Chapter VI

Other Novels: Different Forms of Oppression

We have been, so far, trying to explicate the minority concerns of Wiebe in his four major novels which are saturated and overflowing with his sympathies for the voiceless. The present chapter will give an overview of the remaining novels—First and Vital Candle, The Mad Trapper, My Lovely Enemy and A Discovery of Strangers—so as to demonstrate that Wiebe’s concern for the voiceless minorities is not totally forgotten even in his ‘non-minority fiction.’

**FIRST AND VITAL CANDLE**

First and Vital Candle, perhaps the least known of Wiebe’s novels, published in 1966 was not reprinted until 1979. W.J. Keith notes that the original reviews were “mixed and, although often respectful, never enthusiastic” (Epic Fiction 28). First and Vital Candle is thematically akin to Peace Shall Destroy Many. Abe Ross, the central character here, is Thom Wiens’ shadow figure. Whereas Thom is preoccupied with doubt, Abe is struggling with religious faith and acceptance. Both long for an elusive peace, but are forced to acknowledge the violence within themselves. Both are dissatisfied with mere-existence and are in search for a set of values that can not only be admired but also lived (Keith, Epic Fiction 29).

The structure of the novel is rather simple. It is divided into seven parts. The odd-numbered parts are told by a third person
narrator limited to Abe's consciousness. The even-numbered parts, however, consist of first person flashbacks, and that too of Abe Ross. Thus the whole story centres around Abe Ross. He fled from his vindictive father Adam and was at Arctic for twelve years with Eskimos working for a private company. Then he came to Winnipeg for one year. And then he took up the job with Frobisher company and moved to Frozen Lake in northern Ontario, the homeland of Ojibwa Indians. There he had to confront the evil of his competitor, Sig Bjornesen. But at the same time he befriended Joshua and Lena Bishop, a non-sectarian missionary couple and devout Christians who really loved the Ojibwa Indians and worked for their well-being, and also Sally Howell, another true Christian, who came there as a teacher with whom later Abe fell in love. But tragically she died in a flood and he was left alone to wrestle with his faith and life.

In First and Vital Candle the minority concerns of Wiebe are evident in his treatment of Eskimos and Ojibwa. Part Two sets forth a grim picture of the Eskimo community in the Arctic. This part, devoted to Oolulik, later published by Wiebe as a separate short story under the title "Oolulik" in his Where Is the Voice Coming From? and later included in his collection River of Stone, is "a moving account of survival and the failure to survive, of the inadequacy of white values, including religious values, in a grim and alien environment" (Keith, Epic Fiction 32). Wiebe shows that as the white man invades their land, the deer leave and the Eskimo starves. It works at two levels:
commercial and religious. In the first level, as Oolulik says: “When the white man came to the people with guns and oil for heating, it was almost as if we no longer needed shamans or taboo for we could hunt the deer wherever we wished, from afar” (82); the commercial avarice of the white resulted in over-hunting which resulted in the extinction of deer and the deer people. In the second level, as Oolulik says: “Then the missionary came and told us of Jesus and we listened and soon our old beliefs seemed of little use for us to live” (FVC 82); the replacement of religion brought about a dangerous shift in value system. As Susan Whaley notes, “their beliefs in the spirits who rule the natural world have been annihilated by the white man and replaced with words and rituals that even he does not believe in” (“Rudy Wiebe” 332). The end result is “they no longer keep the taboo of not killing more than can be eaten” (82). Horst Jeffer, the Manager of Frobisher in Winnipeg, in his friendly talk with Abe remarks of the plight of Eskimo:

His religion, once part of his daily hunting and resting, is fixed up by reading in the Black Book in the morning and holding prayer meetings once in a while and especially the two times a year the churchman can make it around and remind you of all the rules and baptise the children and give the communion. No song-cousins, no drum dances, no communal justice for murderers because human life is so sacred the Mounties will get you sure and send you where
you’ll never see your people again. Then comes the long darkness and guns are useless because there are no animals. You can’t try to appease spirits because there aren’t supposed to be any. You pray to Jesus because as the churchmen plainly show he takes mighty good care of them that talk about him most. But no animals come. In what state of blessedness do you end then? (91)

The shift in religious beliefs destroyed the traditional taboos regarding hunting. Oolulik laments: “There is nothing left to believe. The deer and the people are gone” (82). Wiebe tactfully makes a scathing comment through the mouth of Oolulik: “The missionaries tell us that we must believe other things, and the white men do not even believe what the white missionary says. We have seen them in Baker Lake; many never go to church, and yet they are fat and warm and never hungry. We believed and prayed, and see —” (82). And so she sings:

Eyaya – eya
Where have gone the deer,
And the people of the deer?
Eyaya – eya. (82)

By this song of mourning with its haunting simplicity Oolulik banishes the formalized incantations of white man’s religion. But it was too late. They were stricken by utter poverty and were isolated which even forced some of them to eat their own children leaving behind only some bones (75). Oolulik was a fervent Christian and her husband,
Itooi, was the church catechist for the band. Her brother-in-law, Ukwa, “big simply child-like man who could not hunt very well” (79), but depended on Itooi for food, in utter poverty became mad and killed Itooi and his elder daughter. Then for Oolulik, “There was only one law left her: survival” (79). She pulled a thong taut around Ukwa’s neck and killed him. Oolulik, then, with her ten year old son, Mala, and her baby on her back, left the place despite the severe winter snowstorm. Mala was too weak and after one hour he collapsed and died. Even after that she proceeded with her little boy. Abe Ross, on his attempts to save the isolated Eskimos, found her, sheltered her in a snow igloo; but her baby died after three days. Then Abe searched out Ukwa’s wife and two daughters who were unaware of the family’s plight and were waiting for death by hunger. By that time the plane with RCMP arrived for their rescue. However, the greatest of the tragedy is that Oolulik was arrested by the RCMP for murdering insane Ukwa who had killed her husband and her elder daughter. But she hanged herself the first night in jail. “She too had gone away” (84) as she had wished: “The deer are gone and the people of deer are gone. I also wish to go away” (FVC 83). Through this story of Oolulik, Wiebe shows how the white law, insensitive to the basic human instinct of survival and inadequate in an alien environment, brings about the extinction of a minority band. Again, while Abe attempts to explain the nature of Eskimo life at a fashionable party of the supposedly educated and enlightened white group in Winnipeg, they “can only respond
with superficial clichés about the primitive and a taste for sexual
innuendo," (Keith, Epic Fiction 32), which is not in difference with
Wiebe’s own view. Eskimos had rigid taboos with regard to sex, but
had certain traditions with regard to trading wives because of the land
and the particular situations they lived in. The white man’s curiosity
in their life style is “not humane, only sexually snoopy” (FVC 28).
However, besides the cultural, commercial and religious subjugation
of the white, the voice of the Eskimo comes out through Wiebe’s
narration of Oolulik’s story.

Abe Ross visits Louis Fiel’s tomb (45) which foreshadows his
later involvement with the native Indians. He reached Frozen Lake
as the store manager of Frobisher company. Abe Ross represents
a modern man – he ran away from his vindictive father and the
restiveness of a narrow and empty extreme Presbyterian home and
had no tolerance for the platitudes of Christian orthodoxy: “... the
gibberish from precisely acted ritual to shapeless hallelujah-amen-ism,
from idiotic appeals of emotion to as idiotic screams, with all the
innumerable gradients of emotional and mental atrophy and massage
between ...” (93). Such was when he went to Arctic and no different
as he moved to Frozen Lake. But Josh Bishop could recognize the
good-man in Abe. Josh says: “You’re too human despite your logic,
and you do some warm, illogical things ... you’re kind and thoughtful
– a good man and I thank God every day for that” (FVC 173).
However Abe encountered two extreme forces at Frozen Lake:
the demonic Bjornesen and the angelic missionary couple, Joshua and Lena Bishop.

