

Rachel Epp Buller & Kerry Fast, editors. *Mothering Mennonite*. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2013. 312 pp.

Book Review by Dorolen Wolfs

As I sit down to reflect on *Mothering Mennonite*, I am self-consciously aware that I am still wearing my apron. I have just finished braiding dough that will accompany a nice pot of homemade borscht, and I laugh-out-loud at this stereotypical feminine Mennonite image. I briefly contemplate removing my apron – a visible reminder of my domesticity – before I engage with some serious scholarly work. However, I swiftly reject this intrusive thought on the grounds that I want to embody my belief that domesticity and intellectual pursuits are compatible. My husband has taken our three children ice skating and I have a few delicious moments to reflect on a book that has meaningfully delivered on its back-cover promise to “[meet] a need for mothers like myself who live with the tension of being independent, thinking, artistic mothers who live to varying degrees within a conservative religious community.”¹ Not only is this book juicy, insightful, and timely, but it evokes an awakening that meets a deep need for authenticity and for inner reconciliation between self and community, past and present, and duty and vocation.

This intimate anthology of multidisciplinary essays, creative writing, and poetry tackles the (de)construction of women’s identity in the ethnic Mennonite culture, especially related to women’s roles as Mothers. Through deeply personal accounts, the authors grapple with the expectations of Mennonite women, analyze their sociocultural context, and/or pay tribute to various maternal figures in their lives (including themselves!). Using a feminist lens, the contributors dissect relations of power and reveal their consequences for women. While the authors pay variable attention to the patriarchal nature of ethnic Mennonite communities, they emphasize how mothering is an empowering experience: the power of Mennonite women in their role as mothers comes from their place “at the heart of perpetuating and determining Mennonite identity” (Buller, Fast 7).

Mothering Mennonite is divided into four sections: “Picturing Mothers and Daughters,” “Mothering Across Generations,” “Challenging Mennonite Motherhood,” and “Mothering in and Around Culture(s).” An overarching theme throughout the anthology is the special role of mothers in the transmission (and/or creation) of culture and religion in their communities. The essays explore identity questions such as “How do assumptions about our female ancestors influence our own identity as women?” and “How has the perception of the ‘ideal’ mother developed among Mennonites and what are the consequences of this perception?” Other topics that are explored include the construction of Mennonite feminine identity, the tensions that arise when multiple meanings of “Mennonite” and “Mother” are intertwined, how one’s “Mennoniteness” might enrich one’s career, and how cultural contexts shape the experiences and expectations of Mennonite mothers. Poignant essays about singleness and childlessness invite the reader to consider his or her part in sustaining a culture that idealizes motherhood and devalues the role of women who are not married or who do not bear and raise children. Overall, the reader of this anthology becomes more self-aware and is left to ponder how she – and her mother and grandmothers – complied with or resisted particular social expectations, and how she plays a role in perpetuating or determining maternal and Mennonite identities.

This anthology is geared toward Mennonite women and those who are interested in exploring questions of cultural transmission of maternal identity. *Mothering Mennonite* takes

some time to savour since the content is rich, thought-provoking, and written in the type of academic language necessary for the authors to build a scholarly case. Overall, I was impressed by the breadth and depth of Mennonite scholarship represented in this book. The editors certainly achieve their goal of presenting a diverse – yet cohesive – account of how Mennonite culture has shaped experiences of mothering (and vice versa). Readers will appreciate the authors' range of expertise, authentic engagement in the subject matter, and evocative narrative.

¹ Alana Ruben Free, playwright, *Beginner at Life and other Eden Plays*, and founding editor of *The Mom Egg*.

This book is available at www.demeterpress.org/motheringmennonite.html as well as in the MHSBC office library.