

excerpts of the transcript at <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/holland.html> (accessed April 7, 2012).

3. This distinction is briefly described in *Between Pulpit and Pew: The Supernatural World in Mormon History and Folklore*, edited by W. Paul Reeve and Michael Scott Van Wagenen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011).

4. William A. Wilson, "Folklore," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:518–20, or <http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Folklore> (accessed April 7, 2012).

5. These archival collections are described in William A. Wilson, "Mormon Folklore." *Mormon Americana: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the U. S.* (Provo: BYU Studies, 1995), 437–54.

6. Peter Burke's historiographical survey of history and folklore studies outlines an early "age of harmony" (ca.. 1846–1920s), an "age of suspicion" (apx. 1920s–1970s), and an "age of rapprochement" (ca.. 1970s to 2000s). See Burke, "History and Folklore: A Historiographical Survey," *Folklore* vol. 115, no. 2 (Aug. 2004): 133–39. In addition to Reeve's edited collection, Brant A. Gardner fruitfully uses folklore theory to analyze the statements of witnesses to Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon translation. See *The Gift and the Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

Faith and Doubt in the First-Person Singular

Therese Doucet. *A Lost Argument: A Latter-Day Novel*. Washington, DC: Strange Violin Editions, 2011. 254 pp. \$14.00. ISBN: 978–0–9837484–1–0

Why I Stay: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Mormons, edited by Robert Ress. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011. 199 pp. \$24.95. ISBN: 978–1–56085–213–1

Thomas Riskas. *Deconstructing Mormonism: An Analysis and Assessment of the Mormon Faith*. Cranford, N.J.: American Atheist Press, 2011. 480 pp. \$29.95. ISBN: 978–1–57884–007–6

Reviewed by Rosalynde Welch

In 1979, Mary Bradford published in these pages an important personal essay on personal essays. Titled "I, Eye, Aye," the piece

first outlines a brief history of the genre within Mormon letters and then offers its memorable and enduringly useful analytical triptych: the Mormon first-person, as it was emerging among the essayists flourishing at the time, is characterized by its firmly personal point of view, the “I”; by its cultural work of observation, the “eye”; and by its ultimately affirmative and redemptive perspective, the “aye.”

I want to borrow Bradford’s framework and put it to what may seem at first a strange and inapt use: to make sense of three recent books on Mormonism, each of which comes to grips with the Mormon first-person voice in a different way. Only one of the three is a volume of personal essays in the sense that Bradford had in mind; the second is a novel, partly written in first-person diary form; and the third is a dense academic work framed by a personal narrative of disillusionment, an anti-testimony. It is admittedly a strain to yoke these three odd and unlike specimens into Bradford’s homophonic schema, but I think that together they can tell us something about how the Mormon first-person has evolved over the past thirty years, and what kind of work it does in this age of faith, doubt and blogging.

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Mary Bradford’s first category is “I”: the first-person voice in all its vulnerability, idiosyncrasy, and bias, let loose to romp or rant among the paragraphs of a personal essay. Signature’s new collection *Why I Stay: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Mormons* is a solid example of the personal essay form as Bradford understood it, celebrated it and indeed helped to define in these pages. The essays in *Why I Stay* originated as presentations at the “Why I Stay” sessions of the annual Sunstone Symposium during the past decade, and most of the names in the table of contents will be familiar to readers of this journal. The contributors for the most part represent a mature generation of liberal Mormons, those who were present at the foundation of Dialogue and Sunstone during the tumultuous 1960s and who deeply absorbed the lessons and ethos of the civil rights movement. They have brought that set of critical sensibilities and social commitments to bear on church culture and structure for almost five decades now.

There are no great surprises within the pages of this volume, and the dominant themes of doubt and faith, questioning and obedience, disappointment and commitment will be familiar to any Latter-day Saint who has followed the development of serious Mormon thought, first in academic journals and now extended into the electronic realm of Mormon blogs. Each essay grapples with the titular question—why stay committed to the church despite political, spiritual, or social differences—and each essayist lays out his or her personal grounds, sometimes as personal reminiscence and sometimes as formal justification. A shared sense of commitment, chagrin, and grounded hope defines the mood of the collection, and it's one that I find tremendously appealing.

