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Rit S. Wengel

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Book Review

Union of Opposites. Letters from Rit Svane Wengel

Edited by Craig W. Miller

Reviewed by ROLF BUSCHARDT CHRISTENSEN

The book *Union of Opposites* is about the life of Rit Wengel, who was born Rit Svane in Frederikssund. Her father was a captain and the family lived in a lovely villa with a view of Roskilde Fjord. After graduating from the University of Copenhagen in about 1908, she became a governess for the children of Baron Rosenørn-Lehn at Orebygaard near Saxkjøbing on the island of Lolland. Here she met Poul Wengel, the gardener. In about 1911, Poul Wengel emigrated to Canada, where he obtained a farm in Saskatchewan, outside Price Albert. Fourteen years later, in 1925, she gave up her position as governess at Orebygaard and left for Canada to join Poul Wengel.

Shortly after her arrival in Canada, Mrs. Rit Wengel met Alice Miller, whose husband owned a clothing store in Price Albert. From 1928 to her death in 1959, Mrs Wengel wrote letters to Mrs. Miller. There were of course letters in both directions, but only Mrs. Wengel's letters have survived. There letters were found by Mrs. Miller's son, Craig, after his mother's death. After reading the collection of letters, Craig Miller thought there was material here for a book. And what a book!

The book is very much Mrs. Wengel's letters, But Craig Miller fills in the gaps, as he remembers both Rit and Poul Wengel - and then he did a little research to fill in his own gaps. In other words, Rit Wengel tells her own story. We can easily understand it, as Craig Miller helps with both comments and photographs.

We hear about life on the Canadian Prairies in the 1920s and 30s. she describes poverty and loneliness as well as an unhappy marriage. There is very little communication between the Wengels. When war breaks out in 1939, Mrs. Wengel, by now a Canadian citizen, is trapped in Denmark for the duration of the war, while her husband is in Canada. After the war Mrs. Wengel has trouble locating her husband in Canada. Not until the summer of 1947 is she reunited with her husband. They move to Victoria on Vancouver Island and then to Chilliwack in British Columbia.

Poul Wengel is not the best provider and even though Rit Wengel takes various low paying jobs, they live in rooming houses, rooms or cabins. Moreover, Mr. Wengel is seeing another woman. Rit Wengel, the daughter of Captain Svane and a former governess, is ashamed of her life and refuses to see friends visiting from Denmark. She is trapped in poverty and in an unhappy relationship, which turns out to be a 'union of opposites', to say the least.

Before her death, she returns to Denmark to sell her parents' house. Here she has to endure a dispute with her brother. She triumphs and returns to Canada with enough money to live a comfortable life. But the fruits are only enjoyed by her carefree husband, who survives her. Truly a moving story!

The book reads like an exciting and continuous story and not a collection of disjointed letters. As well, it contains

black and white photographs with explanatory captions. Despite the spelling mistakes here and there (Danish spelled danish with a small d), I warmly recommend this delightful book.

Union of Opposites: Letter from Rit Svane Wengel retails for CAD\$ 16.00 in Canada. It may be ordered directly from the Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada S4S 0A2 (add \$4.00 mailing and handling for one book, \$ 1.00 for each additional book, and 7% Goods and Services Tax). To order **Union of Opposites** from your nearest bookstore, quote the ISBN: 0-889770-092-1.