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Mormon Women Speak: A Collection of Essays by Mary Lythgoe
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MARY LYTHGOE BRADFORD, ed. *Mormon Women Speak: A Collection of Essays*. Salt Lake City: Olympus Publishing Company, 1982. 237 pp. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Camille S. Williams, part-time faculty member of the Brigham Young University English Department, researching a language approach to Shakespeare.

In 1980 *Dialogue* and the Olympus Publishing Company sponsored an essay contest for Latter-day Saint women, the contest announcement declaring that “essays will be judged on originality, depth of perception and clarity of expression. They should be a product of the writer’s

soul-searching and should reflect her conflicts and struggles, whether she views them realistically or idealistically.” The winning essays were gathered in *Mormon Women Speak*. While the contest announcement called for originality, and the editor, in her introduction, alludes to “common themes” and “exciting differences,” the collection in fact reflects the same themes and thoughts that have been published during the past ten years in *Exponent II*, in *Dialogue*, and in the writings of the women’s movement outside the Church. Some of the names and faces have changed, but most of these essays persist in the tradition of the liberal subjective quest of the self presenting an account of the self seeking the self.

Such a result was probably inevitable, given the clichéd terms of the contest announcement. To call for essays which are the product of “soul-searching,” “conflicts,” and “struggles” is to invite postures of self-pity and self-assertion. A personal essay need not be about the self, nor need it be self-conscious. The essayist has many means of helping us to know and feel what she has felt without giving us a guided tour of her psyche. The constraints the contest put on the writers has shaped too many of these twenty-four essays into accounts of primarily mental events, or cerebral accounts of physical events. Incidents are often recounted merely to illustrate the author’s state of mind. This places the focus on the author, not on her experiences.

The best essays in the book do not feature their authors as sole protagonists, nor do they aspire to art. Edna B. Laney (“The Last Project”) tells how she and her dying husband arrange for her to care for him at home. “He came to call [it] ‘Our honeymoon in reverse.’ Instead of knitting our lives together, we would now begin to unwind the strands and go our separate ways” (p. 84). She recounts incidents which allow us to see their love, humor, and faith. Her use of standard phrases sometimes distracts (for example, “he breathed his last,” p. 90), but her essay is genuine and unpretentious.

In “Tse Her, My Sister” Donna T. Smart introduces us to a Hmong refugee and her family adjusting to life in the United States. The friendship exists despite the language and cultural differences.

In contrast to the plainness of these essays, Dian Saderup and Helen C. Stark overwork their overriding metaphors, “the Wall” and “the Witch,” respectively. This strain for literary language is seen in the shifts from good prose to a semi-poetic diction, sometimes in the same paragraph. Compare Saderup’s description of her father, with her description of herself: “[I love] my father’s broad hands, the ridiculous Russian hat he wears in cold weather, the pair of old temple garments he has wrapped around his prized first edition copy

of the Book of Mormon in his dresser drawer . . . (p. 19); my heart . . . starts with sudden feeling, like the dark flock of sparrows exploding into the air from the limbs of a barren tree" (p. 19). This mix of normal and formal language deflects attention from the theme of the essay (testimony) to "*this* artist as a young woman" (p. 16) exhibiting her "tangled images of self" (p. 17).

Stark's essay begins straightforwardly: "It was the first evening of a college course in magazine article writing" (p. 31) but gets lost in the play of her own language: "I stand humbled before that alchemy which has merged my welter of positive and negative happenings into a tenuous new insight. I perceive that although nemesis does indeed follow hubris, it is not for me to force that resolution. The gods grind inexorably and in their own time" (p. 35). Stylistically, most of the essays are between the straightforward and the strained, although patches of overwrought prose are sprinkled throughout. Personal essays with a message—whether social critique, testimonial, defense of the faith, or feminist analysis—tend to alternate narrative and commentary, wobbling between analytic prose and poetic outbursts. Deciphering the tone(s) of an essay which couples impersonal with personal, formal with colloquial, or logical with emotive language is messy business: a collage of many discrete bright bits allows no clear focus on message, analysis, or perception. This mix of styles within essays is more distracting than the stylistic differences between authors.

The thematic grouping of essays attempts to give the book cohesiveness but sometimes results in too frequent repetition of common complaints, such as the zealous belief in and intolerance for the "stereotypical" Mormon woman. While viewing themselves as victims of stereotyping who are trying to destroy stereotypes in their own lives, contributors frequently perpetuate the stereotyping of other Mormon women. "I would cringe if someone told me I look Mormon. I must admit that I don't feel as I expect a Mormon woman to feel" (p. 150); "I don't seem to be cast in quite the same mold as all those other mothers" (p. 69); "I used to think being a Mormon woman meant . . ." (p. 137); "I somehow fell short of the ideal Mormon womanhood had come to symbolize" (p. 192). Because the existence of the stereotype is necessary as a checklist of what some of these Mormon women *aren't*, they have a stake in perpetuating it by writing about it as though it did exist. Elizabeth O. Wach's "Have a Good Time" is dependent upon the stereotype of a narrow-minded Wasatch Front Mormon family. Her exaggeration seems more tolerant, however, than the occasional slaps at an assumed Mormon subculture

appearing in other essays as though they were unquestionably true: “Church culture strives to suppress ambivalence, to deal only with the positive, two-dimensional view” (p. 199); “In our society, and particularly within the Mormon culture, there are seeming rewards of love and protection for the woman who remains, in some respects, a child-like, semi-adult” (pp. 152–53). Maureen Ursenbach Beecher condemns an insensitive—or simply inarticulate—father via an ecclesiastical comparison: “The [handicapped] baby’s father came in, in his bishop’s voice playing out complacencies about this ‘special angel,’ this seventh child whose difference neither parent had in the slightest anticipated” (p. 52).