Bjornesen, an Icelander, but born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, represents the corrupt commercial value system of the white. He is an independent trader living with an Indian woman, but childless. He speaks Ojibwa fluently; takes advantage of their superstitious beliefs and threatens them with his curses; sells yeast for home brewing and corrupts the Indians with drinking sessions, and gets all the best of furs from them at the lowest price. Kekekose, patriarch of the Crane family and the only remaining conjuror among the Frozen Lake Ojibwa, and Harry Sturgeon, another Ojibwa, protested against Bjornesen. Bjornesen, using all the Ojibwa curse formulas, cursed Harry and he became sick and slowly died, and Kekekose’s wife also became paralyzed. Josh couldn’t but comment: “It takes an educated man to be less human than a heathen . . . Thinking he can logically explain everything that happens” (145). Joshua Bishop represents the religious values of Wiebe himself. Joshua is portrayed as “just a decent quiet kinda guy. Him and his wife pretty well live with the Indians, in their own house but there’s Indians runnin’ through it all the time and stayin’ to eat. Any other preachers you see up here keep them out like flies” (104). He started a winter school for them. His own words describe his missionary work:

What we are doing now is showing them what a Christ-follower lives like – at least we’re trying. It’s a hard way to
live, and nobody ever levered anybody into it. And when, if ever, they understand that to follow Christ is the only way, they'll come. And Bjornesen will be finished and he'll be the first to know it. And maybe Frobisher will be finished too. (FVC 246)

Abe aligned with Joshua Bishop and Sally Howell, the teacher, on humanistic and moral grounds, though he couldn't accept their religious stand. However, they stood together for the Indian community. Slowly he was attracted to Sally and fell in love with her. She started to inflame the little spiritual fire that was in Abe's heart. Here the significance of the title of the novel is evident. The line, "Mend first and vital candle in close heart's vault" from Gerard Manly Hopkins' sonnet, "The Candle Indoors" (printed in the back cover page of the novel) "alludes to the presence of a living flame in the depths of the self" (Keith, Epic Fiction 35). Sally Howell, for whom Abe comes to feel a love that proves the existence of such a flame within him, uses the image while describing her own conversion:

It's more like a small flame starting which you can't snub and that flame is Jesus Christ, in person. His realness isn't of your doing or imagining. It's an act of grace, complete irrefutable grace from God catching fire in you, and it's real. (290)

Ultimately, Abe comes to recognize that for him God may be working through Sally: "He understood that this spot [Sally's grave] would never again be of absolute importance to him because all that she had been and promised to be was flickering, alive in him" (FVC 354).
Keith sees this novel as a book about change (Epic Fiction 34). Kekekose “found strength to change” (352); James Sturgeon came to know of change through Joshua Bishop (FVC 326). Abe also changes in the course of the novel. There is an indication that the demonic Bjornesen even changes as he comes forward to join the rescue team to save Sally Howell from the floods.

What emerges from Wiebe’s writing here is that an ideal Indian Community existed at Frozen Lake before the arrival of Bjornesen: “Before Bjornesen came here with his yeast there was never any need for arrests” (208), and Sally testifies: “I think they love their children more than most whites I met teaching” (207). What then she wants of them is to “get their human dignity back . . . An understanding of themselves as physical human beings, with mental powers for rational thought” (209). Her dream is proved to be fruitful as Violet, the Ojibwa girl, at the end of the novel takes a decision: “I want to be a teacher, like her [Sally] . . . I want to go out, to high school, and – the other school and come back and teach” (FVC 353). Wiebe sees the salvation of natives coming from themselves.

**The Mad Trapper**

Wiebe’s novella, The Mad Trapper, published in 1980, is the story of the Rat River trapper Albert Johnson. The novel is a linear, fast-paced narrative depicting a series of confrontations between the RCMP and the madman who refuses to be named. Once he is labelled Albert Johnson, he leads the Mounties on an incredible chase over
impossible terrain, killing as he goes. With the exception of a few perceptive reviews such as those of Howells and Keith, this fictional version of the pursuit of Johnson across the Canadian Arctic’s frozen tundra in the early 1930’s, has received undeservedly short shrift, ranging from R.P. Bilan’s dismissal of it as a minor work – despite his concession that it is “a skilfully told narrative with the power totally to engross and engage the reader” (“Letters in Canada” 15) – to William French’s failure to see why Wiebe bothered to write it at all (“Review” 12). And Jeffrey even judges it as simply “disappointing” (“Lost Voice?” 114).

Albert Johnson (who is, significantly, misnamed) appears from nowhere, builds a cabin beside the Rat River. The RCMP comes to question him about a sprung trap line, but he neither opens the door nor answers them. From there begins a long and tough confrontation and chase for the next six weeks (from December 28, 1931 to February 17, 1932) during which he leads the Mounties on an unimaginable manhunt in severe winter blizzard and kills two RCMP before being killed. It is for the first time in history that the RCMP uses radio and plane for a manhunt, only to discover, at the end, that he is not Albert Johnson, and his identity is unknown even today.

Wiebe has already made this actual manhunt the theme of his short story, “The Naming of Albert Johnson,” included in the collection, Where Is the Voice Coming From? Both in this short story and in the novella, The Mad Trapper, Wiebe has radically altered
many of the historical facts unlike in his other historical fiction, which
infuriated Frank Hersey, the last survivor of the party that hunted
down Albert Johnson in 1932, to condemn this novella as “inaccurate
and ridiculous” (qtd. in Keith's Review of *The Mad Trapper* 101).
Nancy Baily in her article “Imaginative and Historical Truth in Wiebe's
*The Mad Trapper*” points out the instances where Wiebe substitutes
imaginative fact for history in *The Mad Trapper*. The most important
deviation from history is Wiebe’s developing the RCMP Edgar Spike
Millen into a central figure. In actuality, Millen was shot dead by
Johnson on January 29, 1932. Wiebe substitutes a fictional RCMP
Paul Thompson for that occasion and has Millen survive until February
17 when he can come face to face with Johnson at the climax. Keith
justifies this change to history on the ground that “the changes are
made not because of ignorance but for reasons that are primarily
structural and artistic. Wiebe is creating, not reporting” (Review 102).
Howells also justifies the change to history saying that it “is another
way of showing what the imagination has made of Johnson, and
how the psychological truth not available from historical fact may be
apprehended through fiction” (“Silence in Rudy Wiebe's *The Mad
Trapper*” 367).

John Jennings severely criticizes Wiebe saying “the entire
treatment of the plot does a great disservice to the facts of the hunt”
(87). History sees Johnson as a malevolent being, a threat to the
community, for whose riddance police and people, Indians and Whites
stood together. And so Jennings asks: “Can legitimate literary license extend to the creation of character and plot which bears so little relation to reality?” (87), and he even ridicules: “Wiebe’s final shoot-out between Constable Millen and Johnson is pure formula grade B Hollywood” (88). But at the same time Jennings is aware of the reason why Wiebe has utterly contrived the Mad Trapper story: “Here Wiebe is bringing to the novel his pet theme of compassion and understanding for the underdog and minorities” (88). And we see in the novel, Wiebe’s Johnson won’t kill anyone unless cornered and pushed too hard by overbearing authority. Johnson continually spares the good Mountie Millen’s life until the final unavoidable showdown. Johnson once said to the Indian William Nersyoo: “I never bother anybody . . . If they don’t bother me” (53). When the RCMP came to question Johnson for the sprung trap, there was no clear evidence that it was he who did it. It was only from the evidence of snowshoe tracks that Nersyoo guessed Johnson had sprung the trap and argued: “One trap today, two tomorrow . . .” (58). But Johnson did not comply to give an explanation to the RCMP Spike Millen and Alfred King. So they secured a search warrant from Inspector Eames to “Break in and search, as necessary” (MT 66). With this warrant, as they tried too much to push him out, Johnson fired and wounded King. With this started the whole range of terrible fight and chase. The RCMP blew up his cabin with dynamite. But Johnson escaped. They started
chasing him. At one point, when the RCMP Paul Thompson cornered him, he shot Thompson dead. And at the end of six weeks when there was no way of escape for him and was surrounded by the RCMP on all sides with the plane above, he started firing recklessly and killed Spike Millen, and himself fell dead with a barrage of bullets from the RCMP, bringing an end to the manhunt. Wiebe’s Johnson shoots only when he is pushed too hard by the all powerful authority. When an individual or a minority is pushed too hard it is normal that they react violently. John Jennings makes also a brief study on Trapper, Thomas York’s novel on the same theme, and comments: “Johnson becomes the shining beacon of individualism and defiance of oppressive authority” (89).

