarian commitment. The intellectual and aesthetic impulse, nurtured both in the process of handing on the tradition *and* in the process of maintaining and defining the boundaries of a society, tends, however, to question both... the freedom of aesthetic and intellectual experience that is craved by many, if not most, Mennonites may well prove to sound the death knell for the Mennonite ethos and reality.”

—Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society* (1989)

And Determination (of various sorts)

“How often has there been an aesthetically serious representation of our ethos in its classic issues--obedience, simplicity, humility, defenselessness, the questioning of progress, the maintenance of identity... that did not veer into sentimental advocacy or irritable exposé?”

-John Ruth, *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*

Another sort

“I hate having to choose between my inherited identity and my life: traditional Mennonite *versus* contemporary Canadian woman writer, yet how can i be both & not fly apart?”

“The new Mennonite writing exists as transgression, a violation of the authority of God and the Bible and the father. It begins to give a voice to the children and women silenced by the tradition. And it does this by a kind of striptease, taking off the clothes of the official story, layer by layer, stripping away the codes we have lived by to get to the stories underneath of our real, aching bodies in the world.... What the new Mennonite poetry does is to bring the story home, back to earth, where hurt is really hurt, and death is really death, and desire is really and truly desire.”

-Di Brandt, *Dancing Naked*

And another...

“When the man was done, I would let his wood-framed cellar door slam shut and walk home through the backyards, thinking, ‘Well, that was not so bad. It was only my body.’ I think that the martyr stories taught me that wonderful splintering trick: it is only the body.

“Writing is a process by which suppressed feelings come to consciousness. The wound becomes a mouth that finally speaks its testimony, thereby transforming a mute, confused victim into a subject with a clear vision of her experience and a literate voice.” (172 in *TS*).

Julia Spicher Kasdorf, “Writing Like a Mennonite”

Some recent developments

- Memoir (already noted)
- Fantasy and experimental fiction
- LGBTQ writing
- Theopoetics

Keith Miller, *The Book on Fire*

Call me Balthazar. Call me silverfish, sweet dreams, the end of the rainbow. Call me dust devil, night owl, will-o-the-wisp. Call me the man in the moon. But call me Balthazar, and place a book in my hands. And what book is that, the book I reach for? Ah, that is why you are reading, of course, that is why I am here, in my thin-soled shoes and soiled leather jacket, a knife in my belt and a coin in my pocket, a wink and a grin at the ready, to lead you toward that book. And to lead myself toward that book, because this is a journey we will take together. You can almost see it, the book of our desires, its green morocco binding tooled in gold... (7)

Sofia Samatar, *A Stranger in Olondria*

Perhaps, one day, Tyom will become the last refuge of books. I do not know. I read. I take the children of Tyom hunting with Findred, spearing boar in showy Olondrian forests. Together we enter the dark-shuttered castle of Beal. And Fodra takes us to Bain, to the white walls overlooking the sea, the eternal flavor of olives. Then I look up: the light has changed, the children are restless with hunger, we have all lost another afternoon of our lives, gaining nothing but an enigmatic glow: for the cup I lift now is not merely a cup but carries on its glazed surface the shadows of sails. (298)

Jessica Penner, *Shaken in the Water*

[God] doesn't see you, or me, or anyone in the singular. It doesn't mean he doesn't care. He just doesn't see.

That can't be true! (64)....

That's why I'm with Huldah. That's why I was with your momma long ago.... Some people need a little more attention—attention God can't spare (65).

Emily Hedrick, *Confessions of a God Killer*

But to my utter horror, I discovered that the coughing had nothing to do with God being sick and everything to do with God being strangled! Every time the Man of God paused in his speaking, I watched God try to address the group, but the Man of God grabbed him at the throat, suffocating him in an effort to keep him silent while the chains around God's hands kept him from being able to fight. (30)

Jean Janzen, *What the Body Knows*

Each word unfurls the promise,
like Gabriel kneeling. The body
knows that wings, like waves,
can break through walls and enter,
that the secret of the story
is love, that even as we sleep,
its tides carry us in a wild safety. (79)

Keith Ratzlaff, *Dubious Angels*

from “Crying Angel”

How did we ever come to think
the single world was precious,
the model for us to love—
one town, one house, one sky,

one woman, the mole on her back—
when it is the universe, its gaps,
the mileage between its outposts,
God loves and is his image?

They weren't lies after all, the stories
where we are transmuted into stars
or into water lost in the infinity
of itself. Who could have imagined

God's need for distance,
his hurling us away to be near him?
(35-6)



“Meditation with Muddy Woods and Swinging Bridge,” Jeff Gundy (after Grace Jantzen)

Morning reading: What kind of God would drown every living thing that
wouldn't fit on some puny ark? Would slaughter the people of
Canaan for the sake of one hungry band of nomads? [...]

