

*Books on the Border Land:*

*A Mennonite Woman's Memoir of Reading and Remembering the Sacred*

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## Abstract

This arts-based thesis, written from my perspective as a Manitoba Mennonite woman and English Language Arts educator, is a memoir of books and reading. As a voracious reader, I am dismayed by the general perception of literacy in public schools as being a set of measureable tasks, and I have found that reading, in particular, has become divorced from its traditional link to life-giving and sacred things. In this thesis, I used life writing to share some of my reading history to illustrate, in part, the degree to which books may enrich our lives by helping us understand the past, present, and future – but only if we allow them to do so.

## Acknowledgements

To my husband, Steve, who was willing to bid adieu to his family and friends, quit his job and find a new one, sell our house, move to a new city, and postpone his beloved hobby so that I could fulfill my dream of a graduate degree: I would call you a great feminist, but I know you'd hate that, so I won't.

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The heart is literate.

It wants to read the pages it has unfurled.

-Rishma Dunlop, *Reading Like a Girl*

## PRELUDE: THE LITERATE HEART

When I unfurl one of the first pages of my memory, my first recollection of reading is a story that belongs, in fact, to my mother:

One of my brothers took my little girl for a Sunday afternoon car ride. She is three-and-a-half. Her hair is blonde and her eyes are blue, and so people want me to put her in beauty pageants, but I tell them I'm not doing that, no way. Her grandparents think she's beautiful, and my mom made a tiny pink crocheted dress that my dad liked to see her wear. I wish it still fit her. When my brother got back with her, he asked me, "Do you know that Pam can read?" She saw all the words on the streets, and she said them to me. I said yes, of course I knew that. "She knows English?" my brother wanted to know. I say, well, she is picking it up as she is reading. We don't speak English at home.<sup>1</sup>

I have no tangible evidence to prove that this story is true. Perhaps Mom is exaggerating. Perhaps my uncle wanted to be an explorer. Experience reminds me, though, that I have never not known the words on the streets. I'm prompted at this point to think of British author and editor Margaret Meek's concept of 'the literate child,' who comes to reading by learning the words she sees around her: I was a perfect illustration of this concept.<sup>2</sup> I think my mother's story is true, and I can't help but feel that Alysoun, the Wife of Bath – who speaks at length in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* on the truth of women's stories and experiences – would corroborate this view.

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<sup>1</sup> Revised excerpt from my reader's diary.

<sup>2</sup> From the book *Learning to Read*.

Shortly after my Sunday afternoon car ride, my family moved from Winnipeg to a homogeneous rural town, and my ‘street smarts’ lay fallow until I reached adulthood and moved away, back to city life, though I continued to read at every opportunity. To borrow the words of British novelist Jeanette Winterson – whose own childhood spent with fundamentalist Christian parents strikes a familiar chord with me – my bibliomania has always approached “something pretty close to hoarding the hair of martyrs and the sweat of saints.”<sup>3</sup> People were afraid of how much I read. From books, I learned things I wasn’t supposed to know. Adults wanted to control my reading habits: if I didn’t read, they forced ‘literacy’ on me; when I was reading, they insisted that I should go outside and play or weed the garden.

I struggle to find a metaphor, something clean and unused, for the place reading has in my life. The first associations are obvious: a taking-in, having not enough food, not enough water, not enough air. Not only are they clichés, in my case they don’t operate well. Though I should feel enriched by my life in books, I see reading as a hardscrabble thing, especially because the act is perceived by many people in my literal-minded Mennonite community as an illicit activity, a time-waster, a substitute for experience.<sup>4</sup> I needed to read, though – needed the escape from a world of rules – even though my desire became filled with guilt, partly because I abandoned my culture’s traditionally

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<sup>3</sup> Winterson, *Art Objects*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> The Mennonites, named after Menno Simons, are Anabaptists whose beliefs began in sixteenth-century western Europe. Mennonites believe in a strictly literal interpretation of the Bible and emphasize discipleship, adult baptism, and pacifism. Nowadays there are Mennonites all over the world, including a large number in the Congo. I am of the Dutch Mennonite variety (my ancestors moved from the Netherlands/Germany to Prussia, then to Russia, and finally to Canada) with some German and Jewish blood.

unwritten language, Plautdietsch, so I could know what written words said.<sup>5</sup> For me, it was one or the other, and English won out. That was the first betrayal.

I find myself apologizing, still, for my desire to look at – and work with – words. For instance, as I considered ideas for this graduate thesis, I resisted the most seductive idea – writing about reading and books – because I knew it would be narcissistic and too pleasurable, and, therefore, inappropriate. Why would anyone want to read about me, anyway? As English professor Jane Tompkins writes in her memoir, *A Life in School*, which I admire greatly: “a voice inside me gets in the way. *You don’t have a story to tell*, it says. [...] *Just who do you think you are?*”<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, I pushed aside the guilt and talked myself into writing about my biblio-obsession. I reasoned that I couldn’t refuse, since I’d already completed a great deal of the work. In my mind, setting it aside would be wasteful, which is anathema in my family. Then, as I began my research into the practice of life writing, I discovered that this memoir fits into a literary tradition of women writing apologetic narratives. Perhaps, I thought, just this once, I could forget about the apologies?

In an arts-based methodology class I attended as a visiting student at York University, one of our assignments was to create a reader’s diary. I wrote compulsively in it every night before I dragged myself to bed, and I read similar works by other writers,

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<sup>5</sup> On the web site [www.plautdietsch.ca](http://www.plautdietsch.ca), Jim Derksen defines Plautdietsch (rough pronunciation is *Ploat’-deetsh*):

Plautdietsch, or Mennonite Low German, was originally a Low Prussian variety of East Low German, with Dutch influence, that developed in the 16th and 17th Century in the Vistula delta area of Royal Prussia, today Polish territory. The word is etymologically cognate with Plattdeutsch, or Low German. Plaut is the same word as German platt or Dutch plat, meaning ‘Low’, but the name Dietsch = Dutch Diets, meaning ‘ordinary language, language of the people’; whereas Deutsch can only refer to German Deutsch.

For an audio taste, the web site [www.plautdietsch.ca](http://www.plautdietsch.ca) contains files from native speakers. For a textual bite, read at least the first chapter of Armin Wiebe’s gloriously comic novel *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*.

<sup>6</sup> *Life in School*, 8.



including *A Reading Diary* by the Canadian bibliophile extraordinaire Alberto Manguel. I ended up with sixty pages of comments about our course readings, books I read when I was a girl, my covert operations for helping my school students read passionately, a list of favourite poets, a list of books I want to read, a list of books I ought to read, and so on. Sixty pages! My obsession about my reader's diary germinated into the raw material I needed for the thesis work, a memoir that is cross-pollinated with other genres and in which I want to convey some of the ways in which my interactions with text construct (underpin, decorate, overrun) my life, including my role as a Language Arts educator. More specifically, I thought that the trajectory of childhood to adulthood reading might be interesting to study, particularly because, ironically, my experiences in undergraduate and graduate literary studies turned me off reading for a long time. For me the course is more cyclical than straight since, for example, I read *Pride and Prejudice* as a child, and resisted *Where the Wild Things Are* until I was an adult. In general, lying on the table as possibilities for creating this thesis are all of my ideas, beliefs, passions, images, and memories elicited when I think of *books* and *reading*. To focus my writing, I have selected four particular titles from the home of my memory. Despite my desire to write about hundreds of books, three seemed manageable, given the limitations of a thesis. For too many reasons to list, I couldn't restrict myself to the magical number three, and so I settled on four, which I will detail below. This selective process of the method – picking and choosing stories of my reading experiences – fits the discerning nature of memoir, which often contains fragments and things left unsaid. I have, regretfully, omitted many seductive reading experiences.

What I am attempting to accomplish in this memoir is twofold. Not only am I writing selections from my reading history, but I am also providing a catalogue of the writers who have been so generous as to deposit their honed words in my memory, including authors of academic work, picture books, young adult literature, classic and contemporary novels, poems, memoirs, oral tales, and so on. And so please do not be startled to see mentioned everyone from Roland Barthes (theorist) to Jeanette Winterson (contemporary novelist) to Louise Rennison (comedienne and writer of fiction for young women) to Amiri Baraka (poet). Incorporated in my catalogue, as well, are the fictional characters who live in my mind, such as Oliver Twist, the Wife of Bath, the baby Beloved, the delightfully neurotic Georgia Nicolson, and the little boy who rules Wild Things in the jungle. The sudden appearances on the stage of these contrasting creators and characters are symptomatic of how my memory works when I write: I skip in the sky through quotations and scenes and ideas and images, all of which seem to appear out of nowhere, and which contribute colour to what I am trying to say; they add a sense, paradoxically, of rootedness to my work, I think. Speaking pragmatically: all of these disparate creators and characters act as my secondary sources. For instance, that is why, when I began writing this introduction by alluding to the truth of my mother's experience, the first person who spoke to me was Chaucer's boisterous Alysoun, and, of course, because she will not be silenced, I was compelled to include her in the scene; as it turns out, Alysoun's incursions bolster my thoughts about women's stories as valuable entities. I will try, as often as I'm able, to provide introductions to the various people who enter my work, but because what I have created resembles a reader's diary – which often appears to be a bricolage by nature – often these entrances and exits may be surprising.

As you continue to read this work, you may notice that I've used many pages to lay out a foyer, including my rationale, of sorts, as well as a meditation on my choice of arts-based education research and my practice of life writing. I thought at first that these sections were inordinately long, but I realized that everything is necessary so that I may provide a roomy entry into what I promise will be a somewhat unconventional piece.

When the introductions have concluded, we begin to walk, and I write about the associations that arise for me between my reading and my life. In the first chapter of the memoir proper, entitled "Reading with Corrective Lenses," I talk about The Good Book, the Bible, as a way to frame my words so that you may begin to understand my outlook in general. (For instance, I hope you'll see why, when I come across the word 'fire,' my mind leaps associatively between Moses and the burning bush, a virgin's lamplight at a wedding party, and the flames of hell, as well as my father's near-immolation during a farm accident which nearly scared the hell *out* of my family.) Next, with the Bible as a lens, it made sense to me in "Questions I Ask" to write about words that become suspect, and even banned ('banned' being a pun on the Mennonite tradition of excommunicating wayward church members), and I talk in particular about our indigenous writer, Di Brandt, who has been shunned from our community for speaking truths that were most difficult to hear. Third, in "A Room of My Own," I accept Virginia Woolf's directive to think back through mothers – perhaps to continue work on a matrilineal tradition of reading – as a way to call to the lost and the excluded. In "The Wild Things," I touch on my vagrancy from books – or rather, what drove me away – and on how I've tried to return to them, a homeland, in my effort to recover the sacred. Finally, in "Let's Get

Lost,” I consider my teaching life to think about what I’ve done well in my reading pedagogy, and where I may need to travel from this point.

Dear Reader,

To prepare myself for this act of life writing, I, of course, read numerous books and articles on the topic. One of the critics whose words lingered with me the most was Marlene Kadar, a professor at York University who studies the theory of life writing. She speaks briefly in the article “Reading Life Writing” about the involvement of the audience in this genre; in particular, she says that the reader “who feels welcomed is the reader most likely to succeed at reading.”<sup>7</sup> I was struck by the importance of a reception, and perhaps to establish some reciprocity between us, I thought it desirable to include a brief greeting from me to you.

A simple wish: I hope you enjoy reading my work. I know I’ve put you in a somewhat awkward predicament – encouraging you to join me in creating this text, though this is such a personal work, and so it would be socially awkward to critique it, I think.<sup>8</sup> I wish I could circumvent this pitfall. I don’t relish your challenge of using a critical lens to read a personal work; perhaps this task is impossible. I do, however, welcome your words.

Love,

Pam

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<sup>7</sup> “Reading Life Writing,” x.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., in the article “Autobiography,” Madeleine Grumet expresses this particular concern about autobiographical research in the field of Education.

## Chapter 1

### WEIGHING PIGS FOR THE MARKET: THE *PROBLEM* OF READING

In February 2009, I co-presented a joint memoir of books and reading at a popular culture and American culture conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Our panel related stories of our childhood, our adolescence, and our adulthood immersed in words on pages, and we shared a slideshow of complementary pictures, including photographs of us reading as children (my favourite entry was a recent shot of my nine-year-old niece posing with me: we're both wearing tiaras and holding gifts of books). One audience member, an American professor of Education, responded to our work by expressing her longing to encourage in her teacher candidates a similar passion for reading amid the ruins of the *No Child Left Behind* policy, which has left in its wake an emphasis on outcomes-based learning and standards tests. Together we discussed the frustrating impossibility of encouraging in children a passion for books amid periodic trends for educators to teach reading as a set of discrete tasks.

Our consensus: we link reading to love, desire, passion – nothing quantifiable; everything physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual. We understand that the importance of literature to humans should not require debate. Aidan Chambers, a well-known British author and critic, talks about the significance of literature in our lives (hence, why we need to read and listen and speak and write):

We are all human beings. And the thing that's important about literature is this. It concerns itself with one of the few attributes that makes us human: language. Not just language itself, for birds seem to have a kind of language, and dolphins, and ... such little creatures as bees. So not just language, but language

used in the particular form we call narrative, in which I include stories and poems and drama and the kind of writing that tries to tell us what happened, to whom, and why.

I would go so far as to say that it is this particular use of language – the literary use that some have called ‘storying’ – that defines humanity and makes us human.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps even more importantly, the children in our care require the use of storying. Most adults preach about books and reading and storytelling as key ways for children to grow in the world, to develop autonomy, to cultivate identity. In his own engaging memoir about childhood reading, *The Child that Books Built*, Francis Spufford says that story’s lucidating way with experience rushes into the primary fashioning of a self, the very first construction of a person out of the materials of environment, and family, and reading silence.<sup>2</sup> To underscore the significance to children of stories, Aidan Chambers quotes James Moffett from the book *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*:

Whereas adults differentiate their thought with specialized kinds of discourse, generalization, and theory, children must, for a long time, make narrative do for all. They utter themselves almost entirely through stories – real or invented – and they apprehend what others say through story.<sup>3</sup>

If this statement is true, as Chambers notes, do we really need to make any other claim for the absolute importance for children to come to reading?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Booktalk*, 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Child that Books Built*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> From *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, p. 49; quoted in Aidan Chambers’s *Booktalk*, p. 4.

To illustrate Moffett's words: do you remember a story that changed you when you were a child? I do. Louisa May Alcott's classic *Little Women* fell into my hands at just the right time – I think I was twelve or thirteen years old. As I read thirstily, my gangly legs draped over the sofa's arm, I began to recognize the character Josephine March as someone whom I aspired to become: as someone who *went away from home* and did things that were important to her, including writing. I read the world through this story and then others, and I wouldn't be surprised to find myself saying that Jo was a first step on the way to feminism, though, at the time of my reading *Little Women*, I was unfamiliar with the many meanings of that particular word.

In this chapter, I've tried to describe a rich view of literacy that is antithetical to the periodic trend in Education to treat it as a measurable activity – by the use of test scores – which is akin to weighing pigs for market. (My dad, a retired teacher and hog farmer, would appreciate that analogy; I must remember to tell it to him.)<sup>5</sup> As an English teacher who believes in a nuanced, fluid, and contextual view of literacy, I cope in a world in which I've learned that there exists a pendulum governing the perception of how we ought to teach reading to children, and that it swings periodically between viewing reading as an experience involving choice, voice, and freedom (in other words, an endeavour that is resonant within the context of people's lives) to handling reading as a measurable activity (that is, a set of skills that students must obtain to meet the requirements of an objectives-based curriculum). I don't do well with the latter view. I

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<sup>4</sup> A relevant statistic from Statistics Canada: more than 9 million Canadian adults (i.e., between the ages of 16-65) experience difficulties with language, literacy, and numeracy.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Lissa Paul for making this apt comparison.



don't know how to think about reading that way, nor how to teach it. And that is partly why I have written this memoir: to share what I know from experience about reading as a good and meaningful activity.

Hélène Cixous:

We don't always think of this because we no longer read; we used to read when we were children and knew how violent reading can be. The book strikes a blow, but you, with your book, strike the outside world with an equal blow.<sup>6</sup>

Francis Spufford: "Look at me! (Don't look at me!) I'm cramming myself over here, I'm gobbling worlds!"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cixous, *Three Steps*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Spufford, *The Child that Books Built*, 5.

## Chapter 2

### ARTS-BASED EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: WE ARE FULL OF PARAGRAPHS THAT NEED REVISING

Initially, I attempted to create a more conventional research design. I know that I should not apologize for negatives and absences – for the things I choose not to do – but I think it's important for you to know why I'm beginning this chapter with an explanation. When I began my graduate degree, I prepared myself to write a traditional (calm, persuasive, telling) social sciences thesis, as I was unaware that there were alternate ways of producing knowledge in Education.<sup>1</sup> As I completed the coursework for my master's degree, I began to learn about the nature of research in Education, including the difference between qualitative and quantitative work. I chose the former, initially, as a location in which I could move with some comfort and style. I prepared myself for an interpretive approach, possibly with a feminist slant, to a research question, and I began thinking of various topics. I didn't anticipate that what I would eventually choose to do would work on the borders of the qualitative tradition.

Almost two years ago, I took what I found to be a brilliant and unconventional class, entitled *The Act of Writing: The Essay* at York University with Dr Rishma Dunlop who created a stir with her doctoral dissertation in Education, a novel entitled *Boundary Bay*. The students, unable to tolerate our dull course title, renamed ourselves *The Writers'*

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<sup>1</sup> Hell, I didn't even know the difference between qualitative and quantitative research, given that my Bachelor of Education curriculum at the University of Manitoba was painfully practical – more about *praxis* (sans a solid theoretical foundation, in my opinion) than anything else – and I've since discovered the provincial government's heavy hand in the curriculum for teacher candidates, thereby explaining my impression of being trained rather than educated. (E.g., see Sadowy, "Resisting an Assault," 11-12.)

*Salon*, and together we read and wrote unusual essays. On November 29, 2007, after a meeting of The Salon, I wrote the following entry in my reader's diary:

Nearly every class, I have an epiphany, and that's no exaggeration.

I have mountains of work due in the next ten days, and my chronic neck and back pain have been very bad this week; when it's like that, I also feel as though I have a most wicked case of the flu. I'm far behind on my final papers.

However, I am beginning to realize that this pain tends to flare up at points in my life when I'm heading down the wrong path, especially when I'm not doing the work I need to do, and that seems to be the case now, as well. So tonight, on the way home, I made a decision to follow a creative path for my thesis. I want to write a memoir: the teacher that books built. I've read a memoir entitled *The Child that Books Built*, and I want to borrow that idea. It will be theoretical, critical, academic, etc.

Magically, my neck feels better. My body is my barometer, it seems. Blue skies are in the forecast. Though I am afraid of hearing NO.)

I thought about how the ideas in the above entry linked together, and how they arose from experiences in graduate reading. How the layers of my self were peeling away because of the artifact of the book, including the act of reading it. I want to be clear, though, that I didn't feel as though I was reaching any essential being; rather, I was most interested in studying the effects that reading has had on me, in all my different selves, masks, and roles: all the splintered bits held in one body.

As I considered possible approaches to this topic, our collective work in The Writers' Salon drew my attention to the existence of something called arts-based

educational research (ABER), a developing methodology that is championed by such Education theorists as Elliot Eisner. ABER (alternately called arts-based, -led, or – informed practice), which borrows heavily from concepts in the arts and humanities, values both academic and aesthetic qualities in research and cares about communicating people’s lived experiences in thoughtful and imaginative ways. This emerging methodology owes much to poststructural thought which poses that language is not fixed and authoritative; rather, it is fluid, dynamic, and works in unexpected and contradictory ways. ABER researchers play with these qualities in their work, much of which is experimental and transgressive, and they borrow poststructural ways of seeing (such as undermining the traditional hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the researched). This methodology allowed me to browse among a limitless variety of methods with which to collect, analyze, and present my imaginative research. Poetry, dance, and installation artwork are only a few of the options on the spectrum, and the researcher’s ability to cross-pollinate among them is considered a virtue. Although most often it is the visual arts that take centre stage in ABER, creative writing is a valued entity, partly for its performative potential (as Susan Finley remarks upon at length in “Arts-Based Inquiry”), and creative writing happens to be the art I love the most.

I had an immediate desire to use the arts and humanities to scaffold my project because of my background as an emerging writer and an English literature honours student: my manner of thought, interdisciplinary and nonlinear, lends itself well to ABER which not only values both academic and aesthetic considerations in research but also collects ways of thinking and doing from other disciplines. Arts-based practice mirrors my life in which I create art, and use it as a strategy through which I attempt to make

some sense of things, including my role as a teacher. If art and life are connected, as Maxine Greene implies beautifully throughout the book *Variations on a Blue Guitar* (for example, she comments on how our brushes with the arts “affect our being in the world”) it seems right for me to use creative practice to tell stories of my life in reading.<sup>2</sup> This is my attempt to escape from the confinement of literal thinking, which I need in my life as I am from a culture in which most people are socialized to believe in the literal interpretation of the written word (despite the people’s intimate contradictory knowledge of the power of water over rock). Arts-based educational research, with its roots in poststructural ways of thinking and being and doing, lets me try to say what I mean outside of my cultural community’s belief that each word is a stone.

From the first meeting of the Writers’ Salon, we struggled with the question: What constitutes an essay, exactly? Academic writing, as we were always taught in the English department, had to be a certain way: formal and formulaic. No ‘I’ should exist anywhere. But it is so hard for me to care when the words are spun by an invisible hand.

With the help of unconventional essays by writers such as Anne Carson and Susan Sontag, I have come to realize that, all along, I perceived essay-writing as a genre, when I needed to see it, as well, as a form of critical practice. Ah! As I write, in a real act of communication, I stop pretending that both the author and the reader are absent. I act, instead, as though I want to be read (here I’m referencing a quotation by Marianna Torgovnick used in Marlene Kadar’s essay “Coming to Terms”), and I remember Roland Barthes’s concept of the ‘writerly’ text, which invites the reader to the party.<sup>3</sup> Art, then,

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<sup>2</sup> Greene, *Variations*, 151.

<sup>3</sup> “Coming to Terms,” 2.

becomes a form and process of inquiry for all involved parties. Here is the best example I can think of with which to make my point. In Rachel Blau Du Plessis's *The Pink Guitar*, in which she discusses the development of a female written aesthetic, she undermines patriarchal writing using a variety of techniques (her work is nonlinear; it has gaps). The result is stunning. This, to me, is essay writing in its truest sense of the word essay: *to try*. Although this trying isn't the usual sense of a teacher giving you an *A* for effort. It's an attempt, a challenge, subversion, an unexpected victory. Everyday life is sacred, and washing the dishes is a form of supplication. A traditional academic essay, such as the ones I wrote with its "celestially detached brain," could not accomplish this work.<sup>4</sup>

I was concerned about my selection of arts-based methodology, given its relatively marginalized status in the social sciences community (it was not mentioned in any of my M.Ed. textbooks), until I came across a recent essay by Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor in which she points out that Education theory's history is based, in fact, in the arts. This comment piqued my interest, especially given how the face of Education theory has changed, then, since its inception. Elliot Eisner wrote the influential study *The Enlightened Eye* in part to explore how the arts and humanities, which are traditionally undervalued in educational inquiry, might be unearthed to help us "better understand our schools and classrooms."<sup>5</sup> I thought: well, then, this is the perfect point of my life at which to combine my love of art with my interest in research. In "Persistent Tensions in Arts-Based Research," Eisner defends the university as the place for students to think imaginatively and to use new methods, and I couldn't agree more: if I can't dream and

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<sup>4</sup> Griffin, "The Red Shoes," 306. Also, I want to include this quotation from Nancy K. Miller: "I prefer the gossip grain of situated writing to the academic sublime" (*Getting Personal*, xi).

<sup>5</sup> *The Enlightened Eye*, 2.

experiment in this setting, where else may I do these things? I've usually found the university to be a liberating place, a space in which I can say what I think without fear of censure, unlike my life outside of academia.

