

ELOUISE BELL (1935–2017)

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In the fall of 1973, I enrolled as a sophomore at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. On a whim, I registered for a course titled ENG 240 WRITING POETRY, INSTRUCTOR: E. BELL. I had no idea who “E. Bell” was—male or female? animal, vegetable, or mineral?—but I soon found out. The first day of class, as we eager, would-be-poets settled into our neatly aligned desk-chairs, the door opened and a statuesque woman with the regal swagger of a Hawaiian queen and the deadpan grin of a stand-up comic entered the classroom toting a hefty book bag that she promptly dropped on the teacher’s desk—clunk! With an audible exhalation, she sat down and eyed us like a disgruntled basketball coach sizing up her ragtag recruits. She briefly rummaged through her bag, removed a book, cracked it open, and proceeded to read a poem. I don’t remember the name of the poem or its author, but I vividly recall the manner in which “E. Bell” read it: full-throttle, varying the voices of the multiple narrators, at one point howling like a coyote, at another lowering her voice until it was barely audible, then blasting a hole through the wall with it. Her face twisted, contorted, smiled, frowned. In two short minutes, she displayed the Three Faces of Eve and the Seven Faces of Dr. Lao. She wasn’t just reading—she was performing. She was putting on a show, and the walls of our classroom seemed to close in upon us, and the world outside withdrew as we became her captive little audience in a fire-lit Paleolithic cave where the power of words—not flashing screens or monitors—was our sole source of entertainment.

At that moment I remember thinking to myself: “What the hell have I gotten myself into?”

I soon found out. Elouise Bell's class would be the most exhilarating and enlightening experience of my college career. Every class session we would take our seats and wait in silent anticipation wondering, "What's she going to do today? What magic trick is she going to pull out of that book bag?"

Periodically, she would enthrall us with her histrionic readings, but the title of the course was WRITING POETRY, so for the lion's share of the class we read our well-intentioned work while receiving constructive feedback from our peers and, most importantly, from our venerable if somewhat eccentric instructor. I can still see Elouise sitting at her desk listening as we read our work, periodically nodding (a good sign) or her lower lip twisting and her forehead buckling (a bad sign), every so often smiling (very good), and very, very rarely, whispering as if to herself: "nice . . . very nice." And if she tagged our name onto the whisper (as in, "very nice, Joan" or "very nice, David"), we knew we had scored a winner. Although she always found something positive in our efforts, Elouise did not dish out praise perfunctorily. You had to earn your little gold stars. In retrospect, it was remarkable how much sway her opinions had over my young heart. If I got a "very nice, Michael," I would be flying high for a week. On the other hand, I remember how on one of my more experimental pieces she scribbled one word: "UGH!" I was devastated. I couldn't sleep for a month.

Back then, Brigham Young University had—and still maintains—a strict code of conduct that includes explicit dress and grooming standards. During those first few weeks of class, I had allowed my sun-bleached locks to creep down over my ears and past my collar—a strictly verboten length. Either a fellow student had ratted me out or I was the victim of a random sighting by the BYU Dress and Grooming Police. In any case, for some reason, Elouise was notified that I was in violation of the Honor Code, and what was she going to do about it? (Elouise never did understand why she had been assigned to call me on the carpet.) She didn't summon me into her office for a finger-shaking

lecture about integrity and honoring covenants and how hair over my collar was the first step towards a swift descent to Hell. Rather, in classic Elouise Bell fashion, at the end of the next class, she called me up to her desk, handed me a sealed envelope, smiled, and said four words: “Oh, Michael, Michael, Michael . . .”

I played nonchalant at first, thanking her for the letter as I strolled out into the autumn sunlight. But the instant I was out of eyesight and earshot, I ripped open the envelope, fully expecting to see my expulsion papers. Instead, I found a poem, an Elouise Bell original, two pages of clever, dancing, prancing words that read like a lilting manifesto that could also have been the lyrics to a song on the Beatles’ *White Album*. The gist of the message was: if you want to stay in school—and I hope you do—please choose the clippers over the ruby slippers.