The answers to the question implied in the title fall into three rough categories, and following Bradford's lead we might make another triptych analysis, just for fun. One category is what we might call a "Positive" commitment to Mormon ideas, "positive" in the epistemological rather than affective sense. These authors do not profess certainty about every LDS belief—on the contrary, they freely express skepticism about some teachings—but they offer at least some form of positive belief as a primary reason for their staying. In this category we find folks like Bill Russell and Greg Prince, who writes in his essay "I Trust the Data":

I can summarize my encounter with Mormonism in four words: "Go with the data." If a question is susceptible to examination, I want to make sure for myself that the data are solid. Then I go with the facts. If it is something that cannot be measured and tested, I am willing to accept it as a matter of faith and be content with it. This approach has not failed me. (94)

This category tends to attract the reformers and the idealists, those who embrace the optimistic and revolutionary elements of the Mormon cosmos and who work for what they see as the natural extension of those precepts into all elements of LDS sociality. Robert Rees is the paradigmatic specimen here:

I stay in the Church because I want to be part of the spiritual and social revolution that began when Joseph Smith knelt in the grove to trees near Palmyra. . . . I sincerely believe the Lord wants his Church to be better than it is, and I have the hope that I may play some small part in making it so. (184)

Another category is what I've called an "Appreciative" attachment to Mormonism, those Saints who love the rich history of the institution, its meaning in American history and its powerful, complicated legacy, while offering a critical perspective on contemporary Mormon culture and politics. The incomparable Claudia Bushman puts it humorously in her essay "Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Church":

We are fortunate to have such an interesting Church structure, such colorful doctrines, such tortured relationships with other Churches and individuals. . . . I am so glad not to be anything ordinary in the religious line, but to have a history, beliefs, and activities that leave others incredulous, amazed, horrified, bewildered. (36)

Appreciative Saints love the community offered by the Church, the support for families, and the structure in place to form loving relationships of mutual obligation.

Finally, there are those who claim a "Constitutive" relationship to the Church. These folks may doubt the Church's doctrines, cringe at its history, reject its politics, and dislike its community culture. But they are Mormon at the bone, and they can't change that even if they wanted to. In Lavina Fielding Anderson's extraordinary case, the Church has actively disclaimed her through excommunication, but she continues to attend services because, as she puts it, "The Church had power over my membership but does not have power over my Mormonness, which I continue to claim as my own destiny" (89). Karen Rosenbaum strikes a more melancholy note in her sensitive essay "How Frail a Foundation":

Many of my friends have made the leap out of Mormonism— but I suspect I cannot change my Mormonness. As long as I have a mind, Mormon hymns will run through it. I cannot erase them— even those I don't like. (159)

Positive, appreciative, and constitutive: chances are that each of these modes of attachment is present in every member's relationship to the Church in some degree. *Why I Stay* offers a local habitation and a name, in the form of personal perspectives and narratives, for readers working to define and understand their own relationships to the institution that binds us together.

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It's tempting to imagine a scene in which author Therese Doucet pitches her novel, *A Lost Argument*, to a publishing executive: "It's My Name is Charlotte Simmons meets Plato's *Phaedrus* meets NBC's *Community* meets bodice ripper romance novel. What's not to love?" As it happened, Doucet self-published the novel under her own imprint, Strange Violins Editions; such a meeting never occurred, one presumes. But the novel itself is indeed as quirky an amalgam of themes and styles as the imagined pitch suggests.

The novel is set about twenty years ago in what now seems like an impossibly old-fashioned college scene. Nary a cell phone nor even a personal computer darkens the narrative door; characters communicate via long letters, land lines, and answering machines. Quaintest of all, the story is driven by college students' quest not for hook-up sex but for true love, though it does include several gratuitous and awkwardly-rendered scenes of libidinous fumbling. Heavy petting among college students rarely wins style points.

