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**Abstract** Review of *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith* (2005), by Martha Beck.

## RESPONSE TO *LEAVING THE SAINTS*

Boyd Jay Petersen

**K***irkus Reviews* assures us that Martha Beck's *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith* "is not a trashy exposé but a loving, sad account of coming home again."<sup>1</sup> However, those familiar with the "trashy Mormon exposés" of the nineteenth century will find in this book all the familiar chestnuts of that genre: the horrors of polygamy, the strange secrets of the temple, the dictatorial rule of church leaders, Joseph Smith's obvious failures as a translator of Egyptian, and his strange account of Native Americans being descendents of ancient Israelites. Even the Danites make their required appearance. Like other exposés, this book's treatment of most historical events amounts to little more than caricature.<sup>2</sup> Rather

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The first part of Petersen's response to Beck's book appears at [www.fairlds.org/Reviews/Rvw200504.html](http://www.fairlds.org/Reviews/Rvw200504.html) (accessed 1 November 2005). The second part, "As Things Stand at the Moment: Responding to Martha Beck's *Leaving the Saints*," pp. 240–51, is a follow-up to the previous response and was presented at the 2005 FAIR Conference. The text appears at [www.fairlds.org/Reviews/Rvw200506.html](http://www.fairlds.org/Reviews/Rvw200506.html) (accessed 1 November 2005).

1. *Kirkus Reviews* 72 (15 December 2004): 1174.

2. The one exception to this is Martha's treatment of the history of the Joseph Smith Papyri (pp. 150–60), where she does give a fairly detailed account; however, here she appears to rely mostly on Charles M. Larson's *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri* (1985; repr., Grand Rapids: Institute for Religious

Review of Martha Beck. *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith*. New York: Crown, 2005. ix + 306 pp. \$24.95.

than investigating complicated historical events, Martha provides one-dimensional portrayals of those events to show how silly, patriarchal, and violent Mormonism really is.

There are, however, two significant differences between this exposé and its antecedents. First, this book is surely one of the best written exposés I have encountered. As a teacher of literature, I found myself admiring the way Martha weaves this narrative. The book is well-paced, the writing is lively, the descriptions are vivid, and the wit sparkles. On the other hand, Martha has an annoying habit of placing herself rhetorically above everyone else in the narrative and sneering at all that is “not-Martha”—especially all that is Mormon. As a practicing Latter-day Saint, I found this off-putting. Despite its lively prose and *Kirkus*’s claims to the contrary, *Leaving the Saints* is still, at its core, an exposé.

The second difference between this book and previous exposés is the focus of its narrative: the book recounts Martha Beck’s recovered memories of sexual abuse at the hands of her father, unnamed in the book but recognizable to most Mormons as Hugh Nibley. As Martha’s brother-in-law and Hugh Nibley’s son-in-law and biographer,<sup>3</sup> I feel compelled to respond. At the outset, however, I must make four things perfectly clear:

1. This is not and should not be read as a *review* of the book as much as a *response* to it. I make no attempt to include all the requisite elements of a standard academic or popular book review.

2. Because of my proximity to this story—I have lived with its effects on my family for over a decade now—I cannot be dispassionate; I have a stake in this debate. But I also have insights others do not have that are both relevant and, I believe, compelling.

3. This response should not be seen as the “official” position of the Nibley family. While I cannot help but be influenced by my wife

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Research, 1992), and she repeats several of Larson’s mistakes. A more responsible approach is found in both John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).

3. Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2002).

and her family—and I have tried to be sensitive to their feelings—this response represents *my* opinion.

4. My goal is not to discredit or further alienate Martha. I sincerely wish her well. I have made every effort to confine myself strictly to matters of evidence from which a reasonable conclusion can be drawn about the credibility of her story.

### Martha's Claims

Picking up roughly where her previous memoir, *Expecting Adam*, left off, *Leaving the Saints* chronicles how Martha and her husband, John, retreat from the high-pressure world of Harvard to the more compassionate and supportive atmosphere of their native Utah Valley following the birth of their Down syndrome son, Adam. Both Martha and John began teaching at BYU, where, she claims, they witnessed “the Church’s ruthlessness as it silenced dissidents and masked truths that contradicted its published beliefs” (dust jacket). More disturbing is that, after beginning meditation and having a “white-light experience” while undergoing surgery, Martha began to remember sexual abuse at the hands of her father that is supposed to have occurred when she was between the ages of five and eight. Martha is quite explicit about her accusations of abuse but is mostly implicit about the details.

Among the explicit claims are (1) that she believes her father was likely a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of his mother and (2) that he was further traumatized on the grisly battlefields of World War II. In preparing my biography of Hugh, I noted that his mother and especially his grandmother were both fond of strange homemade “cures,” some of which were likely painful and frightening, but I found no evidence of abuse, either physical or sexual. World War II was no doubt painful for Hugh, but he must have worked through these issues before I began asking him questions about the war. I never noticed any symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in any of the many interviews I conducted with Hugh about his war years.

(3) Martha alleges that in 1967, when church authorities asked Hugh to translate the Joseph Smith Papyri, he was placed in a double-

bind situation that caused him to crack. He knew, Martha claims, that the church wanted him to assert that the text contained the Book of Abraham, but he also knew it to be the Egyptian Book of Breathing. As she puts it, “He could either lose his job, his livelihood, his social standing, his bully pulpit, by publicly revealing information that would undermine the very foundations of Mormonism, or he could lie flat out. In a way, I admire him for choosing the only other alternative: he went crazy” (p. 148). Martha makes these assertions in the face of facts that show just the opposite. She neglects to note that it was Hugh who first called scholarly and public attention to the fact that the papyri contained the text of the Egyptian Book of Breathing rather than the Book of the Dead.<sup>4</sup> She also fails to mention how Hugh, who confessed that for a period he was merely “skirmishing and sparring,” immediately launched into a series of monthly articles for the *Improvement Era* which ran during 1968–70 while simultaneously publishing more scholarly articles in *Dialogue* and *BYU Studies*.<sup>5</sup> She further omits mention of the fact that Hugh focused right from the start on what Klaus Baer stated was the “only” argument that “will get the Mormons out of the dilemma”—that it is not the Egyptian text but the English one that can provide evidence for its authenticity. And while Hugh did not rush into print with his own translation, in 1968 he did a translation of the papyri’s close cousin, “Book of Breathing, P. Louvre 3284,” which he circulated widely. And in 1975, Hugh included this translation with similar selections from the Joseph Smith Papyri in *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*. What is especially noticeable about this omission is that Martha herself

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4. Hugh Nibley, “Getting Ready to Begin: An Editorial,” *BYU Studies* 8/3 (1968): 245–49.

5. Hugh Nibley, “A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price,” ran in the *Improvement Era* from January 1968 through May 1970; “Phase One,” *Dialogue* 3/2 (1968): 99–105; “Prolegomena to Any Study of the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies* 8/2 (1968): 171–78; “Fragment Found in Salt Lake City,” *BYU Studies* 8/2 (1968): 191–94; “Getting Ready to Begin,” 245–54; “As Things Stand at the Moment,” *BYU Studies* 9/1 (1968): 69–102; “What Is ‘The Book of Breathing?’” *BYU Studies* 11/2 (1971): 153–87; “The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” *BYU Studies* 11/4 (1971): 350–99.

helped to illustrate this book<sup>6</sup>—an odd task to undertake for someone who claims to have had a “lifelong strange reaction to all things Egyptian,” who had repeated nightmares, “one in which [she] was trapped in the two-dimensional world of an ancient papyrus drawing . . . as the corpse of a dead man scuttled along behind me, right on my heels” (p. 146). It is also clear, from both Hugh’s publications and private correspondence, that during the years in question, he was at the height of his career; there is no indication of psychological breakdown. Furthermore, Hugh never lost “his job, his livelihood, his social standing, [or] his bully pulpit” for telling the truth while simultaneously defending the church.

Martha’s book mostly hints at the details of Hugh’s alleged breakdown, but evidently she believes that her father ritually abused her while reenacting Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, all the while wearing an Egyptian costume of Amut the Destroyer (pp. 121–22, 146–47).<sup>7</sup>

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6. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975). Martha is acknowledged for her help “drawing some of the pictures” on page xiii.

7. Since this response was first written, Martha has objected to this characterization of her memories, stating that it makes light of her allegations. But if I made this assumption, I was not alone. Many of the early reviews mentioned it. While there is nothing explicitly linking the dream sequence about Amut the Destroyer and the ritual abuse described in *Leaving the Saints*, the way Martha tells the story implies a causal chain of related events.

