In This Issue

One consequence of the contemporary flourishing of Mennonite literature in Canada and the U.S.—broadly understood to include fiction, poetry, memoir, and literary criticism—is the difficulty of describing its current trajectory. Based on the presentations given at the sixth "Mennonite/s Writing" conference, held in the spring of 2012 on the campus of Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, it seems clear that a generational transition is under way within the community of Mennonite writers, the contours of which are only beginning to come into focus. This issue of *MQR* continues a tradition, started by the journal in 1998, of devoting a special issue to the Mennonite Writer/s conference every five years as a way of providing readers with regular signposts to mark the state of Mennonite writing.

The first three essays, all by influential voices in the field, suggest the variegated nature of the current landscape. **Julia Spicher Kasdorf** opens with a series of ruminations (she calls them "confessions") presented at the conclusion of the conference. Kasdorf begins by naming a dominant "creation myth" within contemporary Mennonite literature—anchored in Rudy Wiebe's experience following the publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962)—that associates authenticity with transgression, exile, and a creative identity forged "over against" the oppressions, real or imagined, of the religious community. This narrative, she argues, may well have run its course. Although a younger generation of writers will need to tell their own story, Kasdorf suggests that the motifs of irony—especially play and improvisation—might serve them well.

Hildi Froese Tiessen follows with a perceptive analysis of current directions in Canadian Mennonite writing. If a first generation of immigrant authors framed their writing primarily in terms of "homeland," the next wave tended to understand their work as a distinct ethnic voice within the "identity politics" of Canadian multiculturalism. Today, Froese Tiessen suggests, writers once identified as "Mennonite" are more likely to anchor their narratives in a wide variety of particular contexts, addressing universal themes in ways that reduce their Mennonite identity to merely a "trace." If what Froese Tiessen describes here is a natural—perhaps inevitable—evolution, her essay raises significant questions about the eventual disappearance of "Mennonite writing" as such.

Ann Hostetler returns to more familiar territory by problematizing the "Self" in Mennonite writing. Taking Rhoda Janzen's controversial memoir, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, as her point of departure, Hostetler reflects on the narrative construction of the self, and especially

on the challenge of memoir literature in a community of Mennonite readers who tend to be inherently suspicious of anything that calls attention to the self. Hostetler's essay captures well a persistent dilemma among Mennonite writers, who often define their identity over against the community, but nevertheless long for Mennonite readers and are frustrated when the community does not fully embrace their writing.

The remainder of the essays offer examples of contemporary literary criticism within the Mennonite writing community. **Ervin Beck** begins with a formalistic analysis of Steven Byler's novel in stories, *Searching for Intruders*. Beck reveals a hidden coherence in the novel by identifying three "intruders," each of whom represents a philosophical option for the protagonist. **Paul Tiessen** follows with a literary analysis of two contrasting Mennonite approaches to the cinema: a defense of movie-going offered by John Rempel in the pages of *Arena*, a short-lived Mennonite journal of culture he edited in the late 1960s, and an alternative approach in *Irma Voth*, a recent novel by the Canadian writer Miriam Toews, in which the cinema is a central motif. Tiessen argues that the tensions around movie-going expressed in the pages of *Arena* are creatively resolved in *Irma Voth*. **Jesse Nathan**, editor of the McSweeney's Poetry Series, offers a very close reading of William Stafford's poem "Allegiances," using it as a lens for exploring key elements in Stafford's biography. Stafford's minimalist and realist poetic style, Nathan argues, is implicitly pacifist insofar as it offers an alternative to the verbose and militaristic excesses of modern culture. **John J. Fisher**, who has spent a lifetime reading and reflecting on the writings of Rudy Wiebe, follows with a tightly-constructed review of *Collected Stories*, Wiebe's recent compilation of his entire ouvre of short stories. On the surface, the diverse collection—organized non-chronologically into four sections—seems to defy any overarching metanarrative. Yet Fisher discerns an inner coherence in the artifacts of these stories, anchored in Wiebe's recurring symbolism of the people and places in the Arctic north.

Finally, we conclude this issue—as we have done in previous special issues devoted to the Mennonite/s Writing conferences—with a series of tributes to significant writers whose pioneering work has inspired a generation of students, readers, and writers.

Stay tuned for the next special issue of *MQR* devoted to Mennonite writing five years hence to assess which of the divergent directions suggested by Kasdorf, Froese Tiessen, and Hostetler have borne fruit.

– John D. Roth, editor