

should walk. He wisely told them that education is the ladder to success and happiness. "Go my son, and climb that ladder. . . ."

Go, my son, go and climb the ladder.
Go, my son, go and earn your feather.
Go, my son, make your people proud of you.
Work, my son, get an education.
Work, my son, learn a good vocation and
Climb, my son. Go and take a lofty view.
From on the ladder of an education,
You can see to help your Indian Nation,
And reach, my son, and lift your people up with you.
Go, my son, go and climb the ladder.
Go, my son, go and earn your feather.
Go, my son, make your people proud of you.
Work, my son, get an education.
Work, my son, learn a good vocation and
Climb, my son. Go and take a lofty view.
From on the ladder of an education,
You can see to help your Indian Nation,
And reach, my son. Lift your people up with you.

3. Hozho Nahasdlii', *Language of the Holy People*, 2006, accessed May 26, 2013, <http://www.gomyson.com/gmssong.html>.

4. *Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life* uses the word "Indian" predominantly to indicate all Native Americans. The authors' choice of using "Indian" reflects the trend here in the Four Corners region, including among Navajos, and, increasingly, in scholarly venues. For instance, my Navajo supervisors say "Indian," "Native," or refer to a specific nation when referring to the students or to their own families.

5. Amy Irvine, *Trespass: Living at the Edge of the Promised Land* (New York: North Point Press, 2008).

Eternal Families: Persecution Days or Rapture?

Jenn Ashworth. *The Friday Gospels*. London: Sceptre, 2013. 336 pp. Paper: £8.99. ISBN: 978-1444707748.

Reviewed by Julie J. Nichols

In his introduction to the 1996 Signature publication *Tending the Garden*, Gene England refers to “President Kimball’s 1977 call for a literature that includes the full range of Mormon experience: ‘struggles and frustrations; apostasies and inner revolutions and counter-revolutions . . . counter-reactions . . . persecution days . . . rapture.’”¹ I love that list—persecution days and rapture, yes!

But who can make a complete list? Let us hypothesize that the “full range of Mormon experience” includes the full range of *anyone’s* experience, with the addition of two crucial overlays. The first: at least an awareness, at most a strong certainty regarding the truth, of doctrines that declare humans, in all their frailty, to have a certain spectacularly implicative relationship to God. Here’s where readers might argue. The doctrine that we’re literally gods in embryo, evolving toward material and/or purposeful oneness with beings of an order different from us and yet the same, may not be the distinctive feature of Mormonism. But the metaphysical and material intersection of godliness in human endeavor certainly seems central to our scriptures and our aspirations, perhaps not completely unique to Mormonism but certainly not universal in religious or secular thought.

The second, related, overlay that we might hypothesize as essential to any notion of “the full range of Mormon experience” consists of at least an awareness, at most a conviction regarding the necessity of, Church members’ efforts to create a milieu where the evolutionary/generational relationship between humans and gods can be enacted. In other words, Mormon literature that answers Kimball’s call rejects no part of human experience, but includes (unlike “non-Mormon literature”) the poignant, complex, occasionally incongruous peculiarities of Mormon institutional culture as it seeks to embody a stunning Mormon doctrine within any larger culture.

If we can agree that literature encompassing the “full range of Mormon experience” can be widely varied and diverse, as long as it acknowledges a spiritual-relational purpose for humanity, and the need for active community attempts to put that purpose into practice, perhaps we can explore the idea that Mormon lit becomes problematic in the attitude it presents regarding that spiritual purpose and those community attempts at practice. Over-

whelming adherence to a particular purpose and a particular set of practices, as if they were unalterably right or true, renders the story as ineffective as overwhelming rejection of them, as if they could be neither. Too much adherence, too much rejection trivializes the tension that arises in the effort to discover how the practices can support the purpose. Jenn Ashworth's *The Friday Gospels* presents an intriguing ratio, a delicate balance. As Mormon lit, this novel deserves our attention.

Five voices speak in alternate sections in this problematically Mormon novel, published in the U.K. in January of this year to positive reviews. All five first-person narrators are members of the Mormon working-class Leeke family of northwestern England. In order of appearance, they are daughter Jeannie, a young woman in early-morning seminary, but neither innocent nor clear, any more, about what's good and right; father Martin, wretched husband to an incontinent fanatic, trapped in a life he's ready to abandon, if he only knew how; twentysomething oldest son Julian, trapped, like his father only differently, by forces over which he's desperate to have more control; disabled mum Pauline; and missionary son Gary, returning home in honor tonight, the Friday of the title, to a set of circumstances he could only imagine in his worst nightmares.

