

her personal, spiritual experience through her visions of the sacredness of the earth, art, the body, and the community of discovery. I have longed to hear such personal spiritual experience from General Authorities—the kind of spiritual witness that Steve Benson wanted to hear from Dallin Oaks and Neal Maxwell when they invited him to Salt Lake City to encourage him not to leave the church. He asked them if they had had any spiritual experiences they could share with him. Benson reported that there was a disappointing lack of response from these ostensible spiritual giants. Either they had no such experiences or, confoundingly, and perhaps worse, they would not share such experiences with others who were seeking God and whom they claimed to lead.

Williams graciously shares her

spiritual life, and, by doing so, creates a community of discovery with her reader and with the artist who defied the limited religious paradigm that could only see the world in black and white. Nevertheless, if, as Williams points out, individual restoration follows crisis and restlessness, she, like Bosch, is still framed by the Christian desire for assured endings. In the ending of *Leap*, Williams concludes, “We can obey our own authority through our own agency to choose. I choose to believe in the power of restoration, the restoration of our faith, even within my own Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (p. 264). Here there is not so much a restless leap to endless discovery and community as there is an almost solipsistic need to find a resting place sheltered from the violence of a religion gone astray.

## Making Miracles

*Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, by Phyllis Barber (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 129 pp., \$16.95 paper.

Reviewed by Mary Ellen Robertson, MA, Women’s Studies in Religion, The Claremont Graduate School.

When I was twelve, the youth in our ward did baptisms for the dead in the Los Angeles temple. To pique our interest, our leaders told tales of spirits appearing to the living and thanking them for performing ordinances on their behalf. I stayed awake half the night afterward waiting for my visitation; however, the veil did not part as I expected it would.

Phyllis Barber’s collection of short stories, *Parting the Veil: Stories from a*

*Mormon Imagination*, illustrates the form our longing for the divine can take. Barber describes a childhood wherein “it was as common to think of an angel appearing by my bed as it was to drink orange juice for breakfast” (p. ix). As a result of being steeped in Mormon culture, Barber says “I can’t help telling stories that wrestle with the suspicion of a thin veil fluttering nearby” (p. xi). Her twelve stories are inspired by the Mormon experience—testimony meetings, family history anecdotes, and collections of folklore.

In the stories, unborn spirit children appear in dreams and ask to be made flesh. A fiddler’s lullaby tames a hungry wolf pack. Three divine beings inspire a mother to send wild sage to cure her ailing missionary son. An

aristocratic stranger appears during a dust storm to ask a grieving widow for her last gold piece. A disembodied hand appears over the dinner table in time to remove a fishbone from a choking boy's throat. A prophet implores a harried follower to forget the demands of God long enough to help him build a sandcastle.

Barber's stories rework the human quest for the divine and prompt questions about the parting of the veil. How do we identify the hand of God working in our lives? How can we distinguish the miraculous from the circumstantial? Is our appreciation for miracles indivisible from our Mormonness? Barber's stories invite us to part the veil and explore the possibilities.

In "Bread for Gunnar," Anna Crandall watches Gunnar Swenson adorn his house and yard—painting his fence a vivid red, building a staircase to nowhere, covering his chimney with paper flowers. Watching Gunnar soothes Anna as the demands in her own life grow. After months of observation, Anna decides to take Gunnar a loaf of bread and introduce herself.

Mistaking her for his long-lost sweetheart—also named Anna—Gunnar invites her in. He asks why she left, then rejoices at her return. He lights a fire and accidentally sets the house ablaze. "Anna's bower—bouquets, valentines, bluebirds, poems hidden in drawers, lace hanging to protect the bridal chamber"—is devoured by flames (p. 87). Anna embraces Gunnar, tells him she loves him, and flees the burning house. She continues to feel Gunnar's presence and "the enormity of his devotion" (p. 88), and this gives her the strength to watch her husband take a second wife. Experiencing Gunnar's love allows Anna to submit her will to God's mysterious ways.

