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The Demands of Poetry: A Review of Collections Published in 2018 by Latter-day Saint Authors

Susan Elizabeth Howe and Casualene Meyer

During the nineteenth century, poets had the celebrity status of today's most famous singers. Most of today's educated readers (including educated Latter-day Saint readers), however, can't name five poets who are highly regarded in our generation. But readers may not be completely to blame for this shift. Early in the twentieth century, poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, poets later grouped under the term *Modernist*, took poetry, which had been one of the most popular genres of literature, and made it so difficult—so full of allusions, voices, and fragments of thought not necessarily connected to each other—that poetry became a subject to be studied by university professors and students, not a popular form of literature.

Contemporary poetry's reputation for difficulty, if not outright incomprehensibility, is in some ways deserved. For the past century at least, poets have argued about how much work readers should be asked to do to comprehend a poem. Modernists felt that poetry should be difficult to reflect the breakdown in institutions that had provided the Western worldview before World War I. The writers who call themselves “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E” poets feel that some of the racist or sexist assumptions inherent in language make readers complicit in perpetuating injustice, and so—as they do with the word *language* in their own name—they seek to disrupt the linear comprehension of a poem by distorting syntax, altering punctuation, and fragmenting sentences to require readers to question those assumptions. Poets favoring a more democratic poetry have questioned the writer's authority to control what a poem means and have deliberately composed poems of indeterminate

meaning so that readers are enabled/required to bring their own ideas to the language of a poem as they attempt to create meaning.

But there is an equally large and vocal group of poets who write and support poetry that is more accessible to readers. They argue that the entire function of language is to communicate and that poems, being composed of language, should participate in the work of communication. Their poetry is more welcoming to the reader, making clear the situation of the poem and the voices involved. The newness of their poetry is in their original use of language, the imaginative representations of their subjects, and the wit and wisdom they bring to the poems.

This review essay doesn't mean to promote one type of poetry above another. Rather, it is an attempt to help readers learn to engage with any collection of poetry they may encounter. In reality, there are so many different types of poetry being published today that most readers who try a few books will find some they enjoy. In addition, readers can learn the demands of many types of poetry, preparing themselves to engage with poems they may otherwise have considered too difficult to appreciate.

Last year was an extraordinary year of publishing for Latter-day Saint poets; eight individual collections and an anthology all bear 2018 copyright dates. These books fit into the spectrum of contemporary poetry, some more difficult than others. This review essay uses these books to identify various types of contemporary poetry and help readers understand the demands of each type of poetry on the reader. This review also hopes to foster an interest among Latter-day Saints in poetry written by those who address, among many subjects, topics and experiences shared by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

James Goldberg, *Phoenix Song*. American Fork, Utah: Beant Kaur Books, 2018.

This collection is both strong and accessible to the reader. With short lines, open forms, conversational language, and a thoughtful, faithful voice, James Goldberg's poems beautifully render the continuum of human experience, from suffering to joy. In two sections of the book, "That Other Country" and "Looking Back," Goldberg presents his experiences with cancer. He wrestles both emotionally and physically with the illness, examining his situation with restraint and honesty. "What I could use," he says in the poem "When You Ask How You Can Help," "—to be frank— / is a somewhat normal bowel movement." The frankness of these poems is one of their pleasures.

Goldberg never names his illness—a poetic choice that gives the poems the power of the unsaid. “The Parable of the Fist” suggests the ravages of his disease by showing the excruciating pain of the treatments: “I mention / how I gargle every two hours, / as instructed, with the chalky / protein rinse that makes me / gag,” and after sucking on ice “to close up the capillaries” in his mouth, Goldberg says, “I suck till I shake / with cold so the chemicals will / tear up my mouth just a little bit / less.” The hospital chaplain, with whom Goldberg speaks to distract himself from his pain, uses a fist and a relaxed hand to explain the craving for control versus the openness of acceptance: “*But if you / open yourself up to accept / the trouble and the pain, / . . . you are also / open to receive / and recognize / grace*” (italics in original). The voice in these poems seems to be Goldberg’s own, not an invented persona, and his ideas are enlightening to the reader precisely because they are sincere and authentic.

An acknowledgment of suffering is found also in “The Questions I Beg My Bible to Answer: June 2018,” a poem that uses the date as an indirect reference to refugee families separated at the U.S.-Mexico border by the U.S. government. The poem likens these people to the Hebrew slaves oppressed by the Egyptians in the story of the Exodus. The poem begins with the question “Why are the Egyptians / *afraid* of the Hebrews?” (italics in original), which becomes a refrain at the beginning of each of the poem’s three sections. While seeming to focus on the ancient Egyptian civilization, the comparison to a faltering America is strongly suggested in the description “an aging / civilization, haunted / by mirages of its own / bygone youth,” and by the final question: “what makes them give / the order to tear children / from their mothers’ arms?” This question should become the reader’s questions as well; this poem is both art and an invitation to ethical action.

Other poems take up the suffering involved in bearing with imperfect humans and forgiving their faults, an example being “In the Choir,” where singing in the choir is a metaphoric representation of engaging with those we find annoying or obnoxious: “Complementary voices who frequently / (secretly) wish they could go / for each other’s throats.” In the course of a rehearsal, the choir members have to accept the imperfections of others for the sake of the choir, “forgiving a sharp note, overlooking / a measure that runs flat. Trusting / that someday we’ll find / a heavenly harmony.”

