

guide should know that they will not emerge with sure answers and easy denouements. Instead, you will walk into dark places that are safe (a Sasquatch's den) and familiar places (BYU campus, I-15) that will haunt you long after you've put down the book. When the penetrating gaze of the cover model is hidden from your view, obscured and pressed against other books on the shelf, you will no longer be an intruder. Instead, you might become the girl, glaring with dismay at the implications of interactions between genders. Or maybe you'll be the invisible man, wondering why camouflage doesn't offer safety. In the moments between your everyday life and to-do list, your mind may catch on a detail, a sentence, a phrase, and you'll reconsider what nuances you may have missed the first time.



Speaking for Herself

Ashley Mae Hoiland. *One Hundred Birds Taught Me to Fly: The Art of Seeking God*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2016. 212 pp. Paperback: \$11.92. ISBN: 9780842529921.

Reviewed by Glen Nelson

One Hundred Birds Taught Me to Fly: The Art of Seeking God is a collection of short missives—poems, essays, and autobiographical sketches—grouped loosely and thematically into thirteen sections and an epilogue. Ashley Mae Hoiland is the author/illustrator of three self-published children's books, a contributor to a collection of essays, *Fresh Courage Take: New Directions by Mormon Women* (Signature Books, 2015), a blogger (under the name ashmae) for *By Common Consent*, and the creator of a collection of sixty (trading or flash) cards of notable women in history, *We Brave Women* (Kickstarter, 2015).

Ultimately, the publisher does Hoiland a disservice by setting readers' expectations for *One Hundred Birds Taught Me to Fly* at sky-high levels. A florid and overreaching foreword by Kristin L. Matthews compares the text to (merely): Donne, Milton, Bradstreet, Yeats, and Bunyan, and to twentieth-century writers of distinction, particularly women writers. Further, the book's front matter begins with fifteen blurbs of praise by some of the most significant names in Mormon letters today. They employ vocabulary of superlatives and make claims for Hoiland's book as a work of historic importance. But there is little in Hoiland's book to suggest she aspires to such loftiness. It is a modest book—a personal, open, heartfelt, frank, and gentle book—published in the Neal A. Maxwell Institute's Living Faith series. Its daring comes from candid explorations that could be generalized with this question: what is a person in the LDS Church to do right now regarding an internal battle of belief and nonbelief?

Hoiland goes to great lengths to establish an authorial voice that speaks only for herself. The book is almost entirely free of “shoulds” or generalizations of any kind or, for that matter, direct references to Church policy and pronouncements. This is an account of a young mother trying to make sense of shifting internal foundations. “The weight of having to believe every thread of my Mormonism felt too heavy to bear,” she writes (105); still, she resists the word “crisis” regarding her faith: “I could no longer give my spiritual questions and wanderings the name of ‘crisis.’ I could not continue pelting my own sincere heart with stones of shame and guilt because I did not believe perfectly, or understand perfectly, or even sustain a constant desire to do either of those things” (106). She adds, “Not a crisis now—just my story, the surprising story that was one of faith all along” (108).

At its best—in the stories of her sister Sage, who left the Church nearly ten years ago; her brother Dane, who is punched by his missionary companion and who ultimately falls into drug addiction; and her husband, Carl, whose homeless father arranges for the young boy

to sleep in the cab of his truck in an LDS temple parking lot so he can wake up amid the morning shadows of holiness—Hoiland shows a deft and graceful hand when writing about people, including herself, whom she knows intimately. The description of her husband's gradual integration into an accepting church community and his own self-acceptance in college is simply beautiful. She writes exquisitely about being in nature. Particularly when she creates heightened poetic images that underscore grander metaphors, Hoiland's prose shines, such as the poetic description of her husband's childhood toys after the Willamette Valley Flood of 1996, with "plastic arms sticking up out of the mud" (47).

