Anthology That Sings

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22 Young Mormon Writers. By Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, editors; Provo, Utah: Communications Workshop, 1975

These five short stories and twenty-four poems are marked by talent, self-consciousness and unevenness. The stories are more consistently accomplished than the poetry, with one exception I will discuss later.

I began at the beginning with "I Just Don't Think That It's Such a Big Deal Any More" by Ann Doty, a story whose lithe prose caught me by surprise—there was a writer. Then I went to the end, to Kent A. Farnsworth's, "A Season and a Time," selected by the publisher as the best-written piece to have "a deep understanding of the message of Jesus Christ." It is beautifully crafted in setting and tone, specifically a Mormon story for its realistic, sensitive telling of a missionary's experience.

Three of the stories are about death. In many of the poems, too, there is self-conscious reaching toward serious themes of universal value. This does not lessen their legitimacy, but the price is the dazed, groping quality of a youth's response to death. What Peggy Wiseman's story, "Of Age," lacks in maturity, it makes up for in wry, sympathy-swelling understatement of an experience indigenous to youth—the gaining of independent judgment.

Disillusionment is another youthful theme—the frustration of doubt and a certain mournfulness that the trust of childhood has gone:

> I wish
> to heaven
> he had taken
> the queen's mad money
> and sailed right
> off the edge . . .

Susan Chock's "For Mary Frances . . ." suffers in citation, for its effect depends on a progressively pounding rhythm:

> There is a spirit here but I have lost it . . .
> . . . Now with cautious eyes I must
> discern it and dissect it, though I held it once
> within my hand, the sand
> unquestioning and warm.

("Prodigal" by Ann Doty gains in citation; it still has poignancy, but it needs editing and the metaphor has been used before.)

These are honest poems. Sometimes too honest, as Jed A. Bryan's ballad, "Sheep Crossing," in which two stanzas detail the collision of a train with a flock of sheep. (It would have made a fine short story—and an exercise in understatement.) Sometimes just right, as Cathy Gileadi's pregnant sonnet, with its awkward, cautious probings that raise more than the obvious

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wonderment. Sometimes only superficially honest, the writer barely taps his feelings and perceptions or strangles them in preachiness. The first stanza of Clifton Holt Jolley's "Mamo" does not suffer from this; blatantly preachy, the tone has definite artistic purpose—irritating and unjust though it may seem to any feminist. (What his poem does suffer from is splayed metaphor.)

I did not expect so many experiments with traditional rhyming. With one or two excellent exceptions, less restrictive verse proves more successful partly because it encourages precision. Take Giles H. Florence, Jr.'s regal tribute, "Nearly Blanched":

> North America's Southwest, nearly blanched, boasts
> A solitary land and a reserved nation—a landscape
> Whose face at incandescent
> day reflects the hue and hewn
> of its natives who have for centuries lived
> Among and on the holy mesolithic totems . . .

Later it is more vivid, but what first attracted me was the music; only once or twice does his ear fail, as in this line: "The sun-baked red rock rose-/ tinted natural Rushmores . . ." (I do not like the final intrusion of a supernatural symbol. The symbol is a provocative but small piece of irony and it destroys a beautiful piece whose meaning already encompasses the irony and much more.)

Here is a predictable rhythm which ruins some marvelous word-pictures about an unpredictable father:

> He gave us all it took to get along,
> Including bowls of laughter with the soup
> And closets full of teasing till we cried.

Put some surprise in that monotonous phrasing and "The Provider" by Bonnie Howe is an unsentimental, very moving portrait of a father. At least three other poems have the same problem—rhythm working against the intent of the poem—and in others the rhythm does not help. I still cannot decide if Linda Sillitoe has overdone the cumbersomeness of her "Still-life Study" of a plodding ancestor; the more I read the poem the less trouble I have with it.

There are poems that tickle the intellect—"The Gift" by Don M. Sharp., Jr., a picture poem, an epic in an apple—and "To Compose a Poem" by Stephen O. Taylor, with its almost-perfect ambiguity. Then there is Kris Cassity's "Every Man's Prayer"; senses and idea come together here, the images stringing like rosary beads into lines that chant toward a flash of impact with . . . something. "Blessed Jesus, Great and Good, save my wretched soul. Amen." (Never able to let a good "Amen" rest, I've begun to consider those images more closely and wonder if they aren't more symbolic than sensuous and if this doesn't limit the power of the poem. Maybe not.)

Other pieces are flatly unfinished. "Released," the fifth short story, is an unsatisfying attempt to get at the feelings of a bishop being released after a nervous breakdown—unsatisfying because the conflict has intriguing possi- ities but we are given only a surface glimpse and resolution of it. This is probably a case of writing about foreign experience, also writing about

thoughts rather than feelings or motives. "The Mustard Seed" by Bela Petsco is a more ambitious character study with evidence of real intent and some fine moments. But its point of view is confused; the problem might have been solved by either assigning the bishop knowledge short of omniscience to narrow the focus, or adopting an outside observer whose omniscience is plausible.

A frequent weakness is insufficient trust in the reader—or perhaps in the author himself. Note the tacked-on moral of "Fitzgerald, My Comfort" by Peggy Wiseman, which belabors an already labored point:

> Fitzgerald, whose few public ruffles
> Were polite and quite bloodless—
> Fitzgerald, my comfort—
> Fitzgerald
> More bitter for what he witheld.

Three of Jan Lalli's "Poems Too Short for Titles" suffer not from redundancy but pre-dundancy; she means to be writing proverbs. Some are appealing anyway, but ingenuity is no substitute for obedience, without which a poet limits her depth as well as her skill. Her fourth poem, "And he said he'd," proves that all but one or two elements of poetry can be ignored and the effect still be poetry—sort of. In fewer words than I need to analyze it, she draws images and drama out of imageless slang:

> And he said he'd
> kinda like to take
> me out
> and I said
> for a date
> and he said
> he guessed so
> and then
> I said
> all right . . .

One rule working here is rhythm, visual as well as spoken, which quickly brings this little monologue to a close:

> and we went
> out
> and
> came back
> very quickly.

Some of the straying from poetic motives can be blamed on the editors, who take pains to say:

> But above all the young writer must, in the face of all difficulties, remain true to the best that is in him, knowing all along that, at bottom, the feelings that stir in his heart stir in the hearts of all men. To concentrate on his own bruises, to be content with simple self-exposure as another failing human may touch our sympathy but not our spirit. To concentrate on his own heart, to work at self-expression as a struggling son of God may move us not only to hope, but to try. Pity is a good thing, but courage is better.

The advice is fine, but I wonder if it shouldn't be given elsewhere, perhaps at church or in a Nobel acceptance speech. Otherwise it will prove another of the difficulties for young writers.