And then, much to my delight, I began to unearth the methodology's emerging literature. To begin at the beginning (not always the best place to start, but it works for me here), Eisner helped to initiate interest in this area, and he has written extensively in its defense. He and Tom Barone say that the idea of 'arts based educational research' is defined by:

the presence of certain aesthetic qualities or design elements that infuse the inquiry and its writing. Although these aesthetic elements are in evidence to some degree in all educational research activity, the more pronounced they are, the more the research may be characterized as arts based.<sup>6</sup>

Barone and Eisner go on to elucidate these design elements which include such qualities as 'expressive language' and evidence of the 'personal signature' of the writer. Recently, Eisner has clarified this definition by adding that "[a]rts-based research is not simply the application of a variety of loose methods, it is the result of artistically crafting the description of the situation *so that it can be seen from another angle*" (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> In agreement, Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor is reluctant to define arts-based educational research in opposition to 'traditional' research; rather, she says, it is just another way to see, and it provide new ways in which to share information, particularly with people outside of the academy. I am attracted to the notion that ABER provides a different sort

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<sup>6</sup> "Arts-Based Educational Research," 73.

<sup>7</sup> "Persistent Tensions in Arts-Based Research," 22.

of lens. The aesthetic framework in education begins with the act of perception. As Eisner explains: to truly *see* “requires an enlightened eye.”<sup>8</sup> After all, as Maxine Greene writes: “it is in the world as it *appears* to us that we look for resemblances, seek out connections, identify possibilities, go in quests of meaning.”<sup>9</sup> I am interested in the open quality that this act of sight – which is always subjective, as Greene notes with the use of the visual reference ‘appears’ – lends to Education research, including what it might mean for researchers, participants, and the potential audience of the research.

To move back to the discussion of Eisner and Barone's ideas about ABER, I wonder if they have conveyed the concept through the use of old terms. Specifically, I think that they are viewing this methodology through a modernist lens; their conception of a story, for example, is very Western in notion and follows the modernist idea of a plot. (John W. Creswell echoes this point, as well, in his textbook commentary on narrative inquiry, in which he emphasizes the importance of locating the beginning, the middle, and the end.) From what I have seen up to this point, I think that arts-based educational research tends to use more of a poststructural outlook in which stories don't follow traditional paths - as stories change depending on where they begin - and in which we must attend to subject position. I would argue that not only is ABER a different way by which to convey and perceive research, but that it operates outside the established paradigm of Education research.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Enlightened Eye*, 1. The full quotation is worth repeating here: “If the visual arts teach one lesson, it's that seeing is central to making. Seeing, rather than mere looking, requires an enlightened eye: this is as true and as important in understanding and improving education as in creating a painting.”

<sup>9</sup> *Variations*, 12.



In contrast, the use of poststructural thought is evident in ABER's emerging subfield of a/r/tography (which boasts a large Canadian contingent, including Stephanie Springgay and Rita L. Irwin), in which the often conflicting roles of *artist*, *researcher*, and *teacher* - each of which engage "a critical hermeneutic, self-reflexive practice of art making and writing" - become deeply connected.<sup>10</sup> A/r/tography "entangles and performs" Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the *rhizome* and transforms the traditional conceptions of theory and practice: "theory *as* practice becomes an embodied, living space of inquiry."<sup>11</sup> The rhizome "activates the *in-between*; an invitation to explore the interstitial spaces of art making, researching, and teaching."<sup>12</sup> This form of research calls for links between artistic forms and text; knowing, doing, and making (in reference to Aristotle's articulation of three types of thought: *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poesis*) fuse and diffuse, creating *métissage*, an explicitly Canadian notion in Irwin's conceptualization: a language of the in-between for artists-researchers-teachers.<sup>13</sup>

I am not sure yet what to think of a/r/tography - though I do like its emphasis on breaking down the boundary between theory and practice - partly because I haven't decided what I think about some of its key figures of speech. Maybe this is trivial, but I know you can tell a lot about something by its tropes. First, the rhizome is becoming a tired metaphor, a situation which I find most unfortunate because I liked Deleuze and

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<sup>10</sup> Bickel, "Who will Read this Body?," 126.

<sup>11</sup> Irwin and Springgay, "A/r/tography," 106.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., "A/r/tography," 106.

<sup>13</sup> I don't understand Irwin's definition of this term, incidentally, so I found a more fleshed-out description of the word in "Embracing the World, with All Our Relations: Métissage as an Artful Braiding," by Hasebe-Ludt, et al. They explain that the term's Latin and Greek etymology gives rise to the idea of mixing disparate ingredients, with a result that synthesizes the individual parts into something new.

Guattari's articulation of this phenomenon when I first encountered it: it struck me as apt and humourous. Having grown up on a farm where we dealt each spring and summer with unwanted root systems in our large garden, I have an intimate and literal knowledge of rhizomes, and so extending my activated knowledge of dandelions and raspberries and the dreaded *fatte hahn* (I think this weed is called *purslane* in English) helped me learn how to read such rhizomatic works as Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*, which rewrites the quest novel. I understand why the rhizome is such an attractive metaphor in a/r/tographic circles, but it has become overused. Second, I am wary of using the word *métissage*. Irwin expresses that this word is an explicitly Canadian concept, and this idea doesn't sit well with me, personally, as I feel that it may be an appropriation of a Métis cultural term. Considering this country's history of colonialism, as well as the fact that I am a white woman, I am not comfortable with assuming the use of this word until further work has addressed its cultural appropriateness. And so I remain undecided on this model of ABER.

As Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, and Sylvia W. Kind comment in another article, 'A/r/tography as Living Inquiry Through Art and Text,' several other ABER models exist, including "research as performative, research as provocative, and research as poetic."<sup>14</sup> I am still familiarizing myself with these ABER forms, although I must say that I identify strongly with Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre's description of writing as a method of inquiry. Their account of writing appears to fit with the idea of 'research as poetic,' and I'll write more about this further on. Again, I'm still

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<sup>14</sup> "A/r/tography," 898.

learning.<sup>15</sup>

As I said earlier, I believe that I have stepped outside of qualitative research, or at least I am pretty sure that I am operating in a borderland. I struggled with my qualitative dilemma for many months - I thought I was conducting qualitative research by default. Because I was completing a social sciences degree, it had to be either quantitative or qualitative (right?), and since I was certainly not doing a quantitative project, I reasoned that I lay in the default position. But my thesis advisor suggested to me that my work was not really qualitative. Hm. After thinking about this for a few weeks, and noting my chronic annoyance with the sterile terms 'data collection' and 'data analysis' in my writing, I mused about what I really trying to accomplish. Personally, I'm comfortable with not providing definitions and a firm point of departure, since I tend to write things that are relatively open to interpretation (often to a fault), but many other people are not, so I knew I'd have to generate some kind of response. Fortunately - and I find that this happy coincidence happens often when reading for research - I accidentally came across a *Qualitative Inquiry* journal article (which I mentioned a few paragraphs ago) in which Springgay, Irwin, and Kind state that arts-based education research operates outside of the qualitative tradition, partly because it doesn't fit into the existing criteria for qualitative inquiry, and so it makes sense to consider ABER a methodology in its own right. I agree with this statement, for the most part, particularly because I like the authors' emphasis on how ABER's view of interdisciplinarity (as a rupture in which new paths are

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<sup>15</sup> You may wonder, as you read this, why I'm not using much of the vocabulary of qualitative social science research. E.g., I don't mention *autoethnography*, which should be an obvious choice, considering that this is a self-study. I thought at first that this wasn't an autoethnography - partly because on the continuum of self to social, I believed my research veered more to the left - but now I've come to disagree with myself. Alternately, I'd be interested to have a qualitative researcher 'read' my work as autoethnography and tell me how that goes.

found) means that it has stepped away from the qualitative tradition in favour of “new courses of action.”<sup>16</sup> Though I don’t know if I can say firmly one way or the other where ABER ‘fits,’ I stand convinced that I’m in a blurry area that is open to possibility, and how exciting is that?

And so, I know now that I am working among the models of ABER, although I don't know, really, which camp suits me. At the same time, I don't know if it's important to choose one. In general, I am pleased that I may incorporate into my thesis my ways of being in the world, using my preferred tools and the knowledge I have gathered along the way. It seems that my graduate degree has been focused on what was missing all along for me – *theoria* – from which I have become better able to think about my *praxis*, and commit to lifelong *poeisis*. This, for me, is a joyful thing.

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<sup>16</sup> Springgay et al., “Living Inquiry,” 897.

## Chapter 3

### LIFE WRITING: THE MIND AS BOOK

From theorist Roland Barthes arises an oft-quoted comment about the universality of narrative:

All classes, all human groups, have their narratives . . . . Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.<sup>1</sup>

Stories are delightfully inescapable, for “wherever there are people they use language to tell stories.”<sup>2</sup> We need narratives, declares novelist Jeanette Winterson, as we “mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others.”<sup>3</sup> In *Booktalk*, Aidan Chambers comments passionately on our human need to share our tales: “While we can tell each other what is going on inside us and be told what is going on inside other people we remain human, sane, hopeful, creative.”<sup>4</sup> In this sense, telling our narratives to other people helps us with our very survival. Everything is a story – after all, as God says, in the beginning was the word – and that people make sense of their experiences through the use of narrative. Even the so-called ‘illiterate’ Oliver Twist, while lying convalescing on a bed, looked for meaning as he read the pattern of light on the ceiling.

In the field of Education, D.J. Clandinin and F.M. Connelly say that human lives are constructed by stories: people weave their identities through their own and others’

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<sup>1</sup> *Image, Music, Text*, 79.

<sup>2</sup> Chambers, *Booktalk*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Art Objects*, 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Booktalk*, 5.

stories, and they experience daily interactions and events as stories. Every phenomenon in the social world, then, becomes a meeting place for individual and collective narratives. In the narrative approach, the story becomes an object of study that focuses on how people make sense of events and actions in their lives.<sup>5</sup> And so, it seems that I am on a path of narrative inquiry – which Clandinin and Connelly describe as “stories lived and told” – collecting accounts about my lived experience of reading.<sup>6</sup>

Problems arise, however, with the narrow definition of narrative inquiry that is provided by Clandinin and Connelly. I worry about their description of the function of narrative inquiry *vis a vis* other research traditions. Specifically, Clandinin and Connelly posit two ‘grand narratives’ in educational research: they label one tradition as ‘reductionist,’ in which researchers pull phenomena into parts in order to analyze them, and the other is termed ‘formalist,’ in which researchers base their work on theoretical positions. Clandinin and Connelly say that narrative inquiry exists on the outskirts of these two traditions. I can’t comment on the reductionist tradition – I think I don’t have enough experience to critique it appropriately – but I do take exception to their critique of those who base their work on theoretical stances, as they say that theory eclipses the personal. I find this an odd view of theory, considering that their entire book consists of theorizing about narrative theory. As well, I believe that good use of a theoretical position illuminates the lived life. I feel discounted by their point of view, actually, since I often rely on theory to think through my life and to imagine possibilities for the future. For

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., Chase, “Narrative Inquiry”; Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*; Creswell, “Five Qualitative Approaches”; Neuman, *Social Research Methods*.

<sup>6</sup> *Narrative Inquiry*, 20.

example, my readings in maternal teaching theory (e.g., Sara Ruddick and Nancy Chodorow) helped me understand that my pedagogy is maternal in style, even though I am not a mother. I cannot imagine writing autobiographically – constructing and reciting my narrative – without trying on different theoretical lenses to help explain what I am trying to say.

Additionally, Lissa Paul points out to me that she finds Clandinin and Connelly's approach narrow as it concentrates on theme and misses out on narratology's discussion on how a story is told. In the future, this is an idea I will need to consider in more depth, particularly to compare Clandinin and Connelly's thematic approach to, say, that of Barbara Czarniawska, who engages instead in plot as narrative's vehicle.<sup>7</sup> I thought that the significance of plot had been taken to task by poststructural theorists and authors and other artists, but I see that Czarniawska might disagree. My research in this area continues.

Considering the degree to which the telling of the tale matters, I decided that I needed to step outside of traditional Education research for other ways to consider narrative inquiry, and so I looked at the humanities and at cutting-edge work in Education. For instance, I perused the work of Gérard Genette, just to see what narratological alternatives look like. I read literature professor Barbara Hardy's *Tellers and Listeners* and appreciated her description of narrative:

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<sup>7</sup> Czarniawska, *Narratives in Social Science Research*.

The stories of our days and the stories in our days are joined in that autobiography we are all engaged in making and remaking, as long as we live, which we never complete, though we all know how it is going to end.<sup>8</sup>

This quotation, which portrays the everydayness and universality of narrative, appeals to me, partly because Hardy is acknowledging the intrinsic link between narrative and autobiography – an association that I’m attempting to develop in this memoir. Hardy also says that narrative “must be seen as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life.”<sup>9</sup> To accomplish this movement from my life to this work, *writing-as-method* guides my research process, including my creation and interpretation of material (that is, what qualitative researchers call ‘data collection’ and ‘data analysis’). In “Writing: A Method of Inquiry,” Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre describes writing as “nomadic inquiry” – a term which she elucidates in “Nomadic Inquiry in the Smooth Spaces of the Field” – and explains that

writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery. Many writers in the humanities have known this all along.<sup>10</sup>

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I have learned that writing is a miracle: most unexpectedly, I learn what I want to say as I’m handwriting or typing the words. I’m often surprised to see on the page thoughts and ideas and beliefs that I didn’t know I possessed. (Alberto Manguel comments in his reading diary on this phenomenon of writing – its magical and intuitive qualities – and how he becomes allowed to “think

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<sup>8</sup> *Tellers and Listeners*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Tellers and Listeners*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> “Writing,” 967.



without an established destination.”)<sup>11</sup> In terms of social science research, I am drawn to Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre’s description of her research process which relied on writing *as* data collection and *as* data analysis.<sup>12</sup> She wrote – threads, thoughts, dreams – to think and to make connections, declaring that “[t]hought happened in the writing.”<sup>13</sup> When I read that sentence, I felt as though I was coming home, with its familiarity and comforts. In brief, I would describe my process as a kind of close reading that is influenced by my undergraduate experiences in literature and history. To suit the nature of this imaginative research, I wanted to use a more intuitive method of writing/analyzing, one that might parallel the intimate way of ‘reading like a girl’ (in reference to Rishma Dunlop’s collection of poetry by the same name), one that resembles how people often think: in fragments and in surprising leaps. As I’ve said earlier, ABER relies on techniques from the humanities, including strategies for analysis, and so what I’ve expressed here is not unusual by any means.

In the beginning stages of this project, I couldn’t articulate my vision for the framework of my writing. The idea of developing a before-the-fact grammar for my story felt absurd and even counter-productive.<sup>14</sup> I’m familiar with writing – any kind of writing

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<sup>11</sup> *A Reading Diary*, 113. Interestingly, Manguel comments in the fragment that follows this quotation that, despite his eventual writing destination, the reader “contradicts the writer’s method, whatever that may be.”

<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the use of writing as the means for data collection and analysis tears down the divide between the two – thereby deconstructing the term *method* – and allowing room for different means of knowledge production.

<sup>13</sup> “Writing,” 970. Manguel, in *A Reading Diary*, also describes this phenomenon: “sometimes the words fall precisely into place as I follow a thought in my writing, as if, in the unraveling of that thought, shapes and sounds returned to a pre-established order that seems exactly right” (203).

– as a drawn-out, disjointed, painful affair. I never know what it is that I am trying to say until I reach the end, and I’ve learned that many writers operate in a similar fashion.<sup>15</sup>

John Dewey even commented in the nearly century-old *Art as Experience* on the nonlinear phenomenon of writing, and so that ought to solidify my position on the matter. (Here I smile.) Dewey even says: “Those who carry on their work as a demonstration of a preconceived thesis may have the joys of egotistic success but not that of fulfillment of an experience for its own sake.”<sup>16</sup> Agreed ... although I wish I knew what it was like to begin at the beginning and end at the end!

To accomplish the task I set for myself, I have turned to *life writing* as a way to think through my words. In life writing, the author writes about her or his own life or that of another person; the genre includes such forms as autobiography, biography, memoir, journals, letters, oral history, blogs, and even Facebook. I’ve chosen to rely on Marlene Kadar’s inclusive definition of life writing as both a genre and a critical practice.<sup>17</sup> I appreciate her expansive description of the term, partly because it includes more kinds of writing that have traditionally been marginalized (especially sorts of writing that are often associated with women, such as diaries and lists), and partly because it includes the reader in the process of creation. In life writing, the narrator’s key position relative to the writing – as someone fully present in the text – “creates a subject position for the

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<sup>14</sup> I was reminded of my high school English classes, for which we had to submit essay outlines; I wrote the essay first and then extracted its main points in order to create the sketch. It’s likely that most of my peers used the same strategy.

<sup>15</sup> From what I have learned about the writing process, this is not an unusual manner in which to work (e.g., see the Richardson and St. Pierre article to which I referred at the beginning of this section).

<sup>16</sup> *Art as Experience*, 144.

<sup>17</sup> “Coming to Terms,” 3.

reader.”<sup>18</sup> The reader, then, is encouraged to “develop and foster his/her own self-consciousness in order to [...] humanize and make less abstract (which is not to say less mysterious) the self-in-the-writing.”<sup>19</sup> A good way to begin my balancing act between the text and the reader, I think.

I lean heavily on the memoir which is a popular genre with a long history. Jill Ker Conway begins *When Memory Speaks* by wondering why the memoir is so popular, and though that is a question, which, for lack of space, I cannot address here, I think it bears repeating that we seem to live in a confessional age, a time of secret-sharing, of airing out the past (think for instance of guest divulgences on Oprah Winfrey’s television show). Personally, I read memoirs mainly because I love to hear stories about people’s lives. I care about rememberings, imaginings, musings; so enlightening, so untrustworthy.<sup>20</sup> For my Bachelor of Arts degree, I often chose for the topic of my papers the subject of memory – which has its own branch of critical literature – especially ways in which we reconstruct it and use it to address the past. I wrote one of my favourite papers about Christine de Pizan’s medieval *The Book of the City of Ladies* in which she hinges memory on the buildings of her textual city. My travel-worn Dutch Mennonite ancestors - who moved from Holland and northern Germany to Prussia (now Poland), then to Russia (now the Ukraine), and then to Canada – seem to have chosen, in my experience, not to

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<sup>18</sup> “Reading Life Writing,” ix.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>20</sup> Omissions are a part of the nature of memoir – the process is selective, and gaps remain. Those spaces are often the most laden with meaning, as in the case of Louise DeSalvo’s *Vertigo*, which could be read as a conversion narrative – i.e., in terms of her salvation, she moves from her Catholic faith to a belief in hard intellectual work and becomes a successful Virginia Woolf scholar – but nowhere does she describe a definitive moment in which this change takes place, or why. Such provocative pauses and openings are part of this genre’s appeal for many readers. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes explains the value of gaps in the text and identifies that as the feature that distinguishes writerly texts from pasted-over readerly texts; this is valuable for me to remember as I embark on the process of doing my own memory work.

pass down the memories of their persecution (as well as, though they would wish to forget this, how we, the Mennonites, have persecuted others).<sup>21</sup> My way to transgress is writing, to try to make memory *stay*, and so creating a memoir-as-research is my conscious act of rebellion, to borrow the words of Jill Ker Conway, who also notes memoir's accessibility in conversing about life's big questions.<sup>22</sup>

Time to propose a definition, which I often forget to do. In their compendium of women's writing about American second-wave feminism, Rachel Blau Du Plessis and Anita Snitow offer the following statement about the memoir, and the work it attempts to accomplish:

To say 'memoir' [...] announces a goal – of describing events with their affects attached, of examining a complex of acts and feelings in social and personal space, of making an honest and ethical attempt to restore a sense of history's specifics.<sup>23</sup>

In Janet Ellerby's book *Intimate Reading*, in which she braids her story of teenage pregnancy with the memoirs of other American women, she agrees with the above statement, saying that the memoir "serves as an intellectual site where intimate narratives of socially significant memories can publicly resonate."<sup>24</sup> She comments that memoirists try to elicit truer renditions of the past, not only for the purpose of self-study, but to

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<sup>21</sup> Our homeplace is situated on dispossessed First Nations territory. Read more in the essay 'This land I love, this wide, wide prairie,' located in *So this is the world & here I am in it*, by Di Brandt.

<sup>22</sup> *When Memory Speaks*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> "A Feminist Memoir Project," 23.

<sup>24</sup> *Intimate Reading*, 32.

“confront the moral dilemmas of a dissonant culture.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Carolyn Heilbrun, in a series of lectures published by the University of Toronto, says that contemporary women memoirists “search for, or reflect upon, the changes in their lives they have themselves brought about, and which they see as continuing to affect them as they remain in a state of liminality” and write, hoping for a different world.<sup>26</sup> In all three cases, the idea of confronting the dissonant culture is of vital importance, and the way to do it involves reading and writing intimate narratives.

I rely as well on the reader’s diary, which consists of jottings and meditations about the things one has read, and which happens to be another kind of life writing. My writing has been influenced by *A Reading Diary*, in which bibliophile extraordinaire Alberto Manguel tracks a year of rereading his favourite books, intermingling his thoughts on the texts with ruminations on life. His readings of such books as Sei Shonagon’s *The Pillow Book* and Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* act as commentary on world events, particularly 9/11 and President George W. Bush’s incoherent actions during the subsequent ‘War on Terror.’ (The fragmented nature of Manguel’s writing in this book reflects the disjointed state of the world, as he himself notes: “I am gripped by a nauseating feeling of incoherence, of fragments whose lack of meaning does not stem from the fact that they are fragments but from the fact that they belong to an incoherent whole.”)<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the authors’ words encourage him to reflect on himself. As the threads of life and literature become enmeshed in the most interesting ways,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>26</sup> *Women’s Lives*, 45-46.

<sup>27</sup> *A Reading Diary*, 207.

Manguel's reader's diary becomes an autobiographical text. I am reminded of Rishma Dunlop's comment in "Following the Curve of a Sentence" on the link between memoir and the reader's diary:

An individual's history of reading is an autobiography. To write our own memoir of books reminds us, in the writing and re-reading of books, of a sensual engagement with lived experiences that is at once visceral, creative and intellectual, a connection to the individual's consciousness of connections of reading literature with the narratives of life histories.<sup>28</sup>

Francis Spufford notes, too, that his memoir about reading is an "inward autobiography," explaining that "the words we take into ourselves help to shape us."<sup>29</sup> In light of this relationship between these two kinds of life writing, I see that my creation of a hybridized work was inevitable, for how could I dislocate my history of reading from my autobiography? I can't - not when I mediate my life through texts, starting with the Bible in my head and ending with everything else. As well, other forms of life writing infiltrate my text: lists, confessional poetry, letters, testimony, my remembrance of oral history. These choices of forms were both deliberate and accidental. Although I purposely included all of them (because I think they are fascinating ways in which to conduct research), their inclusion did depend on the emerging content. I will act as a *bricoleur*, using any available textual materials, to create a finished piece, hopefully with a montage-like quality.<sup>30</sup> I think, really, that the final product, with its variety of forms,

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<sup>28</sup> *Reading like a Girl*, 59-60.

<sup>29</sup> *The Child that Books Built*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> See Denzin and Lincoln, "Introduction," for a more detailed explanation of bricolage.

retains something of the feeling of a reader's diary. Fortunately, the use of pastiche is welcomed in arts-based research, and so my goal of creating a piece that has the feel of a commonplace book, in the vein of Manguel's diary, is not outlandish.<sup>31</sup>

I want to say that I selected memoir, as well, for entirely practical reasons: when I looked at the best work I accomplished in my university courses, most of it consisted of intimate writing that involved my thoughts about reading and about my culture (these two concepts for me are always intertwined). My choice to write about reading and my heritage seemed highly appropriate, given the point in my life at which I have stepped out of my cultural norms, and given that I am exploring my identity, both personally and professionally, with the use of new terms. Janet Ellerby comments on how memoir is a way to renarrate, reconstitute, to try to make sense of things, and I need to re-member myself (sorry, tired metaphor, but it will have to do for now) at this point in my life. I want to write this memoir in an attempt to make sense of the various cultures in which I have been immersed so that I stop thinking of myself as monstrous for not fitting in where I should (for example, as Carolyn Heilbrun might say). Ellerby remarks that

[m]emoirists write not just for self-awareness but to confront the moral dilemmas of a dissonant culture. If we are to be rigorous interrogators of dominant ideology, we can learn from memoirs not to flatten the complexity of lived experience.<sup>32</sup>

My hope is that writing about selected lived experiences will provide another way to look at such issues of culture. I didn't realize that discussing my particular culture would be

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<sup>31</sup> As well, Kadar mentions that life writing is intrinsically "a blended genre," as it may incorporate elements of fiction and nonfiction, as well as components of art both 'popular' and 'high' ("Reading Life Writing," x).

