

A Motherless Son Sings the Blues

Paul Swenson, *Iced at the Ward, Burned at the Stake* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 82 pp.

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Last spring I wrote an essay for the March 2004 AML symposium in which I argued that the most effective poets writing from the LDS culture are those who provide a counterweight to the mainstream LDS perspective. Paul Swenson's book *Iced at the Ward, Burned at the Stake* addresses head on the dilemma of a culture that, though in desperate need of counterweights, does everything it can to literally throw them out.

The poems are written in a lyrical voice creating lines that are both evocative and musical. The title poem refers to September 1993, when Lynne Kanavel Whitesides was disfellowshipped and Paul J. Toscano excommunicated. Both Whitesides and Toscano are part of what has been called "the September Six"—a group of people who were disciplined in a variety of ways by the Church for being "dissident." One of the primary conflicts seems to have been views on Mother in Heaven, and concerns about how the Church patriarchy silences the voices of women. Swenson explores these themes in four different sections by presenting an interesting twist on the gender inequity that exists in the Church.

In many poems, Swenson expresses the loss of a Heavenly Mother, of a female deity to whom he can turn; and by extension, he mourns the lack of women's voices in the Church. According to Mormon doctrine, men who righteously hold the priesthood represent Heavenly Father; therefore, are not many devout, intelligent, and compassionate women representations of Heavenly Mother? These poems recognize that the Church is out of balance when those in authority use their "power" to silence the female perspective or limit exploration of feminist doctrine.

As Swenson writes from the point of view of a son searching for an invisible and nameless mother, he gives a new interpretation to the issue of gender inequity in the Church. He expresses the frustration of having limited access to this female deity because of dubious doctrine that keeps her hidden, just as many women have been frustrated by the sexism that can make the Church's power base inaccessible to them. In the poem "Strange Gods" Swenson ends with:

I lust for the veiled god
who will not go to war with her
 children
who will not author famine or floods,
who will not prune the buds of her
 most promising flowers
in some grand Apocalypse. (26)

The tone is one of anger that "the

veiled god" might present a less destructive alternative to the vengeful Old Testament one, yet her views and influence have been silenced.

The third section of the book, entitled "Body and Soul," explores more thoroughly this separation between the speaker and Mother in Heaven. The first poem, "Motherless Child," presents the female deity as wild and elusive and questions if she is present more than we realize but is imperceptible: "When something just outside my memory refracts / a glimmer of her glory, I want to ask, whose child am I?" (42)

The third poem, "White Gardenia," presents the imbalance of gender power as a bishop interviews a young woman preparing for her wedding. The interview seems to be so invasive and inappropriate that it violates her innocent anticipation of her wedding. Her voice is not heard during the interview; it remains silent in her mind as she contrasts her innocent preparations for the wedding with the disturbing tone of the interview.

A poem that attempts to restore gender equity is "The Prophet Debbie," in which a variety of women and girls representing this prophet slip in and out of congregations and concert crowds, unnoticed yet influential, which seems to be the nature of women's spirituality within the Church. The most dramatic of these scenes is one in which a mother has a vision as she is giving birth that "[penetrates] the long dark tunnel of her vagina, / [to see] umbilical cord wrapped

around her daughter's neck. / Warned the doctor, who untangled the cord, / saved the child. But she had seen it first, from the inside" (50). The poem ends with this female prophet creating gender balance by introducing the "Sons of the men to the Moon Circle, / and the daughters of women to Iron John" (50).

The final poem of this section, "Exejesus," continues to create a counterweight, presenting Jesus as a man who loves to be in the presence of women, both as a guide and as an equal. He reluctantly boards the boat of the male disciples (57). This image of Jesus as a "women's man" is counter to the LDS culture which encourages male bonding to such a degree that women's viewpoints often become expendable.

If these poems focused exclusively on the perspective of those who are marginalized, then one could argue that they themselves need balancing. But at the end of the collection, Swenson counterbalances the scenes where women are at the mercy of male authority by placing himself at the mercy of women. He does this humorously in "Dog Days of August" with a visit to a female proctologist. In "Brides of the Afternoons" the tone is both ironic and poignant as he deconstructs what has become a Mormon icon—the beautiful bride in her white wedding dress posing for photographs on Temple Square. In a strangely vulnerable way, the brides have all the power; they lead the way, stop traffic, smile at "the rabble" who

stare at them as if they are a type of goddess for that one day. Visual reminders of a temple marriage, they become symbolic of the Mormon pursuit for eternal perfection. The speaker watches from the sidelines, appreciating their loveliness but questioning what the future holds for their perfect beauty. Even as he recognizes the ludicrousness of their symbolism, he can't help but be entranced by them.

My one criticism of these poems is that some were addressed to an inner circle. The names and stories may be familiar to those on the Wasatch Front; but to a reader who is quite removed from those circles, the occasional name dropping without a context created an exclusiveness. I also wonder how some of the poems, so specific in their pertinence to Mormonism, would be acces-

sible to a national audience. This is the challenge of any LDS writer—how to convey the unique experience of growing up in a religion that is still so obscure to those on the outside.

Mormonism provides a minuscule part of American religious literary identity. When it does not exist within laughable or perverse stereotypes, the Mormon experience is still a mystery nationwide because there are not yet enough quality writers with national publications who honestly convey the experience of being part of the LDS Church and culture—its complexities, its nuances, its ironies, its hypocrisies, and the transformative power of its truths. It will take writers like Swenson who refuse to approach Mormonism in a facile manner to make this leap.