

## Understudies for Angels

Megan Sanborn Jones. *Contemporary Mormon Pageantry: Seeking After the Dead*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2018. 336 pp. Hardcover: \$77.74. Kindle: \$64.95. ISBN: 978-0472130979.

*Reviewed by Michael Hicks*

The cover photo startles us into the book's theme: two tribes, ghosts and mortals, staring off in the same direction. Beyond that cover we take a trek through Mormonism's pageantry—not the pageantry of temple rituals or General Conferences or Tabernacle Choir spectaculars, but the outdoor reenactment of events both real and mythic in the faith's ancient history or old-timey past. A pageant, Jones shows us, is a surrogate reincarnation. It is neither fiction nor fantasy, however contrived or stagey, but is a eulogy, headstone, and resurrection all at once.

Among the book's several roles, it acts as a compendium of four recent long-running pageants: the Hill Cumorah, Manti, Nauvoo, and Mesa. The locales are all Church-related sites, though suitably removed from Salt Lake City. Their real estate shapes the analysis, since the locale of a pageant *is* the stage. And that stage is inviolate. The pageant can't go on tour. For Jones, the reenactment of events in their primal environs links present to the past in profound ways, even allowing the ghosts of original characters to mingle with their proxy casts. This sociology suits Mormonism well: dead men delivered its founding book, transmitted its priesthood from beyond the grave, and then assigned tasks—including the dead men's own redemption—from the other side of the supernatural "veil." Mormonism is not just a religion, but also an elaborate ghost story.

The title has two taxonomic grey areas for me. First: "contemporary"—contemporary with what? How old makes the cut? More important, what do we mean by "pageant"? Jones limits her observations

to most outdoor church-sponsored events called “pageants” functioning annually at the time she wrote. Indoor pageants (like *It Came to Pass*, which operated for decades near the Oakland Temple), non-continuous commemorative pageants (like *Message of the Ages*, mounted for the successive centennials of the church’s founding and of its entry into the Salt Lake Valley), shorter-lived ones (like *People of the Book* in Southern California and Utah, 1967–1969), and even the portable, multiple-site pageants *Zion* (created and published by the Church for its 1980 sesqui-centennial) and *Savior of the World* (currently promoted on the Church’s website), all fail to make it even into the back story of this book. That keeps Jones’s focus tidy and clean. Which is good. But the omissions feel a bit like a flat earth taking the place of a round one.

Jones provides fairly lush detail about her four works’ scripting, casting, music, lighting, choreography, and such, not in the form of lists but as ripples in the ably flowing prose. The construction of that prose, mind you, is cinematic. Although the book has five chapters and an epilogue, it often crosscuts among topics, from the naming of the Hill Cumorah itself, to the pursuit of virtue in religious media, to temples as death-redemption, and so forth. Meanwhile, if her topics roam confidently through Mormonism’s intellectual landscape, so do her sources, from theoretical to anecdotal. The range of scholarship reveals a mind at once single-minded yet vividly curious. The verbiage floats easily from theoretical to practical and from jargon to vernacular with little shift in tone.

One of the duties of a reviewer, of course, is to utter his or her obligatory disappointments. Other than the one about putative pageants that fly under Jones’s radar, I have two slight misgivings. First, the bibliography lacks some classic works and authors in the realm of Mormon theater. The strangest omission is that of George Pyper, who virtually ran the cultural life of the Church in the early twentieth century, and whose *Romance of an Old Playhouse* might have lent some savory ingredients to Jones’s recipe. Second, I dislike those telegraphing moments that typify

academic prose: “In what follows, I will do [x] and then [y]”—followed, of course, by x and y. That construction suits dissertations, I suppose, but feels stale in books. At least ones that make my mind salivate.

With those reservations out of the way, let me make clear: Jones is sharp-minded, dogged, and fair. Those three traits make hers the standard treatment that will be paralleled and troped but never superseded. Its ruminations on death-theology-via-pageantry make it complete a trilogy on my shelves alongside Douglas Davies’s *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* and Samuel Brown’s *In Heaven As It Is on Earth*.

In the architecture of Mormon scholarship, irony is often the capstone. Here, that irony is the Church’s wholesale cancellation of pageants on the heels of this book’s publication. Of Jones’s four pageants, only Nauvoo escaped the axe. Since her book barely preceded the edict, she will have to wait for another edition to analyze its cause and effect. Till then, this book survives as an elegant relic of a now even ghostlier art.



## The Maidservant’s Witness

Mette Harrison. *The Book of Abish*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2019. 190 pp. Paperback: \$9.95. ISBN: 978-1948218085.

*Reviewed by Luisa Perkins*

Every writer, whether prophetic or not, questions some things and assumes others. One of the attractions of a retelling is the way it highlights subjectivity—something we tend to ignore as readers of history, myth, or scripture. In Mette Harrison’s *The Book of Abish*, as with any retelling, we encounter subjectivity not only of character, but of author.