I highly recommend this book for its portrayal of the women's varied and mostly negative reactions to living in polygamy even when they believed in the principle.

Mormons Are a Different Country

Mette Ivie Harrison. *The Bishop's Wife*. New York: Soho Crime, 2014. 352 pp. Hardcover: $18.99. ISBN: 9781616954765.

Reviewed by Scott Abbott

Mette Ivie Harrison's new novel is a work of genre fiction. Like other mysteries, *The Bishop's Wife* revolves around a crime the main character eventually solves. In this case, a young woman disappears, leaving her husband both bereft and suspect. The husband first turns to Bishop Kurt Wallheim for help, but it is the bishop's wife, Linda Wallheim, who becomes involved in the case. Like other mysteries, including Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander mysteries, whose characters lend Harrison's their approximate names, there will be subsequent volumes, for this is "A Linda Wallheim Novel."

Harrison's book has drawn attention well beyond the tepid critical interest that usually accompanies publication of genre fiction; the novel has been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *LA Times*, NPR's *Weekend Edition*, and so on. The reason for the attention, I think, is that this book invites a reader into the mundane and intimate details of contemporary Mormonism. It does so through the intriguing but decidedly unglamorous person of its narrator, Linda Wallheim.

The bishop's wife is a Latter-day Saint. She bakes bread and cinnamon rolls and delivers them to troubled ward members. She eases their spiritual pain with practical wisdom. She is the devoted and skillful stay-at-home mother of five boys. She is well-read and theologically astute and good at keeping that knowledge to herself in Relief Society and Sunday School. She lends a hand at the marriages and funerals of her Mormon brothers and sisters. She is a good wife.

The bishop's wife is a heretic. She blithely prepares breakfast on fast Sunday. She was a philosophy major in college. She uses Catholic words like "peccadillo." She can swear. She doubts the efficacy of fasting and prayer. In the heat of the moment, she distrusts God because he is a man. She thinks the structural hierarchy of the LDS Church enables the crimes she attempts to uncover in her Draper, Utah ward.

The bishop's wife is also a fairly normal human being. She is a little rounder than she might be (the cinnamon rolls!). She can be didactic. She suffers emotionally after the birth of a stillborn daughter. She is a bit of a busybody. She hasn't traveled much and thinks a cruise would widen her horizons. She can be obsessive-compulsive (peeling and chopping ten pounds of onions and fifty pounds of potatoes in a fit of anger). She sometimes states the obvious as if no one else has ever had those thoughts. She jumps to conclusions. To her credit, she is aware that she is human—all too human.

These triple set of attributes makes Linda Wallheim a very interesting character and a unique narrator. This Mormon woman is thoughtful, self-critical, observant, quick to explain, ready to opine, and wonderfully garrulous. She stands looking at the cultural hall in the church, for instance, and admits:

> I . . . thought how strange it was that we could repurpose the same room for so many different things. This cultural hall would see everything in the course of its life. Funeral luncheons, weddings, basketball games, monthly Relief Society meetings, a Road Show or Stake Pageant, music practices, Sunday School, Young Men's and Young Women's activities, Boy Scout meetings, and the overflow from sacrament meetings and stake conferences. In many ways, this hall was the most Mormon place of them all. Didn't that make it holy in its own way? Maybe more holy than the quiet, white temple that was not part of our weekly worship? This hall was where God came, if you believed in God. And I did. After all this time and all my doubts, I did. (20)

When she gets involved with the disappearance of a young wife and mother from the ward, Linda Wallheim must contend

with the bishop's counsel, and her internal response to this (and to other situations) sets this novel apart from others in the genre:

> "You've gotten too caught up in this," Kurt went on. "You're not thinking clearly about it." Of course he was thinking clearly. He always thought clearly. And that was supposed to be the right thing to do. Not feel emotion. Not thrash around in anger. Be rational. Be a man. Well, I wasn't a man. . . . How could he say this to me? He was playing the authority card. He was the bishop. He had the experience. He had the mantle of being God's voice in my ears. Well, I didn't care what God had to say about this. God was a man, too, and as far as I was concerned, until I heard Heavenly Mother tell me how to deal with a little girl in shock and fear, I wasn't going to listen. (212)

Internal dialogue of this sort is a staple of the novel. To give a second example, when Linda Wallheim finds herself discussing marriage with ward members whose matrimonial situations are widely varied and even dangerous, she confesses that