<sup>32</sup> *Intimate Reading*, xx.

absolutely integral to my thesis. Rather, I did know it was important, knew it was everything, but I intended to leave it in the dust. If you are a fellow Menno who writes, you might understand the frustration of trying to write without always writing about being Mennonite, and especially about being a Mennonite woman: it is monumentally difficult task, and so I thought it would be best if I mentioned it only incidentally, otherwise I knew it would take over the thesis. (I understood that, if my cultural background came to the forefront, I would necessarily have to talk about my separation – in order to write – and that I would have to provide a critique of ‘home’ in some way or another. It is a very predictable part of our literature.) But when I started reading Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir, *The Woman Warrior*, I became curious about the author’s strategy of framing her stories through those of others: other women talk, other stories abound, and nothing is straightforward. I had seen this ‘framing’ method in other pieces of writing; for example, Carol Shields’s novel *The Stone Diaries*, in which Daisy’s story is told through the words of everyone around her. And then, a few days later, my thinking on this matter began to coalesce when I read Sidonie Smith’s article about *The Woman Warrior* in which she writes:

Recognizing the inextricable relationship between an individual’s sense of ‘self’ and the community’s stories of selfhood, Kingston self-consciously reads herself into existence through the stories her culture tells about women.<sup>33</sup>

Jill Ker Conway writes that reading autobiography encourages us to reflect on our own cultural scripts, for, as we read autobiographically, we may see how others have “broken

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<sup>33</sup> Smith, 1058.



the internalized code a culture supplies about how life should be experienced.”<sup>34</sup> I became quite sure, then, that my writing would follow the path of ‘reading myself into existence’ through the community’s stories, especially since I had already begun my writing by using my mother’s voice to talk about myself, as you’ll see when you continue reading. I saw, too, that I had been given a way to write against the script. And so, I realized that addressing ‘The Mennonite Question’ would be inevitable, as I hope you’ll see when you continue reading this document. I will just have to get used to that question taking over my life. Incidentally, in ‘Writing Autobiography,’ bell hooks writes her story with an optimism that startles me, particularly as she begins by saying that she sets out to kill her girlhood self. Through writing autobiographically, hooks performs self-salvation: the act of remembering makes the narrative whole again, through which she rescues herself. I’m somewhat doubtful that I’ll reach a kind of reconciliation through this particular act of writing, but you never know for sure, I guess.

In this context – using writing to save oneself – it shouldn’t be surprising that many memoirists are women. It has become a part of feminist practice to write about private things – for example, second-wave feminists latched onto personal narratives as a way to communicate women’s experiences, as in the case of Du Plessis and Snitow’s edited anthology – and to accept that we can learn through our selves, including, of course, our long-forgotten bodies (e.g., see the work of the French feminists, including Hélène Cixous’s famous essay, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’). Memoir, says Marlene Kadar, may be more attractive to women than autobiography partly because the former is “less formal in organization; or, at least, time does not have to carry the narrative in a

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<sup>34</sup> *When Memory Speaks*, 17.

straight line.”<sup>35</sup> Feminist critics, such as Shari Benstock, Jill Ker Conway, and Sidonie Smith, have explicitly linked gender to this genre, as life writing has become a way for women to bring taboo personal experiences to the public eye. According to Jill Ker Conway (and many other writers),

[t]he mere act of sitting down to write an autobiography broke the code of female respectability, because doing so required a woman to believe that her direct experience, rather than her relationships with others, was what gave meaning to her life.<sup>36</sup>

Conway expresses the problem found in the act of a woman writing about her life:

For the woman autobiographer the major question becomes how to see one’s life whole when one has been taught to see it as expressed through family and bonds with others.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, to recall the work of Nancy Chodorow, women don’t usually think of themselves in opposition to others: women think of themselves through others, through relationships with people. Thus, the issue of a woman thinking her life worthy enough to write about – for other people to view – becomes an interesting problem. I mean, what makes me believe that my life is special enough to write about? Why do I think that another person would want to read this? And how can I even begin to write about my life without expressing it through the terms of family members, friends, and acquaintances? These are all questions to consider as I write and as you read; as we co-create.

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<sup>35</sup> “Reading Life Writing,” xii.

<sup>36</sup> *When Memory Speaks*, 87.

<sup>37</sup> *When Memory Speaks*, 4.

Keeping in mind the bond between gender and genre, it's interesting to note that self-study has become an accepted form of research in the field of Education (e.g., see the work of Madeleine Grumet, William Pinar, Clandinin & Connelly, Ellis & Bochner, and Carl Leggo). In the introduction to *Just Who Do We Think We Are?*, Claudia Mitchell and Sandra Weber comment on teachers' postcolonial experiences and they talk about self-study – which they define as “the idea of questioning what happens in classrooms from the perspective of teachers and teacher educators” – as a way of ‘writing back’: a way to answer, to add a voice, to refuse silence.<sup>38</sup> Carl Leggo, in “Autobiography: Researching our Lives,” provides a lovely meditation on why self-study both inside and outside Education is vital, partly because “we live with too many lies,” and Leggo ends with an invocation for more stories.<sup>39</sup> Critics of self-study may denigrate the method as simple self-absorption.<sup>40</sup> Mitchell, Weber and O'Reilly-Scanlon respond to this concern by saying that nothing about the usual criticisms of memoir as a narcissistic act – the perceived sin of looking inward – precludes the possibility of then gazing outward “towards the political and social.”<sup>41</sup> For instance, in the brilliant *Bitter Milk* (which has become one of my favourite books), Madeleine Grumet layers her mothering life, her teaching life, and her artistic life into a triadic lens through which she finds a powerful way to rethink the enormous field of educational theory and practice. It is clear to me from Grumet's example and from others (e.g., the writings of Sara Ruddick and Rachel

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<sup>38</sup> “Just Who do We Think We Are,” 1.

<sup>39</sup> “Autobiography: Researching our Lives,” 21.

<sup>40</sup> Even Madeleine Grumet, in “Autobiography,” voices concern about the flood of personal narrative, and cautions us about the pitfalls of autobiographical writing.

<sup>41</sup> “Just Who Do We Think We Are,” 4.

Blau Du Plessis), that self-study is a commitment to growth – to personal and social change – as Mitchell and Weber comment in another work, *Reinventing Ourselves as Teachers*, and I think that it offers educators a powerful method through which to share their usually marginalized experiences.

In a world in which women constitute the overwhelming majority of grade-school educators, the memoir (along with other forms of life writing) is a vital form of research in order to learn more about our experiences in teaching, which are often kept under wraps (e.g., see Mitchell, Weber, and O'Reilly-Scanlon's *Just Who Do We Think We Are?*). As Janet Ellerby comments,

[t]here is value in listening carefully to all women's stories, but especially to women who have had to be silent. The memoir is a significant and insurgent genre for countering the current resistance to painful truths about women's lives.<sup>42</sup>

With Ellerby's comment in mind, I hope that my work encourages other women teachers to tell their own valuable stories. In the classic *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun emphasizes the importance for women to come out of isolation to tell stories. She says that we don't do this enough – that we need to tell the truth to each other – particularly because women often think themselves monstrous if they don't fit the conventional plot.<sup>43</sup> I think we can extend this injunction to women educators: let's talk, for the personal knowledge elucidated by memoirs is of vital importance. Consequently, room must be made for these acts of self-disclosure. As Ellerby writes:

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<sup>42</sup> *Intimate Reading*, 155.

<sup>43</sup> *Writing a Woman's Life*, 44-45.

[b]y authorizing memoirlike procedure, responsibly intimate disclosure in locations where we can gather together as friends and acquaintances, colleagues and peers, caretakers and caregivers, fellow learners and fellow citizens, we can learn what needs attending to, what requires our concern. By allowing time for the personal in our classrooms, our churches and synagogues, our workplaces, our civic groups, our shelters, our prisons, our hospitals, and our homes, we can better create the stage for meaningful collective work.<sup>44</sup>

Where better to practice this work than in schools? Clearly, the students of teachers who value memoir also stand to benefit, for

[w]hen we say that understanding our own narrative is a metaphor for understanding the curriculum of our students, we are saying that if you understand what makes up the curriculum of the person most important to you, namely, yourself, you will better understand the difficulties, whys, and wherefores of the curriculum of your students. There is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves.<sup>45</sup>

I came across a statement by William Pinar (who was a forerunner of autobiographical research in Education) that I'd like to share here, because he states superbly why writing autobiographically matters to the bodies who are teaching and learning:

The curriculum is not comprised of subjects, but of Subjects, of subjectivity. The running of the course is the building of the self, the lived experience of

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<sup>44</sup> Ellerby, 75.

<sup>45</sup> Connelly and Clandinin, *Narrative Inquiry*, 31.

subjectivity. Autobiography is an architecture of self, a self we create and embody as we read, write, speak and listen. The self becomes flesh, in the world.<sup>46</sup>

Of course, my dream of creating *a piece that matters* is a lofty aspiration, and probably unattainable. In a way, it seems to me an exercise in despair to think that other people might care about what I've written. As one of my mentors has said to me, the graduate thesis is simply evidence that the student understands the process of research, and he cautioned me against dreaming of anything more. But we all want our writing to mean more than that, I think. What I mean is that I hope for at least one person to read what I've done and to say, "Oh, now I would like to rethink what I always thought," or "That's what I always thought, too." If I don't get such a response, I will be talking to myself, and, though I don't mind that, it's nice to share ideas. In this context, I want to use my thesis as an active document, as something I will use to model for my students one example of a teacher who also conducts research/practices art - and who tries to learn more about herself - and to encourage them to engage in these practices as well.

I must add that this entire process required *faith* that my intuition would lead me in a direction in which I could reflect on myriad ideas and find ways in which to synthesize them. Jeanette Winterson comments in spiritual terms about the creation of art: "Art is an act of faith. [...] It is necessary to believe that there is something here worth having."<sup>47</sup> This was a frightening manner in which to work, and it required belief that my intuition was leading me to the places I needed to go.

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<sup>46</sup> "Autobiography," 220.

<sup>47</sup> *Art Objects*, 96.

## INTERLUDE

In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun says:

Stories have created us, we live by them,  
and we use them to create other stories.<sup>1</sup>

Almost two weeks before 'test tube baby' Louise Brown's arrival in 1978, on the thirteenth day of the seventh month, a Mennonite woman gave birth at Winnipeg's Victoria General Hospital to the first of three children, a girl whose given name means 'all sweetness' in Greek. To help set the context for her birth, this is the same year in which

- Roman Polanski skips bail;
- China lifts its ban on works by Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Charles Dickens;
- electrical workers unearth the remains of the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan;
- Stump v. Sparkman is settled;
- Holland finishes second in the FIFA World Cup;
- *Garfield* makes its debut;
- two popes die.

In the beginning was the world.

In *When Memory Speaks*, Jill Ker Conway states:

We are all autobiographers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Writing a Woman's Life*, 37.

<sup>2</sup> *When Memory Speaks*, 178.

i

everything i had was playtime

when church was outside  
in winter candy cottonwoods

and the best schoolwork was done  
by the blown sunlight  
still leaves and scraps of smoke

harmonies and cutting echoes of songs  
everything music and airborne

all simple pure white cold  
against my cheeks

my mother taught me to  
    wear gloves in winter  
    look toward the garden  
    and have the clothes prepared  
as she was slave spread over chores

food was gardened and given  
clean forks held inside my mouth

my father knew  
everything

friends brought neighbourhood secrets  
and coloured wrappers



when i left you  
i was almost everything

this is my autobiographia<sup>3</sup>

~Pam Klassen-Dueck

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<sup>3</sup> Something to note. In the words of Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life*: "Nostalgia, particularly for childhood, is likely to be a mask for unrecognized anger" (15).

## Chapter 4

### READING WITH CORRECTIVE LENSES: THE GOOD BOOK

My parents lived demanding rural childhoods; at least, that fact is what I have gleaned from their stories. There were no books, except for High German Bibles, one in each of the community's households. This was normal. Di Brandt, poet-academic and former (*if such a thing is possible*) Mennonite, says that homes in our community usually featured copies of the *Martyrs Mirror*, a prominent seventeenth century Anabaptist tome, but I never heard of this title until I came across references to it in my high school's Grade 12 Mennonite History class.<sup>1</sup> The founding events of Mennonite history were not told to me until I was 17 years old. Even though I have always expressed a great interest in my religious and cultural heritage, few people could tell me much about it. And we didn't have the Internet, nor access to unlimited books and magazines and newspapers – plus I didn't have access to the public library. Consequently, much of my identity was a mystery to me. I read myself by seeing my image reflected in the people who knew me best, the people of my community.

My dad remembers public school and the threat of the strap for speaking Plautdietsch. He tells me about not knowing that the marks on the page corresponded to sounds in the mouth; I am amazed by this tidbit, for how could anyone not know how to read? I wish my mom recalled such stories about herself. She says that her stories, if she still possessed them, would probably resemble those of my father.

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<sup>1</sup> Brandt, *So this is the world*, 108. *Martyrs Mirror* is an illustrated anthology of over 4,000 testimonies of martyrdom.

Mom and Dad believe that you should work all the time. Recreational time is a luxury like soap-on-a-rope, and reading for pleasure is an activity that should be kept for Sunday afternoons, and not even then, because that is when we go *spizieren*.<sup>2</sup> I'm not supposed to read at people's houses, though, for that would be rude. I'm expected to play with my cousins. Their games are always the same. They want to fool around with Barbies, and I am thirteen, too old for that. I sit on the bed and watch. I know the script.

Ken: "Barbie, let's take a walk in the closet."

Barbie: "Ooooh, yes, Ken. And then let's get married and have babies."

I scoured my environment for reading material, trying to learn about the outside world. Contrary to their own upbringing, my parents had books in our house, but I breathed through the good ones a million billion times and didn't want to read Dad's undergraduate textbooks because they were in hardcover, plus they had crashingly boring titles such as *The History of Macroeconomics* and *Modern Mathematics: An Elementary Approach*. I knew whole books by memory, as well as High German poems and songs and Bible chapters. I can still recite the Creation story, the Ten Commandments, the Twenty-third Psalm, the Christmas story from the Book of Luke, and probably much more. I loved my collection of Arthur Maxwell's Bible stories (which, to this day, sits on the bookshelves in my dad's home office), and not because I was a particularly pious child but because the tales were utterly fascinating, certainly on par with my beloved fairy tales. Magic, injustice, drama, redemption. I was taught to read the world through

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<sup>2</sup> A social ritual that involves going out to visit family and friends; usually done on Sunday afternoons. *Faspa*, a late afternoon supper, is always included: buns, squeaky New Bothwell cheddar cheese, cold sliced meats, homemade jam, pickles, dainties, coffee, etc.

these words. I don't remember which stories were my favourites although I certainly recall which ones were omitted: Eve's nakedness, the Song of Songs, the impending end of the world.

If someone prompted me, I could probably say much of our Sommerfelder Mennonite catechism – a small blue softcover book – from memory, in English. My dad's mom knew that particular book by heart (as was customary among her generation and those older in our particular church), and when I had her to myself it became almost a party game, to pose the questions and to hear her answer and then laugh. I thought she must be the smartest woman in the world.

Where I come from, the nation's Sunflower Capital – located in the border land between Canada and the United States – the earth is a patchwork quilt of greens, yellows, and blues. The sky is reflected in fields of flax. If you dive in as the violet deepens to indigo, it is the same as flying, before you awake suspended between dreams and the morning. I listened for the sound of birds; their songs meant fine weather.

At my grandparents' home place – which features the loamiest earth you will ever see – which my parents purchased when I was fifteen years old, the house was hidden from the world by two trees, both of which spent decades in the process of dying.<sup>3</sup> These gnarled trees stood as sentries since the beginning of time: the originals in Eden, planted after the Mennonites' arrival from Imperial Russia in the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>3</sup> The home place refers to one's farm, including house, various outbuildings, gardens and fields. It often means that it's all been in the family since 'time immemorial,' so to speak.

Anyway, we will plant seedlings soon, my grandparents said, maybe next year when there is more time. We kids were always told not to climb them because they were poplars, a brittle tree, and could break at the slightest provocation. Grandma knew someone whose cousin had sliced his hand open when the poplar branch beneath his trunk cracked and attempted to plunge him prematurely into the earth. Except you knew she meant that he landed on the ground and not six feet under.

Before my nuclear family moved to the home place when I was fifteen, we lived ten miles away in Altona - anybody's how town - which boasted neutral bungalows and rows of efficient marigolds and Queen Anne's lace. You may drive straight in or out, no detours. (This is not Winnipeg which is seventy-five minutes away: one street cannot lead into another, and cannot hold more than one name at the same time.) There are few non-Mennonites. On the spot, I can count up the total of Mennonite surnames – this is not comforting for future breeding purposes. When my husband and I met, we were deathly afraid that we were related since he is a Dueck which was also my father's mother's name, plus Grandma and Steve's mom grew up just a few miles apart, but we were safe; related only through marriage. Grandma's comment to me:

We didn't need to ask about Steven's upbringing because we knew his parents. I grew up a few miles from his mom. My, that was a long time ago now. So we knew everything was fine.

Then "yeh," a swift intake of breath.

I did learn during our textual and oral hunt through our clan's convoluted family tree that an annoying boy who had romantically pursued me a few months prior was my second cousin. Ew, yuck, and gross. I tell you, this is the danger in being Mennonite.

Our town's tiny library was housed in the shopping mall, but I wasn't allowed to have a public library card; I still don't know what the reason for this was, and I am still reluctant to ask. Our junior high school's bare library contained a minimal selection for girls: elderly "Sweet Valley Highs" and insipid teen romance novels. Elsewhere, young adult literature was developing, and I was fully aware of that fact. However, I had few ways to obtain any new YA titles, or the classics I'd read about – such as *The Wind in the Willows*, *Treasure Island*, and *The Cricket in Times Square* – but had never held in my hands. I read and reread what I had and did not feel punished by this, though I yearned for more.

Heaven is rationalized every day. You can see it when you drive down the highway: on a windy day, the power lines shaking and groaning in ecstasy.

We lived seasonally: ate fruits and vegetables when they were ready in summer, slaughtered animals in the fall, hibernated in the winter. I know how to grow and preserve all the produce we'd need for a year and more, to mend clothing, to heat a home with wood, to feed an eager calf. I can make bread from scratch, as well as yogurt and cottage cheese. I'm horrified by the canned salty piss called 'soup' in a modern grocery store, and, if you ask me, I'll make you a batch of real good soup straight from the recipe book in my head. If I had to, I could probably sew a quilt by hand, if I had to, since I've studied my grandmother's blanket-making arts – notes woven in thread – in the basement of her house. I've never made homemade soap, but I'm aware of the recipe, and I have a

bar of my great-grandmother's homemade concoction kicking around somewhere, even though one of my aunties told me that that was disgusting and that I should throw it out. Steve knows how to butcher (I should, but I don't because I loathe the smell), how to milk a cow, how to shear a sheep, how to build a car, how to construct a house, how to love me. Raw milk is best – we resent government interference into this beverage preference – and no, we've never had tuberculosis. We hate the chains of life on a dairy farm. We know enough of what to say when we're in the city so that people can't grasp our words. I sorrow because, if I am ever blessed with a daughter, she will not know most of these things for herself. At the same time, I feel sick with relief.

I take for granted the word 'Mennonite.' I assume that everyone knows what I mean because, back home, everyone does know what I'm talking about. And so I present to you a definition. Mennonites are a collection of Christian Anabaptist denominations who take their lead from Menno Simons (1496-1561), originally a Frisian Catholic priest who expressed doubt about infant baptism and the mass. He turned to the Bible for answers, and, at the age of 40, he left the church and became a rebel leader of the Dutch Anabaptists. Long persecuted by the Catholic church, Mennonites believed in reading the Bible “‘through Christ,’ believing that, if they obeyed as best they knew, the Spirit would lead them on,” and this kind of hermeneutics led to the assembly's radical beliefs in adult baptism, pacifism, and discipleship.<sup>4</sup> But I prefer the following description of the group from Miriam Toews's novel *A Complicated Kindness*, the fictitious memoir of Nomi Nickel, a Holden Caulfield-esque Manitoba Mennonite teenager:

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<sup>4</sup> Dyck, “This They Believed,” 133-150.

Imagine the least well-adjusted kid in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock'n'roll, having sex for fun, swimming, make-up, jewelry, going to cities, or staying up past nine o'clock. That was Menno. Thanks a lot, Menno.

Verily I say to you: Guess how much Nomi is *not* exaggerating in this passage, contrary to the bleating of some conservative Mennonite critics.<sup>5</sup>

One addition to these definitions: keeping in spirit with our breakaway past from the Catholic Church, we have traditionally been iconoclasts. Smashers of Images. Plain People. In theory, anyway. You'd never guess this if you saw me and visited with me in our home. I love beautiful clothing and have enough articles in my closet to *almost* make up for my four years of encasement in my private high school's dowdy navy jumper (accompanied by a prim white blouse, dark unpatterned hose, and unforgiving dress shoes). Grandma loved to see me wear red. I use makeup. I dye my hair back to my childhood blonde. I am by far not the only Mennonite woman who does these things – my mom was quite the fashionista, according to my aunties. I also buy and make art. I decorate my home to be light and calm, like a gallery. I am fascinated with Mexican Catholic iconography, and I have a handmade retablo perched on my wall, shining silver every morning. *Our Lady of the Lost and Found*, Diane Schoemperlen's meditation on the Blessed Virgin Mary, is one of my favourite novels. I want to wear the BVM on my shirt.

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<sup>5</sup> Including those Mennonites who wrote heated letters regarding this novel to the editor of the *Steinbach Carillon*, a newspaper that is based in Manitoba's Mennonite East Reserve.



At any rate, ask any Mennonite around the world to define ‘Mennonite’ and you’ll get a different answer every time, so I hope you don’t walk away from my thesis thinking that you’ve learned many general things about this faith and culture because I promise that you won’t. There are just so many kinds of Mennonites. In my situation, my ancestors moved in the sixteenth century from the Netherlands and Germany to Prussia, then to the Russian steppes, and finally in the 1870s to southern Manitoba (home to two seasons: winter and mosquitoes). As far as I know, I have a smattering of Jewish blood, but most of my extended family don’t like to acknowledge the Jewish great-great-grandmother. This is the harsh truth. We are Old Colony and Sommerfelders, all of us, and so is my husband’s family.<sup>6</sup> We’ve been close for so long.

Incidentally, I want to say what a crazy feeling it was to return to Holland after all this time. From 1997 to 1998 I lived in the Dutch village of Elspeet and then in the city of Haarlem. To hear the language that is still so similar to my own, to hold Menno’s handwriting in my own hands, to smell *oliebollen* in the open market and think of my dad on New Year’s Day, wearing his mother’s flowered apron, scooping out of the big silver *komm* the raisin-studded *portzelky* dough that rises faster than you can get through it, frying.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Old Colony Mennonites, a group also known as Reinlander Mennoniten Gemeinde, grew from immigrants from the Chortitza (which was the oldest colony in Russia) and the Fürstenland colonies. They represent the most conservative branch of Mennonitism.

The Sommerfeld Mennonites are a very conservative assembly of Manitoba Mennonites. In 1890 they split off from the Bergthal Mennonite Church over the issue of the provincial government’s attendance requirement at English schools.

