

Faith, Family, and Art

Jack Harrell. *Writing Ourselves: Essays on Creativity, Craft, and Mormonism*. Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2016. 156 pp. Paperback: \$18.95. ISBN: 978-1-58958-754-0.

Reviewed by Jennifer Quist

The back cover of Jack Harrell's new collection *Writing Ourselves: Essays on Creativity, Craft, and Mormonism* describes the book as a continuation of "a conversation as old as Mormonism itself." It's a fraught phrase, bringing to mind the image of an academic, artistic, and social in-group that has been conversing among themselves for a very long time. It isn't the in-group's fault that the conversation happens in the absence of non-members and newcomers to the Church, neither is it their fault that it goes on without writers, readers, and scholars unconnected to the American Mormon heartland. None of this is the in-group's fault, but perhaps all of it is their problem. Many in the in-group strive to, in Harrell's words, "giv[e] the church and its religion a human and literary face" (99). However, we can't understand what our own faces look like without relying on the reflections and perceptions of people and objects outside ourselves. Perhaps Jack Harrell, as a previous outsider to not just the Mormon literary world but the Mormon world altogether, is especially well-suited to put himself forward to articulate what Mormon letters are and what they ought to be and become.

The notion of "a conversation as old as Mormonism itself" is daunting and possibly counter-productive, backward-looking, exclusive. However, Harrell moves toward cutting it down to size when he provides an overview, a primer, of Mormon literature's history, movements, and canon. This guide appears early in an essay buried late in the book entitled "Toward a Mormon Literary Theory." Harrell credits the substance of this section to Eugene England's 1982 essay "The Dawn-

ing of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years.” Recalling his first reading of the essay in a literature class at BYU in 1991, Harrell says the “essay . . . came as a revelation to me—as it did for most of the students in the class” (98). The story of Mormon literature is not retold enough if even within the in-group—literature students at the Church’s flagship university—it can still come as a revelation. Harrell’s retelling is concise and elementary but also vital. It signals to newcomers to the “conversation” that it’s alright for us to sit down knowing very little about what’s been discussed before we arrived. Harrell is willing to act as a wise, patient, and badly-needed guide.

In the same book, however, there is plenty to ruminate upon for those with more ravenous appetites for Mormon literary theory, those wanting more than a basic orientation. “Making Meaning as a Mormon Writer,” which first appeared in *Sunstone*, ventures from critiques of “traditional Christianity” and postmodernism all the way to an exegesis of the Book of Abraham. Harrell addresses connections between God’s creative work and our own artistic work, making ambitious and provocative claims such as, “The making of meaning through science, art, and literature aligns ideally with Mormon theology. Our desire to make meaning results from seeing the universe as God does” (71).

The book’s fourteen essays can be classified into three main types: personal essays, discussions of the craft of creative writing, and theoretical treatises like the ones mentioned above. The personal essays are vignettes from Harrell’s family history and his early life in rural Illinois before his Mormon conversion. With candor and warmth, the essays relate elements of social life that have lost their taboos in mainstream American culture—divorce, cohabitation, cannabis and the rest of teenage partying—in matter-of-fact ways, sparing readers any sermonizing and, conversely, any defenses or rationalizations. They are stories told in the clear, tender but restrained voice of good memoir writing. They are exercises, as Harrell says elsewhere, in “seeing things anew—seeing

inside things, behind things, below things, above things” (146), which, Harrell argues, is what creation means. The personal essays also serve to show readers who may not have as varied a background as Harrell’s that the hearts, minds, and desires of people outside the cultural Mormon heartland are very much like their own and that there is little need to be self-conscious and guarded. In “Verne and Gusty,” the fineness of the detail he relates gets tiresome, communicating the grind of farm life a little too well. Still, these familiar human experiences help make the case for two important premises of the book: that “the rules of aesthetics and craftsmanship are no respecter of persons” (47) and that “good writing can be born out of ordinary ideas” (48).

