

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

doubting is thinking. It is therefore self-evident that I exist as a thinking being. This is the epistemological foundation upon which all of his other knowledge claims are built.

Earl Wunderli has an analogous way of reading disputed texts. He attempts to start with the most certain epistemological principle that he can—the text itself. The starting point to understand the Book of Mormon, Wunderli claims, is not found in history, archaeology, or even revelation. History, linguistics, and archaeology regarding the Book of Mormon place the meaning of the text in the hands of a narrow group of specialists whose arguments are difficult to assess. Revelation is, according to Wunderli, certainly a real empirical experience but cannot be the ground of textual knowledge since its meaning is not self-evident and open to dispute. I recall while attending the University of Utah witnessing a returned missionary walking up to a female friend of mine at lunch in the Institute of Religion. The returned missionary informed my friend that God had revealed to him that they would be married. My friend laughed in his face and walked away. She soon thereafter married someone else. This young man's revelation is one of many examples that demonstrate that the meaning of revelation is not self-evident and is therefore not an infallible epistemological foundation in a Cartesian sense.

While Wunderli sees historical, linguistic, archaeological, and revelatory knowledge claims regarding the Book of Mormon as arcan, opaque, or private, what is not open to dispute is the existence of the text itself; the text has the virtue of being easily accessible to all and its content is agreed upon. I read the text, therefore I am. So Wunderli spent decades studying names, words, and phrases in the Nephite text. However, he does not claim infallibility of interpretation or knowledge, nor does he throw out all academic disciplines that provide a possible context for reading. What he does insist upon is that academic tap dancing cannot be allowed to silence the voice of the text. In his book, Wunderli has written about a widespread flaw in the history of Book of Mormon

interpretation—ignoring the voice of the text. In Wunderli's approach, the first task of understanding a text is to carefully question the text itself.

The corollary of his thesis is that the one thing a text cannot do is hide what it is. Every opening of a book is a judgment day in which words can be interpreted and texts weighed in the balance. Here are some samples of Wunderli's method. What are the major themes in the Book of Mormon? Wunderli concludes that that can be determined by finding what the narrators spend the most time discussing. For example, Nephi's account constitutes only fifty-five years but amounts to twenty percent of the Book of Mormon. The four books after 2 Nephi cover 415 years but only constitute five percent of the Book of Mormon. These four books are seen as mere filler to connect the narrative of Nephi with the large plates and do not contribute to the text's major themes. Wunderli argues along these lines and concludes from the text itself that the main themes of the Book of Mormon are:

Origins of the American Indians and a destiny of the scattering from Babel

The restoration of ancient Christianity to an apostate world

The visit of Jesus as God to America

The continuous cycle of righteousness and ruin, ending in final destruction. (17–22)

Another topic Wunderli mines from the text itself is the extent of the promised land. "The Jaredites first and then Nephi and Lehi all include North America as part of their promised land" (259). Here he argues that a continental view of the promised land is the clear understanding in the text. "The limited geography theorists [such as John Sorenson who confine the Book of Mormon story to a small section of Central America] disregard much of what the Book of Mormon explicitly states in order to preserve their view of its real history" (267).

Once Wunderli has established the interpretive principle of listening to the text, he then brings in various disciplines of scholarship to

dialogue with the text. His primary concern is to determine if Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon or if it is a translation of an ancient text. Wunderli again believes that his conclusions are obvious to any objective reader of the text.

He starts with the biblical passages in the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith used the King James Version of the Bible throughout, with its many translation and textual errors. Nephite writers quote biblical texts that would be written hundreds of years after the Nephite quotation. Prophecy in the Book of Mormon is detailed and accurate up to the time of Joseph Smith. After that, the prophecies begin to fail. For example, the Book of Mormon repeatedly prophesies that the Jews would return to the promised land after they had been converted to Christianity. By examining the theology, word usage, names, and idioms in the Book of Mormon, Wunderli concludes that the Book of Mormon is very likely the product of a single author with the perspective of a white European-American.

Wunderli summarizes the textual, scientific, and religious ideas in the Book of Mormon that are anachronistic. He then concludes, “The contents of the Book of Mormon speak for themselves. . . . The Book of Mormon may mean different things to different people, but it is not a literal history of ancient America” (238).

Mormon scholarship on the Book of Mormon seems to be headed in the opposite direction from the call to hear the voice of the text. Tap dancing with the shoes of obscurity is written on the Mormon apologists’ marquee. But I predict that someday Book of Mormon scholars of all persuasions will come around to listening carefully to the voice of the text as the foundation of knowledge about the Book of Mormon, as Wunderli has advocated.