

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,

after the two women return from their missions. Rejoining each other as roommates at BYU, the two women spend all of their time together until Brennan meets her future husband, Carter, on campus one evening. If it seems like a stereotypical BYU roommate story, where one roommate gets a boyfriend-fiancé-husband and the other becomes the third wheel, it isn't. We know from her opening soliloquy that Claire is in love with Brennan. Each burst of feeling for Brennan that Claire shares with us possesses the electricity that all of us who have ever been in love will recognize. The play's movement toward its climatic scene is gripping and breathless in its intensity, while the denouement offers little by way of resolution, instead proffering a world of small miracles, that to some might not seem like miracles at all, as fuel for continuing.

Like *Happy Little Secrets*, *Pilot Program* tests faith-in-action with the principle of plural marriage. Set in a hypothetical, but near, future, *Pilot Program* imagines the restoration of polygamy in the LDS Church. Abigail, a professor, married, but without children, and her husband, Jacob, have been invited to be early practitioners in this new era of plural marriage. Compelled by a flash of testimony and perhaps feeling inadequate as a wife after three miscarriages, Abigail pushes the project forward. She selects a wife for her husband—her former student, Heather—attends their sealing, sends them off on a honeymoon night, leaves teaching to take care of the child that they have. It's uncomfortable reckoning with the day-to-day realities this hypothetical arrangement forces us to consider, such as setting the days of the week Jacob spends with each woman. To watch a family arrangement awkwardly emerge as these three stumble through even the language to talk about it forces us to reckon with what eternal families might really feel like when we are so accustomed to singular monogamy.

Love and marriage plots and relationship interlopers are not new themes for the stage, but Larson's plays offer a particularly Mormon treatment of marriages with a third lover. As a pair, these plays prod, gently, at the circumstances that interfere with the characters' easy alignment with

the church they believe in. Each woman's particular struggle is largely what we expect it might be given their faith, and they are never angry. At points despairing, they are largely patient and longsuffering, even if that sometimes seems too good to be possible. Still, they give us grounds for their reactions. Their narrations provide privileged access to their thoughts. These interventions create intimacy and interiority. This intimacy is the critical strength of these plays. By design, the narrations bind us to them, and, as a consequence, we experience their vulnerability. Their candor fosters engaged concern with the feelings they navigate.

To say that neither play resolves is more observation of content than complaint of form. I'm in agreement with Eric Samuelsen's claim in his foreword to this collection: these are problem plays. Like Shakespeare's problem plays, they present the reader with social and ethical dilemmas that are not easily resolved. Akin to the problem comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, which strains justice and mercy in the treatment of Shylock, the community outsider who exits the stage unwell, stripped of his religion and his fortune, *Third Wheel* shows us characters with pain points that prompt us to discuss their conditions. These dilemmas matter a great deal to the spectrum of conversations currently underway in the LDS community. It's worth reading, staging, and discussing these plays. Doing so will cultivate compassion for the conflicts that arise at the intersection of the LDS doctrine, faith, and lived human experience as they invite us to ask, "What ought we to do when we see suffering?"