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Moth and Rust: Mormon Encounters with Death

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Moth and Rust: Mormon Encounters with Death
Edited by Stephen Carter
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Reviewed by Connie Lamb

Latter-day Saints view death as part of the plan of salvation and some have even claimed to have glimpsed the afterlife. Thus, as the book's introduction explains, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have a good understanding of death and the afterlife, but many still fear dying (x). Despite Church teachings on the temporary nature of death, the death of someone dearly loved can still cause a Latter-day Saint to face stark reality and ask serious questions. *Moth and Rust* captures Latter-day Saints' varying experiences and demonstrates the many ways death can be conceived.

Although not explained in the book, the title of this collection comes from the Sermon on the Mount, given in Matthew 6:19–20 and 3 Nephi 13:19–20: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, . . . but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt." These verses capture an appropriate Christian, and specifically Latter-day Saint, view of the mortal world of destruction and decay, a world that can be overcome through death.

In this 257-page book, forty-six different contributors talk about death in a variety of ways. They view death from different perspectives—both as a concept and as a personal reality. The entries include essays and poems that vary in style and mood, but all are written by established writers and authors. Some speak of their own impending death or the death of a loved one; others discuss the death of animals or talk about death through fiction. The book elicits responses that range from sadness to laughter, from distress to increased faith. As the editor states, both orthodox and heterodox perspectives are included, and all of the pieces are informed by the Latter-day Saint perspective.

Moth and Rust is divided into five sections, grouping similar entries together. The first section, titled "Passages," has fourteen entries that contain thoughts on the death of a loved one. Some are sweet, others sad. The second section is "Piercing the Veil" and comprises six entries that deal with ideas about the condition of the soul after death. Third is "Fleeting," with seven entries that discuss the death of children. The fourth section, "A Wider View," has ten entries that look at death within other contexts, such as in the animal kingdom, the universe, and sacred history and theology. In the last section, titled "A Single Soul," the nine entries focus on how death has personally affected the respective authors.

Accompanying each section are black and white photos from the series *Compressions* by artist Maddison Colvin. These images are close-up photographs of vegetation pressed against glass—epitaphs to a vanishing landscape. The photos represent an additional view of death, that of squeezing life out of nature.

A review of the existing literature reveals that there are few books about Latter-day Saints and death, although there are many talks and articles on the subject. A book published by LDS Book Publications in Provo in 1979, titled *Death and the LDS Family: Dealing with Death and Dying,* is a compilation of talks and essays, including a few poems by General Authorities and others, that discuss Latter-day Saint religious aspects of death. Another book, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation,* discusses death as part of the complete eternal plan. A piece in *Nursing Times,* published in 1992, accurately portrays Latter-day Saint beliefs for hospital workers who serve Latter-day Saint patients. The chapter in *Death in America* called "Gates Ajar: Death in Mormon Thought and Practice" makes the point that death in the Latter-day Saint worldview is just a step in the progression of life. Those who die continue active in redemptive work; although it is difficult to face the death of a loved one, death is not a termination but a continuation for those who are gone from us. A paper in a 1986 *BYU Studies* issue discusses how early Latter-day Saint perceptions of death diverged from the Calvinist and other Christian views about death because of the Saints' firm belief in a hereafter and eternal families.[1] There are many articles in Church

1. C. Douglass Beardall and Jewel N. Stratford, comps., *Death and the LDS Family* (Provo, Utah: LDS Book Publications, 1979); Douglas James Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation: Force, Grace, and Glory* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2000); Mary Ann Myers, "Gates Ajar: Death in Mormon Thought and

magazines and other publications that discuss both doctrine and feelings surrounding death. *Moth and Rust*, however, is quite unique in the literature because it deals with actual experiences and personal perceptions concerning death rather than Latter-day Saint doctrine and because its discussions of death extend beyond that of the human body.

Descriptions of a few of the book's entries provide a sampling of the diversity contained in the book. In the section "Passages," the author of the entry titled "The Living and the Telling" talks about the death of her brother and reflects on portions of his life (48–59). When she joined the Church, her brother teased her about it; however, she still deeply loved him and was hurt and angry at his death from cancer. His widow asked the author to pick up the ashes of her brother and bring them to her—a difficult request. The author finally realized that her sister-in-law's efforts in taking care of her brother and watching him die were far more important than her anguish over the ashes and made her love her sister-in-law even more. Another short entry in that section contains two poems, one about the death of the author's mother in 2004 and one about his father's death in 2008 (60–61). Looking at them in death, he yearns to remember everything about them in life, to hang onto the cord that binds them.

