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Mormon Women in Memoir

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Mormon Women in Memoir

Introduction by Angela Hallstrom

From a very young age, Latter-day Saints are taught to pay attention to the meaningful details of everyday life and to share these experiences by bearing public testimony or keeping a journal to be passed on to posterity. The importance of keeping written records has been emphasized from the Church's inception, and as a result we enjoy access to a trove of personal histories written by Mormons that reach back nearly two hundred years. Mormon women have been particularly diligent writers of personal history, and their words have helped to preserve a nuanced, multifaceted representation of what it means to be a female Latter-day Saint. According to former Church Historian Leonard J. Arrington, the personal histories penned by our earliest Mormon sisters allow us a valuable glimpse into the lives of these "formidable, intelligent, resourceful, and independent women who deserve to be remembered."¹

In the twenty-first century, Mormon women have continued this tradition of preserving personal history, both in print and online. For example, over the last decade Mormon women have established such a dominant online presence as bloggers and social media aficionados that articles appearing on websites like *Salon*² and *Gawker*³ have exclaimed over the

1. Leonard J. Arrington, "Blessed Damozels: Women in Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (1971): 24.

2. Emily Matchar, "Why I Can't Stop Reading Mormon Housewife Blogs," *Salon.com*, January 15, 2011, http://www.salon.com/2011/01/15/feminist_obsessed_with_mormon_blogs/.

3. Adrian Chen, "Why Do Mormons, Including Mitt Romney's Wife, Love Pinterest?" *Gawker.com*, February 21, 2012, <http://gawker.com/5887097/why-do-mormons-including-mitt-romneys-wife-love-pinterest>.

phenomenon. However, modern Mormon women haven't restricted themselves to detailing their lives solely online. Recently a spate of well-received memoirs by Mormon women has been published by national presses and marketed to non-Mormon audiences. Although some of these women, like plane crash survivor Stephanie Nielsen and scholar Joanna Brooks, were popular bloggers before publishing their memoirs, others, like poet Emma Lou Thayne and world-traveler Melissa Dalton-Bradford, took a more traditional route to publication, without the benefit of a built-in online audience. Some of these recently published memoirs are more literary in style and hark back to Terry Tempest Williams's groundbreaking 1992 memoir *Refuge*—a personal and political exploration of family, environmentalism, and Mormon faith. Others are more straightforward personal narratives. But no matter the style or the route to publication, it is clear that the turn of the new millennium has seen an unprecedented number of Mormon women publicly telling their stories to an ever-widening audience.

One obvious explanation for this publication trend is the advent of the “Mormon Moment”—a period of heightened national attention trained on Mormonism due in large part to Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential bid, but abetted by the popular *Book of Mormon* Broadway musical, the Church's own “I'm a Mormon” campaign, and other small stories that caught the media's attention. It is interesting to note, however, that this increased scrutiny did not seem to lead to increased sensationalism by national publishers in many of the memoirs they chose to promote. In the past, most “Mormon” memoirs published nationally were written by former members and touted as exposés; memoirs marketed to a mainstream audience rarely featured the voices of active, believing Latter-day Saints. Of course, memoir is more about an author's narrative artistry and personal perspective than about the strict dissemination of historical facts, and a story tends to get more attention when it is sensational or reflects the interests and viewpoints of national publishers. Notwithstanding this tendency, a significant number of recent memoirs written by Mormons but marketed to a national non-Mormon audience have featured diverse voices, very few of which present themselves as antagonistic to Mormonism. Most of these memoirs do not contain an overt religious message: they aren't primarily focused on convincing readers to leave or join the Church. They focus instead on telling engaging personal stories of women who also happen to have connections to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The memoirs chosen for inclusion here represent a wide range of experiences and approaches, and some of these writers are more

explicitly interested in exploring Mormonism itself than others are. Such a broad selection is not intended as a generalized endorsement but is designed to be helpful to scholars who study the virtue and vulnerability of memoir, along with its historic and folkloric impact on culture at large. The following coverage focuses on six titles published since 2010: *Heaven Is Here: An Incredible Story of Hope, Triumph, and Everyday Joy* by Stephanie Nielson (2013); *My Story* by Elizabeth Smart (2013); *Flunking Sainthood: A Year of Breaking the Sabbath, Forgetting to Pray, and Still Loving My Neighbor* by Jana Riess (2011); *The Place of Knowing: A Spiritual Autobiography* by Emma Lou Warner Thayne (2011); *The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of an American Faith* by Joanna Brooks (2012); and *Global Mom: Eight Countries, Sixteen Addresses, Five Languages, One Family* by Melissa Dalton-Bradford (2013).