This poem also demonstrates that Goldberg’s collection is not just about suffering. It is a thoughtful engagement with many aspects of being, as demonstrated by sections titled “Qualify for the Work,” “Sketches

from My Ward,” and “Paths of Virtue.” The final section, “Lullaby,” presents a believable representation of joy in “Love Song for Nicole and James”: “I pray, though I know that before I reach amen, / I’ll fall asleep. I lift up my thoughts / and thank God for this love. This love, / pressed to diamond beneath the weight / of long days and short years.” *Phoenix Song’s* demands on the reader do not grow out of poetic difficulty but of the personal reflection they invite in the reader in response to clear and thoughtful expression.

Deja Earley. *To the Mormon Newlyweds Who Thought the Belly-Button Was Somehow Involved*. Salt Lake City: Signature, 2018.

Like Goldberg’s poems, Deja Earley’s are welcoming rather than forbidding to the reader. Conversational language, open forms, and clearly established situations invite readers to enter the poems. Earley often uses the title to clue the reader in to the poem’s situation: “I Watch a Couple on the Train,” “In the Hall While They Take Chest X-Rays,” and “I Teach Six-Year-Olds about Jesus.” The poems don’t annoy the reader by withholding necessary information: if a poem addresses a “you” or speaks of a “he,” it quickly becomes clear who that you or he is. Rather than their ambiguity or confusion, it is the poems’ precision that engages the reader, the immediate entry into the complex emotional situations they explore.

These poems, which also seem to be in the voice of the poet rather than an invented persona, present the gender development of a girl into an inexperienced teen and young adult, and then into a married woman. They offer the pain, humor, innocence, ignorance, obsessions, romances, mistakes, negotiations, and eventual fulfillment of a Latter-day Saint woman who has to learn what is and is not prohibited and, conversely, what is allowed or even required. An awareness of the way the poet creates multiple meanings with her endings enhances the reader’s enjoyment of these complex and intriguing poems, as does attention to the way the poems are sequenced.

“Artichoke” is one of the many poems that is so successful in using the ending to expand the meaning of the poem. It does a great deal of work in its brief ten lines. The speaker says as the poem opens, “Humming, I nestle artichokes, / preparing them to simmer. / I fill water to their hips, sprinkle salt, / and nearly forget to turn on the burner.” These lines suggest that more than just vegetables are going to “simmer.” The next three lines confirm that suspicion: “At dinner I teach him to bare / his teeth, scrape the fleshy edge. / He tries one leaf.” Apparently, a boyfriend has come to dinner, and the speaker wants to teach him both how

to eat artichokes and something else about baring his teeth and scraping “the fleshy edge.” He doesn’t seem to be interested, as he eats only a single leaf. The poem ends: “But I don’t give up. I take a knife, / split the hair from the choke, / present him with a forkful of heart.” That “forkful of heart” does extraordinary work in the poem, not just in its literal sense as the best part of the artichoke but also as an offering of the speaker’s heart—her desire and affection for this man.

Even the sequence of poems itself enhances the reading of the collection. In “Whatever Would Follow Hello,” the speaker is “In London, alone at a ballet.” She notices that the man sitting next to her seems to be checking her out, and part of her wants to respond, to have him invite her “for intermission wine,” to flirt with him and discover what might develop. But her beliefs about chastity keep her from responding to him. She darts off at intermission; her romantic encounter with this man never gets off the ground. But the next poem, titled “Seducing Stonehenge,” offers a humorous, ironic response to that experience; she may not be willing to seduce a man, but she knows how to seduce an ancient monument.

Significant poems are arranged throughout the collection in a way that, all together, create the story of the speaker eventually finding a beloved and marrying. For example, the poem “Not Yet” is about the speaker having lunch with a man during a rainstorm. He goes to get the car, which is “covered in white blossoms” (suggesting a wedding, perhaps?), and she runs toward the car too early, before he has had a chance to make a U-turn and come back for her. “*I didn’t think you would get closer,*” the speaker says, another last line that means much more than its response to the literal situation (italics in original). This man, apparently, plans to come back for the speaker, to carry her off, as it were. The poem poignantly expresses that she doesn’t understand the love and concern he feels for her, which makes the next poem, in which the speaker is a married woman, that much more of a fulfillment for the speaker and a revelation for the reader. This portrait of a young woman’s coming of age is a coherent collection that is satisfying and engaging.

Karen Kelsay. *Of Omens That Flitter*. Boston: Big Table Publishing, 2018.