"Ida's Sabbath" tells the story of a woman "dependable as the seasons" (p. 40) who discovers her own unpredictable skin. One night, Ida Rossiter "decided it didn't matter if she kept [her garments] off for a few minutes beyond her nightly bath. Just once. Just for the one hour it would take to wash and dry the pile of soiled clothes accumulated in her hamper" (p. 41). Ida spends that hour awakening to her own sentience. "She loved the feel of her body, free of belts and zippers and buttons and nylons, the feel of nothing between her and the air" (p. 48). But her conscience kicks in; she kneels, prays, repents for enjoying her own skin.

That night, a storm knocks out the power and Ida wakes to discover the washing machine full of cold, wet garments. She puts on her clothes (sans garments) and goes to church, but she can't escape the events of the previous night—or their curious effect on her Sabbath. I find Ida's awakening miraculous, given a religious culture that cloaks sentience with a second skin, depriving sensation for righteousness's sake. To shed that skin—even for a moment—is a powerful act.

Another story explores the possibility of misinterpreting mundane events as a parting of the veil. In "The Whip," Karl and Hilma Gustavson's miracle happens at someone else's expense: they inherit a dead woman's wagon, team, and whip. Karl's involvement with the whip becomes obsessive. Hilma's embarrassment and her failure to redirect his energies cause her to turn to God for help.

One day, Hilma notices that Karl has left the whip at home and seizes the opportunity to dispose of it. She cuts the whip into pieces and adds it to the soup, convinced "she was doing God's will as she scraped the diced

whip into the boiling water" (p. 3). Karl misses the whip while they are eating dinner. Hilma reassures him that he knows the whip too intimately to really lose it. Karl tells her, "God knew what I needed when he sent you, Hilma. The wagon, too" (p. 4). Had Karl been aware of Hilma's part in the whip's disappearance, would he be so understanding? Would he think she was carrying out God's will—or her own? And does a loving God cause one person's demise so another can inherit a wagon?

Perhaps the miracle is in the eye of the beholder. Barber's stories invite the reader to muse about the miraculous, pose provocative questions, and explore the ways God's hand touches our lives. In a religious community that tends to distance itself from its ecstatic past, Barber's stories serve as a valuable reminder of our collective belief in miracles, the potency of our oral traditions, and our persistent efforts to part the veil that separates us from the divine.

## A Prophet, Seer, and Revelator

*The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith*, edited by Bryan Waterman (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 352 pp., \$18.95 paper.

Reviewed by Bradley D. Woodworth, Ph.D. candidate in History, Indiana University.

What does it mean that Joseph Smith was "a seer, a translator, a prophet" (D&C 21:1)? This is the question addressed by the fifteen essays in this book, the eighth in Signature Books's *Essays on Mormonism* series. Over a quarter of a century ago, non-Mormon historian Jan Shipps called upon her colleagues to work towards a solution of "the prophet puzzle": to reconcile the money-digging young Joseph Smith with the mature prophet and man of God. In the article containing her challenge (reprinted here) Shipps suggested that this gap could be bridged by a greater understanding of what, in Joseph's case, being a prophet, seer, and translator was all about. The essays printed here represent responses to this challenge.

Mormon readers curious to know whether secular, professional scholarship on Joseph Smith is at all congruent with contemporary LDS orthodox thought might be surprised at the complex range of belief they find in this volume. Most of the essays will be familiar to students of Mormon history as all but three have been published before, primarily in *Dialogue* and the *Journal of Mormon History*.

Appearing here for the first time are articles by Richard L. Bushman, Eugene England, and Susan Staker. Bushman, who is working on a new biography of Joseph Smith, points in his essay to the centrality of unconventional, unlearned translation in Joseph's understanding of his prophetic role. (This idea is central in the 1989 essay of Karl C. Sandberg, "Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith as Translator," reprinted in this volume.) The work of translating the Book of Mormon, Bushman writes, "joined two traditions—the holy calling of seer and the magical practice of divining with a stone." Joseph Smith's earlier experi-