

A Philosophical Portrait in Pieces

Steven L. Peck. *Gilda Trillim: Shepherdess of Rats*. Winchester, UK: Roundfire Books, 2017. 272 pp. Paper: \$21.95. ISBN: 978-1-78279-864-4.

Reviewed by Rachel Kirkwood

It has now been months since I first made the acquaintance of Gilda Trillim, but even now I must admit that I do not completely understand her.

However, I do not view this as a failure of the novel that bears her name, nor of my comprehension of it. For Steven L. Peck's *Gilda Trillim: Shepherdess of Rats*—a generic chimera that is part character study, part academic satire, and part philosophical treatise—is not your average book club fare. In it we are presented not with a storyline or even literary characters in their conventional form, but with an “Academic Work Disguised as a Novel Disguised as an Academic Work”—an amateur source biography on Trillim compiled by fictional graduate student Kattrim Mender. As we sift through the letters, journal entries, gossip columns, magazine articles, novel excerpts, and interviews collected here, a rough image of Trillim emerges but never solidifies. Each vignette reveals a different side of this enigmatic figure: one moment she is a Western girl from a potato farm in Idaho, the next she is an avant-garde poet, the next a professional badminton player, the next a supplicant studying at a Soviet monastery, and still later a POW in Vietnam. Just when you think you may have finally pinned down her character, she takes an unexpected turn. Her life is less easily described than listed, a constellation of competing experiences and character traits that inhere within one body-shaped ecosystem.

While at times frustrating, such elusiveness seems fitting in a book so concerned with modes of knowledge and understanding. Peck's novel itself takes the form of an academic quest to understand a subject, and

that very subject—Gilda Trillim—has a quest of her own. She is insatiably drawn to pursuing questions of being and the reach of radical empathy: Where do we come from? What is the place of human life in the cosmos? How does it feel to be another person? A rat? The items of a junk drawer?

In many ways, the story of Trillim's life and career is the story of the conceptual development of her answers to these questions, and of the various means she employs to reach satisfying answers. Trillim does not shy away from traditional sources of knowledge, such as academic study and organized religion, but she does not view them as sufficient. Instead she supplements them by looking for answers to life's questions in less obvious places. Some of these are relatively well-accepted by society's norms (art, literature, travel), while others veer into the fringe or extreme (monastic meditation, psychedelic drugs, visionary meetings with the divine, and physical communion with other creatures).

It is through Trillim's exploration of these less traditional practices that her quixotic relationship to Mormonism is made clear. Trillim identifies herself as a Mormon, and the text itself takes a knowledge of Mormonism for granted; indeed, Peck quite unabashedly incorporates phrases and concepts from the Mormon idiolect and LDS Church history into the text without explanation. "Sacrament meeting" (48), "the priesthood" (145), "the Nephites" (12), "the Mexican territories" (13), and "sacred garments" (29), for example, are sprinkled throughout the text without much elaboration of cultural context. Such a familiarity with Mormonism, however, does not make Gilda's a familiar Mormon story, for as Katt states, Trillim's "take on Mormonism was unorthodox to say the least" (9). The most obvious signs of Trillim's sideways relationship to the LDS faith are her inconsistent record of church attendance over the years and participation in practices that are not sanctioned by the Church as presently constituted (blessings of female healing, for example) or are actively condemned by it (her use of ayahuasca in her vision quest, and for that matter of marijuana in her youth [166]).

But these outward signs are but indications of a more basic difference in theological approach that sets her apart from the Mormon masses. Trillim is many things—an athlete, an explorer, a writer, a thinker. But she is also, unquestionably, a mystic—in the mold of Hildegard of Bingen or Margery Kempe. Her connection with the divine is intense, individual, and punctuated by unique visions that in their specificity and strangeness are discordant with most accounts of Mormon revelatory manifestations. In one she meets a giant dragonfly, for example, who leads her through the cosmos and the beginning of time (78), and in another she chats with a Heavenly Mother that appears not wearing the Mormon angel’s uniform of generic white robes, but a “red sequin cloche hat” and “gorgeous blue heels” (148). While not actively contradicting Mormon doctrine, these visions are outside the standardized norms of discussions of the creation, Heavenly Mother, etc. within the Church, and as such these moments gave me as an LDS reader moments of pause, despite myself. Conditioned as I am to the standard stories and doctrines I have been taught since I was a child, I fought against the knee-jerk reaction to reject the unfamiliar and pondered why I had experienced such discomfort in the first place. I found myself thinking, “Putting aside the fact that Trillim is a fictional character and that therefore these visions are in fact also fictional, the accounts in this book are only descriptions of personal experience, not statements of absolute doctrine or dogma. So why did they make me raise my eyebrows? Do I not believe in personal revelation, at least to this extent?”

My experience grappling with Trillim’s iteration of my religion highlighted for me how much Mormonism and mysticism are uncomfortable bedfellows. In some ways the LDS Church is one of the most personal and mystical Christian sects of the modern era. After all, the Church was born out of the visionary revelations of a prophet and teaches of a God who knows each of us by name and to whom we can turn for individual guidance and revelation. As Trillim herself states, “Indeed, all of Mormon faith is about seeking an encounter with the

divine” (219). But it is also a church of order and authority—there are protocols regarding stewardship over revelation: every member may receive answers from God, but not every member is a prophet who we can trust to receive *the* correct answer, particularly to questions of great doctrinal significance. Combine this with a belief in the existence of ultimate truth, and thus of right or wrong answers, and one is left with a church that believes in individual revelation—and indeed visions—in theory but is wary of them in practice.

When regarded cynically, these seeming safeguards to revelation may be viewed as a way to discredit dissidents and to control the Church through denying some versions of personal theological exploration. But is it not also true that not every “vision” comes from God, and that there is the chance for a madman to appear among the mystics? If so, where does Trillim fall on the spectrum? How are we meant to view her? As a misguided outsider at odds with her culture? As a mystic who pushes the boundaries of Mormon culture to uncover deeper truths? As a woman struggling with mental illness and delusions of grandeur? As a prophetess, or even a savior? Neither Kattrim nor Peck solves the mystery; through the fragments collected we read many different interpretations of Trillim’s life—from scholars, Trillim’s friend (perhaps lover) Babs, and Katt himself—and none entirely agree. Indeed, although the reader is made to feel predisposed to believe and sympathize with Trillim throughout the text, in the final scenes her fervid religiosity reaches such a peak that she offers her body as a salvific sacrament to the rats of Thailand. It is difficult to rationalize that action, and indeed it is the turning point for Babs in her interpretation of her dear friend, prompting her to concede that perhaps a madness lurked in Trillim that she had not previously seen.

This open-ended conclusion is all to the book’s good, for it underscores the questions at the book’s heart that were so important to Trillim and that insistently demanded my attention as I puzzled over her: Where do I find sources of information and insight and why do I trust them?

What place does the mystical have in my religious practice? What is my limit case for revelation? Just how far can empathy reach? And how does anyone come to understand the being of *any* other creature, be it an eccentric poet, a rat, or an apple seed?

Just as Trillim fails to completely understand the essence of the seed she studies for so long, my studies of Trillim feel unfinished. I've looked at her from numerous angles, attempted to sketch her qualities, stretched the limits of my empathy, but each vignette is an insufficient portrait of the whole. I am not entirely convinced that each part in this literary ecosystem—in particular the frame narrative—provide the characterization and depth for which the book seems to reach. But the insufficiency of the fragments has its own charm, letting the questions in this novel of ideas hang, not masking them with niceties and pleasant endings.

So, do I completely understand Trillim? No. Was it a fascinating, baffling, and rewarding experience to try? Absolutely.