<sup>7</sup> *Komm* means ‘bowl.’ *Portzelky* (in English we call them ‘New Year’s Cookies’); as per the English name, we eat them when each new year begins. They are delicious round raisin-studded pastries – fried in lard – which are eaten dipped in sugar. This is not a dessert: it constitutes the entire meal! When I walked for the first time into a Dutch open-air market, I caught the scent of *oliebollen*, which are still exactly the same thing – after all this time – but are eaten whenever one desires!

**generation<sup>8</sup>**

words climb and fall like notes on a scale  
 among my aunties and uncles  
 and cousins and grandparents,

along with plümemoos,<sup>9</sup>  
 bread and cheese,

the price of grain and the certain warm  
 weather forecast (according to cky and cfam),<sup>10</sup>

the good sermon of the minister last  
 sunday morning.

presently this reality of numbers and  
 things you can feel  
 will become forfeited

to mennonite myth: the story that becomes  
 a vinyl tablecloth;  
 that is told and retold at  
 every faspa at every gathering for  
 the rest of your life,

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<sup>8</sup> Published previously in *Rhubarb*.

<sup>9</sup> Cold fruit soup.

<sup>10</sup> CKY is a Winnipeg TV station. Based in Altona, Manitoba, CFAM 950 (the flagship radio station of Golden West Broadcasting, of which I've been an employee) targets the local Mennonite community.

for the diversion of the white-haired ones,  
who forget and are reminded every time,  
and to everyone else, who will never admit  
that they also need the chord struck  
before they sing

the song they remember  
from before their births. statuesque

as the stained glass of  
medieval worshippers,

voices ascend in harmony with story  
on these unconditional days

i have been led to believe that the oral past never changes; no  
matter what historians and english professors say:  
the truth is in the telling

(wedged between sunflower-shelled floors  
and creaky hymns residing in grandpa's  
plastic radio).

From what I have seen, relatively little research has been done on the relationship between Mennonites and reading. I've found bits and pieces of information scattered across books and journal articles and diaries and novels, and I relied on my memory of stories I've been told about the history of reading in our area.<sup>11</sup> What I do know is that, as People of the Book – modeled after the Hebrews, but rarely identifying with them due to an anti-semitic undercurrent – reading is traditionally entrenched in religious practice, though that phenomenon has begun to change in many Mennonite circles. The best example of this shift in reading's significance is found in Di Brandt's poetry from *questions i asked my mother*. For example, she includes a frustrated burst from the poet-persona's Mennonite father about the significance of learning to read:

where i come from the reason you learn to read is to understand God's

Holy Word i only went to school 7 year & it's done me okay<sup>12</sup>

The father and the young daughter in this poem are arguing about how to read the Bible as though they live in different villages of different people. The two characters are, in a way, from two dissimilar positions, as they perform some of the variance between oral and print cultures, especially about what it means to read. To the father, who is still rooted in a primarily oral culture, to 'understand' what one reads means that a person has been inducted into the received meanings of the Bible, which includes listening in church, fumbling through holy writ before each breakfast, believing in the assigned meanings, and accepting that a mystery surrounds the words' borders. What he says is true: seven years of formal education was enough for him, as he runs a family and a

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<sup>11</sup> Certainly a most valuable piece of research would be a qualitative study asking the elderly people in our area to tell stories of Mennonites and books and reading.

<sup>12</sup> *questions*, 4.

successful farm. He has learned what he needs to know, and has fulfilled his obligations, and this has made him acceptable to his social community. He wants the same success for his child and to see the community deem her acceptable as well. But in comparison, the daughter, a voracious reader who lives in a liminal position between the oral and print culture, clamps her jaw in frustration with her dad, insisting that “you can’t just take some old crackpot idea and say you found them in these words even the Bible has to make some sense.”<sup>13</sup> In a later poem, the patriarch replies:

you’re  
 always trying to figure everything out your own way instead of submitting quietly  
 to the teachings of the church when are you  
 going to learn not everything has to make sense ...  
 what counts is your attitude  
 & your faith your willingness to accept the mystery of God’s ways.<sup>14</sup>

This conversation shows the deep divide between the two family members, though, as Grace Kehler points out in “Stealing the Word(s)” – in which she focuses on how Brandt undermines monologic language of the Mennonites and of the *Englische* (non-Mennonites) who criticize the group without first examining their own problematic discourses – at least, amid the mother’s poignant attempts at pacification, they are engaged in a dialogue about the topic.<sup>15</sup> They are creating meanings together, which I think is a hallowed activity.

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<sup>13</sup> *questions*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> “Stealing the Words,” 23.

Of course, the concept of reading as a sacred act is not limited to Mennonites. Speaking in broader terms, reading in the western world was linked to the reception of holy words. Learning to read and learning to read the Bible were virtually interchangeable ideas between roughly the late medieval period and the eighteenth century. As Lissa Paul explains, “[l]earning to read became synonymous with learning to be Christian.”<sup>16</sup> Alberto Manguel also comments on reading’s history as religious instruction, and how it was linked to the body. Most memorably, he describes how Jewish children licked honey from the Torah and ate eggs on which sacred words had been written. That sounds almost unbearably sensual to me. In contrast, I was

told repeatedly to  
sit still stop your breathing look  
down at your numb legs your false skirt sighing  
sit still & listen<sup>17</sup>

We read the King James Bible and our catechism in Sunday School, as well as weekly lessons and hymn lyrics. I don’t think we learned to read in order to read the Bible, contrary to what you might expect me to say (especially when one considers Mennonitism’s ‘priesthood of all believers’ Anabaptist beginnings, by which I mean the belief in unmediated contact between the believer and God’s Word), and contrary to the history of reading in the western world.<sup>18</sup> You could be a Mennonite in my world and never read the Bible for yourself, if you were so inclined, since you would hear most of

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<sup>16</sup> Paul, “Learning to be Literate,” unpaginated.

<sup>17</sup> Brandt, *questions*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., see Alberto Manguel’s *History of Reading* or Lissa Paul’s introduction to the *Cambridge Guide to Children’s Literature*.

what you needed to know in church (though you would never openly admit not reading the Holy Book). I'm certainly not disparaging this penchant for the oral/aural, though, particularly because it befits our traditional unwritten culture. In early Anabaptist history, the art of reading was different than the way we think about it now. This difference is illustrated by a story from Arnold Snyder's work about a man named Fridolin Sicher:

[Sicher] reported that he could not even go out for a walk on Sundays without bumping into huddled crowds of people doing their 'readings.' Furthermore, gross commoners with no culture or learning began to read. 'I myself have heard,' he wrote, 'an illiterate person preach or "read," which is something I cannot understand.' Sicher concluded that either these readers were full of grace like St. Peter and the apostles, or the devil was behind their activity.<sup>19</sup>

This story demonstrates a completely different relationship between the reader and the book. Here, the text is used as an induction into a religious community, which includes the Holy Spirit as the divine guide. Exegesis of every word was not the key goal. As a matter of fact, as Trevor Bechtel states,

[o]ften Anabaptists would hear the 'letter' of scripture read aloud, remember central passages, and by living in accordance with these principles would claim to be true interpreters of the Word.<sup>20</sup>

To the Anabaptists, written words were not privileged over the spoken word, and so this variety of "spirit-led interpretation" was actually assigned more authority than the written

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<sup>19</sup> "Orality," 374. Trevor Bechtel, in "How to Eat Your Bible," drew my attention to this story.

<sup>20</sup> "How to Eat Your Bible," 85.

Word.<sup>21</sup> I like the idea that being literate in a conventional sense confers no advantage to interpret holy mysteries. Ironically, despite my penchant for text, this seems like a more egalitarian way to worship, as it does befit the classless structure – the ‘priesthood of all believers’ – to which the Anabaptists aspired. Truth, then, becomes accessible to all, as the Bible is read performatively.

In our area’s public schools, it would be interesting to trace the trend of teaching reading, including its gradual divorce from daily life and worship, which illustrates Spufford’s comment on how reading’s link to holiness has ebbed:

in the secular times of the last three centuries, which brought us printed words on every subject, print to screw in a ball and flip away after a single reading sometimes, the promise of revelation has splintered, and the splinters have fallen separately.<sup>22</sup>

As Mennonite children in the 1980s, we did phonics, read about the antics of Mr Mugs, and learned through SRA kits to read random stories and answer comprehension questions at warp speed – for, as it turns out, a quick eye was what made a good reader. Reading was becoming divorced from real life, secularized, reduced to a set of disconnected tasks. Though I had already learned to read *a la* Margaret Meek – by *reading* – my Early Years teachers (whom I loved and wanted to please) still *taught* me how to read. And so I sang ‘God Save the Queen,’ read the primers, completed a million comprehension worksheets, and practiced my letters (spontaneously turning inside out ‘y’

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>22</sup> *The Child that Books Built*, 8.



and ‘z’ to see what would happen on the page, and my teacher always marked them with a red ‘X,’ which made me giggle). I know, it doesn’t make sense, but that’s the way it was. Can’t blame the instructors, since that was what everyone was then doing in Education, for the most part, from what I’ve heard older teachers say.

My elders, keepers of the traditions we’d had going back to the sixteenth century – indeed, back to the first Apostles, according to church teachings – had a right to be anxious about our way of life. (Hence the 1920s migration of the Manitoba Old Colony Mennonites to Mexico in response to the provincial government’s intrusion into their schools. I read in my mother’s family tree that my Old Colony great-grandparents, Heinrich and Katharina, were slated to go, but just before the move my great-grandfather changed his mind.) In my generation, for instance, our language is being lost; my refusal to speak it at the tender age of three, at the same time I was learning to read English, was, in fact, a betrayal of the worst kind. My elders, they knew of what they spoke. As Di Brandt laments:

They were worried about the effects of an English school education on their children, the loss of tradition and culture that would result. They were quite right.

I’m sad now to see the enormous losses that did occur in my generation.<sup>23</sup>

I’ve become anglicized; my mind is divided.

As a child, I didn’t discern much of a difference between what should be read at what time and in which space: just about anything I read at church and at school was something I’d read at home, and vice versa. Hence my illicit borrowing of school Social

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<sup>23</sup> *Dancing Naked*, 206.

Studies textbooks – which were to remain as reference materials in the library; my teachers probably assumed that no child would care to read them outside of school, anyway (or anywhere else, for that matter), but my interests followed no rule regarding *where we should read what kind of thing*. Like my adolescence in the Manitoba Mennonite community, in which work and home and church were still such public entities – everybody knew everybody and their business – there was nothing *private* about my reading habits, really, though I longed for an empty room, a sanctuary – “a home away from home, *and* away from school” – and all the books I wanted. Permission to “annihilate the world with a book.”<sup>24</sup> Where I lived, this rejection of the other was not tenable. I can tell among my family and friends who reads and who doesn’t. People who aren’t readers tend to interrupt my immersion and accuse me of skipping pages. It’s a twenty-first century witchhunt, I swear.

I learned that the printed word never lies, and that Jonah survived in the whale’s belly. But I wasn’t able to remain receptive, an empty vessel. I, a “questionable one” (though always soft-spoken), asked my Sunday School teacher how Jonah lived in spite of the creature’s stomach acids, but he did not grace me with an answer.<sup>25</sup> Where do we come from? No one would tell me; no one would say what happened in the last two thousand years, though I was desperate to know. What on earth are they keeping from me?

Once, I got into trouble for bringing my black NIV Bible to church; for, as my Sunday School teacher said, the King James alone was the true Word of God. I wanted to

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<sup>24</sup> Tompkins, *A Life in School*, 43; Cixous, *Three Steps*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Brandt, *questions*, from unpaginated “foreword.”

know how he knew that, and he said that it was because the Älteste (the ministerial) said so. Fine. One of two things happened. From that day forward, I brought one of my King James editions, a white leather-bound book given to me by my parents, but I would not read aloud from its eggshell pages. Or: I took the black book along anyway and I said that my teacher would have to discuss the problem with my dad, who was the Sunday School superintendent. (I don't remember which ending it was.) I was a good girl, a "good Mennonite daughter," so no one ever knew what to do about my quiet rebellions.<sup>26</sup>

Think I'm joking about the atmosphere, or perhaps exaggerating? The venerable Harold S. Bender, the 'Father' of Mennonite academia, has pronounced in an Anabaptist encyclopedia the following judgment on my church:

The complete cut-off from outside cultural influences ... had its inevitable consequence in intellectual and cultural stagnation. The lack of a vital understanding of the Gospel and really creative reading and exposition of the Bible, as well as the suffocation of creativity in the ministry which destroys the possibility of revival and results in a complete bondage to dead tradition, resulted in serious spiritual stagnation.<sup>27</sup>

So much for objectivity in an encyclopedia!

Over the phone, I read Bender's passage to my dad; he snorted and said, "Well, what else would you expect a Bergthaler to say?" I don't know if Bender was a Bergthaler, but I laughed and laughed.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., from unpaginated "foreword."

<sup>27</sup> "Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, s.v. "Sommerfeld Mennonites," <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/S666ME.html> (accessed May 14, 2009).

In my childhood and adolescence, reading was a practical art, of course, for not only was it meant to lead one through the guidebook of salvation, it helped one to keep track of life, as evidenced by the farm diaries and accounting books and recipes and commonplace books and lists I saw everywhere. My dad's father, who leans forward like a battered tin mailbox, wrote every day in his diary: the weather, the number of calves born, the day on which seeding began, when the disk broke, and so on. He kept the small leather-bound journal by the radio, and I looked at it once when he'd forgotten to put it away. My dad keeps track of the farm and the weather, too, in spiral-bound scribbles. Today, if I cared, I could find out what the weather was like on the day we moved to the farm. My mom writes constantly, too, on bits and pieces of paper that are stacked precariously on a stool beside her kitchen chair, and we all tease her about this for, if a wind came along, pages would drift like snow all over the clean linoleum. She never writes in a straight line or in a complete sentence, and I love that about her.

Before my father-in-law, a keeper of memories, passed away a year ago, he and my mother-in-law wrote (at the urging of my husband, their youngest child) in Hilroy notebooks fragments about their lives, and we treasure those handwritten words. I asked my dad if he would please do this, too – I didn't have to ask my mom because she does it already – and he launched into a story about how my mom's dad, a taciturn man, sat him

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<sup>28</sup> The Sommerfelders broke off from the Bergthaler Mennonites in the early twentieth century. Historically, Mennonites have had a penchant for breaking away from their churches to begin new ones. My unmathematical guess is that there are fifteen million kinds of Mennonite churches on the face of the earth. On a recent episode of *The Vinyl Café* on CBC Radio 1, in fact, host Stuart MacLean tells the following story:

A Mennonite man was in a shipwreck and was subsequently stranded on a deserted island. When he was rescued, it was noticed that the man had built for himself three huts. When asked about the purpose of the buildings, he replied: "One is my house. The second is my church. The third is the church I used to go to."

down under a pine tree in the seventies, and they both *knacked zoat*, and he told his son-in-law story after story about his life.<sup>29</sup> Dad says he doesn't remember even one tale, and he's very sorry about it. In my dad's language, that means *sure*.

Recipes and recipe books proliferated in people's homes, and women recorded whole histories in the margins: origin, dates used, numbers of people served, buttery smears, ratings ranging from 'excellent!' to 'don't make again.' The cookbook as curriculum: an act of aesthetic beauty, of social justice. It's probably odd that I don't use cookbooks, but I've internalized the recipes. It's not that difficult to boil potatoes and fry farmer sausage and overcook peas, anyway, when a 'Mennonite' meal is in order.

Every morning at eleven o'clock, my grandmother listened to the funeral announcements on CFAM Radio 950 and jotted down the vital statistics of those who'd recently passed over to the better place. I thought everyone did all of these things.

I was not familiar with any adults who read books for pleasure, but some other kids my age did. I outread them all: usually I devoured three novels per day. I was embarrassed to tell my teachers that I had been intimate with so many books. But I couldn't stop – reading was an intrinsic part of me: books as feet, to walk though and around and away from the cultural script. (Hence my deep empathy with Louise DeSalvo's description of childhood reading in the opening pages of her memoir, *Vertigo*, in which she runs away from her volatile home, into the library, and – after hiding behind

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<sup>29</sup> Plautdietsch for "cracking (i.e., eating) sunflower seeds."

an encyclopedia – self-soothes with fiction.) Certainly I was perceived by my community with bemusement, amusement, and irritation for my propensity to read instead of working, socializing, and sitting still to listen. After all, “we weren’t supposed to read books, never mind write them. They might distract us from the Book, from God’s Word.”<sup>30</sup> All of the rubbernecks had something to say about it.

I resisted going upstairs to the church service. There was nothing pretty to look at in the sanctuary, no “stained glass colors of salvation.”<sup>31</sup> I was forbidden from walking to the bathroom, and I could not tap the oak pew with my white *Sindache* shoes because that made my dad glower.<sup>32</sup> I liked kneeling to pray between the dual-language service because it offered a chance to stretch, and I raced with myself to see how many times I could think through the prayer *Unser Vater in Himmel* before we were directed to be reseated.<sup>33</sup> The ministers droned in a mixture of Plautdietsch and High German and then English, reading to us from their painstakingly handwritten pages, and I had a hard time sitting still and listening, as instructed. I asked Dad after the service: if what the ministers are reading to us is so important, how come they don’t sound like they care about it? I don’t think I ever asked such questions of my mother, but maybe I’m wrong. We sang from unlined hymnbooks, unaccompanied by instruments.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Brandt, *Dancing*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Denise, “after church,” unpaginated.

<sup>32</sup> Plautdietsch word for Sunday.

<sup>33</sup> High German for ‘The Lord’s Prayer.’

<sup>34</sup> In the article “Mennonite choral music recordings of the West Coast Mennonite chamber choir,” published in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Jonathan Dueck (who is actually a former classmate of

I own at least seven or eight Bibles; each was a gift at some point or other; an experience in collaborative reading.<sup>35</sup> In my lifetime I have only purchased one Bible, and that was a 2005 Christmas present for my mother who told me that she had never owned her very own copy. Her lack was so utterly foreign to my own experience, I had to right the wrong.

I haven't kept up with reading Scripture for a long time now – something I do not admit to just anyone – though its majestic phrases float unbidden through my mind. I have read about the Bible's canonization process, and, though it is undoubtedly a most fascinating history, it makes me feel suspicious. If God was directing the translation, then how come a bunch of men had to sit and have so many meetings about it? (They must have been meeting-obsessed Mennonites, too, ha ha).<sup>36</sup> I should know better. I remember a simple song from Sunday School:

*Read your Bible*

*Pray every day*

*Pray every day*

*Pray every day*

*If you follow Me*

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mine) describes the 'lined-out' method of church singing: "a leader begins (or 'lines out') a melody and all singers subsequently join in on that single melody." He goes on to say that the Mennonite churches "transitioned to four-part hymns, in which each singer sings one of four distinct and simultaneous parts, usually notated in a hymnal," but my particular church kept the traditional lined-out method; we didn't sing in harmony.

<sup>35</sup> Dunlop, "Following the curve," 82.

<sup>36</sup> Really and truly, Mennonites must have more meetings than any other denomination!

Many things have happened since I last sang these words.

i wish the sky was still pasted on  
 to the ceiling the floor of God's  
 heaven i wish the stars were really  
 made of tin foil sliding at night  
 into dark earth under my bed i want  
 angels in cellophane surrounding my  
 head<sup>37</sup>

A prairie girl, a city woman: doesn't know what to call herself anymore, how to see herself, where to live or what to do. It's too simple to think that fiction has helped me with these things I'm telling to you, no? But so many writers, both Mennonite and not, insist that fiction and poetry have saved them, and isn't this enough evidence to believe in? I think about the memoir *Vertigo*, for example, in which Virginia Woolf scholar Louise DeSalvo testifies in a multitude of ways about how reading saved her life: emotionally, spiritually, cognitively, and even physically. As an adult, working on Virginia Woolf's manuscripts – and reading her own life in conjunction with Woolf's words – DeSalvo resuscitated herself from a childhood past of incest and violence. (Though the entire book is compelling, I found most powerful the chapter "A Portrait of the *Puttana* as a Woman in Midlife" in which the author details her dramatic entry into academic life from her Italian working class roots in Hoboken, New Jersey. I encourage you to read it.) This is what's on my mind. To borrow the words of the observant Nomi Nickel,

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<sup>37</sup> Brandt, "i wish the sky was still," 54.



I've learned, from living in this town, that stories are what matter, and that if we can believe them, I mean really believe them, we have a chance at redemption. [. . .] Is it wrong to believe in a beautiful lie if it helps you get through life?<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Toews, *A Complicated Kindness*, 245.

## Chapter 5

### QUESTIONS I ASK: READING LIKE A MARTYR

In Gianni Rodari's playful and instructive book *Grammar of Fantasy*, which addresses the value of storytelling with children, he says that any word "chosen by chance can function as a magical word to exhume fields of memory that have rested under the dust of time."<sup>1</sup> I chant quietly to myself 'ban, ban, ban,' and wonder what might be unearthed from a shallow grave.

During my undergraduate literary training, as in Sunday School, I was taught that everything must begin in the word. To clarify: it is necessary to refer to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a tome which reveals the etymological truth. In my mind, this act of reference is indeed useful for the creativity it might provoke, as evidenced in Louise DeSalvo's act, described in *Vertigo*, of looking up the word 'vertigo' (because of her own plaguing dizziness), and among the definitions she finds an intriguing link between the words 'verse' and 'to turn,' which makes me jealous. I've never found anything *that* fascinating in the *OED*, but here's hoping! In my research, I often forget to perform the act of looking up keywords, but not today. I pull up the online *OED* and find the word 'ban' located between 'bamboula' and 'Banagher':

*Ban*: An "authoritative proclamation." Earliest usage was a summons to arms. A curse, a directive. I feel unsurprised by the term's militaristic gift-wrap.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Grammar of Fantasy*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. "Ban," <http://dictionary.oed.com.proxy.library.brocku.ca/cgi/entry/00181778> (accessed June 26, 2009).

Surprisingly, the word 'ban' is also related to 'the banns' - a proclamation of marriage. I should have thought of this link, considering that Steve and I had our marriage banns read in church on three successive Sundays before our wedding day.

I see missing usages, including The Mennonite Ban (that is, the community shunning of a transgressive member, which is mostly done informally now), but this is also unsurprising.

What can I say? With The Good Book as the preferred corrective spectacles, many other texts appeared taboo to us. Of course, there is an entire history of censoring what children read, but in my opinion we Mennonites were even stricter about which books were acceptable and which were not, and those rules extended to people of all ages.

#### Books to Ban

- Anything that questions The Word of God.
- Harlequin romance novels, or any erotica, for that matter. Here I include the Bible's passionate *Song of Songs*; and, because we cannot avoid this book-lodged-within-The-Book, we invent ways to read around it as the spiritual relationship between God and us, the body of Christ.<sup>3</sup>
- Any piece of text that contains any unacceptable word. Not even a book that has so much as the word 'ass' in it, even if referring literally to a donkey.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Dave Barry, the humour columnist: I am not making this up.
- Any piece of text that contains the community's version of immorality (including "queerness" and disrespectful behaviour toward parents).

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<sup>3</sup> 'Towering breasts' just represent something else, obviously.

<sup>4</sup> Note: I include here such words as 'bra,' 'menstruation,' and 'orgasm.'

- Fairytales, fantasy, science fiction, and mythology (depending on how evangelical one feels at any given moment).

There was a stark contrast between what I *ought* to have read (the Bible) and what I *did* read (just about anything).

Book banning in our schools was done as a community service, often performed by cheerful mother-volunteers who scoured through recent acquisitions, redeeming the banned by virtue of their thick black markers. It's another betrayal – what I've just said – but it is the truth.