On page 146, Martha asks Hugh, “But I’m not at all clear how the Egyptian stuff ties in. . . . It was so bizarre. Do you remember that?” Then she says, the “peculiar details” of her memories—“they were so *weird*”—caused her to doubt herself, but “in the end, reinforced [her] conviction” that she had not made them up. She states that “the flashes of memory included hearing him mention Egypt repeatedly, and this aspect of my memories baffled me at first.” Then she discusses her nightmare of Amut the Destroyer standing outside her room. Later she talks about encountering her “nemesis” in a child’s book. Then she talks about asking her father “do you remember my alligator dreams? . . . The nightmares I had every week or two?” She says that his response was that she “was being ‘pursued by an evil spirit’” (p. 147).

As Meier Sternberg (or any Reader Response theorist for that matter) would argue, every act of reading is a process of gap filling, of putting together pieces of information that make sense of the text. And every reader is forced to make sense of a text by following the directions given by the writer. Here Martha may or may not have intentionally wanted us to believe that her father wore an Egyptian costume while he is supposed to have abused her, but the causal chain produced by juxtaposing this material together

Part of the reason it is so difficult to determine exactly what Martha believes happened is that she does not always distinguish between her memories and her dreams. In reading her book, one gets the feeling that Martha herself may not be able to distinguish where one ends and the other begins. Further, before setting out these strange memories/dreams, Martha contends that the very strangeness of these details somehow proves their truth: “The peculiar details of my memories had at first made me doubt myself—they were so *weird*—but in the end, reinforced my conviction that I hadn’t unconsciously made something up” (p. 146).

Innuendo and an apparently superdeveloped ability to read facial expressions and minute changes in skin color are among Martha’s main sources of insight. During a contrived meeting in a hotel room, when she confronts her father with the question, “What were you doing with all that Egyptian stuff? I mean, when you were performing your ‘Abrahamic sacrifices’ on me?” Martha then has her description of Hugh’s facial expression condemn him: “The blow lands right on target; my father flinches, his face flashing an expression that tells me a great deal. It isn’t just frightened. It certainly isn’t confused. It’s *knowing*, in a way that both chills and reassures me. It tells me that, while I can’t trust him, I can trust my own memory” (pp. 121–22). Could it possibly be that Hugh did not flinch at all, or if he did, that he flinched because he found Martha’s words so horribly strange and sad and alarming? Martha’s leading questions and her ability to “know” the minds of her interlocutors allow her to drive her points home with a forcefulness and conviction of “accuracy” that readers must see is just not there. Martha describes several other instances that demonstrate her ability to read the minds of others by the expressions on their faces and illustrate the precision of her personal skin-color lie detector (for example, pp. 88, 107, 127). She imagines that people turn different shades of blue, depending on the enormity of their lies: “powder blue for small lies, periwinkle for naughty fibs, cobalt for outright deception, and so on to deep navy” (p. 85). When she asks her father

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certainly leads the reader to this conclusion. If it is a misreading, it is a result of sloppy writing, not of sloppy reading.



about whether he is afraid of death, he replies, “of course not,” and “the skin all over his entire body [turns] as blue as his eyes” (p. 88). Such things may convict in Martha’s courtroom, but in the world I live in, most lies and half truths are not so easily revealed.

Another way Martha uses innuendo is by creating a causal chain of (often erroneously reported) events and then letting the reader draw a conclusion. In one instance, after leading the reader through a series of misreported events that hint that one of her sisters may be consciously or unconsciously aware of the abuse, Martha adds “but I’m trained as a social scientist, which means that I try very hard not to jump to conclusions” (p. 207). It appears, however, that she is more than happy for her readers to jump to conclusions for her.

Another frustrating methodological choice that Martha made is that she never gives the real names of anyone with the exception of herself, her husband, John, and their children. Members of her family of origin are all referred to as “my sister,” “my brother,” “my father,” or “my mother.” But everyone else gets a pseudonym, even people who were in the public spotlight and who were well-known at the time. I found this terribly frustrating, partly because it kept pulling me out of the narrative to speculate as to who each person was and partly because it made it impossible to corroborate many of the details in this book. I understand the need to use pseudonyms to protect some individuals from embarrassment or to prevent legal action against Martha or her publisher, but why use pseudonyms for everyone? Particularly since Martha makes such serious allegations, one would think she would want some witnesses to back up her words. But even her “witnesses”—her two cousins hiding in the hotel room with a tape recorder—are not named (pp. 5–6).

At one point in the book, Martha’s use of a pseudonym is downright disingenuous. After an altercation with her first therapist, Martha decided to go to another one who had been recommended to her. “Let’s call her Dr. Rachel Grant,” Martha writes on page 234. On the same page, she describes sitting in the waiting room before her first appointment with this woman and “second-guessing [her] decision” to see this therapist, “wonder[ing] if Dr. Grant was descended from former

Mormon president Heber J. Grant.” This gives Martha a narrative opening to tell a terribly funny family story about how her grandfather would accompany on the piano the tone-deaf President Grant when he sang and then change keys “in the middle of the prophet’s performances, creating excruciating discord as the prophet sang obliviously onward” (pp. 234–35). It is a good story. Almost good enough for us to forget that the name Rachel Grant is a *pseudonym* that Martha gave this therapist only a few sentences earlier. This account of her inner mind can be nothing but fiction.

A deep paranoia permeates Martha’s narrative. Granted, the events Martha describes would be harrowing, if true, but the conspiracy she describes seems to be straight out of *The X-Files* or *The History of the Saints, or An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*. Martha begins to get threatening notes from students (p. 223); she is then called in by her unidentified department chair after a student sends an anonymous letter to the General Authorities (p. 237); she then receives threatening anonymous phone calls (p. 241); and she and John then hear a “strange, intermittent clicking sound” on their phones and “[discover] that [their] phone line had been crossed with another line inside a phone junction box at the nearby Mormon chapel” (p. 233). They have the line repaired, but it starts “clicking” again. One day, she picks up the phone to hear a strange voice threaten, “I think that people who speak out against the Gospel shouldn’t be Church members. They should be dis-membered,” the voice pausing to emphasize the “clever word play” (p. 234). Dissident Mormons worry about parking their cars near Martha’s house because they do not want their license plates to be “written down by the Strengthening the Membership Committee” (p. 251), and Martha worries about the “foul play perpetrated by Mormonism’s lunatic fringe, which [pops] up in the back pages of Utah newspapers on a regular basis” (p. 224). Her therapist tells Martha, “If you do what it takes to get over this thing [the abuse], the Mormon Church is going to ruin your life” (p. 236). After learning that Martha intended to write this book, one ex-Mormon friend from Utah responds, “without a trace of levity,” “They’ll kill you” (p. 191).

The stake president who comes to visit after John has had his name removed from the church's records threatens them: "Bad things happen" to children of "apostate parents" (p. 259). Martha even resurrects the Danites, stating that "every now and then, Utah papers record murders with uniquely Mormon flavoring (death by temple-sanctioned methods, for example) and the word that goes out on the Latter-day grapevine is *Danite*" (p. 190). "I suspected that even though the Mormon powers that be might not actually threaten my life, they would probably try to ruin it," Martha intones. "Yes, these suspicions were outlandish. Yes, they were paranoid. And yes, they were completely accurate" (p. 182). While I know some of these things have happened to some individuals (for example, Hugh Nibley received threats after publishing some of his social commentary), the extreme nature of what Martha describes is truly incredible.

### Challenges to Martha's Accounts

The most serious problems with this book, however, are Martha's persistent hyperbolic assertions and outright distortions of fact. Martha's previous memoir, *Expecting Adam*, caused family members and many friends to raise eyebrows when they read events they had witnessed described in such exaggerated, often unrecognizable, ways. For example, when Martha described taking a year off from Harvard to read texts from Western philosophy and world religions after an existential crisis,<sup>8</sup> family members and close friends knew that she had taken the year off because of an anorexic breakdown, which caused her parents to make her come home and enter therapy, and that the reading assignments were all from a BYU honors colloquium she had audited during the time she was in Provo. When Martha said she was an atheist by the time she left for Harvard, these same family and friends were puzzled that an atheist had attended church regularly, married in the temple, and written an essay on maintaining faith for the *Ensign*. During this period, Martha had also coauthored a book with her husband, published by church-owned Deseret Book, on

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8. Martha Beck, *Expecting Adam* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 169.

recovering from compulsive behaviors like anorexia, drug addiction, and homosexuality by implementing gospel principles. The authors also bore their testimonies that they “accept as inspired the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, family members were shocked by the unkind way in which Martha portrayed them and their reaction to her news about Adam having Down syndrome. In that book, Martha describes her father laughing in a “loud, long, forced guffaw” and her brother commenting on how if retarded people were allowed to marry, “the half-brains in question should at least be voluntarily sterilized.”<sup>10</sup> Family members found this to be an unrecognizable and uncharitable description of their very real acceptance of her and her baby and their sincere respect for her choice not to abort. Likewise, Martha’s ex-husband states in a note to me that his father and family were offended by the way she characterized them in the book. “My Dad and Mom were *so* sensitive to Adam—my Dad went out and got books on Down syndrome as soon as he heard the diagnosis—and [Martha] made them look like fools.” Furthermore, Martha’s characterization of “Goatstroke,” the overly demanding and mean-spirited Harvard professor, cost John a wonderful friendship. The real “Goatstroke,” John writes, “got Martha into her Sociology program, and was always helpful and kind to her.” Upon reading the book, this professor “was devastated by her characterization” and “my relationship with him—which was very strong—was ruined forever as well [as was hers].”<sup>11</sup>

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9. See Martha Nibley Beck, “Cultivating Faith: LDS Students at New England Universities,” *Ensign*, July 1984, 32–36. Martha Nibley Beck and John C. Beck, *Breaking the Cycle of Compulsive Behavior* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), xi.

