Reaching toward Heaven, Rooted on Earth

Falling toward Heaven, by John Bennion. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000). 312 pp.

Reviewed by Paul Guajardo, Assistant Professor of English literature, University of Houston.

ONE AFTERNOON WHILE EATING MY sandwich in the faculty lounge of the English Department at the University of Houston, I couldn't help but notice a 1989 dissertation that was nearly a foot thick: *Court of Love*. I was surprised to learn that it was about Mormon culture. I took it back to my office, reclined my chair, and became engrossed. I read throughout the night and most of the next day until I finished it, exhausted and depressed—exactly the kind of book I love. I wanted to call the writer and find out more about his work and his characters, especially because the novel ends somewhat ambiguously, allowing readers to decide for themselves. Bennion, in fact, had two possibilities in mind: "One was that Howard and Alison would find a way to live together again, the other was that Howard would end up absolutely isolated from human contact" (p. xxv). The ending he gives perfectly allows for either possibility.

This was my introduction to the prose of John S. Bennion, now a tenured BYU English professor known for the award-winning collection, *Breeding Leah and other Stories*.[1] *Falling toward Heaven* is a revised version of *Court of Love*. His work now in progress includes a novel, *The Burial Pool*, a nineteenth-century polygamist mystery novel, *Water Killing*, and *Desert Women*, a collection of essays about women in Tooele County, Utah.

Falling toward Heaven begins with Elder Howard Rockwood serving a mission in Houston while his "soul was in a waning phase, narrowing to a sliver" (p. 3).

> [His] mission was like thermal underwear, useful for safety and warmth, but hampering his free movement. . . .He had thought that, because he was a doubter, he should leave his mission, but he knew that would break his mother's heart. He had decided to muddle through to the end. His prayers seemed superficial. . .God had always seemed to Howard to be a stern teacher, one focused on obedience to rules. (p. 4)

Then, at a 4th of July concert, Elder Rockwood meets the wispy, free-spir-

1. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991.

ited Allison Warren,[2] who holds a degree from MIT. For her he not only considers breaking mission rules but also risks a dishonorable discharge.

Although doubt is a recurring theme, the novel's major conflict is the result of the mismatched pairing between the atheist Allison, who writes software for oil companies, and the idealistic Howard, who wants to restore his father's ranch to its former glory. Allison questions Howard's religion and culture. She struggles with marriage and her desire for a career, and Howard struggles with his faith, his heritage, and his roots in the town of Rockwood (modeled on Vernon, Utah). He comes from a pioneer family that had farmed and ranched 1200 dusty acres of desert for five generations. Howard "nearly [leaves] the church for [the] aggressive, careless, independent, powerful" (p. 177) Allison, described as a man-eating pagan, who is the liberal daughter of a Rice University professor, and, at the outset, the lover of a man who does sex research at the University of Houston.

On their way to Anchorage, where they will live together without matrimony, Howard and Allison make a stop in Howard's hometown. The visit lasts just long enough for Allison to learn that she has serious questions about small-town life and Mormon culture. Later, just before Howard is called into a church court, Allison reluctantly agrees to marry him, and as a result, he is disfellowshipped instead of excommunicated. Gradually these two work out some of their differences through compromise. Although they ultimately endure a family tragedy, the novel still ends somewhat hopefully, as positively as a novel with these themes can. As much as I *like* and recommend *Falling toward Heaven*, however, I simply *love* the greater emotions evoked by the more tragic *Court of Love*. In this earlier version, Howard and Allison actually stay in Rockwood, where increasingly Allison feels trapped by her boyfriend, his family, his ancestors, his church, and by small-town insularity—all of which leads to heart-wrenching and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to deal with differences.

For me, the beauty of Bennion's fiction is his faultless writing with apt use of metaphor and figurative speech, yet sufficient plot, humor, and insight to keep readers interested. His dialogue is perfectly peppered with lines worthy of the wittiest sit-com banter, yet his characters would do Thomas Hardy proud. Reading Bennion's work, I can't help thinking of another odd couple, Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*. Indeed, what Bennion does best is to portray couples in conflict. Bennion is also particularly adept at depicting oddball characters, religious mystics, fanatics, Jack Mormons, and other varieties of doubters and back-sliders. He is superbly gifted at rendering the internal workings of an anguished mind.

Most of Bennion's minor characters are vivid, and his women are especially strong and well-wrought. Howard's mother has the gift of healing and counseling. She starts a reading group where women discuss their pet peeves: "The power structure of the church or the ways men think they own women's bodies. . .authority. . . patriarchal attitudes toward land and work" (p. 207). Allison laments, "It's sad. Your mother's made to be a preacher, a healer, and she's born into one of the only churches in the country that won't let her do either" (p. 208). Indeed, one of Allison's functions is to

2. The character is named Allison in *Falling Toward Heaven*, Alison in *Court of Love*.

help us see the church and Mormon culture through an outsider's eyes. She calls Rockwood "Howard's tight-assed Mormon town" (p. 85).