Many other titles are worthy of review but could not be included due to space considerations. Kathryn Lynard Soper's *The Year My Son and I Were Born: A Story of Down Syndrome, Motherhood, and Self-Discovery* (GPP Life, 2010) received a great deal of positive attention for its lyrical writing and honest narrative, particularly among readers interested in stories about parenting children with disabilities. Another recent memoir about motherhood, *The Key Is Love: My Mother's Wisdom, a Daughter's Gratitude* (Penguin, 2013), written by well-known Mormon performer Marie Osmond, was praised by *Publishers Weekly* as "poignant and beautifully drawn." Recently published by Deseret Book's imprint that markets books to a national audience, *Diary of Two Mad Black Mormons: Finding the Lord's Lessons in Everyday Life* (Ensign Peak, 2014) by Tamu Smith and Zandra Vranes has reached many readers, Mormon and non-Mormon alike, with its honesty, humor, and wisdom.

These memoirs are just a sampling of the stories told by talented, fascinating Mormon women. Since the main focus of this review project is memoirs recently published by mainstream presses intended for national audiences, unmentioned here are the numerous insights found in memoirs written years ago or the quality of expression found in memoirs written by Mormons, for Mormons, published by Deseret Book, Covenant, and other presses devoted to the LDS market. Clearly, there are many Mormon women willing and eager to speak, and there is much to be learned from them if the public chooses to listen. Although the media's "Mormon Moment" has passed for now, stories such as these will continue to be written, read, and remembered.



Heaven Is Here: An Incredible Story of Hope, Triumph, and Everyday Joy,
by Stephanie Nielson (New York: Hyperion, 2012)

Reviewed by Jacqueline S. Thursby

Stephanie Nielson is a well-known Mommy Blogger with a large following. Raised in the LDS faith, she survived a plane crash that left her with second- and third-degree burns over 80 percent of her body. She was given a slim chance for survival. Her story describes her role as a Latter-day Saint wife and mother, along with how she developed the will to survive.

Stephanie grew up in a large Mormon family in Provo, Utah. With nine brothers and sisters, she was never alone. She lived only a block from her chapel, and both neighborhood friends and schoolmates were LDS. From her earliest years she dreamed of a fairy-tale life of growing up, being married in the temple, and becoming a wife and mother. She says that “for some, the dream of a fairy-tale life fades away, but for me, it never did” (20). Her memoir reflects her happiness in a life based on her faith and familiar culture. The devastating airplane accident, together with the subsequent aftermath of healing from life-threatening injuries, upended predictability and brought unexpected and difficult challenges. In her memoir, she clearly relates how her faith and the love of friends and family sustained her through the long, painful recovery.

Stephanie recounts the accident that happened when they were flying home after a trip to her husband’s family ranch in Arizona. The plane suddenly went down in an explosion of fire, and their lives were changed forever. Their friend Doug was killed in the crash, and both Christian and Stephanie were badly burned. After an almost-three-month-long coma, Stephanie awoke to a broken and burned body, horrific pain and confusion, and what seemed to be total blindness. She describes her returning memory piece by piece—the sequence of the crash, a dangling leaf above her as she lay gravely wounded afterward, and voices reminding her that she would be okay. She also remembers that strangers gave her a comforting priesthood blessing.