Wiebe further develops this point by portraying Millen, one of the Mounties, humane as he detests what the force is doing to someone who only shot a Mountie because he was pushed too hard when he just wanted to be left alone. Millen throughout the book tries to touch Johnson’s humanity, but the policy of the RCMP makes it impossible. While Constable Alfred King values the strict discipline of police, Millen values much the humaneness needed for police. Once he says to King, “If you can’t have dignity while being friendly too, what the world good are you as a policeman?” (15). When King and Millen come to Johnson’s cabin for the first time for enquiry, King wants forceful entry: “Let’s kick the damn door down” (61). But Millen wants dialogue:
You have to talk a little Johnson... You can’t just refuse... that’s what makes people human – they talk to each other. It makes us different from animals. Animals either leave each other alone, up north anyway, or they kill each other. The Eskimos told me that long ago, when I first got here. ‘If we couldn’t talk and dance and sing,’ they said one winter when we’d seen dancing about four days straight, ‘we wouldn’t be people any more. The land and the long darkness is too much here.’ And they’re right, you know, they’re right. (MT 64)

Even after Johnson wounding King, Millen is hopeful and resists violence back: “I’m telling you, I know exactly what I did wrong! Don’t make it even worse now doing again what I did. I can talk him out of there” (MT 81). Millen trusts in talk.

Through the talks of people in a bar Wiebe sheds light into the probable causes that might have made Johnson introvert and cherish suppressed feelings of hatred and anger towards overbearing authority:

“Johnson probably lost his farm,” the bartender said to the lean man, “something like that in this goddamn depression.”

“Sure,” the lean man said too loudly, “and I bet his wife and kids burned up in the farmhouse fire, I just bet, some son-of-a-bitching thing like that and the cops, they’re after him now, they can’t leave him alone, oh no.” (99)
The letters to editors of newspapers showed the anger of the people against the RCMP force: "Stop hounding the poor Mad Trapper, leave him alone . . . there's enough government interference in everything . . ." (MT 107).

At the climax of the manhunt Millen and Johnson stood face to face with rifles raised in their hands and "so it was more important than ever they speak, that they say such words to each other that would hold them in their humanity . . ." (183). But a tense situation, vibrant with violence, brooded over them ready to explode:

But they were too far apart to really see what those opposite eyes could have told them, what the bodies forced for forty-nine days through brush and ravine and river and mountain by those indomitable minds could have explained, because there was Hersey screaming "Spike," in one direction, the plane coming from the air in the other, and behind, at the broad invisible bend of the river, dogs were barking: Eames and his men rushing relentlessly up the track that led all the way back through the mountains to that canyon . . . would ever stop what was going to happen here. Had to happen. (184-85)

Talk and dialogue crumbled down at the rushing forth of force and violence; "Johnson's rifle swung up and so did Millen's. The shots sounded like one" (MT 184).
Inspector Eames searched Johnson's pocket and jerked out a piece of paper, "... break in and search as necessary," the original search warrant issued by him (MT 188). The "break in and search" by a fully equipped and armed force on an individual proved at the end futile and unnecessary and that brought only tragedies. Howell comments that "Johnson's physical body may be violated – just as his cabin was blown up – but the mystery of his selfhood cannot be broken into" ("Silence" 310). The final shock to the police and the onlookers is that "Johnson" is not the man's name. Wiebe stresses: "he was – is forever unnamed" ("The Death and Life of Albert Johnson" 243). The identity of Johnson remains even now a riddle. He can be any oppressed person or minority. His "twisted snarled face" (MT 189) remains for ever a mocking reprimand to the ever increasing onslaught of the majority and the powerful over the minority and the powerless. And Wiebe is more than happy to write: "For me, the essential Johnson in those six weeks becomes a numinous lodestone shining pure as ice through the gathered horror of his ultimate snarl" ("The Death and Life of Albert Johnson" 246).

Another interesting thing, in this context, that deserves our special attention is that Wiebe's compassion for Johnson forces him to portray Millen slowly assuming the identity of Johnson. Millen takes in some of Johnson's distinguishing characteristics. Keith, in her Review, notes:

Wiebe achieves this effect by subtly repeating a word or a phrase originally used of one man when describing the other.
Each tends to “explode” in “rage” or “fury” (all important, recurring words in this book). If Johnson is “the mad trapper,” Millen is “Arctic crazy,” half mad himself from chasing that devil. (102-103)

Millen even gets an uncanny insight into the outlaw’s mind. There comes a point, indeed, in which it seems as if Millen “were reading Johnson out of the very air they were breathing” (MT 166). There is ironical anticipation of this identification in Millen’s question, when the two branches of pursuit stumble upon one another and he is mistaken for Johnson, “Do I look that much like Johnson?” (MT 115). ‘Hero’ and ‘Villain’ are not that dissimilar. As Millen becomes Johnson, he comes to share with him a stature that O’Hagan has likened to Greek tragedy. O’Hagan’s epigram on Johnson is quoted with admiration by Wiebe in his essay on “The Death and Life of Albert Johnson” which could equally apply to Millen: “Like a figure in Greek tragedy, Albert Johnson was doomed and, like that classic figure, sundered by his fate from those about him, he was at last alone upon the stage, the shadows closing in upon him – a man against the world and against himself, one who chose to die and yet, until his last breath, fought to live” (233-34). Millen has become a “desperate character,” as Eames has described Johnson. And Wiebe quotes O’Hagan’s comment in the same essay: “The root of the adjective is the same as that of the Spanish, ‘desesperado’ transliterated into English as ‘desperado’ – and means, literally, ‘without hope’ . . .” (233). Nancy Bailey reaches the
conclusion that if Millen becomes Johnson, it seems legitimate to infer that Johnson might have been like Millen. She notes: “Together they represent our humanity, unwillingly diseased, distorted, and yet recognizably human even in its death agony of despair” (78). Howell also comes to the conclusion that this story “teases us into final recognition of the loss of a man not a ‘red-handed fiend’” (“Silence” 311). Hildebrand too sees The Mad Trapper as “an adventure story and Anabaptist homily that negatively illustrate the values of personalism and non-violence and that delineate the horrible inadequacies of the technocratic state and its impersonal violence” (383). The words from The Blue Mountains of China pop up in our minds as we finish reading this novella: “You can never really ‘understand’ about someone, anyone, even yourself. It is best to believe in them as human; feel that they are alive like you and need warmth, concern” (225). And what Wiebe does in this novella, as Howells remarks, is “filling the silences of history with voices” (“Silence” 305).

**MY LOVELY ENEMY**

Since the appearance of My Lovely Enemy, Wiebe’s seventh novel, in 1983, it had been the subject of severe criticism as it shocked and confused many of his contemporaries among whom David Lyle Jeffrey stands at the head. While The Blue Mountains of China attracted and enchanted Jeffrey prompting him to praise it as “one of the best in this country in our time . . . probably the most demanding
novel English speaking Canada has yet produced” (“A Search for Peace” 185-86), My Lovely Enemy disenchanted him and even shocked him provoking him to lash criticisms as “unfriendly as any book could be to its author’s hard-earned reputation” (“Lost Voice” 111) and as full of “innumerable soap-opera clichés,” “horrific stuff” (112), and literary allusions used “perversely” becoming “a kind of sacrilege” (113), making the whole novel “distinctly unlovely” (114).

