

# Quiet in the Land: A Novel

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By  
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## ABSTRACT

Mennonite fiction is experiencing a renaissance as a new generation of writers and scholars emerge onto the Canadian literary landscape. Authors like Miriam Toews, David Bergen, Rudy Wiebe, Sandra Birdsell, have established a strong bedrock of Mennonite literature, from which a wellspring of fiction-writing about this specific ethno-religious identity is growing amongst a younger group of writers.

A Millennial Mennonite writer myself, my novel-thesis, *Quiet in the Land*, is a contemporary Mennonite Kunstlerroman that explores the lives of three generations of Mennonite women artists living on the Canadian prairies. Through the lives of my fictional characters, I paint a picture of what critic and scholar Magdalene Redekop refers to as the “porous boundaries” of urban and rural Mennonite communities in Manitoba.

The question that guided the writing of *Quiet in the Land* is how Mennonite women across generations imagine and reimagine their identities as artists and/or mothers within Mennonite mythologies of place. The novel spans a reasonable length of time from the 1970’s to present day and features a range of women characters living and working in artistic, domestic, and agricultural contexts. Through a fictional lens, my literary project resists nostalgic tropes, instead focussing on how creative practices produce generative, enlivening spaces within the lives of Mennonite women who choose to make their home on the Western prairies.

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## ARTIST STATEMENT

In a phone conversation with my mother last year, she tells me stories about my grandmother. “She would love to have been a pastor, if the Bible hadn’t said otherwise,” says my mother, a hint of both pride and demission in her voice. This piece of information was new insight to me, though I wasn’t surprised by it given what I already knew about my maternal grandmother. She was smart, creative, and highly motivated—to have lofty career goals was not outside her character. However, a woman living in the 1940s and 1950s who desired to be a pastor within the patriarchal Mennonite church would certainly be considered a transgressor. This was precisely why my grandmother didn’t pursue it, but rather, as she describes it in her self-written obituary, married my grandfather “[a]fter arguing and discussing [with him] various issues.” But this new insight made me wonder about my grandmother. How might her life have looked if she had risked pursuing a career doing the work she loved?

In *Making Believe: Questions of Mennonites and Art*, Magdalene Redekop writes that it was her mother who taught her “the many creative forms that resistance can take” (266). I, too, have been inspired by a myriad of “creative forms of resistance” inherited across lineages of Mennonite women growing up on the Canadian prairies. My MFA in Writing thesis, a novel called *Quiet in the Land*, explores themes of art and transgression within the genres of the contemporary female *Kunstlerroman* (the woman Artist’s Novel) and Canadian Mennonite fiction. It draws inspiration from the multi-generational stories of women who have wrestled with constraints imposed upon them by patriarchal ideologies of Mennonite communities (Nayeri). The novel weaves through the lives of three generations of Mennonite women, spanning a reasonable length of time from the 1970s to present day. It follows two characters, primarily, as they wrestle with questions of marriage, motherhood, and their own creative

pursuits against a specific ethno-religious context, alongside the broader scope of societal expectations imposed upon women.

In the following Artist's Statement, I will: explain where my novel works within the ever-evolving genre of the contemporary woman's *Kunsterroman*; discuss the function of folktale formulas as a key craft element within the narrative of my novel; and, consider themes of art and transgressive approaches to relationships and motherhood as they have guided the writing of my novel, and been treated in the fictional work of selected contemporary women writers.

“There is a change coming in the lives of girls and women...all women have had up till now has been their connection with men.” This insight comes from a speech made by Del Jordan's mother in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Alice Munro's celebrated work of fiction that focusses on the eccentricities in the everyday lives of girls and women residing in small-town Canada. The above quote is foundational to much of Munro's work, and in *Lives of Girls and Women*, it plays out in both a political and artistic dimension. *Quiet in the Land*, the novel that forms my literary thesis for the MFA in Writing, is a flowering from Munro's bedrock text in its portrait of multiple generations of women growing up in a rural and urban Canadian setting, and wrestling with the discovery of who they are outside their connections with men. This question in my novel gains further potency because I've chosen to write the lives of my women characters within and against a Canadian Mennonite context. The question I explore, ultimately, is how the Mennonite woman artist is shaped by mythologies of place. In the process of my writing, research, and obsessive self-reflecting on this question, however, I've also discovered it is inextricably linked to how the woman artist—the Mennonite Woman artist, in this case—is

shaped by her connections with men. Indeed, themes of intimacy and romantic relationships permeate my novel.

