

Rhoda and Rhonda: Two Voices On Mennonite Life

by Fran Martens Friesen

Both Rhoda Janzen and Rhonda Langley recently wrote a memoir about their experiences growing up Mennonite Brethren, with polarized viewpoints: one critical, poking fun at a stifling and outmoded environment, one embracing her community-oriented, rich, cultural heritage. Their lives were strikingly similar. Both participated in many of the same community experiences as they grew up.

The community has, understandably, been intrigued, angered, hurt, humored, proud, scandalized and altogether engaged, in very different ways, by these Mennonite women's microscopic and macroscopic views as depicted in their memoirs. What does one make of these perceptions of Mennonite identity,

brought out into the glaring public light of published work? The conversation around the books goes far beyond the local community, however; discussions reach such far-flung places as Washington, D.C., Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Abbotsford, British Columbia, and likely abroad as well.

Part of these discussions within the Mennonite fold includes the question of how well "Mennonitism" (for lack of a better word) is captured by these authors, par-

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ticularly in *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, which brings about these further questions: Is memoir, a genre that J. Daniel Hess, former Goshen College journalism profes-

sor describes as "troubled"¹, the best place to air our memories? How "accurate" does one need to be in a memoir, or does the author's perceptions trump all? What is the place of humor and exaggeration in memoir?

Some of us MBs who grew up with Rhoda, this author included, raise eyebrows at the idea of a complete wardrobe of home-made clothing, borscht for every lunch and a host of other perceived exaggerations. This skepticism does

not, however, include the penny-pinching episode at the fast-food restaurant—that one is dead on! Furthermore, many outside the Mennonite Brethren sphere—those who are from Mennonite Church USA, for example—can hardly recognize themselves in the book which claims to be "Mennonite" in the broadest sweep. They point to the "prayer veiling" and strict rules on dress and hairstyles as far more outside cultural norms than the customs of the generally assimilated Mennonite Brethren church-goers of California.

On the other hand, *Mennonite in Blue Jeans*, while overtly stated as an answering call to *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, seems to focus only secondarily on educating the public (in a straight-forward, less humorous manner) on the mores and culture of Mennonite Brethren and the distinction between Mennonite groups. The real focus is—and powerfully and hon-



A plain-dressed young Mennonite woman sells items at the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Mennonite Central Committee Sale and Auction, 1980. When Mennonites throughout the eastern United States read Rhoda Janzen's *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, they could not recognize themselves in a book that claimed to be a description of Mennonites in general. Photo credit: Mennonite Central Committee Relief Sale Photographs, 1979-1983. IX-13-2.9. Mennonite Church USA Archives – Goshen, Indiana.

estly so—on the difficult family dynamics of a situation with intrusive health needs of children and husband in recent years. At times the memoir takes on a reverent, almost sentimental tone towards elements of the Mennonite Brethren faith and certain key persons in the author's life. On the other hand, one could argue that the plain-style, family-oriented book, *Mennonite in Blue Jeans*, more accurately reflects the straight-forward approach of Mennonite Brethren religiosity than the sophisticated, witty, and sometimes scandalous writing style of *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*.

There is another question raised by these two memoirs: What do we Mennonites do with some of the harsh, painful, and not-so-flattering aspects of our lives and our faith that do not fit into our neat and tidy molds? Both of these memoirs speak to painful family situations outside the narrow "norms" of a "Mennonite" (in all forms) definition of family: an abusive, gay husband; a child with high-functioning autism, a husband with fibromyalgia. How are we, a rather reserved group in

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the stoic German tradition, to be open about such struggles? Does memoir give us that platform? But what if those written words give pain to someone else?

I recall that in my graduate class on D.H. Lawrence, we discussed the fact that several of Lawrence's friends and family protested angrily when they recognized themselves portrayed in an unflattering manner in his novels. And a novel is more veiled than a memoir. Of course, this happens routinely to writers, but how should we then express and



Women sell borscht, tacos, and bierocks at the West Coast Mennonite Relief Sale, 1979, Reedley, California. The MCC Sale is a cultural event for Mennonites across the United States and Canada. Photo credit: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno.

share honestly our struggles of faith, life and family?

One further question is the role of the reader—perhaps we have an obligation to engage in the same self-reflection as we expect of the writer. How do we respond to both the person who found our culture and faith oppressive and the one who found it life-giving? Typically, what people experience in even the most similar circumstances varies from our own.

Regardless of what could be perceived as opposing views on the value of a Mennonite upbringing in this day, or the role of memoir among us, one thing these books have sparked is engaged conversation among Mennonites and renewed pursuit of the understanding of the identity and value of the Mennonite world today. These conversations over coffee and zwieback—or pita, naan and lattes in the urban areas—are highly relevant to faith, life and the church. Such books have also brought forth courageous voices

of some ordinarily silent and inspired people, particularly women in this case, to reflect on and even more importantly, to write and publish their understandings and experiences of the Mennonite world. And this voice-giving is not a phenomenon to ignore.

May the conversations continue as we endeavor to flesh out the ever-fluid dynamics of what it means to be Mennonite (or more specifically Mennonite Brethren) in this fast-paced, changeable, contemporary world.

ENDNOTES

¹ J. Daniel Hess, "Memoir: A Troubled Genre," *CMW Journal* 4:1 (January 2012), accessed January 2012, <http://www.mennonitewriting.org/journal/4/1/memoir-troubled-genre/>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fran Martens Friesen teaches in the English Department of Fresno Pacific University. She grew up in a Fresno Mennonite Brethren church; her father taught at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and her mother at Fresno Pacific Bible Institute. Thus, her childhood and adolescent environment were similar to that of both Rhoda Janzen and Rhonda Langley.