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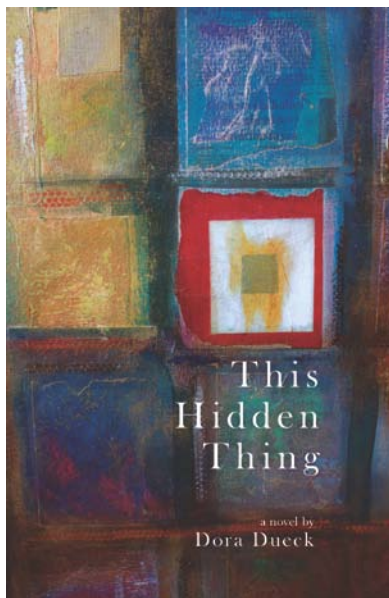
***This Hidden Thing***  
*A Novel by Dora Dueck*

CMU Press 2010 | 350 pages, paper | \$19.50  
ISBN 978-0-920718-86-5

*This Hidden Thing* tells the story of Maria Klassen, a deeply private, faithful, and stubborn Mennonite woman who immigrates to Winnipeg in the 1920s. This lyrical and moving novel offers one woman's compelling, ordinary, and surprising life.

**For more information about *This Hidden Thing*, or to request a review copy, contact:** Jonathan Dyck at [cmupress@cmu.ca](mailto:cmupress@cmu.ca) or 1-204-885-2565 ext. 659. A jpeg cover image of the book is available upon request.

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## *Endorsements*

“I never knew what the next page of *This Hidden Thing* would bring, never could guess what way the story would go, never imagined what the end would be for Maria, whom I had come to love so deeply.”

**Katherine Arnoldi**, author of *The Amazing True Story of a Teenage Single Mom* and *All Things Are Labor*

“Dora Dueck’s powerful and deeply engaging novel follows the fortunes of Maria Klassen, a young immigrant whose heart’s purest desires are in tension with domestic service, sexual passion, and the demands of family and church. Beautifully and intelligently written, the story transcends its Mennonite particulars to shed light on the universal and timeless struggles of the human spirit.”

**Sarah Klassen**, author of *A Feast of Longing* and *A Curious Beatitude*

“Dora Dueck tells a compelling woman’s story too often obscured by history. She inhabits her characters in such a way that the reader is drawn into a living, breathing world that lingers even after the covers of the book are closed. *This Hidden Thing* offers a worthy female, urban counterpart to Rudy Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.”

**Ann Hostetler**, author of *Empty Room with Light* and editor of *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*



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### *About the Author*

**Dora Dueck** is author of the novel *Under the Still Standing Sun* and co-editor of *Northern Lights: An Anthology of Contemporary Christian Writing in Canada*. Her stories have been featured on CBC Radio, and in journals such as *Room*, *Prairie Fire*, *Rhubarb*, and *Journal of Mennonite Studies*. She lives in Winnipeg.



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## *Press Release*

### CMU PRESS PUBLISHES NOVEL BY DORA DUECK

*Offers one woman's compelling, ordinary, and surprising life*

*For release May 6, 2010*

CMU PRESS is pleased to announce the publication of a new novel by Dora Dueck, *This Hidden Thing*. The book will be officially launched on May 19, 8 p.m. at McNally Robinson Booksellers.

Beginning in Winnipeg in the 1920s, *This Hidden Thing* tells the moving story of Maria Klassen, a newly landed Mennonite immigrant. Maria becomes a domestic for a prosperous Canadian family in order to support her family as they struggle to build a life for themselves on a farm near the town of Winkler.

“As I was writing Maria’s story, I thought of it as a way of expressing the immigrant experience,” Dueck reflects. “I think too that I’m always looking at how people, especially women, live their lives – as a way of navigating my own.”

