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## Review of *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest* By Rudy Wiebe

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*Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest.* By Rudy Wiebe. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2006. ix + 391 pp. Maps, photographs. \$34.95 cloth, \$22.00 paper.

Rudy Wiebe, author of nine novels and three collections of stories as well as numerous other works, is best known for his historical fiction—particularly for novels featuring Canada's Native peoples. A first-generation Canadian whose German-speaking Mennonite parents fled Stalinist Ukraine in 1929 and then homesteaded in Saskatchewan, Wiebe has tended to set his fiction on the prairies or in the north. Appalled by the prevailing view that the Plains were "empty" before European immigrants arrived, he has consistently worked to document the repressed history of Canada. His writing has focused not only on the First Nations of his native land, however, but also on his own immigrant people.

Wiebe's considerable power is evident in all his writing, but arguably it is in his more autobiographically-infused work—especially his Mennonite fiction—that his readers might find a

distinctly generous, lyrical tone of voice. It is this voice, so beautifully sustained, so intimate and engaging, that draws readers into *Of This Earth*.

Forty-four years after the publication of his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), which revealed enough autobiographical detail to provoke a hostile reception from members of his community, Wiebe has returned to his childhood among the Mennonites. Invoking in this poignant, humorous, and utterly compelling memoir the innocent perspective of a young boy—and drawing upon family stories, diaries, and memory-laden photographs—Wiebe intrigues and deeply satisfies his reader. His authorial self-reflexive musings throughout add a level of reflection that never rudely interrupts but richly enhances this narrative of a solitary and imaginative child.

Wiebe's memoir, set in "the boreal forest that wraps itself like an immense muffler around the shoulders of North America," foregrounds the life of his family, which in 1933 homesteaded on 160 acres of aspen, poplar, birch, spruce, esker knolls, and shallow sloughs ("You can hear trembling aspen leaves shiver. At the slightest breeze the dark green leaves flicker into their underside paleness and a sigh like great sorrow flows through the forest"). If the book's external landscape is this Saskatchewan geography, the internal landscape is language. Wiebe's native German and Low German, along with English, provide the matrix within which, as a child, he was able to make sense of the natural world and of the routine and ceremonial dynamics of community life.

This is no mere documentary. Wiebe's beautifully-wrought prose will delight any reader who follows both the trajectory and the texture of this child's coming to consciousness in a socially and emotionally complex world. The wonderful story ends with the family's move to another physical and spiritual geography: southern Alberta, a "seemingly endless land forever open to the visitation of wind."

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