Doucet manipulates the novel's narrative voice in ways that are not entirely scrutable to this reader, ways that both evoke and deflect the ethos of the "I" in Bradford's trio. The first half of the story is told in a conventional third-person limited-omniscient voice, with occasional inconsistencies in the omniscient consciousness. The second half of the novel is written in first-person—indeed, in diary form, the very first person—with a single extended irruption of third-person prose that occurs suddenly and without explanation.

Throughout, the protagonist, the figure whom Bradford would recognize as the "eye" of the story, is a figure familiar from chick lit: Marguerite Farnsworth is shy, bookish and flat-chested, but she nevertheless manages to capture the sexual imagination of attractive male atheist philosophers wherever she goes. Prone to depression, self-doubt and consuming romantic fantasy, Marguerite falls prey to serial infatuations over the course of the novel, and these personal misadventures form the spine of the episodic plot. In the first half, Marguerite attempts and fails to convert her philosopher-crush to Mormonism, and in the second half

Marguerite herself loses faith in Mormonism as she flounders through a series of doomed relationships and failed philosophical inquiries. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Socrates, and Levinas are as present to Marguerite as John, Zach, Matthew, and Josh, and her relationship to them just as obsessive. The themes of the novel are thus eros, philosophy, and doubt.

The novel suffers from a humdrum style and a sketchy plot, and the author labors toward a somewhat ponderous unification of its erotic plot and its philosophical themes into a notion that she calls “philosophical eros.” This epistemological erotics likens the pleasure of the self helpless against the force of an erotic infatuation with the pleasure of the mind seized by an inescapable idea. But it is pain as much as pleasure, for the lover is ultimately left alone, unfulfilled and incapable of fulfillment.

My argument was that Socratic philosophical eros is tragic because of its limitations. The lust of knowledge, certainty and beauty can never be satisfied, yet wonder’s embrace leaves the Socratic lover too full to accept any imperfect, mortal love. The Socratic lover loves beauty and wisdom because he lacks them, and can’t let himself be loved in the fragile, contingent way of things that are real because he’s too enamored of the ideal. (192)

It is too rarefied a notion to support the fleshy demands of realistic fiction, and ultimately the novel, like Plato’s unlucky charioteers, fails to achieve flight.

If its central conceit founders, the novel nevertheless makes several stimulating observations about the function of doubt in LDS life. The most illuminating to me is the question of when faith crises occur in a typical LDS coming-of-age. The timing, it turns out, can determine the course that the rest of a life follows. At one point in the story, Marguerite has realized, not for the first time and not for the last, that she does not have a testimony.

She knew what it meant. . . . It meant she couldn’t serve a mission, couldn’t go to the temple, couldn’t bear her testimony in sacrament meeting. These things required a certainty she didn’t have. . . . And she would have to be alone, eternally alone. No faithful man would want to be with an outcast, and no unbeliever would have the patience to wait for her while she waited for God. (203)

Had Marguerite’s faith reached a crisis several years later, after she had served a mission, been endowed, and perhaps mar-

ried in the temple, she would be much more likely to find a way to remain connected to the community, though with her faith in a very different form than it once took. Indeed, the novel illustrates clearly that an unmarried college-age woman, not holding the priesthood and not having served a mission, is more or less structurally uninvested in the Church, tied only by affective bonds of family or faith—though these can certainly be very strong. If those affective bonds weaken, however, as they do for Marguerite, there is little to keep young adult women invested. If temple marriage represents the first major buy-in to full adult Church membership for young adult women, as it has for most LDS women in the past, and if the age of marriage continues to drift upward, young Mormon women will remain effectively uninvested in the institutional church during long periods of crucial identity-formation. Perhaps this will change with the younger missionary age for women. After the load-bearing walls of a life are erected, the structure is much less likely to shift. But if the crisis occurs before those formative experiences and primary relationships are in place, in high school or in college, it's much more likely that the young adult will simply drift away.