Secrets are a major theme in the novel, but not necessarily in the way one might expect. As Dueck notes, the theme of “hiddenness” captures something of the Mennonite immigrant experience. “One of the hardest aspects about being a newcomer in another culture is not being ‘known.’” And for many Mennonite women, this sort of invisibility was already a fact of life. “Women did their theological work privately, and resistance to received wisdom, or knowledge against the grain as it were, would have to be held secretly, perhaps even subversively.” She continues, “In thinking about Maria’s decisions and use of silence, I’m hoping readers might be drawn to reflect on the ways in which secrets might be powerful, even life-giving, and the ways in which they destroy, or build one false wall after the other.”

Among Mennonite writers, Dora Dueck is somewhat unusual for her portrayal of individuals who have remained loyal to their communities of upbringing. Dueck’s previous novel, *Under the Still Standing Sun*, focussed on the pioneering story of Mennonites in the Chaco. According to Ann Hostetler, who is Professor of Creative Writing and Literature at Goshen College, *This Hidden Thing* “offers a worthy female, urban counterpart to Rudy Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.”

“But above all,” continues Hostetler, “this is a novel of character. Dora Dueck inhabits her characters in such a way that the reader is drawn into a living, breathing world that lingers even after the covers of the book are closed.”

Dueck comments: “In my two novels, the protagonists remain ‘insiders’ as it were. It means they reference and use the religious categories, language of the church, the piety, as they live within that world. I’ve tried to present them and that world with integrity, but it shouldn’t feel less complicated for all that.”

*This Hidden Thing* (CMU PRESS) is available from the CMU Bookstore, located at 500 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg. Contact [cmubookstore@cmu.ca](mailto:cmubookstore@cmu.ca); telephone 204.487.3300. The cost is \$19.50.

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## ***An excerpt from This Hidden Thing***

“You’re not wanted,” he told her that January morning in 1927 in a sideways voice, low and dull as if he’d expected it. “She says you’re too fresh off the train.”

“Not wanted?” Maria’s head jerked in Peter’s direction.

They were standing at the back steps of the large brick house, bending a little, like winter-ragged stalks of grass in a ditch, before the intense blue gaze of Edith Lowry, the woman of the house. They were waiting to get inside, to warm up, to have Maria start her employment.

“She has no idea what she’ll do,” he continued in the German dialect, “but she won’t hire a girl without some grasp of the language.”

Maria shuddered from astonishment, and the cold. She’d never been unwanted. And she’d never known such terrible chill, heavy and creeping, weighting her feet and hands like bricks. Such a deceptive, confusing cold, for the atmosphere was radiant, the sky bright and cloudless. Sunshine sparkled on the snow. It danced even in the shadow of the house where she and Peter waited. Danced in violet hues. But there was no warmth in it whatsoever.

Maria had no grasp of the English language. That was plain enough. She hadn’t understood a single word – besides her name – of the English back-and-forth between Peter and the woman looming above them. She was completely dependent on him to talk for her. She’d seen the welcome pale as the other two conversed; she’d heard the woman’s exclamations and the tinge of resentment in Peter’s replies. She’d sensed that something was wrong. But she hadn’t predicted this.

*Not wanted.*

The red brick house seemed to swell and reel while Peter elaborated the woman’s dilemmas: her other girl already gone, the housework urgent. And now the help she’d hung on for couldn’t speak for herself. Such a large and beautiful house, Maria was thinking, nearly bursting with its needs and significance, and its mistress filling the doorway of the porch that formed the back entrance, very fashionably dressed in a navy skirt and a light grey blouse with silver-streaked buttons, her auburn hair waved and piled and ornamented with silvery combs. Three steps up, and rigid, so dreadfully disappointed, she’d said, and Peter and Maria beneath her, both of them in brown – Peter’s pants and jacket frayed and stained, Maria’s coat misshapen from sleeping in it on their journey. They were immigrants.

Mennonite immigrants.

Maria had arrived in Winnipeg from Russia’s Crimea just three days ago, together with her parents Johann and Susanna Klassen and the rest of the family. Peter Konrad, her uncle, had come two years earlier. He was the only living sibling of Maria’s mother, and considerably younger – twenty-three – than she was, for a whole series of infants had died of various childhood diseases between them.