But Pierre Spriet is more mature in criticizing My Lovely Enemy while he explores the meaning and structure of this much disputed novel. However, Spriet admits that My Lovely Enemy “may represent a turning point in Wiebe’s novelistic career: the Mennonite author seems to have turned into a hedonist celebrating sexual intercourse with elation and fervour; his new Gospel is free love if not promiscuousness, and My Lovely Enemy is superficially not very different from the novels which he derided in The Blue Mountains of China” (“Structure and Meaning” 53). But Spriet, further, explores positive elements in My Lovely Enemy that deserve the attention of the readers. At a purely thematic level, this novel is, perhaps, not so different from Wiebe’s previous novels. He continues to blend past and present, Indian stories and modern adventures; and Western Canada provides a basic setting for him. Spriet writes:

The same religious concerns haunt the protagonists; the denunciation of a form of Christianity and morality which, to Wiebe, is definitely not Christian remains a constant of the
novel as it was in Peace Shall Destroy Many, The Blue
Mountains of China or The Temptations of Big Bear. It seems
that, if he now focuses on the relationship between husband
and wife to reveal its limitation, this particular theme is not in
opposition with the views held in other novels. My Lovely
Enemy can be read as the exposure of so-called Christian
morality which sanctifies the most egotistical forms of
possessiveness. (54:

Prophet-like, Wiebe proclaims his message of love and reunion of men
and women in God as he never had, at least so openly, in any of
his earlier fiction. The inadequacy of the world has never been so
forcefully maintained. And Spiet considers My Lovely Enemy as
Wiebe’s “most religious novel in spite of or because of, its sexual
concern” (55). According to T.W. Smyth My Lovely Enemy is not an
aberration; it continues Wiebe’s challenge to a limited perception of
reality, encouraging a whole new way of seeing the world. He then
goes on to remark that Wiebe, as a critic of both church and society,
“continues to witness to radical Christian faith, without apology in
either the popular sense of confessing fault or the technical sense of
explaining his position” (“My Lovely Enemy Revisited” 113).

Edmonton and nearby Vulcan provide the setting for this
tripartite novel. More specifically, much of the action occurs in the
Micro-materials Reading Room in the library basement at the
University of Alberta. The basic stuff of the story is that a middle-aged
history professor falls in love with a young graduate student married to one of his junior colleagues and they have an adulterous affair. Prof. James Dyck is forty-two, happily married to lovely, Swedish Liv, and father to a dynamic ten-year-old daughter, Becca. He spends most of his time in the study of musty microfiches for information on nineteenth-century Western Canadian Indians and fur-trade history. What attracted him most was the tale of one Cree chief named Maskepetoon. But all on a sudden, a gorgeous, dark-maned beauty, Gillian, enters his life. She is married to boring old Harold Lemming, another professor of history at the university and they seem to share a blessedly open concept of marriage. James's strong-willed mother, Ruth, still lives in Vulcan, and his fault-finding father, whom he hated and from whom he ran away, is dead and gone.

The novel is divided into three unequal sections. The first four chapters, collectively titled "May," with James’s first person narrative, describe the beginnings of an affair. The second section is only a small two-page part which bridges first and third sections and is titled aptly enough, "The Black Bridge." The third person narrator introduced here reacquaints us in the third section, titled "September," with the major characters. Susan Whaley notices that the novel is structurally cyclical. The first part begins with James’s study in deep, dark library vaults, and the final part depicts James, Liv, Harold and Gillian descending into the bowels of the earth for a weekend at a very exclusive resort called The Mine. Thus entombed, they achieve a
figurative kind of death. Finally, the novel comes full circle with the real death and resurrection of Ruth (Whaley, “Rudy Wiebe” 361).

However, Magdalene Redekop has commented that the second section, “The Black Bridge,” forms “a horrific, black hole in the center of the novel” (Rev. of MLE 59) as it deliberately fails to bridge. The most obvious fact about this bridge, as described in the novel, is that, hidden in mist, it is not there (182). The text focuses then not on those who “could cross” but on those who “have fallen from” and on the song of all those – six hundred and seventy-two people – fallen from it, but with “No proof” (MLE 183). Arnold E. Davidson remarks that “Wiebe makes any passage provisional on the voice of just those dead” (“Circling the Text” 163) as Wiebe concludes the section: “... at the moment before dawn when white mist dry as snow levels the valley and the bridge vanishes... Perhaps then it is also true that at that moment the bridge itself is unnecessary; that a human being could cross the wide valley on the mist, on the final amazement of that incredible, terrifying song” (MLE 183). Davidson also notes that the “typology of pilgrimage so essential to all of Wiebe’s early fiction is here graphically both laid down and blown up” (163).

Wiebe has already explored Mennonite past and Indian past in separate novels. But in My Lovely Enemy, as Redekop notes, “he weaves them together by the simple device of making his protagonist a historian with a Mennonite past who is studying the Indian past. Both pasts, furthermore, are translated into the present by the device of
making that historian fall in love with a woman who is twenty years his junior” (Rev. of MLE 57). However, the minority concerns of Wiebe take a different form here in this novel. The minority groups share a common trait of being the oppressed ones. In any society and in any family, from time immemorial, women happened to be the oppressed ones. Here in My Lovely Enemy Wiebe portrays two women – Ruth and Liv – and shows us how passing through a suffering past and enduring a painful present, they enter into a hopeful glorious future and transform the life.

Though Liv, James’ wife, had only a limited role, the focus seems to rest on her. T.W. Smyth notes that “she can be seen to exemplify the ‘large meaning’ of this novel, an embodiment of the upward movement of this romance” (“My Lovely Enemy Revisited” 128). In the beginning, Liv is presented as just another housewife and mother who feels the frustration of contemporary living, resents the male domination at the work place and the religion of her parents, but is clearly more ardent than James in her search for “the good life” (79). In the early laundry room exchange with James, she claims that, “As you read more, the Jesus stories just makes more sense” (MLE 62). Although she doesn’t reveal what she is reading, Smyth is of opinion that she may be reading John Howard Yoder, Wiebe’s theological mentor (“My Lovely Enemy Revisited” 128). It is Liv who takes Becca to church and applauds the sermon on the Song of Songs, insisting that the Mennonite preacher “would have explained a few
little things to D.H. Lawrence” about love (MLE 116). We never hear the sermon, but we see a revitalized Liv live out the effects of seeing things differently.

Again, it is Liv who follows John Reimer’s directive in The Blue Mountains of China, “you handle offenders, by forgiving” (BMC 215), as she forgives James for his adultery with Gillian, and she, as Smyth remarks, “in the constancy of her physical and spiritual love, forges an alliance of eros and agape” (“My Lovely Enemy Revisited” 128-29). For James, there is a dawning recognition of the measure of her inaccessible otherness as she “was pulling him . . . into a revelation of something so profound he had somehow always sensed it in her without grasping its dimension . . . her gentle merciful goodness always there though hidden until now” (MLE 233). Again, as if responding to Reimer’s “you show wisdom, by trusting people” (BMC 215), Liv contends that “Love is trust beyond all possibilities” (MLE 233).

Finally, she makes the move that both James and Gillian see as an impossible possibility: following Reimer’s admonition that “you handle enemies, by loving” (BMC 215), she introduces Gillian, portrayed as her “lovely enemy,” to James’s mother: “This is our friend from Edmonton” (MLE 258).