Somebody's cutting something hard in a dry swimming pool.

Who discovered we could cast our angers at the sky and call them God? [...]

Seed pods float in the pond like mothers determined to tan whether or not their
children get lost in the bushes.

On a day so hot it seems crazy to think that God picks sides.

One plank of the swinging bridge is missing, one bowed and soft, and a big lost
branch is wedged high between the end posts, but I walk across it
anyway.

Miriam Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*

Sheila's family and my family are part of the Poor Cousin contingent. We have Rich Cousins who are extremely rich because they are the sons of the sons (our uncles, all dead).... In the Menno cosmology that's how it goes down. The sons inherit the wealth and pass it on to their sons and to their sons and to their sons and the daughters get sweet fuck all. We Poor Cousins don't care at all though, except for when we're on welfare, broke, starving, unable to buy cool high-tops for our children or pay for their university tuition or purchase massive fourth homes on private islands with helicopter landing pads. But whatever, we descendants of the Girl Line may not have wealth and proper windows in our drafty homes but at least we have rage and we will build *empires* with that, gentlemen. (224)

Stephen Beachy, *boneyard*

If you spell your words correctly, the teacher said, we can do whatever you'd like. The crushed, sullen boy is often pouting, usually in trouble, and sometimes kept after school.... I never miss a spelling word, but am rigorously developing a bad attitude.... After school it is just me and the teacher. He sits at his desk staring at me and I can't imagine what he is thinking. He frightens me. I am a splotch. Young man, he says. You squirm around a lot and wiggle your ass on your seat. Is there something on your mind? I chew on my thumbnail. There are so many things on my mind, unfathomable things, an entire cluttered universe of inexpressible longings. I can't follow all the trajectories, I'm becoming less and less accessible. The process of change itself is becoming the definition of who I am. I'm a moody boy. There is nothing on my mind, I say.

Casey Platt, *A Safe Girl to Love*

It is not enough to be queer and have a queer identity. I am tired of believing that is true. I am tired of the marginalization that we inflict onto our own selves. Sequestering ourselves into gayborhoods with our gay bars and our gay readings. It's like the world told us, "Hey, you're different, you don't belong here, queers!" and we said, "Sweet, sure thing, straight people! Let's go build bars and readings and culture and identity away from you!" Well, I am through playing right into the bigot's hands and being told what to do by the man's hands. They say we don't belong, then the most radical thing we can do is start belonging.

Corey Redekop, *Husk*

“I love you, but God will surely punish you for your sinful ways.”
“You might have. Had a point there,” I admitted. I took her hand, feeling the throb of her blood push into my palm. It was like cradling an injured sparrow. “Mom, I have to go now. I don’t know if you’ll understand. I just wanted. I don’t know what I wanted. But you’ll be fine. I’m going to make sure of it.” “I love my son,” she said. “I always tried to make sure he knew that. Please believe me.” I held myself still, barely able to keep from squeezing her hand harder. “I know you did. What happened to him. Was not your fault.” “Sheldon was not the easiest child to like. So many problems. So intelligent. Always asking questions.” “I’m sure he just. Couldn’t help himself.” “I don’t want you to take him.” “I won’t,” I said. “I won’t take him, I promise.”

A few closing questions, and one claim

- Is God really threatened by human creativity?
- What happens if Mennonites drive the smartest, most creative, most independent people out of their communities?
- How much does it matter?
- Rilke wrote, “Inside human beings is where God learns.” Could it be?
- There’s a lot of wonderful writing being done by Mennonites, former Mennonites, new Mennonites, etc., and I have no doubt that will continue, no matter what.

Events and Journals

- Mennonite/s Writing conferences (# VII at Fresno, March 2015)
- Mennonite Arts Weekend in Cincinnati, every other February
- *Rhubarb* (print journal)
- *Center for Mennonite Writing Journal* (online)
- *Conrad Grebel Review, Mennonite Quarterly Review, Journal of Mennonite Studies* (reviews and essays)

Further reading and final notes...

- See Ervin Beck's extensive bibliographies at CMW.
- Here are my bibliographies for *Walker in the Fog* (2007) and *Songs from an Empty Cage* (2013).
- Feel free to contact me at gundyj@bluffton.edu or via Facebook!
- Check out the DreamSeeker series of Mennonite poetry and fiction from Cascadia Press.
- Google is also the friend of writers and readers everywhere. Amazon... Well, maybe!