“I won’t call you uncle,” Maria, who was nineteen, had said that morning, setting out with him on the streetcar for this destination. “You’re not nearly old enough.” She’d felt brave and bold towards

him, towards her new Canadian life, and he'd pretended to be hurt and teased her that her mother wouldn't like it at all. But she could tell he didn't mind.

He was rotating his cap in his hands. He'd removed it eagerly, deferentially, just moments before and seemed unsure what to do with it next, as if too little time had elapsed for its return to his head. The woman's words came at him quickly, he continued to Maria in an undertone, but the point of them was this: she had no use for a girl who was ignorant of the language. As if, he added parenthetically, a servant will be called on to deliver speeches.

The woman implied that he'd intended to mislead her, Peter continued, but this wasn't true; he was sure he'd been clear enough when he spoke with her by the telephone. He'd said, "To answer your notice, my niece, Maria Klassen by name, will soon be here." He'd written what he planned to say before he called, and he stuck to it.

"Will soon be here" was clear enough, wasn't it, that his niece hadn't yet arrived? And surely the woman would know, listening to his accent, that she wouldn't be arriving from England or the United States of America. There was plenty of call for immigrant girls from all the European countries; how did the rest of them manage? The porters weren't offering English lessons under the station rotunda, were they? He'd arranged this date to bring her by, he said, and Mrs Lowry went on to inform him, friendly-like as if the matter was settled, that the pay would be ten dollars a month. Starting.

Maria feared Peter was saying too much. With the translation so much longer than the original, he would surely cause further offense. "Peter," she said, "I understand."

Peter seized the narrow front lip of his cap with one hand and the worn round back with the other and lifted it over his head. He pulled it down quickly, as if to shield himself from a blow.

"She won't have you," he repeated, stretching the flat cap tightly over his thick coppery hair. "Not straight off the train."

Peter lowered his arms and slid his hands into his pockets. He hauled up the scrap of paper he'd consulted at every corner since he and Maria stepped off the streetcar just past the bridge on Academy. He stared at it as if demanding advice. But of course there was nothing new on it, just the address in his large pencilled writing and a roughly sketched map of their way to the Lowrys. He stuffed it away again and bent to pick up Maria's cloth bag of belongings.

In the emotion of their reunion in the CPR station three days ago, Peter had been as large and impressive in Maria's eyes as the grand terminal itself with its massive columns, marble floors, and shafts of amber light pouring from its high windows upon the travelers milling about the central hall. He was someone to lean on, in spite of his being young, barely older than the oldest of the Klassen children, in spite of leaving on his own to Canada, unmarried. Unbaptized. Mother's voice had always seemed to be rubbing at a scar when she spoke of it, how he'd abandoned their elderly parents, only she and Peter still living among all the children her mother had birthed, and what could *she* do for the aging pair, so much distance between the Crimea and Molotschna?

Then Peter turned out to be their Joseph in the distant land of safety and provision, for Maria's father changed his mind about staying to endure the trials foisted on the Mennonites in Russia. The ailing parents died, one soon after the other, so Mother's mind was relieved on that particular problem. When they wrote Peter they were coming, he replied he would do everything he could to help and Mother felt her prayers had been answered, for it sounded as if her brother had reformed his ways.

They'd been leaning on him from afar, and once they arrived, they leaned on him some more. Father clasped his young brother-in-law with a heartiness that got lost in his throat and rendered him speechless. Mother hugged Peter and bawled, and their sobs and laughter mingled so long the rest of

the family grew embarrassed watching them and turned away. Brother and sister finally released their hold on each other and then everyone followed Peter to Immigration Hall.

