

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).



## 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.

Jamie Zvirzdin's book lives up to its promises. A dozen new or underexposed Mormon feminist voices offer fresh and original insights, approaches, interpretations, intersections, and meaning making. These authors authentically claim all their contrasting and intersecting identities, especially their Mormon ones, and integrate them in unique personal ways.

Editor Jamie Zvirzdin herself is an anomaly among Mormon feminists. Far away from Utah and American cultures, she conceived this book while living in the Marshall Islands, on a "sliver of sand in the middle of the Pacific Ocean." There, she learned firsthand that many of her own assumptions about identity, gender, religion, and life, which she "had presumed were universal" were culturally constructed—"more often an American or Utahan concept." This recognition freed her from the stereotypes and limitations she had been taught, and provoked her to examine new questions.

She invited eleven other women to join her in this re-examination of self, a group she calls "our homespun quorum." Each woman articulates personal navigations and renegotiations of identity along three key axes—religion, gender, and culture. These women each redefine Mormon norms, definitions, and practices of what have been traditionally unmalleable LDS concepts—marriage, motherhood, family, race, education, and vocation. Each woman redefines her identity and life, according to her own terms, needs, desires, and realities.

This is precisely what "feminism" means—women practicing self definition. The result of these self-defining explorations is "a pluralistic feminism" ranging from "orthodox to heterodox" that exerts to "acknowledge the diversity of life." These voices include an older feminist, a woman of color, and women of varying marital status, family size, education, and vocation. Although the book doesn't include a GLIBT author, one author takes issue with Church policy regarding LGBT relationships.

What's new is that while these authors might be mainly middle-class white women you'd find in your LDS ward, these Mormons are engaging the constructs of female identity in ways that depart from the norm. They speak mostly from the norm yet confess their Other-ness—their

inner pain, marginalization, isolation, or incompatibility with the norm they are supposed to embody. They then renegotiate the norm—some from within the norm, some departing from it entirely—and in the process they deconstruct the very notion of the ideal Mormon woman, who does not exist.

These women use a strategy that is utterly Mormon—owning “personal agency” as “a fundamental principle of our religion.” It therefore follows, Zvirzdin writes, that “women cannot capitulate this basic responsibility.” These authors define “agency” as the personal *responsibility* to decide and act for themselves. In this way, these women theologically and effectively claim full personal empowerment for their own identities and lives. And they take this basic truth in “new directions” as the subtitle of the book suggests. It is a calm, centered, and personal spiritual revolution.

Retired BYU professor Colleen Whitley reminds us that historically LDS women were agents unto themselves, operating in some uniquely and truly empowered ways. She then shares her own historic struggle and quest for education, career, and empowerment against the debilitating sexism of the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s—a time less friendly to Mormon women in some ways than the previous century. Her journey offers a larger window into the struggles of American women during those decades, struggles so real, yet so foreign today, that reading about it feels anachronistic. At the same time, she acknowledges real progress in the LDS Church and church culture in recent years.

Statistician Erica Ball challenges notions of limiting anyone’s potential and intelligence, based on gender, race, or class. She also challenges the dichotomizing of faith and science. “I am a woman and I do math. I believe in God and I am a scientist.” She affirms that we should not put cultural limitations on any group of people. She bases this equal opportunity on the LDS theological notion of “intelligence” as an innate spiritual reality within all people. She also links spiritual intelligence

with divine agency. In these ways, she claims that spiritual or divine intelligence as a profoundly liberating theology for all.

Rachael Decker Bailey is a “career mother” who teaches writing at Purdue University. She deconstructs the duality or dichotomy of Motherhood vs. Career by fully, equally owning the value and vocational power of both. “I want my daughters to educate themselves, to receive graduate degrees, to have the ability and training to support themselves and their families—but I also want them to understand that they are my greatest accomplishment.” She models a powerful deconstructive strategy by refusing to diminish either option of motherhood or career to any degree, but instead she owns and celebrates both to their fullest potential.

Stay-at-home mom, Karen Challis Critchfield challenges the ways that motherhood can be perceived, experienced, or mobilized to devalue and deplete women’s lives, especially when compared or contrasted with the freedom and empowerment of a career. She simply argues that success in either motherhood or career is based on the very same things—self value, confidence, setting and meeting goals, self-actualization, and finding meaning. “I was buried somewhere within me” she confesses. “I had to rediscover myself . . . I am more than ‘just a mom’ . . . many other identities.” She concludes that “it comes down to the simplicity of making yourself matter . . . Don’t sacrifice who you are for motherhood. Mommy, be you.” Either way, in motherhood or career, being yourself *IS* the success.

Carli Anderson probes her personal agency and divine potential as a single woman, which “turned out to be a source of more joy, adventure, self-awareness, contentment, and spiritual understanding than I would have guessed.” She deftly redefines the spiritual path to exaltation by differentiating inner personal progress from outer partnership progress. Valuing the inner spiritual progress of one’s own soul for itself—as the core of any kind of progress—she reveals the centrality and power of our individual, single, inner path. “When we wrongly assume that power to progress is granted only to the married, we stunt our own spiritual growth.”