Kelsay is a formalist poet—that is, the majority of poems in this collection employ rhyme and meter, formal elements that have characterized poetry for centuries. Her poems in this collection are sketches or vignettes, often describing a natural setting in detail, like the poetry of the Romantics. Also in keeping with the Romantics, her themes include

change, decay, aging, and impermanence. The collection's title poem begins, "A flock of starlings smudge the autumn sky. / The birds swoop high and low, just like the trills / of flutes, and shift their plumage as they fly— / elusive patterns form above the hills." These lines show the power of rhyme and meter to enable a reader to grasp the beauty of a scene from the natural world. Many of Kelsay's other poems begin in a natural setting; for example, "Beside the bank where black swans often lie / in twos, beneath wild fruit trees near the stream." In fact, over half of the collection's seventy poems describe the natural world. Other subjects include sketches of specific individuals (a homeless woman "On Hill Street," a "Superchild" who copes with a dysfunctional mother, the family cat, and "Atomic Tiki Man"). Other poems feature memories of the poet's aging parents and quirky personal reflections on her husband, how to dress when she is old, and her preference for California over Alaska.

Rhyme and meter are a significant aspect of this collection. Used successfully, they can deliver the meaning of a poem forcefully, but they come with some disadvantages for a contemporary poet. In former times, it was permissible to alter word order to achieve rhyme, as in Robert Frost's "Whose woods these are I think I know, / His house is in the village, though." In the natural, conversational language of today, these lines would be expressed, "I think I know whose woods these are, but his house is in the village," a decidedly less memorable and less poetic sentence. It is much more difficult to create rhyme when lines must be composed in conversational language, without resorting to inverted syntax. It is similarly difficult to employ a metrical pattern without adding empty phrases and expressions that contribute little to the poem other than filling out the rhythms of unstressed and stressed syllables in a line. Thus, Kelsay's choice to use these formal elements makes her task more challenging; like a gymnast, her achievement in each poem is determined by both technical difficulty and execution.

One of the poems in which Kelsay succeeds admirably is the sonnet "Home Decor." Note the natural language of the opening lines, which rhyme without distorting the language: "I remember sunning on the sand— / my dad in wet-gear rising from the sea, / an air tank on his shoulders, like Godzilla, / throwing off his mask and calling me." The father has speared a bright turquoise parrotfish, which dulls as it dies. A taxidermist "restore[s] it to its brilliant, deep-blue self," and then the family hangs it above a sliding door. The poem concludes: "Along a full-length teakwood shelf, / we loaded gemmy doodads from the store. / That handsome fish was hatched for our decor." One of the techniques of many poems, and especially sonnets, is using the ending to transform or

invert the expectations the poem has created, an especially memorable and effective technique if the transformation is delivered in rhyme, as it is in this poem. The fish changes from a living creature of nature to a decorative household display, and the final line more or less implicates the family in that act.

The pleasures of this collection, then, are to engage with the forms in which the poems are written, to appreciate how successfully they employ rhyme and meter, and to enjoy the pictures they create of places and people.

Robert A. Rees. *Waiting for Morning*. Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2018.

In her Nobel Prize lecture, American author Toni Morrison observed that “language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never ‘pin down’ slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.”¹ Robert A. Rees’s collection *Waiting for Morning* contains poems that reach for the ineffable, including subjects that are difficult beyond imagination—war, genocide, sexual abuse, and brutally dysfunctional domestic life, for example.

The word *ineffable* means “that which cannot be expressed”;² how does a poet suggest what cannot actually be put into language, and how does a reader connect with the writer’s intentions? The writer can name the subject in the title and then use specific incidents or examples to suggest the work’s greater meaning, as Rees does in his poem “Melancholia.” He begins his examination of melancholia with his grandson’s experience of angst, rage, and fear: “It feels like the whole world / is inside me,” the boy says. Then Rees identifies specific individuals whose melancholia led them to violence, sometimes against themselves—“King Saul, Jeremiah, / Hamlet and Camus, / . . . Woolf and Styron.” He quotes lines from Emily Dickinson that suggest this same feeling: “Dickinson / oppressed by winter light, / felt a funeral in her brain.” He also speaks of how such suffering afflicts even God “. . . when / sequestered hates / and serial annihilations / lean everything backward to chaos / and no flood or fire / can extinguish / the darkness.” The effect

1. Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture,” December 7, 1993, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>.

2. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “ineffable,” accessed February 1, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ineffable>.

of all these expressions of melancholia is to help the reader infer the vastness and complexity of this condition.

Another way to suggest the ineffable is to use specific people or incidents as symbols of larger concerns. Consider Rees's description of African conflict in "Famine and Scarcity": "On the evening news I see / bone piles, the vultures of war, / and beneath a tangled bush in Africa / a woman holding her ghost child— / a collapsed puppet." That a woman's beloved son or daughter is called a "ghost child" or "collapsed puppet" suggests the ending of humanity, which is exactly what happens in war or famine. Though the poem seems to focus on specific individuals, it ends with a broader sense of insufficient action and abandonment—and an implicit invitation to readers to consider their own awareness of and responses to distant sufferings: "At night I say my clichés / for the wrecked and wretched of the world / who speak holy words / to the sky's vast darkness."

A third way of writing the ineffable is to use paradox to move the subject beyond rational thought. In "Ona," Rees gives the tragic biography of the sexually abused girl who will become the speaker's mother, although she drinks poison to try to kill herself and her child before he is born. In "Cold Sweet," the son presents his only memory of his mother, their making ice cream together from a bowl of snow: "I don't know if she kissed me or / touched my cheek, / but I remember / the smell of vanilla, / the taste of cold." Those last two lines suggest a paradox—both the son's yearning for his mother (the sweetness of vanilla) and her failure to return that love (the cold of the snow). These particulars stand in for the immense loss the child suffered as well as the possibilities of transformation that enabled him to thrive and progress in his life.

