Review of Jessica Penner, *Shaken in the Water* (Tripp City, OH: Foxhead Books, 2013). $18.00, 384 pages.

The setting and characters of Jessica Penner's new novel will undoubtedly feel familiar to many Mennonite readers. *Shaken in the Water* follows the lives of a Mennonite family through three generations spanning the 20th century; set in Kansas, the characters move through a small town that seems, at times, like it could be almost any rural Mennonite community dotting the Midwest.

And yet, many details in Penner's excellent work will seem unfamiliar and perhaps unsettling: A woman is swept into a wintertime tornado and emerges, unscathed save for the removal of her head covering. A tiger moves uncharacteristically through a backyard, hemmed in by a prosaic fence over which children can crawl. Voices echo in odd places, sometimes dismaying those who hear.

In other words, *Shaken in the Water* should not be considered just another Mennonite novel, set in a Mennonite town, with Mennonite characters. Instead, Penner uses the conventions of magical realism—in which elements of fantasy are woven into an otherwise realistic narrative—to provide readers a unique story, one that is well worth reading. The use of magical realism in the text opens us up new ways of seeing the world; and so, while some readers might find the narrative challenging because of its more magical elements, the challenges are ultimately rewarding, for Penner asks us to consider what is reality and what is not, and whether our faith—in things seen and unseen—is really what we believe it to be.

Shaken in the Water begins on the wedding night of Agnes and Peter Harder in 1923, when Peter discovers Agnes's birthmark, etched across her back. Agnes had

been born in 1903 with the mark, called Tieja Kjoaw—Tiger Scar—in the Molotschna Colony from which Agnes's ancestors had immigrated. At her birth, the midwife claims the Tiger's Scar can be read as "a mark of possible greatness or the mark of disaster," a prophecy to which the narrative returns often. What of Agnes's progenitors? Are they marked by greatness—or are their lives wrought by disaster? At times, the line between these two poles seems exceedingly thin.

From this opening, the novel moves back and forth through time. The narrative arc spans from Agnes's birth in 1903 to the uncomfortable return of Agnes's granddaughter, Minerva, from the city to her home in 2007. Chapters trace events in Agnes's childhood and her marriage to Peter; her friendship to Nora, Peter's sister; Agnes's own children, struggling to comprehend their place in a world that seems both stable and unchanging, but also unpredictable.

For while life in a small Mennonite farming town appears constant and peaceful, Penner's novel suggests that disquiet thrums beneath the calm. Agnes's daughter, Huldah, is shunned by her church and family because she feels called to forsake the covering, to wear her hair down; she lives the rest of her life by herself in town, away from the family, though she has for company a tiger, presumably connected to (perhaps even embodying) Nora, Agnes's girlhood friend.

And more: There are also hints that Peter's relationship to Nora is more than merely fraternal. Agnes's grandson cannot bear the rejection he feels from his father—and from an in-town girl—because he is different than other teenage boys. Marital relationships are tested, and sometimes found wanting. Characters seek forgiveness, again and again, from each other and from God. Their acts of penance

seem odd, yet also oddly familiar, at least in emotional intensity and in the deep desire to somehow be made whole. The characters' longing, to be loved by God and each other, ground them, making them seem entirely real, even in the midst of the novel's fantastical moments.

Though Mennonites have historically been called to set themselves apart from the world and its cares, Penner's novel suggests that, despite their insularity—despite the strict rules that would separate a daughter from her family over a head covering, for example—Mennonites are no different than the world around them: flawed, broken, often unable to clearly hear God's voice, or that of the Other. Thus, even though Penner situates her novel in a Mennonite community and explores themes most familiar to Mennonites, *Shaken in the Water* is also about the human condition, and the ways Mennonites themselves are set apart by their faith and drawn together by their fallibility.

And what of the Voice, echoing through the pages of Penner's novel? The meaning of the Voice seems puzzling at times, and Penner calls upon the reader to decide exactly who—or what—the Voice is. During an interview last year with Julia Spicher Kasdorf, Penner affirmed that Christ "is already in us," and that the Voice calling throughout her novel is both inside and outside the hearer. Potentially, then, when the novel's characters respond to the Voice, they are responding to Christ speaking within them, and also calling them to something beyond themselves.

The novel's ending offers no easy reconciliation for those broken, and the novel's resolution is not necessarily a happy one. But, Penner suggests, wholeness may come only when someone recognizes that of the holy in another: in a daughter,

shunned by the church; in a son, destroying his body because of a ragged soul; in a father, seeking penance for deeds that haunt him. Only when these characters find human connection, a connection to the divine, do we as readers feel some limited peace for the characters and their often muddled lives.

Shaken in the Water is an excellent debut novel. Because the setting and characters will indeed be familiar to many Mennonite readers, those who have not yet encountered a work of magical realism might find Penner's novel—and its unfamiliar elements—a great place to start.

Melanie Springer Mock, September 28, 2014