10. Beck, *Expecting Adam*, 243.

11. John Beck, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 8 January 2005. In fact, Martha’s paper trail of exaggeration goes back to her very first published article, Martha Nibley, “A Tale of Two Universities,” which appeared in *BYU Today*, November 1982, 3–6. There she compared the intellectual rigor and “Creeping Cynicism” of Harvard with the “safety” and intellectual indolence of BYU, where she was attending while taking her year off to get counseling for anorexia. For example, she described a comparative literature class in which overwhelmed students complained about being given a syllabus with a whole page of readings. Comparing it to Harvard, Martha lamented, “I can check out some supplementary stuff to make this feel like a class” (*ibid.*, 5). Her credibility was tweaked by a letter to the editor from George S. Tate, then chair of the Department of

Martha begins and ends *Expecting Adam* by assuring readers that the events related therein are factual. “I didn’t fictionalize anything. It’s all true,” claims Martha.<sup>12</sup> The “author’s note” at the end of the book reassures readers again that it is not a work of fiction, that she is telling the truth, that the material has come straight from her journals, that she has had others read the book to verify that the facts are straight, and that she has been trained by Harvard as a sociologist to accurately tell “‘just the facts.’”<sup>13</sup> Granted, the story told in that book is extraordinary, but few memoirs go so far to assure us of their veracity. One had to wonder whether it was the reader or Martha herself she was trying to convince. Indeed, her ex-husband later confessed that he felt troubled by that book. “She wrote it as fiction first,” John writes. “It was rejected over and over again. So her editor suggested writing it as non-fiction. She changed very little in it as she transformed it to ‘non-fiction.’ Many parts were clearly fiction (but now with our actual names attached to them).” John continues, “So it makes me wonder about [*Leaving the Saints*] as well.”<sup>14</sup>

It was 1991 when Martha first told her family that she believed she was a victim of abuse. When confronted with this charge, Martha’s siblings and her mother did not dismiss it out of hand, but assessed its strengths and weaknesses and, especially as the story’s details grew, came to doubt its veracity. Since that time, they have been wondering, “where did *that* come from?” After all, the Nibley’s old brick home just south of BYU campus was small, packed tightly with eight children and two parents. During the years in question, Martha shared a room with two of her sisters, neither of whom had any memories of abuse. Bedroom doors were left open, the parents’ bedroom was right next to the girls’ room, and Phyllis was an incredibly light sleeper who

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Humanities and Comparative Literature, in the March 1983 issue of *BYU Today*. Tate confessed that Martha’s essay was “delightful, reflective, and remarkably mature,” but objected to Martha’s “distortion of fact” since the syllabus was, in fact, four pages long, and “the teacher of the course received his training and taught at Harvard before coming to BYU, and if anything characterizes his teaching, it is a conscious effort to transplant the best of the Harvard tradition to BYU” (*ibid.*, 49).

12. Beck, *Expecting Adam*, 7.

13. Beck, *Expecting Adam*, 327.

14. John Beck, e-mail to Petersen, 8 January 2005.

would wake at the first hint of a child in distress. Teenage children were coming and going at all hours of the day and night. There was little privacy and no chance for secrecy. No one has any memory of any inappropriate contact between Hugh and Martha. The children all know their mother was not the kind of dominated housewife to allow one of her children to be hurt while she was present. They know that differing intellectual and personal views were not only allowed in their home, but encouraged. And some of them have had regrets and anger about the way their father—obsessed with his research and writing, and constantly in demand to lecture, to write, and to travel—neglected them in their youth. Martha’s siblings range from agnostics to believers. And each of them is extremely forthright about family problems. Yet each of them, on his or her own terms, came to doubt Martha’s story.<sup>15</sup>

After reading *Leaving the Saints*, many in Martha’s audience will likely be asking “where did *that* come from?”—the same question her family has been asking. One has to doubt the reliability of Martha’s memory when confronting the internal inconsistencies in this book. Some events recounted in this memoir seem implausible but cannot be verified one way or the other. For example, Martha claims that when she was working on her dissertation, she went to the BYU library and discovered that someone had censored all the articles about Mormon dissident Sonia Johnson from the newspapers (p. 83). I cannot prove this did not happen, but it seems highly unlikely. Just by searching the library’s online catalog, one gets over forty hits for information on Sonia Johnson, and Johnson’s book *From Housewife to Heretic*<sup>16</sup> is located both in special collections and in the general stacks where any undergraduate can check it out. While I have not checked the micro-

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15. Furthermore, it was with the full knowledge and support of Hugh, Phyllis, and other family members that I included Martha’s accusations in my *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*, 400 and 400–401 n. 13. A family that feels it has something to hide does not make such revelations public. In a recent review of my biography, D. Michael Quinn stated that “including this discussion in an ‘authorized biography’ is an ultimate example of the dedication to honest history by Hugh Nibley, his wife, and their children,” in review of *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*, by Boyd Jay Petersen, *Journal of Mormon History* 30/2 (2004): 261.

16. Sonia Johnson, *From Housewife to Heretic* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981).

fiche that Martha refers to (and cannot, since she does not give specific dates and articles she could not find), I have consulted with several librarians who have been at the Harold B. Lee Library for many years, and they all tell me that no effort has ever been made to censor information from newspaper articles.

Some less important details also give one pause, such as the occasion when Martha's Utah Valley hairstylist "checked [her] left hand for a wedding ring, then reported [her] request [to have her hair cut "boy-short"] to the owner of the salon, who asked [her] to call [her] husband to ascertain that [she] had his permission to change [her] hairstyle" (p. 193). I have no idea whether this detail is true or not, but my wife has changed her hairstyle many times; most recently she got it cut extremely short, and I have never had a stylist seek my permission, nor has my wife reported such a strange request being made. Or what about when Martha says the Primary president of their LDS ward tried to lure their daughter, Katie, into getting baptized after John had left the church by bribing her with cookies and telling her about a "baptism party" at the church building (p. 274). Again, this cannot be verified, but it just does not sound right. I served as a ward mission leader for a couple of years and know that you cannot baptize a minor without his or her parents' consent.

More important, Martha describes Hugh's "episode of amnesia" and states that she "talked to the neurosurgeon who examined [her] father during the spate of forgetfulness," who told her that "there was no stroke, no brain lesion, no physiological explanation at all" and "concluded that the amnesia was psychogenic, a mental mist that rose from some psychological or emotional conflict too intense for [her] father to bear" (p. 21). I have no idea with whom Martha spoke, and unfortunately both doctors who attended Hugh at that time are now dead, but several things ring untrue about the way she describes this event. First of all, Martha distorts the events surrounding this episode by stating that Hugh was "supposed to deliver an address on certain issues related to Mormonism and Egyptology" (p. 21). However, the event in question was actually a BYU forum that took place on 21 May 1974, in which Hugh was interviewed by Louis Midgley. Hugh

was extremely nervous about this interview. It was held in the BYU Marriott Center (BYU's basketball arena) and was going to be completely spontaneous, with no note cards, no prewritten text, and no prearranged questions. Midgley's goal was to capture the spontaneity of Hugh's wit. Hugh is good with "off the cuff" comments, but when appearing before a crowd he always had note cards or a prepared text to read from. All these factors had Hugh feeling extremely anxious about the event. During the interview, all sorts of topics were discussed, including the temple, education, the environment, and politics. Hugh did briefly refer to Egyptian texts, but it was not the focus of his remarks.<sup>17</sup>

I have shared Martha's description of this event with a medical school faculty member at Indiana University who thought that the way Martha describes these events is overstatement. First, it was highly unlikely that a neurosurgeon would be consulted unless there were "some sort of surgical lesion," and family members confirm that the two doctors who saw Hugh at this time were internists, not neurosurgeons. Second, Martha is correct that the most likely prognosis for Hugh's symptoms was not a stroke since there were no other symptoms besides the amnesia, but this "amnesia" is usually brought on by stress, not some "mental mist" arising from emotional or psychological conflict. The stress of the forum was clearly sufficient to induce this condition. I also find it highly suspect that a neurosurgeon would deem it appropriate to discuss the cause of this amnesia with Martha, either at the time (she would have been only eleven) or years after the event. I tried to get information from doctors about Hugh for my "authorized" biography, and all of them told me that it would breach medical ethics to speak with me without a signed authorization from their patient. Finally, I doubt any neurosurgeon would be willing, or feel competent, to diagnose a psychological explanation as detailed and complex as Martha describes.<sup>18</sup>

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17. BYU Forum interview of Hugh Nibley by Louis Midgley, 21 May 1974. A transcript of the event has been available through FARMS as "Nibley the Scholar."