In her dissertation on female subjectivity in the contemporary *Künstlerroman*, Amy Dickman asserts that one of the chief feminist challenges when it comes to writing the *Künstlerroman* genre is not adhering to the conventions of the genre itself, but the question of the conditions the woman artist requires to create her work. The female *Künstlerroman* must necessarily depart from the patriarchal model of the traditional genre because, as scholar Susan Gubar points out in her essay “The Birth of the Artist as Heroine: (Re)production, the *Künstlerroman* Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield,” the conventions of the *Künstlerroman* “fashioned by male writers are insufficient [for female writers].” She continues to write that women writers writing women artist characters within this genre constitute an anti-tradition of their own, as there is a radical difference in the career trajectory of women versus male artists. Woman writers cannot “write in a genre that plots the continual process by which a male artist progresses toward transcendence necessary to create art.”

In my novel, this tension between male and female artist characters plays out in the comparison of Arlo Koop, a musician, and Emily, a visual artist. Arlo Koop retreats to Schöngart from the city to work on writing and recording an album. He is, apparently, completely unattached, or else has free mobility to seek the isolation and solitude necessary to work on his art, tucked away in a relative’s summer kitchen for however long he needs to be there to complete his album.

Conversely, the conditions of Emily’s life offer her much less flexibility and mobility for creating her art. She must find time to paint within the gaps between her domestic

responsibilities. Emily is a mother, a wife, and a caregiver of her mother-in-law who is a paraplegic. When Emily creates, it is in the small spaces between these domestic roles: in the morning while she's still in bed, her toddler in her arms, she sketches out a scene from a dream she had from the night before; in the Abrams' house barn, caring for her mother-in-law, Nancy, Emily sets up her easel in the parlour and paints a portrait of Nancy. Or course, she longs for "a room of her own" but does not entertain this possibility until Arlo Koop seduces her with the idea. He encourages her to submit her work to galleries in Winnipeg. When Arlo Koop finally relocates back to the city, Emily's own desire to leave the village takes on a heightened fervour. Emily and Arlo Koop begin a letter correspondence that eventually becomes the catalyst for Emily's decision to leave Schöngart and her comfortable, domestic life behind. But the weight of this choice impacts and disrupts the entire community, and consequently creates a fraught relationship between Emily and her own mother.

Bethany Dailey Tisdale examines the woman's *Künstlerroman* as it is rendered in the work of modernist women writers like Edith Wharton, Anzia Yeziarska, Zelda Fitzgerald, and Dawn Powell, highlighting failure as a crucial part of the artist-heroine's journey. Tisdale writes, "[i]n *Künstlerromane* by modern American women writers, marital prospects, domestic duties, and sentimental attachments complicate the drive for independence" (1). What Tisdale ultimately wants to show is how the artist-heroine is required to make certain sacrifices that the male artist, in novels like James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, does not experience as failure or a hindrance in the same way. Where novels like Joyce's and Fitzgerald's laud the solitary artistic genius above all else, many contemporary *Künstlerromane* by women writers focus on the compromises demanded of women—

relationships, status, economic security, and bodily autonomy—in their pursuit of the artist’s life. Tisdale argues that “in the form of these failures and compromises, we can see these texts’ feminist commentary on the cultural pressures that restrict women to the roles of art object or domestic help meet. These women writers demonstrate that women cannot retreat from community and domestic attachments and thus provide us with a new, less isolated version of the *Künstlerroman*” (2). Coming back to the example in my novel, when Emily leaves the village of Schöngart to pursue an artistic vocation, she cannot completely abandon her attachments to the community, however tenuous they may be following her decision to leave. She sends her daughter, Lena, to spend time with her grandparents in the village on the weekends. The reasons for this are twofold: Emily desires the freedom of a “childless” existence on the weekends, going out on dates and leading a more transgressive lifestyle than traditional motherhood allows. But she also recognizes the importance of Lena cultivating a relationship with her grandmother, because Emily still believes Schöngart is an important place in the narrative of her own artistic development. She insists on maintaining a connection to the community through her daughter.

