



1-1-2014

Joanna Brooks, *The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of an American Faith*

Reviewed by Zina Petersen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Petersen, Reviewed by Zina (2014) "Joanna Brooks, *The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of an American Faith*," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol1/iss1/23>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mormon Studies Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

and religious development, the collection also points to Mormon women's fear of failure, particularly in upholding cultural ideals of motherhood. One woman, now in her sixties, wishes that LDS women would ease up on their perfectionism: "I think so many women in the Church are afraid to not be perfect," she says. "We hear that term so much. So many women really suffer because they don't measure up, and they are so stressed and anxious. . . . We are really, really hard on ourselves. We've got to have enough belief in ourselves to stand up for ourselves, to know within ourselves that we have so much ability and strength that we are the ones who make a huge, huge difference in the Church" (p. 55).

By collecting and analyzing Mormon women's stories, *Mormon Women Have Their Say* points, again and again, to that ability and strength.

Jana Kathryn Riess holds a PhD in American religious history from Columbia University and an MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary. She is the author or coauthor of many books, including *The Twible*, *Flunking Sainthood*, and *Mormonism for Dummies*. She blogs for the Religion News Service.

Review of Joanna Brooks. *The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of an American Faith*. New York: Free Press, 2012. 240 pp. \$14.00, paperback.

Reviewed by Zina Petersen

Book of Mormon Girl is first off an engaging and entertaining read. It is by turns sweet, thoughtful, funny, self-effacing, and challenging. Joanna Brooks's first trade book (she has scholarly works in connection with her profession as professor and chair of English at SDSU), the memoir traces her faith journey from her childhood in a secure and idyllically orthodox LDS family in Southern California, through the convergence of her own intellectual blossoming and disillusionment with conservative polemic in college to her problematic return to activity in the fold during the difficult

moment of California's Proposition 8 campaign. Spoiler: She is still an active Latter-day Saint, happily married to her Jewish husband and raising their two daughters to celebrate both the Mormon and Jewish faith traditions.

Brooks's book was originally self-published in 2012 but was quickly picked up by a division of Simon and Schuster. After its first release, the responses were largely from the Mormon voices of the so-called Bloggernacle (in all their varieties); after the national release, her work has received attention from such venues as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Century*, *Huffington Post*, major US networks, plus an interview with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central's *Daily Show*. These public appearances, as much as the book, have made Joanna Brooks fully part of, and in some cases an unofficial mascot for, the "Mormon Moment" of unprecedented attention for the LDS Church. She became the "go-to" interview for many news outlets during Mitt Romney's presidential campaign and was listed among Politico's "50 politicians to watch" for 2011.

Predictably, this notice has bothered a few people. That an unofficial "spokesvoice" of the LDS Church should get the spotlight and the microphone is seen by some as either opportunistic of Brooks or disrespectful of the church's official channels, or both. Others have found it refreshing and liberating that a personality not under contract to any organization could speak from inside it, deeply sympathetic while also aware of and vocal about problems she may have regarding some of its positions. And that very double-consciousness—faithful but unblinking—is what seems to be her defining niche. It is definitely a mark of the book itself.

As good coming-of-age stories should, Brooks's memoir takes a satisfying narrative arc. Like novels, memoirs have "plot," and plot usually involves at the very least (1) a protagonist with (2) an ordinary life that (3) is interrupted by a conflict (or several) disrupting the ordinariness, which in turn is (4) addressed, if not ultimately resolved. Unlike biographies (including autobiographies), which rely on historical veracity via primary and secondary documentation, witness accounts, and cultural placement within wider contexts, memoirs are recollections, narratives of thought and emotion remembered, so they have liberty to internalize

and interpret events and to be “microstories.” Memoir is not the same as autobiography. Memoirs are frequently written by people young enough to have very little “bio” to “graph”; often they deal with the *very* small: a single event, a single person, or even a single day. Brooks’s memoir is like that. It is not an account of her entire life; rather, it is what its title declares, a book about a single Mormon girl: her story of her Mormonness and her relationship with the LDS Church through her journey’s swerves, straightaways, rapids, and calms. It does not preach or defend or attack. For readers expecting one or the other of a two-sided “conflict” over Mormonism’s validity, a simple rejection/critique story or conversion/affirmation narrative, her response is Yes! Or possibly No! Because she has found things to say about both sides. There is no shortage of deep and sincere affection for the Mormon doctrines and traditions that she grew up loving and finding security in. And there is only a little holding back on the anguish of the faith crisis that led her out of the church, and on the complexity of factors that have brought her back.

