

flown the limits of the physical” (115). I can’t help but think Gardner isn’t the only one experiencing this flight of spirit. Through Babcock’s frank and wondering takes on the small but expansive moments in a life, we glimpse the sublime.

The daisy Babcock drew on the board that day in creative writing class was a representation of beauty, but not the deep red rose or elegant symmetry commonly associated with aesthetic pleasure. This simple, two-dimensional daisy had petals of different sizes and shapes and scribbled notes tendriling from it. But the daisy represented the truest expression of beauty I know: authenticity. And in this collection, Babcock is a master of the authentic beauty in the everyday. Although there were moments when I wished he’d take a more direct approach to his subjects, mostly I wanted the collection to hold more than these eleven essays. Matthew James Babcock taught me the essay twice before. With *Heterodoxologies*, he’s taught me the essay all over again.



Judith Freeman: A Remarkable Memoir of an Unremarkable Life

Judith Freeman. *The Latter Days: A Memoir*. New York: Pantheon, 2016. 366 pp. Paperback: \$8.64. ISBN: 978-0-345-80608-6.

Reviewed by Darin Stewart

Judith Freeman’s *The Latter Days: A Memoir* is a remarkable memoir of an unremarkable life. The American novelist ticks all of the standard

boxes when recounting her childhood—abusive father, distant mother, disowned sibling, youthful indiscretion—none falling outside the boundaries of a common coming-of-age narrative. She accomplishes nothing particularly noteworthy and does nothing particularly dreadful. What makes the memoir fascinating is the context in which these non-events occur. Freeman grew up in a small, uniformly Mormon town in 1950s Utah. That backdrop elevates her beautifully written narrative from mildly diverting memoir to insightful social and religious commentary.

It is clear that Freeman did not set out to write a book about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the memoir is not intended as a polemic against Mormonism or the culture it engenders. Nevertheless, the LDS Church is so pervasive in the author's upbringing that it is hard to miss the underlying current of criticism that runs throughout the book.

Readers unfamiliar with Mormonism will find the idiosyncrasies of that culture fascinating if not outright exotic. Those with experience in the LDS community will likely recognize with some discomfort the "careful sameness of the Mormon culture" (21) that permeated the author's childhood and "strove to make us all the same in thought as well as deed" (35). Faithfulness and devotion to the Church were taken for granted, and if necessary enforced, within Freeman's family and community. This proves to be the first chink in Freeman's faith. At age fifteen she realizes "you couldn't believe in something when you'd never been given the chance not to believe" (175).

In a small town where everyone knows everyone else's business, as well as the social standard everyone is expected to maintain without exception, contradictions inevitably arise. Eventually, these expectations and contradictions drive Freeman from the faith and into the wider world. When the author and her husband relocate to St. Paul, Minnesota to seek medical treatment for their son, she encounters,

for the first time, life unconstrained by ecclesiastical expectations and religious norms.

A visit to a Unitarian church, her first non-Mormon religious experience, is revelatory. “I saw how the Unitarians, as opposed to the Mormons, were unafraid to promote questioning and free thinking,” she recalls. “They encouraged individuals to follow their moral conscience. It wasn’t about obeying religious authority” (280). This notion that life could be self-determined rather than lived out of sheer obedience and expectation may be the central message, if there is one, of Freeman’s memoir.

Those looking for insight into how a young woman from rural Utah became a leading American novelist will not find it here, other than understanding the circumstances informing her later fiction. When Freeman first begins to consider the possibility of a writing life, her family is neither supportive nor obstructionist. Her father simply forbids her to write about family and religion. Of course, those topics are the central focus of most of Freeman’s novels including *The Chinchilla Farm*, *Red Water*, and her collection of short stories, *Family Attractions*. The lyricism developed in Freeman’s fiction is on full display here in her memoir. In essence, her entire body of work is an exploration of the themes forbidden by her father.

The Latter Days is at its heart the narrative of a young woman making the transition, as she describes it, “From the bucolic to the knowing. . . . From the Edenic to the worldly. Innocence bleeding into knowledge as I prepared to . . . make the transition from one world to another” (113). At no point in Freeman’s story is there a dramatic break with her family and heritage. Rather there is a gradual drifting away. Her view of the religion of her childhood and the constraints it imposes slowly shifts from seeing it as not helpful, to not necessary, and ultimately not relevant. The events along the way are nothing out of the

ordinary. The overall journey and the manner in which it is conveyed, however, make this memoir remarkable.



Problem Plays that Cultivate Compassion

Melissa Leilani Larson. *Third Wheel: Peculiar Stories of Mormon Women in Love*. Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2017. 142 pp. Paperback: \$9.95. ISBN: 978-0-9986052-3-4.

Reviewed by Julie Bowman

Third Wheel: Peculiar Stories of Mormon Women in Love brings together two plays by award-winning playwright Melissa Leilani Larson: *Happy Little Secrets* and *Pilot Program*. The plays are presented chronologically by premier year. *Happy Little Secrets* premiered at the New Play Project in 2009, *Pilot Program* at Plan-B Theatre Company in 2015. Each won the Association for Mormon Letters award for Drama.

The book's deceptively bright cover, illustrated with a young girl in a solo game of hoop rolling, belies the complexities and maturity of the plays in this compact edition. With hoop rolling as a metaphor for keeping things going, we may take *Third Wheel's* cover as cautionary. The plays are thought problems that take us in a bit of a circle. The endings endorse a quiet kind of endurance. There's nothing wrong with endurance, but it can be frustrating if one wants a conclusion that arrives at a point of view on either of the highly-charged issues that comprise the plays' central conflicts: same-sex attraction and polygamy.

In *Happy Little Secrets*, a twenty-something returned missionary, Claire, recounts her memory of reuniting with her best friend, Brennan,