As Stephanie unfolds the gripping narrative, the essence of her story reveals a personal account of faith, family, community, and love. She explains that her eyes were sewn shut so they could heal, and later, when for the first time she saw Christian with burns over 30 percent of his body, she did not recognize him. When it was safe, Stephanie was moved to University Hospital in Salt Lake City. With pain in every movement, she

had to relearn how to use her muscles. While looking at the Christmas lights on Temple Square from the hospital window, she saw her reflection for the first time after the accident. Shocked, she refused to look again for several days. Eventually, she was lovingly coaxed into it; she examined her face in a hand mirror and gradually accepted the change. The first time her children visited was another traumatic experience, but slowly and patiently, important family bonds were reestablished with tenderness and understanding.

Acceptance of the new situation eventually formed, which she accredits to her faith. She writes: “The foundation of my faith in God had been laid when I was a little girl going to church. I remember even then being moved to tears by music or the words of a talk. As I’d gotten older, my faith had grown deeper. For some people there is a pivotal moment when their belief is crystallized, but for me, my belief in God has never wavered but instead has grown steadily stronger” (139).

Stephanie Nielson’s book is a unique window on a contemporary orthodox but realistic LDS family. Their compassion is a lesson to us all, and the strength of the book is demonstrated by her faith and dignity even under the weight of tragedy. Still, I believe the book could have been improved by shortening the detailed first half about family background and by developing the recovery challenges more fully.

Nielson’s story has had a broad impact on many readers within and without the worldwide LDS membership. Her story is not only of faith but also of newly found strategies that, in spite of continued physical pain, have brought her sustained peace of mind and her readers confirmed hope.

***My Story*, by Elizabeth Smart with Christopher Stewart
(New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013)**

Reviewed by Rosalyn Collings Eves

Elizabeth Smart shares a message about the power of faith to weather incredible hardship. The public details of Elizabeth Smart’s story are well known: as a fourteen-year-old, Smart disappeared on June 5, 2002, and despite the intensive search efforts of her family, friends, and community, she did not reappear until March 12, 2003. After a much publicized trial in 2010, kidnappers Brian David Mitchell and Wanda Barzee were sentenced to prison. In the many years since her abduction, Smart has

become an advocate for children, created a foundation to help prevent crimes against children, served an LDS mission in Paris, and married.

My Story promises a deeper insight into Smart's experience. She begins her narrative with her first encounter with Mitchell in downtown Salt Lake City, nearly eight months before her abduction. Unbeknownst to Smart, Mitchell then began to devise a plan to make her one of his "wives." The book recounts in detail the way he planned and executed her abduction, the months of terror (and boredom) while she was kept chained in a camp up in the local Utah mountains, their eventual move to California, and their return to Utah, at Smart's prompting, where she was finally recognized and rescued.

Smart's faith is a mainstay of the narrative, giving her hope throughout her ordeal. She writes early on that she experienced "miracles—'tender mercies' some have called them—that comfort us in ways that other people may not see" (54). These tender mercies included a feeling that God loved her and was aware of her, a sense that her recently deceased grandfather was often near (56), and a firm belief that her family would continue to love her, no matter what happened (61).

The story that emerges is engrossing, often horrifying, but equally often inspiring, particularly as Smart's grit, tenacity, and faith shine through. The writing style is straightforward, sometimes relying on telling (rather than showing) and exclamation points to convey the depth of Smart's feeling: "I can't describe the terror! It is simply impossible to express. Here I was, a little girl, in the middle of the night, being taken from my bed, from my own home, from what I thought was the safest place in the entire world. It was an unimaginable intrusion!" (26). This stylistic choice is likely meant to convey Smart's youth and to make the memoir more accessible to young women and girls, a group that Smart particularly has championed since her ordeal.

And yet, as inspiring as her faith is, at the end of the narrative I am left with a feeling that Elizabeth Smart is, in some ways, still a mystery. While the story does not shy away from mention of rape and other physical torture, it seems, like many memoirs, filtered in certain ways. Her physical struggles are detailed—we see a young girl who is frightened, sometimes weak with hunger and fatigue—but her inner struggles remain opaque. Her faith never seems to flag, and she never seems to question her purpose. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, in describing the differences between Eliza R. Snow's private diary and the public autobiography she wrote at the end of her life, observes, "It would seem that

in life writings, truth is a matter of purpose and point of view. Personal texts are thus the fictions we create in order to make our lives acceptable to ourselves and our imagined readers.”⁴ Smart’s story, with the help of Christopher Stewart, feels skillfully and purposefully crafted to present the details of her experience to a wider audience in a way that presents Smart in the best possible light while still respecting and preserving some privacy.