The five voices are brilliantly distinct. As each member of the family speaks and then steps back to let another forward, the mitigating circumstances are revealed slowly, bit by bit. From the beginning, Jeannie is confused and afraid. A very bad thing has happened, but she's heard enough lessons on chastity and putting on the armor of God that she's convinced she could have, should have, handled it differently. Her shame is overwhelming. Something's gotta give. Gary's coming home from America today, if his plane can make it through the ash of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull (we can pinpoint the very date of this Friday: April 16, 2010), and she's hanging on just until he gets home. Surely he can make it right.

Martin loves his dog Bovril more than he loves his disabled wife. (His ruminations on dogs reflect most amusingly his beliefs about women, both positive and negative.) Bovril has led him to Nina, another dog lover, and he dreams of moving in with her,

making a new life, leaving the wretchedness of his family behind. But he makes a mess of it.

Julian is as obsessed with the wrong female as his father is, equally obsessed with getting away. It's just a matter of figuring out how. From the moment we comprehend his plan, we're squirring. We know it can't go well.

Pauline's sections have no paragraphing. That's one way we know it's Pauline. Actually, who's speaking is never in question. Each section is clearly titled by the name of the narrator, for one thing, and for another, among the many technically admirable aspects of this novel is that each character's speech patterns and personalities are clearly discernible from the others by subject matter as well as by vocabulary and syntax. As for Pauline, her most defining trait is the Mormon-cliché-ridden, hackneyed worldview she clings to in order to keep herself from despair. Damaged when she gave birth to Jeannie, she's become despicable even to herself, except that Heavenly Father loves everyone, and the ladies in the ward are supposed to be charitable, and Gary's been a good missionary, and those are things to hang on to with the grip of death. Aren't they?

Chapter by chapter, scene by scene, Ashworth develops a creepy tension born of each character's effort to live with Mormonism. This is her third novel; her first, *A Kind of Intimacy* (2010), received a Betty Trask Award for "beautiful, provocative prose and [a] dangerous, quirky protagonist"² and won for Ashworth the honor of being named one of the BBC Culture Show's Best 12 New Novelists of 2011. Reviews of her second novel, *Cold Light* (2012), call it "a hauntingly beautiful and shocking psychological thriller," "bleak . . . gritty . . . in the best possible way an uncomfortable read," comparing Ashworth to Kate Atkinson and Tana French.³ Ashworth is the product of "a small, working class family in the North of England" whose "mother was a convert to mormonism in the 1970s" but who left the Church several years ago.⁴ She told me in private correspondence that she always knew she would write something with a Mormon setting, but she was glad she could

establish my reputation with other topics first. . . . I needed to mature as a human and as a writer in order to be able to inhabit per-

spectives that aren't my own without parody or cruel stereotype. The idea came right away—I wanted to find a way to talk about eternal family, about being sealed, and to demonstrate that through the form of the book—that these individual voices together make up a complete story.⁵

So this novel is, among other things, an exploration of what it means to be “sealed” as a family. A review by Stevie Davies of the *Guardian* says that each of the characters is “hampered in some way by the bizarre ideology that twists the Leeke family out of true: wheelchair-using mum Pauline is only the most obviously disabled . . . Mormonism, with the ‘aprons and the mirrors, the veils and hats and handshakes and chanting,’ is a comic writer’s dream.”⁶ I squirm at Davies’s assessment of Mormonism. I don’t want the temple accoutrements to be laughed at. I don’t want their comic potential to be what Martin, the father, is remembered for. His problem is wider than his utter lack of comprehension of the temple ceremony he’s only attended once, on the day of his marriage and never since. Personality, money struggles, working-class family dynamics, and British or Western social (dis)graces are part of the equation here.

None of the family members is misled by false doctrine or led into sin by Mormonness. None of them fights against contradictions gnawing at their intellectual testimonies; none of them wrestles with politically-charged Mormon issues like same-sex orientation or polygamy. (In fact, Ashworth told me she couldn’t see this particular set of characters in that kind of wrestling match at all.) Instead, each of them separately struggles with great gaps between what they are and their perception of what they ought to be, according to the Church (in the case of Jeannie or Pauline) or according to Pauline (in the case of Martin) or according to their own hopes and dreams (in the case of both sons, I think it’s safe to say).