When I was an adolescent, it made perfect sense to me that I should be allowed to read whatever I liked, and that people ought to leave me alone when I was lying on my narrow bed, entrenched in a fictional world.<sup>5</sup> Books and newspapers and magazines, after all, were the only route outside of our farmland-bound world.<sup>6</sup> I was impatient with the idea of banned books and taboo words, though I understood full well why the adults – both men and women – attempted to control what we read: it almost goes without saying that this act was another way to keep the patriarchal order, to make rigidity seem natural because the Bible said so.<sup>7</sup> Let me put it this way. Years later, when a classmate in a

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<sup>5</sup> I wasn't exactly living in the Privacy Capital of Canada. (For example, I did not write, though I wanted to, because there was no safe place to keep the words). The feminist rallying cry 'The Personal is Political!' is a curious thing to Mennonites, since our culture didn't have much of a divide between public and private spheres. Everybody knew everybody's business. Of course, things are changing now as many of us become assimilated into mainstream Canadian life.

<sup>6</sup> We had a television, but my time with it was usually strictly limited and closely supervised, even when I was approaching my late teens. I completely missed out on the delights of *The Simpsons*. I did not step inside a movie theatre until I was 18 years old.

<sup>7</sup> Also, although we've accepted the lesson of the Enlightenment in regards to books – that they open worlds for us – we cling to a Romantic view of children; i.e., we feel that we must protect them from potential evils which might be found in text. This incompatibility is a problem in our schools, of course.

Victorian literature seminar channeled Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, including Michel Foucault's extension of the idea, I thought it did not sound at all foreign.<sup>8</sup>

But perhaps I am not the best person to ask about Mennonites and book-banning since, although my parents didn't encourage my reading habit, they did not go out of their way to censor my books, either. (Just for the record, I would have sneaked anything I wanted, despite the ensuing threat of eternal damnation. I felt I had the right to know.) In part, I imagine that my parents were relatively more open-minded about my book habit because, in a way, they had outgrown the community's context: both had lived independently in Winnipeg – my mom cut loose when she was sixteen for a job and a place of her own – and my father, rather than work on his parents' dairy, earned a university degree to become a schoolteacher. Transgressive acts. I don't think I fully comprehend the magnitude of my father's rebellion in the 1970s, especially the betrayal of family and farm in a community that was resolved to remain entrenched in the sixteenth century, or at least the early twentieth. Dad told me once that, of all the texts he studied at university, he most identified with Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* for he could relate to Tess.

I've often thought about my parents' decision to allow me freedom in my reading material, but I have never reached an idea of their motivation until I read Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*. In this book, Ruddick describes the "unity of reflection, judgment, and emotion" that comprises maternal thinking, and I was caught up by her comment on

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<sup>8</sup> In the eighteenth century, social theorist Jeremy Bentham created the idea of the Panopticon, which is a kind of prison building in which a person may observe all of the prisoners without the prisoners being able to know whether or not they are being monitored. The idea is that, because the monitor is invisible and therefore doesn't always need to be on duty, the prisoners will learn to 'watch' themselves.

the notion of ‘social acceptability,’ which is one of the demands that maternal practice attempts to meet (i.e., raising a child who meets the community’s standards), though I wonder to myself: doesn’t this make every maternal action acceptable, even female genital mutilation, as long as it’s considered standard community practice? At any rate, when I was a child, I think my parents must have been caught in a predicament between their desire to raise an acceptable child and their intuition that what would make me suitable to the community was not necessarily the best thing for me. The compromise: *raise her the way in which we were raised, but overlook the perplexing book habit.* A radical gesture, one for which I am forever grateful, yet one that enabled my own betrayals.

Mom asked me two or three years ago if she and Dad had done the right thing by ignoring my reading material – because they didn’t know if they should – and I said *yes*, because, if they hadn’t, they wouldn’t have seen me past the age of eighteen. I needed that small freedom among all the rules. She didn’t look surprised by my vehement answer.

In my real life, back home in rural Manitoba, I can’t find the right words to fight censorship, especially regarding reading material for adolescents, particularly given my role as an English Language Arts teacher. I know all of the biblical counter-arguments; if a fellow Mennonite – or anyone, for that matter – said an original thought to me about the act of book-banning, I’d probably fall over in disbelief. I’m not particularly original in this essay, either, since all I’m saying is that intellectual and cultural and spiritual insularity are dangerous, and that’s nothing new. But I should keep trying to win ‘them’

over: how? Well, maxims work well in oral cultures, correct?<sup>9</sup> We could hold a debate of quotations, Bible verses, and maxims. And what if I borrow all male voices with which to make my points? Then would the Prädjasch listen to me?<sup>10</sup> Let us see.<sup>11</sup>

Milton: And yet on the other hand unless warinesse be us'd, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image, but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye.

Prädjasch: ~~We~~ agree. Good books, especially the Bible, should be kept safe. Bad books, on the other hand, must be avoided for fear of spiritual contamination.

Peter S. Jennison: Children deprived of words become school dropouts; dropouts deprived of hope behave delinquently. Amateur censors blame delinquency on reading immoral books and magazines, when in fact, the inability to read anything is the basic trouble.

Prädjasch: Children are dropouts when they don't grow up in a house with a Father and a Mother, and when they don't learn how to read the Bible in Sunday School. Dropping out of school isn't the end of the world, anyway.

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<sup>9</sup> See the work of Walter J. Ong for a fascinating discussion of oral cultures, particularly its use of maxims, and a performance of these ideas in east coast writer Alistair MacLeod's novel *No Great Mischief*.

<sup>10</sup> Plautdietsch word for 'preachers.'

<sup>11</sup> I've borrowed these quotations from a web site on censorship, reference regretfully not remembered.

Juvenal: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*<sup>12</sup>

Prädjasch: God watches the watchers.

Oscar Wilde: The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame.

Prädjasch: The books that are immoral are ones that don't reflect God's Word: the true, the good, the beautiful. We must keep our minds and hearts free from the corruption of immoral words, according to I Timothy 5:8: "neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure." Also, Pamela, please be admonished by the words of Ecclesiastes 12:12, for "of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh." You read too much (*author's note*: they say this kindly); it's probably why you have no kids.

I would lose this duel every time: not for lack of memory, but because I'm not necessarily on the side of God's Word, the right side, the only side; because I care about other people's words, too. Though it would be fun to seduce the Prädjasch into a call-and-response, a song of dueling banjos, a Proverb Slam! I think we'd all be in on the joke.

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<sup>12</sup> 'Who will watch the watchers?'



Mennonite scholar Hildi Froese Tiessen comments in her introduction to *Liars and Rascals: Mennonite Short Stories* that the Canadian Mennonite “lack of receptivity to the arts” during the twentieth century – especially to our indigenous fiction – stood in sharp contrast to the burgeoning literary culture that had emerged in the Russian colonies during the late nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, for a community that has come to distrust artists, many of its members have become stars on the Canadian literary scene; some of my favourites, in no particular order, are Arnold Dyck, Di Brandt, Patrick Friesen, Sandra Birdsell, Armin Wiebe, Miriam Toews, and Anita Horrocks.<sup>14</sup> I was a student in Lois Braun’s Grade Four classroom (the year following her nomination for the Governor General’s Award for fiction), I took a writing class with Armin Wiebe when I was seventeen, I’ve been mentored by Miriam Toews, I’ve reviewed one of Anita Horrocks’s novels, *Almost Eden*, for an online journal (and she’s quoted me twice on her website), and I was nearly dumbstruck when I met the poet Patrick Friesen at Hamilton’s gritLIT festival, for which I sat on the organizing committee. I see these writers as teacher-mentors, as speakers-of-tongues, as prophets.

Of course, we know the maxim about prophets’ receptions in their hometowns, and that is painfully true here: Mennonites have an underhanded way of castigating their own writers. Keep in mind the following quotation from Hildi Froese Tiessen, who says that, to the Russian Mennonites,

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<sup>13</sup> “Introduction,” xi.

<sup>14</sup> Should I be cheeky here and add Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, to the list?

embellishment of object or word was sin. What was true was objective and clear and one-dimensional. The play of the imagination was frivolous and worldly; at worst, it was an expression of the cardinal sin of pride.<sup>15</sup>

Witness, first, the case of Rudy Wiebe, who was forced to resign from his position in the 1960s as the editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (and then fled into exile in the United States) over the controversy regarding his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, which, for the viewing pleasure of the outside world, broke many Mennonite taboos.<sup>16</sup> Second case: Di Brandt's virtual excommunication over *questions i asked my mother*. A third example: the flurry of furious letters to the editor at the *Steinbach Carillon* over Miriam Toews's publication in 2004 of *A Complicated Kindness*. (When I was rooting through my reader's diary from that year, I found the following statement about her novel, which I'd read as soon as it came off the press: "I can't imagine how angry the people in Steinbach are going to be.") And there are many other stories of chastisement and banning.

Di Brandt says that this problem occurs because Mennonites recognize the truth of art, particularly its "imaginative power," and I agree wholeheartedly with her statement (although I do believe that this sense of recognition about art's significance is fading over time as our communities assimilate into mainstream western culture).<sup>17</sup> Art for us was never just decorative as it often tends to be in contemporary North American cities. I must add, as well, that the traditional Mennonite resistance to art doesn't result

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<sup>15</sup> 'Introduction,' xiii.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., see Hildi Froese Tiessen's description of these events in her brief introduction to *Liars and Rascals*.

<sup>17</sup> *So this is the world*, 78.

from some kind of intellectual backwardness on the part of our elders; rather, they were trying to save their oral peasant culture. They knew exactly what was at stake.

Besides, I'd like to point out that

Mennonites do have cultural icons, even altars. Instead of marigolds, we have wheat and sunflowers. [...] In spite of our practicality, we are spiritual beings and could not live without art.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps my greatest fascination with Mennonite literary work lies with the writings of Di Brandt, especially the poetry in *questions i asked my mother* and the essay collection *Dancing Naked: Narrative Strategies for Writing across Centuries*, both of which are sited in the steppes of books that have grown into the side of my living room couch. Despite her insightful work and many accolades, including her current position as SSHRC Chair of Creative Writing at Brandon University, Brandt has essentially been banned from the Manitoba Mennonite community and has now been forgotten, more or less, or at least heavily marginalized. Or people pretend to forget, to make her seem small. She alludes to this shunning, including its violent undertones, throughout her work. For instance, she mentions several times in the collection of essays *Dancing Naked* her fear of violent repercussion for her perceived act of betrayal.<sup>19</sup>

I think I was nine years old when the yellow-and-white book of poetry *questions i asked my mother* was published; I remember disdainful murmurings about *daut jäle*

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<sup>18</sup> Bartel, "Landscape of Memories," <http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2003Mar/bartel.php>.

<sup>19</sup> Brandt, *So this is the world*, 84.

*Büak*,<sup>20</sup> though I remember neither who said these things nor what they said. What I recall clearly: that yellow book was not to be tolerated, and, in case I forgot, the transgressive sketch of a naked woman on the cover acted as a visual cue to shoo me back into the fold of the church. I've never met a person back home who acknowledges having read *questions*, which won the Gerald Lampert award in 1987 and was shortlisted for both the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry and the Dillons Commonwealth Poetry Prize. In fact, I've observed in our community that people my age and younger don't seem to know who she is, though everyone older than I am knows darn well. As I've said to others, if Brandt had been this successful in the National Hockey League, billboards of her face would greet your drive into Manitoba's Mennoland. I also don't understand why my friends in Steinbach have never heard of their very own Patrick Friesen. You see the pattern here?

I grew up a few miles from Di Brandt's family's farm in Reinland, Manitoba; in the seventies, she and my father attended the same private Mennonite high school located on the Manitoba-North Dakota border; a generation later, I was enrolled against my will at the same school. I have overcome the cultural injunction to dismiss both Brandt and her work, and I ask my Mennonite family and friends to consider reading *questions*, at least don't you dare say how awful it is unless you've actually *read* the damn thing.

I imagine you're becoming impatient and wondering what point I'm trying to make. Well, I'm worried that I'm not being truthful enough. This is a feature of women's writing, as noted by innumerable feminist academics: being duplicitous, evasive. I

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<sup>20</sup> Plautdietsch phrase for 'that yellow book.'

remember Jill Kerr Conway's observation in *When Memory Speaks* that when a shift is apparent in a woman's writing, it is a good thing for the reader to pay attention:

Memoirs full of abrupt transitions and shifting narrative styles are sure signs that their authors are struggling to overcome the cultural taboos that define these women as witnesses rather than actors in life's events.<sup>21</sup>

And so I understand better why Janet Ellerby's memoir fascinated me so and made me wonder why it seemed so different, for her narration reads quite straightforwardly, unfrilled, as if she's engaged in a phone conversation. What is the significance of this candour? As Conway might explain,

Whenever someone tells her story straight and in an authoritative voice, we know that she has developed her own sense of agency and can sustain it despite nagging cultural doubts.<sup>22</sup>

In the memoir *Vertigo*, for example, I found that I had to pay close attention to DeSalvo's sudden changes in voice; for example, occasionally when she is talking about an exceptionally difficult situation, such as her mother's death, she uses dated entries, as though she's writing in a diary, something that is usually intended to be private, though this memoir is in the public sphere. DeSalvo's voice seems most uncomfortable in the entries. She avoids using pronouns, her words are choppy and abrupt, and I was left

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<sup>21</sup> *When Memory Speaks*, 88.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 88. Carl Leggo says in "Autobiography: Researching our Lives" that he takes exception to Conway's link between authority and identity, and suggests that she is "laying claim to a notion of essentialized selfhood" that is insufficient to understand the nuanced process of how one's identity becomes formed. He calls for "creative and courageous" ways of writing autobiographically that celebrate the complex process of identity formation (16-17). For the most part, I agree with his critique, though I venture to say that Conway's idea of a woman writing with authority means something other than what Leggo understands. That is, Leggo does not acknowledge that, due to the historical taboo against women writing, "abrupt transitions" and "shifting narrative styles" have traditionally been common features of women's writing, and so for a woman to write 'authoritatively' probably means that she is trying to say *out loud* what she means, without hiding in a fog of words.

wondering about the turmoil that must have swathed her mind. The times during which she is most overt are when she writes about how grateful she is that reading has saved her: her openness gushes over the pages. In another instance, look at Carolyn Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life*, and how her narration slides at one point from the first to the third person when she discusses her mystery writing under the pseudonym of 'Amanda Cross.'<sup>23</sup> Writing in this genre was taboo in 1960s academic circles, a fact that Heilbrun highlights by her abruptly distanced talk about 'Cross's' work. Sometimes literary devices allow space between the author and the material; when these shifts happen, readers must check what is happening around and underneath the words on the page.

To shift gears in my own story at this point, I am thinking of including a letter that I wrote a few years ago. Letters are a most interesting kind of life writing and have historically been the most common writings left by women, including Mennonites. (In my own life, for instance, the only written words I have from my paternal grandmother are the birthday cards she sent, invariably including messages saying, 'I miss you.') Carolyn Heilbrun comments on the phenomenon of women's letters: in particular, she contrasts women's memoirs with their private letters, and then observes that the typical self-belittling tone found in a memoir's narration shifts in an epistle to a sense of self-determination. (She refers, for instance, to Jill Ker Conway's study of the American women of the Progressive Era – i.e., women born between 1855 and 1865 – in which she discusses the “narrative flatness” of their autobiographies in comparison to their letters and diaries which vividly reflected their “ambitions and struggles in the public sphere.”)

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<sup>23</sup> 119.

<sup>24</sup> I speculate that the variation is due to the nature of the letter as a more relational type of writing; that is, the fact that a woman is writing to someone she knows, and consequently perhaps she speaks more directly. In *Ethics*, Michel Foucault includes a brief essay in which he includes the letter as one of two forms of self writing in the ancient Greco-Roman empire, and he describes the missive as a way of manifesting one's self to both self and others and as a way for the writer to establish reciprocity – a congruence of gaze – with the receiver. I like this idea: I do think that a woman who imagines a concrete reader – a person whom she knows in real life – for her words will end up with a piece of writing that differs from narration intended for a memoir. This distinction is something to keep in mind. Perhaps a woman who writes doesn't want to fall into the self-deprecating trap of women writing autobiographically – maybe she wants to speak forwardly and with a sense of empowerment – but perhaps she fears that, by bucking the genre's norm (of women writing in a roundabout way and not taking credit for their own accomplishments), she'll be unable to convey her message to impatient readers who perhaps do not want her to break female typecasting in her writing. Perhaps the publication of autobiographical writing, with the threat of unknown readers digesting her words, means that she has to fall into the trap of being coy, assigning power to outside sources, going with the flow. I wonder if it's easier to say what I mean in a letter, then?<sup>25</sup> So much depends on the genre selected in which to write; it seems that wheelbarrows of diverse colours will carry entirely different stories.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, with these issues in mind, I think of Jane Tompkins' *A Life in School*. As she struggles to understand her experimental pedagogy and where she feels it went wrong, Tompkins moves abruptly to a chapter written entirely as postcards, which are addressed to a variety of people – former students, fellow teachers, an imagined mentor, her husband, herself.

At least the words in my letter, which is included below, approach candour; I think that because the words came out in a flurry, and I felt no need to revise the piece after I signed my name to it. That's usually an indication that I did well. If I hadn't included it, I likely would have kept on writing without actually saying anything. And so, I present to you, from my reader's diary, the following private letter I wrote to Dr Brandt.

Letter, Unsent

Dear Dr Brandt,

I own a copy of your first book of poems, *questions i asked my mother*, which I have never read in its entirety. It lives in my seed container that currently houses most of my worldly goods, near the outskirts of a Manitoba village, a site of a familiar joke: no stoplights. The container sprang a leak last summer, and ruined nearly my entire library – much to my devastation, not the crockpot or the tea towels – but this book remained in a safe corner. I have dipped into its pages, and I shut it, from the threat of punishment. The binding is not discreet, and I fear leaving evidence. Several years ago, I finally picked it up at a used book sale, and I held it publicly, and no one questioned my choice or laughed at me or said I was gay. I see copies of it at many used book sales in southern Manitoba and Winnipeg – as are other books from Mennonite writers - and it is always purchased by somebody. An economy of questions posed to mothers and others, a circulation. It's never one of the leftovers to be carted off to the one of the Mennonite Central Committee's Self-Help stores, where I'm sure it would be met by a most unfortunate fate.

I grew up in the West Reserve, in the aftermath of these questions asked of mothers. I try to remember when I saw your yellow book for the first time. Likely, I was



a preadolescent – gangly, flesh-coloured glasses, teeth and ears too big for face – surprised to see naked breasts on the cover of a book of poetry. In my formal education, I had been told that poetry was about war, roses, rhymes, and riding highwaymen. I can still recite the tale of Abou Ben Adhem, as well as a litany of High German poems and songs, and whole Bible chapters. It seems that you are a Mennonite like me – perhaps you have given yourself creative licence to shorten your surname from Hildebrandt to Brandt, and then liberated capitalization, which I appreciate, and have seen before with e.e. cummings' name. I think that maybe I should do that, too. After all, if I were to sign myself as pam instead of Pam Klassen, my teachers would ignore this transgression because they wouldn't know what to do about it. It is difficult, after all, to know what to do with a docile girl who bursts uncontrollably, like a propane flare busting out of nowhere rather than the intended pile of underbrush. Your words confuse me: they run as though you are out of breath.

This might amuse you. My English teacher at our private Mennonite high school reconvened our brand-new copies of *Romeo and Juliet*, featuring black covers with young lovers, because they contained black-and-white sketches of Juliet's boobs as she stretched her arms in bed to meet the new day. We received the books later, safe, with white tape covering the offensive female anatomy, except for a disembodied head. White tape that we could peel off to expose the wound. (Juliet: I dreamed I was arrested for indecent exposure in my Maidenform bra?)

15 years old. At a library book sale in Winkler, I see a slim yellow volume with the familiar black-and-white cover illustration. It costs 25 cents. I want to read that, I think I will, but I can't carry it around until I make my final purchases. It is so slender,

nearly hidden between the comfortable thick bindings of its neighbours. I leave; I'll pick it up later. When I go to retrieve the volume, it's gone. I look around to see who is daring enough to hold this in public, but I see no yellow anywhere. I wonder if, maybe, my dad has a copy. I know he's got *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*, which is deliciously naughty, and if he owns that, he must possess a book of poetry by Di Brandt, who is from Reinland, which is not very far away. Perhaps I've overlooked it, as many times as I've disentangled his texts, searching for something new. Perhaps it's hidden somewhere. I consider my father a covert intellectual, and his secret is safe with me.

I think about other questions to ask mothers, and imagine posing them to my own mom. She would not be angry with me; she would be deeply embarrassed; I think she might cry.

Eleven years old. In our conservative small-town church, the Sunday School librarians say that you must be at least thirteen years old to graduate to the grown-up Janette Oke series *Love Comes Softly*. This edict makes me secretly irate, a familiar feeling, as I've read most of the books at my grandma's nursing home in Winkler, anyway, so I know that the most titillating scene features Clark tossing a handful of corn kernels down his new bride's dress, safely within the context of their convenient marriage. A joke, a longing to be close, tentative land ownership, a fertile desire. What on earth are they keeping from me? I need more books to read; there are not enough.

Today. I can't read this book, *Dancing Naked*, without dissolving. I signed it out of the university library yesterday, and opened it on the bus on the way home, and read, through tears, your essay about pornographic representations and corporal punishment among Mennonites. I cannot read any more of this publicly. I read it at home, on my

couch, when my husband is at work, for he can't understand how printed text could affect me so deeply. I know that my birth is a cosmic accident, and that if I'd been born in the sixteenth century, I would've been slaughtered as a witch for my many birthmarks, my changeable eyes, my habit of foraging for herbs. Here is a cliché: you have written all of my secret thoughts; my witness of horrific violence against women, children, animals, land. You have comforted me, you have usurped me, you have mothered me. Did you know that Jonah refused to preach to Ninevah because he was an artist? I didn't until just lately. Alberto Manguel says: Jonah understood that the Ninevites would either cast him out or frame his words to hang on a wall.

A confession. As much as I railed against the church when I was a very young woman, I purchased its beliefs. I believed in our innocence, more or less. As recently as a few years ago, I wrote a letter to the editor of *The Winnipeg Free Press* about corporal punishment of children, arguing that the Ontarian Mennonite couple who were charged with child abuse ought to retain the right to spank, as it was done out of love and biblical beliefs. (Here I am reminded of a toddler who mimics her parents' words.) I was spanked, I reasoned to myself, and I turned out fine. My favourite uncle commented to me that he had seen my words, but he neither commended nor chastised me, just looked me curiously. He knew, I think. I feared the black leather belt. I lied when I was in trouble, even though I desired to tell the truth, because I didn't want to be hit, was tired of being in trouble when I never did anything truly bad. Hell, I've never even been drunk, unlike any other Mennonite I've ever known.

Once, when my family was camping in North Dakota, I went climbing with my cousins and siblings, down the rocks to a creek, where it was lovely and cool, to play

among the minnows. There was an unspoken rule that we were not to venture there. One cousin's toe was bitten by a minnow, so she ran screaming, blood trailing from her foot, back to the campsite. I went for a long bike ride through the forest. When I returned, I coolly denied that we'd been there. No one knew what to do with me. So my barbaric words to the editor linger; I want to take them back and delete them; they are on the Internet for anyone to see. I didn't turn out fine; I can't tell the truth.

Sincerely,

Pam Klassen

Instead of playing this hymn by rote, I have taken the time to verify what the words say, to look slowly, and it appears that they never meant what I thought they did. I step away from my laptop and the books every few minutes to wash the dishes; to check my unruly hair; to look out the window at the city of Hamilton, with its reeking steel mills and its carnivalesque downtown and its appealing mixture of buildings old and new. I need to reread certain books at this point, especially *questions i asked my mother*, which I *know* I should *not* read autobiographically because it is a book of poetry and not of life writing, per se, but it's hard for me not to do so, considering how it broke open so many secrets about my own Mennonite world. I find it impossible to read objectively and to remember that everything is just a story. I am not always sure where to locate the line between life writing and fiction, and I think in many cases the boundary is arbitrary. And so I read *questions* as autobiography, anyway, because I must. Simply, it helps me make sense of things, and so I allow myself to do it. Jill Ker Conway says that reading autobiography compels us to reflect on our own cultural scripts as we read to see how

others have “broken the internalized code a culture supplies about how life should be experienced”<sup>26</sup> True, and it hurts in every which way.