Jesus appears to James in the Palliser Hotel room, Calgary (78) and discusses the Old Testament parable of Hosea, describing God’s relationship with Israel in terms of husband and wife. Later it is applied to James’s situation (MLE 138). My Lovely Enemy, in that sense, is
a working out of the parable of Hosea with the difference that in *My Lovely Enemy* it is not a forgiving husband, but a forgiving wife that leads the family to a revitalized union. Smyth, in this context comments:

> Because the machinations surrounding the foregrounded adultery are for Wiebe too trite to justify the novel’s existence, Liv’s forgiving love rather than James’s affair should direct us to another aspect of Wiebe’s indirection: this novel’s essential focus and the measure of its significance is not the eroticism that leads to adultery but agapic love, particularly love as exhibited in the vicissitudes of marriage. ("My lovely Enemy: Revisited" 130)

And as James and Liv lie together they seek a transfiguration to carry them beyond the whims of the flesh into “a singular oneness that knew neither longing nor desire nor want, above all not repletion” (243). However, this brief scene closes with a conflicting sense of isolation in the midst of the most complete physical union, a movement “beyond touch,” and a compelling recognition of the limitations of the flesh: “no body can ever touch enough, deeply” (MLE 247). Coral Ann Howells notes that love is explored in this novel in its seemingly endless variety as we watch “desire being transformed and redefined as spiritual longing . . . This novel that begins with sex ends in mystery, freaking out at the end into visions of love which may be imagined but do not exist except in fantasy” (Rev. of MLE 306). However, as Redekop
observes, this novel “sets up two levels that exist in a state of extreme tension: the ideal world we desire (in which love wipes out all distinctions and jealousies) and the real world we live in (marred by lies, betrayals, separations and guilt)” (Rev. of MLE 59). And Live gives us a hope that the ideal world we desire is possible by each one’s personal sublimation.

All through the novel the recurring image of James’s mother, Liese Ruth, remains a constant reminder of woman-power that can endure and transform lives: “Where was that life motionless as a knitting needle... forever cooking the same food for the same endless hungers” (243). Liv’s frustration over the meaninglessness of her own life is juxtaposed with the harshness of Ruth’s life: “What was there to it?” (244). Ruth’s distinctive trait is one of constant perseverance, tending house and caring for her husband, and praying: “... that’s what she was doing, here for all of us, praying” (245). It was her faith that permeated her existence and sustained her through her trials: the family’s impoverished flight to Canada, the hardships of the farm, the family conflicts, the death of her children and her husband, and her own disabilities and sensory deprivations. Through all these vicissitudes, mirroring the pilgrimage of the people of Israel toward the Promised Land – a pilgrimage reflected again in her funeral procession – she persevered: “she did what she could” (244). The image of Ruth, blind and deaf, sitting at the window, knitting “vests and stockings for third world children” (MLE 244) stands in stark contrast to the image of the elderly Muttachi in *The Blue Mountains of China*, who sits.
without faith and without hope, turning the wheel “to spin wool she had already spun a dozen or perhaps three thousand times” (BMC 35). At the same time the portrait of Ruth is not without ambiguity. James had always adored her while he despised his father from whom he had fled as a youth. But Olena, who nursed Ruth in her later period, challenges James’s bias, suggesting that Ruth was not only “a strong woman” but also “hard” (124). However, Ruth remains a paragon of enduring faith who can confidently anticipate her resurrection – “Blessed are the dead who die in the faith of Christ” (the novel’s dedication), and Aaron, her grandson, reads the same passage from the Bible at her funeral (MLE 253). It is she, above all, who triumphs over “my lovely enemy.”

Gillian appears incredibly smart, entirely witty and unbelievably beautiful. Her role is to seduce unsuspecting James. She stands in sharp contrast to the other two women, Liv and Ruth, but at the end is overcome by them. What happens to her at the end is left unsettled by Wiebe, but the possibility is towards a transformation. She becomes a constant reminder that women’s role in oppressing women can never be underestimated. At the same time Olena, who looks after Ruth in her old age, remains a constant beacon of light that women are never dried up of goodness. Becca, James’s daughter, is charming, attractive and dynamic with child-like innocence and vitality and is a reminder that children are the core of family who make family life worth living and endurable.
Apart from speaking for women, Wiebe is always obsessed with sympathy for native Indians. And so he presents in this novel a Cree chief Maskepetoon whose natural goodness and native innocence stand in stark contrast with the hidden and crooked ways of civilized oncomers including the missionaries. Maskepetoon’s strenuous efforts to establish peace with their archenemy tribe Blackfeet and its brief success bring out the native goodness in him. The exceptional insight and vision of Maskepetoon’s old and bed-ridden father is evident in his advice:

Is a man’s true greatness to be sung in the scalp dance? What do your powerful eyes, what do your travels to unnameable places help if you see only what everyone sees, that war is glory, that killing is revenge? You have always seen different, why can’t you see different about being a great man? . . .

Hate and love, war and peace, goodness and evil. What do you want? What do you see? (48)

These sublime words from an uncivilized father had a tremendous influence upon his famous warrior son, Maskepetoon. This together with the influence of Rev. Rundle made him a true disciple of Jesus, the “Prince of Peace” (52). Still what confuses him is the strife between priests of different denominations which forced him to say, “Each of you three [priests] say you know the way to heaven. Who can tell what you know? You should call a council among yourselves to agree on what you do not know. Then I would go with all of you” (MLE 53).
This scathing remark should be an eye opener for all the so-called civilized missionaries of the 'divided-church,' and Wiebe extols here the sublime vision of a so-called uncivilized native chief. Further, his conviction about the “Prince of Peace” leads him to forgive his enemies, the Blackfeet, and especially his father’s murderer. What Wiebe pictures here is an extraordinary scene of forgiveness which is very rare even in the history of the civilized Christians. The Cree chief Maskepetoon – known as Young Chief among the Blackfeet – puts his ceremonial dress on the murderer of his father, makes him sit on his horse, and then says:

Both my hands are empty. You took my father from me, so now I ask you to be my father. Wear my clothes, ride my horse, and when your people ask you how it is you are still alive, tell them it is because The Young Chief has taken his revenge. (54)

The result was amazing. The old Blackfoot then slid from the horse, embraced Maskepetoon saying: “My son, you have killed me” (MLE 54). In Maskepetoon, Wiebe has extolled the natural goodness, sublimity and innocence of the native people to which all invading groups were blind.

My Lovely Enemy thus becomes the voice of the oppressed: of oppressed women in family life and of the Natives in the greater social context. It goes further and becomes the voice of the goodness: goodness present in ordinary women and in the Natives.
A DISCOVERY OF STRANGERS

A Discovery of Strangers, published in 1994, Wiebe's first novel in eleven years – a novel that won for him the 1994 Governor General's Award for Fiction – is his most beautiful song, a celebration of the true north. In Playing Dead, Wiebe makes a striking comment, "Something beyond mere facts is being told, a truth only words, not facts, can create" (55-56), and five years later he returns to the Franklin Expedition, the subject of his first essay "Exercising Reflection" in Playing Dead, and using the same documents, engages in an imaginative retelling of this chapter in the history of Canadian north. At the bottom level, the story sung in A Discovery of Strangers is one of a clash of cultures between the white explorers, who claim much knowledge, and the indigenous Tetsot'ine, "Those Who Know Something a Little," (also called Yellowknife by the whites). It is a mutual discovery of otherness between the Indians who have survived many generations in these barren lands, and the whites who desire only passage through Indian land. However, as Duffy comments, "Wiebe's tales place before the reader a complex reality that yields to no easy moralizing" (Sounding the Iceberg 75).

From the outset, it is the young Greenstockings as the representative of her people – presumably the woman referred to in Wiebe's 1990 interview with Linda Hutcheon where he says, "I'm right now working on a piece about a nineteenth-century Indian woman – an Indian tribe wiped out about 150 years ago" (Other Solitudes 85) –
who most influences the shape of this novel. In that interview Hutcheon had raised the issue of speaking for the 'Other' suggesting that some writers are "very nervous" (84) about doing so. Wiebe, refusing to be apologetic in his response - "you don't steal anything from anyone when you tell their story, you make them live" (85) - admits his responsibility and his compulsion: "Who will imagine this? Who will remember this? An 'Other' must. Who else?" (85). While John Moss is critical of "how casually Wiebe enters into Indian consciousness, male and female, young and old, at a most cataclysmic and confusing time in Native evolution," claiming that "it must be taken that he creates their reality according to his own design quite separable from origins and actuality" ("Wiebe's Dreamvision" 43), Elizabeth Brewster in discussion of native viewpoint "as represented here" is much more sympathetic and perceptive in her recognition: "If we don't try to imagine one another, how do we discover one another?" ("Exploration of the Other" 23). Moreover, since Tetsot'ine were wiped out by their traditional enemies, the Dogrib, and left no records, Wiebe is compelled more than ever to resort to an imaginative representation of Greenstockings' story, and to become the voice of the 'Other,' the voiceless.

