Mormon Tradition and the Individual Talent

Mary Lythgoe Bradford. *Mr. Mustard Plaster and Other Mormon Essays.* Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2015. 185 pp. Paper: $20.95. ISBN: 978-1-58958-742-7.

Reviewed by Joey Franklin

In his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot writes that tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour."[1] This has always underscored for me the importance of knowing your literary tradition, of reading widely and deeply, and of exposing yourself to a variety of great voices. In many ways the work I did in graduate school was a clunky attempt to cultivate what Eliot calls "the historical sense," an awareness of tradition that "compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones" but with "the whole of the literature of Europe" and "the whole of the literature of his own country" in his mind as well.[2] Tradition, to Eliot, was the deep well of Western literature. Studying the personal essay in school, tradition for me meant the work of the genre's luminaries—Montaigne and Bacon, Hazlitt and Lamb, Woolf and Didion, Baldwin and White.

Tradition was not, decidedly, the cloistered Mormon culture of my youth. In fact, since my time as an English major at BYU, I've deliberately worked to be a writer who happens to be Mormon, and not, heaven forbid, a "Mormon Writer." To focus one's work on the cultural curiosities and provincial preoccupations of Mormondom seemed tantamount to insulating oneself from the "real" artistic world. Writing about Mormonism would turn people off, shut out readers, and invite prejudice, misunderstanding, and maybe even downright scorn. Common

1. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Egoist* 6, no. 4 (1919): 55. The essay in its original publication can be accessed at http://library.brown.edu/pdfs/130876199525004.pdf.

2. Ibid.

advice given to me early on, usually from other writers who happen to be Mormon, was to keep my Mormonness out of my writing; focus on learning the literary tradition and leave my cultural tradition out of it.

But this summer I've been reading a small collection of Mormon essays by Mary Lythgoe Bradford and it has me reconsidering my definition of tradition and my understanding of its role in literature, particularly in the personal essay. Most of *Mr. Mustard Plaster and Other Mormon Essays* was originally published as *Leaving Home* by Signature Books back in 1987, which won the Association for Mormon Letters Personal Essay Award. This new volume reprints those essays on various themes of Mormon interest—faith and doubt, family tradition and genealogy, marriage and parenting—and includes new essays on widowhood and on what Bradford calls being a "DNA Mormon": "The Church belongs to me and I to it" (163).The essays are steeped in Mormon culture, simultaneously critiquing and celebrating Mormon tradition while completely sidestepping any anxiety about how that culture might be received by a non-LDS audience. Granted, much of the book is culled from the pages of decidedly Mormon-centric publications (*Sunstone, Dialogue, Exponent II*), but as I read Bradford, I get the sense her confidence comes less from the security of a sympathetic audience and more from the way she has embraced Mormonism as her own. She writes with Eliot's "historical sense" of the Mormon tradition, and the result is a profoundly authentic portrait of a Mormon life.

The collection is divided into five sections and follows more or less the trajectory of Bradford's life from her pastoral childhood in Salt Lake City to her student years at the University of Utah and its LDS Institute. She offers a glimpse of her life as a wide-eyed newlywed in Washington, DC, and she examines the perceived tensions inherent in being both a bishop's wife and the editor of *Dialogue.* She invites us along on mission tours to the Philippines and Spain with her adult children, and she welcomes us into the small condo of her retired widowhood.

Throughout each essay, Bradford wears her Mormon faith, not as a badge of courage or a scarlet letter, but as a simple fact of who she is. And yet, it's hardly an unremarkable fact. Her faith is the essential ingredient to each essay, and her inside-out exploration of Mormon culture invites readers to consider her particular Mormonness apart from larger expectations of what Mormons are "supposed" to be. And at the same time, because she speaks as an insider, her observations come off as the constructive criticism of a concerned family member, not the bombastic attack of a detractor.

