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LIFE WRITING AND MENNONITE IDENTITY — REVIEW: *ESSAY OF MENNONITE WOMEN'S MEMOIRS*

Melanie Springer Mock

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BOOK MATTER

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

Snyder, Lee. *At Powerline and Diamond Hill: Unexpected Intersections of Life and Work*. Scottsdale: DreamSeeker Books, 2010.

Wiebe, Katie Funk. *You Never Gave Me a Name: One Mennonite Woman's Story*. Scottsdale: DreamSeeker Books, 2009.

Rhoda Janzen's recent success is enviable, her hefty book deal with a prominent press and the publicity that followed her first memoir the kind of triumphs to which writers often aspire. Her book *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* has – in its own way – brought Mennonitism to the mainstream, introducing readers (and plenty of them) to a religious sect that remains, to many, enigmatic and exotic. The book's title alone is alluring, juxtaposing the long-held stereotypes about cape-dress-wearing and be-capped Mennonites with the startling image of a skimpy black shift, a modern emblem of sexy fashion: and so, it seems, entirely *not* Mennonite.

After finishing *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, however, I'm convinced the book is misnamed and that the publisher added "Mennonite" to the title as a clever marketing tool, using the name of a seemingly peculiar religious sect to sell books. While Janzen's memoir is powerful, funny and well-written, it does not reflect much of the Mennonite experience with which I – or many other Mennonite readers – may be familiar. Certainly Mennonites play a background role in Janzen's story, but only as a quiet thrum to a narrative detailing the author's quest to discover the self she had lost and the results of her efforts. And that journey, the real core of Janzen's book, has little – if anything – to do with her Mennonite identity.

I am certainly not alone in my assessment of Janzen's book. Since its publication in late 2009, a number of Mennonite readers have expressed disappointment, even outrage, at the way their faith has been portrayed by Janzen. Shirley Showalter's blog [100 memoirs](#) may have hosted the most engaging discussion on the text and its exploration (or, to some, exploitation) of Mennonite identity. At turns thoughtful, at turns angry, the discussion on Showalter's blog considered the problematic nature of memoir, and in particular of Janzen's book, asking whether it was okay for the author to use hyperbole; whether Janzen should have conflated several strands of Mennonites; and what to do when one's perception of an experience is different from that of another, as was the case for Janzen and her siblings.

Mennonite in a Little Black Dress is a good memoir, as far as the conventions of the genre are now understood. But the problem remains: what, if anything, makes this a Mennonite memoir? Is it the author's Mennonite background? Her allusions to Mennonite ethnic emblems? Or something else? These questions are harder to answer in light of two other memoirs published in the last year, both of which focus on the writer's Mennonite identity as a shaping force in her life story. Only Janzen's text landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list, affording her extensive publicity and a purported book contract for a second memoir. Still, the other books – Katie Funk Wiebe's *You Never Gave Me a Name* and Lee Snyder's *At Powerline and Diamond Hill* – suggest an emerging interest in Mennonite women's stories, while also reflecting the complicated nature of the memoir genre and its ability to provide a compelling narrative of the self.

Janzen, an English professor at Hope College in Michigan, frames her memoir around several catastrophic events that occurred in 2006, including a devastating divorce and, shortly thereafter, a serious car accident. Her husband of 15 years leaves her for a man he has met on gay.com, and Janzen must balance the physical brokenness of her accident with the emotional brokenness of a wrecked marriage. *Mennonite in a Little Black*

Dress details that marriage and its aftermath, narrating chilling incidences of abuse from a husband who is bipolar, cruel, intelligent, charming and unavailable.

To deal with her newly shattered life, Janzen spends a sabbatical with her parents in California and with the Mennonite Brethren community in which her father is a prominent leader – a “Mennonite Pope” she writes, now retired. The memoir traces the healing Janzen experiences amongst her Mennonite people, moving back and forth through time to describe her upbringing as a Mennonite, her journey away from the church, her marriage to Nick and the significance of her home.

A *Mennonite Weekly Review* article reports some Mennonite readers have objected to Janzen’s depiction of them as religiously conservative, culturally isolated, socially backward folk, claiming Janzen plays on “mean-spirited” stereotypes about Mennonites rather than providing a true representation of the denomination’s diversity and its core principles. As a Mennonite reader, I admit to some of the same misgivings. Janzen belongs to the Mennonite Brethren, but writes as if all Mennonites were the same, culturally, ethnically and theologically. Some of her generalizations about Mennonites strike me as patently untrue. For example, she writes that Mennonite girls could not wear jeans and, as a result, she was compelled to wear polyester pants to school, fashioned with additional strips of cloth sewn to the hem for each inch she grew. The bit is certainly funny, but as a Mennonite from her generation growing up in a predominantly Mennonite Brethren community, I never experienced the same. Those of us who were inclined – and that meant most of us – wore jeans to school.

