

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 Those three traits make hers the standard treatment that will be paralleled and troped but never superseded.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.

In Alma 19, we get Abish's experience at least third hand. Ammon presumably told the story to Alma the Younger, who then recorded it. Mormon's relative silence in this section of Alma possibly indicates a lighter editorial hand, though certainty in that regard is difficult—for this non-scholar, at least. But did Ammon speak to Abish directly after the miraculous fact, or did he get his information about her from her employer, the queen? We likely won't know anytime soon.

In any case, the details of the "original" account are sparse, but intriguing. The Lamanite King Lamoni, after arising from a three-day coma in which "the dark veil of unbelief was being cast away from his mind" (verse 6), testifies of his Redeemer and is again "overpowered by the Spirit" (verse 13) to the point of unconsciousness. Lamoni's wife along with Ammon and all the servants in the vicinity soon follow suit—except for Abish, who has been a secret convert for many years. She runs from house to house to tell people what has happened, hoping "it would cause them to believe in the power of God (verse 17)."

However, once everyone arrives on the scene, they don't react the way Abish initially had planned. Desperately trying to curb the Lamanites' rising anger, she takes the queen's hand "that perhaps she might raise her" (verse 29). After praising Jesus, the queen raises up her husband (Ammon apparently arises on his own), who then preaches the gospel to his people. Exit Abish, like Samuel, never again to be encountered by Nephite or Latter-day audiences.

In *The Book of Abish*, Harrison plunges into Alma's significant narrative gaps with energy and imagination, inventing a cast refreshingly rich in female characters. Abish is the youngest of seven sisters, and her mother's enthralling postpartum experiences begin the narrative.

Abish's young life is a riches-to-rags story (and indeed, Harrison cites Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* as a significant influence). Abish's wealthy father dies and the family business is stolen by a greedy partner. Once the family is evicted from their house, the sisters scramble to survive. Some marry with varying degrees of success; one

disappears entirely; and another becomes a prostitute and then commits suicide out of shame and despair. Abish is left to care for and support her grieving and increasingly addled mother as best she can. She eventually gets married and takes a job at the king's house, where she later encounters Ammon, the enigmatic Nephite.

In building Abish's world, Harrison sketches a host of Lamanite gods, with her characters generally selecting one or another as a favorite. In the book's prologue, Abish's mother Timah invokes "the Great One," the absentee father of all other gods, to protect her newborn baby from her husband's wrath at having yet another girl. Curiously, Harrison chooses not to connect "the Great One" to the Nephite "One True God," with whom Abish's father Haman and Abish herself later converse, and no other Lamanite seems to patronize the Great One once the main story begins.

Though Harrison pleasingly rounds out the Lamanite social structure, the book is devoid of much physical setting. I imagine this is due to Harrison's reluctance to side with any of the various Book of Mormon geography factions. Guatemala or Great Lakes? Reticence sidesteps the controversy, but some vividness and clarity is lost as a result. Fabrics, on the other hand, are described in great detail, perhaps alluding to the "fine-twined linen" mentioned throughout the Book of Mormon.

Harrison's focus on Abish as a woman of destiny has clear echoes of Queen Esther. However, though Abish has intimate contact with deity through thoughts and impressions, the visionary experiences remain with men—her father and much later, her husband. A traditional reading of Alma 19:16—"she having been converted unto the Lord for many years, on account of a remarkable vision of her father"—assigns the converting vision to Abish's father. Though "of her father" *can* indicate possession, the verse doesn't have to be read that way. As first pointed out to me in an essay by Kevin and Shauna Christensen, it's just as valid to read the verse as Abish herself having had a vision of her father.

In Alma's account, Abish deliberately takes the queen by the hand to raise her. The queen, in turn, similarly raises her husband. Though

the story takes place more than a hundred years before Christ's ministry, Mormon as editor may have highlighted Abish's physical actions to prefigure the healing and restoring miracles of the resurrected Lord and his Nephite Twelve and hint at intriguing priesthood/temple connections. Harrison's choice to have Abish merely shake the queen awake detracted from the miraculous nature of the story and the "woman of destiny" theme.

Harrison's first book published by BCC Press, *The Book of Laman*, sports a clever cover, its design linking it to the ubiquitous paperback version of the Book of Mormon and hinting at its alternate history plot. BCC's designers, evidently wanting to connect *The Book of Abish* to its earlier companion, use the same iconic typeface and employ the genius tagline "Another Book by Mette Harrison." But instead of navy faux leather, the background is what looks like shocking pink stucco with a few palm fronds waving in front, reminiscent of the kind of loud Hawaiian shirt worn by white men of a certain age. Seeing the pink cover, my ten-year-old asked, "Is that a girl book?" Though gender neutrality shouldn't have to default to more subdued, masculine aesthetics, I did wonder about BCC's intended audience.

These quibbles aside, Harrison should be heartily applauded. *The Book of Abish* is worth reading for more than entertainment value or the thought and conversation Harrison's choices provoke. More than fifty years ago, Hélène Cixous exhorted women to write stories about women, "seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression." In her afterword, Harrison explains she has done just that, "to prioritize a female story and not just a male story because I believe that even if the scriptures don't tell that part of the story, it is there." I hope Harrison and BCC have plans for *The Book of Sariah* and *The Book of Isabel*. I, for one, would read them just as happily as I read Harrison's *Abish*.