***Flunking Sainthood: A Year of Breaking the Sabbath, Forgetting to Pray, and Still Loving My Neighbor*, by Jana Riess (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete Press, 2011)**

Reviewed by Amy A. Easton-Flake

Although marketed to audiences outside of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jana Riess’s memoir offers insights for the LDS community. Her book provides a candid and compelling portrait of the difficulties that arise during the pursuit of living one’s faith. Riess shares her story with authenticity, humor, and at times poignancy, although her narrative style may be somewhat jarring to some LDS readers.

Riess has recently become a more vocal critic against some aspects of the Church, and *Flunking Sainthood* is a candid, irreverent, penetrating, and self-deprecating work that seems to presage her current writings. She offers a focused tale that chronicles her life over one year as she sought to, as she describes it, “pop a little zing back into [her] relationship” with God by focusing on a different faith practice each month of the year (2). She tried fasting from sunup to sundown, mindfulness of God’s presence, *lectio divina*, simplicity and no shopping, centering prayer, keeping the Sabbath, gratitude, hospitality, vegetarianism, fixed-time prayer, and generosity. Absent from Riess’s memoir are any overt references to the Latter-day Saint faith or culture. Instead, she offers a narrative compelling to the countless individuals who have sincerely tried (and failed) to be more committed in their devotion to God or to become a better person.

Riess’s memoir is part of the growing Christian literature on spiritual disciplines. For those unacquainted with the term, a spiritual discipline,

4. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, introduction to *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000), xviii.

as Christian theologian Richard Foster describes it, “is an intentionally directed action which places us in a position to receive from God the power to do what we cannot accomplish on our own.”⁵ Riess’s narrative fits well into this genre and is therefore highly accessible to a wide Christian audience, but what makes her narrative unique is that it does not focus on the doctrine of the disciplines or on how to practice them successfully. Instead, it focuses on what the author learned from exploring practices outside of her faith and is predicated not on her success but on her failure to master each discipline. As she states in the introduction, “I am going to fail at every single spiritual practice I undertake in this book” (ix).

Since readers know the end from the beginning, the formulaic structure of Riess’s narrative becomes a bit pedantic at times as she walks through the same pattern each month: she gleans wisdom by reading a spiritual classic, sets out with enthusiasm to practice what she learns, experiences setbacks and becomes despondent over her inability to master the discipline, and then reflects on what she gains through the process. The book is at its best when Riess shares moments of connection—when the practice she is trying to master reveals to her a more profound issue that is actually inhibiting her progression toward God.

Riess is a well-established author and editor who holds degrees in religion from Wellesley College and Princeton Theological Seminary and a PhD in American religious history from Columbia University. While her religious studies background adds an important depth to her work as she weaves together insights across multiple faiths, Riess’s personal, frank, and light tone creates an enjoyable and accessible narrative that largely belies the depths of her religious training. One does not get the impression from reading the memoir that Riess is a scholar of religion but rather that she is a devoted and seeking Christian. Similarly, Riess’s commitment to the Latter-day Saint faith is masked to those who do not share it. Latter-day Saint readers, however, will recognize her descriptions of prayer, fasting, and tithing. Riess seems to take seriously Joseph Smith’s advice to gather truth wherever it may be, and Latter-day Saint readers will benefit from the brief insights that she offers into religious practices from other faiths.

5. Richard J. Foster, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation* (New York: Renovaré, 2008), 135.

For instance, in her chapter on *lectio divina*—how to read the scriptures deeply—Riess shares suggestions that most Latter-day Saints would benefit from implementing. Similarly, the practices she undergoes on hospitality, gratitude, and prayer would help many draw closer to God. Latter-day Saints may readily identify with her desire to progress spiritually and with the unrealistic expectations that she sets for herself. In the end, readers may benefit from seeing the progress that is found even in seeming failure and the good that may be drawn from faith traditions outside their own. Riess's memoir has much to recommend itself, and the question of whether to read the book will depend largely on the tolerance of readers for a book that seeks enlightenment through whimsy and irreverence.