Steven L. Peck titles a quite unusual chapter in the "Wider View" section, "A Meditation after Watching My Wife Plant Peas" (145–52). The author, lying in a hammock, meditates over the world around him and enumerates what can and cannot die. Peas, apple trees, a wasp, the fire in the fireplace and many other things, including himself, can die. Things that cannot die are the author's shoes, the air, an iPod case, rocks, a rabbit statue, and so on. He muses that a house cannot die, but a home can. Then he grapples with the question, What is death? He surmises that all things are temporary and death can be the cessation of a process, a change of state, or the dissolution of coherence. He concludes with an insightful thesis about death and life: ends will come, but we must enjoy the present and all it has to offer. Another touching entry in this section is titled "Eve, Dying," written by playwright Eric Samuelsen, who passed

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Practice," in *Death in America,* ed. D. E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975); Jennifer Green, "Death with Dignity: The Mormon Church," *Nursing Times* 88, no. 6 (February 5, 1992): 44–45; M. Guy Bishop, "To Overcome the 'Last Enemy': Early Mormon Perceptions of Death," *BYU Studies*, 26, no. 3 (1986): 1–17.

away in September 2019 (174–91). In the piece, written like a play, the two characters, Adam and Eve converse as Eve is dying. They hark back to their time in the garden and the decision they made to eat the fruit, pondering the question, Is mortal life worth it?

The section titled "Fleeting" contains many heart-wrenching stories because they mainly involve babies and young children. "Unwilling" tells the agony of losing an unborn baby (111–13). The mother begged God that the baby would stay, but in her soul she knew that it would not. Her words to her husband, "The baby's gone. I had to let her go," tell the painful ending of hopeful anticipation. "Breathe!" by Fatima S. Salleh is a poignant sermon she delivered at Duke University in 2014 in the wake of civil unrest stemming from recent shootings of blacks (133–37). As the mother of three brown children, she felt like God had abandoned her. She told her children to do and not do certain things and to dress a certain way to protect them from being targeted. Though feeling abandoned, she goes to church at the urging of the Holy Ghost and worships with her people—a faithful people who believe and trust in God.

The section "Piercing the Veil" includes essays on coming or going through the veil, a mixing of the mortal and the immortal. "On the Porch" by Philip McLemore is the story of a retired military chaplain who watched many people die, leading him to reflect seriously on living and dying (92–95). To find a place of solitude in the mornings, he spent time at the Lehi City Cemetery. At first he felt like he was intruding, but after a while he felt at home among the people whose names were on the headstones. He imagined them talking about him, laughing over the thought that he felt sorry for them. He visualized them on a large porch watching those on earth. Perspectives change as we grow older, he observes, and what we didn't understand as children becomes clearer as we come closer to death ourselves. An unusual entry is "Three Grand Keys," by English Brooks, referencing Doctrine and Covenants 129 in which Joseph Smith gives the keys to know whether a nonmortal messenger is from God (83–86). Brooks's piece is three pages long, each page presenting one of the keys in English, Spanish, and Korean, accompanied by striking illustrations.

In the "Single Soul" section, Heidi Naylor's story is thought provoking and sad (214–19). A soldier returning home from World War II had seen so much death and destruction that he was haunted day and night with terrible visions and thoughts. He boarded a train in Ogden, Utah, and headed west with thoughts of Sabbaths at home. Suddenly he heard

the sound of metal on metal as two trains collided, and his last thought was that he had survived twenty months in an artillery battalion only to die in a train crash. The author ends this piece with "*Step forward, soldier,*" meaning the time had come to enter into a new life (219). Boyd Petersen's essay "Out of the Blue and into the Black" describes how we can't go back to experience something from our past with the same feelings (207–13). It is not about real death but rather the difficulty of trying to recapture the past.

The book *Moth and Rust: Mormon Encounters with Death* demonstrates the wide variety of personal feelings about death among Latter-day Saints. The entries are engaging, heart wrenching, and thought provoking. *Moth and Rust* is an unusual grouping of Latter-day Saint responses to the realities of death and dying, adding a new way of talking about death with more personal perspectives. It is an insightful addition to the published literature on death.

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