

What prompted you to write?

Bryson: Of course there were writers who influenced me (and inspired me), but I didn't start writing because I was inspired by someone, nor can I identify something that prompted me to write the book. From experience, I'd say artists are born—there is no prompting required, only nurturing, the decision to honour those gifts and the will to struggle against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune (How do I make money writing? How do I balance the creative impulse with the realities of practical living?).

Cameron: Certainly not the paycheck! It's what I have always wanted to do, love doing, and feel compelled to do. Things "come together" when I write: my intellect, emotions, experiences of physical sensation, dreams and day-dreams. I write to access that balance, to explore it further. Even the effort writing requires balances me: I play, have fun, take myself on an adventure; and I focus, discipline, and challenge myself.... Writing my way into and through something on the page allows the same transformation to happen for me beyond the page. I regard publishing as a form of "Sharing Circle Ceremony." I bring what I have to say in the moment to the circle.

How is your Mennonite background/identity reflected in your writing?

Bryson: In a literal sense, it isn't. The word "Mennonite" is nowhere in the book. God gets a reference, however, and a number of the stories talk about the need people feel for transcendent experiences (though in my stories transcendence is always fleeting, always in the past, and therefore connected with nostalgia...).

In a thematic sense, Anabaptist metaphors and communal anxieties are all through the stories.... My stories are urban and contemporary, most "Mennonite" images are rural and pastoral. I have sometimes called my book a critique of idealism. My stories are literary...which to me means they should be judged against something like William Faulkner's adage about literature: stories about "the human heart in conflict with itself."

Words from new writers

Two young writers published their first books last fall. Thirteen Shades of Black and White (Turnstone) is a collection of short stories by Michael Bryson of Danforth Mennonite Church in Toronto. Holding the Dark (The Muses' Company) is poetry by Melanic Camcron of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario. Melanie currently lives in Winnipeg. Canadian Mennonite asked them about writing and faith.

Mennonite theology, it seems to me, moves in a different direction; namely, towards perfection. The Anabaptists... have struggled for centuries with an idealist cultural heritage which in my opinion often perverts what it means to be a human being; that is, the perpetual process of growing through the different stages of life.... The subtext of many of the Mennonite narratives (in the *Canadian Mennonite*, for example) is anxiety about how both individuals and the community are slipping away from some undefined ideal of perfection. I think this is deeply dysfunctional. I wouldn't say that my stories demonstrate this dysfunction, but they are influenced by my thinking about this subject.

Cameron: I suppose [my Mennonite identity] must be reflected there somehow, because the contexts we're raised in inevitably contribute to shaping our perceptions. But I'm not sure how to discuss my "Mennonite background/identity" as severed from

the rest of my "background/identity." Honestly, I've learned that the less I concern myself with both this question, and the next question, the more I can write genuinely, rather than to external expectations.

How has your book been received?

Bryson: The book has been reviewed three times so far.... Each of these reviews is mixed—some of the stories are really good, some less satisfying.... Comments from friends are similar.

Cameron: It's much too early to speculate on the book's "public" reception.... Meanwhile, responses from Mennos have ranged from very positive, to cautious. Mennos tend to comment on their perceptions of the book's autobiography: readers will misapprehend what I enjoy most if they approach *Holding the Dark* as though it were a literal or lineal document.

Bryson commented further on whether artists are born or made:

Mennonite writers like Patrick Friesen and di brandt have made it a part of their work to talk about how they struggled with their self-identity as artists, citing expectations placed on them by their Mennonite communities as one obstacle they had to overcome. This has not been part of my growth as a writer...but I do see within the larger Mennonite community a suspicion of artists as artists....

There is also confusion about art as cultural artefact. Mennonites place high value on cultural artefacts (say, quilting) but get mighty confused about art.

Is that because artefacts reinforce the perceived ideal structures of the community, while art is by its nature difficult, challenging, destabilizing, and therefore imperfect? I would argue, of course, that art is necessary to the long-term survival of the community, because organisms that do not evolve die....

The changes need to happen through negotiation (criticism) which recognizes both mutual imperfections and the shining light of God in every individual, the 13 shades of black and white, the ambiguous world we all live in, which is the centre of our celebrations and the foundation of our hope.