The Place of Knowing: A Spiritual Autobiography,

by Emma Lou Warner Thayne (Bloomington, Ind.: iUniverse, 2011)

Reviewed by Amy Isaksen Cartwright

From their cultural beginnings in the Great Salt Lake Valley to what is now a worldwide presence, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have sought to define, understand, correlate, and grapple for and with identity. As a body of membership, we have worked to describe who we are—our faith, our heritage, and our culture—both to ourselves and to the broader world. The institutional messages and initiatives are primarily about coming to unity. But the lived experiences of individuals—their needs, hopes, desires, and circumstances—are sometimes different than what is perceived as a prescriptive Mormon identity, and this prompts a search for and reflection of the inward Self. It is this search, and the desire to share individual knowing, that fuels Emma Lou Warner Thayne's *The Place of Knowing: A Spiritual Autobiography*. In this current moment of Church history when questions regarding the female experience are receiving much attention, Thayne adds her voice as a Mormon woman who has followed her convictions and found herself and God in the journey.

Mormon matriarch Emma Lou Warner Thayne (1924–2014) shares what it is to follow her individual path and to find beauty and divinity in unexpected places and ways. Her memoir begins with a terrifying near-death experience in which an iron rod flew through the windshield and into her face. As she processed the events and her experiences surrounding the accident, she recognized what had happened—she had

died and come back. She had experienced the next life, but rather than understanding her experience all at once, she slowly came to understand, piece by piece, her brush with death, the afterlife, and divinity.

Upon first encountering this episode in the book, I expected a more concrete vision of the afterlife—one that looked, sounded, and felt like the afterlife taught to me in Sunday School classes. I expected a clear vision that led the author to a place of certainty. But in this work, one that reads much like a pleasant conversation with a dear friend, Thayne describes transcendence, not in terms of surety or arrival, but in terms of peace and process. The “place of knowing,” the afterlife she experiences in the brief moments of her death, is not one of heaven and hell or judgment and retribution. It is the sweetness of home, the feeling of belonging, the warmth of connection and love of family. It is what Thayne coins as *childness*. The afterlife no longer becomes something wholly separate but an extension of the grandest and most transcendent of the current life.

As beautiful, important, and defining as was Thayne’s near-death experience, it is only one ingredient in the narrative of a life devoted to the love of self and the love of all humankind. As she relates account after account of personal ministration, one cannot help but feel safe in her literary presence. Following the passing of her friend, artist Paul Fini, and his partner, David, from AIDS, she worked with interfaith groups through the AIDS Foundation to display Fini’s fourteen works depicting the Stations of the Cross. When her own daughter struggled through the ravages of bipolar disorder, at a time when there was a great amount of stigma surrounding issues of mental health, she stood by her side and turned to God for peace. Time after time, it is her love that burns brightly and transcends the bounds of race, nationality, life path, or faith tradition. Her message is one of belonging in the human family. The warmth of belonging, which Thayne brings from “the place of knowing” to experiences of the here and now, helps to establish her as the Mormon matriarch she aptly proclaims herself to be.

Alongside her accounts of service and personal enlightenment, Thayne includes a wealth of personal poetry. On a micro level, each poem offers a snapshot into her thoughts, feelings, and details of those events described through her prose. However, the inclusion of her poetry also harkens to a lifetime of upholding while also subverting certain gender roles as a Latter-day Saint woman. Thayne explains how her choice to take time away from home and family to focus on her writing

and poetry was often met with questioning and disapproval. Christ says, “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:25). Such words bring a culture of outward service that weighs heavily upon Latter-day Saints, as it did upon Thayne: “My culture does not encourage a woman to find a life inside herself. Doing is promoted far more than being” (96). With each poem—many of which were composed while spending time in quiet retreat or at workshops away from home—we are reminded of Thayne’s grappling to make peace with expectations from without and her yearning from within.