18. Dr. Russell D. Meldrum, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 20 January 2005; 21 January 2005. This doctor described a similar episode he encountered in his professional duties. The daughter of one of his patients was diagnosed with ovarian can-



Some events described in *Leaving the Saints* are disputed outright by Martha's siblings, her ex-husband, and unrelated witnesses who either were present when the events took place or were confidants of Martha's at the time. For example, Martha maintains that after she began to recover these memories of abuse, one of her "chief criteria for choosing" her first therapist, whom she names Mona, was to find someone who "didn't know [her] father from Bonzo the Chimp" (p. 162). Martha claims that she "nearly choked on [her] fibrillating heart and was hugely relieved when [Mona] actually accepted [her] memories without so much as a twitch" (p. 210). This is disingenuous. In conversations Martha had with her sisters at the time, Martha told them that she had read many self-help books, performed self-hypnosis to "discover" the hidden memories of incest, and then sought out a therapist who "specialized" in recovered memories of sexual abuse. She also tried to persuade her sisters and husband to use the same techniques to discover hidden trauma. "Martha always was hypnotizing herself and trying to hypnotize me," states John. "She tried getting me to go under on multiple occasions. I guess I was a tough subject."<sup>19</sup> The therapist that Martha calls Mona in her book (who met with Martha's sisters and a brother in a therapy session she describes in her "Gang Bang" chapter) was Lynne Finney, who had in 1990 already published her book *Reach for the Rainbow*, which claims to help survivors "recover memories" of abuse and provides "advanced healing for survivors of sexual abuse."<sup>20</sup> Clearly Martha knew she was going to someone who would be disposed to accept her stories. To say that she was shocked that Mona believed her and that her only thought was to find someone who did not know her father is not telling the whole truth.<sup>21</sup>

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cer, and the stress of this situation proved too much for the mother, so she "forgot" that she had a daughter. The situation at hand can easily bring on the symptoms of amnesia.

19. John Beck, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 17 January 2005.

20. Lynne D. Finney, *Reach for the Rainbow: Advanced Healing for Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Park City, UT: Changes, 1990).

21. Following the "memory wars" of the 1990s, Finney is now a "retired psychotherapist" who bills herself as an "author, educator, life coach, motivational speaker, [and] lawyer." See her Web page at [lynnefinney.com/about.htm](http://lynnefinney.com/about.htm) (accessed 2 November 2005).

Two of the central points of the book are also disputed by Martha's now ex-husband. Martha describes in quite explicit detail scars that she maintains confirm her having been abused. However, John states that at the time of her premarital exam performed at Harvard, "Martha never claimed the doctor saw scars. He just asked what kind of contraception she'd been using up to that point. When she said she wasn't having sex, he gave her a disbelieving look." This could be simply because he could not believe that she was not sexually active since she was of college age and engaged to be married. And in a later exam, a Provo doctor not only did *not* notice scars, but he warned Martha to start "loosening up" so that sexual intercourse would not be uncomfortable. If the Harvard doctor saw anything to indicate previous sexual experience, John suggests it may have been caused by a neighbor boy who molested her when she was a young girl. This incident in itself could very well be the source of the memories that Martha has come to embellish with strange details and to associate with her father. While several of her sisters knew about the molestation from the time it happened, John never learned about it until the early 1990s, when Martha began having memories of abuse. "After she told me about the neighbor incident, she never doubted that memory," states John. "But she often expressed doubt about her memories of her father abusing her." He stresses Martha's reluctance to believe herself. "She literally said to me on many occasions: 'I'm such a bad person to have made up those terrible memories about my father.'" John characterizes the fact that she does not mention this incident of sexual molestation by the neighbor in the book as "a *huge* 'oversight.'"<sup>22</sup>

Another detail that John disputes is Martha's claim that she and John left the church because of their growing dissatisfaction with the way the church was silencing dissidents. Martha's presentations at the BYU Women's Conferences in 1992 and 1993, which are published in the official proceedings, certainly do not reveal any great disenchantment with the church or its leaders. In her 1993 presentation, Martha argues that Mormon women need to learn to be stronger, speak the

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22. John Beck, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 8 January 2005; 18 January 2005; and 8 February 2005.

whole truth, and listen to the Spirit of Christ. There is no sense of paranoia in the talk, no sense of Martha being disillusioned with the church or its teachings, and no hint of her being abused. Parts of the talk, where she tells the audience “anything I say might be absolutely wrong,” and where she talks about a study by Solomon Asch, sound like material mentioned in *Leaving the Saints*, but all are given a very Mormon context in the speech.<sup>23</sup>

There was, however, another reason for Martha and John’s leaving the church: their sexual orientation. Until recently, Martha has only hinted about this detail, and she does not reveal it in the book, but has outed herself on the book’s Web site. John states that, “One of the reasons we both left the Church is because we are gay.” He continues, “Martha’s leaving the Church was *very* tied up with the affair (mostly emotional affair, but some physicality involved) that she was having at that time.” John stresses that both Martha’s affair and her sexual abuse by the neighbor boy are “huge variables,” and “if she were doing a regression analysis as a sociologist, she’d have to include them in the equation to explain the correlations.”<sup>24</sup>

There are too many other events that are disputed by family and friends to cover here. But Martha’s characterizations of her mother Phyllis as “the reigning terror of [her] childhood” (p. 44), of Martha

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23. “Adult Spiritual Development: A Conversation with Francine R. Bennion and Martha N. Beck,” in *Women and Christ: Living the Abundant Life*, ed. Dawn Hall Anderson, Susette Fletcher Green, and Marie Cornwall (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 145–66; Martha N. Beck, “Invincible Summer: Finding Grace Within,” in *Women in the Covenant of Grace*, ed. Dawn Hall Anderson and Susette Fletcher Green (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 79–94, especially 87 and 93.

24. John Beck, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 8 January 2005; 8 February 2005. Although Martha has not been eager to share this information, I want to be clear that I am not “outing” her. She hinted at this detail on the dust jacket to *Expecting Adam*, which states: “She lives in Phoenix with her husband, three children, and best friend, Karen.” In an article published for Salon.com, she wrote about buying a house with both John and Karen and described Karen as being “her other mother,” someone who is naturally able to nurture both Martha and Martha’s children ([www.salon.com/mwt/feature/1999/05/04/karen/index.html](http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/1999/05/04/karen/index.html), accessed 2 November 2005). Even though Martha never discusses this in *Leaving the Saints*, the Web site accompanying the book states that Martha “lives in Phoenix, Arizona, with her three teenagers; her partner of ten years, Karen Gerdes, a professor of social work, and their two dogs” at [leavingthesaints.com/author.html](http://leavingthesaints.com/author.html) (accessed 2 November 2005).

being one of the “favorite targets” of Hugh’s “violent temper” (p. 125), of Hugh having war “flashbacks” (p. 89), of Phyllis corroborating the abuse and then denying it (pp. 130–31), of church leaders frequenting the Nibley home (p. 31), of Hugh never speaking of his near-death experience (pp. 85–86), of Phyllis never babysitting Martha’s children (p. 99), of there being a family motto of not touching any child over four (p. 119), of the Becks’ phones being tapped (p. 233), of Phyllis not liking the word *mom* (p. 139), of Hugh being afraid of death (pp. 88–89), of the church “controlling” and “owning” Hugh (p. 169), of Hugh being concerned with money (p. 148), as well as other details, are contested by siblings, colleagues, friends, parents, and her ex-husband.

