

mented, and a battalion raised; and of course, plans for the great trek west were formulated.

Readers will find some surprises in Bennett's account of just what Joseph Smith said and did not say about the Saints going west and just how much, or how little, Brigham Young knew about where the Church was to resettle there; furthermore, tables clarify some of the vexing demographic questions about the Winter Quarters era.

The first four of Bennett's fifteen chapters track the Saints to Winter Quarters and see them settled. The remaining chapters

systematically and thoroughly treat different aspects of the Winter Quarters experience—Indians and Indian agents, economics, sickness and death, Mormon society on the frontier, social and religious life, re-establishment of the First Presidency, and the abandonment of Winter Quarters.

I wish the author had made more of the trek across Iowa and of the main 1848 departure from Winter Quarters, but these are hardly serious reservations. I thoroughly recommend both these monographs to all serious students of the Mormon scene, the exodus, American frontier communities, and Missouri trials.

On the Edge of Solipsism

The Edge of the Reservoir by Larry E. Morris (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 233 pp., \$7.95.

Reviewed by Helen Beach Cannon, freelance writer, teacher of English composition at Utah State University, and an editorial associate of DIALOGUE.

COMPARISONS, THEY SAY, are odious, yet I find it difficult to comment on Larry E. Morris's new novel, *The Edge of the Reservoir*, without referring to Anne Tyler's latest novel, *Breathing Lessons* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988). That I happened to read the two books at roughly the same time may provide an unfair context for this review but may also fortuitously shed light on respective strengths and weaknesses.

First, consider a few striking similarities. Both *Breathing Lessons* and *The Edge of the Reservoir* are clearly domestic novels focused on middle-aged central characters given to fantasizing, probing memories of adolescent flames, and dwelling on mid-life losses and blunted passions. Both forge minimalist plots through funerals, child rearing, and the doldrums of daily life, both expose the silliness of marital quarrels, and, uncannily, both even conjure up the lyrics of fifties' and sixties' pop songs to hang their woes upon. Maggie Moran, the forty-eight-year-old protagonist of *Breath-*

ing Lessons, has learned to read her taciturn husband's moods by the tunes he whistles. Early in their marriage, for example, after a quarrel, he had turned silent and left, whistling a tune whose words she later recalled: "I wonder if I care as much as I did before. . . ." When the marriage becomes less romantic, the words to his whistled tunes even relate to the task at hand; he whistles "This Old House" whenever he tackles a household repair job and "The Wichita Lineman" when he hangs out the clothes (p. 13).

Similarly, thirty-eight-year-old Ryan Masterson in *The Edge of the Reservoir* recalls how his high school love, Rose Richards, had loved Gene Pitney songs—"It Hurts to Be in Love," "I'm Gonna Be Strong," "Half-Heaven, Half Heartache." From these sentimental songs, he divines in Rose, for all her LDS optimism, a sense of the sad and the tragic.

Love lyrics from the fifties even play a part in a zany funeral scene in Tyler's book, and she has Maggie observe: "Why did popular songs always focus on romantic love? Why this preoccupation with first meetings, sad partings, honeyed kisses, heartbreak, when life was also full of children's births and trips to the shore and longtime jokes with friends? . . . It struck Maggie as disproportionate" (p. 64).

Disproportionate. This word provides the key to an essential difference between the two books. While both novelists allow their characters utter freedom to fantasize, Maggie's imaginative flights are funny and wide-ranging while Ryan's dwell on ill-fated teen romance. Tyler's protagonist is aware of certain necessary losses—her girlish figure, her friends, romance, even her children's unquestioning love and respect. Though she notes these losses, she does not cynically, humorlessly agonize over them.

Ryan does. Disproportionately. From the book's first pages, he is despondent over losses. He bemoans the loss of his athletic prowess, his physique, and even his hair; he mourns his lost artistic avenues and wrings his hands over love lost within his marriage. He grieves, understandably, over his mother's death, his father's remarriage, and his stifling profession. Mostly though, he second-guesses his long-ago decision to give up Rose because she was a died-in-the-wool Mormon girl. As early as page five, Ryan's disillusionment is apparent: "What do you do when you find that your marriage and your career are both failures?" For Ryan, only youth has worth and zest. Aging is, and always will be, a process of losing.

It's amazing to turn fifty and look back at the things you've lost.

Amazing to turn sixty and look back at the things you've lost.

Amazing to turn seventy . . . (p. 173).

Youth remains Ryan's eternal goal—"If you could live after death, what could be better than to be young in a world without time" (p. 226).

This chronicle of losses, of foundered ambitions and dissipated dreams, presents a bias against age that also becomes more disproportionate than realistic, more self-pitying than candid: "A teddy bear, a Schwinn three-speed, a box of baseball cards, a bag of marbles, a bow with five or six arrows—he could think of all kinds of things he had treasured as a kid. He had lost all of them, and he couldn't even remember how" (p. 106).