The theme of the isolated intellectual squelched by the oppressive “normal-Mormon” (p. 147) is repeated by Mary Ellen R. MacArthur: “I still tend to ruffle my feathers at too much emphasis on unthinking obedience. . . . [I am expected to] play the role of the devil’s advocate in any good discussion” (p. 210). Such an indictment of stereotyped Church culture in general is less accurate and less important than reported instances of Church members failing their brothers and sisters inside or outside the Church. For example, Marilyn C. White describes LDS women who misused their “power” at Hawaii’s International Women’s Year Conference: “I saw Mormon women chosen as leaders, who over the pulpit and in the name of Jesus Christ told their sisters to watch their lead and vote ‘no’ as a block on every issue” (p. 167). Rubina R. Forester discusses racism, noting, for example, “I know a former Relief Society president who, when she speaks with Polynesians, changes her language to pidgin English . . . and they, though they can speak English fluently and correctly, speak pidgin right back” (p. 96). Aside from a few specific instances (such as these) where individual Church members go wrong, the Mormon subculture is criticized in generalities. The tendency to stereotype other LDS people (as nonthinkers, naive, culture-bound, etc.) is not only a “common theme” but also the foundation for didactic passages such as Cherie T. Pedersen’s testimony that “the goals of both the Church and the women’s movement are the same” (p. 188), or Jerrie W. Hurd’s rediscovery of feminist analysis: “Every woman, whether she is an active feminist or not, must learn to deal with the bias against her. She must recognize both subtle and blatant forms of discrimination” (p. 141). Stereotypes are straw men, convenient fillers when analysis fails, conveniently attackable when pressing questions are to be ignored.

The first-place essay by Judith R. Dushku invokes a straw-man argument (free agency), avoiding the issue at hand—the morality of

elective abortion. Her thesis is poorly formulated. She describes her attitude toward abortion: "Of course I am Pro-Choice. . . . I had read President Kimball's strong statement on abortion. . . . But I had never understood his counsel to negate individual agency" (pp. 58, 59). Free agency is never negated by statements declaring the position of the Church. The purpose of a statement of church policy is not to proscribe choice, but to articulate a moral position. The essay concentrates on the importance of choice, which is a given, but provides no moral insight. Perhaps the essay would have been more effective had she allowed us to *feel* what she was *feeling*, rather than *telling* us what she was *thinking*: "What followed were the most agonizing days of my life. I spent hours examining doctrines, arranging priorities, trying to understand fears and analyze anxieties. . . . I spent intense hours in prayer and intense hours with my bishop. . . . President Kimball's strongly worded cautions against aborting a baby without careful, even agonizing thought and prayer, reminded me of my responsibilities. I was accountable. I could not abrogate that accountability" (pp. 64, 65). *She* draws the conclusions; *she* terms the experience "agonizing" and "intense." Had she simply told what happened her agonies and intensities might have been more perceptible. Her speculation that she decided to give birth in part because this would be her first girl after three boys is disquieting. Her worry "Can we parents provide them [our children] with the spiritual sustenance they need?" (p. 67) seems disingenuous after the admissions that a handicapped or male child would more likely have been aborted.

This collection is not intended to answer all questions about or by LDS women, but it does give an excuse to consider topics related to Mormon women and to the personal essay. It may be that the cumulative effect of reading several of these essays at a stretch gives the impression of too much "temperature-taking." Occasional essays in periodicals are interesting partly because they contrast with the other articles or poems in the same issue. Perhaps Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's question should be asked about private efforts, too: "In the realm of publications, are the needs of women better served by integration . . . or by independence?" (*Dialogue* 12 [Summer 1979]: 126). How valid is a collection based on the writers' sex? Why restrict the essays to the conflict/struggle mode of writing?

Finally, we need to decide how long women are going to be granted immunity for writings that would be considered sexist if written by men. We probably wouldn't tolerate "In Celebration of Male Friends" written by a Mr. Cannon but might still be comfortable

with Ann Edwards–Cannon’s “In Celebration of Female Friends.” Cherie Pedersen’s supposed insights that “the gospel . . . is a celebration of womanhood” (the gospel is a celebration of manhood?), and “my awareness of the multi-faceted nature of my own womanhood” (the multi-faceted nature of my own manhood?) (p. 194) would sound sexist or silly voiced by a man; imagine *Mormon Men Speak*. *Mormon Women Speak* is the feminist variant of the books written to cheer up and enlighten Latter-day Saint women. As a thinking woman’s guide to self-esteem, or an intellectual’s “joy of womanhood,” it is no more satisfying than the conservative originals.