two volumes. I hope to see further volumes of Hales's comic so that I can continue to enjoy the insight and entertainment they bring. Plus, Enid is just so cool.

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Baring Imperfect Human Truths

Holly Welker, ed. *Baring Witness: 36 Mormon Women Talk Candidly about Love, Sex, and Marriage.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016. 296 pp. Paperback: $19.95. ISBN: 9780252081781.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Ostler

We all know the Sunday School answers, but life rarely, if ever, plays out like a seminary video. So what do love, sex, and marriage look like in the lived experience of Mormon women?

Journalist, poet, and "spinster who thinks and writes a great deal about marriage" (1) Holly Welker has compiled a collection of essays that unapologetically reveals the intersection of Mormon theology, culture, individuality, and relational living in her latest book, *Baring Witness: 36 Mormon Women Talk Candidly about Love, Sex, and Marriage.*

Welker guides the reader through the complexities of relational living thematically by dividing *Baring Witness* into five parts: For Better or For Worse; Complicated Paths to the Temple (or Not Getting There at All); Divorce and Other Endings; Second Chances; and Expectations: Met, Unmet, or Exceeded. It's clear that Welker's expected readers are Mormon, but she provides enough background in the introduction and a glossary to help non-Mormons contextualize stories and decipher Mormon lingo.

The thirty-six contributors are diverse in that they were raised in different eras, cultures, wards, and families. Their education and careers vary. Some of the contributors are notable, such as Margaret M. Toscano and Joanna Brooks, but many are not. Regardless, I know these women. I see myself and women I know in their stories.

According to Welker, the title is an intentional pun. By using bare instead of bear, she asserts that this anthology is intended to expose or reveal truths about love, sex, and marriage, not to testify. She writes, "I discouraged conventional testimony-bearing in these essays. Both despite and because of Mormons' aggressive proselytizing program, I did not want this volume to seem like some sort of Mormon missionary effort" (14). With this limitation, Welker prohibits these narratives from traveling into the familiar paths of testifying of eternal families and atonement. In so doing, she has created a place for stories that are messy. They don't fall into the traditional narrative. They don't resolve like a Hallmark movie at the eighty-two-minute mark.

However, there is one oversight. Neither the introduction nor any of the essays grapple with the changes happening currently in the Church regarding love, sex, and marriage. These changes are not insignificant. In 2015, Elder Russell M. Nelson pled with the sisters of the Church "to speak up and speak out in ward and stake councils,"[1] Young Women General President Bonnie Oscarson stressed that everyone who makes up a family—husbands, wives, children—are all homemakers,[2] and Elder M. Russell Ballard counseled women that how each structures her life is a matter of individual inspiration, not formulation: "Is it possible for two similarly faithful women to receive such different responses to the same basic questions? Absolutely! What's right for one woman may not

1. Russell M. Nelson, "A Plea to My Sisters," October 2015, https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/10/a-plea-to-my-sisters?lang=eng.

2. Bonnie L. Oscarson, "Defenders of the Family Proclamation," April 2015, https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/defenders-of-the-family-proclamation?lang=eng.

be right for another. That's why it is so important that we should not question each other's choices or the inspiration behind them."[3]

Nevertheless, there are those who still adhere rigidly to cultural gender norms. And the more traditional Mormon rhetoric and beliefs about marriage, love, and sex still have a strong presence and impact in the lives of women today, as C. L. Hanson writes in "Its Own Reward": "I was raised Mormon, so it's not surprising that I grew up believing that my worth was based on my ability to attract and land a desirable man. . . . Women are explicitly excluded from the church's leadership hierarchy, so they generally derive their status in the Mormon community through their husbands and children" (200). I would have liked this collection to have included at least one essay of a woman attempting to reconcile this type of socialization with the current rhetoric.

Even so, as a collective, these essays bare the breadth of Mormon women's experiences—struggles with faith, homosexuality, infidelity, addiction, singleness, widowhood, marrying outside the faith, etc. There is no lack of courage as these women tell their truth—not the expected or acceptable truth, but the imperfect human truth. The truth that marriage isn't always happy and fulfilling. The truth that a sealing doesn't prevent heartache, resentment, frustration, and bad behavior. The truth that, for some, the sealing gives hope and perspective; it anchors a person, a relationship in the troubles of mortality. The truth that for others, it doesn't. The truth is, as Margaret M. Toscano says in her essay "Sacrifice and Sacrament," "marriage is always a crucible" (209).

The first couple of essays are in a similar tone, which led me to fear the book would not be the dynamic symphony promised. Fortunately, Welker quickly makes good on her promise. She unobtrusively ensures that the majority of the contributors' voices are distinctive and that the essays are well crafted.

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3. M. Russell Ballard, "Women of Dedication, Faith, Determination, and Action," BYU Women's Conference, May 1, 2015, https://womensconference.ce.byu.edu/sites/womensconference.ce.byu.edu/files/elder_m_russell_ballard_0.pdf.

