



On Mennonite Memoir

by Ann Hostetler

Memoir has come of age in Mennonite literature. Family history, genealogy, and oral history have traditionally been rich areas in Mennonite writing, but the literary memoir is more recent territory. Those hesitating to use the personal voice and to name a portion of individual truth for a wider audience, however, have been nudged to-

Forms of writing that serve the community and community memory have been part of Mennonite writing since the *Martyr's Mirror*, a book compiled by Dutch Scholar Thielemann J. van Braght (1660) that includes stories of Anabaptist martyrs in a wider spectrum of martyrs from the early church through the Reformation. The rich influence of this commu-

put forth individual stories rooted in the material and the encounters of everyday life. Those Mennonite writers who have pioneered the contemporary personal memoir—Jeff Gundy, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, Rudy Wiebe—have done so with a strong component of community awareness. Gundy combines family history with creative nonfiction in *A Community of Memory: My Days with George and Clara* (Univ. of Illinois Press 1996), and Spicher Kasdorf reflects on her own creative license with communal memory in *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life* (2001; rpt. Penn State Press 2009). Rudy Wiebe's *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest* (Knopf Canada 2006), is a personal memoir thoroughly interwoven with the story of Mennonite immigration to Canada. Rhoda Janzen, on the other hand, is a self-avowed “black sheep” whose distance from the community enabled her to write an individual and personal memoir without the same kind of obligation to the project of Mennonite representation.

Mennonites have long been suspicious of the individual self, the voice unmoderated by community consensus. Democratic

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ward publication by Rhoda Janzen's recent bestseller, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* (Henry Holt 2009). While widely praised as a witty memoir with undertones of healing and reconciliation, Janzen's book has been highly controversial in Mennonite settings, where strong networks of community make the subjects of this memoir more widely known in a social sense. The tension between community and the individual voice, a vigorous presence in Mennonite literature, is intensified by the very genre of memoir because it privileges the individual point of view.

nal work on Mennonite writing is revealed in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, an anthology of creative writing inspired by the *Martyr's Mirror*, edited by Kirsten Beachy (Herald Press 2009). Arguably, the martyrs used individual voices as they gave their dying testimonies. But their personal stories mattered little—the story they told was of salvation; their individual sacrifice contributed to a literal body of evidence for a faith larger than the self.

With such a legacy of witness and fidelity, it is little wonder that the individual writers from Mennonite tradition would hesitate to

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North Americans, with an ideology of self-development and equal opportunity, have long been suspicious of "group think." Mennonites are also captives of their time and place. Modernity and postmodernity have thoroughly permeated our psyches, as the images of movies (once forbidden) and micro-waves bounced between cell towers invade our minds and bodies. Although speaking for the individual may seem like literary fiction to those aware of the invisible connections between networks of human beings, it is the dominant mode of literature. In a pluralistic society it is our group affiliations that tend to become private and separatist. In speaking for ourselves we leap over these boundaries to connect with other selves. In contemporary mem-

oir we speak for the self, because the self is what we all have in common.

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The California Mennonite Historical Society

2012 Annual Meeting

Saturday, June 9

British Columbia Lounge at
Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary
4824 E. Butler Ave., Fresno, California

Valerie Rempel, Fresno Pacific University Seminary, will be speaking on Writing Mennonite Memoir. Full details of the meeting, including times and cost, will be forthcoming. The afternoon session (time to be announced) will be a viewing of the film
The Pacifist Who Went to War.

For questions or reservations,
call Kevin Enns-Rempel at 559-453-2225.

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