Other events described in the book are disputed by the facts. For example, in chapter 24 of *Leaving the Saints*, Martha asserts that she met a man who “‘had a job for [her] dad’s publisher’” as “‘one of the flunkies who checked his footnotes’” (p. 165). This “Man in Tweed” told Martha that her father “‘makes [his footnotes] all up,’” that “‘conservatively, 90 percent of them’” are not real. “‘I helped cover it up,’” he says (p. 166). She asserts that this man gave her a list of other note checkers and that when she “‘contacted them [she] heard unanimous confirmation that a great many of the footnotes in his works were splendiferously fictional” (p. 169). I have contacted many of the note checkers and editors of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (I cannot contact “Tweedy” since I have no idea who he is, if he exists at all), and they all confirm that, while Hugh has been sloppy—at times mistranslating a text or overstating his case—he does not make up his sources.<sup>25</sup>

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25. Todd Compton, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 8 January 2005; Glen Cooper, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 25 December 2004; John Gee, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 27 December 2004; William Hamblin, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 24 December 2004; Stephen Ricks, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 9 January 2005.

Likely the most damning review of Hugh’s scholarly work has been Kent P. Jackson’s review of *Old Testament and Related Studies*, vol. 1 of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, which appeared in *BYU Studies* 28/4 (1988): 114–19. In that review, Jackson critiques Nibley’s “tendency to gather sources from a variety of cultures all over the ancient world, lump them all together, and then pick and choose the bits and pieces he wants” and to read into these sources things that “simply don’t seem to be there” (*ibid.*, 115). He

Martha also reports that BYU professors were told not to publish in “alternate voices” journals—which she describes as anything from “the *Christian Science Monitor* to *Hustler*” (p. 79). In fact, BYU professors are encouraged and their tenure status requires them to publish in peer-reviewed academic journals. The only places where there is any concern for BYU professors is when they publish in *Sunstone* or *Dialogue*, journals that church leaders apparently feel may undermine the mission of the church. However, BYU professors still *do* publish in

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says Hugh takes phrases out of context, does not provide sufficient documentation for some sources, provides documentation “overkill” on others, and does not give sufficient evidence for some of his assertions. Additionally, Jackson took Nibley to task for his sarcasm and name-calling, “which have no place in serious scholarship” (ibid., 116). But in all of this, Jackson never hints that Nibley simply “made up” his sources. For a further discussion of this criticism, see the review of Beck’s book by Kent P. Jackson, “Leaving the Facts and the Faith,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 119–20; and Louis Midgley, “The First Steps,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): lii–liii n. 96.

John Gee recently completed a statistical analysis of one of Hugh’s articles chosen at random to establish the accuracy of the footnotes. In looking at Hugh’s essay “Victoriosa Loquacitas: The Rise of Rhetoric and the Decline of Everything Else” as it appeared in its original form in *Western Speech* 20/2 (1956): 57–82 (reprinted in *The Ancient State* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991], 243–86), Gee discovered that “87% of the footnotes were completely correct, 8% of the footnotes contained typographical errors, 5% were wrong in some other way (e.g., frequently right author, right page, wrong title). In no case could I determine that any of the errors in the footnotes were intentional or that any of the footnotes were fabrications” (John Gee, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 13 January 2005).

In a later study, Gee analyzed the footnotes in one of Hugh’s Egyptian works, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*. Selecting a chapter from the book at random (chapter 3, the second-longest chapter in the book), Gee found that “94% of the citations were correct, 4% were typographical errors, and 2% were wrong.” It was Gee’s determination that “the results seem to show that Nibley was more accurate when dealing with a Mormon topic, that his Egyptian work was more accurate than his classics work, and that his work on *Message* was better than normal, not worse.” Further, Gee stated that “I have never seen any case where Hugh Nibley ever fabricated or made up a source. After looking up thousands of citations, I have seen him make just about every mistake I think one could make, but I have never seen him make up anything” (John Gee, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 14 March 2005).

Todd Compton wrote to me (e-mail, 8 January 2005): “I was very disillusioned with Nibley’s scholarship when I checked his footnotes carefully. However, I believe he was misinterpreting, not making things up. Furthermore, I believe that saying that 90% of his footnotes were wrong is a wild overstatement, based on my experience editing *Mormonism and Early Christianity*.” As William Hamblin has pointed out, “sloppiness is not dishonesty; it is not good, but it is not fraud” (William Hamblin, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 12 January 2005).

these journals. I have published in both and continue to teach part-time at BYU, and the cover story for the October 2004 issue of *Sunstone* was written by Duane E. Jeffery of the BYU Department of Biology.<sup>26</sup>

Martha also writes that BYU would “have a hard time legally firing [her] from [her] job. [She] was a known rebel, but still a member of the BYU faculty” (p. 259). This is also false. Martha was part-time faculty at BYU. As a part-time faculty member of BYU’s honors program, I know that we are hired on a semester-to-semester basis at the will of the department and university. If there are no sections to teach, I get no contract. If I say or do something in the classroom that is inappropriate, they can choose not to offer me another contract. There are no promises, no long-term contracts, no benefits, and no tenure track for part-time faculty. BYU can choose not to offer a contract to any part-time faculty member at any time, and it is perfectly legal, as it is at any other school, public or private.

Martha claims that after the Joseph Smith Papyri were acquired by the church on 27 November 1967, “the papyri were kept under lock and key, shown only to those who could be absolutely trusted to support Joseph Smith” (p. 158). This grossly distorts the truth. While few people got to see the papyri themselves (it is not uncommon for libraries not to show ancient documents to just anyone since they are usually extremely fragile), the church did publish, “with commendable promptness,” as non-Mormon Egyptologist Klaus Baer stated, sepia-tinted photographs of the papyri in the church magazine, the *Improvement Era*, in February 1968, less than three months after the church acquired them. Baer, writing to Jerald and Sandra Tanner, called the reproductions “quite good ones” and stated that the timely publication was especially impressive “when you consider that such an important Egyptological discovery as the Abusir papyri was jealously guarded by assorted public and private owners for 75 years during which they neither studied them nor let anyone else work with them.”<sup>27</sup>

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26. Duane E. Jeffery, “Noah’s Flood: Modern Scholarship and Mormon Traditions,” *Sunstone*, October 2004, 27–45.

27. Klaus Baer, correspondence to Jerald and Sandra Tanner, 13 August 1968, copy in my possession.

Martha also maintains that her father “had never studied Egyptian” and that it was only after the discovery of the papyri that he was “hustled off to study Egyptian with experts at the University of Chicago” (p. 158). It appears she got these false ideas from Charles Larson’s book, *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri*.<sup>28</sup> Both of these details are wrong and unfair. It is impossible to pin down exactly when Hugh first began studying Egyptian; he maintained he first started dabbling in the language in 1927 at the age of seventeen. It is clear, however, that Hugh was working with Egyptian texts in his PhD dissertation in 1938 and in articles he published in 1945, 1948, 1949, and 1956.<sup>29</sup> He spent a sabbatical during the 1959/60 academic year teaching at Berkeley and studying Egyptian with Klaus Baer. And his 1966/67 sabbatical at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago was actually completed before the papyri had been discovered.<sup>30</sup>

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28. Larson, *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus*, 54, states falsely that Hugh studied Egyptian only after he learned about the papyri. While Martha does not name the sources she used for her research, Martha recommends Larson’s book on the book’s accompanying Web page at [leavingthesaints.com/bboard.html](http://leavingthesaints.com/bboard.html) (accessed 2 November 2005).

29. See Hugh Nibley, “The Roman Games as a Survival of an Archaic Year-Cult” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1939); “Sparsiones,” *Classical Journal* 40/9 (1945): 515–43 (reprinted in *Ancient State*, 148–94); “The Book of Mormon as a Mirror of the East,” *Improvement Era*, April 1948, 202–4; 249–51 (essentially reprinted as “Men of the East,” in *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], 25–42); “The Arrow, the Hunter, and the State,” *Western Political Quarterly* 2/13 (1949): 328–44 (reprinted in *Ancient State*, 1–32); and “Egypt Revisited,” which ran in the *Improvement Era* from March through June 1956 (reprinted in *Lehi in the Desert*, 308–49). Thanks to John Gee for his research on Hugh’s use of Egyptian, which he published in his review of Larson’s book, “A Tragedy of Errors,” *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 93–119.

30. While it is unclear exactly when Hugh first learned for certain of the papyri’s existence, the first time he discussed rumors of the papyri’s existence is when he wrote to Klaus Baer that “recent evidence has been claimed that [the Joseph Smith Papyri] escaped the [Chicago] fire and are still kicking around somewhere” (10 August 1962); by March 1963, Hugh wrote Baer, “Somebody here has just located a pile of unpublished and unknown Egyptian manuscripts that were in the possession of Joseph Smith. I haven’t seen them yet, but there may be something significant” (29 March 1963). Baer was, at the same time, apparently aware of the papyri’s existence. Baer later stated that he saw photographs of the papyri as early as 1963 (Klaus Baer, correspondence to Jerald Tanner, 13 August 1968). So it is very likely that by the time his 1966/67 sabbatical rolled around, Hugh was aware that the papyri existed and that the church might acquire them.