Rees takes on many difficult subjects in this collection of poems: the Spanish conquest of the Americas, the internment of Japanese-American citizens in the 1940s, the war in the Pacific, the Holocaust, and the painful family history of Ona, so damaged by her father's abuse that when she learns her husband has been severely wounded in the Pacific during World War II, she leaves her three children and abandons the family.

Not all the poems in the book deal with such heavy subjects; in fact most do not, including portraits of the natural world, found poems,³ poetic postcards from a visit to China, poems of married love, haiku,

3. A found poem is an expression lifted verbatim from another text and arranged in lines to become independent and make possible a heightened or alternate understanding of the original text.

and a few epigrammatic poems such as “Freud,” who, the poem tells us, “Took the lid / off the id. / When he was gone / we put it back on.” Whatever the subject matter, these are wise and benevolent poems, touching both the public and the private concerns of the human heart.

Lance Larsen. *What the Body Knows*. Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 2018.

What the reader will immediately notice about the poems of this collection is that they don’t have lines. They are all prose poems: poems whose language proceeds from one margin to the other and forms paragraphs or blocks of text. The collection also contains three prose poems in a question-and-answer format. These compositions are called poems rather than essays or short-short stories because they employ, along with the discursive nature of prose, the intensity, imagery, and heightened language of poetry. In addition, many prose poems have an element of strangeness to them, which the reader must anticipate and adjust to.

Despite their strangeness, the poems are not difficult to enter. Like Earley’s titles, Larsen’s titles often establish the situations of the poems, as in, for example, “How to Do Things with Rats,” “Youth Detention Center at Slate Canyon,” and “Why I Washed My Hands in the Fay Wray Fountain.” But what comes after the title is often a great surprise. A Larsen prose poem may be usefully compared to a roller-coaster ride—one cannot anticipate the twists and turns, slow rises, precipitous descents, and upside-down circles before one returns safely to the on-and-off ramp. The pleasure is in the ride.

The poems offer large doses of humor. Some of Larsen’s titles hint at the laughter to come in reading them: “Mother Teresa This, Mother Teresa That,” which phrase is Larsen’s teenaged son’s original way to “cuss”; “All Puffy and White, Goldish, Harpy, and Angelonic,” another teenager’s description of heaven in a sacrament meeting talk; “To the Stranger Who Asked Me to Nominate Him for the Nobel Prize”; and “In Dreams of Old Girlfriends.”

Larsen’s imagination is limitless, and therefore the range of his poems always extends beyond what is expected. “Work Experience,” for instance, starts out, “Well, let’s see, in my life as a lizard I lost my tail twice; as a penny I never came up heads; as a foxglove I spilled my pollen helter-skelter thanks to bees that buffeted and ants that climbed.” There are ten other professional identities this poem’s speaker has assumed, each impossible to guess without reading the poem. “To the Sixties” begins, “Mostly I was losing baby teeth in you, selling Kool-aid, and

praying to Bigfoot. In you: Kent State and banana seats. In you: My Lai and gum wrapper chains, two Kennedys dead and four Monkees singing.” This nostalgic list causes readers to wonder what else Larsen will identify and what new turns he will take in painting a picture of this decade. Only reading the poem will provide the answers.

List poems, like the two just mentioned, are scattered throughout the collection. Another large set of poems is based on incidents: driving on a highway covered for several miles with beetles, watching a daughter who wants to touch Macbeth when she is a groundling at London’s Globe Theatre, helping a girl who cuts off her pinkie finger in shop class, observing a child draw her own picture in the Rembrandt room of the Louvre. The invention and imagination Larsen brings to these poems are equally engaging. As humorous and creative as these poems are, they also show extraordinary love and compassion for their subjects, providing a depth of concern that enhances the poems’ pleasure.

In approaching these prose poems, it helps to look for syntactical patterns in the composition. For example, the poem “Nocturne” is an evening song, as the title suggests. It begins, “To snails and their peregrinations in slime, to hungry deer and my pansies chewed down to their nothings, to worm tailings under the pine.” The pattern this poem employs is that of a toast or dedication to various things that Larsen notices or thinks about as he prepares for bed. Another poem, “Beasts of Burden,” says, “Men like me say, *Fine I’ll carry you, but just this once.* Men like me adjust their shoulders to the new heft and mass of the cosmos and stride up the trail. Men like me do not do French braids or paint fingernails mauve” (italics in original). Here, the reader will note the repeated phrase “men like me” followed by a statement of what they do or do not do. When reading prose poems, which typically don’t have stanzas, line breaks, or a meter to help guide the reading, identifying syntactical patterns can anchor the reader during the passage.

