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Magdalene Redekop, Making Believe: Questions about Mennonites and Art

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[See table of contents](#)

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Reviews

Magdalene Redekop, *Making Believe: Questions about Mennonites and Art*. University of Manitoba Press, 2020. 380 pp.

When one glances at the title of this book, one might understandably assume it is about Mennonite artists, or art about Mennonites. In fact, it is neither of these directly, although it touches on both. The title *Making Believe* is dynamic and questioning, pointing to Redekop's premise that the concepts "Mennonite" and "art" interact in a *spielraum*, a playing space for tricksters and clowns that challenge anyone who dares to pin down definitions of either notion.

While Redekop says there is "no such thing as Mennonite art," (xiv–xv) her study nevertheless describes a renaissance or "flowering" of art by Mennonites that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. She quotes Andris Taskans who described this as a "Mennonite miracle" (3). Redekop's overall argument is, first, that the phenomenon of Mennonites and art responded to a "crisis of representation" and, second, that "cultural identity is dialogical" (xv). The question is less about what a particular art form tells us, or what the artist intended, but how it is represented as Mennonite. Further,

ideas about Mennonites and art, and the art itself, are formed in multiple spaces—“contact zones”—where insider and outsider meet and dialogue.

The art forms highlighted in the study are music, visual art, and creative writing, with brief forays into photography, film, theatre, and dance, media that scholarship on Mennonites has rarely brought together for collective analysis. The Low German dialect itself, appearing as metaphor and story throughout the book, becomes an art form as well. The individuals she writes about are artists “who happen to be Mennonite” (xxv), not to be confused with the label “Mennonite artists.” Yet many of the artists she references in detail or in passing have tangential relationships with a Mennonite ancestry. Most of her examples are at least originally from Manitoba, Redekop’s home province, and have ancestry in the Dutch/Russian Mennonite ethnic stream.

The specific artists and works of art that Redekop chooses to analyze are intriguing. Some are very well known, while others are less so. Some are self-declared Mennonites, others are so-called “outsiders” creating works of art that represent Mennonites, while others exist in the liminal space between insider and outsider whether by choice or positioning. To her credit, Redekop does not fuss too much about defining her usage of the label Mennonite since she describes such a community as “a floating imaginary construct” (xvi). Her personal ambivalence about that identity helps to situate her as both critic and actor in her narrative.

Following an extensive “On Beginnings” introductory section, in which Redekop posits theories about the historic roots of the “flowering” of Mennonite artforms, *Making Believe* has six chapters divided in two parts. Part 1, “Reframing Old Questions” explores the issue of representation using the diverse examples of Peter Power’s photography of Old Order Mennonites, Glen Gould’s radio documentary *Quiet in the Land* (and the choreography which followed), and the (in)famous feature film *Stellet Licht* by Carlos Reygadas. The latter stars well-known Canadian writer of Mennonite background Miriam Toews, whose work appears throughout *Making Believe*. Redekop discusses the role of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia in works by Paul Hiebert and John Weier, Redekop’s choices revealing her own nostalgia for the Canadian prairie that pervades the book.

Part 2, “Witnessing a New Phenomenon” begins with a survey of the “literary bumper crop” (165) of the Mennonite artistic renaissance. Of necessity, Redekop begins with author Rudy Wiebe, who is from Alberta, but then quickly focuses on the poetry, novels, and life writing published by and about Mennonites in Manitoba in the 1980s and 1990s. The abundance of poetry, in particular, challenged the “centuries-old dominance of

Mennonite historical and theological narratives” as well as “the literalism of fundamentalist thinking” (180). Poets become tricksters as they disassemble Mennonite identities.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus primarily on music and visual art respectively. Musical representations include hymn singing, choral conducting, radio broadcasting, and composition. All of these are created and shared in the “muddled world where cultures meet and clash” (219). Numerous forms of music-making are explored through the pervasive Mennonite filter of what is “worldly” (traditionally spurned by Mennonites) and what is “not of the this world” (214). The *Mennonite Piano Concerto* by Victor Davies receives a fair bit of attention, although more space for Mennonite composers would have been welcome. Chapter 6, in which Redekop dialogues with artists such as Wanda Koop, Aganetha Dyck, and Gathie Falk, is perhaps the most interesting given the lack of scholarly attention to Mennonite visual artists. Her notion of iconoclasm seems an appropriate way to describe the role of visual art as perhaps the most discomfiting of art forms for Mennonites.

Certain features of the book reveal its strengths and also present some challenges for the reader. One aspect of *Making Believe* that I really like is its auto-ethnographic approach; throughout, Redekop is an actor in the story about which she writes. The reader is frequently invited into her ancestral and familial world that is Mennonite. Yet on occasion, the personal poses a potential barrier for readers, as in the frequency of Low German phrases and stories and in the book’s two interludes in which Redekop herself is a clown; the purpose of including the latter was unclear to me. And while the array of thinkers and writers referenced throughout the book is impressive and often delightful and illuminating, at times it induces a dizzy feeling as one jumps from one cultural and philosophical allusion to the next.

Redekop acknowledges in her opening “Apologia” that the majority of her readers will be Mennonite. As one of those, I nevertheless found an abundance of insight and wisdom in this book that will compel me to re-think my own scholarship and identity. This book itself—its careful structure, its beautiful prose, its deep thought, its exceptional imagination, its insert of colour photos—is a work of art in itself. The reader should enter into dialogue with this in mind.

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