> I am a happily married woman myself, but I acknowledge marriage can be a dangerous covenant. When both people are honest and good, it is still difficult to live together so intimately, day in and day out. But no one is perfectly good or honest. And so marriage becomes a dance over hot coals and metal spikes. . . . I know from personal experience that marriage can be a holy institution, blessed by God. I have felt moments of perfect bliss and contentment with my husband. I have been expanded in many ways by being yoked to someone who is so different, and I am glad for those chances. But there are twice as many occasions when I shake my head and wonder if we would be happier if we could only live together as friends. Or be business partners. Or share parental responsibilities. Does it always have to be marriage—everything shared and stirred together? (53–54)

The charm of the bishop's wife, at least for me, is that she is a skeptical believer and a faithful skeptic. She is a real person, complex and opinionated and troubled and fallible and curious

and gentle and judgmental and generous. She is the antithesis of the Mormons I described in a *Sunstone* essay in 1992:

> The word "Mormon" can and does evoke bigotry, exclusion, narrowness, and sectarianism. In John Gardner's 1982 novel *Mickelsson's Ghosts*, for example, Mormons are described as a "sea of drab faces, dutiful, bent-backed, hurrying obediently, meekly across an endless murky plain . . . timidly smiling beasts, imaginationless . . . family people, unusually successful in business and agriculture, non-drinkers, non-smokers . . . no real fault but dullness." Or in Tony Kushner's 1992 play, *Angels in America*, a Mormon woman describes Salt Lake City as a hard place, "baked dry. Abundant energy; not much intelligence. That's a combination that can wear a body out."[1]

Gardner and Kushner obviously hadn't met Linda Wallheim.

A comparison with another recent mystery featuring a Mormon narrator may help draw a distinction between a book primarily interested in the ideas and workings of a faith and a book that is set among the people of a faith. Andrew Hunt's lively *City of Saints* is narrated by young Deputy Art Oveson, an observant Mormon working in a corrupt Salt Lake police department. Historical details abound in a plot patterned after a real 1930 homicide. Oveson's character is interesting and his family life very Mormon, but the novel is focused on solving the case. Mormonism and Salt Lake City provide interesting contexts for the mystery in the way Scandinavia is so interesting in crime novels by Jo Nesbø and Stieg Larsson. A note at the end of the book thanks historians John McCormick, Kirk Huffaker, John Sillito, Thomas Alexander, Dean May, and several others for helping to "recreate the Salt Lake City of 1930 and its inhabitants."[2]

To recreate the LDS ward in Draper, Harrison needed only her own lived experience. Her novel mentions the mountains. Linda Wallheim travels once to Provo. But the novel takes place largely in the interactions among ward members, among members of the Wallheim family, and in the narrator's active mind.

Mette Harrison, who is also the author of seven young-adult novels and a book about herself as a triathlete and mother, was

surprised, she writes in the acknowledgments section, that SoHo Crime, which mostly specializes in international crime stories, would want to publish a book set in small-town Utah. Her editor explained, "It's like Mormons are a different country. They speak a different language, and you're the interpreter" (343). Through her marvelous narrator, Harrison is a revealing interpreter of a world she inhabits both gracefully and critically.

Notes

1. Scott Abbott, "One Lord, One Faith, Two Universities," in *Sunstone* 16, no. 3 (1992): 21–22.

2. Andrew Hunt, *City of Saints* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2012), 321.

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The Mormon Murder Mystery Grows Up

Mette Ivie Harrison. *The Bishop's Wife*. New York: SoHo Crime, 2014. 352 pp. $26.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9781616954765.

Tim Wirkus. *City of Brick and Shadow*. Madison, Wisc.: Tyrus Books, 2014. 304 pp. $24.99. Paperback. ISBN: 9781440582769.

Reviewed by Michael Austin

Mystery fiction and Mormonism grew up together. The first modern writer of mystery tales, Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), was an exact contemporary of Joseph Smith (1805–1844). The most famous literary detective in the English-speaking world, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, got his start in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887)—a novel set partly in Utah among the Latter-day Saints. And during the twentieth and early twenty-first century, Mormon mysteries became a recognizable sub-genre in series by Robert Irvine, Gary Stewart, and Sarah Andrews, and in bestselling single installments by (among many others) Tony Hillerman, Stephen White, Karen Kijewski, and Scott Turow.[1]