Not all of the poetics land equally well. The title of the volume comes from an essay about the author's missionary experience in Uruguay: "On Easter all the children built kites out of sticks and tissue paper, and we sat on a front lawn watching them all rising into the sky, colored and cobbled out of the simplest things their world could afford them—one hundred birds teaching me to fly" (53). There are times in the book when the imagery is forced or tired, the lessons to be learned a bit obvious, the moralizing too convenient, and all of it wrapped up too neatly. Occasionally, cultural insensitivities and descriptions of the disadvantaged feel almost exploitative; there are scattered taste issues. But for a reader facing any of the struggles outlined in the book, Hoiland offers some templates of calm: "Over the last years I have done the work of unbinding my heart. Unraveling the threads that I thought it needed bound so tightly to stay good. I spent years in fear of where my heart might go if I untethered it. Fear that it would run from holiness and God and sacred things if I simply let it wander and explore. Fear that it might question itself beyond retention or lose its grip on awe" (98).

In one passage, the author writes about a Sunday, while pregnant, when she decided to stay home from worship services. It is a simple and brief story, if personally momentous: "and the memory of those

three hours is my saving grace at times” (130). She has given herself permission to create her own mode of worship, her own parameters. “I have discovered holiness in the exercise of abandoning my own world to enter the sacred lands of my children,” she writes (135). She finds in the journals of Emmeline B. Wells a validation for doubt. She notes a diminishment, after her missionary service, of a connection to God. She writes tenderly about gay men she has dated and loved. Her life is as messy as any reader’s. Her metaphor of children playing in clutter is apt for the author’s spiritual state. She is content (even relieved) to enjoy it this way, and the implication is that a perfectly clean house with kids in it is not the life she wants; ditto religion.

The key metaphor in the book is the recounting of the gospel story found in St. Mark, in which people cut a hole in the roof above the Savior and lower an ailing friend into the assembled throng: “When I think of these people climbing on top of the roof while carrying their friend on his sickbed, about to dig a hole and interrupt a large crowd—not to mention the most important and sought-after man in the city—I wonder if they hesitated. I wonder if they thought they should turn back, that it was just a silly idea. But then, I marvel at their bravery—breaking a hole in that roof and sending their friend right down where he landed at Jesus’s feet” (141–42).

To the extent the author wants a seat at the table in today’s evolving Mormon dialogue, this is her salvo. For a loving cause, she is asking, can we interrupt the standard proceedings of the faith and be honest with each other? Can real life displace the idealized life in our discourse?

I can imagine many readers craving this exact point of view. She is persuasive and disarming. I also think she is guileless and sincere.

The book could be better. As described in the text, the life of a young mother of two does not yet provide the time to expand on thoughts, to ruminate without coming to simple conclusions, to write more poetry than simply poetically. The Post-it note format of the book suggests a lack of time and energy to make it cohesive and

deeper, narratively. One could say the same about the drawings that illustrate the book. Her skills are color and observation, and the book is sometimes reduced to simple lines, so to speak—at least, that is the slack I want to cut her.

I sympathize. As a young stay-at-home writer dad, I once approached Claudia Bushman for literary advice. How is it possible, I asked her in frustration, enviously, that she managed to raise a large family, pursue her education, conduct original research, publish numerous books, and keep a high-octane household humming? Her reply: “Make those ten minutes count.”

By all appearances, that is what Hoiland is doing. She is juggling it all, doing good, trying to figure it all out, and generating poetry and prose and pictures that aim sincerely to help others do the same. Kudos to her. Yes, the book feels fragmented, but I can’t help but think she will be proud of it in years to come, and a reader will be happy to have read it now . . . perhaps more than happy.

Toward the end of *One Hundred Birds Taught Me to Fly*, Hoiland tells the story of running a half marathon. She is concerned that she will not be able to make it to the finish line and, seeing a stranger in the distance, she decides to run alongside her. Wordlessly, each encourages, calms, paces, and pushes the other. “We crossed the finish line together, and then upon stopping we turned and hugged tightly, sweat dripping down our necks and backs. She said, ‘I could not have done this without you’” (152). I have to wonder whether years from now, there will be a reader who approaches Hoiland and repeats the same sentiment regarding Mormon belief: *I could not have done this without you.*