

California Mennonite

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In this issue. . .

In this issue we explore not only the particular memoirs of two women in our midst but the larger context of memoir-writing in general, as well as what is currently happening in the world of Mennonite memoir-writing. Valerie Rempel writes about memoirs in general society and then turns to the context and focus of the particular books of Rhoda Janzen and Rhonda Langley, highlighting memoir's unique characteristics of immediacy, subjectivity and truth-telling. Ann Hostetler discusses the issues inherent in Mennonite memoir in terms of the voice and memory of individual self vs. community expression and memory. Finally, Karen Neufeld provides a brief annotated bibliography for further reading in the genre.

We believe it is important for the home community to find constructive paths to think about and respond to the ways in which people write about us in all our beauty and all our brokenness.

—Hope Nisly and
Fran Martens Friesen

Black Dress and Blue Jeans: Choices and Truth-telling in Memoir Writing

by Valerie Rempel

The recent publication of several memoirs connected with the Mennonite Brethren community in Fresno has drawn attention to the growing field of memoirs.

While not a new genre, personal memoir has experienced an upsurge in publication and popularity in the last decade. Some memoirs gather a great deal of attention. After glowing reviews, Elizabeth Gilbert got a movie deal for her account of traveling in Italy, India and Indonesia in *Eat, Pray, Love*.¹ So did Julie Powell. Her account of a year spent cooking through Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, had Amy Adams and Meryl Streep playing the leads in *Julie & Julia*.²

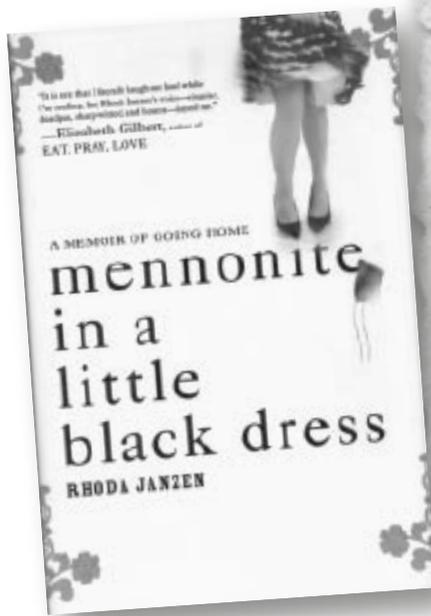
Greg Mortenson received rave reviews, too, but eventually found himself in the midst of a scandal over what seemed to be a greatly exaggerated account of school building in terror-stricken regions of the world in *Three Cups of Tea*.³ Likewise, James Frey landed in hot water after sections of his best-selling memoir, *A Million*

Little Pieces, were found to be fabricated.⁴

Movie deals and scandal—both sell books.

Mennonite writers, or those with Mennonite roots, have also weighed in with a variety of memoirs. Some, like Rhoda Janzen's bestselling *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*,⁵ or Rudy Wiebe's *Of This Earth*,⁶ are read widely in both Mennonite and non-Mennonite circles. Both of these writers won critical acclaim for their work, Janzen as a finalist for the 2010 Thurber Prize for American Humor and Wiebe as the recipient of the 2007 Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction. Others circulate more narrowly to an audience primarily made up of family and friends or readers with an interest in the particular subject matter of the book. The latter category of memoir has been especially aided by the advent of easy methods to self-publish and distribute books via the internet. Here again, the memoirs are diverse and range in theme from Rhonda Langley's

continued



The memoirs by Rhoda Janzen and Rhonda Langley raise questions regarding Mennonite identity and culture. Borscht, a cultural food in the Mennonite Brethren tradition, was the bane of Rhoda Janzen's childhood. In her memoir, she writes that she even had to take it to school in her lunch box. Photo credit: Mark Wiens (in Norma Voth. Mennonite Foods and Folkways from South Russia. Intercourse, Pennsylvania: Good Books, 1990.)

