

Wiebe faces North

Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic
Rudy Wiebe
 Jackpine House/NeWest Press

review by Perry Gereluk

Rudy Wiebe is a creative writing and Canadian literature professor here at the U of A who has an impressive list of work. As a prominent, award-winning Canadian writer, Wiebe's creations deal mainly with Canadian themes. *Playing Dead* is a thoughtful consider-

It is difficult to speak of the contents of these essays in a few words each because they contain so much wisdom about so many things.

ation of the Canadian North.

Playing Dead was originally written as a set of essays that were presented as the *Larkin-Stuart Lectures* at Trinity College in 1987. Wiebe slightly reformed these essays, resulting in this delightful novel. The book is a clever mesh of Northern Indian philosophy/legend and Northern Canadian history. The first essay, entitled "Exercising Re-

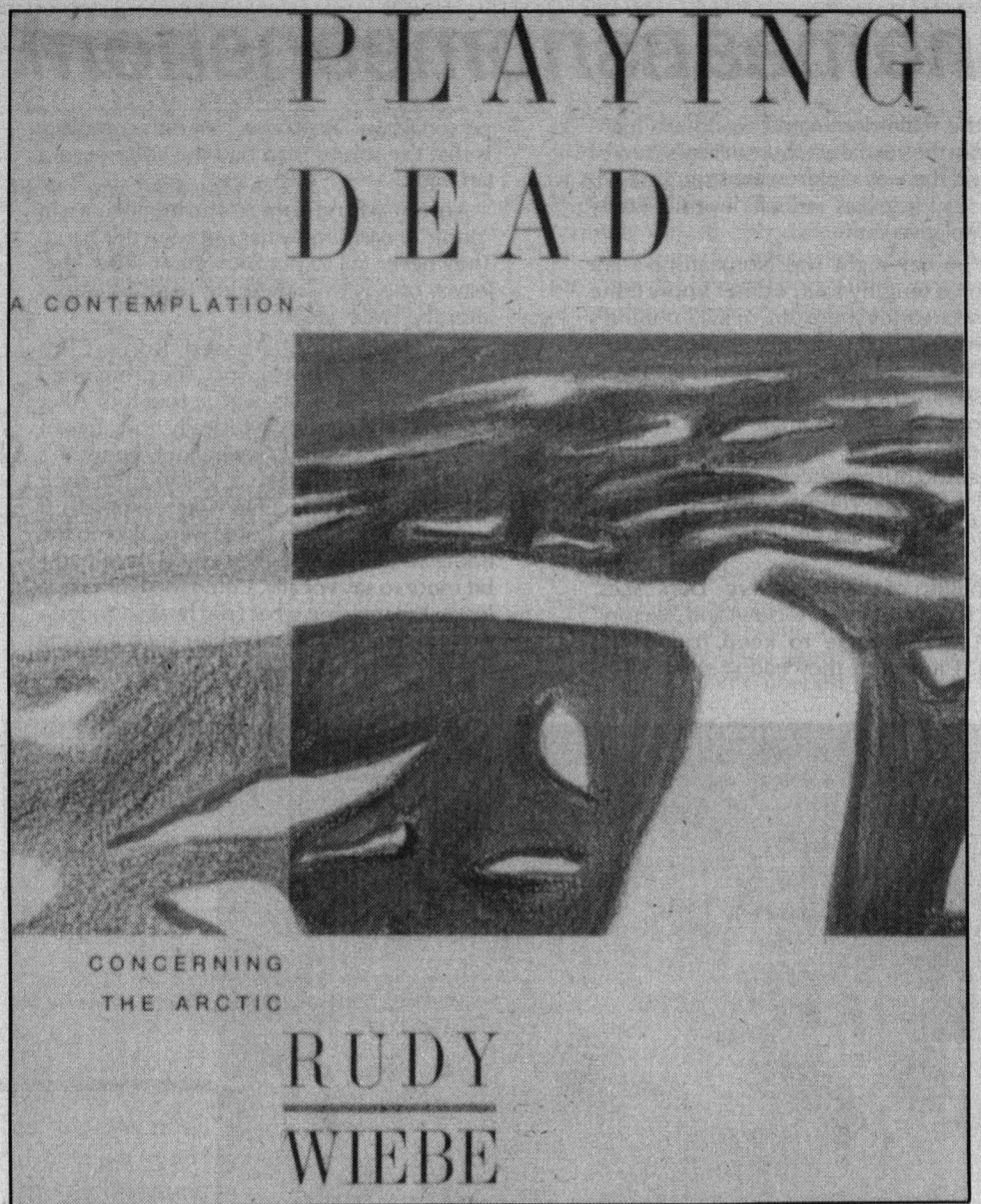
flexion", deals mostly with the early European explorers of Northern Canada and the circumstances that they had to face. "On Being Motionless" talks about the life and death of the enigmatic Albert Johnson (The Mad Trapper). The final essay, "In Your Own Head", is mainly about Indian life in the Arctic when the European explorers arrived.

