

Carrie Wachsmann. *Roadblocks to Hell*. Abbotsford: HeartBeat Productions, 2016. 264 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Sometimes, polar opposites attract. Cali Ginter, raised in a strict Mennonite environment in Steinbach, Manitoba. Walther Colt (not his real name), a troubled kid who hates any kind of authority. And yet, even in early childhood, Cali's heart sees something good in Walther when no one else does. "I figured it was better to make a friend than an enemy, so I did – make a friend" (259). And so these two utterly different individuals achieve a camaraderie that will last a lifetime.

In Carrie Wachsmann's book of creative non-fiction, *Roadblocks to Hell*, the author tells that story in detail. While Cali and her husband, Manfred, go to school, raise children, and find careers, Walther is in and out of jail. In 1972 he is charged with attempted murder of the Steinbach chief of police. He is placed in an adult facility. Cali doesn't forget him, writes letters to him. "Perhaps, she still held hope for Walt because she had seen behind the hardened eyes and angry soul. She saw a young man who had something to offer to society, who was intelligent and bright, who needed something meaningful in his life to express it. 'You don't throw something away just because it's a little bit broken,' she could hear her father say" (69-70).

Cali also knows about Walt's upbringing: an abusive father, and a mother of low intelligence who is incapable of stopping the violence. She finds that prisoners often come from broken backgrounds, and that their imprisonment may make matters worse. When Walt is transferred to the infamous BC Pen, Cali makes it her mission to research the facility. "She was able to confirm that it was known for cruel and inhuman practices. Until 1972, flogging had been used as a form of corporal punishment, along with the chain gang, the limited bread and water diet, and solitary confinement.... Filled with unholy secrets, this prison was the last hellhole anyone would want to do time in" (115-116).

When, in 1975, Walt finds himself in a more relaxed environment at Matsqui Institution, he agrees to a series of interviews with Cali, who is studying criminology and thinks that Walt would be an excellent case study for a paper. There is only one catch: his real name is not to be used. "And that's when he gave her the name, 'Walther Colt'. 'Two of my favourite pieces,' he said with a grin" (120).

Even as the friendship endures, with Walt spending some time with Cali and Manfred on a converted minesweeper on the Fraser River – they had refurbished it into a temporary home to save money on rent – Walt's journey is a rocky one. His difficulties culminate in a 1979 shootout with RCMP officers in Burnaby. At Walt's request, Cali acts as a character witness at his trial. As part of her testimony, Cali states: "At fifteen he's in adult prison where one can only imagine what he has to do to defend himself. So many experiences he's had with the law have not been good ones. So when he sees a uniform, it represents fear and it represents power. It represents something that is out to get him – to cause him pain in some way" (207).

The goal of Cali and Manfred is to set up "roadblocks to hell" for Walt. The troubled soul eventually achieves some kind of redemption, and realizes his unchangeable goal: "I will die free" (250). In this memoir/novel, Carrie Wachsmann uses fictitious names. One might wonder about the efficacy of this when the actual names are easily findable online. Nevertheless, the story, dotted with cliff-hangers and revelations, is well-told, and for many readers may well be a "page-turner."

*Roadblocks to Hell* can be ordered online, or accessed in the MHSBC library.