The apostle Paul writes about the spiritual gifts given to members of the church, and I wonder in light of those words if perhaps Mennonite writers count as speakers of tongues, and readers are the interpreters?<sup>27</sup> At one time I thought that maybe teaching was my gift, but now I wonder if I could begin to include myself as a writer, instead. I feel frustrated by the unfortunate timing of my birth. I want to be a writer, to become a part of the cultural conversation, but I am still too young, and everything I’m saying is old news anyway. In particular, these gifted women Mennonite writers – including the ones I’ve mentioned and more, such as the American poets Julia Kasdorf and Cheryl Denise – have said what needs to be said. If I wrote, too, wouldn’t people be tired of hearing yet another Mennonite woman writer? I kid you not: occasionally I’ve written pieces and then deleted them because I found that someone else had already written the same thing, sometimes almost verbatim. (After generations of inbreeding, is our DNA that much alike?) That, my friends, is demoralizing.

Though this is just a thesis, really, I’m nervous about this writing business. What I’m saying isn’t a bunch of throw-away sentences; every word carries the weight of a migration. I keep telling myself that no one in real life will ever read this – I mean, only two people asked to see my first published poem – so I can say what I want, I don’t have to worry, I won’t be banned, won’t be burned at the stake, haven’t been hit by lightning. If I had been born earlier – 500 years ago or even one generation sooner – I would have

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<sup>26</sup> *When Memory Speaks*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> I Corinthians 12:28.

been in a lot more trouble for some of the things I think and say and write. In sixteenth-century Europe I could have been burned as a witch; in Russia I would have been shunned, at the very least; in the 1980s I would have been censured and then ignored until forgotten.

In the meantime, I accepted a position in my hometown's high school, teaching English. For a variety of reasons, I'm edgy about this job; partly because much of the time I find teaching incompatible with artistic practice, for time and space and freedom are lacking. What I've done, in compromise, is to create when my students are creating, partly also in order to act as a model for them, but it's another thing entirely to write and to read as a matter of public performance, and to self-censor because I want to keep my job. It involves never-ending rounds of negotiations.

In the meantime, I worry about what I will do. How shall I teach? How will I use what I've learned from my coursework and my thesis to affect my students and their work? Though I preach relentlessly on the importance of choice in the reading and writing workshops – in the vein of my beloved Nancie Atwell – for whole-class activities, I also hope to lean on our local prophets: Di Brandt, Armin Wiebe, Lois Braun, Vic Enns, Sandra Birdsell – as well as writers from the surrounding First Nations and French communities – and other sorts of storytellers, including, if possible, some of our grandmothers. I want my students to know the spiritual genealogy of the act of reading, how connected to life it used to be, how communal it was. And in the spirit of community, I will want to know what my students consider good about reading. That is, what do they think it is good for? I'm looking forward to this reciprocity.

What I mean to say is that I want my students to read and to write as martyrs. An odd-sounding concept, but hear me out. The American Mennonite poet Julia Kasdorf comments on the etymology of ‘martyr,’ and how historically the word has included “no trace of suffering or death”; rather, she notes that the root means “witness to a truth.”<sup>28</sup> How lovely and profound, and how appropriate for the history of my culture. This is my small way of redeeming the lost and the shunned. I’m most curious to see what sort of reaction I’ll garner.

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<sup>28</sup> “Writing Like a Mennonite,” 186.

## Chapter 6

### A ROOM OF MY OWN: READING WITH GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

It's true that all readers have dark secrets: the books they haven't read, but should have. I didn't, for instance, read *questions i asked my mother* until I become brave enough to do so. Yet my biggest and most embarrassing example – to which I will allude at the end of my memoir in the list “Things I Like to Read” – is that, until recently, I never read any of Virginia Woolf's work, though throughout my reading life I have seen repeated references to *The Waves*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and especially *A Room of One's Own*. I could've recited a précis of *A Room of One's Own* without ever having read it. I just never got around to doing it. It's quite a sad oversight, especially because I'm interested in the history of women's reading and writing. My omission began to glare at me when I was asked in the Writers' Salon to read *Vertigo* by Louise DeSalvo, someone who happens to be a prominent Woolf scholar.

The following excerpts regarding my lack of Woolfishness are from my reader's diary.

September 2007: Shamefully, I've never read *A Room of One's Own*. I have never read *To the Lighthouse*. Or *On Being Ill*. Or *Mrs. Dalloway*.

I keep meaning to. I've owned a copy of *A Room of One's Own* since I was seventeen, because I had heard that Woolf was important, and I wanted to study English literature. In my pre-M.A. year of studies, I purchased a used, unmarked copy of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Both books remain unread, packed into my seed container in the no-traffic-



light-as-referent village of Fannystelle, Manitoba; hopefully, it is in a corner of the trailer that is resisting the rain.

I blame my professors for not introducing me to Virginia Woolf. It's their fault, really. If she were that important in the *canon* of English literature, surely they would have packed a snippet of her work into their mountainous syllabi of Blake and Shakespeare and Johnson. Amid three British literature courses, of which one focused on illness and disability: no Virginia Woolf. Yes, that's it. I blame all of my professors.

The references to Woolf and her work were, of course, numerous throughout my days of undergrad and pre-M.A. research. I'm aware of what *A Room of One's Own* contains, although I've never read it. When I come across a reference in literature to a woman finding a space in which to write, I realize that this is a nod to Virginia Woolf. When I read *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, I saw a slapstick reference to Woolf, and I laughed at the impudence of Lemony Snicket.

October 2007: I'm reading a book I happened across in the Brock library: *Rooms of Our Own* by Susan Gubar. The title struck me, first, because I enjoy Gubar's work, particularly the book about the madwomen in the attic. I'm crazy (ha) about Victorian fiction, so I found that book fascinating. Anyway, I decided I would check it out because of the title. After all, you're talking to the person who has never read Virginia Woolf, remember?

November 11, 2007: I don't have a room of my own. I exist in a dank, chilly, windowless room that I must share with my husband's odds and ends (and his frustration with the fact

that I am not a neatfreak, unlike my mother). Academic writing is frustrating me these days. There must be a connection.

November 17, 2007: I own a copy of *A Room of One's Own*. It is small, and it has a black cover featuring a portrait of a woman reading. It's in my seed container in Fannystelle, Manitoba, which (if you've forgotten) is a town of the *don't blink* variety. My husband, Steve, even remembers that I own a copy of that book, which is amazing because he doesn't read, and he has never heard of Virginia Woolf. He knows who she is now because I talk about her at least a few times each week.

He and I went to Buffalo today, and I bought a luscious cherry-red winter coat. (Alas! No matching shoes!) Also, I purchased another copy of *A Room of Her Own*. Steve was not exactly pleased that I acquired something which I already own, but when it comes to books and clothes for me, he knows that he has no ground to stand on. Yes, he's a good man.

It's time: knuckle down, buckle down, do it, do it, do it.

I read *A Room of One's Own* last year and again yesterday, and here is my response: I accept Woolf's invitation to think back through mothers. Maybe by doing so I can write more effectively about myself, about my community, about my pedagogy, about the books I've cherished. Maybe I'll be able to establish for myself a matrilineal tradition of reading. I think about my mother's mother's mother, a tiny woman whom my mom says I would have loved.

There exists in the Canadian Mennonite community a semi-iconic black-and-white photograph of a tiny elderly woman, facing southeast, engrossed in the act of reading a book, which she holds on her lap. Sitting on a chair, she is surrounded by a clean and white space and dark, durable furnishings: a flowery Kroege clock, a sewing machine, a bed headed by stacked feather pillows. A first-generation Canadian, she wears the old Mennonite women's uniform: a dark dress and a frilly cap through which we might interpret her theology. This is one of my great-grandmothers, Katharina, the maternal granny beloved by my mother. A first-generation Canadian, Katharina married twice in her life and had fifteen children and nine stepchildren, plus myriad grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

A close-up of Katharina's face in this picture hangs in the Mennonite Museum in the East Reserve town of Steinbach, Manitoba, though we are all from the West Reserve. Her body and her surroundings, including the anonymous book, have been excised, and her downcast head has been flipped to face southwest, perhaps to prayerfully glimpse the setting sun from the corner of an eye. In this museum, a love letter to the past.

We all know, of course, that the book she cradles is a Bible, of the High German variety – our Plautdietsch language is traditionally oral, and besides, High German was the language of the church – and that the day on which the picture was taken must be a Sunday, for she is engaged in an act of leisure. But what if it wasn't a Bible? As I write this, I am two thousand kilometers away from my own reproduction of her, and so I recreate the image in my mind. In the picture, she is engaged in the act of reading – perhaps reading performatively for the camera – and the cover of the text is unavailable

for my eyes. How do we know it was a Bible? Evidence of wishful thinking? My dad says fervidly that it *was* a Bible; she could not have owned a different book. My mom considers my questions and says no, it must have been a Bible, and she can't think of what else it might be. My doubt surprises them. But I want to know. What if she is reading something rather secular and, therefore, suspect: a detective novel, a book of botany, a romance, Virginia Woolf, an owner's manual? What if she was, in fact, taken by surprise by the camera's flash? What if it were not a Sunday?

Katharina shows that she has time to read, somehow, plus space in which to do it. Her performance of reading must mean something. Is this a luxury granted to the elderly? Has the photographer lied? Has a moment of her secret life been exposed, one that is censored in the museum's display? It occurs to me that my great-grandmother Katharina's austere room contains art as well as some of the means with which to make it: the hand-painted hanging clock, the sewing machine, the lovely fat pillows, her homemade dress and frilly cap. In the moment was colour. A portrait of the elderly Mennonite woman as surreptitious artist? What is my mother really doing when she plays hymns on the piano and cans ripe August fruit in jeweled jars?

Marlene Epp says that Mennonite women in Canada have used reading as a way to connect with others – for instance, to learn more about a distant author's point of view – but I question, amid their myriad children and chores, when they would have found the time.<sup>1</sup> I wonder, as well, where they would have found the books; it was hard enough for me in the 1980s to unearth enough decent reading material, and I know that my mom and

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<sup>1</sup> *Mennonite Women in Canada*, 272.

dad didn't have any books except the Bible at home. I don't know why, but I think that Katharina would have been well read if she'd been allowed the time and the space and the access to books. Maybe it's because, in the photo, she is ensconced so comfortably in a reader's pose: sitting in a favourite chair in an unpeopled room, her arms surrounding the text, her neck curved over the pages. I see her as an example of Virginia Woolf's common reader: as someone who reads from the margins, as someone who makes or breaks an author, as someone who uses books to find out about life. I wonder if she liked the few years of schooling she received, and, if she already knew how to read before Grade One, was she was patient with her teacher? I wonder if she ever did what I did as a child: forget that she was reading holy writ and enjoy it as a tempting story. I wonder what her Bible looked like: did she underline words or write in the margins? Did she use the first few pages to record births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths? Did she keep her handwritten engagement letter tucked within the covers? My own battered *New International Version* Bible sits under my bed, a storehouse for things such as

- remarks from my six high school classes in religious instruction;
- notes that Steve and I write to each other when we're bored during a sermon;
- quotations from the charismatic lead pastor at an interdenominational church;
- roses from my wedding bouquet;
- a tulip from my grandmother's funeral wreath; and
- a picture of my baby at nine weeks' gestation.

I don't know what else to say about Katharina because much of what I've written about her is pure speculation. And so I think about her as an artist-creator and try linking myself to her in that way. In this piece of life writing, I'm making myself into a character, only I haven't so many kinds of women from which to choose, really, from our

indigenous fiction. There are only variations of a homely and quiet Eve-before-the-Fall. I could be

- a) a virtuous girl (the fact that I'm putting thoughts to paper means I'm clearly not good, at least in the traditional Mennonite sense; as well, I am thirty-one years old); or
- b) a pious mother (I have no living children, plus I haven't been to church in over two years, except for weddings and funerals); or
- c) a saintly grandmother (obviously not).

Mennonite scholar Katie Funk Wiebe has collected these archetypes into an article, "The Mennonite Woman in Mennonite Fiction," in which she concludes by asking if these three categories are reflective of Mennonite women's life, or if they are what the culture desires for its women to be. (What a way to end an article: with the biggest question of all!) I lean toward the latter suggestion. In real life, I must say that I've seen the fallen Eve (the divorced mother, the unwed pregnant teenager, the loudmouth girl), which is not a position I envy due to community condemnation. And I have seen more resistance from women than what has been described in Russian Mennonite novels. For instance, despite my paternal grandfather's respected position in the community, it was always clear to me that my grandmother was calling the shots. When we went to the home place, we were going to Grandma's house. Then again, the stories I've heard about my maternal grandfather, who has always sounded like a rascal to me, make me think that you, my Groß-großmutter, must have been keenly aware of what your daughter, Helena, was

compelled to do – what with ten children and an astringent husband – to demonstrate *gelassenheit*, to remain a strong seam.<sup>2</sup>

I think a few contemporary Mennonite writers, such as David Bergen, Di Brandt, and Miriam Toews, are creating new images of our culture's women, a "New Eve," as Wiebe suggests, but.<sup>3</sup> But. There is just no space for me if I'm not a mother.

I came across a novel by Otto Schrag, entitled *The Locusts*, which features a strong Mennonite woman, Lydia, as the protagonist – Katie Funk Wiebe comments that Lydia is "the only female character I have encountered in Mennonite literature who assumes a prophetic role, at first rejected, but later acknowledged by her people."<sup>4</sup> Lydia stays within the community, negotiating her identity to the end, reminding me of the poet Sarah Klassen who continues to publish her work while remaining within Winnipeg's Mennonite society. I have prophesied three times in my life, beginning spontaneously when I was thirteen years old, that my father will become a minister; he doesn't like it when I say this. I am not a prophet. What I said about him will come true, though, eventually: we all know it.

I cannot depart too dramatically from stereotype; otherwise no one will listen to me.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Gelassenheit,' High German for 'yieldedness' or 'submission,' is an important and highly debated concept for Mennonites. It means being offered up to God, including the willingness to accept whatever happens in one's life.

<sup>3</sup> "The Mennonite Woman," 232.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>5</sup> Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 16. Conway talks about how women writing autobiographically cannot break away from stereotypes, otherwise they risk alienating their audience.

Where is my space, a room of my own? Physically, it's anywhere I am. Most often I work while sitting on my couch, the current 'gestation station,' with all my papers and books spread over my desk and my kitchen table. I also work in coffee shops, in restaurants, and in front of a picture window in my local library. I work on my blog, a virtual room of one's own, which no one in my real life has read.

Nobody, not even Steve, is allowed to touch any of my work things, including my computer. I am flustered when a breeze laps at the unstapled pages of my manuscripts. A man at a coffee shop asked if he could use my laptop to check his e-mail, and I refused, wondering peevishly as well why he couldn't see that I was busy writing. He asked why not. I said – well, can I wear your wedding ring? He said no. End of story.

My partner and I are both struggling to engage in artistic practice – to think of ourselves as 'artists' – in different ways: I as a writer, he as a vintage car designer and builder. As well, we are both beginning to paint, and we treat the act of cooking as a highly evolved artistic endeavour. Last week I read him excerpts from bell hooks' *Art on My Mind* and from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, and I expressed that we both need time, space, and money in order to pursue our respective crafts. He didn't acknowledge these words, but a few days later, he came to me with a plan for how his art could work out, and I was glad.



He and I feel guilt for our artistic passions which are too much of the body. Art, in the Mennonite community, has traditionally been thought of as something wasteful, fancy, of the world – horrible sins – for both men and women.<sup>6</sup> Di Brandt has written extensively on the difficulty of breaking “centuries-old taboos against self-expression and art-making and public speech.”<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, art was practiced surreptitiously, and creativity was expressed through “extreme functionalism.”<sup>8</sup> For example, women sewed and cooked and gardened (of course, see Alice Walker’s essay, “In Search of my Mother’s Garden,” for a beautiful description of these sorts of acts), as these were useful domestic arts. However, as historian Marlene Epp points out in her lovingly written study of Mennonite women in Canada, the traditional emphasis on simplicity often precluded the possibility of adding a unique aesthetic to one’s work.<sup>9</sup> (To amuse me, my paternal grandmother drew pen-and-ink landscapes and pictures of the home place, but never when another soul was around.)

I don’t know what men did – perhaps they had no means for artistic expression – after all, fields have to be ploughed in straight lines, so no room there for dreaming. I tell my dad about what I’ve just written, and he corrects me, declaring that straight furrows were of utmost importance to Mennonite men: they were a matter of pride in the community. He says it took skill, strength, and a good eye to make a neat field; and even though his dad’s shop was always in disarray, at least his rows were perfect. I stand

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<sup>6</sup> Though I’ve been told several times by family members that the nineteenth-century Russian Mennonites weren’t quite as wary of art in Russia as they were to become in Canada.

<sup>7</sup> *Dancing Naked*, 9. Many other Mennonite writers and artists have commented on this topic, including Al Reimer, Harry Loewen, Katharine Bartel, and Katie Funk Wiebe, to name only a few.

<sup>8</sup> Epp, “Quilters,” 231.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

corrected. And then I muse that even lines hold a certain kind of poetry; perhaps they contain musical notes that never reach my ears. Dad nods. Suddenly I think again of Louise DeSalvo's unearthing from her dictionary of the word 'verse,' which is "derived from the Latin *versus* a row, literally, a turning toward = *vert(ere)* to turn + *tus* suffix of verb of action."<sup>10</sup> I read between the lines a connection between turning and rows: *to plough a field* = *to make a poem*. Perhaps I've underestimated my patriarchs. But other than that, if my grandfathers had an artistic appetite, I don't know anything about it. My dad is a sensitive soul – he used to write poetry, and he likes art – and so I feel that his childhood and adolescence must have been very difficult to bear. My brother loves to draw and has spun his talent into a job as an assistant draftsman.

Dancing was strictly forbidden. I mean no school dances, nothing, though my parents enrolled me in ballet. I do suppose that music was an outlet for both women and men alike, but I'm not optimistic about that notion, having grown up with the unaccompanied dirges of the Altona Sommerfelder Mennonite Church (oh, stories live in those memories: guitars were strictly verboten, and even pianos were suspect). Music was strictly regulated. One of my dear Mennonite friends, Rose, tells a decades-old story about a group of young people in her area who gathered in secret to participate in hymnsings ... in illicit four-part harmony! I laughed when she told me that tale, especially when she reached the part about the participants' irate parents.

According to Marlene Epp, writing was not explicitly forbidden to either sex, particularly the relatively private forms of diaries and letters.<sup>11</sup> Many Mennonite women

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<sup>10</sup> *Vertigo*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

participated in these types of life writing.<sup>12</sup> My great-grandmother Katharina, for instance, kept a farm diary, including records of egg collection, the pounds of milk and potatoes sold each week, and the breeding and calving dates of her cows. (Among her thousands of descendants, I wish I knew where to locate this document.) Public writing, however, was certainly not as acceptable to the community – an attitude which lingers to this day, especially regarding women writing. Hence my own periodic angst on the topic.

How contradictory – our dialect, Plautdietsch, is ripe, direct, and comical in a way that English is not, and so we appreciate stories and gossip and jokes and wordplay in different ways; perhaps language acted as the creative outlet, as long as everyone understood that truth was not inherent in any word. We are taught in church, after all, to be literal, although we do seem to know in our lives the importance of interpretation. We do know that stories are alive and that they migrate to other stories, just as Virginia Woolf appears everywhere in my readings.

So hard to develop artistic practice, and to truly engage in research, when one has been taught to read at face value, and when art and excess education (especially for women and girls) are linked to unnecessary self-indulgence. When I think about it too much, I'm afraid to be creative. When I start thinking crazy, as I do before I fall asleep, I'm exultant, I'm rebelling on the worst level, though I have never even smoked a doobie or gotten a traffic ticket. I am from a culture in which the story is a lie. Meanwhile, my people often make up stories about their own origins – an urban (or rural, rather) myth of innocent and perfectly pacifist Germanic and Russian origins, about being chased by Nestor Makhno and his band of dirty men out of a perfectly cultivated garden. Most

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 267-268.

Mennonites my age and younger would not know what I mean when I say this, due to the lack of education about our past.<sup>13</sup> Although overall our cultural-religious group is highly interested in historical preservation, I find that most Mennonites are not aware of their own history. For example, nowhere except in university or in Mennonite private schools are we able to take a class on our own heritage, and I've never seen in any place a formal course on our dialect (though I did learn recently of a local community college's offering of *Conversational Plautdietsch*, which surprised me). Of course, the best scenario would be to learn about these things in our homes and churches, but I find that that doesn't happen, really – at least, not in my own experience. Instead, we're giving it all away and making up stories to placate ourselves.

I stop writing for long periods of time, especially when I feel guilty or anxious, and Steve practices his art in stolen moments. I signed up for Rishma Dunlop's 'The Act of Writing' class, feeling that I would die if I weren't accepted; Steve has been disoriented in Ontario without access to his tools and a garage.

You would think that only women ask this question - how can art and family life ever work together? – but in my life, the man I know asks this, too. A good sign, I hope. We have agreed to protect each other's materials and space and time, and so I hope that I have cause for optimism. Thus far, we are both physically unproductive; perhaps we're relieved by this fact.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> During the Russian Civil War, Makhno was an anarchist who persecuted the Mennonites still living in Russia, partly because of the group's overall wealth. For more information, see Paul Robert Magocsi's book *A History of the Ukraine* or John G. Rempel's "Nestor Makhno" entry in the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*.

<sup>14</sup> Though I have since discovered that I am pregnant; the cliché of birthing a child and birthing this document is almost too much for me to bear!

To write or to belong? So goes it then always.

*In the meantime, here is a storybook ending:*

It is July 2009. I am nearly finished writing my thesis. I've just moved from Hamilton back to south-central Manitoba, and I'm sitting at my parents' dinner table, fact-checking in our family history books, since my memory's not what it used to be. My mom and dad are reminiscing about the people mentioned in the documents, and since their stories are far more vivid than those in black and white, I ask if they will jot them down in the margins. They don't do it, but they say it's a good idea.

Printed on the very last page of my mother's family tree, I find a cheerful painting, completed on a sunflower yellow background. On the left is a woman wearing a colourful dress; she faces a massive bouquet of flowers. Great-grandmother Katharina painted this picture – perhaps in secret, since nobody seemed to know of its existence. I also find a copy of a poem she wrote for her second husband, my great-grandfather. After her death, the painting and the poem, tucked into the creases of her Bible, were the last of her things found. I wonder what she could have accomplished if she hadn't had two husbands and twenty-four children to mind, as well as a house and chickens and cows.

## Chapter 7

### THE WILD THINGS: READING TO REMEMBER

Long before I knew of my great-grandmother, including her proclivity for art and words, I was, like her, a lover of beautiful things and an insatiable reader. Yet something began to change as I progressed through a dozen graded classrooms. I found that school was a place where ‘literacy’ – a loaded word – was taught as something disjointed and secular, as a series of technical skills for which we were assigned arbitrary numbers; almost certainly quite a different entity from anything my great-grandmother would have known. Most of my teachers treated me as though I were illiterate, and so I participated in bland class literacy activities: look-and-say, phonics instruction, speed reading, copying letters from the chalkboard, and so on. I followed the rules. Consequently, it seemed that books and words were nothing to be afraid of.

I’ve since learned that my early school experience, set in the 1980s, was situated amid the twentieth century “competition for a single ‘best’ instructional methodology” (despite the efforts of the maternal pedagogues of the turn of the nineteenth century, who advocated the idea of matching methodology to child).<sup>1</sup> Lissa Paul explains that, as literacy instruction became concentrated on “how to teach rather than what to teach or why,” it became distanced from important things such as “saving a life or being inducted into a cultural community.”<sup>2</sup> Gradually,

[l]ost from view were the reasons for reading: the religious reasons of the seventeenth-century *New England Primer*, the political reasons of Webster’s

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<sup>1</sup> “Learning to be Literate,” unpaginated.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., unpaginated.

eighteenth-century speller and the cultural reasons of the nineteenth-century McGuffey reader.<sup>3</sup>

This quotation holds true to my experience: reading seemed to have little to do with anything outside of school. I knew otherwise: I knew that reading was linked to many life-giving things. However, trained not to question authority, I did as I was told.