I found a cheap barbershop that afternoon.

After I graduated from BYU, Elouise and I stayed in touch. I kept her posted about my whereabouts, the births of my children, and other mileposts as I hacked my way through the jungles of adult life. I often sent her drafts of short stories that she would return a few weeks later with a little smiley face at the top of page one and red ink hemorrhaging liberally over all the pages that followed. But I had learned to love the sight of her second-hand blood. No one could drill to the heart of a literary work—poem, short story, novel, play—quite like Elouise. Whether it was a Shakespearean masterpiece or a pedestrian effort by a callow undergraduate, she always knew exactly what worked, what didn’t, and why, and she would boldly and blatantly tell you so.

If I was fortunate enough to publish a story or win a contest, Elouise would always send me a congratulatory card. I remember one in particular featured a little red devil wielding a pitchfork with the caption: HOT DAMN AND HALLELUJAH! But other times she sent cards randomly, as if she intuitively knew when I was struggling through a rough patch. Most were humorous, but others were more thought-provoking. All were perfectly timed to rescue me from whatever demons had grabbed

me by the throat at the moment. I pinned those cards to the bulletin board above my desk until they covered the better part of it, and, over the years, a quick glance at that eclectic collage would always conjure up a smile, even on those days when I felt far more like the receiving end of a battering ram than a covenant child of God.

I think it's no understatement to call Elouise the grande dame of Mormon letters. We lost her on September 30, 2017. She will be remembered for oh so many things. She was an award-winning columnist for *network* and *The Salt Lake Tribune* and a gifted writer who published poems, stories, and two collections of humorous essays—*Only When I Laugh* (1990) and *Madame Ridiculous and Lady Sublime* (2001). She also wrote and performed a one-woman play, *Aunt Patty Remembers*, based upon the life of Mormon pioneer mid-wife Patty Bartlett Sessions. She was an entertaining public speaker, a civic leader, and a founding member of the Association of Mormon Letters (1976). She was a lover of animals who, in her words, “had to be vigorously restrained from acting on her belief that she could houstrain llamas.”¹

And she was a pioneer for her era. A staunch advocate for women's rights and equality, on September 30, 1975 she became the first female faculty member at BYU to deliver a forum address, and it was a groundbreaking doozy. “The Implications of Feminism for BYU” became a clarion call for all Latter-day Saints, male and female, to embrace the women's movement as a sacred opportunity to right the historical and societal wrongs against women. And that was just her warm-up act. In 1983, in recognition for her contributions to human rights and the cause of women, the Utah Political Caucus honored Elouise with the Susa Young Gates Award. Fourteen years later, the Governor of Utah presented her with the Utah Woman of Achievement Award in recognition of a lifetime of contribution and service to the cause of women and families.

1. Elouise Bell, “Obituary for Elouise M. Bell.” Unpublished, 2017.

Astoundingly, as she neared the end of her time on earth, Elouise lamented the fact that she hadn't been more vocal about women's rights. I reminded her of her tenuous position for her generation: an unmarried female professor at one of the most patriarchal educational institutions in the nation. If she had been more brash and outspoken, at best she would have been dismissed as a contentious feminist crackpot, an apostate, "one of them"; at worst, she could have been fired. So she had resorted to a far more subversive and effective weapon: humor. Early in life she had learned that she could say just about anything and get away with it as long as she couched it in a good one-liner. So she became the court jester of sorts, the grand humorist who could pull back the curtain on the blushing Wizard or tell the pompous Emperor, "Oh, and by the way, you're buck naked, brother"—without fear of retribution or termination.

After retiring from BYU in 1994, Elouise found herself at another crossroads when she met the love of her life, Nancy R. Jefferis, a senior partner in a law firm in South Carolina. Once again, she took the road less traveled, following her heart, and in 2015 she broke yet another barrier when she married Nancy in the Universalist Church in Edmund, Oklahoma.