While in Playing Dead the white documents controlled the telling, now the story sung in A Discovery of Strangers takes an imaginative retelling of the story of Greenstockings and her people, a people that live in a symbiotic relationship with their environment as
revealed in the song of Keskarrah (father of Greenstockings): “Where would we be without the raven and the owl, the caribou and wolf who taught us how to hunt them, the mouse who gives us wit and small discretion, the beautiful animals, all gifts, gifts” (DOS 122). The opening chapter, “The Animals in This Country,” is fittingly an imaginative tale echoing those told by Greenstockings’ father, Keskarrah, when “all animals talked like people” (18). The telling is unmistakably more sympathetic to the native than to the white. While the initial chapter may be Birdseye’s (mother of Greenstockings) narrative, the literary basis of the story in this chapter – as evident from “Acknowledgements” at the end of the novel – is George Calef’s Caribou and the Barren-lands which contains a speculative tale of a wolf attack on a caribou-herd’s northern migration, an account closely paralleled by the opening narrative. The significant alteration in Wiebe’s text concerns a life-destructive and isolating injury suffered by the wolf pack leader; in Calef’s story the white wolf leader remains both physically sound and undisputed master of his pack. Wiebe also alters the wolf’s fur from white to silver – perhaps to avoid redundant identification with the whites who also face isolation and death – since this wolf, on the road to starvation, is dramatically aligned with the dead members of the expedition: “the silver wolf will recognize his death in the straggle of frozen meat briefly marking the tundra” (DOS 11). There is irony in that alignment since these whites enter this alien land determined to remain alien. From the start, however, we have
intimations of the tragic future that reveals the mutual dependence of all the inhabitants of this land. However, in the “Acknowledgements” Wiebe emphasizes Greenstockings’ role by explicitly asserting that this is her story. And we come to realize that it is true by her sustaining presence all through the novel – she appears party to the prophetic account of the first chapter, participates with Hood in the love story at the novel’s heart, and is the resolute force at the story’s conclusion. It seems that her response to Twospeaker’s question at the end of the novel about whose child she carries, is her personal claim about the story itself: “Do you hear me? . . . Mine” (DOS 317). The sympathy of Wiebe towards the natives will become clearer if we make first, an analysis of the attempts of the whites to control a world they increasingly find alien or strange; second, an analysis of the native sensibility that makes them ‘good samaritans’; and third, an analysis of Wiebe’s artistic use of the white documents.

The whites attempt to control a strange world of natives by their artistic recreation of their travels, by applying white standards to native traditions, by renaming native places and persons, and even by love and romance. The whites try to define and control a strange land by their documenting – writing and painting. Ian MacLaren, who made research on George Back and published it as appendices to Arctic Artist: The Journal and Paintings of George Back, Midshipman with Franklin, 1819-22 argued that the underlying implicit objective of painting is to give an identifiable frame to man’s existence, to provide
him with a sense of place, understanding and control. The world is simplified and it becomes familiar and intelligible with man very much at its centre (MacLaren 287-288). In “Acknowledgements” Wiebe indicates his debt to the research of MacLaren, and Wiebe introduces this documenting into the heart of this novel to domesticate the landscape and to exert human control over an alien land. While the very first sentence of the novel, “The land is so long, and the people travelling in it so few, the curious animals barely notice them from one lifetime to the next,” affirms the vastness and the uncontrollability of the arctic wilderness, the later comment of Back, “these natives live in a dreadful land with more than enough space quite empty around them” (44), reveals his difficulty in capturing the landscape within a frame. Hood also experiences this difficulty “to render the wilderness in picturesque terms” (MacLaren 288):

In the last canoe, Robert Hood had been trying all morning to capture once more, on a small piece of paper, a coherent quadrant of the world through which he was being carried. But even after an exhausting year of continuously widening vistas, he was tempted to look sideways, tugged towards a periphery in the corner of his eye that, when he yielded, was still never there . . .

But his sketch must stop, must have frame! (61-62)

Hood’s desire to frame his sketch is constantly thwarted by “the moment of discovery that the continuous world was . . . not at all
or anywhere ever the same," but he must have a frame and so he would provide his own: "Scribbling in trees where none could exist" (DOS 62).

Hood tries to capture Greenstockings in his painting, and then by romance, while Back tries to capture her by force. John Hepburn reports that when Back used force "she responded in good Yellowknife fashion and slit his leg for him" (103). This incident prompted Hood instantly to challenge Back "to a duel for the honour of the lady he thought his own" (103). Anc. Hepburn comments: "It was the usual matter of white men in primitive lands: a woman of the country" (98). However, Back's attempt was thwarted by Greenstockings herself by the swish of her knife. But Hood, though successful to own her by his romance, was killed at the end by Mohawk, Michel Terohaute. And Greenstockings kept "an independence of mind amazing in a female" (100), and had the courage and intelligence to think of her child from Hood as her own: "Mine" (DOS 317).

The whites use their own standards to find 'reasonable' explanations to native systems, but end up in realizing the fallibility of their perception. Hepburn humorously writes how Franklin's spurious attempt to use the occasion of the partial eclipse of the sun (foretold in his calendar) to prove the superiority of Christian knowledge over native knowledge was undermined by clouds which obscured the eclipse on that day; and moreover, Keskarrah mockingly responds: "If Lieutenant Franklin could foresee the passing darkness of the sun,
how was it he did not understand the approach of winter?” (97). The fallibility of the white perception is more evident in their misreading of native mourning. From a distance they heard some sounds they could not order, “a tintinnabulation of insanities” and saw “things thrown up, or leaping. Shapes skipping erratically against the sky . . .” The whites took them as “Indians . . . jumping wildly about on a small island” and Back declares: “Carnival, sir! They’ve discovered an eternal spring – of rum!” (61). Richardson first sees it as “a witches’ or (more likely) a devils’ Sabbath, performed with typical native perversity in the glare of high noon rather than midnight” (63). The sound was finally recognized “as wailing, as aboriginal dirge” (61), but it is the translator St. Germain who interpreted the event for them: “Somebody for sure dead” (63). The drowning of two Yellowknives has caused the people to engage in sacrificial grieving to purge themselves, by making themselves poor (64). Through the sacrifice of their possessions, animate or inanimate – “loggepoles being broken and skins ripped, kettles crushed, axes splintered, dogs throats being slit and everything, any thing or animal that came to hand, smashed and torn and bleeding, being flung everywhere into the lake” (DOS 63) – they attempt to escape the bonds of the things that hold them.

The whites were totally astounded at the Indian way of mourning. Given his “reverence for life,” Franklin attempts to stop the destructions and the killing. When St. Germain knocks up his arm and urges him “Don’t grab – hide what you can – don’t grab ‘em!,”
Franklin, in turn, urges the Indians not to destroy their guns "given them by their Great Father in England, who would be very angry if his gifts were destroyed, even in deep grief." Franklin then mistakenly interprets their compliance as one of gratitude, "believing he [Franklin] understood something profound at last" (64). Richardson is rendered virtually speechless at this Indian way of mourning, and feeling "lost as in a vacant ship on an empty ocean," and groping in vain for a "suitable English word, he must content himself with the sterile and emotionless 'intemperate.'" For a brief moment this English doctor almost wished if "it were possible for him to wail as they did, beating themselves into exhaustion and emptiness," but he quickly resumed his rationality and dispassionate duty — "We know our duty. These people have mourned before, and they still live" (65). Greenstockings, for her part, may experience the release of "all the accumulating weight of stolid living" (72) — she "had come out of the long paroxysm of community grief as powerfully cleansed as she always was" (72-73). But for the whites, conditioned to thinking in terms of utility, this was something they could neither entertain nor care to understand; the destructive acts of the Yellowknives were clearly without productive purpose. Further, Richardson, taking "the useless husk of the canoe in hand," refuses to accept an obvious responsibility for heightening Indian acquisitiveness that, in return, heightened their need for purging — "They contracted to hunt for us, that cannot harm them" (DOS 66). Instead, he perceives the destruction as not only an outright waste of
useful objects and animals, but also as a threat to the very survival of the mourners, to say nothing of the expedition itself.

