

Thin Volume, Thick Questions

Luisa Perkins. *Prayers in Bath*. New York: Mormon Artists Group, 2017. 128 pp. Paper: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-1543035155.

Reviewed by Sandra Clark Jergensen

The half-inch thickness of the thin paperback belies its contents. Some context on the limited edition, published by Mormon Artists Group, explains the dense publication: fifty hand-bound copies in Asahi silk, hand numbered, and signed with color reproductions of the four original art pieces created by Jacqui Larsen for the book. There are fifty, they are stunning, and they are selling for \$150 each. This small book was not a small project, speedily or thriftily produced, but three years in the making. Perkins explains, “It’s a short book, but it took a long time to write, to feel like I’d gotten it right;”⁷ *Prayers in Bath* is right in so many ways.

Luisa Perkins does not waste time or pages to display her tight research and writing skills. Using the real life discovery of curse tablets from the ancient Bath ruins, Perkins muses, “What else might be waiting to be dug up in that ancient holy place?”⁸ The story is framed around a young Mormon couple: academics, expats, financially and emotionally exhausted by their repeated and failed attempts at in-vitro fertilization. Ted is absorbed by the distraction of research and teaching, but Julia, finished with her Ph.D. in linguistics and biding time in England for Ted’s work, is mired in depression. Ted arranges for her to intern at an archeological dig in Bath; Julia is put off, but a resounding divine personal

7. Perkins, Luisa, “Prayers in Bath,” *Kashkawan* (blog), March 31, 2017, <http://kashkawan.squarespace.com/novembrance/2017/3/31/prayers-in-bath.html>.

8. *Ibid.*

confirmation pushes her forward. Julia sifts through the muck of the dig, hoping to recover herself in the ruins, but stumbles over something else.

A small cylinder is crammed into the clay. Instead of alerting her supervisor, Julia pauses at an immediate prompting to risk her position, career future, morality, and faith to pocket the artifact instead. Trusting the weight of the feeling, she stuffs the heavy object into her jacket. Back at her apartment, Julia opens it, finding copper-colored metal scrolls of writing, in an extinct language she is startled to be able to read. The furious translation brings Julia back to life. Ted notices her renewed spark, but, fearing his judgement, she neglects the prompting to show her husband the source.

Using the layered conflicts to pose significant questions to the characters and reader, the story rises above its seeming simplicity. Does God ask individuals, like Nephi, to break the rules for the greater good? Will God continue to use outsiders, like Joseph Smith, to bring forth truth through unconventional means? What do revelation and scripture look like, and how do we know that it is? What if it comes through a woman?

Julia is a woman, a convert, and a criminal (even if inspired)—facts that Ted spits out as soon as Julia is forced to reveal what she hid from him: white lies, pages of translation, and the cylinder full of scrolls stuffed behind the bathroom plumbing. The husband that seemed so supportive, so understanding, cannot see past the accepted Mormon protocol. Ted is a product of the culture he was raised in, “one of those Taylors that go back to John” (6). As a convert/outsider, Julia can see the possibility, power, and congruence Ted is closed off to. She may share his faith, but how they “navigate the tension between personal revelation and institutional revelation” might not align.⁹

Perhaps Julia’s discovery is a fulfillment of the blessing Ted gave her before the final round of IVF? She and Ted had both felt so sure when

9. Perkins, Luisa. Interview by William Morris. “A Conversation with Luisa Perkins About Her Short Novel, *Prayers in Bath*.” *A Motley Vision* (blog), 18 May 2017. <http://www.motleyvision.org/2017/conversation-luisa-perkins-prayers-in-bath/>.

he spoke, “You will bring forth a miracle” (7). It wasn’t what they anticipated she would bring forth, but was it a miracle and confirmation of Glastonbury legend? “That Jesus came to England as a lad with Joseph of Arimathea, his rich uncle . . . it’s not out of the question is it, given what Latter-day Saints know about Christ in America? If he traveled there, why not here?” (67). Why not her to discover it?

Jacqui Larsen’s art seems to reach for answers too. Collaged circles and shapes stacked on one another extend the idea of building and reaching. Circles in circles point at inclusion and exclusion. In the limited edition, the art is electric, colored beyond the blunt grayscale reproductions in the standard edition, but their questions are the same: circle in or push out potential truths that don’t fit into current belief’s shape? How to follow patterns and not be stuck in them? Notably, there are decorative flourishes of Larsen’s shapes at sections beginnings and endings with one exception—the moment Julia catches a pattern in the scroll’s characters: Jesus (50). Following this circle image in the text, Julia is then able to translate.

With such careful attention paid to this thoughtfully provocative story, original art made for the book, and the weight of thoughtful and deftly-handled questions, it’s unfortunate those who proofed the text didn’t take the same care. For example, Ted announces “So I drove over to the abbey” to look for Julia (72), but how? Ted and Julia don’t have a car. Throughout the small book the couple travels by bus or walks wherever they need to go; they are overseas for a short time and living in a city with easy public transportation. Poor enough to count out chocolate-covered biscuits and with their savings wiped clean by failed fertility treatments, they would not be likely to have a car that they do not need. This small hitch does not hold up the story; it’s a glitch. What it does is smell of the state of most small Mormon publishers. It’s expensive to spend time sifting the silt and snarls out off a manuscript, but there’s a lesson in this. Any book that wants to be taken seriously,

that deserves to be taken seriously (and this book wants to and should be), deserves the expense of a clean copy.

Prayers in Bath is a pivotal book that merits the right to ask what it does through the very real characters that breathe them into life. There are no lines of the prayers Julia uttered in Bath, but the answers unearthed from the ruins were profound. Luisa Perkins earns the right to posit her questions and see her book bound as art and with art, because it is art.



The Life of a Spiritualist Saint

Scott H. Partridge, ed. *Thirteenth Apostle: The Diaries of Amasa M. Lyman, 1832–1877*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2016. 1050 pp. Appendix, biographical register, biography, index. Hardcover: \$60.00. ISBN 978–1–56085–236–3.

Reviewed by Cristina Rosetti

In historic accounts of Mormonism's founding leaders, Amasa M. Lyman is often absent. However, despite this absence, Lyman is noteworthy for the many roles he played in the formative years of the Church. He was converted through the missionizing efforts of Lyman E. Johnson and Orson Pratt, served as a missionary who became known for his charismatic preaching, acted as apostle under both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, led the San Bernardino territory, and was eventually excommunicated for apostasy. For all the roles he played, Lyman's life presents important insight into the complexity and challenges within early Mormonism. In the introductory notes to the volume, Scott Par-