The impact of the loss of faith dominates the first two essays. In "Projects," Heather K. Olson Beal divulges the fears and confusion that washed over her when her husband left the Church. "I assumed that our temple covenants to each other would trump everything else" (23). Beal walks us through the steps she took to grieve for her dreams and to reconcile her reality in order to cultivate happiness and connection with her husband.

Alternatively, Heidi Bernhard-Bubb in "Make It Up Every Day" writes about her guilt in leaving the Church while her husband remains active. "His fear was palpable and primal. He was worried about my soul, but more importantly, my rejection of the church felt like a rejection of our marriage" (35). Bernhard-Bubb and her husband are able to find common ground in kindness and tolerance, and their commitment to each other empowers them to figure out their marriage in the every day. "It was a crucial moment in our marriage. The moment when we stopped reaching for an ideal that no longer existed and instead turned toward the reality of who and where we were" (35).

In an exceptional essay by Kira Olson, we learn of the pain and isolation that comes with trying to live the ideal (read: 1950s housewife) and the liberation that comes from letting it go. That ideal fit Olson like a Halloween costume purchased from a drugstore. She writes with candor and humor about the duality of feeling strong in her authenticity and insecure in her inability to become the perceived ideal. "It would have been easy to blame it on the whole Mormon culture I had butted against since my Young Women's classes" (67). All of the shoulds disappear. She has an epiphany that changes everything for her. "If my past relationships with Mormon men led me to the on-again-off-again battles with expectations throughout my life, it was Mormon women who pulled me out. I count it a great irony that one of the turning points in my perception was joining a group of women to scrapbook every week in the cultural hall of our church building" (67).

For Olson, amidst tape, paper, and scissors, the stories she made up about herself and others were confronted by reality.

> Instead of beating my head against my interpretations I stepped past the Sunday smiles. I spent countless hours with a grandmother who raised five children in the church and told me *living the gospel isn't the same as going to church*. . . . I saw *possibility* instead of walls, finally. I saw success, defined by me and God, not by a stray comment on homemaking. I finally saw that as much as Mormon culture appeared to push around those who entered at their own risk, it was *me* who kept trying to jam my square-peg self into the circle-shaped image of an apparition I had created out of stereotypes and offhanded comments over the years. . . . I brought my individuality back into my life instead of just half-heartedly playing a role. (67–68)

Individuality and the need to live authentically emerge in many of these essays. Do you remember the commercial the Church produced in the '90s that told us that best friends make the best marriages? Well, what happens when that best friend is also a woman? In her essay "Best Friends," Lynne Burnett writes about falling in love with her coworker, "one of the Mormon hippie mom types . . . clad in a denim jumper and Birkenstocks" (189). A heartbreaking declaration of love ends their friendship, until they reconnect many years later. Now married, Burnett sounds like her own version of that commercial: "On the best days it's a dream come true: I'm finally married to my best friend. On the not so good days, we've cried and tried to make smoother the path we're on together" (193).

The last section of this collection appropriately focuses on expectations. Expectation is an obstacle to happiness and life satisfaction. There appears to be a correlation between the lovers' ability to reconcile expectations and the fate of the relationship. The truthfulness of this realization is a reality check. It shatters the myth of perfection and gives voice to struggle and disillusionment.

After reading this collection of essays as a nearly-middle-aged, childless, active LDS, feminist divorcee, I felt more at peace in my singleness, not because I'm not in the cauldron of marriage, because singleness is its own cauldron. It's about acceptance. Gina Colvin articulates it aptly when she writes, "In an outpouring of spiritual feeling, I breathed the

expectation of marriage away in waves of divine peace. I felt for the first time in my life that I was enough alone. In this gift I had found a contented ease with myself, a confident tranquility that with or without marriage I was enough, and I hugged the possibility of singleness and a life of solitude to me like a warm and comforting wind" (219).

The peace and ease comes from the testament that our individual journeys are uniquely our own. Letting go of the shoulds and ideals of perfectionism is necessary for healthy relationships. Let's stop with the assumptions that everyone else's life or marriage has met the ideal and recognize that we're all trying to do the best we can with what we have. As Colvin says, "while the church can supply the engineering expertise, the architecture and interior design must belong to the couple [or individual] alone" (223).

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Fresh Honesty in Authentic Mormon Identity

Jamie Zvirzdin, ed. *Fresh Courage Take: New Directions by Mormon Women.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2015. 200 pp. ISBN: 9781560852407.

Reviewed by Maxine Hanks

An optimistic title and bright red pomegranate on the cover suggest a fresh approach to perennial gender problems in Mormonism—"a feminism that is about 'cooperation and compassion.'" *Fresh Courage Take* is a positive motto for a challenging task, one modelled by Mother Eve—"to act for ourselves instead of being acted upon." The pomegranate is an ancient Jewish symbol of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, which represents both the shattering of stasis to enable growth, and the search for a "communal whole" that still honors the individual.