The second type of essays are those on craftsmanship. They range from extremely basic tips—a numbered list in which the first item is “Make time to write”—to more thoughtful and empirical examinations such as an adaptation of Harrell’s doctoral thesis on “the illusion of independent agency, or IIA” (73). IIA is the sense some authors have of experiencing characters they write the same way children with imaginary friends experience their playmates: as if they act on their own. Generally, these essays were for me the low points of the book. Harrell’s data for the IIA study was conversations with professional fiction writers. In that case, mark me down as one who thinks IIA is a fancy that fuels our vain pursuit of mystique, protects our field by discouraging beginners who don’t relate to it, and makes us look silly.

Overall, the balance of Harrell’s text is original and insightful, at times daring. I may have cheered when in “Human Conflict and the Mormon Writer” he calls out some Mormon writing for its “expurgated sameness . . . [its] will toward conformity and conventionality” (90), its overuse of “stereotypes, cardboard conflicts, cheap resolutions” (91), and its “shallow tags” (95) used to oversimplify piety with superficial markers such as facial hair grooming. He speaks of a “Zion culture” (112) we ought to aspire to in place of the Mormon culture we’re stuck with for now.

In this collection of essays, Harrell has invested the most precious and personal parts of his humanity: faith, family, and art. Unfortunately, the quality of the editing of the book doesn't measure up to the quality and confidence of the essays. The order in which each piece is presented is problematic. While Harrell's text itself encourages Mormon writers to "embrace [our] weirdness" (45), to unapologetically make art that's open to the peculiarities of Mormonism, the book's structure is striking for its keen self-consciousness of those peculiarities. It reads as a book that is, first and foremost, bent on allaying misgivings. Once the book moves past the introductory personal vignette and settles into discussions of theory and craft, it begins by presenting work plucked from Harrell's curriculum vitae—papers with publication and presentation credits in mainstream venues. There is certainly nothing wrong with the papers. "What Violence in Literature Must Teach Us" is excellent and puts forward a perspective on writing darkness and violence that is sobering and morally mature in a way seldom seen in contemporary fiction. Harrell explains:

Gratuitous violence confounds our aesthetic and moral senses because it is a contradiction, an oxymoron—because it isn't true. The writer who gratuitously takes a life in a story misunderstands the very nature of both life and story. (25)

I am a better writer for having read an insight like this one. Maybe I am a better Mormon for having read it. However, padding the beginning of the book with secular-friendly essays still seems like a move meant to assure readers that Harrell's credentials are legitimate and recognized by an academic community at large, not just within Mormon circles.

If there is any need for such reassurances outside the author biography on the back cover (and I'm not convinced there is), it ought to come secondary to delivering on the discussion of "Mormonism" promised in the book's title. The essays that provide this explicit discussion come too late. "Toward a Mormon Literary Theory" should be the first essay in the book, not the eleventh. Readers who pick up this book rather than

merely clicking through generic advice for writers on blogs and Twitter feeds will have chosen it not in spite of its having the word Mormonism on the cover but because of it. With this readership, there is no need to establish a résumé in order to engage us.

It is unfortunate that the Mormon aspects of Harrell's perspective, study, and experience were not deemed powerful enough to open the book. They are. The frank, at times ecstatic, messages of Harrell's material contradicts the cautious self-consciousness of the editing. It's ironic and unnecessary. Harrell's readership arrives prepared to enter the inner rooms of a book where we can finally indulge in bald-faced discussions of Mormon doctrine, experience, and art. Trust us, trust the author, leave us to it.



Asking the Questions

Julie J. Nichols. *Pigs When They Straddle the Air: A Novel in Seven Stories*. Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2016. 148 pp. Paperback: \$13.95. ISBN: 978-0-9883233-5-3.

Reviewed by Emily Shelton Poole

In her full-length debut, *Pigs When They Straddle the Air: A Novel in Seven Stories*, Julie J. Nichols presents the interconnected lives of various women living in Salt Lake City over a span of thirty years, mostly during the 1970s and 1980s. Each of the seven stories focuses on a different main character until their lives become so entangled that the narratives converge in tragedy, heartache, and eventual healing. Some of these stories appeared previously in other publications, including *Dialogue*.