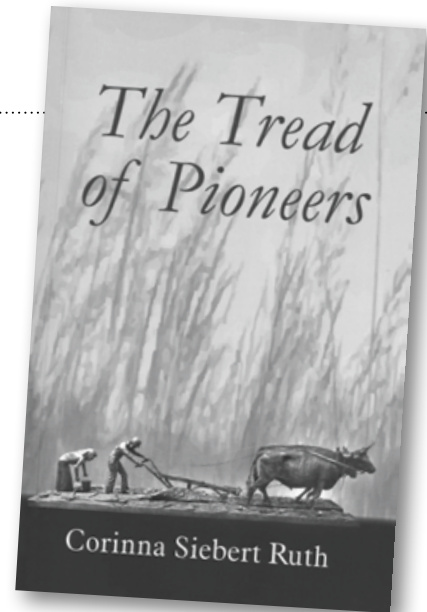


Book Review

The Tread of Pioneers

by Corinna Siebert Ruth
Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2012. 319 pages.

Reviewed by Wilfred Martens



History is best recorded not merely by the historian but also by the poet, novelist, and dramatist. *The Tread of Pioneers* is a historical novel, the story of a Mennonite family which emigrates from South Russia to North America in the 1870s. The plot is not all that unique, but what is unique is the main character and her perspective. Aganetha Friesen faces the prospect of leaving her beloved homeland where she, her husband, and two children have put down roots.

Aganetha has strong feelings about emigrating; she yearns to express her concerns and fears to her community, but as a woman in a Mennonite village she must remain silent. Increasingly, we are drawn into her struggle as she experiences frustration, fear, doubt, anger, and despair. Aganetha car-

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ries us along on the journey; we share her tensions with her husband, Bernhard, the village school-teacher who is more relaxed about the need to emigrate.

Language is important in the villages. The need to seek a new country was intensified among villagers when the government required that the Russian language replace German in the schools. The language of the village is Low German. The author sprinkles the narrative with Low German terms

—foods, titles, expressions. In doing so the author takes a risk: it will enrich the story for those who understand this dialect, but for those who don't, it may be an annoying distraction. The glossary is helpful.

Though the author clearly holds the Mennonite villagers in high regard, she does not hesitate to include the darker side of village life. For example, when groups of Mennonites make a decision to emigrate, there is plenty of land for sale. “... many of the Mennonites who chose to stay in South Russia snatched the opportunity to buy low-priced land for their grown children. Could it be? Aganetha wondered how church members could take advantage of one another that way” (p. 61).

The author uses the pen of a poet in creating some very effec-

tive multi-sensory imagery when describing natural settings—blizzards, grasshopper invasions, spring and fall seasons. For example, “... ribbons of sunlight streaked through the clouds across the prairie, and a slight breeze brushed Aganetha's skirt along the black soil as she bent over the watermelon rows in her garden.” In a few rare instances description becomes excessive when Aganetha is involved in the preparation and baking/cooking processes of

zwieback, varenikje, rollkuchen. For a few moments the novel turns into a recipe book.

Once the family arrives to claim land on the prairies of Nebraska, a series of incidents remind readers of the extreme hardships that pioneers faced: dust storms, blizzards, grasshopper hordes, wolves, prairie fires, leaking sod roofs onto the muddy dirt floor, floods, drought. As the family faces these situations they are encouraged toward a greater dependence on one another, and they find the resolve to trust God.

This is a well-written novel about a woman who is on a journey of self-discovery. She learns to adapt, to resist, to compromise, to lead, to question, to have faith, believe, and accept. But more than the story of an individual, it is also the story of a people, whose faith in God sustains them on a journey of incredible challenges. It is a welcome addition to the expanding library of Mennonite literature.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Wilfred Martens is professor emeritus of English at Fresno Pacific University. He holds a Ph.D. in English with an emphasis on C.S. Lewis. He is the author of *River of Glass*, a Mennonite historical novel.