The generalization is a small one, for sure. It matters little whether Mennonite girls in the mid-’70s wore jeans or not. But in this instance, as in many others, the narrative seems to make generalizations about Mennonites as a means of humor, and always at the expense of Mennonites. For this reason, Janzen’s memoir has been a hit among non-Mennonite readers, who can enjoy a fascinating life story while also learning about a sect that is still shrouded in mystery. For many Mennonites, the reading experience is more problematic, complicated by Janzen’s use of hyperbole and her seeming manipulation of detail. Significantly, too, those familiar with Mennonites may question how or why Mennonitism influences the main arc of her story at all: that is, her destroyed relationship with a gay husband and her quest to be whole again. The story itself might be told without the critique of her tradition, and might be more emotionally effective, if not for the repeated gibes at her apparently backward past.

A Mennonite identity seems far more integral to Funk Wiebe’s memoir, especially when juxtaposed with Janzen’s book. *You Never Gave Me a Name* focuses primarily on Funk Wiebe’s adult years, beginning with her matriculation at Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg and ending with her present-day self: an octogenarian still actively writing, speaking and thinking about her ever-evolving journey with God. Funk Wiebe’s narrative turns on the struggle she feels with her own self-identification, using the metaphor of her own name – one she never believed to be “real” – to explore what it means to be called by God, recognized by a community and shaped by religious and ethnic tradition.

Like Janzen, Funk Wiebe’s life is also disrupted by the grief of a too-short marriage, though for Funk Wiebe, it is a spouse’s illness and death that causes a monumental shift in her identity from a married woman helping her husband establish his own profession to a single mother trying to create a professional life of her own. And what a professional life it has been. Funk Wiebe describes the tedium of being a copy editor for Mennonite Brethren Publishing and the aggravation – keenly felt by readers, I presume – of having men accept credit for her work. From her work as a copy editor, she became an English professor at Tabor College, a widely-published author and a heralded speaker in Mennonite and non-Mennonite circles. Her narrative details the roadblocks she faced at every turn, not least of which was a cultural ethos that demanded women be silent, submissive and subordinate to the men around them.

Both Janzen and Funk Wiebe are critical of Mennonitism, but Funk Wiebe seems to come by her critique more honestly than does Janzen. While Janzen resorts to satirizing the easy targets within Mennonite culture, like its

ethnic food and its notorious frugality, Funk Wiebe contends with more problematic aspects of her life among the Mennonite Brethren: namely, the church's unwillingness to bend on the role of women in leadership; the lack of women's voices in church decision-making; and the absence of support for women and their gifts. Rather than reject Mennonites, writing about them as an outsider as Janzen does in *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, Funk Wiebe describes the many ways she worked within her denomination, using her status as a woman who felt exiled as a means of reshaping, transforming, the church.

Certainly *You Never Gave Me a Name* won't receive the broad readership that Janzen's book has earned. The writing is not as polished as is Janzen's, nor is the narrative arc as focused. But many Mennonite readers will find a good deal that is familiar in Funk Wiebe's story of an evolving self, operating within – rather than against – church tradition. Too, *You Never Gave Me a Name* provides fascinating insight into the changing roles of women in the 20th-century Mennonite Brethren church, Funk Wiebe's singular experience reflecting that of so many other women, constricted (and constructed) by a male-dominated tradition.

Snyder's is another memoir narrating a woman's experience with the Mennonite church. *At Powerline and Diamond Hill* traces Snyder's life story from its beginnings in Oregon to her presidency at Bluffton (Ohio) College, now University, the first woman to head that Mennonite institution of higher education. Writing out of a conservative Mennonite background, Snyder provides vignettes of her childhood years in Brownsville, Ore., with loving parents who helped ground her in a strong faith, providing the structure and guidance allowing Snyder to "know her place." These early chapters limn the contours of a Mennonite upbringing that is constricting but loving, at once "restrictive" but also "mostly life-giving and wondrous." Snyder's memoir suggests she held to these tensions throughout her childhood and into her professional life, recognizing that the Mennonite view of women could be both/and, rather than being either vitalizing or oppressive.

