

Tracing the scars of church schism in novel form

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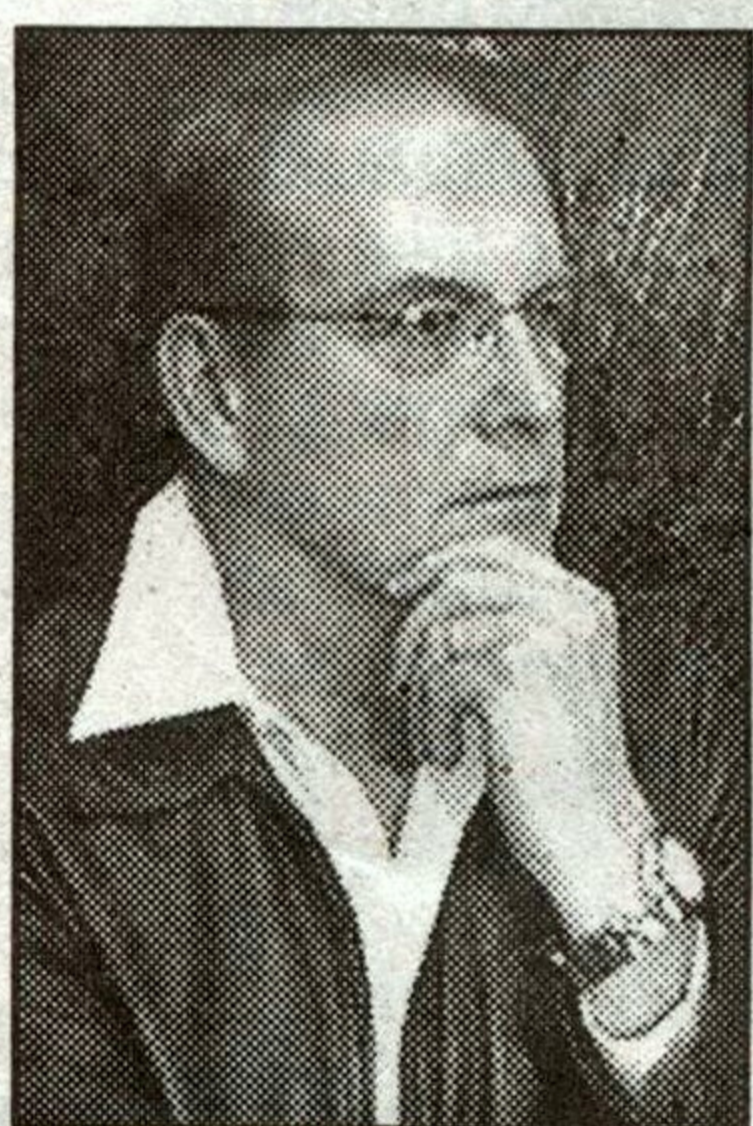
Church history and family heart-break can be read in every variation of buggy, black bumper and bonnet in the Plain community.

Author Ken Yoder Reed was a Lebanon County teen in the late 1960s, when "our pastor and a few other pastors left the Lancaster Mennonite Conference," he said in a telephone interview from his home in Milpitas, Calif.

"My cousin led a group to Paraguay ... seeking to establish a pure church. It did not turn out well," he said.

In fact, the Lancaster Mennonite High School graduate found it all "devastating."

Thirty years later, as a practicing Presbyterian, Reed has processed his experience of church schism into fiction. "He Flew Too High" has just been



Ken Yoder Reed

released by WinePress Publishing Group at \$21.99.

Reed cautions that the real issues and personalities are not those portrayed in his book. He writes that "any effort to find resemblances to living or once living

persons or actual historical events should be resisted."

Differences over television and plain clothes triggered that split, while charismatic revivalism, another divisive issue in the Mennonite church, creates the tension in his novel.

That novel, set in central Pennsylvania in the mid-1950s, tells the story of Saul McNamara, a Mennonite convert and former military man from the big city who marries a bishop's daughter. Saul feels "called" to preach

in the revivalist style, to ensure the people's spiritual purity and to save them from God's wrath.

The bishops, however, will not recognize his calling because it did not come from the traditional drawing of lots used to determine their preachers. Yet Saul knows of an instance in which the bishops bypassed the lot to select a preacher they preferred.

■ Referring to that scene in the book, Reed said, "If there's anything that drives disillusionment, it's hypocrisy," especially among "true believers" in any movement, religious or secular.

A convert "sees those original ideas, believes in them and want to use them as a platform," Reed said.

Saul, his brother-in-law who converted from the Amish faith, and a Mennonite bishop make the break with several hundred families following their lead. Repercussions include severed family ties, bankruptcy, mental illness, even death. Yet in the end there can still be forgiveness, healing.

The book's title comes from the legend of the flight-enamored Icarus, from Ovid's "Metamorphoses." He didn't take advice to keep to a middle course and was doomed.