This observation calls into question the recommendation—which I have made myself—that we “inoculate” our teenagers and young adults against doubt by deliberately exposing them to challenging elements of our history and teaching. If the primary goal is pragmatic, to retain our young people in the fold—rather than, say, to promote openness and transparency for its own sake—then perhaps the vulnerable years of young adulthood are not the ideal time to disrupt their faith, even if we feel it is ultimately for their own spiritual benefit. At the very least, the novel shows that shocks to a naïve faith, while necessary for the formation of a mature spirituality, must be adequately supported by family and ecclesiastical networks. Marguerite's family and bishop are entirely uninvolved in the catastrophes that beset her spiritual life; she finds some support in a sympathetic philosophy professor, but for the most part she muddles through alone with her diary and her philosophy volumes. While the dialectical inflection of Marguerite's exit is unusual, her anguished progress out of the Church is all too common.

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Bradford connects her final category, the aye-saying essay, with the long rhetorical tradition of testimony within Mormonism, a deeply personal, generally brief affirmation of shared beliefs. Thomas Riskas's massive academic tome, *Deconstructing Mormonism: An Analysis and Assessment of the Mormon Faith*, thus seems an odd entry in the aye-saying category: it's an exhaustingly abstract, abstrusely exhaustive, and relentlessly negative treatment of virtually every tenet of Mormon teaching. Indeed, it's 450 pages of pure anti-testimony. Like the starlet sang about rehab, Riskas says no, no, no.

The argument is a "deconstruction" only in the loosest sense of the word: it shares with the literary critical method of that name only a deliberately crabbed, arduous style. It could only have been a labor of love or obsession to write, and it's difficult to imagine what could induce anybody to read it. Riskas cobbles his analytical method together with assorted ideas from psychology, philosophy, empiricism, and continental critical theory, without apparent regard to the ways in which these vocabularies contradict one another. He relies, for example, on a notion of "common sense" that works within an empirical framework but that is reduced to hash when he adopts the language of high critical theory.

Riskas presents his meta-claim thus:

The central analytical argument of this book, viz., that beyond its limited boundaries as a life-form, the Mormon faith (like all other theistic faiths)—because it is an entirely language-dependent belief system intended to be regarded as literally and objectively true—is conceptually problematic and therefore deeply problematic, if not utterly false and incoherent at its metaphysical core. (39)

His argument for this claim largely boils down to two observations: first, that by assuming the existence of God as a given, typical formulations of LDS truth claims rely on a kind of question begging; and that propositional claims must be both conceptually justifiable and empirically justified in order to claim legitimacy. Unsurprisingly, he finds that LDS teachings fail on both counts. These criticisms are hardly novel for Latter-day Saints who have given any sustained attention to the foundations of

their personal faith. That faith is both unjustified and in an important sense unjustifiable—and that its existential power lies precisely in this defenselessness—has been a familiar idea since Kierkegaard.

Riskas is as unironical as he is dogged, and he would rightly point out that the irony I am about to extract from his book is entirely beside the point. Nevertheless, what I enjoyed about his project, and the reason I've chosen to link it to Bradford's testimony category, is the extent to which he unconsciously replicates the distinctive tics of Mormon faith talk. His style is excruciatingly repetitive, "in the service of necessary redundancy," he says, and in the precise manner of the Book of Mormon's numbing repetition (373). He rails against unfalsifiable faith claims, yet his own arguments are themselves impervious to counter evidence as he spins alternative scenarios to explain away virtually any response—even if, as he suggests, the true effects of his claims on devout believers will "very likely take place beneath the surface of awareness." (39) He brings an apocalyptic urgency to his claims, seeing in Mormonism a threat to "scientific progress and personal and social well-being, if not our very existence as a human race." (381) He is fixated on a naïve notion of choice.

