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Goodbye, Hello Marilyn Brown

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MARILYN BROWN. *Goodbye, Hello*. Sandy, Utah: Randall Book Co., 1984. 123 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Richard H. Cracroft, professor of English and dean of the College of Humanities, Brigham Young University.

If, on the palate of Mormon literary tastes, *The Giant Joshua* and *The Evening and the Morning* are prime rib, and Marilyn Brown's more recent and remarkable *The Earthkeepers* is filet mignon, then *Goodbye, Hello*, Brown's slighter but well-marbled offering, must be a tender rib steak. But there the metaphor must fade, for Brown is no modern Mormon-prose tenderizer. She is, instead, a skillful artist, a judicious craftsman who has shaped yet another warm and lyrical book which will age well, to the delight of those who anticipate a significant Mormon literature that examines life and lives through the eyes of faith sharpened by Mormon doctrines, practices, and culture.

Too often, Mormon writers, particularly those of what Edward Geary has called "Mormondom's Lost Generation," have attempted to

write from a position of apparent faith, only to reveal their axe-grinding differences with Mormonism in a prose fraught with art but very little Mormon heart; thus they belie the very traditions they are attempting to re-create. As a work of Mormon literature, *Goodbye, Hello* is refreshing, then, for Brown's characters and themes and setting are unabashedly and unapologetically Mormon. And still they work as literature.

Teresa (Trissy) McQueen, an aging woman who has suffered a stroke, is visited during her last hours by other-worldly beings dressed in white robes. Wavering on the threshold of eternity, Teresa recognizes some of the figures yet is troubled by one who draws near but whom she does not quite recognize. As the dying woman moves steadily towards eternity, the novel recounts her gradual discovery of the identity of the mysterious visitor. In the process of making that discovery, Teresa relives three or four years of her childhood, from the age of five through eight—the period of the courtship and early marriage of her sister Till (Clothilde) and her brother-in-law, Rye Hadley.

The frame structure of the novel permits Brown to portray strikingly life on the brink of eternity. These deathbed scenes are told from the point of view of a woman who has done her work well and kept the faith, one for whom the world no longer holds much interest, but one who continues to be concerned about her sister's eternal well-being. At one point the reminiscing Teresa looks up and sees "a big slab of white light like a page with a dark spot on it" and thinks, "my life's over, and there I go with my white page and a spot on it" (p. 2). The spot turns out to be, however, not a blot on her book of life, but a granddaughter "standing in the sunny doorway" (p. 2), and, recalled to the present, Teresa remembers that she is in her daughter's home. Brown evokes the closeness of the earth and eternity in many similarly effective images throughout the book, weaving Edenic imagery, apple trees, a lost and found ring, a rocking chair, and birth and death into a tightly and colorfully woven tapestry which attests to the author's skill.

For most of the book, however, the frame structure plants Trissy firmly in the past, where she recreates her childhood home in pioneer Utah (Antimony, Circleville, Fillmore) and recalls the courtship of Till and Rye. That blossoming courtship encounters an obstacle in Trissy's pa, who (correctly, it turns out) perceives Rye's lack of commitment to Mormon values and beliefs and so opposes the marriage. Rye contradicts Pa's judgment by proving himself capable of keeping a job and by withstanding Pa's careful investigation into his reputation

and life in Fillmore. The couple marry, weather some adjustment difficulties, leave Utah for Idaho, and eventually move to California, where, to the distress of Trissy and her parents, they gradually withdraw from the family and leave Mormonism for another church, thus apparently fracturing the eternal family unit.

Brown is effective, not only because of her sustained skillful prose with its rich images but also because, in describing the events of the novel through the mind of a five-to-eight-year-old child as recalled by the memory of an old and wise woman, she has managed to impart meaning both to the innocent child's exposure to experience and to the old woman's understanding of the brevity and richness of mortality as she ponders the experiences of the child Trissy.

Brown also effectively portrays the Mormon past. Donald R. Marshall accurately asserts that "no one since Maureen Whipple's *Giant Joshua* has a better gift for transporting us back to a Mormon past that is vivid, tangible, and hauntingly convincing" (book jacket). Subtle, understated, the faithful Mormonness of the story is convincing, not only in the faith of the family members, in their prayers, in their adherence to the Word of Wisdom, and in their authentic application of Mormon folkways, but also in their strong belief in the eternal nature of their relationships, a faith which tempers the pain caused by the deaths of loved ones and heightens their concern with the erring conduct of family members who are sealed to each other for eternity.

The book, centered in incidents in the King family history, is based on such eternal concerns. The "goodbye" and "hello" of the title spring not only from the frequent mortal necessity of bidding goodbye to loved ones who die (The world seemed made of "goodbyes and hellos" [p. 117], Teresa says at one point) but also from the welcomes of kin on the other side of the veil. The book becomes, for Teresa McQueen, a working out of that greeting on the threshold of eternity.

Brown has made very real not only the psychology of a five-year-old child, through whose eyes we relive the events, but also such occasions as the rural Utah wedding, Christmas on the farm, and the daily life of the frontier Mormon family. Whether she is describing the making of lye soap, the gathering of wood chips for the fire, or the inside of early Utah homes and stores, Brown has blended her poetic lyricism with her keen ear and eye for history to create a memorable novel which is at once a literary accomplishment and a book which should be popular. Those interested in the destiny of Mormon fiction will welcome this novel as another felicitous step toward a happy future in

a period which may yet be regarded as an era of renaissance for Mormon literature.