For the “properly regulated minds” (DOS 143) of these English explorers who struggle to make sense of their world and to approach it systematically and rationally, the grief and attendant waste they encounter is not only unimaginable but also totally mindless. But this was but one example of experiences that increasingly overwhelm them. In place of the known, the understandable, they are relentlessly confronted by the strange, the unimaginable. As Smyth remarks, “‘Strange’ or ‘stranger’ punctuate the entire novel; there is barely a page where they do not surface, as the narrative constantly questions accepted perceptions, encouraging an openness in the reader to see things differently” (“Rudy Wiebe as Novelist” 187). The local inhabitants, in turn, see their world change; it becomes strange to them as well. On the first page of the novel, we see that the animals are confronted by the “strange noises, bits of shriek and hammer” the whites make upon their arrival – “These were strangers, so different.” For the Indians, there was a time when all they thought was “of People, and of animals and coming weather, and food, and the prevention and curing of possible illness,” but with the coming of the whites, “a fireball smashed through the sky,” and things are “Strangely, for ever, different” (17). For Greenstockings – and this is her story – what she has to tell is “a story of a stranger, of danger coming and going” (21): people who look strange – with skin that,
despite appearances, “is not at all hard,” and hair that “is crinkled light brown, not black and hard and straight” (21), strange names “As if they had no stories in them” (39), and a strange language – “these incredible pointed words hissed into the coming-winter air, which are as strange in the mouth, or the ears, of a woman as anything these English have dragged into their country” (36). When the whites inadvertently burn down the trees across the river from the site of Fort Enterprise, the translator, St. Germain, exclaims, “It is strange . . . All those trees have never burned themselves for us,” and Keskarrah prophetically responds, “It will get stranger . . .” (DOS 70).

There are also intimations that these whites, blind as well as arrogant, are not harmless, as they infect the Indians, not only with a Whitesickness “of blisters and bleeding perhaps,” but also with their most insidious sickness – “the sickness they bring is a spirit, of things” (269) – “their civilized” desire, not for passage, but for possessions: “They must want more than they need. That is civilization” (59). The white ‘success’ is assured when Broadface, Greenstocking’s companion, is so wrapped up in slitting “the endless throats and bellies” of the animals that “all easy prey to the whiteman’s guns that he forgets to “remember to lift his head for a breath of gratitude” (116). But Bigfoot whom the whites mistakenly perceive as the Indians’ “boss,” is the prime victim: “These English have made him by turns either foolishly arrogant or obsequious, either superbly dignified or fawning without seeming comprehension” (134). Even Keskarrah,
the purported man of wisdom, is not immune to the white influence. He claims to guard Greenstockings in Hood’s portrayal of her, but is less protective of his wife, succumbing to the alleged magic of Richard Sun’s salve to heal her cancerous nose: “He is so strangely, thoughtlessly content about the salve” (118). Curiously, he seems to have forgotten what he later recollects, that in his childhood some tribes infected by the whites were killed “by a blistering, bleeding sickness that no medicine could stop” (264). Greenstockings recognizes that, despite his protestations about the white power, he is at times as blind as they. He supposes that the sun “through glass” (78) deceives the whites, but does not perceive “the truth of that grand deceiver” (80) in his dealings with the doctor – “if he does not believe in power of These English, why does he go everyday to Richard Sun for another portion?” (DOS 79).

The language problem and misunderstanding of signs clearly indicate the cultural gap. All the basic language problems, exemplified in the chapter “Entering Exhaustion,” are summed up in the words, “neither he nor they understand a single sound either can utter” (82). The miscommunication through signs is evident in Franklin’s decision to set fire to some of the brush to signal Bigfoot – he “understands smoke” – that the whites “are coming to help them off the island” (68). But when the “signal” has “metamorphosed” all “their magnificent green prospect south . . . into waste,” Bigfoot asks from his own sign-system: “Who is dead?” (DOS 69).
Furthermore, in Wiebe's exploration of naming, the novel foregrounds fundamental differences between the white and the Indian cultures in their attribution of names. The Yellowknives judge the apparent goal of the whites, "their grand attempt to rename the entire country," (13) as offensive and pretentious. From a Yellowknife perspective, naming appears too easy for the whites; they simply and indiscriminately impose whatever name comes to mind, "whatever sound slips from their mouths" (22). Greenstockings is amused but bewildered by the names of Back and Hood: they seem to mean something, but it is as if "they had no stories in them" (39). On the other hand, for Birdseye and Keskarrah, to know is to name. Between them "they know the land, each name a story complete in their head," but a story "greater than any person or two could comprehend" (24).

The names are waiting there, "all waiting to be breathed out again" (25). Keskarrah painstakingly reveals to Hood, not the 'real' name of the lake that the whites had already agreed to call "Winter" (60) without seeing it, but what should lead to its proper naming:

The lake that you named 'Winter' is really a fish with its head to the east and its tail whipping up the froth of rapids just below us . . . This great lake fish is trying to swim away east, as fish generally do, against the current. You can see that clearly by walking around the lake . . . that giant fish tries to swim east, but these giant trees hold it back . . . If you drew the lake as it is you would have to see the fish, and you could name it correctly. That is, if you wanted to. (DOS 86-87)
He cautions, however, that since the whites have destroyed the trees, the fish may escape, suggesting that this change would obviously also change the name of the lake. Since the Indians, though their world view is simple but coherent, expect so much more from a name they are more vulnerable than the whites to any alterations in the naming process. The dislocation for them is particularly severe because they are open and susceptible to other systems. The whites, however, who seem to have heard “only their own telling, as told to themselves,” (15) remain untouched. Thick English steps onto the land as if he owns it. He and his entourage do not bother to learn native names; they simply impose their own. Some of the women upon whom they were dependent for spliced meat and tanned hides simply remained nameless. Greenstockings, obviously named for the stockings Hood gave her, loses her name – it “vanished from every memory, even it seemed from Birdseye, who bore her and named her first” (17), but she has perceived through the stories of her father and the trial of her own life that actually “her name is She Who Delights” (DOS 198). The Yellowknives’ belief in names also misleads them when confronted by someone like Dr. Richardson, whose name can be seen to mean something. “Richard Sun,” through his strong name, is perceived to have some connection with the power of the sun itself; his name causes Keskarrah to believe the man himself has power over life and death, and mistakenly justifies entrusting his wife’s health to the
expected magical powers of the doctor’s salve. It is much later that he senses the danger, and acknowledges the potential deception in a whiteman’s name.

Smyth argues that “This novel is a relentless attack on those who would wrest sameness out of strangeness, to reduce the other to the same for purpose of comprehension and control” (“Rudy Wiebe as Novelist” 193). What is particularly special about the relationship between Greenstockings and Hood, as we shall see, is that, although they encounter one another in terms of the greatest intimacy, they remain strangers to one another in a relationship which is constantly one of discovery. Their intimate love story, the novel’s primary discovery of strangers and Wiebe’s continuing celebration of the flesh, is consummated in the heat of physical intimacy. Greenstockings is at the age of fifteen already well-experienced, having lived willingly with two men before her present companion Broadface. She well knows that for the men of her tribe, as Birdseye states, “woman are places to go” (76), and Keskarrah adds, “the place of living and men want to be there too” (77). While finding assurance in their embrace, she is repulsed by their forced possessiveness, as they constantly stand over her, always above her. They may gently guide a canoe through troubled waters, but they have no sense of tenderness. She well remembers the knife-stabbing and her own rage at the thrust of Broadface’s first attack upon her: “In an instant he had thrust himself so savagely into her that she lost every awareness except scream and
a sharp, cutting agony that sliced, circled through her like a knife 
stabbing past any intimation of pleasure” (DOS 74). She also learns 
that Back is the English counterpart of Broadface, a lover of force and 
conquest. Constantly aware of his roving and possessive eye, she 
expertly cools his ardour and thwarts his attempts to take her by force 
with a swish of her knife.