Most of all, he has lost his illusions and, if he ever had it, a depth of conjugal love: "Marriage—the cure for loneliness and sexual frustration. That's what you believed when you were young" (p. 117). His shallow commitment to his wife is epitomized by his temptation to accept a stranger's advances. Though he turns the woman down, he does so less from virtue than from "paralysis" and then looks upon the encounter as an "opportunity" missed (p. 150).

There is disillusionment in Tyler too, but it is touched with humor and further mitigated by Maggie's essential and unsinkable optimism. Somehow Tyler is able to turn banal and even potentially shattering situations into half-comic, half-meaningful moments that transcend self-indulgent pulse-taking. Who but Tyler would find meaningful a moment in the cellar when Maggie discovers herself mourning over, of all things, the loss of a humidifier and realizes the ludicrousness of her emotion? "What on earth was wrong with her? she had wondered. Would she spend the rest of her days grieving for every loss equally—a daughter-in-law, a baby, a cat, a machine that dries the air out? Was this how it felt to grow old?" (p. 180)

It is this detached awareness of personal folly that Ryan lacks. Tyler has drawn her muddling characters with genuine affection, enough to allow them occasional laughter, to let them be more than instruments for expressing a fashionable contempt for life.

Perhaps because Ryan humorlessly dwells on a marriage that hasn't lived up to the honeymoon and a life that hasn't measured up to high school yearbook predictions, the issue of a Gentile living among Mormons, an issue that could be central and revelatory, seems only superficial. Endlessly turning in the wind of his youthful decision to give up Rose because of her "testimony," Ryan never makes a mature effort to understand gospel depths.

Perhaps we can forgive him, since no Mormon character in the book ever moves beyond a stereotype. The women carry in

casseroles and attend to mothering; rigid and patriarchal, the men attend to their meetings. Rose's father is this sort of cardboard character, as is Ryan's Aunt Norma, who never stops doing penance for having married a non-Mormon. It is the image of their grim relationship that makes Ryan turn his back on hope. He watches his aunt's pious, unflagging Church activity. In contrast, he sees his beloved Uncle Neal as an eternal outsider, even though, as Ryan poignantly observes in his funeral tribute to his uncle, "He was a Christian. He lived a full life, and he loved his family and friends. He was a good man" (p. 197).

Even Rose, with her "testimony," never seems to move beyond Church activity and a longing for temple marriage. Perhaps this is the image we present to the non-Mormons among us, but there has to be more:

Rose's Sundays would probably be like Norma's — up at 7:00 to do her hair and read scriptures, Neal sleeping till 9:00 or 10:00. Norma would leave for Sunday School at 10:00 and be back at 11:30. She would fix lunch while Neal watched TV. After lunch, a thirty-minute nap, then off to choir practice and sacrament meeting. . . . When she returned in the evening, Norma put on the Tabernacle Choir and sat in her rocking chair to knit (pp. 128–29).

Who wouldn't walk away from the possibility of repeating that scenario for a lifetime of Sundays?

Morris does manage to bring Ryan's solipsistic circling to a suggestion of resignation. When, after Uncle Neal's funeral, Ryan seeks out Rose's mother, the most sympathetic Mormon in the book, he is forced at last to recognize that his dream of Rose has been in stasis while her life has been in human flux. Mrs. Richardson shows him a picture of a middle-aged Rose who has married and lost a daughter, a Rose very unlike his adolescent dream.

Tyler uses a photographic image too, but not to signal a belated resignation. Looking at snapshots, Maggie (never a realist herself) only half faces life changes she'd rather not admit — that her ne'er-do-

well son, Jessie, for instance, is now a divorced, unemployed grownup whose picture she would rather not display.

Tyler could have made this realization into an epiphany for Maggie. Instead, in a way more true to Maggie's character, Tyler simply has her rationalize the picture gap away: "They had run out of wall space by then. Besides, Maggie's mother was always saying how trashy it was to display one's family photographs anywhere but a bedroom" (p. 300).

Tyler's book closes not so much with resignation, then, as with realistic continuity. "Oh Ira," Maggie asks her husband, "What are we two going to live for all the rest of our lives?" (p. 326) Ira keeps playing his game of solitaire but reaches out with one hand to draw her close. With the other hand he transfers the four of spades onto a five. With that deft image, built on all that has come before, Tyler gives her readers to know that Maggie will continue to try to fix lives according to her how-it-should-be notions. And Ira, we feel certain, will continue to be perplexed by Maggie's botched attempts but will go on quietly loving her just the same. In his way, too, he'll keep trying to make things come out right, just as he does with his games of solitaire.

Author Morris, on the other hand, leaves us less assured. Presumably Ryan has at last renounced his adolescent dream of Rose. How will this overdue recognition change his neglected marriage or remedy his no-win job situation? It is not that a novel requires such resolutions; it is that Ryan has been so defined by this dream that the reader can scarcely picture him otherwise now.

Throughout Morris's book I wondered, "Why this title?" and assumed in part that it referred to Ryan as a Gentile living out of the Mormon mainstream. Perhaps, though, it best fits the last pages, where Ryan as a character has nowhere to go. His self-realization has brought him, ironically, to an impasse — to the edge of the reservoir.

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