

Traveling “the undiscovered country”

Stephen Carter, ed. *Moth and Rust: Mormon Encounters with Death*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2017. 257 pp. Paper: \$23.95. ISBN: 9781560852650.

Reviewed by Susan Elizabeth Howe

Death comes into our lives all too often; we don't seek it out. As much as possible, we focus on essential, everyday concerns and keep death in the distance, at the edge of the horizon. Consequently, it is something of an anomaly to find a book of essays, poetry, fiction, drama, and art whose organizing subject is death. Asked to review *Moth and Rust*, I opened it with trepidation, not particularly eager for such a long and intense engagement with, as Shakespeare calls it, “The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (*Hamlet* 3.1.80–1). But this collection has been an altogether satisfying and thought-provoking read. It is original and extremely well-written, and the authors' musings about and personal experiences with death have left me with much to consider.

As I began to read, I immediately noticed that each of the forty-six authors is intelligent and talented and has an extensive publishing record. These writers care about words and use them well, the evocative and mellifluous title *Moth and Rust* being the first example of such care. The excellence of both the prose and the poetry is one of the greatest pleasures the book offers. Flannery O'Connor said that in a literary work of art, the method of presenting the work (the language with which it is written and how that language is arranged) is an aspect of the art and can't be separated from it; it is impossible to summarize what a piece says, because the very way of conveying the story or ideas is an inseparable aspect of how and what the work means. The individual pieces in this collection function in that way, offering more than a reader can comprehend in a single reading. Furthermore, I can describe them only incompletely;

there is so much more to be gained by reading them one by one. And a word about the poems: to feel their full impact in the collection, the reader must slow down, reread each one three or four times in a sitting to absorb the way the images and symbols expand and echo, extending the meaning of the words.

The unusual focus of this book is one of its strongest assets; I've never read anything even remotely like it. Editor Stephen Carter has divided the contents into five loosely arranged sections. The first, "Passages," includes works about the death of someone close to the narrator. Usually that closeness is loving and sustaining; in one essay it is based on cruelty, and in others what should be closeness is complicated by the taciturn or flighty, irresponsible personality of the beloved person. Five of the works are about mothers, four about fathers, three about grandmothers or great grandmothers, one about a brother, and one about a beloved woman friend. Some are more about the narrator than the dying person, often the way the narrator comes to a new understanding of death or of his or her relationship with the departed loved one. There are five poems, nine personal essays, and one joke—the dying person's joke.

The second section is "Piercing the Veil," about visitations from those who have passed. I expected that in this section, the personal essays would be more hesitant than the stories in making claims about communication with ghosts and angels, but two of the three essays are as emphatic in tone as the stories. In one essay, the writer describes matter-of-factly all the ghosts that have visited his family. In the other, a message from children who had died a century before teaches a chaplain of the relationship between this world and the next. The more tentative essay begins with a dream a gay man has of his partner drowning in churning, muddy water, at the actual time he was drowning in the Mississippi River. The stories, being fictional, are free to speculate. The first imagines how "mothers in heaven," women of one family who have passed on to the spirit world, come back to the mortal world to bless their daughters and granddaughters during times of great stress. The

other is about a teenaged girl whose dead boyfriend returns to be with her constantly.

I found “Fleeting,” the third section, about the deaths of children, to be the most painful. There is no fiction in this section; these are personal stories of a miscarriage, an abortion, the deaths of a one-day old son, a three-year-old son, and other equally poignant pieces, including a poem about a mother reading the letter that tells her how her dead son’s organs have been donated.

In the fourth section, “A Wider View,” writers look at death as a subject of philosophical speculation. These pieces ask difficult questions: how can a biologist, comprehending his discipline’s perspective that all life on Earth will eventually be extinguished, enjoy planting peas with his wife in their garden? How can God have required, with the Fall, the pervasive and horrendous suffering of animals, which must prey upon each other to survive? What is one’s responsibility for the animals he personally has killed? As they were about to be separated by Eve’s death, how did Adam and Eve feel about her choice to lead us all into this suffering, mortal world? Why are some Mormons protected from death by heavenly warnings while others aren’t? This section presents readers with troubling paradoxes about death that cannot be reconciled, only examined and accepted within the limits of our current knowledge of eternal truth.

The fifth section, “A Single Soul,” presents individual takes on death. Some of them are quirky—one about the writer’s dissatisfaction with the slowly rusting 1965 Ford Fairlane he bought because it was like the one he had in high school, another about the narrator’s fear of dying at night in an automobile accident as he drives from one comedy gig to another. One informational essay admonishes readers to create a bucket list that reflects their personal dreams, not the culture’s or the Church’s expectations. The other pieces in the section are profound personal essays about such subjects as dealing with severe chronic pain or life-threatening cancer.

The variety of genres is another pleasure of this collection. There are personal essays, informational essays, experimental essays, sermons, stories, poems, a play (not surprisingly, by Eric Samuelsen), and three drawings titled “Three Grand Keys,” with text explaining in three different languages how to tell if an otherworldly visitor is an angel, a just man made perfect, or the devil appearing as an angel of light. Carter has done an extraordinary job of weaving all these genres together so that in turning to the next piece, the reader is surprised and has to adjust expectations for how the narrative will develop.

As Carter says in the introduction, being confronted with death “brings us squarely into the present,” and only in the face of death are we “so intimately connected to life, so unburdened and unsupported by the past and future.” There are such a variety of responses to death that each reader will find some pieces to fit and others to challenge his or her paradigm of what happens at death, of how the dead interact with the living, and of how we create meaning in or come to an acceptance of this mortal experience that ultimately awaits us all.



A Life Worth Living

George B. Handley. *Learning to Like Life: A Tribute to Lowell Bennion*. Self-Published, CreateSpace, 2017. 122 pp. Paper: \$12.99. ISBN: 9781975992699.

Reviewed by Zach Hutchins

The highest achievement for a volume of *Festschrift* is to prompt readers to revisit the life and teachings of that individual in whose honor it has