Jeannie remembers (to me, horrible) lessons on chastity and “putting on the armor of God,” so that how she determines to respond to her situation has roots in the Mormon culture she can’t avoid. Gary’s stutter has been an affliction all his life, but it doesn’t go away during his mission, and doesn’t help him baptize anyone, and though he doesn’t doubt the gospel, he doubts *something* deeply—and yet he knows what must be done in the end. Pauline’s

affliction is the result of bad decisions by incompetent doctors during Jeannie's birth; her obsessive personality grasps at Mormon doctrine and institutionalized Mormon kindness to find uneasy meaning and comfort in her life despite her incontinence. It's the non-Mormon Nina who shows her a real, practical solution, which Pauline embraces fully, deciding it's a gift from God. Ashworth has said,

what surprises me is how much I wanted to write a happy ending for these people, and have each of the characters undergo a 180 degree change, or reversal—or conversion, perhaps. My original conception of the book had quite a dark ending, but after living with these people for so long (the novel took about two and a half years, from initial idea to final draft—though the first draft was written in four very intense months) I knew I needed to find a little light for them, and that light needed to be because of their Mormonism, not in spite of it.⁷

Yet though the nurse's advice for Pauline is, perhaps, redemptive, and the missionary son's stutter is gone at the end of the novel and he is a strength for the rest of his family, in other ways the resolution is in the tradition of Ashworth's other novels: dangerous, shocking. Despite the family's unity, this is not what I'd call a happy ending. Without spoiling it, I can only say that given the story as Ashworth writes it, the ending seems inevitable. Jeannie has to do what she does, and because she does it, her brothers must act as they do; and because Pauline's problem looks to be alleviated, she can bear it, though it is awful. A different ending that doesn't cloy is hard to imagine. But there's as much darkness as there is light there, as much hell as eternal life.

In an email interview this April, Ashworth wrote:

I wrestled over the definition of "Mormon fiction" and what it could/should do. In the end I decided that a very open, exploratory, character-first narrative stance, and one that didn't work too hard to reconcile different kinds of truths or different accounts, would be a very Mormon-flavoured book to write. . . . I draw a distinction, I think, between what it means to be LDS and what it means to be a Mormon. I have no links to or affiliation with the institution—but the culture is still very much part of me, and that's the part I'm interested in. Faith wise—I see what a powerful positive influence it is on people's lives. I see how faith and doubt are essential to the writing process . . . I always wanted to be a writer, and for me, being a writer

means it just isn't possible to be certain about anything. I find the way some kinds of Mormonism require certainty totally impossible.⁸

The key phrase here may be “some kinds of Mormonism.” Is there one kind of Catholicism, evident uniformly in Chesterton, Joyce, O'Connor, Heaney, and the host of other Catholic writers whose works make up Catholic literature? One kind of Judaism as clarified by Bellow, Roth, Potok, Paley? Of course not. The Leekes are kinds of Mormons, their story—individual and family—bound up with their Mormonism. Mormon lit need not be bizarre or comic, but it *can* be. Persecution days abound for each of us; rapture comes occasionally to us all. Ashworth may never write another “Mormon” novel (she tells me her next one is about faith and healing, though not about faith healing), but *The Friday Gospels* wrestles with doctrines and institutional flaws unique to Mormons, and her notion of a family sealed on earth by trials and by story may be one right way to consider the meaning of that doctrine. Families may be forever, but if each of us is flawed, how we are to support each other becomes a key question in the full range of Mormon experience. *The Friday Gospels* suggests one answer in the full range of Mormon literature. You should read it.

Notes

1. Eugene England, “Introduction,” in *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature*, edited by Eugene England and Lavina F. Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996).

2. Publishers Weekly starred review at http://www.amazon.com/Kind-Intimacy-Jenn-Ashworth/dp/1933372869/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1386790746&sr=1-1&keywords=A+Kind+of+Intimacy.

3. From the descriptive blurb at http://www.amazon.com/Cold-Light-Jenn-Ashworth-ebook/dp/B005PMWKV0/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1386798651&sr=1-3&keywords=Jenn+Ashworth.

4. Personal correspondence with Jenn Ashworth, May 2013.

5. Personal correspondence with Jenn Ashworth, May 2013.

6. Steve Davies, “The Friday Gospels by Jenn Ashworth—Review: A Moving but Comical Tale of Life in a Mormon Family,” *The Guardian*, January 18, 2013, accessed May 24, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2013/jan/18/friday-gospels-jenn-ashworth-review>.

7. Personal correspondence with Jenn Ashworth, May 2013.

8. Personal correspondence with Jenn Ashworth, April 2013.