With the collection’s wide range and creativity, a willingness to be surprised is essential to fully appreciate and enjoy these poems. The poem “Sad Jar of Atoms” creates a mystery with its title. The poem explains that the phrase, which originated with the English Romantic poet Lord Byron, is a term of endearment Larsen and his wife use for each other. After the poem shows the couple acting in ways that justify the term “sad jar of atoms” for each of them, it then attaches the phrase to all sorts of other things—a praying mantis, a horse, life, sea turtles, Benjamin Franklin, God, and so forth. A poem itself is “a jar made of sizzle and cordite.” That phrase is an apt description of all the poems in

Lance Larsen's collection. Literally every poem explodes, expanding the reader's perceptions of the possibilities of our lives.

Heather Harris Bergevin. *Lawless Women*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2018.

The title *Lawless Women* suggests that this collection is feminist in nature, which might raise concerns for some readers. But the collection offers an interpretation of feminism that challenges stereotypes and assumptions about what that term means. To Heather Harris Bergevin, feminism includes tender and involved mothering. One poem, for example, presents her anxiety about cutting her daughter's long hair. Fortunately, Bergevin succeeds in the task and says, "you grin in / the mirror, instantly older, instantly taller, / beautiful (but you were / always beautiful.)" Other touching poems take up her son's fierceness and independence, her youngest's memory of Heavenly Father telling him that he was coming to Earth, and the complexities of a single day for a mom with three kids who all have different schedules.

Bergevin's feminism also includes political wisdom—one poem is about alternatives to the hate-filled protests at the funerals of fallen gay servicemen, the exploitation of young girls in polygamous cultures, and the inflamed xenophobia that sees poor, fleeing refugees as enemies. In response to these events, she concludes that when we meet our Eternal Parents and the Savior, we will be "blinded / by the dazzling of / the Love, by the perfect / logic, reason, doctrine, / Truth, finally pure / unadulterated, untranslated / by culture, by prejudice." The test she sees that separates the wheat from the tares is that of learning to love—the first and essential doctrine.

There are other poems that are more traditionally feminist. In "Colossians," a woman speaker seems to be addressing a controlling spouse: "you ask me to find my voice / and say my heart, / but carefully in only the right / tone / and not in classes, / or online, / or in the home / or community, / so do (but don't), unless / it's what we say to say to say." Several poems like this demonstrate the contradictory messages women receive about what they should say and do. Countering these messages, Bergevin demonstrates throughout the collection how capable she is of speaking for herself.

Another group of poems in the collection are feminist revisionist poems that retell the stories of many female characters from their point of view rather than from the point of the view of male authors who, down the centuries, labeled the women as lawless or criminal or evil.

In the collection's introduction, Bergevin says that she loved mythology and fairy tales from the time she was a child but wondered why, for example, stepmothers were always portrayed as crones or witches. Once she realized that it was because men told the stories, she began to reimagine these women's accounts and to write poems retelling them.

The "lawless women" poems are inventive and intelligent and entirely plausible alternative stories for the heroines. For example, in "Stepmother," the queen is Snow White's real mother and stepmother only to the king's children by an earlier wife; the queen hides her daughter away from court because the king begins to show less interest in his wife and more interest in this young and lovely stepdaughter ("come, girl, let's / have a song, come sit / here on my lap"); the mother disguises herself as an old, bent woman when she visits her daughter so the king won't be able to trace her; and it is the king who poisons the apple to kill Snow White when he learns that he has been deceived by his wife. Our retelling is far inferior to the artistry and intelligence of the poem, which, for example, describes the dwarves as "the labor faction / deeply forested" and then as "hardened, mine-worked men, / artisans in metallurgy, / jewelers to Europa" and "Adept hunters, trappers, / mountaineers, who just happen / to be tall as my elbow."

For those familiar with the Snow White story, "Stepmother" is a relatively easy poem to engage with, as are the poems "Shadowed" (about Wendy in the Peter Pan story) and "First" (about Eve). But many female figures inhabiting these poems are more obscure, and the poems assume, as they should, that readers will know these stories that have been handed down in fairy tales, the Bible, and classical mythology. These figures include Vashti; Gothel (from the Grimm fairy tale, not the Disney movie); Clytemnestra and Cassandra, in their relation to Agamemnon; "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"; Medea; Juno, whom Bergevin associates with Melania Trump; and the woman with an issue of blood who touched Christ's robe.

It is an unwritten rule of contemporary poetry that if a reader doesn't understand an allusion, it is his or her responsibility to seek out that information. This is one way in which readers are asked to participate in creating the meaning of the poem. That willingness to do research on the characters is the most important factor in how much readers will enjoy this collection. Other poems in the collection also make historical or literary references, such as the poem "Jacques-Bernard Brunius Describes Palais Ideal to the Dadaists." References are also made to

Colossians, “Bartleby the Scrivener” from the story by Herman Melville, and Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 29.” Fortunately, we live in the world of Google and Bing and Siri and Alexa, and most of the stories are easy to find. The effort required to engage fully with these poems is entirely worth it; they are smart, intelligent poems that lead readers to reassess their understanding of contemporary culture and old stories about women.

Javen Tanner. *The God Mask*. American Fork, Utah: Kelsay Books, 2018.

The God Mask makes considerable demands—both philosophical and existential—on readers and requires them to spend a longer time with the poems to arrive at an understanding of both their artistry and intentions. But there is a significant payoff for that increased attention; the poems make a deep and reasoned critique of what it means to live in a fallen world. They are informed by a serious application of Latter-day Saint doctrine about the Fall, and although the journey through them is dark, they arrive—for that very reason—at an enlightening resolution.