In this arguably feminist novel, traditional male/female roles are inverted. Allison works; Howard stays home or looks for work. He is something of a homemaker who cooks the dinners: "'We've got apple pie and ice cream.' He was Mr. June Cleaver" (p. 251). She is the more educated one; he continually borrows money from her and is dependent. There are references to *his* biological clock; *he* is the one who wants children. She "rejected all wifeliness; her pill, which he wanted to flush down the toilet, kept her from motherhood" (p. 176). She states "I'm not going to give up my job for him" (p. 206). The narrator frequently describes Allison as wolf-like. Ironically, Howard reads romances of the American West, where the "roles of men and women were clearly defined" (p. 205).

Howard's recurring doubt serves as a leitmotif: "All his life he had been taught that the universe was simple and unitary; now he knew it was not. Opposites were true, paradoxes were as commonplace as stars" (p. 110). Sometimes he wonders if "his fresh desire for faith was merely a retreat from a fear he could not endure" (p. 146). While in church, "Howard felt like a foreigner, seeing the meeting with new eyes. He wondered at the simple faith. His own was so tangled that it hardly existed. Instead of a stern and unforgiving patriarchal father, he tried to imagine a distant and pure god, one who didn't traffic in any kind of power" (p. 139). Nevertheless, part of Howard's development concerns his growing belief; he wonders "if he could do the same with his faith, reconstruct faith out of the flashes of light he had felt since meeting Allison. Could he embrace hope by choice, giving it priority over fear?" (p. 148). Eventually he learns "that prayer was a form of eternal calculus, a way of making closer and closer estimates of God's person-ness. But for the first time since he was a child, he had faith in the process" (p. 184). Howard's faith waxes and wanes, and ultimately Allison is able to offer more consolation and understanding of grief and loss.

I must confess my initial surprise at how candidly Bennion, a BYU professor, writes about sex, feminism, hypocrisy, patriarchy, and polygamy. However accurately he may depict the diversity of the church, at first I came away with somewhat negative images. Call me simplistic. In spite of my overwhelming enthusiasm for Bennion's writing, I first naively questioned its suitability for non-members or the weak of testimony. What I might call *negative* depictions, however, Bennion would call *realistic.* These aspects of his fiction are placed in perspective on second reading. Yes, his characters make mistakes, criticize Mormon culture, and honestly harbor considerable doubt, but all this adds to the strength of the writing and the ideas. I believe that Bennion's candor is ultimately beneficial to anyone who has struggled with testimony, obedience, or matters of faith.

John Bennion has thought carefully about what it means to be a Mormon writer and about the purposes of fiction in the essay "Popular and Literary Mormon Novels: Can Weyland and Whipple Dance Together in the House of Fiction?"[3] For the sake of

3. *BYU Studies* 37.1 (1997-1998): 159-182. Rpt. at http://jackweyland.com/review3.html.

simplicity, literature can be classified as literary or popular; similarly, Mormon literature has been divided into: literature of faith and belief, versus what Karl Keller once called "jack-fiction."[4] In discussing orthodox Mormon fiction that reverberates with heart-warming conclusions, Bennion writes, "My academic training makes me want to mock this kind of extended plot, but Weyland's books sell like peanuts at a circus."[5] Elaborating on the distinctions, Bennion comments that

> In popular fiction, truth is easily understood; good and evil are clearly marked. But in literary fiction, outcomes are uncertain and characters ambiguous. The reader is invited by literary fictions to judge between relative truths and to questions former truths. The focus is not on a didactic outcome but on the experience of the character, the career of their lives. (p. 8)

Bennion acknowledges that many readers, including some of his students, are not interested in fiction "that deals ambiguously with good and evil" (p. 7). Nevertheless, he argues, the value of this literature lies in requiring "moral decisions in a fictional universe that approaches the complexity and ambiguity of the universe we find ourselves in. . .[thus]. . .careful readers can still grow morally by being forced to decide in the world of the literary novel" (p. 9). Ultimately, Bennion calls for a balanced narrative diet, and that is exactly what he gives us in *Falling Toward Heaven,* a decidedly literary work about the complexity of relationships and religion. Go forth and read.

Dissent Without Definition

Mormon Mavericks: Essays on Dissenters, edited by John Sillito and Susan Staker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 376 pp.

Reviewed by Stephen C. Taysom, Associate Instructor of American Religious History, Indiana University

ALL GOOD HISTORY is as much about the present as it is about the past. Sillito and Staker's volume, which includes biographical sketches of dissenters ranging widely across the 180-year history of the LDS church, is firmly grounded in the polarized present. In compiling the volume, the editors sought to find out "What. . .the lives and beliefs of these independent spirits tell us about Mormonism, ourselves, and the larger world around us" (p. x). The "independent spirits" dealt with in the volume include Amasa Lyman, John E. Page, Sarah Pratt, William Smith, T.B.H. and Fanny Stenhouse, James Strang, Moses Thatcher, Fawn Brodie, Juanita Brooks, Thomas Stewart Ferguson, Sterling McMurrin, Samuel W. Taylor, and D. Michael Quinn. Sillito and Staker at-

4. Quoted in jackweyland.com/review3, 1.
5. jackweyland.com/review3, 4.