Above all, Thayne exemplifies the strife for enlightenment and progression common to all. We learn that to be a woman is not just to be found in *doing* particular things, but in *being*: passionate, intuitive, insightful, and seeking. Thayne discovers the unexpected Self in her constant work and desire to build relationships—horizontally to the earthly, inwardly to the self, and vertically to the Divine.⁶

The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of an American Faith,
by Joanna Brooks (New York: Free Press/Simon and Schuster, 2012)

Reviewed by Jacqueline S. Thursby

Joanna Brooks is an author and professor of English and comparative literature at San Diego State University. She has contributed to several media outlets, including *Religion Dispatches*. Her popular memoir tells her story of growing up in the Latter-day Saint faith and her struggles with orthodox Mormonism. Her autobiography documents her efforts to find a compromise that assuages memories of deeply ingrained mores and still provides some peace of mind.

Joanna’s family of six—two sisters, one brother, and their parents—lived in Southern California, where there were few LDS members. She explains that when growing up she was often the only Mormon girl in her school classroom. At friends’ birthday parties, she often felt conspicuous because they were served Coca-Cola (or Dr. Pepper, Mountain Dew, or Sunkist); she could not have those because of her family’s strict

6. For a recent interview with Emma Lou Thayne before she passed away, see “Emma Lou Thayne and the Art of Peace,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (2014): 181–195.

prohibition from caffeine and so had to request root beer or another noncaffeinated soda.

Joanna recounts how when she was eleven and living in Southern California, her family was caught up in the fear triggered by the “Cold War arms race” (36). From her childhood perspective, these reactions created an atmosphere of anxiety and dread. Also an issue at this time was the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, and she frequently heard discussions about the signs of the times, which left her with a sense of foreboding. Lessons about moral behavior likewise left her uncomfortable; she had been hurt physically by a friend’s father and by an aggressive boy, and her feelings about the subject of sexuality were numbed. In her text, she represents her formative years as typical of an LDS girl, but she clearly conveys the discomfort she felt by the threat of “unseen powers of darkness” (43). While family members dispute her version of the story, these compelling descriptions of those years are poignant and deeply moving, and they set the scene for later reversals in her life.

When Joanna entered BYU, English professors like Eugene England resonated with her and helped rekindle her spiritual sensitivity. She writes, “But whereas before my cosmic Mormon vision had been colored by dark tones of end times, I now saw it anew in the basement classroom in the BYU humanities building: ‘the glory of God was intelligence’ as Joseph Smith wrote, ‘or in other words, light and truth’” (132). Joanna was also present at BYU when “Boyd K. Packer, a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, delivered a speech to the Mormon All-Church Coordinating Council declaring that the three greatest ‘dangers’ to the Church were the ‘gay-lesbian’ movement, ‘the feminist movement,’ and the ‘so-called scholars or intellectuals’” (136). She considered herself a feminist and scholar; these words, she felt, “declared [her] a double enemy” (139).

Strong feelings are sometimes more visceral than factual, and looking at the original speech shows that Elder Packer neither called these movements “the three greatest dangers” nor declared people in these movements as “the enemy,” though he did raise concerns about them. Nevertheless, Joanna’s reaction to this speech and other currents in Mormonism were acute. While graduating from BYU and earning a PhD in Los Angeles, she struggled with feelings of exile and deep angst for what seemed lost, and she moved on and married a Jewish man from her hometown. Though not active while in her self-imposed exile years, she kept the embers of her faith alive, remembered progenitors, and appreciated the helpful devotion and care of a faithful visiting teacher.

Brooks writes that many needful issues are seldom discussed by Latter-day Saints when their relationships with Church teachings are strained. She asks, “How is it we come through most of the difficult miles? . . . Do we come in company, or do we come alone?” (155). Brooks has traveled alone before, but now her marriage is good, her daughters are bright and healthy, and her LDS heritage is alive in her memory and records. Her daughters have a double heritage—both Jewish and Mormon. Each year, the family attends the Pioneer Day celebrations so the girls can be familiar with that element of their heritage. In describing herself, she writes, “I am an unorthodox woman with a fierce and hungry faith” (168).