The situation of a poem is sometimes not clarified, but there are enough clues to help the reader figure out what is happening. For example, the poem “In the River” apparently takes place in “*Otaua, New Zealand*,” which is the epigraph (*italics in original*). The poem opens in the river: “Hold your breath. Imagine sin / smoldering on your skin, and dissipating / like ink in the slow current. Come up for air.” This is a poem of direct address, but the swimmer who is told to hold his/her breath is unnamed and never identified more clearly. The poem continues: “Feel the weight and suction of wet linen. / It’s cold, but sometimes we are reborn / in winter.” At that point, the reader realizes that this is about a winter baptism in a New Zealand river and that the person being addressed is the person being baptized. The poem concludes by telling this newly baptized Church member, “You have been taught to analyze what I mean / when I say salvation is a trace of blood // in the mouth, a lung full of air, / a darkness with a crown of thorns. / But you already know.” The crown of thorns is a metonymy we already associate with the Savior’s sacrifice, but what does Tanner intend by calling salvation “a trace of blood in the mouth” and “a lung full of air”? The reader is left to think about that question; the poem doesn’t explain. Perhaps the first phrase is meant to recall the sacrament and the second the breath of accepting the covenant of baptism, but other considerations are equally possible.

The poems grapple with the brutality of the fallen world. The poem “Fish” is a remembrance of the speaker as a nine-year-old making his six-year-old brother gut a fish they had caught. The brother wanted to kick the fish back into the water, but the speaker says instead, “I took mercy and crushed / its head with my heel.” The speaker remembers his younger brother’s fear, and also the flies, “their relentlessness, / diving at the entrails, / coating the crooked mouth / as if to keep it from saying, / *You, too, will suffer*” (italics in original). The speaker also acknowledges his own anger and guilt, asking his brother if he remembers “how the more we cleaned, / the filthier we became?” The pathos of innocence trying on the violence of the world is graphic; the vulnerability of both brothers is palpably rendered. Other poems take on the shootings at a college in Umpqua, Oregon; the burial of a miscarried fetus; and the meaninglessness of existence that a scientific view of the universe suggests. That last concern is expressed in “The Observable Universe,” which speaks of “death and nothingness, out of which we / find not meaning, but perspective.” The poem ambiguously concludes, “What we will not say—what we must never say to each other— / is this: There are some things that mean everything / to stargazers like you and me, who are nothing.”

Some poems feature surreal elements that the reader has to grapple with to create meaning. In the prose poem “Central Park,” the speaker asks his family, “If you could have anyone dig your grave, who would it be?” This question is apparently a game, according to the speaker’s son. Right away we are on shaky ground since this is not a question we often consider, much less in the form of a game. Then come the answers. According to the son, “a good gravedigger must have a vacant look.” The wife agrees and adds, “and he must answer yes to all philosophical questions,” and the daughter adds, “most of all, he must interrupt the instructions of weeping mothers to say, ‘Lady, I do this for a living.’” As the family returns to Columbus Circle, they see a goat hit by a taxi and “instead of blood, red delicious apples scattered everywhere.” To enjoy this poem, the reader has to ask about the game, the answers, the goat in uptown Manhattan, and, above all, those red delicious apples—all surreal elements. The purpose of surrealism is to release the mind from rational thought and thereby arrive at what is hidden within the unconscious. This poem, then, may be an attempt to get at the reader’s unacknowledged feelings about death, which will be revealed in his or her interpretation of each element of the poem.

Only about a third of the poems in the collection are this difficult; most are much more accessible. The poems usually contain clues to orient the reader, including scriptural references, the names of Greek deities and Shakespearean characters, references from Latter-day Saint history like the Sweetwater River and the First Vision—all these allusions are transformed in some way from their original stories or identities. As with Bergevin's poems, research is sometimes required to make the connections and fully enjoy the work. Tanner's poems are exquisite and undeniably poetic, but for the most part they don't convey a sense of even temporary happiness. Readers who go through the poems only once may be left asking, "God, where art thou?" But those who stay with the poems longer will gain a sense of their serious exploration of the fallen world and will feel gratitude for the deeply satisfying reconciliations at the end.

Lara Candland. *The Lapidary's Nosegay*. Ft. Collins, Colo.: The Center for Literary Publishing, 2018.

This is a collection unlike any other. Candland has created a whole new way of writing poetry, and poetry that is truly new is often so strange to readers that they initially reject it, though they often return to discover its merits. *The Lapidary's Nosegay* is a postmodern book, and its poems intellectually engage with language rather than attempt to represent personal experience. The label "postmodern" also means that the poems violate expectations about poetry; Candland's poems feature footnotes, allusions and quotations from other texts, and a variety of formatting elements that add meaning to the poetry, including wide spacing throughout the page and punctuation marks used as decoration and to suggest how to read the lines. This collection of poetry is for readers who appreciate an intellectual challenge, like to solve puzzles, and are willing to put in enough time to see how the poems sing and how lively they are.

