

# **The Salvation of Yasch Siemens by Armin Wiebe Turnstone Press 1984, 2004 A Reading Guide**

## **Introduction**

*The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* is a comic *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel that has been enjoyed by readers young and old for the past 20 years. Reading the novel is rumoured to have saved souls, induced labour in an overdue pregnancy, and persuaded a major business to stay in Manitoba. The book has been carried in brown paper bags, sold from under counters, and holds an unofficial record for the most copies of a novel sold in a hardware store. Professors have taught the novel in university literature courses and scholars have devoted chapters of their doctoral dissertations to this novel. *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* has been analyzed in terms of the rhetoric of plain style, myth and ritual, and Bakhtin's carnival theory, among others. But mostly, readers have doubled over with laughter, wept, and revelled in the sensuous, earthy world created by language both strange and familiar at the same time.

## **Why study *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*?**

- The novel is a prairie classic. Before the novels of David Bergen and Miriam Toews and the poetry of Di Brandt, there was *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*.
- The novel can be read on a number of levels.
- The novel is an example of “ethnic” writing that transcends its origins without surrendering to the “mainstream”.
- In a time when most pop culture stories come from New York or Los Angeles, this novel encourages readers to value their own backgrounds and experiences.
- The novel harnesses vernacular language effectively for literary purposes. “It [the language of *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*] is a new language, as fresh and irreverant—which is to say as profoundly comic and deeply serious—as Shakespeare’s idiom must have been in his day.” E.F. Dyck
- The novel presents readers with two rollicking, unconventional characters, Yasch and Oata, who face up to the things “an honest man can’t lie about.”
- The novel makes readers laugh.
- The novel takes readers on a spiritual journey.

## **Does the reader have to be Mennonite to enjoy *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*?**

No. Readers of a variety of backgrounds have enjoyed reading *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* and appreciated the musical quality the author brings to the English language through the his use of Flat German words and sentence structures. The term “Mennonite” is not used in the novel at all. The problems and situations the main character, Yasch, struggles with are very human problems and situations that have universal relevance.

## The Language of Yasch Siemens

*The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* is a first person narrative written in a made-for-Yasch Siemens dialect which consists of a liberal sprinkling of *Plautdietsch* or Flat German words and expression as well as an underlying rhythm of German sentence structures corrupted by the life and language of the Canadian prairies. The language of the novel is the language of the main character Yasch Siemens, a dow-nix hired man born on the wrong side of the double dike. In a note in *Prairie Fire* the author wrote:

I lived the first 18 years of my life in southern Manitoba between the Red River and the Pembina Hills, after the war and before the hippies. Most of my published fiction to date is set in that time and place when we still spoke Low German a lot in a way that the kids following us did not. This time and place is now largely an unreliable region of my memory where my characters stumble through their lives. Conscious attempts to write "Mennonite" tend to result in writer's block.

The writing of *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* began with a playful sentence: "So goes it then always." This is a direct translation of a common Low German expression. Once this sentence was put down on paper I had to find out who said it. In the process of tracking down this voice I heard the crows outside the barn and saw Muttachi sitting on the milking stool in her Robin Hood sack dress and her manure-spattered four-buckles and it wasn't long before the voice had been traced to the loft of the tiny house to the rumpled bed of that dow-nix Yasch. From that point the language of the book became the language of Yasch, the narrator, and was largely governed by his character and personality. Certainly, the Flat German of Yasch is related to the Low German of southern Manitoba, and he uses many of the actual words found in that dialect. But in essence the language of Yasch is a buggering up of both English and Low German. And this buggering up of the language is at least a semi-conscious pose on Yasch's part. He knows better. After all, he took Grade 10 correspondence and passed everything except algebra not. Would a Mennonite do something like that? (Armin Wiebe writing in *Prairie Fire* Vol. 11, No. 2 Summer 1990)

How you might approach the language of *Yasch Siemens* in the classroom

- Read the opening chapter aloud with the students.
- Sound the strange words out using English phonetics.
- Invite students to define the strange words using their context.
- Have students read passages aloud.
- Compare the language of *Yasch Siemens* to samples from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, *Star Trek*'s Klingon, or Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

### Helpful resources:

- "An Illiterate Hitchhiker's Guide to the Gutenthal Galaxy" is a glossary found at the back of Armin Wiebe's novel *The Second Coming of Yeeat Shpanst* that covers the vocabulary of all three of his Gutenthal novels.
- The sound pages on Armin Wiebe's Wiebe Site <http://www.arminwiebe.ca>

## Study suggestions

### Possible comparisons with other novels:

*The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* and *A Complicated Kindness* by Miriam Toews

*The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* and *A Year of Lesser* by David Bergen

*The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* and *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger

*The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce

*The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* and *Portnoy's Complaint* by Phillip Roth

*The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* and *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain

### Discussion/ essay topics

- “We witness Oata in the process of changing from object to subject.” Magdalene Redekop  
Trace the process of how Oata changes from object to subject in the novel.
- “Where the salvation of Yasch seems at first to hinge on an escape from Oata, it eventually turns on what he confronts in himself, his fear of his own free will.” Magdalene Redekop  
How accurate a description of the novel is this?
- “We have to be brought down, it seems, to dung and death in order to contemplate change.”  
Magdalene Redekop How does *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* illustrate this statement?
- “Yasch is a fool, of course. Like the traditional fool of medieval carnivals, he is attached to his mother.” Magdalene Redekop Justify this statement with examples from *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*.
- Discuss *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* in terms of THE HERO'S JOURNEY as described by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers 2nd Edition*.
  1. Heroes are introduced in the ORDINARY WORLD, where
  2. they receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE.
  3. They are RELUCTANT at first or REFUSE THE CALL, but
  4. are encouraged by a MENTOR to
  5. CROSS THE FIRST THRESHOLD and enter the Special World where
  6. they encounter TESTS, ALLIES, AND ENEMIES.
  7. They APPROACH THE INMOST CAVE, crossing a second threshold
  8. where they endure the ORDEAL.
  9. They take possession of their REWARD and
  10. are pursued on THE ROAD BACK to the Ordinary World.
  11. They cross the third threshold, experience a RESURRECTION, and are transformed by the experience.
  12. They RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR, a boon or treasure to benefit the Ordinary World.

Another approach might be to discuss the novel in terms of a specific heroic myth or a contemporary work such as the Coen brothers' film *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

- Douglas Reimer has described *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* as an archetypal “quest for the father” novel. Could a case be made for this statement?
- “Some things an honest man can’t lie about.” How does Yasch live up to this maxim he states in Chapter 8?
- At an academic conference the author found that while men admired his creation of the character Yasch, women admired his creation of the character Oata. What qualities does each of the characters have which would appeal to their respective sexes?
- In Chapter 2, Yasch is dressed as a woman for the boys’ New Year’s Eve antics. Is there a thematic link to other events in the novel?
- Yasch frequently describes his experiences using imagery of vehicles and farm machinery. What major events are described using this imagery and how does this imagery serve the novel?

### **Critical writing about *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens***

Fay Lando, 'Review', *Canadian Book Review Annual*, 1985

Al Reimer, 'The Funny-Sad World of Yasch Siemens', *Mennonite Mirror*, May, 1984

Ron Friesen, 'Review' *NeWest Review*, September, 1984

Robert Kreider, 'Review', *Mennonite Life*, September, 1984

Ron Robinson, 'Less fertilizer, more weeding', *Winnipeg Sun*, April 22, 1984

Di Brandt, 'Review', *Mennonite Historian*, June, 1984

Paul Wilson, 'Review', *Books in Canada*, June/July, 1984

David Williamson, 'Comic novel totally satisfying', *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 21, 1984

Brian Geary, 'Wiebe novel deserves its popularity', *Pembina Times*,

John Parr, 'Delightfully funny first novel comes as a treat', *Toronto Star*, May 12, 1984

Margaret Loewen Reimer, 'Low German novel is a cultural treasure', *Mennonite Reporter*, November 12, 1984

### **Scholarly Writing**

Frank Michael Strauss, 'The Salvation of Yasch Siemens: A Second Reading', *Journal of Mennonite Studies* Vol. 7, 1989

Henry Wiebe, 'Myth, Ritual, and Language in Armin Wiebe's The Salvation of Yasch Siemens', *The New Quarterly* Vol. X, No. 1+2, Spring/Summer 1990.

E.F. Dyck, 'The Rhetoric of the Plain Style in Mennonite Writing', *The New Quarterly* Vol. X, No. 1+2, Spring/Summer 1990.

Magdalene Redekop, 'The Pickling of the Mennonite Madonna', *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*, edited by Hildi Froese Thiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe, Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1992 ISBN 0-88898-106-6

Douglas Reimer, *Surplus at the Border: Mennonite Writing in Canada* (Rudy Wiebe, Armin Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, Sandra Birdsell), Reimer, Douglas, Turnstone Press, 2002 ISBN 0-88801-275-6

To Write or to Belong: The Dilemma of Canadian Mennonite Story-Tellers (Writing, Belonging), Froese, Edna, 1996, PhD dissertation University of Saskatchewan.

Fragmented Identity: A Comparative Study of German Jewish and Canadian Mennonite Literature after World War II, Schroeder, Elfrieda Neufeld, 2001, PhD dissertation University of Waterloo

Separation from the world: postcolonial aspects of Mennonite/s writing in Western Canada by Amy D. Kroeker. Thesis (M.A.)--The University of Manitoba, 2001.

For more information about these theses:<http://amicus.nlc-bnc.ca/s4-bin/Main/RouteRqst>