I did enjoy most of my teachers' material selections for junior high and high school Language Arts classes, especially the novels (except for the detested *Jake and the Kid*). I still remember many of them:

- *Cue for Treason*
- *The Outsiders*
- *Lord of the Flies*
- *A Separate Peace*
- *The Old Man and the Sea*
- *Peace Shall Destroy Many*
- *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*

I'm thirty-one years old now, but I bet I could still pass tests on those books, and from time to time, I re-read Al Reimer's sweeping *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*. I still have the greatest admiration for Rudy Wiebe's didactic *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, and S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* remains one of my classroom's go-to novels for reluctant readers; I think Diane Lane was the perfect Cherry in the film adaptation. I was afraid of poetry and hated grammar, especially diagramming sentences. I was shocked to discover in Grade Nine that Shakespeare was magnificent.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., unpaginated.



I had patience for the accompanying assignments (written summaries, questions-and-answers, character maps, and so on), the lack of bulk reading, and the books without female protagonists. I read on, in spite of these limitations. I happily took the books home to relish on my own, and then I'd enjoy them again (behind a stoic mask) when we read together as a class; I didn't wait for class time when we would read aloud the assigned texts.

I watch a pair of turtle doves swoop down onto the grass outside my window, strut around for a moment and then fly back up onto the roof of the pigeon tower at the end of my library. They do this (apparently) for the fun of repetition. Partly, that is why I enjoy rereading.<sup>4</sup>

Rereading rarely tired me; I understood that words were layered like strata, as Ann Michaels demonstrates so eloquently in the novel *Fugitive Pieces*, and that with subsequent review, I could come to see depth, some of the historical record.<sup>5</sup>

Though my interest in books was gradually wearing thin late in high school, for the most part this remained a time of obsessive reading because I finally gained access to a wider variety of material. Our high school's library is pathetically underfunded and censored beyond measure, but I work in the public library as a *student page*, ha ha. I don't even realize what I've got access to. Stephen Leacock. Victor Borge. Russian history. Czarina Alexandra and Rasputin are fascinating. I'm uncertain about how someone could think that the more you sin, the more forgiveness you could have. One

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<sup>4</sup> Manguel, *A Reading Diary*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> A lovely discussion about rereading favourite childhood stories with older students is found in Tom Liam Lynch's "Rereadings and Literacy," which I've listed in my bibliography.

girl I don't like reads Harlequins at every opportunity; she keeps them stored in her uniform's big pockets. I am interested in the content of those books, though I know that romances are dull, really; everyone knows how the story will end, and so I feel sorry for the authors' lack of imagination. I am getting out of this town.

I am also engrossed in Harriet Ann Jacobs and the Chinese opium war. I binge on topics until I'm saturated, which occasionally takes some time. When my friend opens my locker and my collection slides out, she asks, "Obsess much?"

Before I migrated from Manitoba to Ontario to pursue my graduate degree, I took time to go through my high school coursework. My parents had saved every sheet of it. I was most interested in my English assignments, and, as I paged through them, I remembered the fill-in-the-blank work. I dumped the leaves of paper into my backyard barbeque pit.

At age eighteen, I moved to Winnipeg, to go to university. (After my dad, I was the second person in my entire extended family to attend post-secondary school.) While my friends back home were looking for jobs, life partners, and houses, I indulged my passion for books and learning and travel. Ironically, this was when reading became an impossible task, often distasteful, one that made me even forget why and how I had ever fallen in love – and I'm not using that phrase lightly – with *Wuthering Heights*: I hated the first three-quarters of Emily Brontë's novel and then proceeded abruptly through the remaining pages with my mouth wide open. Somehow, at a good Winnipeg university, I forgot this trajectory of feelings. Isn't that awful?

English literature classes are indeed not the feel-good places they so often are in high school; indeed, when I told one of my esteemed B.Ed. professors that my major was English (and my minor was history), and that my G.P.A. had topped out at 4.0, he exclaimed: “That’s more work than pre-med!” And that is likely true. To do well in English honours and graduate classes, I found that it was vital to read the assigned texts at *least* three or four times each and to annotate them (remembering that every single word counts); otherwise it was impossible to contribute intelligently to the seminar discussions. Keep in mind that it is common in a full undergrad English lit course load – at least in my experience – to be assigned weekly somewhere between three to eight new books to read, plus the readings for piles of seminars and term papers. All I did was read, but it was a kind of reading that hurt. I missed out on so much: time spent with family and friends, watching films, writing poetry, renovating our 100-year-old Fort Rouge home, walking along the nearby Red River trail.

Though reading during my undergraduate degree in English literature was often a terrible experience, paradoxically it is one for which I am forever grateful because, finally, it stretched me to the limit of my ability to read. As a child, I had been encouraged to read quickly and for literal meaning, for basic comprehension rather than for any meditative purpose. Learning the art of close reading for my B.A. made me slow down, down, down; made me conscious of associative thinking; made me see how theory (when used sensibly) can illuminate literature. This kind of formalist reading was hard, so hard.<sup>6</sup> It was like growing potatoes without using pesticides: regularly you have to crouch

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down on the dirt and comb through each muddy green leaf, looking for those pesky potato bugs, and then toss them into a pail to be drowned or burned. In my heart of hearts, I valued the intensity of this kind of study: I enjoyed coming to familiarity with the nuances on the pages; becoming aware of how the words and meanings play and tell truths and lies; to consider what Plato and Samuel Johnson and T.S. Eliot and Mikhail Bakhtin and Hélène Cixous might be getting at; to learn, slowly and painfully, how to engage in sustained literary discussion; how to make it all *mean* something. I carry these painfully acquired critical reading skills with me to this day, though I feel I've become rusty: I struggle like Jacob against the Angel to retain what I've learned.

In *Reading Like a Writer*, novelist Francine Prose says that when she learned the art of close reading, she thought that she “was learning to read in a whole new way,” when, in fact, she realized that she was simply “relearning to read in an old way.”<sup>7</sup> What she means is that we all come to text as close readers. That is, “[w]ord by word is how we learn to hear and then read, which seems only fitting because it is how the books we are reading were written in the first place.”<sup>8</sup> I like her observation: reading as a circular process.

What was dreadful in university was the toll taken on my time and on my body, and I couldn't sustain the work, for a variety of reasons. For one: my neck burned from

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<sup>6</sup> At least my store of biblical knowledge meant that I never missed even a trace of an allusion to the Patriarchs or any of their fellow actors!

<sup>7</sup> *Reading Like a Writer*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the classic swan-dipping-into-pages pose; I'd been in a series of three car accidents within seven months – none of which were my fault – from which I still experience chronic soft-tissue injuries, and the additional pain from reading too much was very real. I had to start and stop my research every few minutes to walk around and stretch and lie down, and so reading took longer still. I couldn't pay for all the chiropractic, massage, and acupuncture care that I required: I'd had to quit teaching, mainly because of the pain, plus the insurance company claimed that whiplash was not a real injury, and so after a few months, it wouldn't pay for therapy. It is a terrible thing for me now to associate reading with pain and disability.

Another reason: many of the theoretical readings made me feel ill; I didn't understand what was happening. We pretended to know everything, and really, who the hell ever knows what Jacques Derrida is getting at? I was overwhelmed by how the theory was overtaking the novels and poems and essays and drama. 60% theory; 40% literature – that is a conservative estimate. In other words, the theory *becomes* the literature, and vice versa. Is that the way it's supposed to be? I resisted the heavy emphasis on the canon of theory we were to employ; at the same time, I loved it, I loved how Walter Benjamin and Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes allowed me to read other works in new ways, and how it all affected my writing: I could create with more depth, with more seriousness, and with more playfulness.

For the purpose of this memoir, I read DeSalvo's *Vertigo* and Tompkins's *A Life in School* as both theory and literature; I never actually stopped to think about why I was doing so – it seemed very natural.<sup>9</sup>

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Seminar discussions were like improvisational theatre in which everyone is on display; students performed for the professor and for each other. In her call for holistic education, Jane Tompkins agrees that the undergraduate classroom is a performance on which much depends: students' "own self-esteem, the regard of their fellow students, the good opinion of the teacher, and ultimately their grade... There are many ways to fail."<sup>10</sup> She comments that the lessons learned in this environment create a "lopsided person": someone who processes information efficiently and who works hard, someone who reads dispassionately, someone who is "taught not to feel."<sup>11</sup> What is the use of becoming this kind of person?

*Excerpt from reader's diary:*

September 2007

In x number of years as an English major, I never came to class without annotating my texts.

"Close readings!" my professors expounded. We were to read crossways, slantways, and all the ways in between. We came to class with prepared comments, questions, and observations. We were trying to unsettle the text. Always, my books were marked up so much that no one else wants to borrow them from me because they feel as though they are intruding on my private life.

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<sup>9</sup> Though I do realize that 'natural' is one of those key words that isn't normally allowed to slide by unnoticed in a piece of academic work!

<sup>10</sup> *A Life in School*, 210.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-212.

When I look back into some of those texts, such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, I think of how my annotations crowd the original text into the gutter of the book. I think of medieval manuscripts, such as a page from the Bible, on which the commentary far outweighs the passages of its deliberations. Does the commentary's importance overshadow the sacred verses? Or does it simply mean to impress on the minds of the readers/listeners how much the words weigh? Should I insert a moral here, in case you don't read into this in the manner in which I intended? Yes?

In that case: Be sure to always treat your books with care. Don't fold them so that their spines break.

As I learned the basics of critical theory, I came to an explicit understanding that we Mennonites are engaging in dangerous (and even violent) behaviour by reading the Bible so very literally. I realized that we have been reading in a very old way: following the platonic search for the true, the good, and the beautiful. Plato, the ancient Athenian philosopher, thought that fiction ought to tell the truth, and to that end he argued in *The Republic* against literary artists, saying that, because they do not possess knowledge of the real metaphysical realm, their creations are nothing but fantasy, and, therefore, they transmit an untruthful outlook on the world.<sup>12</sup> Since I was a child, I've heard variations on this idea. Traditionally in Mennonite circles, no text should conflict with the community's received meanings. As Julia Kasdorf puts it in her interesting collection of essays, Mennonites are accustomed to "measuring texts against a set hierarchy":

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<sup>12</sup> *The Republic*, 337.

- 1) first the Bible, the Martyrs' Mirror and other books pointing toward the Truth,  
then
- 2) forms that "enlighten for the right objectives," and then
- 3) forms to amuse and even corrupt (which we are expected to shun, really).<sup>13</sup>

This is quite an onerous reading method for it limits the texts that are deemed acceptable. Hence my list in "Questions I Ask" of *Books to Ban*. As well, the establishment of this hierarchy means that it is nearly impossible for indigenous authors to make art that lives up to these readerly demands. Hence the exile of artists from the land.

I suppose this must sound like a naïve statement to non-Mennonites – of course we can't take any text at face value – but for me it came as a shock. I denied this knowledge for a long time. Finally I realized that it was true – though I don't recall when or where this happened – and I became flooded with relief. Does the fate of my soul depend on my literal belief in Jonah's survival in the whale's belly? Probably not. Is this considered a blasphemous statement? Yes, certainly.

I am still learning how to read the Bible then, for I want to be able, *sans* guilt, to separate the wheat from the chaff. I'm sick of my culture's patriarchal structure which the church insists is Scriptural. I don't want to feel guilty for being a woman, and my desire is not to subdue the earth, and I don't want to spank my child, and I abhor the homophobia that runs rampant in my community. And that's just the start of my objections. I can't read the Bible literally, the way in which I was taught, otherwise I will have to believe in many things that I know are wrong. What I need is a different lens. I don't know if what I seek is deliberately a woman's way of reading, though perhaps I

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<sup>13</sup> *The Body and the Book*, 45.



should look into it; I do know that the idea of gendered reading comes with its own suite of literature; just a few of the relevant works that spring to mind are Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Jonathan Culler's "Reading as a Woman," Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, and Rishma Dunlop's *Reading Like a Girl*.

What makes me smile, though, is the example of a woman who used a comical and effective way to resist old offensive texts by rereading them in new ways. The person I have in mind is the fictional Alysoun, Wife of Bath, who appropriates what she has heard from the text – as she was an aural reader – and assigns her own meanings. When Alysoun quotes Scripture, she interprets the words to serve her own purposes. For instance, to validate her succession of spouses, she cites two Old Testament patriarchs, and uses their example of multiple marriages as a literal directive for herself (rather than interpreting the tale allegorically, à la St. Augustine, which was in vogue at the time). I like Alysoun's way of detaching the fixed text and using it as something fluid. This reminds me, actually, of *questions i asked my mother*, in which Brandt's poet-persona steals the traditional scriptural discourse and displaces it, thereby changing the words' significance so that they are "no longer distanced and sacrosanct, but subject to the reconfigurations and desires of the individual."<sup>14</sup> In particular, the six missionary position poems found in *questions*

subvert fundamentalism from within by applying the tradition of literal readings of the Bible to concepts which the Mennonite patriarchs preferred to read as symbolic. In Brandt's constructions, God is collapsed with the physical father, the

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<sup>14</sup> Kehler, "Stealing the Word(s)," 22.

punishing father, with his hard, crooked staff, and Jesus – the Biblical god-man, lover of the church, and bridegroom of the wise virgins – is variously figured as a sexual partner for the oppressed daughter or as a promised lover who fails to appear when expected.<sup>15</sup>

As we see in the cases of both Alysoun and Brandt's poet-persona, this stolen discourse threatens authority because of its failed ability to enforce restrictions on interpretation.

I wonder, I wonder.

In 2005, I began a Master of Arts degree in English literature. I planned to write about the work of South African writer J.M. Coetzee, although I was still leaning toward African American literature, particularly the understudied poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks (including *In the Mecca*). I had received a prestigious Manitoba Graduate Scholarship, and when my proud husband shared this news with the people in our lives, we received a surprising range of reactions.

After a few months of graduate study, I dropped out. In part, I left because I could not fathom the distance that I had to maintain between the text and my life. My life was informing my work, and vice versa, but there remained a divide between the two; and this was not something you could discuss with people in the department. In keeping with New Criticism, text had to stand alone. We could acknowledge our biases and fallibilities as interpreters of meaning, but, in the end, we stood alone, a solitary lamppost in a snowy field. (And my critical theory professor chuckled for our entire week as he taught us about reader response theory, which he assured us no one 'did' anymore.) This is a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 21.

forbidden subject. If we admit our passion, the study of literature becomes less rigorous and even more laughable to those who study the ‘pure’ sciences. Those of us in the study of Education – particularly those who work within in the qualitative tradition – will recognize this fear, I think.

But experience continued to push open my door and walk straight into my studies, as it has for others. In *Vertigo*, for instance, Louise DeSalvo writes of a high school incident in a beloved English class in which the teacher is encouraging the students to explicate a Shakespeare sonnet – in particular, she expects them to use what they know to scaffold their understanding of the poet’s words. The teacher waits. The class is silent. Louise’s hand shoots up. She has solved the case. She realizes, because of her own experience with boys, that the sonnet is alluding to sex, and she is startled to apprehend that her life counts for something where books are concerned. I have my own example. In one of my Victorian literature classes, we were doing a close reading of the scene in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* in which the vampire feeds on Mina Harker and then forces her to drink blood from a wound on his chest; the scene is said to resemble that of child pushing a kitten’s nose into a bowl of milk. I knew – because my mom has had a million barn cats over the years – that kittens, especially if they’re not weaned, do not just walk up to cow’s milk and start lapping. They stand beside the bowl, sniffing and trembling. Usually you have to force their faces into the creamy liquid, otherwise they don’t know what to do, or perhaps they are afraid. The tiny creatures are always happy in the end that you’ve done this to them. I said this to the class, and the professor’s interested reaction made me feel that finally the farm might be of some use in my life. I didn’t see this bit of feline knowledge in any book or article I read about *Dracula* (though perhaps I missed

it), but it should be included: it's important because everything counts; it counts that Lucy wanted something but didn't know how to go about getting it; it counts that violence was required for her to achieve pleasure.

But life wasn't supposed to come into play. *Stay with the text; only the text matters.* I took an African American literature honours seminar in which one classmate was black, and the rest of us were white (for all I knew...), and we never discussed how our skin colours might influence our reading and our discussion and our writing. Even though the professor grew up in a Caribbean country under colonial rule: a student alluded to this background, and we were all rendered uncomfortable by the personal intrusion of life into our assigned text (which I seem to recall was *Beloved*, Toni Morrison's terribly and wonderfully made novel). I think of that now: ludicrous! No words can convey the absurdity! The professor's background meant something, and so did ours! So, I wondered, why do I, probably the whitest white woman in appearance you'll ever see, care so intensely about literature written by black people, and especially by African Americans? Why have I been obsessed – since I was a child – with Harriet Tubman and Harriet Ann Jacobs and Frederick Douglass and Gwendolyn Brooks? I don't know why, but I care. Surely this matters.

I couldn't finish my M.A.; it was a disorienting world; in many ways I felt dislocated, disinterested, *unheimlich*.<sup>16</sup> (When I read Jane Tompkins' chapter 'Higher Education' in *A Life in School*, I nodded in recognition at the description of how she had to stifle her love of literature during her M.A. at Yale. Similarly, Francine Prose writes about the one time in which her passion for reading led her astray; in her own words:

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<sup>16</sup> Never mind Freud: I mean the kind of 'unheimlich' I heard about in church: unhomely, lonely, out of place.

“that was when I let it persuade me to go to graduate school.”)<sup>17</sup> I was a visitor; I didn’t know where the linen closet is, or how to turn on the faucet that sticks in cold weather.

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<sup>17</sup> *Reading Like a Writer*, 8.

### Reading as Dizzying

Late at night, a young woman, with long thick hair that thins as it ages, bent over a book in the light, marking tentative seams along the margins.

Louise DeSalvo engages in both her life and her work in a way I've never seen. Her life and her work have a symbiotic relationship, and it is unavoidable, and even necessary. And the academy doesn't laugh at her, does it?

I couldn't mark up the pages of her *Vertigo* because I kept forgetting that I was studying it, per se. I read it three times, and each time, I forgot. I noticed more and more every time I read, of course. The last time I read it, I was compelled by the numerous references to dates and times of day. I didn't notice during the first reading the implications that her father was molesting his youngest daughter. I realized after the third reading, and after the class discussion, that a significant hole in the text is created by DeSalvo not mentioning how she rescinded her faith and came to believe, instead, in salvation through work. I used to think that holes in the text – although it's a common technique used by writers who are toying with postmodern ideas – were still irritating, but it made more sense to me after I read *Vertigo*. The holes are natural, and they need to be there.

Holes in the memoir. She renounces her faith; work becomes her salvation, she says. So, with this statement, she moves from Catholicism to hyper-Protestantism.

(Sorry, I couldn't resist!)

This afternoon in late November, I lounge in a homey coffee shop, typing away on my laptop, and daydreaming. I need to finish reading Tillie Olsen's *Silences* at some point today, since it's overdue at the library, and we all know how some librarians view the collections as their very personal private property.<sup>18</sup> I'm back in graduate studies, this time in Education, and I think I'll make it through, despite feeling massively inadequate, which I hear is normal for female students. How nervewracking it is to be a woman in graduate studies, expected to produce knowledge, rather than engage in the reproductive acts (for the most part) of undergraduate work; according to many of my family members and friends and colleagues, I should be reproductive in the body, instead, and stay in one place for once. I seem to have inherited a nomadic impulse that courses through much of my maternal family; it's hard to manage. At least my wandering heart is welcome in Education (relatively speaking, anyway), where I can attempt to write something unexpected, something that crosses borders, something unconventional. And my husband indulges me, so what else may I ask for, really?

I found a sale at [www.bookcloseouts.com](http://www.bookcloseouts.com): fiction is discounted up to eighty-eight percent, plus free shipping. I order thirteen novels for thirty-seven dollars and forty cents, including two by Diane Schoemperlen, one Maxine Hong Kingston, one Louise Erdrich, one David Bergen, and one Toni Morrison, and anticipate how cozy I will feel when they arrive: I'll stack them against my side of the living room couch and look at their spines for any number of days before I plow through the sentences and linger in the spaces. Because a number of the books are related to my thesis, I don't feel very guilty about

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<sup>18</sup> *Silences*, by Tillie Olsen. I've never read until now, so I picked it up because it pops up as a reference in numerous books and journal articles.

spending money on the order. The two worlds of reading for pleasure and reading for work have embraced each other once again, collided. Thank the powers that be for most of my elective classes: courses on children's literature, maternal teaching theory, and arts-based methodology and method, for which I read Lia Purpura, Alice Walker, Rachel Blau Du Plessis, Susan Sontag, Sara Ruddick, Nancy Chodorow, Andrea O'Reilly, Elliot Eisner, *Peter Pan*. New favourites: Madeleine Grumet, Susan Griffin, bell hooks, Nancy K Miller, Carolyn Heilbrun. I was asked to re-read old favourites: *Little Women* and *Beloved*, hurray! I revisited Louise Rennison's *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging*, my very favourite piece of 'junior chick lit,' one I've read at least a dozen times, and recognized Georgia's anguish – masked by outrageous humour – about femininity, girlhood, feminism, and motherhood. Perhaps I should reread *Wuthering Heights*, try to recover Cathy in my mind. At every turn of the page, I commit a crime that resembles New Criticism's dreaded affective fallacy. I can believe in things again.

Reading during my M.Ed. has been a different experience, not one as concentrated and as in-depth as my prior experiences in university. I often felt that many of my colleagues had merely skimmed the course readings, and it became difficult to have sustained discussions in class; rather, we flitted from topic to topic, and the professor's role became more of an explicator than anything else.

In my arts-based methodology classes, I came across the recent book *Reading Like a Writer* in which Francine Prose presents lessons to aspiring writers on how to read critically for the purpose of absorbing writing lessons from the world's most influential



authors (incidentally, Prose includes in her work a list entitled “Books to be Read Immediately,” which contains all sorts of interesting titles). Before I studied *Reading Like a Writer*, I was aware that my budding skill of close reading always assists me as I write, although I wish that I would slow down as I read in order to absorb more of the rich teachings offered by various writers. (Prose reminds me that I need read at a more leisurely pace.) However, *Reading Like a Writer* made me realize that I have to read in a way other than that of a literary critic in order to pick up lessons on the art of writing. I wish I knew how to explain the difference. Learning to read in order to analyze a work’s structure feels different than reading for the purpose of creating texts of your own. It seems that there are numerous ways of reading.

Some people might object to Prose’s slightly overbearing tone throughout *Reading Like a Writer*. Though she does sound superior at times, I wasn’t bothered by it. I’ve become inured to the imperious tones of academic writing, I think, after getting myself all in a lather over Derrida and Foucault two years ago. This is why I never want to be twenty years old again: because I’d have to encounter Derrida and Foucault for the first time. I don’t want that virginity back again for anything.

I should add: Francine Prose is missing some spiritual sense of writing and reading – the part where your head gets lifted off, as Emily Dickinson says. She touches on it in her chapter on Anton Chekhov’s short stories – in which she describes how reading Chekhov taught her how to teach writing – but I think that the point may become lost in the book’s crush of close reading.

Though I have missed some of the intensity of my honours English classes during my M.Ed. coursework, I wouldn't trade it for the freedom I've found, for the most part, to read with love and to write the way I want. I found in these graduate courses that it was not, in fact, anathema to bring our lives into focus, for our experiences highlighted our critical readings of the assigned texts and sharpened our writing. Thus, we came to know things in different ways. For example, I spoke earlier in this document about Sara Ruddick's book *Maternal Thinking*, and how her idea of 'social acceptability' led me to see some the ways in which my parents engaged in – and yet also resisted – this notion when it came to my own upbringing. It was in Lissa Paul's course on maternal pedagogy that I participated in a group dialogue about social acceptability, a discussion which led me to realize that my parents had been perhaps overly strict with me for a valid reason: they were attempting to meet the community's very high expectation of children. As my classmates and I discussed the text proper, I felt that I was gaining a deeper understanding of my parents' childrearing decisions which, hitherto, I'd had trouble comprehending. And so I am grateful for a communal chat about a book because, as clichéd as this sounds, it helped me understand an important aspect of my life. It seems, then, that reading is not always a solitary activity. To complete the illustration of what I am saying, imagine this scene:

Yeshiva students turning the dangerous pages of the Kabbala would do so in groups, around their rabbi, so that the authority of the rabbi entered into the reading, and each was protected from the intensity of a solitary encounter with wild knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Spufford, *The Child that Books Built*, 62.