Mennonite in Blue Jeans,⁸ to James Helmuth's *Crossing the Bridge*.⁹

What these writers have in common is the form itself. While an autobiography tends to be about the sum of one's life, memoirs are focused on telling particular stories from out of that life. They are less ambitious in their scope, though not in their art. Thomas Larson has observed that "to write memoir is to be selective; to write one's autobiography is to be indiscriminate."¹⁰ While mem-

"For both writers, the authority of their perspective comes via experiential knowledge rather than academic research."

oirs can and often do include stories from the distant past, memoirists are frequently drawing on the immediate past or even what Larson refers to as the "still-corruptible present."¹¹

Janzen and Langley, both writers and poets who grew up in Fresno, California, represent some of the diversity in contemporary memoir writing as well as the immediacy that often characterizes the form. Janzen's book grew out of a series of e-mail exchanges with friends after she found her-

self spending a sabbatical at her parents' home. She was there, in part, to recover from an auto accident and the dissolution of her marriage. Her memoir, published shortly afterwards, captures the turbulent energy and emotion of the months spent living in her childhood home while she tried to edit a manuscript and reorient her

life. It also became the occasion to reflect on her experience of growing up Mennonite Brethren in the Central Valley. It is easy to grasp her sense of disorientation when the choices she made to leave the community bring her back to it instead.

Langley's book was written as a response to Janzen. After finding a copy of Janzen's book in the used book bin at her local library, Langley decided to write her own account of what it means to be Mennonite. Framed in the con-

text of a Lenten journey, the book is part spiritual memoir and part love story as it moves between narrative and the poems written as anniversary presents for her husband. Langley's decision to include her poetry and her description of the academic career she pursued and then left behind serve as a way of highlighting some of the similarities and differences in the lives and choices of these two writers, as does her decision to self-publish rather than pursue a traditional publishing house. These are deliberate "blue jeans" choices, rather than sophisticated "black dress" choices.

For both writers, being Mennonite serves as a kind of narrative device—a way to provide a context for their stories of childhood and early adult experiences. This presents the reader with a tension that is ongoing in Mennonite circles. Is "Mennonite" a faith tradition, a religious subculture or even an ethnic identity? Both Janzen and Langley describe a Mennonite



Langley's memoir is part spiritual memoir framed in the context of a Lenten journey.

“Both Janzen and Langley describe a Mennonite tradition that is part culture ... and part religious identity.”

tradition that is part culture—food and folkways—and part religious identity. For Janzen, it is a tradition formed primarily by the Mennonite Brethren experience in the Central Valley while for Langley the experience is broadened by Mennonite Church experiences in

North Carolina, New York, and now Portland, Oregon. For both writers, the authority of their perspective comes via experiential knowledge rather than academic research. This makes the description of these communities highly subjective and open to criticism,

especially if the description is perceived to be unflattering.¹²

The question of subjectivity is an important issue for memoirists and for their readers. Readers want some assurance that the memoirist is “telling the truth.” The deliberate fabrication of events tends to invalidate the author’s work, as illustrated in the revelations concerning Mortensen and Frey’s bestselling books. For others, the “facts” are not nearly as important as the “truth”—the authentic emotion, the evidence of self-understanding and the honest “conviction about what is and is not true.”¹³ Both Janzen and Langley manage to convey this sense of conviction, in spite of stories that seem to describe very different communities. In doing so, they provide varying perspectives on the Mennonite experience and offer the reminder that there is no single Mennonite truth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

¹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (New York: Viking Adult, 2006). See also *Eat, Pray, Love*, directed by Ryan Murphy (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2010).

² Julie Powell, *Julie and Julia: 365 days, 524 recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen: How One Girl Risked Her Marriage, Her Job and Her Sanity to Master the Art of Living* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005). See also *Julie & Julia*, directed by Nora Ephron (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2009).

³ Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin. *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations--One School at a Time* (New York: Viking, 2006).

⁴ James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2003).

⁵ Rhoda Janzen, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress: A Memoir of Going Home* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009).

⁶ Rudy Wiebe, *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2006).

⁷ “2010 Thurber Prize for American Humor,” Thurber House, accessed February 26, 2012, <http://www.thurberhouse.com/2010-thurber-prize-for-american-humor.html>.

⁸ “Rudy Wiebe Receives Prize for ‘Of This Earth,’” *Mennonite Weekly Review* (March 5, 2007), accessed February 26, 2012, <http://www.mennoneweekly.org/2007/3/5/rudy-wiebe-receives-prize-earth/>.

⁸ Rhonda Langley, *Mennonite in Blue Jeans: A Lenten Journey* (Portland: Forest Rose Books, 2011).

⁹ James Helmuth, *Crossing the Bridge: From Mennonite Boy to Gay Man* (iUniverse, 2009).

¹⁰ Thomas Larson, *Memoir and the Memoirist* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2007), 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² See, for example, Jessica Baldanzi’s review of Janzen’s book and the extended conversation in the comments section, “Book Review: *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*,” *CMW Journal* 1 (September 2009), accessed February 27, 2012, <http://www.mennonitewriting.org/journal/1/5/book-review/>.

¹³ Larson, 61.