The most amusing disputable “fact” Martha provides is her claim that men at BYU are required to wear socks “on the premise that the hair on human ankles can be thought of as an extension of pubic hair” (pp. 77–78). While socks were part of the BYU dress and grooming standards between 1982 and 1992 (they are no longer mentioned), the only official justification for the rule was to “reflect the language” of the church’s *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet. The pubic-hair justification is nothing more—at most—than BYU folklore that Martha presents as fact.<sup>31</sup>

Martha states that her “family’s code” prevents her siblings from believing her, that she is “the traitor to our family’s code of conduct, the enemy of everything we once stood for together. [Their] father was [their] claim to fame, [their] saving glory. Turning against him in such a shocking way was like using a burning flag to set fire to our supreme commander” (p. 217). I find this to be a grossly unfair accusation. I came from a family that *did* keep secrets—nothing major, but my parents cared deeply that the neighbors not know that they did not live by “cookie-cutter Mormon” codes. I was absolutely shocked when I married into the Nibley family because if there is anything bad to be said about the family, it is the Nibley family that will say it. They will tell you exactly which members are disenchanting with or have left the church; they will tell you that they grew up in a messy house where Hugh’s idea of yard work consisted of mowing carefully around the dandelions; they will tell you that their father would add yeast to the apple cider to make it “virtuous”; and they will wax eloquent about their own neuroses and personal hang-ups. They will tell you very

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However, Baer later wrote that he doubted “very much that [Hugh’s] stay in Chicago had anything to do with purchasing the papyri” (Klaus Baer, correspondence to Wesley P. Walters, 29 August 1967, my private collection). Regardless, to suggest that Hugh’s interest in and study of Egyptian began after the papyri were acquired is completely incorrect. See my treatment of the events surrounding the discovery of the Joseph Smith Papyri in *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*, 314–24.

31. See Kallee Nielsen, “Modesty a Given for Most Students,” *BYU Newsnet*, 15 March 2002, [newsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/37652](http://newsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/37652) (accessed 28 November 2005). Just to be certain, I spoke with Gordon Daines, the university archivist at BYU, about this allegation. He went through all the relevant official papers from the period on the Honor Code and found nothing about pubic hair and socks.



openly about every dysfunction of their family—and their efforts to overcome them. The fact that none of Martha’s siblings support her claims of incest is the result, not of some family code, but of her siblings finding her claims simply unbelievable.

Martha’s “desperate thirst for data in any area related to [her] father” (p. 3) is also disingenuous since she quite obviously never read any of her father’s correspondence, never interviewed any of his colleagues and friends, never watched the documentary made by her brother, and read only one page—the one referring to her allegations, which she also misrepresents—of my biography of her father. In addition to distorting details of Hugh’s Egyptian studies and episode of amnesia, she gets most of the details of Hugh’s life wrong, including his war stories, near-death experience, and “five o’clocks” (which were prescient moments, not flashbacks). And Martha’s lack of familiarity with Hugh’s writings and thought is simply astounding (although one is tempted to believe she used her father’s satirical “How to Write an Anti-Mormon Book [A Handbook for Beginners]” as a writing manual).<sup>32</sup> Martha writes about a man she knows only through her own, very muddled, memories. And, given her unreliability on so many fronts, I would suggest that her accusations are of things that only happened in her very troubled mind.

## Conclusions

Martha describes herself in several places as one committed to solid scholarship and hence persuaded only by evidence: “Thus began my love affair with evidence” (p. 5); “I followed the Baconian model of believing nothing until it was proven true” (p. 9); “I became almost maniacally committed to . . . precise wording and conditional assertion” (p. 209); “[My] strict sociological education served me well in investigating the return of my repressed memories” (p. 209). Throughout this book, as with her other books, it is obvious that she

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32. Found in *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 474–580. For such a comparison, see the review of Beck’s book by Gregory Taggart, “How Martha Wrote an Anti-Mormon Book (Using Her Father’s Handbook as Her Guide?),” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 123–70.

distorts the record as much as or more than she reports it, jumps to conclusions more than provides evidence leading to conclusions, and blurs fact and fantasy. But to stick to the facts requires more than simply assuring readers that you do. You actually have to stick to them—something, it seems, that Martha seldom does.

Considering the nature of her allegations, it seems strange that Martha is not more careful in recounting her story. As readers confront the hyperbolic language, the inaccurate characterizations of Latter-day Saints, the factual errors, and the distortions in this book, I believe they will be forced to conclude that Martha Beck is not a reliable narrator. She is, however, a fabulous storyteller. Perhaps we can learn something from Fawn Brodie, who once wrote that, “A man’s memory is bound to be a distortion of his past in accordance with his present interests, and the most faithful autobiography is likely to mirror less what a man was than what he has become.”<sup>33</sup> Martha has a very different life now than she did when she and her now ex-husband collaborated on *Breaking the Cycle of Compulsive Behavior*. To retell her past in such a distorted way may be nothing more than a heart-breaking attempt to justify her leaving the Saints.

### **As Things Stand at the Moment: Responding to Martha Beck’s *Leaving the Saints***

I find myself in a strange predicament today. I had not intended to discuss Martha Beck’s book *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith*. FAIR did not ask me to speak about it, and, personally, I would rather talk about something—*anything*—else. I knew that some might want to hear what I have to say on the topic, that others might prefer not to hear what I have to say. I also believe that, even though my position is obviously biased, I have access to information that others do not have that documents the factual distortions in Martha’s book. I understand this apologetic need to respond to Martha’s allegations and feel it keenly. But as a family member, I

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33. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), 275.

also share with my wife, her mother, and her brothers and sisters frustration and resentment that all but one of the newspapers ran obituaries about Hugh Nibley in which his significant life and legacy were overshadowed by the hideous lies from Martha's book. Furthermore, the timing of this whole ordeal has made it horribly painful to us all. *The New York Times* brought Martha's allegations to national attention on 24 February 2005, the very day Hugh Nibley passed away.<sup>34</sup> So please understand that I harbor great resentment about both the book and the timing of its release.

Furthermore, I feel like most of what I have to say I have already said in my response to her book. So I wanted to move on, to focus on Hugh's life and legacy, and to get beyond the shadow cast upon it by his treacherous daughter. However, on 16 July, the *Deseret News* published an article about the *Sunstone* Symposium and FAIR's conference, which said there would be sessions at *Sunstone* discussing Martha's book and that I would be speaking about Martha's accusations here at FAIR's conference.<sup>35</sup> The article went on to note that *Sunstone's* editor, Dan Wotherspoon, had "considered inviting Beck to the conference but decided against it, opting rather for a variety of panelists to offer their assessments from praise to criticism." It is true that Wotherspoon decided against inviting Martha. His reasoning was that she did not meet the criteria of the *Sunstone* mission statement, which calls for a "responsible interchange of ideas that is respectful of all people and what they hold sacred."<sup>36</sup> While *Sunstone* has had critical voices at its symposium, Wotherspoon felt that Martha's book is not just critical of Mormon culture, but that the book mocks that culture and its temple rituals in a mean-spirited way.

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34. Edward Wyatt, "A Mormon Daughter's Book Stirs a Storm," *New York Times*, 24 February 2005, E1. The following day, the same reporter wrote the obituary for the *Times*. Edward Wyatt, "Hugh Nibley, Outspoken Mormon Scholar, Dies at 94," *New York Times*, 25 February 2005, A21. Although the obituary was very respectful, Martha's claims were front and center.

35. Carrie A. Moore, "Smith is Focus of 2 Annual Gatherings: Sunstone and FAIR Conferences Plan Variety of Topics," *Deseret News*, 16 July 2005, E1.

36. Found at [www.sunstoneonline.com/sunstone/sun-history.asp](http://www.sunstoneonline.com/sunstone/sun-history.asp) (accessed 20 November 2005).