Editor Jamie Zvirzdin describes her alter ego “Giselle” as the ideal Mormon woman, mother, and wife she had to dismantle in order to accept herself. “I’ve never known a woman who prayed as much” she describes the ideal. “Rarely did God fail to respond to her.” Even though “Giselle is not a real human being,” as Zvirzdin says, she was “a real enough presence in my life . . . [a] psychological taskmaster.” For Zvirzdin, her marriage to an understanding husband and her traumatic experience of childbirth, together with her study of feminist and scholarly works and her move to the Marshall Islands helped her embrace the real-life Jamie by destroying the oppressive “idealatry” of the ideal Giselle. “She was my God,” she admits. “A false one.”

Librarian and bibliophile Brooke Stoneman describes her struggle with infertility, which caused her deep grief and to “question the very nature of God.” She moved from viewing motherhood as “woman’s truest calling and most self-actualizing achievement in life,” to questioning “what true womanhood was.” She also found she had “to stop equating womanhood with motherhood . . . [as] the qualifying life event that ushers us into ‘real’ womanhood.” Along the way, she discovered that her infertility actually enabled her “to reorient [her]self based on truer principles” and “make a new social and theological space for [her]self.” Her focus changed from a life based on “the presence of a future child” or waiting “to start living a full and joyful life” to one of coming into “a place of real joy” in the present reality. Infertility also gave her a “reservoir of compassion [she] previously lacked for the challenges inundating others.”

Ashley Mae Holland is a writer who shares her honest wrestling with Mormon faith, belief, doctrine and policies. “I want to be critically minded . . . yet faith is a precious thing I don’t want to lose,” she explains. Holland deconstructs “faith crisis” by reclaiming the word “crisis” using its Cantonese symbol, which holds a dual meaning of “danger *and* opportunity.” For her, crisis means “growth, empathy, maturity” and “an opening-up to things more beautiful and complex.” She wants to offer nonmembers and shunned members her “friendship and love

without my religion's policies standing between us." She balances the "weight of discrepancies [that] seems like it will break everything" with the "countering moments of joy that make my heart burst." Ultimately, she doesn't "want questions to cancel out my ability to find peace."

Musician Sylvia Lankford is a convert to Mormonism, a faith that brought her "something missing from my knowledge of Jesus Christ." Of African descent, she encountered a starkly white church when she was baptized, without anyone "of our race at church." Even though her family saw her conversion to Mormonism as "an abandonment of my race," she knew it was "the denomination I needed to join, not withstanding our ethnicity, while also admitting that "sometimes it is hard to understand why God wants us to do one thing or another." She states that she needed Mormonism to grow, to evolve, "to gain more insight into the gospel and to progress further in life." Her faith is balanced within the paradox that "racism had such a long history I could not unravel . . . I had to trust that God would not withhold his blessings indefinitely." She also "prayed to see others of my race enter the ward, and I have been blessed to see that happen." She also found peace in healing from a difficult divorce.

Writing teacher and mother Marcee Monroe talks about needing glasses to correct her visual depth perception as a metaphor for deepening her understanding of identity. She shares how her perspectives on "domesticity" and "devotion" as well as motherhood and feminism evolved via new insight. She describes her ability to simultaneously engage both the negative and positive views of domesticity and feminism by stating, "I saw double." Embracing feminism enabled "finding myself and forging an identity." As she views life "in both eyes" she can envision "devotion" as a "deliberate choice" rather than as a diminishment of agency. She discovers "the depth of my devotion to both motherhood and feminism." She concludes, "My identity has been magnified . . . God gave me glasses."

Therapist Rachel Brown explores the "feminine wound in religion," lamenting that when growing up, "I looked to the heavens I could not

see my own face.” She wonders how the “greatest aspiration should be motherhood and have the ultimate mother missing in action.” She remembers realizing, “how could I trust this Father . . . who seemed to cast his daughters into the shadows? . . . I spent hours in the black holes of my soul.” She admires others “whose Mormonism is porous, who are able to shift and sift. Mine felt more like a choke hold. I felt I had no other choice than to believe it all. She seeks her own moments “on the mountain with God” and discovers that she is “the author of [her] own life, and the canon is open.” She admits that, “I still have a scar, but I no longer feel wounded.”

Writer and mom Camille Strate Fairbanks confesses, “I felt I had already failed as a mother the moment I became one . . . I couldn’t shake my twin demons, both the lack of excitement and the guilt.” She writes while pregnant with her first child, contemplating the pros and cons of her condition. “Women who don’t like motherhood . . . are, by our culture’s definition, Bad Women.” She notes that the “wife-and-mother destiny seemed based more on Mormon culture than actual doctrine.” As a teen, she felt that her ambitions “seemed at odds with my religion’s goals for me” so she chose “to rebel” and adopt a “‘Never Having Kids’ mantra” as her identity. However, after meeting a man she wanted to marry and making a conscious choice to have a child, she came to a new recognition. “By the church’s cultural standards, I failed long ago. The only standards left are my own.” She concludes, “There is no right way to be a mother, wife, or woman. There is only the way we are doing it.”

Fresh honesty is what gives these voices fresh courage. This collection is a needed chorus of Mormon feminist voices. Their stories of inner struggle are deeply inspiring, because in their their honest wrestlings with identity and contradiction we encounter our own. We re-live our own deconstructions, breakthroughs, and paradoxes as they are reflected in theirs. It is a comforting and confirming experience.

These voices give me a sense of refuge, renewal, and home. Fresh courage is exactly what I found and will take from this “homespun quorum.”