

more accurate edition for the future. The dilemma of readability versus reliability forever haunts the editor.

For the moment, we may be thankful for what we have. This is an important and valuable work.

## Plight and Promise

*Windows on the Sea and Other Stories* by Linda Sillitoe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 175 pp., \$9.95, paper.

Reviewed by Levi S. Peterson, professor of English, Weber State College, Ogden, Utah.

LINDA SILLITOE is a powerful wielder of the story writer's craft. In the stories at hand, her plots are organic, her sentences are flexible and lucid, and her metaphors convey a kinetic motion. Over and over she shows herself to be a master of scene, melding setting, dialogue, and gesture into efficient, vivid episodes. Achieving a fresh perspective and emotion in each story, she maintains undeviating suspense and variety.

Her subject matter is the Mormons of urban Utah. Inescapably, Sillitoe is one of them, though acuity of mind and an extraordinary empathy have disillusioned her. She is especially sensitive to the failure of an ideal union between men and women. She speaks resiliently for her own sex. No one illuminates the plight and promise of contemporary Mormon women more realistically than she.

Underlying these stories is a sense of the world's irremediable ills. In many of them, it is Sillitoe's express purpose to uncover those ills. The story entitled "Pay Day" presents a journalist suffering memory loss from an accidental head injury. A woman of deep sympathy, she plans to give ten dollars to a transient when she has cashed her paycheck. When she emerges from the bank, she lapses into confusion and hands a twenty-dollar bill to another transient. Though the presence of a policeman prevents the first transient from renewing his demand, she feels

guilty for failing him. Then she remembers seeing two cobras at a zoo whose entangled coils she impulsively likened to the journalist's profession. "Every story is important because an aware public might improve things, right?" she remembers saying to a fellow reporter. "But at the same time, there's the plain fact that nothing ever really changes" (pp. 34-35). One is reminded that Sillitoe has done signal duty as an investigative reporter. At this story's end, she deftly centers the evil which a reporter must daily record but never succeed in vanquishing upon the symbolic image of the entwined cobras, at once companionable and venomous.

Among the ills with which Sillitoe is preoccupied in these stories is the victimization of Mormon women by Mormon men. In the world Sillitoe depicts, men have defined a benumbing role for women and with a relentless energy attempt to enforce it. This theme is rendered tragically in "Bishop Ted," where a widow on Church welfare drifts into insanity because her bishop, militantly enforcing ecclesiastical discipline, sequesters her from a rebellious female friend who could have given her a saving support. This theme appears in equally sobering if less drastic circumstances in "Susanna in the Meadow," where a wife who desires the cooperation of her husband in achieving a dignified liberty discovers he will not grant it.

The same theme is given express articulation in "Mornings," where, interestingly, the point of view is not a woman, as it is in all of Sillitoe's other stories, but a man. This man perceives a variety of ways in which the official Church prefers discipline and conformity to charitable Christian service. For one thing, he knows

his phone in the Church Office Building is tapped on a regular basis. For another, when he and a companion move the furniture of an inactive single mother whom they have visited as home teachers, his companion attempts to barter their assistance for the woman's increased attendance at meetings. Most important, he has come to believe the role which his own loving wife fulfills all too well—Mormon mother, bound to home and children and distanced from her private needs and interests—is unrighteously repressive. In testimony meeting, he hears his wife express appreciation for her conversion to Mormonism. Like his wife, he has hitherto interpreted that conversion as a rescue from a sea in which she floundered. Suddenly he doubts it was a rescue at all, and he feels guilty for his part in it. "Someday—how had it escaped being today?—would she look at him and see in a blinding instant not a rescuer but a double agent who ensnared her in a hopeless plot?" (p. 143)

The world Sillitoe depicts includes women who resist and survive their victimization by men or who have luckily escaped it altogether. In the title story, "Windows on the Sea," an older woman, undergoing surgery for severe facial burns, offers healing help to a hospitalized adolescent who angrily preserves the specious honor of her family by concealing the sexual abuse her father has repeatedly imposed upon her. In this, the last story of the collection, Sillitoe suggests it will be women who heal and liberate their victimized sisters. To be noted as well is a protagonist's refusal to step into a demeaning role in "He Called Us Mormon Nuns." In this story a woman is affronted by the courtship of an eligible widower, who relentlessly suggests that she must resign her professional career and confine herself to motherhood. In total command of herself, the woman calmly contrives to turn the condescending widower over to her straight-arrow roommate. There is

irony in the story's title, which derives from a male friend's jesting accusation that this woman and her roommates are nuns because they aren't married. The story makes apparent that among the women of Mormondom, it is often the married rather than the unmarried who lead the confining lives of nuns.

In "The Spiral Staircase," Sillitoe honors the multitudes of Mormon couples who find respect, affection, and mutual fulfillment in their marriages. In this story, a wife frankly covets a position in a soon-to-be-organized bishopric for her husband. She fulfills her duties as wife, mother, and ward member with both pride and pleasure, disappointed only in the fact that her husband refuses to take his leadership potential seriously. Though he is reliable and well liked, he repeatedly behaves with a levity that strikes her as undignified. A culminating example of his behavior occurs after election day when he goes on a local radio show to concede the election to his opponent—a joke because he entered the election only by writing in his own name in the voting booth. Rather than responding with despair or anger, his wife decides to reciprocate with a joke of her own. She quickly invites in numerous ward members and greets him, as he returns that evening, with a backyard concession party. It is, of course, she who has bravely and sensibly made a concession. The fundamental affection between this couple has reasserted itself. Compared to that affection, the failed position in a bishopric is nothing.

There is no question a healing love is what Sillitoe desires for humankind. Taken as a whole, her stories are infused by a healing love. If there are aggressors and victims among her characters, there are also those who love and affirm and serve. Sillitoe does not abrogate the age-old union between women and men. Instead, she calls for its continued improvement.