

Catch Me When I Fall

by Patricia Westerhof

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Reviewed by Dave Williamson

Toronto's Patricia Westerhof draws on her background – a Dutch Canadian community in rural Alberta – for her delightful first collection of short stories, *Catch Me When I Fall*. The title has its own charm: note the word *when* rather than *if*, nicely hinting at a predicament that each protagonist will face, while also suggesting the comfort of the Christian faith.

Each of the eleven stories takes place in Poplar Grove, Alberta, somewhere between Edmonton and Red Deer. The protagonists come from farming families that go regularly to church. The parents foster traditional values, but these are more and more being challenged by their children, in deed as well as in word.

Westerhof treats her material with a deft touch; she has an ability to show both sides of an issue with alacrity and understanding.

The people of Poplar Grove are not tolerant of pregnancy out of wedlock, and that is a calamity in two of the stories. In "You in Your Small Corner," Eustace faces two problems: not only has he made Naomi pregnant, Naomi is not of the same faith as he – she is Jewish. At the same time that Westerhof conveys Eustace's anxiety, she also makes the reader chuckle. Here's Eustace, believing Naomi could look like Humpty Dumpty in a few months: "Maybe more than a few – he was vague about the pace of pregnancy in humans, knew more about hogs and Holsteins than women in that department. Would Naomi stay enormous after the baby? He would be eighteen with a shapeless manatee of a wife. And a kid." (31)

In the story "Poplar Grove," the girl narrator is staying with the Van Dykes while her parents are away. While visiting her two younger brothers, who are staying with another family, the Veenstras, she learns of something that is troubling the Van Dykes. Because the story is told from Paula's point of view, that something – the Van Dykes' daughter's pregnancy – is not nearly as alarming as the news Paula's parents bring home, that her father has an offer from an Ontario university.

Virtually all the characters are treated sympathetically. In "How Lovely Are the Feet of Them," Eliza is literally afraid of fellow teacher Stan because of his militaristic approach to life and how he might be influencing the students. Halfway through the story, Westerhof shifts point of view from Eliza's to Stan's, and we see that he does have a heart – or is he simply planning to woo Eliza?

The first story, "Unfailing Mercies," sets the tone for the book, promising playfulness in the opening paragraphs, even when presenting a church full of devout Christians:

Gripping his new cordless microphone, the minister stood in front of the pulpit and hollered, "CHRIST ROSE FROM THE DEAD!" his voice as gleeful as if he had just won the Stanley Cup. "HOW DO WE KNOW? BECAUSE OF ALL THE PEOPLE WHO SAW HIM."

A lot of people believe they've seen Elvis too, Sarah thought, though her fellow congregants seemed rapt. (1)

"Holy Earth" applies gentle satire to a few contemporary preoccupations. Erin's brother Peter is getting married and Erin will be a bridesmaid, but she despairs about how she'll look, being 21 and overweight. Her mother is angry at Peter, who is such a fanatic about the environment, he refuses to send his grandmother an invitation because she'll have to travel by air – a terrible waste of fossil fuel.

All of Westerhof's considerable narrative skills are on display in "God's Laughter." Again with a just-right delicate touch, the author shows us twenty-ish Ruthie announcing to her parents Alida and Klaas that she is a lesbian. Klaas reacts:

"I hope you'll change your mind. Maybe see a different counsellor. Until then, we can't – you're not – we can't welcome you anymore." Ruthie's eyes, round with shock, met his. Klaas's chest hurt, and he kept his arms firmly crossed in front of it. Love the sinner; hate the sin, he told himself. "We just can't condone the lifestyle you're choosing. We're not comfortable with those ideas around here." (60)

This unfolds in a satisfying way as both an authentic real-life experience and a well-crafted story.

Catch Me When I Fall completely succeeds in its portrayal of a community whose parents are coming to grips with the fact that their children will leave their agrarian homes to make their way in the bigger, more complicated world. Patricia Westerhof's debut is impressive. ♡

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg novelist and reviewer.

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