As to my speaking about Martha here, I do not have a clue where the reporter got that idea since the official conference program said I would be speaking about Hugh Nibley. What makes this all so difficult is that immediately following the publication of the *Deseret News* article, both FAIR and *Sunstone* received threatening letters from an attorney representing Martha Beck and her partner Karen Gerdes, admonishing them that my response to Martha's book should not be discussed. It is not the first threatening letter FAIR and *Sunstone* have received from this attorney, nor is it the only threatening letter he has sent out in an effort to silence critics. When my response first appeared on *Sunstone's* Web site, Beck and Gerdes threatened *Sunstone*. Martha's ex-husband, John Beck, whom I quote in my response, received a similar letter. To avoid any legal entanglements, I personally asked *Sunstone* to remove my response from their Web site, and I asked FAIR if they would be interested in it. Not long after my response went up on FAIR's Web site, FAIR received a letter similar to the one *Sunstone* had received. John Beck and FAIR have both, admirably, stood their ground. Evidently, there is material in my response that deeply bothers both Martha Beck and Karen Gerdes. But I want to assure you that there is nothing in that response that I know to be untrue. I believe it is, in the end, the truth they do not like.

I find it deeply ironic that in her book Martha claims that Latter-day Saints silence dissenters since Martha keeps trying to silence those critical of her book. I find it equally curious that it is somehow all right to trash the reputations of Hugh Nibley, the Nibley family, and the Church of Jesus Christ with lies and unsubstantiated allegations, but it is not all right to take issue with those lies by revealing the truth. Incidentally, at the July 2005 *Sunstone* Symposium, Martha sent her cousin Sylvia (in Martha's book, she is the cousin in the closet—it is nice to know she has finally come out of the closet). Sylvia passed out a press release stating that Martha was not invited to attend either of these conferences because both *Sunstone* and FAIR are “‘faith affirming’ for Mormons and apologist [*sic*] in nature.”<sup>37</sup> I think this may

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37. “Best-Selling Author Responds to Conferences’ Panel Discussions and Sessions Based on Her Controversial Book, *Leaving the Saints*,” 27 July 2005. Distributed at

come as a surprise to some, but I think it illustrates just how out-of-touch Martha is. Furthermore, I am fairly confident that Martha could have walked through those doors at *Sunstone* just as easily as her cousin did. But perhaps she was afraid of those *Sunstone* Danites.

I also want to mention that Martha's legal threats have not been reserved only for those who respond to her in writing. We, as the Nibley family, also received a threatening letter from Martha's attorney warning us not to contact Martha or Karen directly, but only through their lawyer. I want everyone to know that it is not the Nibley family that has cut off Martha, but Martha who has cut off her family. Despite this controversy, I do not want to spend my time here rehashing the significant and numerous inconsistencies in Martha's book. But since Martha has thrown down the gauntlet, I do not want it to appear that I am caving in to her demands. So let me take a few minutes to analyze how this whole story seems to have played out to this point and to clear up a few misconceptions that some readers of Martha's book have had. Before I do, however, let me state that my views are mine alone. They do not represent the Nibley family nor do they represent FAIR. I alone am responsible for what I have to say. Second, I do not want this to be part of my other talk. That will be a completely separate matter.<sup>38</sup>

There was a silver lining to the cloud created by *Leaving the Saints*. We were thrice blessed: First, Martha waited ten years after she recovered these memories before publishing her exposé. To get a feel for how things might have played out if she had written this book in the early or mid-1990s, one should read Massimo Introvigne's talk from the 1994 conference of the Mormon History Association, in which he documents the paranoia, fear, and wounds these kinds of recovered memories created.<sup>39</sup> Let me share with you just one account from a

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Sunstone panel #162 "How Reliable Are Our Memories? Memory Creation and Retrieval in Relation to Martha Beck's *Leaving the Saints*," 28 July 2005.

38. "What I Learned about Life, the Church, and the Cosmos from Hugh Nibley" at [www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2005PetB.html](http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2005PetB.html) (accessed 16 December 2005).

39. Massimo Introvigne, "A Rumor of Devils: Allegations of Satanic Child Abuse and Mormonism, 1985-1994"; see [www.cesnur.org/2001/archive/mi\\_mormons.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2001/archive/mi_mormons.htm) (accessed 2 November 2005).

woman who experienced the type of therapy that was rampant during those days:

I saw a therapist in 1991 who was convinced that I had been molested as a child and who insisted I do work to “re-cover” memories of the abuse. I told her I knew very well that I’d never been molested because of my gynecological history, but she insisted there was some horrible trauma that I was repressing and that it had already happened by the time I was five. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be suffering from such profound depression as an adult (as if adolescence and puberty couldn’t be reason to become depressed). So I dutifully sent myself into a trance, and, as she directed, walked down the street of the house where my five-year-old self lived. My young self stood on the front porch wearing red shorts and a red gingham shirt appliquéd with a sailboat. The big self greeted the little self, hugged her, and said, “I love you. I care about you. How are you? If something’s wrong, you can tell me.” The five-year-old self looked at her skeptically and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m very happy. I think you should come back later.”

I thought that was really funny but the therapist got really mad and told me I’d done it wrong, at which point I said, “You’re a crackpot and this is not helping me at all and I’m not coming back,” which also made her mad. But thinking about it now I feel rather lucky, when I consider what might have happened had I had a weaker mind or a reason to want the hypnosis to produce something.<sup>40</sup>

This is the “therapeutic” social context for Martha’s recovered memories. As silly as this sounds, in the early to mid-1990s, there were many people “discovering” memories of abuse that never happened and many people who experienced the real repercussions for those accusations. The accused suffered alienation of their children’s affection, embarrassment and shame when these false allegations

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40. Holly Welker, e-mail correspondence to Boyd Petersen, 16 July 2005.

were made public, family disintegration, and, for some, time in jail for crimes they never committed. Had Martha made these claims public ten years earlier, it would have been a very different scenario than the one that has played out in 2005 when a decade of scientific evidence has shown these induced “memories” to be fictions created through hypnosis.

The second blessing was that Martha wrote a very bad book. Please do not get me wrong—Martha is a fine writer. She is witty, clever, and sassy. She knows how to turn a phrase, how to make a reader laugh and cry. In short, she can tell a tale. But here we had a narrative presented as history that was so full of internal and external inconsistencies that readers had a hard time believing her. This is quite a stroke of luck, because, as Tzvetan Todorov has argued, readers implicitly trust a first-person narrative.<sup>41</sup> But *Leaving the Saints* had Mormons, former Mormons, non-Mormons, and even anti-Mormons shaking their heads in bewilderment. The sheer number of problems with this book caused me to wonder if maybe somewhere in Martha’s psyche she actually wanted to get caught, for the truth to be revealed. I just do not know why she felt that she could get away with this. Without the inconsistencies, the hyperbole, and the distortion, her story, even though false, could have been compelling. But most readers have come away from this book expressing the feeling that “if I can’t trust her in the small details, how can I trust her in the big ones?”

Finally, we were blessed that the negative response to this book came initially from the very place where it might have gained acceptance. Whether this was because of the numerous inconsistencies in Martha’s book or because of the status Hugh Nibley holds within the Mormon community—that he is revered for his social criticism as well as his apologetics—it was a significant departure from the past for the criticism to originate first from Signature Books, *Sunstone*, and Affirmation. The first negative response came from the marketing

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41. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 84: “The first-person narrator most readily permits the reader to identify with the character, since as we know the pronoun ‘I’ belongs to everyone.”

director of Signature Books, Tom Kimball, who called the book “problematic” and “most likely heavily laced with fiction.”<sup>42</sup> *Sunstone’s* reviewer, Tania Lyon, gave the book a fair trial; at the end of the first reading, she admitted she was “persuaded.” But by applying the analytical tools of her trade, pitting her Princeton sociology PhD against Martha’s Harvard sociology PhD, she came to the conclusion that “Martha’s case against Mormonism is . . . exaggerated and shallow, the accuracy of her narrative style . . . suspect, and her use of hyperbole in such a devastating accusation . . . misplaced.”<sup>43</sup> Even Affirmation, the Gay Mormon alliance, objected to the book. Stung by the hypocrisy of Martha’s homosexual lifestyle in light of her previous characterization of homosexuality as a “compulsive behavior” that can be changed and “cured,” Affirmation posted a news story on their Web page declaring that “Martha Beck’s credibility as an author is now in question” as *Leaving the Saints* “is being criticized for its alleged inaccuracies.”<sup>44</sup> I have even seen some people on an anti-Mormon board lament that any one of them could have written a better book than did Martha. My perception is that *Leaving the Saints* has been received favorably by only three groups of people: (1) those who know nothing about either Mormonism or false memory syndrome, (2) those whose rage against the Church of Jesus Christ has blinded them to the irrational content of this book, and (3) those who have been abused and cannot separate Martha’s false victimhood from their own very real, very legitimate victimhood.

I would also like to clear up a few details that have confused some readers of *Leaving the Saints*. First, to make claims is not the same as offering evidence. Allegations are not proof. Martha has claimed a lot of things, but she has proven none of them. To say something hap-

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42. Tom Kimball’s review is available at [www.fairlds.org/Reviews/Rvw200501.html](http://www.fairlds.org/Reviews/Rvw200501.html) (accessed 2 November 2005).