*Quiet in the Land* draws on the example of the *Künstlerroman* we encounter in Anzia Yeziarska’s novel *Bread Givers*, as opposed to, say, James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, because the *Künstlerroman* played out in my novel does not laud the promise of modernity, that is, the emancipation of the artistic genius from the bonds of social and communal obligations. The (typically male) artist in novels like Joyce’s seeks artistic freedom and success through their alienation from others. Conversely, Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers* “continually draws our attention back to community, households, the society of other women, romances, friendships, neighbourhoods, tenements, and intellectual alliances... [These] are the focal points of

Yeziarska's work in spite of her narratives of individual artistic achievement" (Tisdale 45).

Contrary to traditional, masculine examples of the *Kunstlerroman*, alienation is not necessary for a woman artist to succeed in her work. Yeziarska's novel demonstrates that, while independence is a crucial aspect of the woman artist's life, it is not what guarantees, or ultimately ordains the artist.

In *Quiet in the Land*, I have sought to create a similar portrait of the woman artist's life through characters that continually seek love, friendship, and community as integral parts of their artistic becoming.

One craft tool I found significant for my novel's portrayal of the woman artist's life as deeply rooted in the collective, is the use of folklore, and oral and artistic modes of storytelling. Anita Yezierka's novel *Bread Givers* serves, again, as an example of a *Kunstlerroman* that uses folklore to continually bring the artist back to the interconnected spaces they inhabit. *Bread Givers* uses what the scholar Alice Kessler-Harns refers to as *folktale formulas*. Folktale formulas incorporate traditional modes of storytelling into otherwise realistic depictions of everyday life. For example, Yeziarska, a Jewish author, sprinkles *Bread Givers* with Yiddish exclamations.

*Quiet in the Land* incorporates similar folktale formulas to convey the ways in which Lena's and Emily's lives are embedded in those of family members, friends, and lovers that populate their lives. I pepper the narrative with terms and expressions in the Mennonite mother tongue, *Plautdietsch*, a low German dialect carried over to Canada with the Russian Mennonites during the 1870s migration, as well as incorporate various forms of oral storytelling. For example, the character of Sofia—Lena's best friend—is a natural storyteller, with a flair for

transforming her life experiences into stories of ghosts and hauntings. There are two main instances in the novel where Sofia relays a ghost story, and after each time, Lena experiences an uncanny encounter with a ghost or spirit resembling some aspect of the ghostly character in Sofia's tale. These uncanny encounters are instances of Lena being confronted with some unresolved aspect of herself. What is crucial to note, here, is that Lena does not encounter these haunted parts of herself without first having them revealed to her through Sofia's tales. In other words, Lena cannot self-actualize on her own terms. There are crucial parts of herself that she simply cannot discover in a vacuum. Although much of Lena's perspective is written through interiority—indeed, the reader spends a lot of time in her head—her desires, struggles, and the nature of her own artistry, are ultimately revealed to her through the lives and stories of the other characters that surround her.

One significant craft challenge I encountered in my use of folktale formulas was the risk of appropriating ethnic stories. This was an issue primarily in my writing of Sofia's character, who I had initially cast as Argentinian. The ghost story Sofia tells on the dock at Lena's birthday party was initially set during Argentina's "Dirty War" of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though I had taken time to research this significant event in Argentina's history, I was strongly encouraged by my writing mentor to lean, instead, into the history and stories of my own ethnic identity. Although I do believe a writer should be allowed a certain degree of creative liberty, I agree with Hari Kunzru who cautions fellow writers to "go forth boldly...but...tread with humility." In *The Guardian*, Kunzru comments, "Good writers transgress without transgressing, in part because they are humble about what they do not know...They respect people, not by leaving them alone in the inviolability of their cultural authenticity, but by becoming involved with them." Kunzru's point is not that writers should not try to perceive subjectivities unfamiliar

to themselves (our characters would all be clones of ourselves!) but that there is a level of respect, research, and humility that must be considered when entering unfamiliar subjectivities. Because my character, Sofia, is a storyteller, and relays her Argentinian ghost story with an authoritative tone to her voice, I risked my narrative turning into a mouthpiece for a cultural history I knew too little about. To curb this risk, I brought Sofia's character back into the Mennonite fold, tracing her lineage back to the Russian Mennonites who settled colonies in Mexico. This allowed me to deepen my research on the history of different Mennonite migrations and denominations and remain consistent within the larger themes my novel explores, one of which, significantly, is contemporary Mennonite women's' identities.