The work is an homage to Emily Dickinson. Candland imagines that she and Dickinson are sitting together and talking, using mostly Dickinson's nineteenth-century language, questioning and commenting on many aspects of life. The more readers know about Dickinson, the more they will be able to take from the work. Take the title, for example. A nosegay is a tightly arranged bouquet of flowers, like a bridal bouquet, often a celebratory gift. A lapidary is someone who cuts, polishes, and engraves stones, including gems. Given the ambiguity of the phrase,

a “lapidary’s nosegay” may be a nosegay given to a lapidary in honor of something, or it may be a nosegay created by a lapidary. Because Emily Dickinson uses gems so often in her poems (chrysolite, ruby, amethyst, emerald, topaz, pearl, diamond, beryl, and so forth), the nosegay may be imagined to be an arrangement of gems to look like a bouquet of flowers, and perhaps the gems are Dickinson’s own words.

Another key to understanding Candland’s collection is that Dickinson, when she was about fifteen, created an herbarium, a book in which she placed plants and flowers she herself had dried; the book was a beautiful creation, each page an artistic masterpiece. *The Lapidary’s Nosegay* is like that herbarium—an artistic arrangement of the gems and flowers of language, including the liberal use of the actual gems and flowers named in Dickinson’s poems. The poems are arranged as an abecedarium, with sections for each letter of the alphabet. The first poem of each section is from *The New England Primer*, an illustrated textbook first published in 1690 to teach children to read. Several of its two-line poems preach a Calvinist doctrine: “In Adam’s fall / We sinned all”; “As runs the glass, / Man’s life doth pass”; “Peter denies / His Lord, and cries.” Following the verse from the primer are one to four new poems that intermingle Dickinson’s and Candland’s voices.

Candland’s unconventional use of punctuation is one way the poems disrupt readers and slow them down. “NOTES ON THE WRITING OF *The Lapidary’s Nosegay*,” which is a poem as well as an introduction to the collection, begins, “I’m sitting with the (((P(o)etess))) in the (((chrysolite))) (((sun))).” It is impossible not to notice those parentheses. The poem continues, “I’m writing down her words (((())) / (((She))) patient / teaches me the alphabet of high desert my deseret.” The sets of four parentheses mean, according to a key at the beginning, “unsaid, unanswered, ineffable, prayer, the Holy Spirit, ghost visitations, clouds, air, Emily Dickinson is in the room, fill in the blank.” Thus the wide-spaced set of four parentheses introduces the ineffable in the poem. The key also has instructions for reading several different configurations of parentheses—two, three, four, six, and “(((o!))),” which means “surprise, awe, yawn, praise, supplication, pleasure, pearl”—as well as strings of colons, “:.....:,” which stand for “stars, pearls, daisy chain, diadem, constellations, eggs, insects, microbes.” Because these conventions are used throughout the collection, it is a good idea to copy the key and keep it next to the open page as one proceeds through the poems.

In approaching the poems, readers can appreciate the breathtaking sensory language they employ: “(((Moth-star dropt))) int(o) the

(o)rchard / and last night— / (((o!))) / the wind has already been ((murmuring)),” and “the stand of treble-throated ((sparr(ow)s)) threads / the (((amethyst))) needle thr(ough) / one season’s (((eye))) & int(o) the next.”⁴ The poems often comment on Dickinson herself and indirectly allude to her poems, so the more one knows about Dickinson, the better. The poem “September’s escutcheon” shows Dickinson at work: “(((god’s gh(o)st stitcher—Daisy—s(ew)s s(o) prettily))) / winter’s surplice—& spring’s kirtle—” Daisy is a nickname Dickinson was called throughout her life.

While engaging with these poems, Latter-day Saint readers will also particularly enjoy the introduction of concepts from Latter-day Saint doctrines. “Eyes,” for example, introduces a “comely infant / . . . / just beyond the veil— / . . . / between worlds.”

For the purposes of library classification, *The Lapidary’s Nosegay* is labeled “experimental poetry,” and that which is experimental is unfamiliar and untried. But the investment of effort required to enter these unfamiliar poems will expand one’s ability to appreciate poetry as well as one’s knowledge about Emily Dickinson and her world.

Tyler Chadwick, Dayna Patterson, and Martin Pulido, editors.
Dove Song: Heavenly Mother in Mormon Poetry. El Cerrito, Calif.: Peculiar Pages, 2018.

Unlike all the other books discussed in this review, *Dove Song* is an anthology, not a collection by an individual author. It is highly significant because it brings together for the first time poems that enlighten readers about the character of Mother in Heaven, including poems from 1844 to the present day. The anthology contains a foreword by the editors—Chadwick, Patterson, and Pulido—as well as a critical introduction by Susan Elizabeth Howe. Additionally, the collection features graphic artworks, artists’ notes, endnotes situating the historical poems, brief biographies of the pioneer-era poets, and contributor notes, which all work together to create an academic as well as aesthetic experience for the reader.

Although the stiffness of their forms can become a bit wearying, the pioneer-era poems in the first section of the anthology are important in demonstrating that the doctrine of a Mother in Heaven was taught by

4. Because of space limitations, we are unable to replicate here the original spacing of these lines.

Joseph Smith not only to Eliza R. Snow but also to Apostles and other priesthood holders. Eliza R. Snow's "O, My Father" is included under its original title of "Invocation, or the Eternal Father and Mother," as are poems by William W. Phelps, Edward W. Tullidge, Orson F. Whitney, and other Church leaders.