Brooks’s book will resonate with certain readers because of its irony and sardonic contrasts and restless outlook. “I want to do what my ancestors did,” she explains. “Look west and dream up a new country for my children” (200). But her vision of the journey is likely to offend some LDS readers and strike others as being a somewhat lightweight effort at capturing the spirit of her pioneer heritage. Why did the pioneers in early Utah choose to sacrifice so much? Her narrative would have been improved by answering that question and sharing at a deeper level more of what she feels about the restored gospel.

For Joanna Brooks, faith and striving are the bedrock of her journey, but she appears to have found personal peace on a different path than many others in her faith community.

Global Mom: Eight Countries, Sixteen Addresses, Five Languages, One Family, by Melissa Dalton-Bradford (Utah: Familius, 2013)

Reviewed by Rosalyn Collings Eves

On her blog, *Melissa Writes of Passage*, Melissa Dalton-Bradford describes herself as a “mother, wife, sister, daughter, friend, writer, independent scholar, [and] professional soprano,” among other things. She holds a BA in German and an MA in comparative literature from BYU; speaks French, German, Norwegian, and some Mandarin; and has taught language and literature courses at various universities. She is a prize-winning poet and has served on the editorial board of *Segullah*, a literary magazine for LDS women. In many ways, her resume is as ambitious as her book, which is at once a memoir of parenting, living abroad, negotiating between the demands of motherhood and career, and a manual of grieving—all wrapped in Dalton-Bradford’s lovely prose. Her memoir is witty,

complicated, and confessional: she spills her guts on so many topics that readers are left feeling they have become her new best friend.

Before Dalton-Bradford married, she and her husband, Randall, knew they wanted to raise their children abroad. So when he proposed a move to Norway several years into their marriage, she agreed, despite misgivings she had about what this hiatus might do to her fledgling acting career in New York City. Contemplating this move, Dalton-Bradford writes, “Somehow we know in our bones that however narrow and colorless that strip of comfort zone ledge might be that we’re teetering on, leaving it, flinging ourselves off into a major geographic and cultural relocation, will expose us. It will expose our limitations, insecurities, weaknesses, and our baggy Superhero underwear” (10).

Dalton-Bradford might have said the same of her memoir. While her vivid prose carries readers through the cultural idiosyncrasies of each new exotic land (Norway, France, Germany, Singapore, and Switzerland), it is ultimately her exposure that pulls readers into her story. Dalton-Bradford’s attempts to navigate the cultural expectations, particularly at each of her children’s schools, are funny and heart-warming, and readers cheer at her small triumphs, such as mastering French bureaucracy. But she is also honest about her struggles, her recurring bouts with depression in France, her feelings of alienation upon returning to America, and, of course, her devastating grief over her oldest son Parker who, trying to save another, died in a swimming accident at age eighteen.

In one of the most tender and wrenching passages of the book, Dalton-Bradford describes the nurse who washes her son as he lies comatose in the hospital:

Now this stranger, this woman with white nurse’s shoes and a metal rolling trolley is walking toward those hands, hands with calluses she cannot read, toward an entire geography of flesh and blood she cannot know. Nothing but foreign soil to her. And then, with everyday grace softening her movements, she proceeds with the speechless routine of turning and lifting, wrapping and bending, of dipping a cloth in cool water and tracing a limb with it. . . . This unnamed woman, cradling my son, following the curve of his mortal landscape, sharing with him his final sacrament (209).

While the memoir as a whole is about building a life in unfamiliar landscapes, this new landscape of grief becomes the grounding heart of the story, making an otherwise ordinary (if fascinating) narrative extraordinary. Dalton-Bradford admits on her blog that her life

is “sometimes irrationally busy and unpredictable,” and readers might wonder what hidden struggles children encounter in this more nomadic lifestyle. Whatever the case, Dalton-Bradford’s willingness to expose herself to new places, new friends, new experiences, and even new loss is for her transformative—and can be so for readers as well.

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