

Dora Dueck. *What You Get at Home*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2012. 178 pp.  
Book review by Robert Martens

In 2011, Dora Dueck's novel, *This Hidden Thing*, won the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award, which is bestowed annually for the best adult English-language writing in the province of Manitoba. Dueck is a historian as well, sitting as its Winnipeg representative on the board of the MB Historical Commission. Recently she has had published a book of short stories entitled *What You Get at Home*.



Dueck's stories in this collection are deftly written and finely nuanced: each character, each situation and event seems convincingly real. Tiny washes of emotion colour a routine scene. Motivations tip incidents into unexpected directions. And sorrow, anger and jealousy intrude in ways we would all find familiar. Dueck's stories, though, aren't cynical: they are narratives of individuals finding their way to points of meaning, love, redemption.

Perhaps "writing from what she knows," or propelled by her historical interests, many of Dueck's stories feature Mennonite characters. "In the Village of Women" features a Paraguayan Mennonite woman who has been betrayed by her suitor. "Helping Isaak" recalls the lives of Mennonites living through the Stalinist terror. Dueck's stories with Mennonite themes tend to deal with crisis situations and intense human suffering.

It could be argued that some of the "non-Mennonite" stories in this book are among the best. They are concerned with the commonplace, the routine of life in the secure country of Canada, but in such a way that the mundane is frequently redemptive. "An Advance on an Uncertain Feature" describes a first (very uncertain) date from the conflicting and confused perspectives of both young man and woman. And "The Rocking Chair," a story about a sibling quarrel over a father's inheritance, is a near perfect recounting of human weaknesses – and, ultimately, faith.

The final seven stories in the collection revolve around a single character, Liese, who emigrates to Canada from Paraguay, encounters a culture clash, dates, marries, enters the routine of wedded life, raises children, fights and makes up, finds friends, reads through the night, discovers the Canadian work-out regime: all the great and little things that constitute a remarkable/unremarkable life. In the end, Liese experiences an extraordinary conversion. In one

of the intermediate stories, “Mama, Like a Mirage,” she is still grappling with Canadian ways. The following extract is the beginning of that story.

*What You Get at Home* can be purchased at the MHSBC office.

That winter, the year Robert turns one, Anita Johnson – the woman from the church who’s befriended Liese – starts doing exercises every morning with a television show and walking three or four times a week regardless of the weather, and then she joins a women’s club called a spa. She’s “into” fitness, she says, and Liese, who still struggles with English prepositions on occasion, finds it odd that Anita would talk about her relentless activity as if it’s a tunnel she crawls inside.

Maybe that’s how it is when you get so busy with something and it’s all you can see, she thinks. Until you’re into something else. She wonders aloud if she’ll be abandoned too.

Johnny says she’s being unreasonable. “You’re friends,” he says.

“She can’t resist. I’m new. I need her expertise.”

“Oh jeez,” he says. “Why are you always so suspicious?”

Johnnie, she thinks, is glad for whoever shows up, never mind quality. Or durability.

Then Anita calls and says she has a guest pass and would Liese want to join her for the evening? “I know you’ll love it, Louise,” she says, using the English version of Liese’s name. “You’re not overweight or anything, I know, but it’s more than that. It’s about overall fitness. Feeling energetic and really refreshed. You wouldn’t believe how much better I feel since I’ve been going. Not just physically better, but in every single way.”

She pauses but Liese doesn’t say anything so she hurries on. “Plus you’ll have some idea of what I’m up to, you know what I mean? You’ll be able to visualize the place.”

“Well...” Liese can’t tell her the reasons she doesn’t want to go. Not, at least, the ones that come to her first. She can’t say, I’d rather not because it’s dark outside. Or, you’ve called me as a last resort, haven’t you?

“I know it’s short notice,” Anita is saying, as if she can hear what Liese is thinking. “I meant to call you earlier, but today’s been such a whirl!”

She can’t say winter is hard on her, that it’s summer in Paraguay now, where she grew up, and no one ever believes you could miss the heat. She can’t say that she’s still unnerved by unfamiliar situations.

Anita will think she needs to console her. She’ll repeat her name to show how much she cares. “But Louise,” she’ll say, “you’ve been here five years already. And think of it, Louise, how awfully much courage it took you to come. How brave and strong you’ve been.”

Their friendship has too many sentences like that in it.

“I’ll check with Johnnie,” she says.

The table is cluttered with dishes, the brown stoneware plates, his and hers, their orange sunflowers streaked with gravy, looking even more grotesque than before they’d spooned their suppers onto them. She’d exclaimed over the set when they got it as a wedding gift but she despises it now. Eating on those fat showy petals day after day.

A chunk of meatball has fallen onto the seat of Robert’s highchair. There’s a pickle on the floor, just out of her reach. And the curtain’s aren’t drawn for the night.

This never bothers Johnnie. “We’re on the second floor,” he says, “so who’s looking in?” One of the hooks is off the rod and a narrow ridge of ice lines the bottom of her window.

Liese sees the letter-in-progress to her parents, the pale blue aerogram, so light, so insubstantial, lying on the spindly-legged coffee table they picked up cheap at a garage sale. But oh how heavy with endeavour it is: such careful words, so cramped and slanted, composed about

anything she can think of that may be informative or lend itself to further elaboration, every line tucked closely under the last. To make it worth sending.

Once a month, a letter home. When you leave home, Liese knows, you have to reassure your mother.

“Up to you,” Johnnie says when she whispers the invitation. “I can do the dishes, put Robert to bed.” (137-139)