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*On Fire in Baltimore:
Black Mormon Women and Conversion in a Raging City*
By Laura Rutter Strickling

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018

Reviewed by Rachel Cope

In her thought-provoking book, *On Fire in Baltimore: Black Mormon Women and Conversion in a Raging City*, Laura Rutter Strickling captures the complex conversion narratives of fifteen Latter-day Saint women who found space for themselves within a “historically White church” (xiii). The book provides powerful accounts of individual spiritual journeys while also grappling with the racial tensions that implicitly and explicitly influence black and white interaction within and without The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Strickling’s book project first took shape when she enrolled in a graduate course on Africana race and ethnicity while working on her PhD in sociocultural linguistics at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. This course caused her to “examine [her] own White identity in relation to a Black perspective,” fostered an interest in “social contexts where African American English was spoken,” and eventually motivated her to interview black women in her Baltimore ward about their conversion stories (xii). The latter project was motivated by Strickling’s desire to understand why these women chose the Church they did.

The book is divided into eleven chapters, each of which recounts the stories of individual black women from Baltimore who found their way into the Latter-day Saint fold. Strickling quotes heavily from the words of the interviewees (whose names have been changed to protect their privacy), rather than retelling their experiences from her perspective as a white Church member, thus allowing the women’s voices, words, and worldviews to remain central to the story. In this way, the book functions as a collection of primary sources as well as a monograph. Indeed, the accounts the women share provide more than interesting stories; they challenge stereotypical views of Latter-day Saint womanhood—poverty, addiction, abandonment, imprisonment, rape, abuse, single

motherhood, and death figure into their narratives. Women's lives, their stories suggest, are diverse, complex, and typically stray from the ideals presented over the pulpit.

Their personal narratives also add nuance and depth to the meaning of conversion and testimony in Latter-day Saint contexts. Elements of the women's black Christian culture are woven into their encounters with and embracement of the Church of Jesus Christ. Visions, spiritual dreams, experiences with angels and other heavenly beings, instances of divine protection, and miraculous moments are laced throughout their stories. Prayer is raw, real, and powerful and results in divine intervention. Relationships with God are deeply personal. Jesus is central to their spiritual lives. Community matters. Through these themes, the stories shared in this book refigure the supernatural and the ethereal elements of nineteenth-century Church culture into a contemporary narrative. And their spiritual biographies provide more than an appendage to this larger narrative. By challenging assumptions about race, conversion, religious experience, and worship, these women's stories also push and probe the boundaries of what it means to be a Latter-day Saint in the twenty-first century.

In addition to sharing black women's stories, Strickling also recounts details about the interview process, intentionally acknowledging her whiteness and grappling with how her own racial constructs and understandings may have impacted the interview experiences, including the questions she asked, how she asked them, and how she interacted with the women she interviewed. She also talks about some of the uncertainty she sensed from several of the women during the interview process, surmising that they did not always know how to talk about matters of race with a white woman. In sharing these details, Strickling demonstrates how a white woman can rethink her assumptions about race and recognize her own whiteness in her effort to come to a better understanding of the experiences of others. This approach models for readers how to begin thinking about whiteness and blackness as racial constructs and encourages others to do future work on the issues of race (and gender) in the Latter-day Saint experience more thoughtfully.

The book is a carefully reasoned and interesting read that grapples with questions about race, drawing upon historical context, ethnography, and racial and linguistic theory; its framing, however, could be more historiographically sound. The author's intent seems to be sharing untold stories and dealing with the convergence of black and white experiences and beliefs—and she successfully meets those goals. But

more nuanced contextual detail would strengthen the work for readers interested in how these stories fit within specific kinds of context, such as black women's conversion experiences or their spiritual biographies and memoirs.

Notwithstanding the noted omissions, Strickling has written a compelling book that encourages readers to consider the forgotten and the overlooked in order to understand religious belief, practice, and experience within the Church of Jesus Christ. Even though Strickling focuses more on sharing the stories of why these women chose to become Latter-day Saints than she does on interpreting and analyzing the historical meaning and significance of these stories, her work does, both implicitly and explicitly, pose the question: what does it mean to be a Latter-day Saint?

Rachel Cope is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University. She graduated from Brigham Young University with a BA and MA in history before receiving her PhD in American history, with an emphasis in women's history and religious history, from Syracuse University. Her publications focus on conversion and women's religious experiences in early America.