

Mennonite Weekly Review

Conflict grows from revival

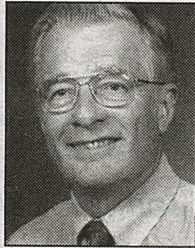
On my desk is a historical novel about church conflict and schism growing out of charismatic revivalism in the Lancaster Conference of eastern Pennsylvania in the 1950s: *He Flew Too High* by Ken Yoder Reed, published by WinePress Publishing, 2009, 350 pages, \$21.99.

Reed grew up in Lebanon County, Pa. The pastor of his home church left the conference, and his cousin led a schismatic group to Paraguay. "This is my boyhood world," says Reed. "It's the story I was born to tell."

The revival fires in Lancaster Conference began in June 1951, with what historian John Ruth called the "spectacular tent revival series" led by George R. Brunk II and his brother Lawrence. Ken Reed says that in his novel, which takes place in 1956, "all people and events are fictitious." He does not give the names of the actual historical revivalists or of the controlling traditionalist bishops.

In this respect, Reed's story is different from Sara Stambaugh's novel, *I Hear the Reaper's Song* (1984) about the earlier disruptive revival of the 1890s in the Lancaster Conference area. Stambaugh named names. She was quite judgmental about the "western revival preacher" Amos Wenger, who was so ready to consign to hell those who resisted his message.

Ken Reed is a good storyteller. His main character, Saul McNamara, is a former military man who finds a place in the Mennonite community with his testimony of conversion to Anabaptist non-resistance. Saul marries the bishop's daughter and begins teaching at the Mennonite college, but loses that job when it is learned that his wife was pregnant before



ON MY DESK

JAMES JUHNKE

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they were married.

Saul feels a powerful calling to preach but is denied by the traditional leadership selection process. He is eager to extricate himself from the farm, owned by his father-in-law, where his wife wants to make her home.

When manifestations of the Holy Spirit fall upon young people gathered at a winter youth camp, Saul and other spiritually revived folk begin a tumultuous journey that results in family conflict, vengeful betrayal, church schism, mental illness and a failed migration and settlement in British Honduras. The pain runs most deeply through the bishop's family. This book is as much about family and community as it is about one man who lost his way.

Reed fits the details of his story into an overarching frame derived from the classical myth of Icarus, a mythological character who escaped from prison on wings fashioned from wax. Icarus ignored his father's admonition not to fly too

close to the sun, lest the heat melt the wax. Overcome by the joy of flight, Icarus flew too high and plunged tragically into the sea. Icarus did not have a second chance. Will Saul McNamara survive his own plunge? If so, on what terms?

Reed's first historical novel, *Mennonite Soldier* (1974) effectively used the biblical story of the prodigal son as the frame to tell about the struggles of a Mennonite family in World War I. The author's decision to use a frame of classical tragedy for this second novel raises important critical literary issues. Is it possible convincingly to graft a Christian conclusion of forgiveness and hope onto a frame of pagan Greek tragedy?

The historical novels by Ken Yoder Reed and Sara Stambaugh constitute warnings against the excesses of religious enthusiasm — in the 1890s, the 1950s or any age. Both novels give us imaginative access to the environment of Pennsylvania Mennonitism. Both will be felt most deeply by readers who have personal experience with the harrowing tension between entrenched tradition and charismatic revival in times of social change.

He Flew Too High is available from Masthof Bookstore, 219 Mill Road, Morgantown, PA 19543; www.masthof.com; 610-286-0258.

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