

David Bergen, *See the Child*. (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1999). Paper, 234 pp. \$18.95.

Like the story of Job, Manitoba writer David Bergen's second novel poses the question, what does a good and prosperous man do if he loses what he most loves? As *See the Child* opens, Paul Unger, the second-generation owner of a profitable furniture store in the small town of Furst, answers a knocking at his door to learn that his teenaged son Stephen has been found dead in his neighbour's field, improbably drowned in the mud into which he has fallen on his way home drunk from a party. Unger's well-stocked world, which has seemed until now to be "innocent, as if this is how it was, is, and always will be," becomes "a swollen river with no means to reach the other side." In his grief and guilt, Unger turns away from his home, his work, his wife, his daughter, and his friends to live alone on his hobby beekeeping farm. There appears to be the possibility that Unger will find a way back to solid ground when Stephen's girlfriend Nicole returns to Furst with a child he claims as his grandson. But, while he opens his house and heart to Nicole and Sky, he must, finally, relinquish them, too.

Bergen explores Unger's situation through the traditional terms of tragedy, isolating one man—and this is very much a novel about a *man*—against implacable and impersonal forces, what Unger at one point calls the "awful symmetry" of the world. Less common is the nature of the loss Bergen takes as his subject. While many tragedies focus on the dying of personal power, the leaving of a lover, or even the passing of a parent, Bergen probes the bottomless depths of pain of a father mourning a son for whom he has failed to make the world safe.

The structure Bergen has chosen for his novel beautifully conveys the dissociative condition of grieving. Many sections begin with accounts or announcements of specific events—linear time continues to pass in the world around Paul Unger—and then spiral back through layers of memories, Unger's subjective sense of time. For the reader, it is difficult to construct more than a tenuous sense of the

timeline of the novel; a firm hold on the sequences of causes and effects by which we customarily anchor ourselves to normalcy give way here to the rhythms of commemoration.

Given the subject Bergen has chosen, one might expect rage or railing in his prose. But Bergen renders despair rather as a delicate and tender pain: Paul Unger feels the need and longing of his wife and daughter even as he moves away from them. Bergen explicitly contemplates and refuses the easy compensations of melodrama. In the sequence of the novel set in Montana, Unger identifies Nicole's new boyfriend Wyatt as the block to the return of his son's son. Unger briefly considers playing the role of rescuer and avenger of Nicole and Sky, going so far as to buy a gun to use against Wyatt. In the end, however, he buckles Sky carefully into the seat of Wyatt's truck, choosing the best possibility for the boy's safety over futile heroic gestures.

The large themes of Bergen's novel are inflected by the geographical and cultural landscape of small-town Manitoba. For example, when Unger first begins to search for his son, he reflects, ironically, that the "flat earth" of his world is "fully available and empty of surprises." The attention Bergen pays to the intricacies of beekeeping and the special pleasures of swimming in gravel pits places the novel, as well as pointing to its thematic concerns. It is clear that successful Mennonite businessmen like Unger and his father have considerable power and prestige in the town of Furth. Because of his position, for example, Unger knows that his behaviour and that of his family is the subject of interested conversation among his neighbours.

These circumstances supply the texture of Bergen's novel, but he does not write a Mennonite novel or even a novel about a Mennonite man in any obvious sense. Questions of church or cultural authority are absent from Unger's search to define "who he was and what he knew." When Pastor Herb reads a few verses from the Psalms and whispers a prayer, Unger can see only a dim reflection of his own eye in his coffee cup. In a scene that is repeated several times in the novel, Unger methodically scrapes from the beehives the propolis of previous years, the glue used by bees to stop up crevices in hives. The scene seems emblematic of Bergen's procedure as a writer: he too is concerned to write a novel that does not find formulaic answers to its difficult questions in established religious, cultural, or literary traditions.

Perhaps because Bergen eschews examination of Unger's Mennonitism, his frequent references to the ethnicity of the French people of the area are somewhat jarring. While both Nicole and Lise are complex characters, the fact is that both women and Daniel, who is also French Canadian, are represented as glibly promiscuous. Both Nicole and Lise have fathers who drink too much. Because ethnicity as a category is not interrogated here, these characterizations come uncomfortably close to stereotypes of the feckless ethnic other.

But, this is a novel that confirms Bergen as an accomplished and important writer. It is also a courageous book. Children, says Paul Unger, "work their way up to the heart" and then "they go away." There is no flinching here from the starkness of those terms. The biblical story of Job ends with full restoration: not only does

Job become twice as rich as he was before he was made a pawn in the contest between God and Satan, but a new set of seven sons and three daughters neatly replace those struck down at the beginning of his ordeal. In his extended meditation on inconsolable loss in this novel, David Bergen disputes the sufficiency of such a conclusion.

Mavis Reimer
University of Winnipeg