Brooks’s story begins with the comfortable warm-bread narrative of a protected, testimony-guarded, sure-thing Mormon life with her bishop dad and home-canning mom, her ward with fundraising activities and youth dances and Young Women’s Camp rich with camaraderie and discovery, her efforts to follow Marie Osmond’s guide to success in practically everything, and the allure of her future RM husband, to be found at BYU, in the almost mythical utopia of *Provo, Utah!* (she always italizes and exclaims it that way). The writing in this part of the book is lovely, at times gorgeously poetic; she is also wryly funny in her descriptions of eighth-grade Joanna following Marie’s beauty regimen and her friends’ girls’ camp awe at coming across their youth leader’s (enormous!) feminine hygiene products. It is a reflection of the author’s newly refound joy in her tradition, I think, that these descriptions of her simpler, naïve faith are much easier to read than the middle section of the narrative.

In college, in fact at BYU, ironically (in the sense of the word that Alanis Morissette never knew), Joanna Brooks’s faith took an enormous hit. Though she does not shy away from revealing the sources of her doubts and pain, she does not linger over the details or, as in the earlier

section, revel poetically in the description. The writing becomes more controlled, almost distant, as if the sting is still too fresh to be poked at. And who can blame her? Disillusionment is by definition painful, as she is fully aware. It is also, by definition that not many of us are happy about, necessary.

As I read about Brooks's disillusionment with the flawed cultural church and its flawed members (and saw in it the precursor to her return), I recognized patterns from other provinces of the human story. In the narrative arc of fiction, her college challenges would be the disrupted status quo; from mythology's hero cycle they represent the crisis when the protagonist's identity is painfully stripped away; and from a comparative religions point of view, the episode has all the earmarks of the deliberate disenchantment. In his article "Disenchantment: A Religious Abduction," anthropologist Sam Gill discusses certain tribal traditions from various parts of the globe wherein children are deliberately disenchanted with the religion they are being raised in.¹ The moment of their initiation into the mysteries and higher understanding of their faith is actually a moment of supreme disappointment. For Hopi children, the Kachina dancers, whom the children have been taught to revere as gods, take off their heads, which turn out to be masks, revealing relatives, neighbors, even parents who have duped the children. For Australian aboriginal children, the hidden noise of the voice of their god approaching is shown to be the spooky sound effects of bull-roarers, simple wooden slats tied to strings and spun through the air. For the African tribe Gill lived among, the children beat against a figure, which they are told is their god hiding behind a drapery; as they pummel it, they are led to believe that they, themselves, are responsible for "killing" the god of the tribe, and they are allowed neither to stop their battering nor to try to save him from the onslaught the initiated are forcing them to perform. In other words, in all of these tribal religions, the children who love, fear, respect, and rely on their gods must, at the moment they believe they are being initiated into mature faith, destroy the thing they believed in. In

1. Sam Gill, "Disenchantment," *Parabola* 1/3 (1976): 6–13.

fact, this is the very act that does lead them into mature faith. Interviewing an older Hopi woman, Gill records her saying she knows now that it was what she had to go through to understand the bigger spiritual truths behind the Kachina spirits, but that at the time it was devastating and broke her young heart.

The college portion of Brooks's memoir reminded me of the words of that Hopi woman. It is enormously comforting to have the sort of faith that a child raised Mormon has, and it is beyond merely jarring to have that faith challenged—it is agonizing. Brooks's story is similar to the tribal stories also because it is a story of how the faith tradition itself is the source of both the naïve faith of "little Joanna" *and* the discord of disillusionment. But it is *unlike* them in that it is not self-consciously so. Joanna's adolescent and young-adult faith is not challenged by a deliberate act of revelation or trickery, but by an unself-conscious shift in her awareness and priority coming into clash with an unbending system.

