

Collected Stories, 1955–2010

by Rudy Wiebe

Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2010, ISBN 978-088864-540-1, 529 pp., \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In this collection, the reader is offered a tapestry of Rudy Wiebe's writing over the past half century. Wiebe remarks in his preface that he has largely left these stories "as they were first published, their styles, attitudes, opinions left intact," for to "contemporize" them, to his thinking, "would only falsify whatever merit they have" (xii). Although he refrains from correcting an error in the well-known story "Where is the Voice Coming From?" in which the historical Edmund Grundy's grave, contrary to the story's account, may actually be found outside the Anglican Church ruins in Duck Lake, in "Broken Arm" he adds a paragraph about the brutal inter-tribal battle since this background "draw[s] the tragic irony of a magnificent life," namely that of the chief Broken Arm, "into its full, completed circle"(xiii). Adding an amusing authenticity to his "teenage gothic" (513) high-school story "Predestined," for which he won a prize, Wiebe even leaves the spelling mistakes intact ("cemetary" and "recieve," 514, 515).

One of my favourite stories is "Broken Arm," which introduces this tome with the entrance of the great warrior of that name who comes in the shadow of his also wise father. Perhaps Wiebe's most notable strength and contribution to postmodern fiction is his attendance to voice and point of view, and even here in the reported words of Broken Arm's father, this magnanimity of spirit breathes through the words:

Is a man's true greatness to be sung in the scalp dance? What do your powerful eyes, what do your travels to unnamable places help if you see only what everyone sees, that war is glory, that killing is revenge? You have always seen different, why can't you see different about being a brave man? (5).

In this way, Broken Arm's father makes a plea for his son to look beyond accepted social values with their inborn prejudices. When the young warrior's father is killed in a raid by a neighbouring tribe, however, the young chief is expected to retaliate. Broken Arm's revenge takes a curious turn when the man who killed his father is finally brought to justice before him. By now having reached maturity, Broken Arm requests that the guilty warrior wear his own clothes (inherited from his father) and ride his horse (also inherited from his father), for the murderer to identify with his own position and to understand loss. The young warrior is amply punished by the superstition that, by impersonating the old chief, he will bring back the ghost of Broken Arm's father. The story develops in perfect increments, our appreciation of Broken Arm's transformation from vainglorious and irascible youth to sometimes volatile husband and warrior with a troubled conscience, finally to reach his father's magnanimous stature by the end of the story.

Point of view similarly becomes a shaping feature in the other stories. Whereas in "Watch for two Coyotes, Crossing," we witness events through the historical landscape painter Paul Kane's eyes, in "Games for Victoria," we see the world through the eyes of a young man turned soldier eager to go

to war and prove his manhood. However, in “The Naming of Albert Johnson,” in which the historical outlaw’s elusiveness as he escaped the RCMP is profiled, point of view is more obscure and puzzling, no doubt to mimic the Scandinavian’s backwards-snowshoeing tactics.

Point of view is used both to reveal character and to allow us to see history from the inside, as it were. William Butler in “Games for Victoria” writes a letter in which he offers his opinion of the Louis Riel – Thomas Scott scandal:

With all the vanity of the Indian peeping out, Riel began to imagine himself a very great personage indeed and within a few months the Provisional Government went from violence to pillage to robbery, all accompanied by that debauchery which ever follows the mendicant suddenly placed in equestrian position. Finally on March 4, 1870, disregarding appeals for mercy and with many accessories of the coldest cruelty, they shot to death a helpless Canadian named Thomas Scott. Such an act bears only one name – the red name of murder – and in April 1870, the Colonial Office advised the Canadian Government to send an armed force against the malcontents of Red River. (77)

While Butler’s account may seem to present the Canadian governing establishment’s point of view at this time, his impression of Riel appears so real that we, as readers, may even come to reconsider the recent adjustment of historical accounts. In favouring the victim, as has become the trend in contemporary Canadian history books, perhaps we have overcompensated in our defence of Riel over the supposedly irascible and drunken young Scott (in my Grade 5 history book, he was presented as middle-aged), and perhaps tweak it, just a little, in favour of what might indeed have been an alternative scapegoat in Thomas Scott.

Although many of Wiebe’s short stories are set in an historical context, a few, including “Did Jesus Ever Laugh,” have a modern setting. Here, point of view shapes the story and gives it life and authenticity. In the climactic scene, we watch the stalker and future murderer face his victim in the young woman and make her wait in an agony of fear for his next move. He maintains control over her by frightening her:

Oh, the waiting I’ve done, sitting, my body going dead sitting, or sometimes walking a little, waiting outside all those buildings in a place the size of Edmonton, seven hundred thousand friendly souls and how can it be I couldn’t, didn’t find anyone, no one after you, and you – ah-h-h – just sitting here across from her with her slim legs decently together and skirt over her knees even when everything has exploded as it were in her usual life, to sit there and face me again with a dark solid face like rock and I don’t have to begin anything. She will keep facing me I know without a words and her face set until I’m good and ready to start. When I’m ready. (284)

The murderer’s enjoyment of his perverse control is further enforced through his remark, “There is, of course, no reason in the world why a human being should laugh.” With this crazed lucidity, the reader’s impression that the speaker is insane and a calculating murderer who premeditates his crime is confirmed.

Wiebe also plays with the format of the memoir and personal essay, at times coming up with a fictional hybrid. The story, as editor Thomas Wharton astutely points out in his introduction, often becomes a journey or quest in Wiebe’s fiction, and accordingly, an archaeological object like the “Old Man Buffalo” (a meteorite displayed on the title page for Part One) becomes an almost iconic image for the usurped identity of the First Nation People while the name of the meteorite is prosaically

renamed by the white man as “Iron Creek Meteorite” (364). Using a first-person narrator, Wiebe begins “In the Shadow of a Rock” most skillfully, requiring a suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader so that he or she may disassociate herself/himself from a particular heritage that threatens to obscure all possibility of empathy and identification with this First Nation people:

And sometimes, on these prairie high places, people found erratics, great wandering rocks carried and left by the wayward ice. To locate the roving animals they needed to eat and live, aboriginal people often waited in the shadow of these rocks, waited for days and nights, waited for weeks, felt the grainy, massive boulders against their sinking bodies as air and land and stone slowly, steadily, materialized them into their prayer. And eventually, always, the animals came. A gift to be thankfully, skillfully taken. (359)

The story ends with an appeal to “listen,” with that word linguistically affiliated with the seemingly oppositional word, “silence” (366). This piece of creative nonfiction becomes a powerful injunction to all peoples to empathize with another way of life and survival.

This collection reveals the strength of Wiebe’s fiction in the way it elicits empathy in the reader and invites discovery of layers of truth through voice and point of view, as well as an almost religious, certainly spiritual, way of looking at nature and her effects. It provides a profile of Wiebe’s work from the beginning of his writing career to the present time, and will prove invaluable for students of his work. Its illustrations of Old Man Buffalo and First Nation art are a treasure to hold and to look at. ♡

Gillian Harding-Russell has published three poetry collections, most recently *I forgot to tell you* (Thistledown Press, 2007). The chapbooks *Poems for the Summer Solstice* (Leaf Press) and *Stories of Snow* (Alfred Gustav Press) will appear in 2012.

Buy *Collected Stories, 1955–2010* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
<http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9780888645401/rudy-wiebe/rudy-wiebe?blnBKM=1>