

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*.

Nichols wrote the stories as part of her dissertation for a PhD in English from the University of Utah. Two of the stories were controversial enough that Nichols lost her position as a creative writing instructor at Brigham Young University. I speculated, briefly, about which stories could have brought about Nichols's dismissal from BYU—was it the lesbian teaching Primary or the woman calling on Heavenly Mother to bless a nearly-drowned child? The reference to abortifacient herbs? Or the faith healing without the official exercise of the priesthood? Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Each one touches, to some degree, on the fringing edges of Mormonism, and while the stories are fiction and easy to dismiss in an academic way, the existence of actual people on those fringes is a far different matter to consider. In their first iterations, she says, they were unrelated, but many explored "the difficulties of being an educated, unorthodox woman in Utah Mormon culture."<sup>2</sup>

Unorthodox doesn't adequately convey the breadth of Mormon experience portrayed in *Pigs When They Straddle the Air*: faithful, practicing LDS Adela; earthy, mystical, lesbian Riva and her partner, Nina; Riva's daughter, Katie, caught between her traditional LDS father and decidedly non-traditional mother; Riva's sister-in-law, Suzanne, conservative but curious; Annie, a poet and faith healer, unofficially adopted by Riva and Nina as a child; rigidly polygamous Jean and Peggy, and Peggy's young daughter Leeny; and even Riva's grandmother-in-law, portrayed only through her journals. Nichols approaches the lives and choices of each woman with the eye of an omniscient but benevolent observer, completely devoid of judgment or aspersion. Individual devotion is, Nichols asserts, exactly that: shaped individually by unique combinations of cultural bias and life experience.

While Nichols's clear-headed and even-handed approach to her portrayals of Mormon life may provide interesting fodder for book club discussions, it doesn't actually serve the characters that well. They

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2. Julie J. Nichols, "About the Book," <http://www.juliejnichols.com/about-the-book/>.

are known to the reader, but developed deeply only in narrow trenches, with crystalline, efficiently emotive prose, while the more pedestrian aspects of their lives—the very details that might cause a character to imprint more memorably on the reader—are ignored in favor of the more sensational characteristics that make them different. I find this interesting in and of itself: Nichols's purpose seems to be to demonstrate the Venn diagram overlap among all of these different Mormon lives, but the only parts she really uncovers are the isolating ones.

Because of this lack of full character development, the character list at the beginning of *Pigs When They Straddle the Air* is absolutely essential to keeping all of the relationships straight. I found myself drawing family trees with connection lines across generations, trying to cement those relationships in my mind; and what is either a math error or a typo became the subject of a minor obsession as I struggled to reconcile the age difference between two characters.

At its heart, though, *Pigs When They Straddle the Air* is about ideas, and the characters are more like archetypes of unorthodoxy who exist to serve a philosophical end. All people are connected, and the connections are strong but mysterious to both reader and characters. Nichols also wants readers to think about the big questions, some of which cannot be answered: Is there room in the Mormon community for a broader definition of devotion? Can we embrace those who doubt with love rather than judgment? Does an acknowledgment of Heavenly Mother undermine the priesthood or strengthen it? Is Mormonism, at its root, any less mystical than other religious traditions?

In *Pigs When They Straddle the Air*, Nichols deftly draws threads of connection between the traditional, conservative Mormon community and the souls who inhabit the gray area around the edges. Her characters, like the Gadarene pigs alluded to in the title, who received devils cast out of a madman by Jesus, straddle the air in that weightless space between choice and consequence, doubt and devotion, tradition and change. Faithful people straddle worlds and traditions and question their own motives and purposes every day. As Nichols herself said

in her profile on *Mormon Scholars Testify*, “Questioning does not have to lead to divorce or mayhem.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, for Nichols, compassion and understanding are essential elements of faith, especially when helping others to define theirs. *Pigs When They Straddle the Air* may not hold the answers, but it does, at least, ask the questions.



## The Fruit of Knowledge

Thomas F. Rogers. *Let Your Hearts and Minds Expand: Reflections on Faith, Reason, Charity, and Beauty*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016. 349 pp. Paperback: \$21.95. ISBN: 978-0-8425-2976-1.

*Reviewed by Mahonri Stewart*

As a book of short, religious, and academic non-fiction, Thomas F. Rogers’s *Let Your Hearts and Minds Expand* is extremely valuable to the Mormon intellectual community; but as a reflection of a devoted disciple and a soulful artist, it goes beyond even that to be authentically moving. In a modern world where spirituality and religious belief is a place of tension and contention, Rogers has written from his place of the faithful agitator—pushing our culture’s boundaries where needed and then turning around to help the Mormon community reach inward and pull the wagons around shared principles.

Working from that place of “proving contraries,” as Joseph Smith recommended, Rogers has often been put under scrutiny by the orthodox, but he has also been championed as a defender of the faith. He

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3. Julie J. Nichols, *Mormon Scholars Testify*, May 2011, <http://mormonscholarstestify.org/2445/julie-j-nichols>.