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Book Review: One Foot in Heaven by David Waltner-Toews

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One Foot in Heaven. By David Waltner-Toews. Regina, Sask.: Coteau Books. 2005. Pp. 257. \$18.95, Can.; \$16.95, U.S.

One Foot in Heaven, David Waltner-Toews's first published collection of fiction, is ostensibly a cycle of fourteen stories, tracing the life of Prom, a Ukrainian immigrant who moves to Alberta; Prom's children and their friends; and Prom's neighbors and acquaintances. Yet *One Foot in Heaven* is far more than a compilation of finely crafted narratives. As with Waltner-Toews's other published work—both his half-dozen poetry collections and his nonfiction work on the environment—*One Foot in Heaven* reflects a keen sense of the relationship between the material and the spiritual. Just as Waltner-Toews's 1992 book on food poisoning (*Food, Sex, and Salmonella*) reminds us how intermeshed we are with the physical world (even, perhaps, when we would rather not be), his newest collection suggests our most spiritual selves will always be grounded by human longing and fallenness, despite our best intentions. The book's title implies this theme, a theme that resonates clearly through the fourteen stories: we are compelled to straddle two worlds, the material and spiritual, earth and heaven, so long as we live.

Waltner-Toews's short story cycle begins and ends with Prom Koslowski, a Mennonite who reveals in the opening story, "Wild Geese," the difficulty of his immigration to Canada. His history echoes the painful journey taken by many Mennonite immigrants: deprivation, loss of family, a rootless blurring of personal history and culture as one begins life in a new land. Yet because Prom is so skillfully drawn, his character escapes any cloying Mennonite-as-immigrant stereotypes. Instead, as with the other characters in the collection, Prom seems fully human, flawed in his own way, driven by complicated and often competing desires.

The stories that frame the collection are written in first person, a narrative strategy allowing readers certain intimacy with the protagonist, Prom. For, even in those selections where Prom does not appear, he still seems present, tying together the lives and stories of the book's other characters. Prom's presence is felt most fiercely in the stories featuring his children, Sarah and Thomas, who mature with the collection's progression, buffeted through their journey to maturity by complexities: a mother who dies during immigration and childbirth; a single father navigating the shoals of his new world; a disquieting term with Mennonite Central Committee; an unhappy marriage; a vocational dream lost, and then fulfilled.

While other stories feature different protagonists—Thomas's friend Ab Dueck plays a prominent role, for example—*One Foot in Heaven* seems to be most about Prom, about what his life has sown and reaped, about his own longing to be "pulled loose" and "unstuck from earth" (241), an escape from every pain of the corporal. If the image of wild geese in flight hints at this theme in the opening story, the collection's denouement, "A Sunny Day in Canada," suggests Prom's desire may be imminently fulfilled. "A Sunny Day in Canada," perhaps the strongest story in the cycle, provides a heartbreaking—and in its own way beautiful—conclusion to Waltner-Toews's exploration of the ways we are bounded by our physical selves, even when our spiritual selves long for something different, something more.

When the stories' focus shifts from the Koslowski family, from Prom and his children, the conflict between the material and the spiritual remains. Most notably in the stories about Ab Dueck, Waltner-Toews tenderly and humorously explores the struggle most Mennonite young people experience: namely, that when the spirit is most willing, the flesh remains appallingly weak. (As Ab's tales imply, the flesh might be most frail at Mennonite church camp.) In "The Desires of the Spirit," for example, Waltner-Toews cleverly uses the vehicle of Ab's baptism to examine the two kingdom dichotomy that has long stymied Mennonite youth caught between the carnal yearning of young hormones and the longing for God's kingdom: "It was all or nothing," Ab believes. "It was the desires of the flesh or the desires of the spirit, and the desires of the flesh were really only a displaced desire for God, and therefore, if he wanted God, had to be suppressed" (77). Having decided at his baptism to renounce all lust for taut young girls, Ab climbs from the font, purified, and sits next to the object of his desire, who has likewise been baptized. There, he feels the girl's "firm thigh" pressed against his leg. Even in our most sanctified moments, Waltner-Toews reminds us, our flesh keeps us grounded.

As the collection moves towards its conclusion, the scattered lives of Prom, his children and their friends are woven together; in the final stories, Waltner-Toews provides closure to the many narrative threads he has sewn, allowing readers a sense of where the characters' journeys have taken them. This inclination to create closure initially seems forced, most notably in the collection's penultimate story, "Animal Doctor," in which Waltner-Toews finally consummates the decades-old unrequited relationship between Prom's daughter, Sarah, and Ab Dueck. Yet because of an unanticipated narrative turn taken in "Animal Doctor," the fate of Sarah and Ab begins to feel far less artificial.

Instead, Waltner-Toews once again leaves readers with the complexities wrought by our most human urges, our longing to be loved and to love, and the "what if" that lingers when we make one decision, rather than another (238).

In many ways, then, Waltner-Toews's protagonist(s) appear(s) to both question and reinforce the Mennonite two kingdoms belief. The characters are told, by Scripture and church authority, to long for membership in that other kingdom, the kingdom of God; yet their fallenness betrays them, and they remain trapped in the world by their own bodies' machinations. Thus *One Foot in Heaven* incisively explores a potential emotional byproduct of the two kingdom theology, and the ways that the movement between spiritual and material, emblemized in Ab Dueck's "touching himself and touching God," might well become "emotionally symmetrical experiences, linked in never-ending cycles by ropes of guilt and despair" (79).

Although the final story provides some narrative closure to Prom's journey, and to that of his children, Waltner-Toews offers no easy resolution to the collection's thematic conundrum. At its heart, therefore, Waltner-Toews's collection may well challenge readers to question whether we can wholly live in the world, without being of it. No polemic, this: instead, *One Foot in Heaven* delivers its challenge through delightful verisimilitude, and through likable characters who might well be our parents, our friends, our selves. And, clearly, if Waltner-Toews's stories suggest that our struggle toward spiritual wholeness persists in both our basest and our holiest moments, the collection's ending also offers certain hope. Like Prom Koslowski, we might someday escape our aching, yearning selves and be drawn upward, as a floating kite, toward that other kingdom for which we oftentimes long.

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