As well, in rewriting Sofia's ghost story about the murder of her great grandmother as one distinctly Mennonite, I was able to create a deeper, more nuanced portrayal of the ways in which my contemporary women characters continue to live through and embody the stories of their maternal ancestors.

This leads me, finally, to discuss one of my novel's dominant themes, which is the artist's life, alongside transgressive approaches to relationships and motherhood. When I began to think about writing this novel, I knew it would be about motherhood. Specifically, I wanted to write about the tension between a woman's maternal instincts and her desire to pursue independence and artistic fulfillment. I opened this Artist Statement with a story about my maternal grandmother, Lorraine, and the sacrifice she made in not pursuing a vocation, instead prioritizing her role as wife and mother. I return to this familial story because it has, to some degree, haunted the writing of my novel. In fact, though I only sat down to formally begin writing the first pages

of this novel two years ago, it has been a project percolating since my grandmother's death in April 2016. Following her death, I left a long-term relationship and struck out on my own, partner-less, for the first time in my young adult life. I moved into my own place in Winnipeg, and though there were tensions between my mother and I regarding this breakup, my artist-mother let me house a gigantic painting she had recently completed of my grandmother. The painting recreates a photo of Lorraine, in her mid-twenties, strolling down Winnipeg's Portage Avenue in an elegant, seafoam green coat. She is young, attractive, and her piercing eyes have an eerie way of leaping beyond the canvas—indeed, I always had an uncanny sense they followed me around my apartment. I have moved with that painting to subsequent places, and questions and ideas surrounding my grandmother's life have continued to haunt me. Questions like: what might her life have been if she had chosen not to have children? Or what if she had left her marriage to pursue her dream vocation?

Sheila Heti, in her auto-fiction novel, *Motherhood*, offers a poignant articulation of this maternal haunting I have wrestled with over the past decade, a central idea that has flowered into my novel. Heti, through her fictional alter-ego, writes:

There's something in you that knows how to keep walking, but something's stopping you. And what's stopping you is...grief. I don't know what the grief is. But it has nothing to do with your boyfriend. It's there from before you met him, and it's a quiet grief. You don't feel it every day, but it's there all the time. It may be that you're porous and the grief isn't yours... [I]t might be that you were born with your mother's grief, like it got implanted in you as an energy ball..." (144).

Indeed, this "energy ball" of a mother's grief is what I wanted to find expression for within the subjectivities of my characters. Each main character embodies an approach to motherhood

influenced by the dominant attitudes of their generation, and yet each character is still a unique iteration of an artistic personality belonging to a particular lineage of Mennonite women.

What I have realized, in reflecting on the way I've written my characters, is that my "what-if" questions surrounding my grandmother's life play out, in one way or another, through the narratives of my protagonists, mainly Lena and Emily. Heti's words do, indeed, form the central expression of my novel: that a woman's life embodies the grief, and unlived aspects of her mother's life. Additionally, a woman's creative identity arises from recognition of her own porousness. In other words, her life is her own and yet it is lived in continuum with the maternal lives that precede her. Di Brandt's scholarship on questions of the maternal narrative in contemporary Canadian women's writing speaks to my project, too. Brandt writes, "[i]t is...in contemporary feminist writing, perhaps, because of its largely antithetical investment in Western thought, that the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue has flowered, especially around the question of the maternal" (7-8).

If *Quiet in the Land* is to be understood through any list of literary terms and genres, it must be as a contemporary, feminist *Kunstlerroman*. The cross-generational, cross-cultural dialogue that arises between my characters, as they make choices pertaining to motherhood, relationships, and art, is possible because of a certain level of porousness, or boundlessness, that exists within their feminine identities; a boundlessness born from the question: Could a life be lived like this, too?

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