Above all, he imports a distinctively Mormon certainty into his language, along the lines of an LDS testimony's litany of "I know" statements. The prose is littered with "surely," "clearly" and other adverbial signals of certitude. He issues an "invitation and challenge" to his devout readers to undertake what he calls the "Outsider Test of Faith": a serious investigation of Mormon truth claims with a presumption of skepticism, an evaluation of faith as from the outside through the lens of incredulity. This is, delightfully, almost a perfect negative of Moroni's invitation at the end of the Book of Mormon, charging the reader to examine these things with a presumption of truth. Both tests are, of course, hopelessly rigged from the beginning, and fundamentally unsound as empirical means of finding truth. But they are fantastically effective at magnifying and confirming emotional affiliations. In the devout Mormon's view, Moroni's invitation cannot fail to yield an affirmative result to the sincere seeker. In Riskas's view, the Outsider Test cannot fail to yield a negative result. If it

should fail, however, one may rest assured that it is very likely working beneath the surface of awareness.

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On its own, none of these three books is likely to claim history's notice in the long view of Mormon letters; one is too warmed over, one too outlandish and shaky in its style, and one is simply a miscarriage of argument. Taken together, though, these three books make something more than a sum of parts. These new books bring tidings from the first person in a twenty-first century landscape of doubt and belief. When Bradford wrote her essay in 1978, the "I" already stood athwart a long and winding rhetorical history. With a taproot in Christian confessional practices, developed and refined in Augustine's *Confessions*, implicated in Reformation-era social disruptions around private conscience, harnessed as an engine of enlightenment liberalism, and appropriated by the emerging forms of the novel and capital-A Art, the first person arrived in the modern world with a chip on his shoulder, itching for a fight with authority, institution, and tradition. The rhetorical "I" carries with it a whole host of contested assumptions about the sovereignty of the individual in the private sphere, the legitimacy of first-person experience vis-à-vis empirical knowledge and traditional wisdom, and the aesthetic privilege of the individual artistic sensibility.

Two decades after Bradford wrote her 1978 essay, the world saw an explosive invasion of the first-person perspective into public discourse in the form of blogging and personal electronic publishing of all stripes. Where the public first-person was once largely confined to opinion pages and literature, the "I" has busted out in a big way: millions of words of personal narrative, personal opinion, and personal history are available literally at one's fingertips at any given moment. Many days, my own media diet consists largely of first-person writing.

The LDS Church has been prompt in the twenty-first century to embrace this cultural shift toward the individual voice, most recently in its "I'm a Mormon" advertising campaign, which features individual Mormons offering their personal identities and perspectives as rhetorical down payment on the farm: "And I'm a

Mormon.” A related website allows individual members to upload profiles and share their personal answers to spiritual questions. This can be seen as a natural development from native LDS beliefs about the eternal nature of the personality, an ethos of individualism fired in early Mormon traumas, and our textual traditions of first-person journals and testimonies.

What effect has this triumph of the first-person had on Mormon letters? Does the ubiquity of self-expression on the internet legitimize or cheapen the “I”? Personal expression may be more widely accepted as cultural currency—we now find it entirely normal to address knotty philosophical and moral questions in public debate by way of personal expression rather than formal argument, for example—but is it simultaneously less valued? After all, personal views on faith, doubt and anything in between are a dime a dozen, with poor grammar and misspellings thrown in for free.

Our eccentric trio of texts may bring tidings from both the rear and the vanguard of this first-person offensive. *Why I Stay* represents a baseline measure for the cultural work of the “I” in mid-century Mormonism, reflecting as it does a mature generation of Latter-day Saints. During what may have been the apogee of the first-person’s cultural prestige, mid-century personal discourse possessed both the authenticity to express affirmative faith and the authority to express unorthodox doubt, the confidence to challenge official discourse. By contrast, Riskas’s *Deconstructing Mormonism*, in its blundering and bludgeoning way, registers the assaults on the confidence and authority of the first-person brought in the intervening years by neuroscience, psychology, and critical theory: Riskas’s tome echoes, often incoherently, the challenges to notions of free will, human rationality, and altruism that science and philosophy have leveled against the foundations of liberal individualism over the past two decades.