43. Tania Rands Lyon, “An Exhausted Memoir of Reading *Leaving the Saints*,” *Sunstone*, March 2005, 62–67, specifically 63 and 67.

44. One of the three central case studies in her book *Breaking the Cycle of Compulsive Behavior* is a homosexual. See Jason Clark, “LDS Couple Who Dubbed Homosexuality ‘Addiction’ Come Out,” 27 February 2005, at [www.affirmation.org/news/2005\\_08.asp](http://www.affirmation.org/news/2005_08.asp) (accessed 2 November 2005).



pened does not prove it happened; to say one has physical evidence is not to show that evidence. Martha, to date, has offered no evidence and has proven nothing. We are still at the level of he-said/she-said. But Martha has given us a lot of evidence with which to judge who is the most reliable witness. Hugh Nibley's footnotes have held up much better than her shoddy memoir.

Second, Martha has changed her story considerably, not only between the time when she first began to recover her "memories" and when she published the book, but even since the book was published. Back in the 1990s, she was fairly open about her use of hypnosis. She tried to convince her sisters and her then husband to try self-hypnosis, and she fully admitted using hypnosis herself. In the book she makes it sound as if the memories just "popped out." Since the book came out, however, she told a reporter for the *New York Times* that she "practiced self-hypnosis once under Ms. Finney but that it did not play a part in her memory recovery."<sup>45</sup> Then on her Web site Martha claimed that when her first therapist "proposed a hypnosis session, [she] refused, for the very reason that [she] didn't want [her] experiences tainted by any suggestive or leading methods."<sup>46</sup> This is only one example of how Martha has had a really hard time keeping her story straight.

Third, even though many have recognized that Martha is an unreliable narrator, they still do not always recognize that when she reports the words of others, she is equally unreliable. I have interviewed dozens of the people Martha quotes in her book, and in every single instance they have said Martha got it wrong—and not just a little wrong. No, she got things glaringly, unrecognizably, completely wrong. So those reading *Leaving the Saints* should remember that when Martha gives the words of her parents, they are really words invented by Martha; when Martha gives the words of her brothers and sisters, they are really words invented by Martha; when Martha gives the words of her former BYU colleagues, her bishop, or her stake president, they are really words invented by Martha; and even when Martha gives the

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45. Wyatt, "A Mormon Daughter's Book Stirs a Storm."

46. Martha Beck, "Setting the Record Straight: Physical Evidence and Memories from My Childhood" [leavingthesaints.com/settingrecord.htm](http://leavingthesaints.com/settingrecord.htm) (accessed 2 November 2005).

words of her ex-husband, they are really words invented by Martha. To wit, Martha's mother did not admit that the abuse happened and then later deny it, as Martha reports in her book. Martha's brothers and sisters do not believe she was physically abused, as Martha reports in her book; and Martha's father's last words were not "she was my favorite," as Martha has reported to the press.

Let me also say that my response to Martha's book was not something I enjoyed writing; I did not want to smear her or attack her. I had much better things—my family, my teaching, and my dissertation—that needed my attention. But I also felt that her allegations needed a response; as her father's biographer and a family member, I had access to information to which others were not privy. I also admit that I felt somewhat responsible that Martha's book included these allegations since I published them first in the biography of her father, albeit in a very short sentence and a very long footnote, and with, of course, a very different perspective. I struggled over how to handle this episode of Hugh's life for months—if I should include it, how I should include it, and what the repercussions would be either way. But I felt that the only real choice I had was to put it in so readers would not think I was covering things up. The Nibley family was in consensus about this too. All of them felt that it needed to be addressed. The response to the open way I addressed this and other issues in the book has been overwhelmingly positive. As I mentioned in my written response to Martha's book, D. Michael Quinn reviewed my book and stated that he felt "all readers will agree that including this [candid] discussion in an 'authorized biography' is an ultimate example of the dedication to honest history by Hugh Nibley, his wife, and their children."<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, I still felt somehow responsible, that perhaps if I had not mentioned this episode, Martha might not have felt the need to write this book.<sup>48</sup> So it was partially out of a desire to do penance that I took on the challenge to respond.

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47. Quinn, review of *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*, 261.

48. Martha told a reporter from the *Arizona Republic* that "I only decided to publish after my family put their account out there. Two years ago my brother-in-law (Boyd Jay Petersen) wrote a biography (*Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*) that deified my father." Susan Felt, "Tale of Abuse Draws Fire from Church and Family," *Arizona Republic*, 16 March

Writing my response was maddeningly frustrating. Hugh Nibley once told me that writing *Sounding Brass*, his response to anti-Mormon literature, was the hardest, most negative thing he ever had to do—this coming from a man who survived the Great Depression, World War II, and teaching for several decades in the Religion Department! At the time I could not understand why he felt writing *Sounding Brass* was such an awful experience since the book is, I believe, clever, satirical—in short, hilarious. But after responding to Martha, I think I understand. I found it so difficult trying to discern where the truth ended and the lies began that I felt as if I were descending into some kind of personal hell. The lack of names made it impossible to figure out who all the people were. The chronology of her life was so different from the book’s chronology that it was easy to get disoriented (for example, the book has the September Six excommunications occurring before the Spring Women’s Conference where she allegedly made her revelation public). I got so frustrated while trying to respond to her book that I literally broke three teeth; it was not until the third that I realized I was holding in a lot of anger and grinding my teeth—“if I had my teeth, I would bite,” as Shakespeare says.

Yet I expressly did not want to attack Martha—I do not hate her. I just hate what she has chosen to do. Nor did I want to be accused of a personal attack. But how does one tell the true story of Martha’s life without revealing the truth, which is not terribly flattering? What has surprised me is that, to date, the only people who have told me that they found my response to be a personal attack on Martha have been men. I had assumed that women would be more sensitive to personal attacks than men. I do have a theory about why it is men rather than women who think I was attacking Martha: I think men tend to want to stick up for the little guy when they see one being attacked. But I would like to remind listeners that this is exactly what I was doing. I was sticking up for a 94-year-old man who could not stick up for himself; I was defending my wife who is portrayed as a simple-minded

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2005. If my book “deifies” her father, that is not the sense most readers have come away with, since they have unanimously told me that they were surprised by the “warts-and-all” way I told the story. But then I suspect Martha only read one page of the book.

nutcase in Martha's book; I was defending my children who do not deserve to have their fine heritage stained with these terrible lies; and I was defending my church, which was depicted in her book as a cult just to the right of Jonestown.

Further, I was responding to a woman who has the bully pulpit of Random House and Oprah's Harpo media conglomerate behind her. This is also a woman who was trained in the martial arts; who kidnapped her aging father when he was only days out of the hospital suffering from chest pains; who held him hostage in a hotel room for over five hours with three other women watching guard; who left her mother unattended after she had just been released from the hospital with an infection that we all thought might take her from us; who, when Hugh asked permission to leave, confesses in her book, "I'm sure any patient, high-minded, enlightened person would let him go right now. Me, I'm just getting started" (p. 111). Let me just ask, what if the genders in that hotel room were reversed—what if four young men took a 90-year-old woman into a hotel room, kept her there against her will, and tried to make her confess to a sexual crime she did not commit? This is not a poor defenseless woman I am up against; this is a poor defenseless man I was defending.

I am now more confused than ever about how to respond to the works of anti-Mormons without attacking the person. I sincerely believe that *ad hominem* has no place in scholarly circles and certainly no place in religious circles, but I am also more aware that a writer's personal background, often unknown to the public, can and often does motivate anti-Mormon attacks and can be very relevant to the discussion. This seems to be especially true when addressing a personal memoir, as with this book.

I have learned a few things as this episode has played out in the press, discussion boards, chat rooms, and reviews. First, apologists need to support each other. There were times when I felt so lonely while writing my response, and no one in my ward could possibly understand what I was going through. Responding to anti-Mormon attacks is nasty business, and we need to support each other emotionally as we do this. Second, I believe we should reach out where

we can to the broader spectrum of Mormonism. My sense is that we can disagree with people and still be polite. One can be supportive of the church and still be respectful to those who may be critical. In this particular case, I believe, the reviews attacking *Leaving the Saints* that originated with these less apologetic sources had greater credibility in the press and with the general public. And they appeared, I believe, because Hugh Nibley, despite his apologetic work, was loved by a broad spectrum of the Mormon public. Finally, I learned that the truth ultimately triumphs. Even though Hugh Nibley's life story was tarnished by these false allegations, his life was not. He died peacefully, knowing that he had committed no evil. And, ultimately, most of the public is coming to realize the same thing.