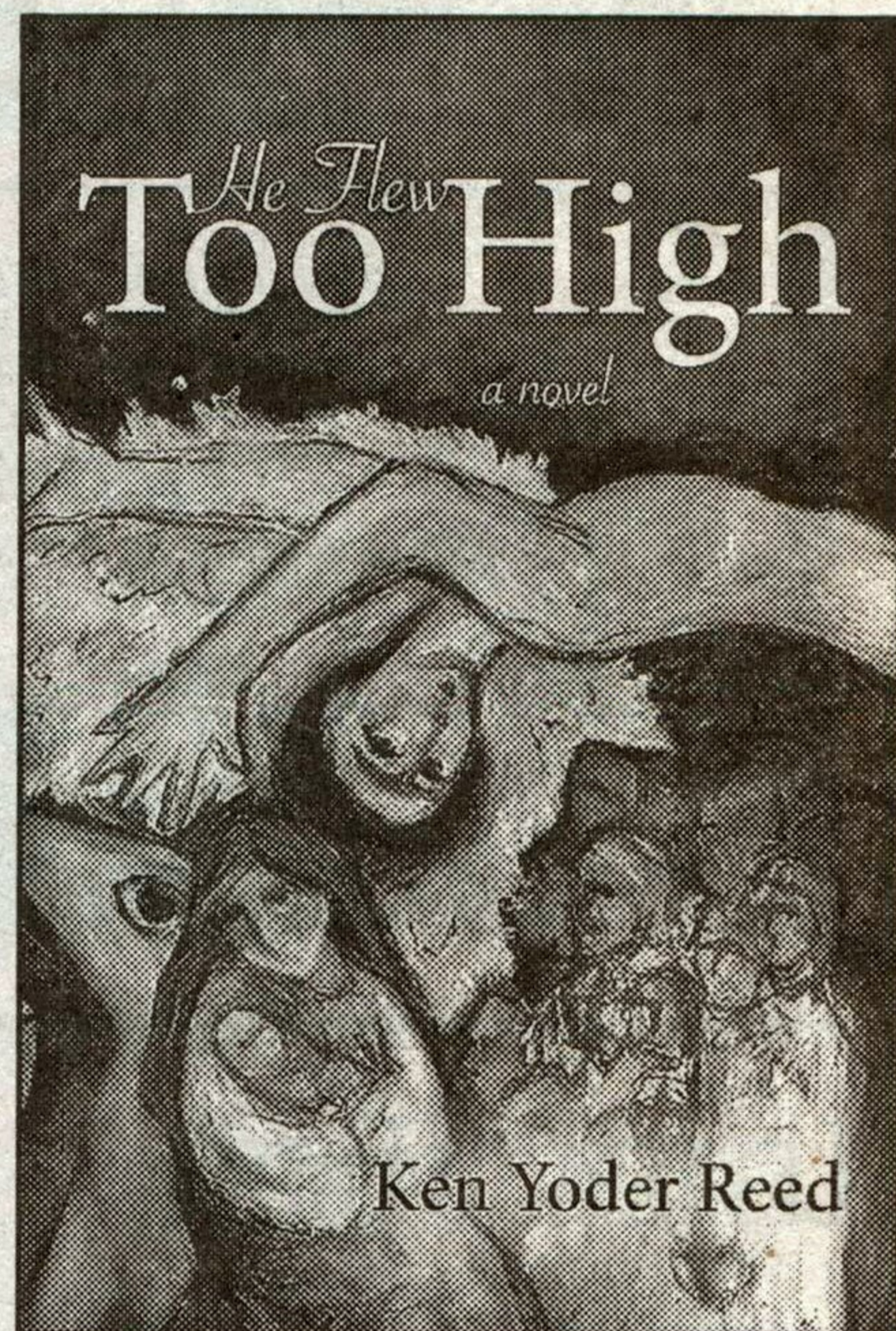
Those familiar with the Jesus story may suspect a religious reformer would be no more likely than the early aeronaut to embrace moderation. Doom? That may be the price of following conscience — or ego.

■ "It's not a 'Sound of Music' story," Reed says.

"Some people are going to be very upset. We never see ourselves as others see us." He thinks some will see it as "airing of dirty laundry."

He also hopes others will say, "From a Christian point of view, there has to be a way to work things out through discussion before we split."

Mennonite leader Dr. Myron Augsburger says the novel "lays bare the tensions that build when people confuse application with dogma." He called the book an "exposé of the



human elements that have confronted the church" from its earliest leaders to the "individualistic revivalists and controlling bishops in our own day" and recommends it.

Non-Mennonites will appreciate the novel for its fluid narrative and insight into the egos and the power struggles that can accompany religious zeal.

And then there's the writer's take on Plain passion, in which he describes Saul's encounter with wife Anna Mary in their home:

"The billow of warm sauerkraut-scented air reached him seconds before her body and sturdy thighs and breasts pressed against him. With that, his mission completely flushed away in a coursing of hot blood."

It makes a reader wonder: Would more sex mean less schism?

The author will read from and sign his 350-page novel 10 a.m.-noon Saturday, June 27, at Masthof Press, 219 Mill Road, Morgantown. He will also sign his first novel about World War I, "Mennonite Soldier," recently reissued through Masthof Press. For more information, log onto <http://kyreed.com>.