Doucet’s *A Lost Argument* offers the most interesting brief on the present state of the Mormon first-person as the work of a young novelist coming into her professional life in the internet age. The novel approaches the problem of the “I” obliquely, through shifts in its narrative discourse at key moments in the psychological action. The most abrupt of these shifts occurs in chap-

ter 22, in which the protagonist Marguerite, in the midst of spiritual crisis, climbs a mountain and petitions God for a revelation. No theophany ensues. The disillusionment that follows is itself predictable; these days, blogs have made de-conversion narratives as familiar a species as conversion stories. What is interesting in this passage, though, is the sudden switch away from the intimate diary form of the surrounding chapters—an informal personal voice that would be very much at home, in both tone and content, in *Why I Stay*—to a flat, limited-omniscient third-person discourse. The protagonist's spiritual climax is not rendered in her own voice; indeed one begins to realize that in the world of this novel, spiritual seeking cannot be rendered in the first-person. For Doucet, it turns out, the first-person can only voice doubt, never faith.

Why this is so is the critic's privilege to surmise. My favored explanation is that the ubiquity of personal discourse online has undermined the prestige and authenticity of the first-person, especially when the theme is conventional or affirmative, leaving it suitable only for the blogging hoi polloi and entirely too cheap for the literary novelist. To retain the critical authority of the first person, the artist must flee to ever more challenging territory—doubt, transgression, rupture. The aesthetic results for literary fiction are often dismaying, ghettoized and irrelevant. This, of course, is a well-worn cultural path, long pre-dating the blogging revolution, pre-dating even the 1960s marriage of counterculture with mainstream, marketed cool. In this sense, the crisis of the first person shapes not only Doucet's novel but also the personal voices in *Why I Stay* and Riskas's undergirding authorial presence: for all their differences, these writers came of age in or around the 1960s, their adult personas shaped by that decade's valorizing of the transgressor and the outsider; the notion of the brave, lonely voice for truth continues to operate at some level in their writing. Indeed, Riskas's outsider status is virtually his only claim on our interest.

The primary generational difference traced by our motley trilogy, then, is not merely an obsession with virtuous doubt; this has been a leitmotif of literary culture, including Mormon literary culture, for several generations now. The difference may be, if

our sample is representative, in the diminished authority of the first person for elite writers. An analogous trajectory in American literature might be drawn between, say, J. D. Salinger and David Foster Wallace: each an iconic elite artist of his time, the first leveraging the prestige of the outsider first-person, both in his most famous novel and in his reclusive persona, and the latter ruthlessly destabilizing every formal and philosophical assumption beneath the authorial “I.”

Does Doucet in fact represent a larger flight in Mormon letters away from the affirmative first person, a reaction to the ubiquity of the first person in mainstream culture? On this question it is the critic’s privilege to demur. If she does indeed represent the vanguard of such a flight, I cannot resist a bit of advice for our Mormon literary artists: if the “I, eye, and aye” of Bradford’s confident, critical, and ultimately affirmative first-person singular is to be abandoned or attenuated, find a new narrative vehicle from within the rich cultural resources of our own history and tradition. A fine example of this kind of culturally-specific narrative experimentation is Steven Peck’s 2011 novel *The Scholar of Moab*. (Coincidentally, Peck’s second novel, *A Short Stay in Hell*, was published by Doucet’s imprint, Strange Violin, in 2012.) Peck’s *Scholar* draws on Mormon diary culture, southern Utah regionalism, and our conflicted traditions of individualism and collectivism to create a wonderfully strange, deeply philosophical narrative that interrogates the nature of the first person. My own vote for a fresh narrative vehicle in Mormon letters is the first-person plural, the “we” at the center of our prayer language, our communitarian legacy, our most beloved hymns. The first-person plural would provide the artist with a medium for formal experimentation while retaining a connection to native Mormon culture. There’s more to be discovered about faith and doubt than that lonely first-person singular can accomplish on its own.

The Cultural Contexts of Mormonism

Kim Östman, *The Introduction of Mormonism to Finnish Society*,