

Omar Eby: A Tribute

CARROLL YODER

I first met Omar the year before I enrolled at Eastern Mennonite College in the pages of the 1957 *Shenandoah*, the college paper that he edited. Then from 1972 through 1999 we became close friends as colleagues at our alma mater. My course evaluations received a welcome boost when we team-taught courses like African Literature and Continental Fiction, thanks to Omar's careful planning, honest evaluation, and listening and discernment skills. As an oblivious optimist, I did not realize for a long time the extent of the inner conflict created by Omar's deep commitment to his family, his students, his writing, and his faith. No wonder life was not always easy for this conscientious perfectionist.

Four books in particular serve to remind us of Omar's accomplishments. In 1982 he received a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Virginia. There, under the tutelage of Peter Taylor and John Casey, he wrote a series of short stories, several of which served as the basis of his 1988 novel, *A Long Dry Season*. For the missionary Thomas Martin, grace comes through his wife and through the promise of the distant rains that will bring an end to his dry season. Family and faith are apparently reconciled. Not so for Omar, whose publication dry spell continued for fifteen years before Cascadia published a collection of essays titled *Markings My Own* (2003).

This spiritual memoir displays the full range of Omar's disciplined versatility. Seventy meditations, each confined to exactly three pages of text, guide us through the book of Mark. Is this a commentary? A personal journal? Literary criticism? A confession? Yes, no, and much more. What did it cost this lover of privacy and solitude to provide personal "soul food" for the masses? In her foreword, Lee Snyder describes the book as a "literary lover's feast" and provides a list of Omar's personae: author, Anabaptist, colleague, descendant, friend, horticulturist, grandparent, gourmand, teacher, mentor, missionary, music lover, parent, pilgrim, poet, seeker, sinner, and spouse. *The Boy & the Old Man*, which appeared in 2009, takes us back to Somalia, where Omar was a young missionary from 1957 to 1960. Here, in sixteen autobiographical essays, the old man judges the boy both severely and tenderly. I believe the essays represent Omar's greatest strengths as a writer. He steers clear of nostalgia and reminds us in a quotation that ". . . remembering a previous time and place with affection—indeed with

love—is a kind of wholesome suffering. . . .”¹ The discrepancy between memory and history prompts his question, “Might the memory of an incident recalled forty-five years later have an even greater truth than the bare historical record?”² No true writer would disagree.

A few more personal words for Omar. In all honesty, I wasn’t sure about *Mill Creek*, your most recent novel set in the context of a well-known Mennonite high school in eastern Pennsylvania. Would this coming-of-age novel succeed, given the fact that it was based so closely upon real events and real people, delineating so precisely the expressions of Mennonite conservatism of the 1950s? Could all of Arthur’s flamboyant nudity find its place among plain coats and carefully covered hair? Favorable reviews and readers’ testimonies show that you hit the sweet spot with your authentic recreation of the little world of Hagerstown and Lancaster.

Allow this evening’s audience to bear witness to the worth of your faith, work, and words. Accept without reservation God’s message for you, Omar: “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Al Reimer: A Tribute

RAYLENE HINZ-PENNER

I cringe today to read my review of Al Reimer’s best-selling Canadian historical novel, *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning*, which appeared 25 years ago in the June 1987 issue of *Mennonite Life*. I was ill-equipped to be a good reader of this groundbreaking novel, and my review was poorly written. Nonetheless, I returned to it to write this tribute, remembering what a profound education and reading experience Reimer’s book had been for me. I was in my early years of teaching contemporary American literature at Bethel (Kan.) College, which is why the review fell to me; thereafter I quit saying that I really had no interest in writing about or reading Mennonite literature. It was the first time I cared.

I immediately and intuitively recognized Reimer’s characters’ dilemmas—their angst and religious questions: “Perhaps our big mistake right from the start was to think we could live in our little world like

1. Omar Eby, *The Boy & the Old Man: Three Years in Somalia* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris, 2009), 10.

2. *Ibid.*, 88.