

This Hidden Thing

by Dora Dueck

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Reviewed by Faith Johnston

It is January, 1927. Nineteen-year-old Maria Klassen stands on the doorstep of a home in Winnipeg's posh Crescentwood area and is told that she is not wanted. Yes, the family does need a maid, but one who speaks English.

How appropriate that this absorbing, finely crafted novel about one immigrant's experience begins with the words (translated for Maria by her uncle, Peter) "You're not wanted."

But Maria is determined. The welfare of her whole family depends on her getting the job. Finally the woman of the house, Edith Lowry, invites the pair in, and Maria's life in Canada begins. She will work for the Lowrys for five years. It is those years of intense and painful learning that form the heart of the novel.

Only three days after disembarking from the train in Winnipeg, this eldest daughter in a Mennonite family of nine finds herself immersed in a new language, a new family, and a job that demands physical stamina. At the end of each day, when she climbs the back stairs from the kitchen to the maid's room, English words are still running through her head, "but she was so completely finished by evening, she didn't have the power to rein them in or mentally fasten them onto the objects around her" (29).

Occasionally, Maria does have reason to rejoice – she has cooked an excellent soup, she has used a new word correctly – but she has no one with whom to share her happiness. She learns early and painfully that "her duty wasn't to initiate: it was to receive the moods Mrs. Lowry projected . . ." (34). And her own family is so far away. She is determined not to complain to them for they are living much harder lives in rural Manitoba. So begins Maria's secret life. She knows the lives of her siblings but they have very little idea of her life. She thinks of the biblical Joseph who "*knew his brethren but they knew him not*" (31).

After five years Maria returns to the family to help raise her youngest siblings after her mother's death. By this time her father is making his living on an acreage in the new suburb of North Kildonan. Maria's skills in English and her knowledge of English ways contribute to the family's growing prosperity. She is an intelligent, sophisticated, reliable woman who keeps her distance from all her contemporaries. Even her sisters find her a somewhat stern and controlling character. It is not surprising. She will never be able to tell them one of the most important parts of her life. While working for the Lowrys, she fell in love with their oldest son and gave birth to a baby boy.

The experience of a woman who comes of age as a servant and remains single the rest of her life is not the usual stuff of fiction. But for the times, such a life was not unusual, and neither was the concealment of a pregnancy. Dora Dueck's background as a historian researching Russian Mennonite immigration to Winnipeg, and her use of others' research on the lives of domestic servants in Winnipeg have no doubt contributed to the realistic feel of the novel and its characters. But it takes a great deal of dedicated imagination to create a convincing fictional world. In the acknowledgements Dueck says the book has taken a long time to write. She has lived with these characters for many

years, and it shows in the full, empathetic portraits, particularly of Maria, but also of others. There are no stock characters here, no shortcuts.

Dora Duek's first novel, *Under the Still Standing Sun* (1989), was set in a Mennonite community in Paraguay in the 1930s. *This Hidden Thing* won the McNally Robinson Manitoba Book of the Year Award in 2010. ❧

Faith Johnston is author of *A Great Restlessness*, the true story of a British immigrant who arrived in Canada in January 1927.

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