

Mormon institutions and biographies of increasingly minor figures.

Editor Thomas G. Alexander takes up the cudgels against Peterson in his introduction, as he does against no other contributor, but it is difficult to avoid concluding that Peterson has the best of the debate. The narrow range of publishers of the best recent Mormon monographs cited in Alexander's footnotes and the limited circle of reviewers in Mormon periodicals strongly indicate that Mormon

scholars are generally writing for each other.

If Peterson's indictment of Mormon scholarship is at all valid, then young Mormon scholars could hardly do better than to dust off their copies of *Great Basin Kingdom* and try to fathom some of the genius of that great book. Along the way, they may find ways to connect Mormon studies once again with the nourishing bloodstream of American scholarship.

I Laugh, Therefore I Am

Only When I Laugh by Elouise Bell (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 136 pp. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Miriam B. Murphy, associate editor, *Utah Historical Quarterly*.

A STUDENT OF ZEN BUDDHISM meditated daily on koans assigned by the Zen master. None of his insights impressed the master until one day, after years of thought about these puzzles, the student timidly began his exposition of a koan and then burst into uncontrollable laughter, at which point the Zen master clapped him on the back and shouted his congratulations.

Laughter is not necessarily the appropriate response to every koan or to all of life's mysteries and travails, but Elouise Bell, like the Zen master, leads us to suspect that laughter may be one of the great liberating forces in the universe. Indeed, I laugh, therefore I am (which Bell may well have coined) is probably a more useful precept than that originated by René Descartes. From Descartes' time to our own, the world has been awash with the weighty thoughts of competing philosophies—many of them ridiculous and some downright dangerous. Imagine, for example, how different history might have been had Elouise or an equally gifted wit cut her teeth on a turgid copy of *Das Kapital* when it first plopped off the press.

The thirty-six entries included in *Only When I Laugh* cover a range of cultural

topics from Z (for zucchini) to C (for Christmas). Many were originally published in Bell's *Network* column. Their collection in book form is a stroke of good luck for those interested in literary history, because her work represents a rare genre in Utah and Mormon letters. Utah has poets aplenty, historians, writers of song lyrics and fiction in its many forms, and even playwrights and philosophers—but where are the humorists (other than cartoonists)? Possibly the late Pulitzer Prize winner and one-time Utahn Phyllis McGinley fits in this niche, as does the late *Salt Lake Tribune* columnist Dan Valentine. Really, though, the field isn't overpopulated.

Bell's humor is disarming rather than armor-piercing; moreover, it usually directs the reader to a closer examination of life and the cultural norms we live by. "The Mug-wump" asks us to look again at the extremist positions of the clenched-fist feminist and the don't-you-dare-call-me-one-of-them camps. Bell engages the reader in a dialogue that gently restores equilibrium by dispelling the polarizing notion that true-believer zeal is superior to a more open, less vehement view. In the context of *Only When I Laugh*, we could call it the Elouisean mean.

"The Meeting" is classic satire. It describes a typical Sunday morning church service in a familiar format of announcements, music, and talks; but in this instance all the key players are women—