They followed him meekly, willing to be contented with this new homeland of theirs, and with him, their brother, uncle, and guide. He knew the customs, the habits of the land. He knew English. He would tell them what everything meant, he would teach them what they needed to know. He popped hard lemon candies out of his pockets for the younger children like a Father Nikolaus and teased the older girls with compliments, and he clapped Gerhard on the shoulder as best friends do, and then he charmed his “dear dear sister,” Maria’s mother, by presenting her with a gift of perfume in a tiny oval bottle. He amazed them all.

Now Maria realized Peter wasn’t that far past stepping off the station platform himself. She heard the gap between his English and the woman’s, his speech like a long day of planting potatoes, a trudge from one hole to the next, and hers brisk and expressive as if its back had never ached.

Then somewhere in the neighbourhood, church bells tolled. The sudden sound startled her, its tones so round and crisp and beautiful, but resolute too, almost stern in the cold bright air. *Not wanted?* Maria was aware of her immigrant brownness, the drab deportment of flight, of poverty, and she hated it. But hadn’t they also been prosperous once, not so long ago, before everything in Russia was turned on its head by the Great War and the Revolution? And wasn’t it true – and not to be dismissed – that God brought them out of it all? And wasn’t she the second of seven, and the oldest daughter, with all the competence and affection that went along with that, with all the careful pride her parents had bestowed on her? She was loved. She’d been praised for her looks, her skills, her intelligence.

She couldn’t just return, trudge back through the maze of streets they’d walked to this house, ride east along the route just taken west, watch the knot of her family that tightened as the streetcar tore her away from them loosen and fall open again, worry sliding over Mother’s face like a veil, Father solemn but puzzled, the younger children mobbing her with their questions about why she’d been refused. Maria didn’t want to work out but what choice did she have? Both she and her older brother Gerhard needed to find employment, and possibly Susanna – the sister next to her – as well. It was a momentous thing to start over, establish a family as large as theirs, pay off the travel debt. They all felt the responsibility.

Maria’s feet tormented her with their hope of warmth in the house, behind the scowling and resistant Mrs Lowry. They were desperate to thaw and grow placid with heat, and then to get to work. Maria despised her thin, brown boots.

She grabbed Peter’s sleeve. She pulled until he straightened. “Tell her I learn quickly,” she commanded in a rush of air. “Tell her it won’t take me long with the language. Say we’re very, very sorry about the misunderstanding. Tell her I’m the oldest girl. Of us seven children. That I know how to work. That I’ve also been to school. I can’t go back. Father and Mother are expecting me to work.”

“You’ve been plenty rich,” he muttered.

There was no time for anything but “Peter!” in dismay, and “Start then!”

He cleared his throat, removed his cap, addressed Mrs Lowry again.

When he stopped, Maria said, “Did you tell her everything? That I learn quickly?”

“You don’t know the language.”

“Tell her I’m good at learning language!” There’d been a shift in Mrs Lowry’s demeanour, Maria was sure of it. “Say the same things over and over until she agrees. I’m not going back!”

Peter plodded through some more English sentences.

“Keep insisting,” Maria said. “Repeat yourself.”



Then she saw Mrs Lowry's body ripple in the cold, saw her give in. The English woman motioned for Peter and Maria to follow her and Maria leapt to obey, up the wooden steps, through the unheated back porch with its low roof and its windows arched with frost, through a second door and into a spacious, modern kitchen, Peter hurrying after her with her bag, his speech trailing to a halt. She didn't know whether he got around to mentioning she was good at languages or not. She had no proof of it, of course, but she would make it true, and therefore not a lie.

Maria found the kitchen warm and tidy, not chaotic as she'd been led to believe. Her feet thawed and tingled while Peter and Mrs Lowry reviewed the arrangements. The woman's manner hadn't softened, but she agreed to hire Maria. On a trial basis, Peter informed her in German. If she did well, she could stay.

From the novel *This Hidden Thing* by Dora Dueck. *This Hidden Thing* (CMU PRESS) is available from the CMU Bookstore, located at 500 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg. Contact [cmubookstore@cmu.ca](mailto:cmubookstore@cmu.ca); telephone 204.487.3300. The cost is \$19.50.

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