

## BOOK REVIEW

Hugh Cook. **Cracked Wheat and Other Stories.** Oakville and New York: Mosaic Press. 1985. 122 pages.

Reviewed by Arie Staal, Eastern Michigan University

The title of Hugh Cook's collection of short stories, **Cracked Wheat**, aptly suggests the homespun richness of Cook's fiction. The stories are a fine blend of Dutch Calvinism, Canadian prairie land, and epiphany.

That Cook is no stranger to Dutch Calvinism and rural settings is evident from "First Snow." He touches the Dutch Reformed tradition gently at its heart with his account of Dominee DeWolde, who is sent out on **huisbezoek** to search for an apparently errant member of his flock. Cook's sensitive depiction of this rural brand of Calvinism distances us only slightly from the harried pastor and his overly parochial church members.

The same Biblical emphasis is suggested in a number of the stories, including "Clown" with its somewhat foreign circus setting and "Cracked Wheat", the story from which the volume formally receives its title. In each case there are images of a pursuing figure who abruptly reminds the wayward protagonist of spiritual realities.

While "Clown" and "Cracked Wheat" present us with the motif of a watchful, insistent divinity, the epiphany of other protagonists is less definitive. In "Easter Lily", Terry knows only that he has "done something terrible." He knows that life has been cruel and that retaliation is somehow appropriate; beyond that his mind is little more than "a mad riot of colour, red, purple, blue, with jagged stabs of white."

A clearer epiphany, though not much more positive, is the one experienced by Baars in "Pisces". Gloomy after an unrewarding week of vacation, Baars is reeling in his fishing line when he suddenly loses his balance and is thrown into the "utter darkness" of the lake. Struggling in the water, he realizes he has

experienced the sound of God's creation in travail. His companion, Cragg, cannot share his insight and dismisses it as merely personal panic.

Cook's work is particularly deft when the epiphany is experienced by a child. In "The White Rabbit", Joop must come to terms not only with the death of his grandfather but also with the fact that he has strongly rejected his grandfather as a model. However, he sees that the violence he has associated with his grandfather in the slaughtering of a rabbit must be tempered by his grandfather's tremulous singing of Dutch psalms on his deathbed. He must struggle to reconcile the terrible beauty of the sight of his dying grandfather with the sound of slaughter he had experienced earlier.

Although Cook's writing is sprinkled lightly with Dutch colloquialisms and flavored by the conundrums of Dutch Calvinism, the stories embody a warmth and humanity that is not at all parochial. Their wit and wisdom transcend regional and national boundaries.