

inappropriate to have the characters plant a new bush. Not giving up on the original bush would have made a more satisfying ending for me.

I would also like to see Thom use a bush that is more suitable to this region. Azaleas don't usually do well in Utah, except on Temple Square where the heat comes up from the underground parking area. Call me picky; but as a gardener, I would like Robert to understand more fully the needs of his bush. When the roots are good and strong, there must be a way to bring it back to health and full bloom. Faith and understanding are required on the part of both the Liahona and the Iron Rod.

The play is insightful and thought provoking. The characters have universal appeal—real, likable, and interesting. Although the Poll dichotomy is used throughout, this play is about a father and a son in need of understanding. Duncan plans to film his play and assures us that The Nauvoo Theatrical Society will soon be making its second start. There are also plans to publish the play in an issue of *Irreantum*.

If Mormon theater can't make it in "Happy Valley," then where?
Help make it happen.

A Touching Remembrance

Helen Elizabeth Nebeker. *Bittersweet: A Candid Love Story*. Phoenix, Ariz.: Acacia Publishing, 2005. 424 pp., \$21.95.

Reviewed by Richard J. Jacob, professor emeritus of physics and dean of the Emeritus College, Arizona State University

Extracting one's memoirs from correspondence can be emotionally hazardous. This is especially true if the subject is romance and the sources are love letters. But if the settings, both global and personal, are unusually profound, the task can be draining almost beyond endurance. Helen Nebeker relates how the tears would flow endlessly as she transcribed and narrated the letters and circumstances upon which is based this engaging and touching remembrance of her and her husband's passionate and rocky marriage.

Helen Nebeker is professor emeritus of English at Arizona State University, where she helped pioneer professional opportunities for women in academia during the 1950s and later, until her retirement in 1988 as associate chair of the English Department. She wrote her story

with revealing openness for a faithful LDS woman in her late seventies, in a period of just a few months. Beautifully and skillfully written, as one might expect from a teacher of literature, it required, as the author reports privately, no more than fifty word changes after the initial draft had been serially completed.

The greater part of the effort was the transcription of nearly 800 letters exchanged between Nebeker and her recently married husband, Aquila Chauncey Nebeker Jr., or more simply, “Neb,” while he served with the 106th Infantry Division, which took tragic losses in the Battle of the Bulge near the end of World War II. The format of her account is a final love letter to Neb, who died in 2001. She fondly, coyly, and sometimes chidingly “recalls” along with him the issues and nuances uncovered in these letters and confronts with equal frankness cupids and demons as they are resurrected.

Helen Nebeker’s story begins in Indianapolis, her home town, in 1944. She left home at age seventeen, pretending to be twenty—a white lie she maintained with Neb until circumstances required her to “come clean” many years later—to obtain a job. Neb, a smoking, drinking, returned Mormon missionary from Mesa, Arizona, is stationed in town with the 592nd Field Artillery Battalion. They meet under typical war-time conditions, have a whirlwind romance, and are married within four months. She recounts this portion in great detail, even what Nebeker herself refers to as the “steamy parts.” Steamy, yes. Some readers may be moved by the boldness with which she describes deeply personal matters—but not seamy.

Two months later, Neb is deployed overseas, where he experiences the harshest of fighting and weather conditions on the German front, and Helen returns to work, along with countless other war wives. Neb soon persuades her to visit his parents in Mesa, which she does and eventually decides to stay. Although initially unfamiliar with the Mormon Church, she is baptized before Neb’s return. Her convert faith provides the strength to face the lifetime of intense challenges ahead of her.

Neb’s eventual return from war and their meeting in Los Angeles are described in a gem of romance writing:

How I managed to get from the airport to that Pershing Square—to this day I don’t really know where it is—and *then* to find it a huge place, with hundreds (it seemed to me) of people milling around, most of them uniformed service men, I shall never understand. I only know I searched the

crowds, bewildered. . . . Oh, how am I to find you, my love? I wait. And I wait. And you are not there. Am I in the wrong place? On the wrong day? At the wrong time? I begin to grow afraid. Then suddenly, just as in my dream . . . I see you! And you see me! And we are running. And I am in your arms. And I see your sweet face. And then, at last encircled tightly in your arms, I know that all is well. . . . Well dear, I have no letters to remind me of that night—nor of the three more nights to come—either in your words or in mine. But I remember. There was no fear, no holding back by you or me. You had, indeed, saved all your strength and love, for me. And I had waited for it, wanted it with all my being. (286, 288)

Helen's letters are transcribed exactly as written; she did not permit even minor typographical alterations by the publisher. They demonstrate remarkable maturity and facility with language from the still-teenaged letter writer. In December 1944, while Neb was on the allied front near Bastogne, she wrote:

I don't think I'm being sacrilegious if I think that Someone took the trouble to direct our fate so that we could meet. Suppose you had left the country and I had never gone to the Claypool that night. I wouldn't be sitting here writing and you—well you might have been someone else's husband, sweetheart or lover. (And I couldn't stand that!) Even if it is lonesome, I'd much rather be your wife, waiting and planning for your return, than lead any kind of life I can think of. Of course, I would have never known what I missed. . . . But I would have grown old without really living. (781)

Her facility with language and thought pointed to the academic career, so far from her mind at the time, which she began at the age of twenty-five, when, with two small children and a vexing husband, she made the decision to enroll in college.

The remaining third of the book recounts their stormy marriage. Neb has returned, in the pattern of many World War II combat veterans, with emotional and behavioral dysfunction. Helen endures these challenges throughout their lifetime together, but not without two filings for divorce and a suicide attempt. She also experienced the sorrow of an adult son's untimely death.

All is recounted with candor and prayerful thanks as this final "love letter" continues. Of her most desperate moment, she writes: "In the end, I clearly saw that only God could solve my dilemma. Quite deliberately, dear love, I wrote you a final letter of goodbye, swallowed the pills, lay down on my bed—completely at peace. And left the choice to God" (353). Helen's faith does not fail her, and she is miraculously rescued. This plac-

ing of her very life in God's hands is an act probably not recommended by Church canon; but with heroic determination, she rebuilds her life with Neb and enjoys his last decades with him as he finally, if not completely, overcomes his past and provides her the potential for eternal companionship for which she had so long prayed.

It would have been easy for Helen to make Neb a villain in the reader's eyes. She pulls no punches in portraying his dysfunction as a husband, a father, and a Latter-day Saint. But her love for him will not allow that. Her belief in redemption underscores the "sweet" in this bittersweet memoir. Neb remained and remains her love and, in the end, shares the heroism of this tale with his adoring wife.