David Funk. *On The Banks of The Irtysh River*. N.p., n.d. 232 pp.
Reviewed by Robert Martens.

In his fine first novel, Abbotsford resident David Funk has chosen to highlight the Mennonite experience in Siberia, quite different from that of European Russia. Many Mennonite settlers in the Omsk area were already on the path to assimilation, and mingled far more readily with the Russian mainstream. The novel's main character, Heinrich Rempel, has no agricultural skills of any kind; he is solely a businessman. Additionally, the brutal oppression that disrupted Siberian Mennonite life emanated from both right and left, very unlike the Ukrainian experience, for example, where the violence came mostly from the left. *On the Banks of the Irtysh River* depicts the Omsk-based rightist regime of Alexander Kolchak as equally malevolent to the Bolshevik tyranny that followed. The novel provides fresh insights into an era of Mennonite history that is often overlooked.

The story begins with its end: the Rempel family have escaped the Russian chaos and are travelling on the S.S. Melita to begin a new life in Canada. A British doctor, formerly involved with the Allied military intervention in post-revolutionary Russia, has befriended the family. In the novel, he is telling the story, but the first-person narrative transitions, a little awkwardly, into a full account of the Rempels' experience. The reader consequently knows the conclusion of the story before it really begins, but there are some great surprises in the plot nevertheless, enhanced by some compassionate and vivid writing.

Funk's novel centres on a theme of faith and despair. His Mennonite characters, progressive as they may be, are yet somehow innocent of the workings of the world. At least the men are; the women seem to have a better understanding. Heinrich Rempel is convinced that God will always supply the family's needs, and that a simple faith is all that is necessary. His wife, Katy, has a far more realistic point of view: "Long before all those armies of German boots were churning Russian dirt to dust and mud in far off Ukraine," she says, "I had already laid to rest three children in that same black Russian soil and my heart was broken into ever smaller pieces with each new death. It didn't take a war to bring trouble to our family. Trouble is a fact of life" (19).

The Rempel family move from western Russia to the village of Kulomzino, on the banks of the Irtysh River, where Heinrich has dreams of opening a farm implement retail business. Along the way, the reader is given a glimpse of the rot of aristocratic Russia through the eyes of Heinrich's son, Henry. Upon being settled in Kulomzino, Henry befriends a local Russian boy from the class of the perennially impoverished. Heinrich encourages the friendship, and indeed he and Katy become close friends with their neighbours, the Sarkovskys, who are Socialists. The Rempels are not at all the stereotypical insular Mennonite colonist.

And then, with the two Russian Revolutions and subsequent civil war, the Rempels' life begins to unravel. Heinrich's business stalls and then stops completely. Refugees flood Omsk and Kulomzino. It is Katy who instigates a new plan for a new time: Heinrich's intended warehouse is converted into a block of apartments, and for a time, Russians and Mennonites live together in "an oasis of peace" (chap. title). And Heinrich learns that his Christian ideals are not so different from those of a Bolshevik friend, Lepinov, "whose utopian dream for his family was driven by a desire to have a leak-proof roof to sleep under, plenty of good bread to fill the stomach, and honest work to bring dignity to a man's soul" (125).

On December 22 and 23, 1918, an uprising is launched by Bolsheviks (or perhaps Socialists; the facts are somewhat hazy) against Kolchak's counter-revolutionary coalition

government in Omsk. Cossacks suppress the revolt with unspeakable brutality. Heinrich watches from his window as a Cossack horseman effortlessly rides down a fleeing villager and slices him open with his bayonet – then turns to Rempel's window, sees him, and smiles. From that day on, Heinrich is afflicted with a growing trauma, even feeling complicity in the Cossack murder with the momentary communication of a smile.

Kolchak's regime is overthrown, and another reign of terror, that of the Bolsheviks, begins. "Different faces behind the guns, same inhumanity," says Heinrich. "Whites, Reds, they're all the same!" (187) Smitten by all the tragedy, Heinrich despairs. "Why did our Lord teach us to pray, 'Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil' when he himself was not saved from the time of trial and he certainly was not delivered from evil?" says Heinrich to an elder. " He was tortured and died at the hands of murderers! Evil is rampant and our lives are upon trial. The prayer makes a mockery of God who remains silent and distant as the stars. I cannot fathom it" (197).

The novel ends with some powerful reflections. Safely upon the S.S. Melita, Heinrich speaks with the ship's surgeon. "We thought that God could control the events of our lives and that when we suffered it was for our good. A comfortable theology in prosperous times" (221). He has many questions, he says. "I would like to believe," he continues, "that God is with us, that in the midst of our misfortunes, perhaps, He is like the air we breathe, present to sustain us, to give us the strength to endure and to live when our hearts are breaking and we have lost all hope. Otherwise, how could I have the courage to go on?" (222)

David Funk is a talented artist as well as a writer. His novel can be purchased at the MHSBC office.