

bright. As studies of interactive media and the internet are added to criticism like that included here, our concept of the history and capacity of Mormon media will enlarge, audiences and creators will come into closer contact, and the quality of new works will improve. Decker, Austin, and their contributors have created an invaluable resource to bolster the growing field, and one can only hope that the critics who begin to fill in their gaps will do so to the same standards upheld throughout this book.

Notes

1. Michael Otterson, "The Church's Reputation: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunity," Patheos.com, August 9, 2010, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Churchs-Reputation-Progress-Challenges-and-Opportunity.html> (accessed August 11, 2010).

2. These include Mitt Romney, Warren Jeffs, and Proposition 8; also see Austin's discussion of polygamy in his own essay, pp. 37–61.

Pirouettes on Strings

Phyllis Barber. *Raw Edges*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2010. ix + 268 pp. Hardcover: \$26.95. ISBN: 978-0-87417-807-4

Reviewed by Kathryn Lynard Soper

A mobile hangs from the ceiling above Phyllis Barber's writing desk: tissue-paper ballerinas suspended in midair, light and delicate, twirling in currents of warmth from the nearby fireplace. As she labored to finish *Raw Edges*, Barber often glanced up from the computer screen for the dancers' wordless encouragement. *You need to finish your book*, they reminded her (1). I'm glad she listened, for this memoir shares a compelling story, often poetic and sometimes heartbreaking, rich with the makings of wisdom.

The narrative cycles repeatedly through conundrums of identity and intimacy which surface during Barber's "seven lean years of being lost" (1); she writes to find herself in the shreds and patches of three love relationships, including a marriage of thirty-three years to a man ill-suited for the obligations of monogamy. The result is a weaving, sometimes frayed but still effective story

of emerging self-awareness, and a stark cautionary tale of troubled relationships and blurred boundaries.

As a BYU student in the mid-sixties, Barber senses intuitive fears about marrying her charismatic fiancé, David, but forges ahead nonetheless, considering him an intriguing puzzle as well as a lucky catch. Tension between the newlyweds builds immediately as David chafes against the restrictions of life as a married Mormon man and Barber struggles to compensate. After having two children within two years, they discover that their firstborn, Geoffrey, is hemophilic. His death as a preschooler strikes a blunt blow to Barber's already weakened sense of self, and the possibility that she may have been at fault haunts her from that point forward, becoming her agonizing "black secret" (186).

In the years following Geoffrey's death, the pressures of Barber's family life intensify, as does her husband's dissatisfaction. A third son joins the household, then a fourth. After admitting to an extramarital affair, David requests an open marriage arrangement to accommodate his desire for multiple romantic partners. "It's certainly not about not loving you," he assures Barber, as she holds herself back from punching his jaw (117). Devastated by this betrayal, Barber hears a clear inner voice: "Pay attention to *your* life. Focus on what *you* need to do. Not on him" (118). She takes this message as her cue to accept David's ethics and even adapt them as her own, despite the fact that such action constitutes "a shattering of [her] vows, [her] promises" (147).

The scenes that follow are both wrenching and surreal. In one, Phyllis Barber's first extramarital affair unfolds almost as a matter of duty (144) ; in another she attempts damage control over lunch with one of the "other women" (180). At one point, after waiting all night for her to return from a romantic visit on the final night of summer vacation, an ironically jealous David drives their minivan and three sons away, leaving her stranded on a sidewalk halfway across the country—and she laughs it off (151).

Unwilling to practice Mormonism without David and uncomfortable about attending church in the midst of their mutual infidelities, she leaves the faith that has been the center of her life since childhood, then tells her devastated oldest son that he can attend alone if he wants. After years of yo-yo decision making, including a second overt betrayal from David when he breaks a specific agree-

ment (156), she finally separates from him only to settle in with an equally troubled partner: Spinner, a man sixteen years her junior with big brown eyes and a full-blown cocaine addiction. As Spinner progressively lies, cheats, and steals from her, Barber's inner voice clearly signals danger; but her own apparent addiction to being needed by others ("I needed to go to rehab to get over being a mother," 192) deafens her to the warnings. The mess of betrayals, break-ups, and get-back-togethers, crowned by a harrowing scene of physical abuse, leads even the most sympathetic reader to wonder "What in the hell [is she] doing with a loser like that?" (130)

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the story is the way Barber often appears to be taking the threads of her life into her own hands, only to revert to her dysfunctional ways. Her identity crisis sparks a series of adventures from the admirable (pursuing a graduate degree) to the daring (a thousand-mile cross-country bike ride) to the clichéd (a quest in a Yucatan temple to "accept the goddess within") (226). She collects potentially transformative experiences the way she collects rare stamps in a leather album, and a breakthrough seems to come when she learns that misprinted stamps dramatically increase in value—mistakes, she realizes, can become "collector's gold." Yet this alchemy is stalled because she never resolves her need to be needed, which continually arises as a taunt from her own mind: "Nobody needs you anymore. Maybe they never did" (252).

Toward the end of the story Barber is living in the stifling heat of David's Denver attic after a second failed marriage, whacking her head on the slanted ceiling, suicidal, and condemned to a prison of her own making. The narrative ends (literally) on a happy note, as Barber reunites with her faith community and savors the simple joy of singing LDS hymns on a Sabbath morning. But her hopeful concluding words—"Why had I thought I needed more?"—are outweighed by the question she's been asking herself all along: "Why have I settled for so little?" (213).

Barber is unquestionably a talented writer. She captures settings in vivid detail and evokes metaphors that are truly beautiful, even breathtaking; the emotion she expresses is sometimes sentimentalized (particularly in the overwrought passages of internal dialogue), yet her self-disclosure is sincere enough and brave enough to compensate for its heaviness. The memoir's organic

structure ambitiously aims at having form mirror function. In the introduction, Barber explains, “The endless thinking on the bicycle was never experienced in ordered chronology or form. Rather, it spun out of the vast reservoir of fragments in my head while my legs relentlessly spun the pedals” (2). This is, after all, how memory works, and how truth is experienced in real time. But Barber’s attempt to weave three storylines often feels more awkward than artistic: the narrative jumps haphazardly between scenes from the early years of her marriage to David, scenes from the present day, and scenes from her bike trip that provide a sort of framing narrative and, inevitably, impose the image of a journey. Ultimately, I found that the succession of vignettes lacked the cohesion necessary for this journey’s satisfactory resolution. Instead, I had a sense of spinning wheels, a glimpse of a destination never reached. And while the individual stamps in Barber’s album possess meaning and beauty, she doesn’t indicate what redemptive value the collection may hold.

But perhaps this sense of unmet potential conveys the memoir’s most enduring message. A life—a self—cannot be circumscribed in tidy ways and always falls short of what might have been. There’s no grand “aha” inscribed triumphantly on the last page of our personal narratives, no scene of ultimate redemption. There is only endurance through struggle, which hopefully yields mercy for others and self. By so candidly sharing her weakness, Barber offers readers an opportunity to face their own; by accepting her raw edges, she shows how our ragged selves fit seamlessly into humanity, and how this unity can salve our individual wounds. Indeed, Barber’s search for self ends as a plea for personal transcendence: “Help me out of myself, please” (214). And while her unsettling journey doesn’t lead to a place of solid truth to rest upon, through her words we hover near enlightenment like the tissue-paper dancers in her mobile, circling around and above the certainty of understanding, continually turning pirouettes on strings.

Breaking New Ground

Grant Hardy. *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide*.