While Janzen's memoir seems to despair of the writer's life trajectory and the mysterious future Janzen faces because of life's tragedies, Snyder's outlooks feels decidedly more optimistic. Snyder narrates events leading to her ascendancy to the presidency not so much as a series of coincidences, but as the hand of Providence directing her path. Her childhood in Oregon, her marriage to a supportive husband, her education and the beginning of her academic career – all provide "nudges" forward in her life, nudges, she admits, she can only see clearly in retrospect.

The "order and meaning" we give to our lives becomes a recurrent theme in Snyder's memoir. Some autobiographical scholars might find the theme unsophisticated, arguing that of course writers find patterns in their lives where none exist, but in Snyder's hand, the idea of ordering the events of our lives (while also embracing the mystery) lends the memoir refreshing hopefulness.

Snyder's is not a naïve hopefulness that accompanies an easy life. Being molested by a near-stranger at age seven led to years of guilt and isolation – feelings unburdened only after a chance encounter with the man in early adulthood. Time spent as a missionary in Africa was difficult, especially as a young mother, separated from her husband by Nigeria's instability. And, as in Funk Wiebe's memoir, there is the sense that Mennonite beliefs about women's roles become, at times, a challenge for Snyder, although she admits as well that "the traditional woman's place did not diminish my sense of possibility." Like Funk Wiebe, Snyder works within and through the Mennonite church's limitations and, rather than rejecting her Mennonite identity, Snyder seeks to embrace that identity and the church it represents – or, at least, the people within the church, imperfect though they may be.

A number of recent considerations of Janzen's work question the toll Janzen's memoir has taken on the people within her own imperfect church, including her family and her Fresno community. More broadly, some readers have wondered what – if any – responsibility writers have to their tribe and its story. Ann Hostetler, a professor of Goshen (Ind.) College, has posed this problem to her students, about Janzen's memoir and other Mennonite texts. Their responses – found on their class blog at [Mennonite Literature](#) – have been insightful. This question of a writer's responsibility to her community is especially tricky for a denomination that has traditionally

compelled women to remain silent. Those who oppose Janzen's satire about her own community may be accused of suppressing Janzen's voice, of trying to silence a story that it is Janzen's right to tell, no matter what the cost, emotional or otherwise, to those around her.

Yet although Snyder and Wiebe are less pointed in their criticism of Mennonites, I resist the notion that these writers have sacrificed their own authorial voices for the good of the community. Both women provide a strong critique of the problematic aspects of Mennonite culture and tradition, as they have lived that culture and tradition. The memoirs of both women betray their desire to work within, and transform, a church that has not always been open to hearing the stories they needed to tell. Perhaps for that reason, too, both Snyder's and Wiebe's memoirs are important historical artifacts that should be useful to anyone hoping to study the shifting roles women have played in Mennonite denominations. Ironically, the groundbreaking work done by women like Snyder and Wiebe established changes in the denomination that have made it possible for women of later generations, like Janzen, to find their voices within and outside their Mennonite communities, and to narrate their own experiences of growing up within a church tradition that rarely honored their stories.

As a student of memoir, I find it hard to begrudge Janzen her book, despite its critique of Mennonites. And while I hesitate to believe her text a Mennonite memoir, Janzen has her defenders: those who see her story tied together with the threads of a Mennonite identity and who believe her focus on family, sacrifice, redemption and a complex relationship with the body is particular to Mennonite writers. Therefore, despite its mixed reception among Mennonites, Janzen's memoir has – at the least – opened avenues for discussion about the state of Mennonite literature and of memoir and has raised important questions about the role of the storyteller in Mennonite communities. *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* has been a valuable addition to the Mennonite literary community because of these conversations.

Although Snyder and Funk Wiebe provide narratives that seem truer to the Mennonite experience, neither text will receive the same wide audiences as Janzen's memoir nor will their books provoke the same level of discussion. Both Snyder and Funk Wiebe should find appreciative readers among Mennonites, who will no doubt relate to the writers' experiences in ways they cannot relate to Janzen's. Still, it is regrettable that Janzen's perspective on Mennonites will be the one accepted by those outside of Mennonitism, along with the problematic but popular Amish and Mennonite romances. Janzen, a gifted writer and thinker, could certainly add to the stories by Mennonite women that Funk Wiebe and Snyder have provided. Hopefully, Janzen's second memoir will be a little more thoughtful, a little less barbed, in its reflection on what it means to be Mennonite, while still retaining some of the wit and insight that made her first life narrative so good.