This symbiotic world-to-text and text-to-world connection is at the heart of literary discourse.

It is possible that my perceived newfound freedom to read and write is, in reality, a weakness in arts-based methodology. I feel guilty, actually, because I think that this thesis is closer to an M.A. piece of research (though, in my mind, it wouldn't be considered original or focused enough to count as such), and yet I see that, because my writing is positioned in between fields, on border lands with no passport, what I've done doesn't fit the traditional requirements of either. I'm pretending at being a literary critic, dabbling at being a historian, and making something resembling an Education thesis. I suppose that ABER critics would celebrate my in-betweenness, even though I often feel like a fraud and I complain to my husband that my writing is inadequate because it doesn't meet anyone's expectations, really, and that I'm not saying anything cutting-edge about the topic of reading.

For what new thing might I say? We learn to read by reading, and the reason we read is because we must; it is an act of reclaiming the intimate and the sacred, of turning to truth, of loving thy self, of recreating the community, of resisting injustice. My dearly beloved Mennonite people – though I make terrible fun, they are in me and I in them – need to redeem this knowledge, to avoid spiritual complacency and cultural insularity. Mennonites need their authors, and authors need their people for sustenance, for inspiration, for interpretation. This cry falls mainly on indifferent ears. That is why I keep a list of Books to Remind Me: like the amnesiac villagers in Gabriel Marcel Marques's

novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I need signs to help recover my memory; I don't want to forget, though I understand that the failure of memory is inevitable.

In one of Lissa Paul's classes, I achieved a victory: I finally read *Where the Wild Things Are*. Maurice Sendak's classic picture book features the story of Max, who – after being sent to bed with no dinner by his mother – becomes The King of All Wild Things in a self-designed jungle that is populated by smiling monsters (whom I perceived at the time to be tremendously scary). A wild party ensues, though Max soon finds himself forlorn and homesick, and he returns to his bedroom, where he finds his supper waiting for him. I, a nightmare-ridden soul, refused to touch *Where the Wild Things Are*: I would not even approach the corner of my Grade One classroom in which the picture book was housed, for fear of contamination, or even retribution. As an adult, still afraid of unleashing dark emotions, I still didn't want to touch it.

Now, much to my surprise, I see that the monsters are smiling; I always thought they were baring their teeth at me, and so did my husband, as a matter of fact. When I read this section aloud, he cries, "No, the monsters are *mad* at that boy, rooaaaaar!" And we laugh together, relaxing after a long day's work on our living room couch, remembering the place of that picture book in our long-ago lives.<sup>20</sup> The liars and the rascals are the bearers of what is true, and our mothers will keep dinner hot for us.

We laugh, though we know we were childishly wise to fear the book.

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<sup>20</sup> Please don't think that I'm encasing the act of reading within an affirmation of heteronormativity; I can't help it that I'm sitting with my husband: simply, we like each other very much. What am I going to do about it?

## Chapter 8

### LET'S GET LOST: SHARED READING

For now, in my home province of Manitoba, most public school teachers are in a pretty good situation: for the most part, we enjoy considerable autonomy to interpret the provincial curriculum for our students. (Who knows what will happen when the NDP party eventually loses power.) No one has ever interfered in my professional decisions regarding my reading of the curriculum, including what I've chosen to include or omit. I use reading and writing workshops – my own version of what you'd see in Nancie Atwell's lovingly written guides – which involve the principles of choice, time, and voice.<sup>1</sup> I know that I am often perceived by my colleagues and students as a novelty because of my resistance to teaching Language Arts in the way that I was taught. Often I have the impression that many English Language Arts teachers remain mired in the idea that reading is a measurable activity, much in the way that they themselves were taught, most likely, in public school. (Aidan Chambers, in *Booktalk*, says succinctly: "Teachers tend to teach in the same way as they were taught and to teach the same books read during their course.")<sup>2</sup> I don't know why some teachers often limit their pedagogy, though I suspect it has much to do with our status as "victims of a system where hierarchy reigns and rocking the boat is not tolerated."<sup>3</sup> Yet I've rarely been criticized by fellow teachers and parents – at least openly – for operating outside of the mainstream.

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<sup>1</sup> Atwell's key work, entitled *In the Middle*, helped me frame the way in which I wanted to teach Language Arts.

<sup>2</sup> *Booktalk*, 117.

<sup>3</sup> Contenta, "Egerton Ryerson," 27. Contenta goes on to say that teachers are a kind of "walking wounded" who accept with resignation the fact that any new pedagogical initiative will be overruled by the hidden curriculum; hence teachers' propensity to greet new initiatives with cynicism (27).

I know that the province's pendulum will eventually swing the other direction, closer to my own experience of school in the 1980s and 1990s, in which I read despite my teachers' well-intentioned interventions, and I think this will happen before teachers have a chance to catch up to the more child-centered approach (which is in itself, of course, not at all a new idea). For instance, the Manitoba government has in recent years implemented a new standards test in Grade 8 Language Arts. I insisted to my panicked Grade Eight students (and to their rightfully concerned parents and guardians) that their scores on this test had *not one thing* to do with their actual abilities as readers and writers, and my classes rose up in anger to send letters of protest to the provincial NDP government regarding these arbitrary exercises. They then wrote to the local Tories concerning that party's addition of math standards tests to their election platform. I must admit that I was amused and pleased by my students' reactions, but more than that, I was grateful for the affirmation that adolescents *care*; they want to learn as much as I do.

I know – as do all other readers – that reading is a fundamental activity. And now, as a result of my dips into the history of reading, I realize that literacy instruction must be hinged on recuperating the political, the cultural, and the sacred: those aspects which, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, in our minds have become divorced from reading, that wild act. With this historical awareness in my pocket, I am more determined than ever to succeed at my teaching task: I want all of my students to find texts to break their frozen seas – to make lists of books that move them – and this job requires a huge amount of work, plus daily panic. Here is my list of worries:

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- Will the class settle down?
- How might I make the space more comfortable? Why must they sit in such rigid chairs?
- Has every child eaten today?
- How many P.A. interruptions will we have to live through?
- Does each person have the book that she/he needs and wants? How might I obtain copies of new releases?
- If a visitor (such as my principal) comes by and sees me absorbed in a book, will she or he understand why I'm not 'working'?

I like the challenge of encouraging every student to love reading, usually, but it takes tremendous effort since I meet many children for whom literature was not considered a "birthright," with an accompanying "environment that made its birthright available, accessible," and so I have spent full school periods sitting with individual kids in the hallway, hearing them scream their hatred of reading, and negotiating with them to try it, please try it, give it a chance. What do I have to do to make this work?<sup>4</sup>

In one teaching instance, one of my 'resistant readers' refused to cooperate with our class's reading program.<sup>5</sup> I felt empathetic since it was clear that he'd had bad experiences with books and probably didn't believe that he could read well, though I had noticed that, when no one was watching, he could. Because I believe that people can't be forced into reading, I wasn't willing to compel him to do anything, yet at the same time,

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<sup>4</sup> Chambers, *Booktalk*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Term borrowed from Bintz's article "Exploring Reading Nightmares."

as his teacher, I expected some reciprocity from him. This is school, and certain things must get done.

He and I reached the point where he agreed to read three or four pages per day, but the book had better be *good*, he said firmly. I was to select the material. And he did not want the artifact of the book anywhere near his body. He would accept a photocopy of the proffered pages, read them, and then sit quietly with his head on his desk until the period was finished. I realized that book selection would be all-important here, and that I'd better not screw it up. I wondered if David Klass's *You Don't Know Me* – the funny and sad story of John, an alienated and abused teenaged boy – would work. The book had great reviews from *Kirkus* as well as the *School Library Journal*. The biting beginning would catch his attention, I thought.

So we tried. I kept up my end of the deal and did not ask for more than what he had promised. We continued this strategy for some two or three weeks, from what I recall.

And then all my hard work was trumped. His best friend in the class, an avid reader, threw a novel at him and said, "If you don't read this, I'll never talk to you again." I watched this exchange with interest. At this point, if I were telling this story to fellow Middle Years teachers, they would want to know the book's title. It was Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels*, a coming-of-age story of a young African American soldier in the Vietnam War, and it won the Coretta Scott King Award in 1989. I haven't read it yet, but Myers is a compelling writer, and I've heard from students nothing but raves about the book. A good sign.



And so this boy read. He put his head on his desk, book propped on his knees, and that was it. If I hadn't seen the exchange between my two students, I would have thought that he'd fallen asleep.

He stayed in the classroom and read. I seem to remember that this process took almost two school days. I never interrupted him, and I didn't have to ask any of his friends to leave him alone. When he completed the book, he looked dazed. He passed the book along to another interested friend. I didn't see *Fallen Angels* again until the last day of school when it was returned to my classroom library, and he and I never spoke about this. At this point, I suppose that any discerning critic will say to me that the boy did not read; he merely fell asleep for several schooldays, and that I indulged him. I say that he did not, and I did not.

Of course, I always have one or two students who resist the pleasures of reading, but that's normal, I think. In general, though, my students read a great deal. One day I called in sick, and found out later from the principal and the receptionist that the whole class had resisted doing any of the work I sent; instead, they read *all day*, supervised by a teaching assistant rather than by a substitute teacher. When I returned to work, the class recounted gleefully what they read and what they thought of their books. I pretended to be annoyed with them, of course, to keep them secure in the knowledge that they weren't actually 'working.' Ah, the psychological games we play; the imagination this requires.

In *A Life in School*, Jane Tompkins says a most beautiful thing about pedagogy as a book through which we may escape:

all our teaching ...is a text – beautiful, strange, many layered, frightening – woven out of the memory and desire of every person in the room. We never look at this tapestry, almost. It hangs there on our collective mental wall, oscillating gently, sinister, inviting. Its brilliant, darkly textured world is worth the risk of entering, despite the danger. Let's get lost.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes my colleagues ask me how I attempt to create a classroom culture of reading. Believe me, it's not due to the gimmicky *Stop Drop and Read*, or *I Love to Read Month*, or *Family Literacy Day*. I do not think that those types of activities contain much lasting value; they exist on the periphery of the curriculum, hoping to infiltrate our consciousness, but they cannot be effective because they are fleeting: they are not deeply ingrained in everything we do. My students see through the pretense, and often they will not pull out a book when the principal's voice radiates through the p.a. system to intone: *It's time ... to Stop, Drop, and Read!* These reading programs counteract my hard work in the classroom, and so I resent being forced to participate in such events.

Perhaps here I fall into stereotype by blushing and stammering that I personally don't have much to do with my success. After all, I just follow the recipe that I know works best, and I'm surprised that anyone thinks it's a secret.

#### Recipe for Growing a Reader (serves everyone)

##### *Ingredients*

- Lots of texts of different genres; on a variety of topics; from different eras; by men, women, and

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<sup>6</sup> *A Life in School*, 163.

children; by authors of different ages, races,  
cultures, genders, and sexualities.

- Regular time.
- Comfortable space.
- The opportunity to collect thoughts about reading  
(by writing, talking, drawing), and to receive a  
response from somebody.

### *Directions*

1. Gather together and stir.
2. Enjoy! Be sure to tell your friends!

There is nothing remotely original about this recipe; all habitual readers know it. Aidan Chambers, for instance, includes a more succinct version on page eleven of his wonderful *Booktalk*. (In *The Reading Environment*, Chambers deals even more explicitly with what he terms “the reading circle”: a loop that includes reading, selection, and response; at the centre of this circle is the adult who facilitates these activities.)<sup>7</sup> I’ve let my beliefs about reading simmer in the back of my mind for a long time, trying to find something unique to say – this is the goal of academic writing, right? – but that’s it, folks. Maybe it’s just not as complicated as we think it is.<sup>8</sup>

But then again, recipes are never as transparent as they appear. Recipes are subjective, they require tweaking, the cook must leave an imprint, including a comment (“good! served family jan 4/86”) or a floury thumbprint; or the lack of one, to hide a

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<sup>7</sup> *The Reading Environment*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, though, there are many students who have very real reading disabilities – that is another story – so I differentiate my instruction for them, and we try to find ways to make it work.

failed attempt or perhaps a culinary secret. When the recipes are good, others desire them, to the point of ripping pages from spiral-bound church ladies' fundraiser cookbooks.

Perhaps this recipe contradicts the rest of my memoir in which I explore reading as cultural, contextual, and contested. It is all so complicated. I do think that this recipe is an example of how I am situated within a literary community, and that I'm in a position to bring this writing-in-the-world part of my life to the students I teach. My buttery trace is that I *read*, and that's got to make a difference. (Aidan Chambers says bluntly that "non-reading children are made by non-reading adults," and I've always vowed not to be one of *those* grown-ups.)<sup>9</sup> Researchers seem to agree that teachers are the best literacy role models. For example, the United Kingdom Literacy Association recently conducted research to develop teachers' reading lives so that they could become better able to build "reciprocal reading communities" in their classrooms. The UKLA reported that teachers who read – particularly those who became familiar with children's literature – were better able to encourage a love of reading in their students.<sup>10</sup> This outcome shouldn't surprise anyone.

But I do more than just read at home: I read with the kids in class. I didn't intentionally omit this ingredient from the recipe: the teacher as immediate role model. Perhaps it's because I take it for granted. I have never differentiated between a public reading life and a private reading life, and I didn't realize until recently – thanks to an interesting article on the topic by Kimberly Gomez – that many other teachers do

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<sup>9</sup> *Booktalk*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> "Teachers as Readers," 32.

maintain separate spheres for these things.<sup>11</sup> I don't know how that's possible; if I kept my public and private reading separate, I'd never have time to read what I want, and that would make me a crappy English teacher. Sometimes reading period is the only time in my whole day – both inside and outside of school – during which I am able to sit down with a book, and it is such a relief. Usually I choose a novel – often the young adult fiction that I review for *CM: Canadian Review of Materials* – or a few poems, or the newspaper. I relax in my chair, and this reminds me that my students must be uncomfortable in their straight-backed plastic chairs. (I sigh and wonder how I could score a class set of washable beanbag chairs and pillows, for how can people come to reading if they don't associate the activity with pleasure?)<sup>12</sup> And then I read – always attuned to the class, for kids having trouble getting into their selections.

I physically respond to the text. On a student's recommendation, I read Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, and when I sucked in my breath in utter disbelief at what happened to the zebra, I looked up and caught my student's eye and she grinned widely at me. She knew. When I read the über-hilarious 'junior chick lit' novel *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging*, by Louise Rennison, I had to run out into the hallway because I was laughing too hard. During a class conference on a student's essay about her grandmother, I cried; it was beautifully written. I wasn't ashamed of my reaction until I was reprimanded by a colleague – who somehow discovered what happened – for being too emotional. And so I try to be more 'professional,' whatever that means. By physically reacting to what I read, am I compromising my authority as the teacher? Maybe. Does it

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<sup>11</sup> "Teachers of Literacy," 92.

<sup>12</sup> This, written in the month of May, has become my main concern for my next teaching position.

complicate what I do at my job? Yes, certainly. And other problems abound: the denial of the body in classroom, the fear of female excess, the anxiety about emotion.

But what happened as a result of these three instances? Other students read *Life of Pi* because they wanted to know what the shocker was, others read *Angus* – including a few boys – because they wanted to share in the laughter, and others wrote memorable stories about their grandmothers. This isn't 'the happy ending'; it's just what happened. In *A Life in School*, Jane Tompkins describes the wonder of teachers who read with their bodies: bodies trembling, voices with intonations, listening with a shiver.<sup>13</sup> I think that sounds wonderful.

The stone falls into water; the gentle ripples are inevitable and are more affective than many of us presume. It's a community I'm attempting to establish – partly through the empathy (here I mean "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect") that reading may evoke in us.<sup>14</sup> Not through any kind of 'moral of the month' posted on a sign outside of the school building (e.g., *September is Kindness!*).

It's nothing new to suggest that the vicarious living we do through reading, especially through stories – by trying on different personae, attempting to feel the way a character does – may transfer to real life. Francis Spufford notes that

books did for us on the scale of our childhoods what the propagandists of the Enlightenment promised that all books could do for everyone, everywhere. They

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<sup>13</sup> *A Life in School*, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Keene, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," 208.

freed us from the limitations of having just one limited life with one point of view.<sup>15</sup>

More than just a pleasurable activity, reading is “educative and life-enhancing.”<sup>16</sup> Studies show that readers of fiction, in particular, show greater empathy to others. For example, a group of scientists from the University of Toronto published in *New Science* their recent research on the psychological benefits of reading fiction: these researchers found that people’s social skills appear to improve significantly when they spend time reading novels.<sup>17</sup> Surprise, surprise. I milk this phenomenon for everything it’s worth, trying in particular to help students learn to experiment with subject positions. This is my way of nurturing good people, of promoting self-understanding – my way of engaging in social justice.

Allow me clarify myself. I am certainly not saying that the ability to read necessarily makes a person good. My vision is not that utopic. In a novel entitled *Wanting Mor*, which I reviewed recently for *CM: Canadian Review of Materials*, I was struck by how banal the ability to read must seem to people who are faced by events – war, destruction, poverty, and the deaths of every person you know – that are beyond words. In the novel, which is set mainly in a girls’ orphanage in post-Taliban, foreign army occupied Afghanistan, Jameela (a newcomer who has recently lost her mother and been abandoned by her father) is delighted at the prospect of finally learning to read. She expresses her joy to her unimpressed friend Soraya who responds flatly – in a voice of

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<sup>15</sup> *The Child that Books Built*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Oatley, “The Science of Fiction,” 42.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

experience – that the ability to read doesn’t necessarily make someone into a better person. Jameela doesn’t know how to react. In the very next paragraph, a number of American soldiers – presumably literate members of the U.S. occupation, as well as objects of fear to the girls – stride unannounced into their classroom.<sup>18</sup> A most jarring image.

Around the same time I read *Wanting Mor*, I came across the article “Literacy Practices in Dark Times,” in which Jun-Chae Yoon, a South Korean student with vivid memories of government persecution for his participation in an illicit book club, chastises ‘first world’ students for being unaware of the emancipatory possibilities loaded in the ability to read. I feel ashamed for not having a full understanding – i.e., experience – of what he says, and then, without this knowledge, how might I teach reading and literature responsibly?

No, I can’t say that the ability to read automatically makes a person become good – books are not machines, after all. (Incidentally, as Lissa Paul commented to me, censorship issues work the opposite way, on the assumption that books can also make people bad.) Alberto Manguel struggles throughout his reader’s diary with this problem, as well: if reading offers us the chance to be more empathetic, why are seemingly literate people able to do such terrible things to each other? He offers no pat answers, and neither will I; this is a topic for an ongoing dialogue. I remain hopeful that books can help break the frozen sea inside us.

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<sup>18</sup> Khan, *Wanting Mor*, 102-103.



With so many things to keep in mind, I am anxious about what I will do when I return this fall to my career in English Language Arts education – back in my hometown – where the pendulum will swing gradually, like it or not, to an unfavourable view of reading, which is both familiar to me (as it is similar to my school experiences of reading) and so alien to my own childhood self-taught experience (when I lived to tell the tale). When I teach reading to my own students, I feel as though I’m walking against the wind, starting all over again every September with rooms full of new, and often apathetic, faces. Where in curriculum documents might I find an ‘official’ emphasis on imagination, on empathy, on emotional attachment to words, loving language for the sake of it, because it’s a part of us, because we need it, because we come into this world as animals who read, as Alberto Manguel writes in *The History of Reading*? Why are we trying to break into the house through windows as thieves, rather than walking through the front door as honoured guests? Is that too simple? What will I do when I must abide by the idea of teaching reading ‘the other way,’ as a collection of discrete skills that can be evaluated through the use of numbers? The young adults in my care will see through my façade and will know I think their coursework is devoid of meaning, and then most of them won’t do any of it, or just go through the motions to satisfy others’ expectations. And then what? I sound desperate, I know, and this is partly why I jump-started myself into writing this memoir of a white female thirty-one-year-old childless (though pregnant) bibliophilic mixed-up Canadian Mennonite.

The fact that I’m moving back to the homeland of my childhood – the scene of the crime – is another story entirely. I’m not so naïve to think that all will be the same; I

realize that many things will be unfamiliar. And I worry that I won't be able to write anymore when I'm there – for fear of censure, as I don't know how to be both a Mennonite and an aspiring writer – but at the same time, I can't abandon this place and these people.

Now this is a seam at which I try to assemble the loose threads. What, I wonder, do these various books – The Bible, *questions i asked my mother*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *The Wild Things*, plus the surfeit of others on which I've leaned throughout this process – have to do with each other in this memoir? And how might I secure this knowledge to my pedagogical practice?

As I consider these questions, I have come home, so to speak. I've returned to the land of my childhood after being away – travelling, obtaining postsecondary degrees, working, seeing the sights – for thirteen years. Home is, of course, not what it once was (if it was, indeed, ever that at all) and I find myself regretful of this move, but for now it is too late. I have a first-rate teaching position, my husband is running a business, we've purchased a house, and we have a beloved baby on the way. We are required, for the time being, to grow roots. Although many of my books are in my new classroom, most remain in storage – spines breaking and pages tearing – until we're able to build bookshelves in a sunny room. Perhaps then I will be at home in myself, surrounded by titles and covers and words, and sharing them with my baby girl, following the pedagogy of the millions of other mothers before me. (Or maybe I'll feel trapped. I don't know.)

I think that this idea is what my four chosen books – The Bible, *questions i asked my mother*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *The Wild Things* – face. All deal with the subject

of home: creating/taking a homeland, heaven as home, leaving home, making room in one's home, longing for home, returning home. Home: the place, as Madeleine Grumet says in *Bitter Milk*, where we're the most ashamed and the most proud. Home as the place where we learned to be in the word and in the world.

For my students in our classroom, I tie this idea of 'home' to the concept of reading like a martyr. Reading as a witness, reading in the complicated ways I've explored here: reading for history, reading as inquiry, reading for learning, for enjoyment, for rebellion, for induction into a culture and/or religion, and so on. I suggest to you that this multifocal, shimmering, unquantifiable reading does much work to bridge the space between the school and the home. At this place I leave my ideas, and I invite into this work the thoughts and dreams of other researchers.

Attach these words to real life: reattach story to place.

Despite my misgivings, I have written this partial memoir. *That wasn't so hard now, was it?*

I will secure the house with a benediction, of sorts: a poem I wrote five or six years ago for my husband, a devout hot rodder, who, when I met him, went out of his way to avoid text of any kind, though he grew up with parents who were both avid readers.

**Driving**

I don't doubt that you would have  
liked to read, if  
the teacher spoke of a love you wish,  
and the writer withdrew you to  
the enchanting world of castles  
and children playing on city streets.

You would have been right at home,  
sitting in the backseat of your  
favourite car.

## Chapter 9

### POSTLUDE: MEMORY, WITNESS

Hélène Cixous: “Writing is this effort not to obliterate the picture, not to forget.”<sup>1</sup>

Julia Kasdorf:

The meaning of the word memory for me is enriched when I see that its tangled Indo-European roots run through the Latin *memor* (mindful); the Greek *martus* (witness), which became martyr; as well as the Germanic and Old English *murnam* (to grieve). We write to bring things in mind, to witness, and eventually, to grieve.<sup>2</sup>

T.S. Eliot: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.”<sup>3</sup>

I've written this to bear witness, to offer	the homeplace's heavy lilacs,
a bouquet to a dying old man who remembered	wild roses from the ditch, and
red typeface but has instead	
asked for flowers:	his mother's peonies

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<sup>1</sup> *Three Steps*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *The Body and the Book*, 189.

<sup>3</sup> “The Waste Land,” 79, line 430.

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