

Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives: Ceaselessly into the Past

Karen Rosenbaum. *Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives*. Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2015. 204 pp. Paper: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-0-9883233-6-0.

Reviewed by Josh Allen

When reading Karen Rosenbaum's short story collection *Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives*, I kept thinking about the end of *The Great Gatsby* and Fitzgerald's haunting conclusion: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."³ So it is with the women who populate Rosenbaum's fourteen stories in this collection. The past defines them, breathes always within them. They live preoccupied with family legacies and personal histories, often ruminating, always remembering. Consider, for example, the structure of Rosenbaum's story "Requiem in L Minor." Charlotte, the main character, is recopying an old address book that's grown faded and illegible. She's reached the Ls—Angela and Mark Laird. Their names are offered to readers as a subheading, and under that heading, Charlotte dredges up memories of her time with the Lairds, reflecting on the past. The story continues in this way, on through the address book, with Nathan Loewe, Carole and Ken Lidwell, Jill Leonard, Morty Lawler, and Ginny Lin. In each of these sections, Charlotte moves through her past, reaffirming it. This single story's structure seems a fitting microcosm for the larger collection. The fourteen stories in this book are divided into four sections, each section focusing on the women within a single family and exploring their histories and the accumulated baggage of their lives. But it's not just their own lives' weight these women bear. They also bear the weight of family legacy—inherited faith, family responsibilities, or even stories themselves. And yet, for Rosenbaum's female protagonists,

3. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1925/2004), 180.

the past is never an oppressive force. Rosenbaum's women bear their pasts without complaint, accepting them as instrumental and often welcome parts of who they are. This emphasis on / preoccupation with the past does much for Rosenbaum's writing. It fuels her prose, lends her stories a gratifying subtlety, allows her to develop finely wrought characters, and ultimately imbues her work with the artistic weight that makes this collection such a pleasure.

There are no high-adrenaline moments in these stories, no swift crescendos into passion or drama, and so, neither are there passages where the sentences shorten and speed up to fuel the rising drama. The prose throughout this collection remains quiet, reflective—as it should for a book built upon memory. It's all a bit like this passage from “The Price of Ties”: “The daughter hums as the Honda laps up the Interstate. She likes to drive, likes the sensation of speed and smoothness and control. Her monthly weekend trips from Evanston began when her father was ill and continued after he died” (23). And so it goes—a simple present action (i.e., driving) propels a character into reflection. This formula pervades these stories and fuels prose that rolls along like that car on the interstate, set on quiet cruise control. The prose moves methodically, even elegantly, as it does in this passage from “Paradise Paved”: “She can almost see, standing at her right elbow, Miss Hunsaker, a pen in her right hand, a short, fat glass of something clear and tinkly in her left. When she would lean over Elaine to correct her hand position or draw arrows to the problem notes, Elaine could smell Miss Hunsaker's strong, juniperish breath” (105–06). Here, the prose remains soft and slow-moving—Elaine “almost” sees her past, as if she's witnessing the slow movement of ghosts—because the past is always treated with reverence, and each of the characters is moved by it to a genuine sense of awe.

Related to this quiet prose are the quiet and subtle transformations of Rosenbaum's characters. Impatient readers might crave more volatility—more dynamic characters and grander character arcs. But given Rosenbaum's emphasis on memory, her characters' subtle transformations

feel authentic. Consider the end of “Requiem in L Minor.” Returning again to her address book, Charlotte thinks: “I should write to Ramona. No confession, no conversion. A letter of love. Love, no matter what. Mostly” (152). Any changes that emerge here, from a character willing to dwell so worshipfully over her address book, feel more like affirmations than transformations. And yet, this story, like so many in the collection, ends with both an affirmation and a transformation. Charlotte makes the kind of change that can be triggered by revisiting long-carried memories—a subtle change—so subtle that it’s captured in a single word (i.e., “Mostly”). Other stories in this collection follow suit. In fact, a few of the character arcs in these stories are so understated that I had to re-read them to see them at work. But the story arcs are there. By moving through their pasts, these characters not only reaffirm their identities; they also slowly and methodically develop them.

Rosenbaum’s reverence for memory, then, becomes the defining attribute of her finely wrought characters, and since we stick with her characters for more than one story, we get to see them reflect on different aspects of their pasts, often from different points in their lives. Sometimes, a single character’s stories are even separated by decades, such as in “Havesu,” which follows Elaine on a river rafting trip, and then in “The River Rerun” (published in this issue), which follows Elaine on the same trip some thirty years later. This technique—letting us watch characters wrestle with memory at different points in their lives—draws readers closer to Rosenbaum’s characters. As more stories are offered, more memories are turned over, and readers gain new layers of character authenticity and complexity. I often found myself growing fonder of these characters the more I read. This technique also allows Rosenbaum to develop one of her major themes: that bearing the weight of memory is a shared feminine experience that spans generations, and that by bearing the past, women (particularly western, Mormon women) become bound in a universal feminine soul. In this way, even everyday objects like old snapshots and long-since worn baby dresses take on enormous weight.

One of the most common burdens of the past that Rosenbaum revisits is that of faith. Some of her characters take up their inherited

Mormon faith gladly; others shed it. But to Rosenbaum's credit, her characters are not hobby horses for some agenda. This book is not activism masquerading as fiction. Her characters are too carefully developed for that. For example, in "The Price of Ties," one character says, "Believing isn't the easiest thing in the world" (31), and we believe her. These characters' faith or lack thereof comes across as simply one of their human qualities, one piece of their pasts they're destined to wrestle with, never a statement by their author.

Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives is a fine collection. It is carefully crafted, and its thorough examination of how our histories shape and refine us lends this book its artistic and thematic weight. That weight, like these characters' pasts, is well worth bearing. These stories were composed over four decades and appeared originally in various publications including *Sunstone*, *Irreantum*, and *Dialogue*. Fittingly, *Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives* received an award from the Association for Mormon Letters in 2015.



[The New Descartes and the Book of Mormon](#)

Earl M. Wunderli. *An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us about Itself*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013. 396 pp. Paper: \$32.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-230-8.

Reviewed by Mark D. Thomas

The seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes is known as the father of modern philosophy and a leading figure in the rationalist movement. Descartes was weary of past authority and of knowledge gained through the senses. His most famous philosophical statement is "Cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am). If I doubt that I exist, that