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Enduring Ties: Poems of Family Relationships ed. Grant Hardy

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Grant Hardy, ed., *Enduring Ties:
Poems of Family Relationships*.
South Royalton, Vermont: Steerforth, 2003.

Reviewed by Lance Larsen

Recently, a seasoned poetry editor of a national magazine with a circulation of 500,000 admitted he didn't much care for poetry anthologies. It wasn't the poems he minded (thank goodness), so much as the sometimes awkward umbrellas under which the poems were forced to gather. "Not another anthology," one can imagine him groaning. A visit to almost any bookstore will reveal a plethora (he might say "glut") of poetry anthologies. Anthologies focusing on love, baseball, sunning cats, patriotism, vampires, knitting, left-handedness, you name it. Enough already. Like that grumpy editor, I usually find myself looking elsewhere for my poetry fix: to single-author collections emphasizing context and unity, at one extreme; or to magazines, at the other, where the circumstance of reading a poem tends toward the haphazard and serendipitous.

And yet, part of me thrills at the prospect of a new anthology: the distillation of so much lived truth in one place, the opportunity of being carried away by some editor's magpie reading, the chance to see what kind of cosmos a particular group of poems will constellate. When *Enduring Ties: Poems of Family Relationships*, edited by Grant Hardy, crossed my desk, I was curious, but a little suspicious. With a title like that, I was sure to find earnest poems, but would they be good? As I scanned the table of contents, I was happily surprised. Here were poems I had admired for years alongside translations I had never read. I sat down to read with greater care and a more open mind. As Hardy himself explains, "This anthology began as a folder in a file cabinet" (1) bearing the rubric of "Favorite Poems" that went public only after he discovered there weren't any anthologies quite like it. Lucky for us Hardy is not just an ardent reader, but a discriminating one as well. (As a side note, I might mention that this is the same Grant Hardy who recently published *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, the much touted study version of the Book of Mormon—published by the prestigious

University of Illinois Press, but marketed, among others, to mainstream Mormons who frequent Deseret Book.)

So what kinds of poets will one find in *Enduring Ties*? Hardy serves up an eclectic mix of wordsmiths: Chinese masters, Homer and Sappho, a selection from Psalm 78, a sampling of metaphysical poets from the seventeenth century, nineteenth-century American watershed poets such as Dickinson and Whitman, a few Romantics, as well as Victorians, Modernists, and Nobel giants. Clearly, then, the anthology canvasses the canon for deserving poems about family, but it also looks forward. In fact, an informal tally on my part suggests that more than half of the poems were first published after 1950, which according to some definitions would make this a contemporary anthology. To sum up, here the past and present mingle together intriguingly.

Though *Enduring Ties* is a relatively slim volume, containing fewer than 200 pages of poetry, the editor has been especially solicitous of readers, providing not just an introduction, but an index, a seventeen-page appendix on poetic form, as well as contextualizing footnotes. And who are Hardy's intended readers? Perhaps foremost are those seeking clarity and insight through poetry who are underexposed to the tradition. For accessibility and unity, Hardy has organized the poems into seven sections: "Growing Up," "Marrying," "Childbearing," "Parenting," "Growing Older," "Parting," and "Inheriting." For those readers interested in seeing how a suite of poems traces a larger narrative or metaphoric pattern, this organization will work well. It will also prove helpful for those readers who want to zero in on poems of a chosen subject. For those who prefer less editorial intrusion and who lean toward hopscotch reading, the section breaks may prove a distraction, but not a serious one, because the individual selections are of such high quality.

What pleases me most about the selections in this anthology is that, though they tend to give the best possible spin to family life, they do not retreat from difficulty. Once again, it may be worth quoting Hardy, whose aim is to provide "a celebration of family life, an affirmation of the worth of those relationships in which we have invested so much of ourselves. Yet it conveys these sentiments without sentimentality" (1). "Without sentimentality" is the operative phrase here. I would define sentimentality as unearned emotion, the most common failing of poems that seek, but fail, to move us. Perhaps a comment by Donald Barthelme, the great postmodern short story writer, speaks to the point: "Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art." To his credit, Hardy has chosen poems that juggle with success, art, difficulty, and celebration.

Take for instance Edward Hirsch's "Infertility," a poem about a couple struggling to conceive. Rather than artificially resolve every lingering question, or worse, present the couple with a pair of twins in the last stanza, Hirsch offers up, with great honesty, the couple's shifting perspectives. Though some readers may find the open-endedness of the closing lines unsatisfying, to my mind the narrator's extreme honesty constitutes a sort of beleaguered faith, the poem itself a prayer:

We'd like to believe that we have planted
 And tended seeds
 in their honor,
 But the spirits never appear
 in darkness or light.
 We don't know whether to believe in their non-existence
 Or their secrecy and evasiveness,
 their invisible spite.
 Maybe it's past us, maybe it's the shape of nothing
 Being born,
 the cold slopes of the absolute. (64-65)

Alongside the above poem, likely new to most readers, one finds mid-twentieth-century gems, such as Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays," in which a speaker looks back on childhood and remembers his father. What distinguishes this poem is that Hayden does not shy away from contradiction. In the same breath he acknowledges "the chronic angers of that house" *and* the service his father performed in shining "with cracked hands" his children's shoes and making "banked fires blaze." Not until his own adulthood does the narrator fully recognize the debt he owes his father. The poem ends with these haunting lines: "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?" (31). A lesser poet might have favored extreme depictions, converting the father into some otherworldly ideal or demonizing him for "the chronic angers," rather than working the much more interesting middle ground. For me, Hayden's poem dovetails nicely with King Benjamin's sense of gospel service: we are all imperfect, all "beggars" and "unprofitable servants" (Mosiah 4:19; 2:20-21). Though we may fail in our doing, we must keep on doing.

In a review this short, all I can do is point to a few felicitous moments in a handful of poems and hope they represent. To this end, consider Anne Bradstreet on marital love: "If ever two were one, then surely we, / If ever man were loved by wife, then thee" (47). Or this anonymous twelfth-century Sanskrit poet describing separation: "climbing like / bad monkeys

to the windows" (50). Or Sylvia Plath addressing an unborn child: "Love set you going like a fat gold watch" (72). Or Kobayashi Issa, a nineteenth-century haiku poet, alive to wonder:

Crawl, laugh
 Do as you wish —
 For you are two years old
 This morning. (145)

Or Anne Bradstreet again, this time on leaving a book of her poems, "your living mother's mind," to her children: "Make use of what I leave in love, / And God shall bless you from above" (164). Or finally, Ben Jonson on the death of his son: "'Here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry'" (146). In these last two quotes, one senses life breaking into art, or is it art breaking into life? Of course there is no definitive answer, only effect: that of sending us from poems to more authentic living and back to poems.

To sum up, this is an anthology I heartily recommend. It succeeds where most values-based anthologies—Christian, Mormon, or otherwise—fail. Too often the injunction in the Doctrine and Covenants about seeking learning out of the best books (D&C 88:118) gets interpreted in simplistic or opportunistic ways. Poetry, if it makes anyone's Best Books List, more often than not turns out to be mere verse—bromides and clichés served up with a singsong meter and heavy-handed rhyme. In Hardy's volume, by contrast, you will find poems that are poems first, and values-centered texts only incidentally. If you care about both aesthetics and values, this is not a compromise, but rather a needful hierarchy. These poems, nearly all of them, live up to Matthew Arnold's description of the best literature: "sweetness and light." It is an anthology suited for many kinds of readers, but especially those interested in both instruction and delight, not necessarily in that order.

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