Much more pleasurable to read, the poems in the second and third sections of the book (poems written, respectively, between 1973 and 2003 and between 2005 and 2017) use metaphor and imagination as seer stones, which the authors and readers can use to consider who Mother in Heaven is. By examining their own inspiration, imagination, and experience, and especially by looking for Heavenly Mother in the natural world, the seventy twentieth-century and contemporary poets in these sections depict her gifts, power, and identity.

Many poets comment on Mother in Heaven's absence and their own attempts to find her. Desiree Miller's "Yin" declares: "Black Mother is hidden, / we forget Her every time. / We attempt nothing / because we do not care to know." The poem concludes, however, "The other half of God can be found / and She will act of her own accord, / for God is a bystander / until called upon." We are implicated in her absence; we have not sought her.

Multiple poems in *Dove Song* take the position that Mother in Heaven reveals herself in the beauties of the natural world. This position hearkens to the expression from Alma 30:44 that "all things denote there is a God." Tara Timpson's "Small Gifts," for example, asks Heavenly Mother, "Is your name hidden in the color of vermillion sandstone in this canyon / Is your voice in the trill of Canyon Wren or the call of Gambel Quail / Is your touch the silk of cottontail fur and soft desert breeze / Is your scent the delicious mixture of Sage, Pinyon and Juniper?" Timpson uses no punctuation, as if she were breathless in her need to ask these questions. The poem concludes, "Is your heart so big and wide, its chambers so miraculous and well / muscled that it can contain love and compassion big enough to surpass / all the human, animal and plant suffering that weighs on me / Will you sanctify my search for you with these continued small gifts / I will keep all these things in my heart and remember them."

Many of the poets of *Dove Song* tend to see the Mother as loving, everywhere present, beautiful, epic, and, well, godly. Tyler Chadwick imagines her thus: "Goddess stirring something up, folding light / into cosmos the way her mother showed her / an aeon ago"; Marilyn Bushman-Carlton refers to the Mother as "robed in flowing white, / her

face ravishing and wise”; and S. E. Page’s version of the Mother describes herself this way: “I AM that which is star, and the shadow of it / I AM the moon walking in brightness / I AM the burning rays of the rising sun.” The repeated “I AM” employs the name of YAHWEH or Jehovah in the Old Testament.

But another vision of Heavenly Mother shows her not as a perfect female being but as a harried mother, like many of the poets themselves. In Elisa Eastwood Pulido’s “The Heavenly Mother Takes a Break,” Heavenly Mother needs to get away now and again: “Sometimes it is all too much, / and even a mother of gods / may grieve under pressure.” At such times she can be found “at the drive-through window of a fast-food joint / at the edge of the galaxy, [where] she orders a Diet Coke.” Similarly, Rebekah Orton imagines an overwhelmed Mother in “It’s Possible I’m Projecting”: “She can’t even hide Her Glory in Kolob’s bathroom / long enough to eat a beatific cookie in peace / without little fingers searching underneath the door / as shrill voices whimper ‘choc-lat?” Orton concludes the poem, though, with a vision more in keeping with the composed cosmic Mother: “Please let that just be me. / I’d rather think She’s serene, azure. / Twice a day She cleans her paintbrush, / and every night She fills the sky with stars: / lights to calm us.” Both visions—the expected and unexpected divine Mother—offer spiritual and aesthetic insight into both Mother in Heaven and the poets themselves.

Dove Song is a good choice for readers who want the pleasure of a tasting or a poetic buffet; with so many poems to sample, readers are likely to find some that give them pleasure and insight. This anthology demands that readers come as they are and read according to what they seek. *Dove Song* has the feel of an apocryphal book of scripture; through the power of the Holy Spirit and their own inner lights, readers can benefit from and accept what feels true for them among all the poets’ visions of the Mother.

Conclusion

The traditional purpose of poetry has always been to offer readers pleasure and enlightenment. The pleasure of poetry is not necessarily happiness; it is the joy or sensations that come from witnessing the poetic mind inquiring into a subject and making use of imagination, metaphor, and language in all its possibilities, including the aural aspects of rhythm and sound. A poem enlightens when it offers new or deeper knowledge and opportunities for empathy. A well-written poem can seize the imagination and stay in the heart like no other literary

expression. Despite the bad reputation of poetry today, enlightenment and pleasure are still its purposes. The collections and anthology of this review demonstrate that poetry is still the fine art it always has been and deserves the attention of educated readers, including readers of *BYU Studies Quarterly*.

Susan Elizabeth Howe's second poetry collection, *Salt* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books), was published in 2013; her third is in the works. Her poems have recently appeared in *Poetry*, *Pleiades*, *Atlanta Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, and other journals. She retired from the Brigham Young University English Department in 2015, after working there for twenty-seven years. A reviewer and contributing editor of *Tar River Poetry* and newly appointed associate editor of *BYU Studies*, she lives with her husband, Cless Young, in Ephraim, Utah.

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