It is difficult to speak of the contents of these essays in only a few words each because they contain so much wisdom about so many things. Furthermore, although the essays are separated by titles, they are very much interconnected.

A delightful quirk of *Playing Dead* is its precision. This is perhaps the most efficiently worded book that I have ever read. Maybe the thought of an 'efficiently worded essay' does not sound too appealing to a casual reader, but *Playing Dead* is far from what you would expect. It is an informal insight into the Arctic that progresses comfortably throughout. It is peppered with absorbing quotations and is rich in Northern Indian folklore. It really holds your attention as well as your interest.

This book is aptly subtitled "A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic." The ideas within are truly thought-provoking. Sometimes though, Wiebe tends to speak about the Arctic on a level that only someone familiar with the Arctic would understand. I think that the Arctic holds a magic with Rudy Wiebe that is difficult to capture on paper. I will admit, however, that his book does spark a certain curiosity in the Arctic and a respect for its inhabitants.

By reading *Playing Dead*, you will not only be delightfully entertained, but you will also learn a great deal about Northern Canadian history.



The Vinyl Phyle

SCREAMING BLUE



MESSIAHS

The Screaming Blue Messiahs
Totally Religious
 Electra/WEA

The Screaming Blue Messiahs, I'm happy to report, have not sold out. After all, the temptation to do so must have been there, following the success of their "I Wanna Be a Flintstone" single from their last album, *Bikini Red*. It would have been easy for the Messiahs to write songs about wanting to be Lippy the Lion and Hardy-har-har, thus capitalizing on past success. Instead, they've made what is arguably their toughest, most uncompromising record.

Familiarity with the rest of the Messiahs work demonstrates that their "Flintstone" single wasn't just a kitschy aberration. On *Gun-Shy* and *Bikini Red*, they exhibited an obsession with things American. Unlike a band like U2, this obsession went beyond mere superficial acquaintance with American roots music (blues and country). The Messiahs are also fascinated with the fabric of American culture. Lyrically, they reflect the obsession with cars and guns that figures so prominently in the American Weltanschauung (world view). Chrome-domed frontman Bill Carter's lyrics also bely an understanding of the essence of blues lyrics. Carter is obviously taken by the lyrics of someone like John Lee Hooker, which go beyond the standard melancholy of the blues to reveal such subterranean sentiments as murderous rage.

Besides Carter's lyrics, it is his guitar work which is the main attraction of this band. All of the songs on *Totally Religious* are constructed around Carter's reverb-drenched guitar riffs. He augments these riffs with squalling wah-wah, howling feedback and psychotic slide guitar, to incredibly dynamic effect. On *Totally Religious* Carter also shows off a previously unheard facility with the harmonica, lending greater authenticity to blusier numbers like "Here Comes Lucky."

Totally Religious is a ferocious record. Its major flaw is the production (they've put so much echo on the snare drum that it often sounds like drummer Kenny Harris is playing in a mine shaft). But the songs and the musicianship make up for this quibble. From the floor-shaking dance rhythms of "Nitro" to the thrashing frenzy of "Gunfight," the music on this record packs tremendous power. On the whole, *Totally Religious* is totally cool.

- Paul Murphy

Downchild Blues Band
Gone Fishing . . .
 Stony Plain

If Sam and Dave were white Canadians instead of black Americans, this is what their music would sound like. *Gone Fishing . . .* breaks no new ground, nor is it the apex of any individual aspect of the blues. Instead, it follows along a familiar path. The licks, breaks, solos, arrangements, and vocals have all been done before, and better.

All of which is not to say that this is a bad album. Donnie Walsh is a decent craftsman on guitar. Richard Walsh has a good blues voice. The rest of the band's ever-changing lineup are capable at their instruments. Downchild is a tight group, and the production allows for the occasional featuring of them all.

The Walsh boys take turns writing nice

little tunes (they each contribute five songs, with only one cover on the album). The tempo varies, from slow, sad songs ("It Isn't Right") to out-and-out dance tunes ("When I Say Jump"). The group, fueled by Gene Taylor on piano and Pat Carey on saxophones, are best at the boogies.

Put the package together, and you have a good background tape, or music to read by. It just won't excite or amaze you. The fast songs make the start of a fine party tape. To know Downchild in concert is to love them, and if you've seen them in front of a dance floor, this will remind you of some fine times. Otherwise, it's solid blues, Chicago style, done by a band from Toronto.

My one serious complaint with the album is the cheesecake cover photo of a nude model with a fish. I know Donnie Walsh isn't exactly Adonis, but there's got to be a better way to sell records than this. On the other hand, it is a mighty nice salmon. . .

-Randal Smathers

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