But, then, in Hood she discovers a man who truly is a stranger: 
“he asks nothing, demands nothing, forces nothing to happen even 
with his possible male domineering” (161). Clearly, in his dealings with 
Greenstockings he shows nothing but tender innocence. His initial 
desire of discovery is aesthetic; he desires to uncover more of her so he 
can draw her better. The continuation of his undemanding innocence 
leaves her marvelling throughout at his strangeness – “this stranger 
whom she sometimes believes she can understand”: “when he isn’t 
there in the red, smoky warmth of the lodge she moves effortlessly, 
turns, works in what she comprehends to be the memory of his gentle 
tenderness, the kind of underdemand he offers her humming a desire 
within her . . . strange . . . strange” (161). The warmth and comfort of 
the flesh envelop the two of them, she “listening to his happiness,” as 
he “speaks softly” to her to encourage the rhythm of her voice (161). 
They are bound one to the other; “her happiness begins to dance with 
him” (162). In their freedom, they both explode with laughter and, in 
common expression of their disparate, innermost longing, burst into 
mutually incomprehensible song. Neither one comprehending the
other, or what is happening between them, they become one in mental and physical intimacy. Thus for Wiebe, Greenstockings and Hood, despite their lack of knowledge of one another’s language, can come to understand one another, can through language as well as the flesh discover one another. However, the entire novel being an elaborate study of the cultural confrontation between the white explorers and the Yellowknives, ample evidences prove that the cultural gap is not readily bridged. Keskarrah, who “has been given the power to know something a little” (19) claims: “For them the world is always wrong because they never want it to be . . . the way it is . . . before these Whitemuds got here, I think they’d decided how the world should be” (DOS 132). But Wiebe is not without hope. Love unites Hood and Greenstockings, bridging two cultures.

Wiebe is always mindful of the Indian sensibility. He makes the whites declare the kindness and generosity of the natives, who are usually branded as barbarians and uncivilized. When the whites hired the best of Yellowknife hunters to hunt for them, Hood was inquisitive: “So who will feed all their families this winter?” Back has no doubt to affirm: “They share what the others have – Indians share.” They are a sharing community, not only among themselves but also to an alien community. The chief, Keskarrah declares, “Never will we allow our new friends, the White warriors, to go hungry!” (49). And they kept their promises. As Richardson admits, “before God remain our last hope” (DOS 278), Indians came with help. Wiebe quotes from historical documents of Richardson:
In the morning we heard the report of a musket, and soon after a great shout, and on looking out beheld three Indians with sledges below on the river. I imparted this joyful intelligence to Lieutenant Franklin, who immediately returned thanks to the Almighty, but poor Adam could scarcely comprehend it.

The Indians, The Rat, Crookedfoot and Boudelkell, had been sent from Bigfoot by Mr. Back with dried meat and fat. We devoured their food, and they incautiously permitted us to eat as much as we could . . . The Indians treated us with the utmost tenderness, gave us their snowshoes and walked without themselves, keeping by our sides that they might lift us when we fell.

About three miles distant from the house we encamped, as I was unable to continue. The Indians cooked for and fed us as if we had been children, evincing a degree of humanity that would have done honour to the most civilized of nations.

(DOS 294-295)

Even when the Indians are constantly on the edge of starvation and death — “We ourselves are always dying” — they respond instinctively to the pleading of the whites, “Look! We’re here . . . Feed us!” (299). Hepburn also testifies that the Yellowknives were very “considerate and humane, especially in our great distress later where their delicacy and care cannot be overstated.” He also points out the
“tender attachment between couples, particularly between the old map-drawer [Keskarrah] and his wife, whose ulcerated face Doctor Richardson treated at that time” (99). The natural goodness of the natives comes out as Keskarrah declares, “We couldn’t, of course . . . withhold food from anyone if we have some, especially from those to whom we have already given hospitality” (299). The meat they have only lately acquired is, at Bigfoot’s order, taken from the mouths of their children and swiftly transported fifty-five miles to the whites who “always need food, right now, food!” (DOS 297). Paradoxically, the savage Indians are the givers and the civilized whites are the receivers. Further, in Wiebe’s representation it is the ‘Christian’ whites who do evil by abandoning the overworked voyageurs and Eskimos to death by starvation on their way back while preferentially attending to their own comrades, and it is ‘heathen’ Yellowknives who do good sacrificing their own needs in their rescue of the whites. Wiebe puts white’s ‘salvation’ in the hands of Indians. In this context it is worth noting that in Playing Dead Wiebe raises doubts about the white judicial system that favours the white. Wiebe points to the fact that the Northwest Company clerk, Willard Wentzel, who had accompanied the expedition on the early part of its journey, accused Richardson of murdering the native Mohawk Michel and then “no investigation is ever made . . . A special law for whites persists in the north” (Playing Dead 34). Wiebe mocks treating whites as above the law.

A look at Wiebe’s use of history in this novel will, as usual, reveal the unwritten part of history. John Moss, in his review of this
novel states that “Authenticity and historical insight are quite beyond the point” ("Wiebe’s Dreamvision" 43). It is true that Wiebe does not write “historical fiction,” but history is part of Wiebe’s concern. Wiebe himself describes what he writes as “meditation on the past” (Reimer and Steiner, “Translating” 129). These meditations involve an exploration of the known material that enables him to probe its complexity from past, present and future vantage points. As the story is well known, the facts are less important than what is made of them. He does not try to invent the facts, but attempts to capture the things done, which tend to “vanish with their doing,” and reveal their truth in his imaginative creation, a structure which he admits is deliberately “made” (Wiebe, “A Novelist’s Personal Notes” 217). While the story of A Discovery of Strangers most definitely concerns the first Franklin Expedition and draws extensively from its documents, his concern is to provide another telling, one not controlled by those documents. In an interview, Wiebe says: “. . . the reason I use documents is because it seems to me ridiculous to invent some of that stuff or even put any effort into inventing it when life offers you such richness.” But he is confident enough to affirm “I want to say this in a different way . . . I have a sense of trying to get the truth of things – I think the truth of things can be gotten at still – by setting the diamond of the document in the artificial set of the fictive situation. The diamond shines so much more clearly, it shows its true nature” (Neuman, “Unearthing Language” 237). The story of A Discovery of Strangers provides a
further vision of that process, as its participants anticipate, experience and reflect back on the historical events, and then anticipate once more. Keskarrah argues that stories are like ropes: "They pull you to incomprehensible places . . . a story can tangle you up so badly you start to think differently" (126-27). He also says of Birdseye's prophetic story of the whites' tragedy, that, "the story is telling itself backwards" (DOS 152). While these whites want the straight story, a unified linear telling, Wiebe's novel mimics Indian telling, as it begins from what is known of the end, and constantly circles forwards and backwards, telling and retelling, but with a difference.

John Moss, further, states that "the Indians in this novel . . . are remarkable creations, as are Franklin and his men, but they exist entirely as projections of the author's own sensibility." This assessment has some merit in terms of the Indians who are historically speechless, having left no personal record of their discovery of these white men, and Moss's point may be acknowledged in his own assertion: "The success of Wiebe's Indians as figures in a fiction is that they inhabit a thoughtful, white, late-twentieth-century middle-aged male's imagining of what the world might have been if he had been its creator - as, indeed, he is" ("Wiebe's Dreamvision" 43). But, by also including Franklin and his men as "entirely" Wiebe's creation, Moss distorts Wiebe's work. The whites are definitely not speechless and records of their thoughts remain since most of them kept journals, parts of which enter into Wiebe's creation. As Wiebe acknowledges in the
“Prefatory Note” of the novel, extensive quotations from the journals of Robert Hood and John Richardson, “some with minor rearrangements,” are inserted between chapters. By using the written white documents for telling an Indian story, *A Discovery of Strangers* becomes the unwritten part of history and the voice of the Yellowknives.