In "Yesterday the Ward House," Bradford describes how the church building served as a hub of social and spiritual life growing up and laments the homey feeling that has gone away from contemporary chapels. "We call it The Church, and we are warned to keep our kids from tearing the phone off the wall," she writes. "My children sit with folded arms learning 'reverence'" (5). And she uses those quotation marks with a subtlety that invites us to consider our own definitions of reverence. In "Marriage and Printmaking," she writes about her work as editor at *Dialogue* in the early 1980s while her husband served as a bishop, and she calls attention to strains of anti-intellectualism in Mormon culture: "In the mind of some, piety and publishing don't mix—especially independent, scholarly publishing in a church context. But our response was: They do too mix!" (36). And in "Seeding In," Bradford analyzes the cultural difficulty of speaking openly about sexuality: "I don't want my teenagers to think of sex as just a dangerous temptation, like drugs, instead of what it is, the motivating life force that enables us to be both different from each other and alike too" (41).

In one essay with a more academic flavor, Bradford offers a portrait of Virginia Sorensen, author of several novels and children's books and winner of the 1957 Newbery Medal. Bradford believes Sorensen has been neglected by Mormon culture because of a "misunderstanding many Mormons share about the purpose of fiction" (21); that is, too many Mormons have difficulty stomaching the realities of good and evil in

the world. "Fiction has always been about sinners and their struggles between good and evil," writes Bradford. "Fiction writers must stand aside from that which most engages their personal lives, looking to a deeper engagement with their art" (21).

Bradford has been a participant in and critic of Mormon culture as it has grown from a regional to a global phenomenon, and the fact that much of her observations and criticisms still hold true today (her Sorensen article on the Mormon aversion to "difficult" fiction, for instance, is nearly fifty years old) is perhaps the strongest argument for this collection's reprinting. Mormon culture needs Bradford-like writers now more than ever: those who can write about Mormon culture as naturally and openly as the best Catholic and Jewish and Buddhist authors write about their own religious traditions; writers who can be critical in constructive ways, who can speak up and speak out; writers who can champion Bradford's vision for Mormonism: "A Mormonism that recognizes the human condition, that accepts different ways of seeing, a Mormonism that recognizes that true religion is not so much unity of opinion as unity of action" (30).

It is this vision of Mormonism that makes Bradford's collection an essential read for young writers in the Mormon tradition who are figuring out what role their own faith will play in their work. *Mr. Mustard Plaster* is not written as a model for how every Mormon writer should engage their tradition. Instead, it reads as a reminder that authenticity depends a great deal on one's willingness to engage with all aspects of one's self, and that between the poles of sanctimony and cynicism, there is a hopeful place where art and faith can thrive, not in spite of, but because of each other.

As a personal essayist, a teacher, and a Mormon, I read Bradford's work and the label "Mormon Writer" begins to feel less problematic. After all, the most successful essayists will always write from the core of Eliot's literary tradition, but an essential part of that tradition is a candid analysis of the essayist's life. If Bradford's collection teaches us

anything, it is that the line between one's life and one's culture is thin, if it exists at all. And a writer's best hope for authenticity is to not only embrace one's literary tradition but one's cultural tradition as well.

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Quiet Stories, Complex Emotion

Darin Cozzens. *The Last Blessing of J. Guyman LeGrand and Other Stories.* Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2016. 202 pp. Paper: $14.95. ISBN: 978-0-9883233-9-1.

Reviewed by Braden Hepner

Darin Cozzens's second collection, *The Last Blessing of J. Guyman LeGrand and Other Stories,* contains Emus and Mormon spinsters, ill-fated wedding ceremonies and wheelchair races in the dementia ward, washtub nostalgia and the ambiguous values of patriarchal blessings. Beneath these elements of the quietly bizarre run themes of desire, fate, and, most prominently, forgiveness.

From the wind-swept lands of Wyoming and the Intermountain West, these stories feature lives of struggle and need. Cozzens plumbs the human experience for meaning and dredges it up in double handfuls. This is our world, an existence within which "it is a rare case that doesn't involve one human wronging another" (128), where chastity is a cakewalk compared to "loving your enemy" (133), where "excitement is half fear" (22), "love is a fearful thing" (22), and the ubiquity of injustice is poignant and heartbreaking. In the face of this travail, Cozzens's characters trudge on because, as one of them observes, the only "human antidote" is love (160).

In "The Washtub," a bidding war erupts at a farm liquidation sale over a washtub, with human intrigue driving the paddles rather than