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## Book Review: Come Back by Rudy Wiebe

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*Come Back*. By Rudy Wiebe. Toronto: Knopf Canada. 2014. Pp. 268. \$26.95.

Rudy Wiebe's newest novel is a study in grief, hope, loss, memory, and a father's intense love for his son. To read *Come Back* as a parent is heartbreaking, so accurately does Wiebe depict the mystery and longing and ache that colors our relationship to our children; those who have lost a child—or, for that matter a friend, a parent, a sibling—to suicide, must find reading *Come Back* an even more emotionally wrenching experience, though perhaps a hopeful one as well.

*Come Back* traces the story of Hal Wiens, a retired professor living in Edmonton, contending with the death of his wife, Yo. Or perhaps not contending: Hal is so paralyzed by grief, he makes no changes in his household since her death, and relies on well-established routines to get him through,

including daily ventures to a nearby coffee shop to visit with a Dene friend named Owl.

Hal's now-predictable life is thrown into chaos when, during one of his meetings with Owl, Hal sees his son Gabe walk by the coffee shop window. At least Hal thinks he sees Gabe, wearing a distinct Orange Downfill coat and with a stride similar to that of his son—the same son who had, twenty-five years earlier, committed suicide. Hal attempts to find the Orange Downfill specter and then, when that fails, to discover more of the son he lost: now twice, it seems.

Seeing the Orange Downfill coat changes Hal irrevocably, his years of carefully controlled emotions and a carefully controlled life disrupted by the memory of Gabe's coat and his suicide. Wiebe writes, "The Orange Downfill had ripped open what he locked down so carefully every day, every minute . . . a violent chasm torn through the eroded mountains of his life" (32). Seeking somehow to fill that chasm, Hal turns to his basement, and to the boxes of Gabe's effects—papers, journals, the eulogy Hal had himself written—to divine who Gabe had become in the time leading up to his death.

Thus a majority of the novel focuses on Hal's journey toward finding his son, in the literal sense of wandering through Edmonton with Owl, trying to find the Orange Downfill coat; but more significantly in the figurative sense, as Hal reads what Gabe has written. Excerpts from Gabe's journal are woven together with Hal's reflections on his son and his memories of the past. Here, Wiebe masterfully contrasts Gabe's voice with Hal's, replicating well Hal's struggle to know who his son was becoming in the journals, and Gabe's increasingly fragmented, obsessed, and self-destructive tendencies.

At the center of Gabe's obsession is a 13-year-old girl, the daughter of family friends who, during a family vacation in Europe, briefly holds his hand. This momentary affection seems Gabe's undoing, and thoughts of the girl, named Ailsa, fill pages and pages of his journals, where he also drafts letters to her, some sent, none reciprocated. Although somewhat discomfiting—as a 24-year-old man's romantic thoughts of a barely-teenaged girl might be—Wiebe replicates well the chaotic stirrings of a clearly disordered mind, and Gabe's obsessive musings evoke empathy and sadness far more than disdain, a sense that Gabe is tortured by thoughts he cannot control, no matter his attempts to try.

Hal's reflections on what he's read are woven throughout Gabe's journal entries, as are his memories of his son. The portrayal of Hal is wholly sympathetic, despite what seems to become his own obsession of knowing his son: we are drawn to this grieved parent and can fully understand Hal's impulse to chase after Gabe—through the Edmonton streets, through the pages of Gabe's journal. As Gabe's writing becomes more and more fractured, his musings less cogent, we recognize that Hal will never comprehend his son's life and death, a realization that is in its own way heartbreaking, for Hal and for the reader.

Heartbreaking, but also a reflection of what we are asked to acknowledge as true: that we can never fully know another person, even those we know most intimately; and that sometimes, the most painful events in our lives will remain shrouded in mystery. For although Hal may have uncovered more of his son's story, he never conclusively answers the question of why Gabe decided to end



his life, nor does Hal discover what might have been done to change Gabe's desire to live.

"We all live alone," Hal decides, "beyond comprehension alone within whatever secrets we cannot forget. Years of talk, so much secret . . . our words—they mirror some thoughts if we dare to speak a few out loud—our words pass each other somewhere" (211).

Despite the sadness with which *Come Back* is freighted, Wiebe threads a sense of hope through the narrative—a sense that although our relationships may be compromised by the secrets we do not tell, although they will be tainted with grief, we still seek out others. Hal continues to meet with Owl and also talks with his other children by phone, halting conversations that reach toward a depth he cannot yet plumb. And when he finally articulates to himself all his unanswerable questions about Gabe, he goes also to Scripture, recognizing there a potential answer to what he seeks.

*Come Back* is a beautifully written novel, manifesting Wiebe's immense skill with the written word. Those unfamiliar with Wiebe's style might find *Come Back* a more difficult read; the lack of a straightforward narrative and the intertwining of various voices may cause too much dissonance for some readers. Yet, as a two-time winner of Canada's Governor General's Award (in 1973 and 1994), Wiebe clearly understands his craft, and his place in English letters has already been well established. *Come Back* adds to his esteem as perhaps the preeminent voice in Mennonite literature. The heartbreaking struggle of Hal Wiens—and of his son, Gabe—will linger with readers long after they have finished *Come Back*, as will the longing we all have to be fully known and loved by another.

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