

Rudy Wiebe. *Where the Truth Lies: Selected Essays*. Edmonton, NeWest Press: 2016. 312 pp.

Review by Robert Martens

Rudy Wiebe has enjoyed a long career as a novelist, starting with the controversial *Peace Shall Destroy Many* published in 1962. He has twice been awarded the Governor General's Award for fiction. Wiebe has also written some fine nonfiction, including his childhood memoir, *Of This Earth*. More recently, he has published a book of essays, talks, and articles, all of which are previously written material dating from 1978 through 2012. *Where the Truth Lies* is a fascinating collection and recollection of Rudy Wiebe's "life narrative." The topics so vividly examined in this book are wide-ranging in content; however, several dominant themes emerge.

*Writing*: Words, says Wiebe, are bafflingly powerful in their ability to bring people together. Even Scripture, he points out, declares that "in the beginning was the Word." "Who could ever have imagined," writes Wiebe, "such a simple, such an endlessly complex matter: the first sounds a baby utters will eventually make it possible for us to walk on the moon, to converse about love or hate, to think eternity" (78). Fact and fiction are both ways to communicate with words, but what differentiates the two? Fact, writes Wiebe, "is an act of witnessing *and* an act of remembering. ..." (85). Fiction is something derived from fact, but is not necessarily something that is "made up" – in fact, it rarely is. "*Fiction is the narrative you and I make out of the facts of our lives*" (81 Wiebe's italics). Every day, when we converse with others, writes Wiebe, we create narratives of our own experiences, past, present, and future. In a sense, we are all "novelists."

*Sexuality*: In Dene mythology, Wiebe points out (he is consistently fascinated by Aboriginal myths), the body is perceived as guiltless, in contrast to some of the ideas perpetrated in the West. Jesus, says Wiebe, was fully body. He goes on to point out that, in the so-called Dark Ages in Europe, women were often permitted considerable power in the church hierarchy. Those privileges were gradually cut back until women, after the Reformation, were largely confined to the domains of home and family. Female Mennonite writers, Wiebe contends, have been franker about sexual experience than their male counterparts.

*The North*: Rudy Wiebe has a passion for the North and for the role it plays in Canadian identity. His essay on Ellesmere Island in this book is brilliantly visceral: "There is such imaginable Stillness here. The endless noise of contemporary living batters us until we ignore almost everything, but in the Arctic a tuft of moss is an event, a fly a blue companion. You watch, and listen. Hear silence" (158).

*The Indigenous*: When Wiebe writes of the First Nations of Canada, it is almost invariably with a sense of outrage. The French and English imagined, somehow, that the newly "discovered" continent of North America now belonged to them. "How can I imagine I 'own' this land?" asks Wiebe. In English law, he says, crown tenure and consequently land ownership were considered a legal fiction, imposed by the monarch in the interests of order and justice. In North America, however, the concept of crown tenure was used as a pretext for stripping Aboriginals of the land they considered given them by the Great Spirit.

*Nonviolence*: Anger is also at the heart of Wiebe's writings on warfare: an essay title, "Killing Our Way to Peace," condenses in a phrase the irony of humans murdering each other in the interests of harmony. There is no rationality in warfare, says Wiebe; in fact, we may be irrationally addicted to violence. And war reduces human beings to statistics: "...human beings never die as a single mass. We may die together, in small or greater numbers, but we are always,

each of us *one*, and unique; every individual human being is of an absolute moral worth” (240). At the end of the twentieth century, writes Wiebe in “On Death and Writing,” (1983) there may be only one nation left on earth: “*The United Republics of Total Death*” (224 Wiebe’s italics).

*Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage:* In 2009, Wiebe listed some of the major influences on his life and work. Among them are his birthplace, Jesus Christ, his mother, reading and writing, the great Cree chief Big Bear, his students, and his Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage. In *Where the Truth Lies*, Wiebe occasionally writes specifically on his heritage, as in his essay, “Flowers for Approaching the Fire,” a lovely meditation on martyrdom. His Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage, though, is an abiding presence throughout this book, lingering in the background in every essay as a kind of “wallpaper.”

In 1959, while still a young man wrestling over what to do with his life, Wiebe received some crucial advice from Frederick Salter, professor of English at the University of Alberta. Salter told him “that there were no doubt numberless students capable of writing an acceptable MA thesis on Shakespeare but, perhaps, only I could write a good novel about Canadian Mennonites. He dared me; and I dared” (19). The result was Wiebe’s groundbreaking first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. In this volume of essays, the story of the novel’s writing and publication is told in “Hold Your Peace,” which was the lecture delivered at the Mennonite Historical Society of BC’s fundraiser banquet in 2012.

The essays in *Where the Truth Lies* are remarkably diverse, ranging from brief newspaper opinion columns to extended speeches and crafted journal articles. Each of them, in its own way, is compelling.