It is her utopian dream-school of BYU that Brooks sees punishing her favorite professor, Cecilia Konchar Farr, for the very feminist views that have begun to open new possibilities for Brooks. It is the self-righteous "good kids," the "believers" who shout at her and catcall her as she walks to her apartment in *Provo, Utah!* with a peace sign on her bag. It is her own family who, though they love her, find her new challenges off-putting and troubling, adding to, rather than subtracting from, a sense of betrayal, alienation, and crushing disappointment both parties feel as she goes through her faith crisis. The masks of unrealistic "Molly Mormon" perfectionistic expectation have fallen off, but college-aged Joanna is not so sure she was ever meant to see the man behind the curtain.

Gill does not leave out the Christian tradition of disenchantment in his essay. He uses as a Christian example the image of the Marys, the most devoted of Jesus's disciples, standing destitute in an empty tomb, having believed in Jesus the man and having nothing—*nothing*—on which to practice their faith's final act of love and respect, not even a dead body to anoint. But it is the very emptiness of the tomb, the very detail of their hope's crushing destruction, that is the sign and signal of Jesus the *Christ*. The nadir of hope is the signal of hope. In being disappointed in Jesus's

absence, the Marys' moment of Empty Tomb is the darkness before the dawn of resurrection and good news. It takes an angel to deliver heavenly news; the angel has to explain the joke that has been played, the trick of killing Death itself: you claimed you really believed him! But here you are looking for a god in a tomb! That's hilarious, really.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said that a person's mind, once stretched by a new idea, can never regain its original dimensions.² The Christian story can never undo the miracle of resurrection to get back to fully understanding the stage of hopelessness in which the Marys found themselves in that tomb, because we know how it ends. We know that the story of the empty tomb is not about Jesus using trickery or a mask to teach us, though some could say his mortality masked, for a while, his divinity. But though he would not deceive us, yet we foolish mortals would still be deceived. We're stupid like that. Certainly Joanna Brooks's mind can never return to her childlike, childish, magical-thinking kind of faith. But we know how that ends too. And so we can rejoice with her in her return. It is, satisfyingly if not unpredictably, love that restores her to her former church, though not to her former innocence of ignorance. She is not the same person she had been as a child, but is open now to the pain, and thus open to the innocence of guiltlessness, the empathy of a grown-up in the faith.

The last part of her memoir brings her, and us readers, back into the fold. She has the benefit and lovely support structure of a strong and thoughtful marriage to a strong and thoughtful man, and she has their children. As they become more than babies, she obviously wants to teach her children things about God and religion, but as the mother in a mixed-faith family, she struggles with her new ambivalence about what, and how much, to teach them. It is at the same time she is debating whether and how much of Mormonism to share with her children that the church was becoming involved in a cause she painfully disagrees with, California's Proposition 8 debate. So even though she wants to expose her children to what she remembers of the sweet parts of being LDS,

2. Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (1858), chap. 11.

she is more than reluctant to involve them in political activities with a cause for which she finds herself on the church's "wrong" side. Another spoiler: she does return, and she does not abandon her stance on marriage equality.

In fact, her conclusion is a call for an inclusiveness that might not have been as reflective had the Prop 8 situation not been the context for her return. She calls for room at the table for every brand of Mormon, non-Mormon, or Other she can think of; her rallying cry is for all the familiar and all the unfamiliar, even and especially the kinds of people her childhood self with its easily defined and shadowless good/evil distinctions might have found threatening, wrong, or at least misguided. Brooks's best good news: we're *all* the misguided. And so we are all the invited, invited to the table. That's always the surprising nature of grace and mercy, though: the Law killeth, but the Spirit giveth life, and the Spirit is a little out of control with the generosity, there, pardner. Innocent faith is made to die, to be buried in the waters of baptism and the fires of trial. Empty tombs and dark nights of the soul may seem so long as to be permanent, but then an angel comes and gives the punch line: why seek you the living among the dead? Why are you looking for a living Christ in a graveyard? You cannot find dead bodies or Death here; come and sit at the table with the Living.

Zina Petersen teaches courses in early British literature and language at Brigham Young University. She received her graduate degrees from The Catholic University of America in 1992 and 1997. Her research interests include the literary history of Christianity, mysticism, women's religious and spiritual writings, Chaucer, Malory, and King Arthur traditions.