Writer, poet, humorist, world-class essayist, thespian, activist, pioneer: Elouise was all of these and more, but first and foremost, she was a teacher. She was born to teach, and she knew it. She once told me that, after graduating from college, she was offered a job as a journalist at a prestigious magazine in New York. "I could have been good," she said, "damn good! Barbara Walters good!" She signed the contract, sealed the envelope, stuck it in her mailbox, and raised the little red flag. Then she walked back inside, sat down, folded her arms, and thought a moment. There was this job offer that had been nibbling at the back of her brain. They needed an English teacher at Brigham Young University. Why was this thought still nibbling so earnestly? She got up, sauntered out to the mailbox, retrieved the envelope, tore it up, and a few days later she was on her way to Provo.

I once asked Elouise if she ever regretted that decision. She shook her head vigorously, then explained why. The first day when she stood in front of her first class, she felt an adrenal rush of sheer euphoria, like an actor when the lights come up on opening night. And she thought to herself: *This is what I want to do for the rest of my life.*

And so she did—at least for the next thirty-five years of it. And I and the myriad other students who were fortunate enough to occupy a seat in one of her classrooms were forever blessed because of it. She taught us far more than how to string together coherent sentences. She taught us honesty and authenticity. She taught us to write what we actually felt, not what some individual or institution told us we were supposed to feel. She helped us find our unique voice and then gave us the courage to articulate it. Elouise never had children of her own, yet she had thousands—surrogate sons and daughters like me whose lives were literally transformed in her classroom. Because of Elouise, we saw the world differently and we saw ourselves differently. We saw grace and goodness in the ordinary, and injustice and hypocrisy in established norms. We saw strength and beauty in diversity, and the power and glory of words.

Thus, she taught us—generations of us—to look a little more deeply at life, love, politics, and religion; to question societal and cultural traditions that had been passed down as gospel truth. Instead of burning her bra, she made jokes. She made us laugh. And after we had finished laughing, an hour later and five miles down the road, when it hit us like a delayed double-take, she made us think. And then things got really interesting. In time we conceived our own impossible dreams and charged Quixote-like into the breach: hot damn and hallelujah!

As her students, she saw us through a mother's eyes, which is to say through God's eyes: not as dust-of-the-earth misfits blundering through mortality but as angels of light divinely commissioned to save the world in our own unique way. We seldom lived up to the billing, but any good thing that I have done in my adult life has Elouise's fingerprints on it.

And whenever my head droops or my courage falters, I hear her voice above the din cheering me on: the clouds part, I press on, and in time I'm standing on the summit with her arm around my shoulder, a kiss on my cheek, and a funky congratulatory card in my hand.

Elouise was bigger than life, a one-of-a-kind who will never be duplicated. I'm tempted to say that a shining light on the hill has forever been extinguished, but that's not true. Elouise has simply taken her well-earned place among the stars. In one of her essays titled "Still Teaching?" Elouise made this observation:

When people move beyond school years, they think of themselves as advancing down a time-line. But memory claims those years we move beyond, including the people involved. Teachers are part of the furniture of those chambers of memory. Though rationally we know otherwise, emotionally we believe they have never changed position on that time-line. So meeting a former teacher is like re-entering our own past. As long as Mrs Booker is still teaching English, as long as Professor Gasbag still lectures on chemistry, our past is intact, just as we remember it. We have stepped into a holodeck of our own creation. And next time we return, it will still be there. Won't it?²

In Elouise's case, the answer is a resounding yes, because her light, her spirit, continues to radiate through her many friends and former students, and through our children and our grandchildren down through the generations.

At the funeral of feminist activist Algie E. Ballif, Elouise remarked to a stranger, "She was the great role model of my life."

"Ah," the other woman said. "Then you haven't really lost her."³

Nor have we lost Elouise.

2. Elouise Bell, "Still Teaching?" *Madame Ridiculous and Lady Sublime* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books 2001), 72.

3. Elouise Bell, "In Memoriam: Algie E. Ballif," *Only When I Laugh* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books 1990), 36.