

The “Blackblue Heartguts” of Trees

Brooke Larson. *Pleasing Tree*. Arc Pair Press, 2019. 158 pp. Paperback. \$16.00. ISBN: 978-1733971911.

Reviewed by Amy Takabori

Brooke Larson is a tree hugger—literally.

She hugs a female ginkgo in Central Park after pissing at its base. This reminds her of a tree she once hugged in Jerusalem. She walks tree to tree down sidewalks in Salt Lake City.

Larson’s interactions with trees and other earth things are central to her “earthling” wanderings through the Arizona desert, New York City parks, and Israel in her collection of personal essays, *Pleasing Tree*. Throughout, Larson masterfully balances humor with profundity, using her insights into plant processes to explore questions like “how did I get here?”

The collection begins powerfully with “Ecology of Absence,” in which Larson recounts her experiences as a guide in a wilderness therapy program for “precarious” teens, which centers around a long walk across a wild stretch of Arizona desert. Walking is the process and the destination—there’s little else to do under the blazing sun. In between episodes about variously stubborn and pained teen walkers, Larson walks us through ruminations of Navajo tradition, Mormon pioneer heritage, Chinese aesthetic philosophy, and John Cage’s performances of silence. In doing so, Larson extols the virtue of blandness. “The bland is a full achievement: not the lack of flavor, but the possibility of all flavors” (8). The bland, the silent, the empty, and the arid: these are not states of lacking. They are states of possibility.

Our winding nature walk continues in “Plant Inter/eruption” as Larson loses herself in a crisis of post-Mormon transition, then finds solace in dewdrops on a plant. “I found myself dropped to knees to look into light. My heart beat prismatic, my finger tapped the leaf, the dew bounced its way down from blade to blade, never breaking, sparkling,

a self-contained sunburst. Good god! I exhaled. That there could be something so lit up” (44).

We keep walking with Larson in “Treehab” as she compares a kiss to a pea tendril. Plants respond to touch, but at their own pace. If you touch a chilled pea tendril, she explains, it will not move, but “as soon as it warms up, the tendril will curl as if you just stroked it. Plants don’t forget you out there” (57). The kiss is one she shared with a fellow trail guide in a tent before sunrise. “Under that rain shelter, then in sunlight, then beyond desert, in the city, across the country, on foreign couches and under wool blankets, from bored winters to barefoot road trips, long-distance phone calls, silence, sarcasm, ending, and not letting go, and ending again, finally, and forgiving—he and I will grow different for touching” (64). We are similar to plants, Larson shows us. Our shapes will take their time to reveal how even brief encounters will change us.

Larson’s steps are sometimes furtive, such as in darting down alleys as a “recreational urban urinator” (68), in “Piss on Heartbreak.” There are not enough public bathrooms in the city to meet her needs, so she makes a hobby of covert public urination. On one particular day she can’t avoid shitting her pants standing on a New York City sidewalk, and she strides triumphantly home for three miles—what else can she do?

Her wanderings cover more ground than I have space to cover here, but suffice to say her reflections on trying ayahuasca, on seasonal affective disorder, and the “manyfold worlds” (136) of Jerusalem are worth the trek.

Between the full-length essays are intermissions of concrete poems, or images composed by letters and symbols, and flash essays that are each a page and a half long. While these are mostly lovely, my only quibble with *Pleasing Tree* is with one of these flash essays, and it is a concern of stylistic preference. The hyper-alliteration in “brood” in lines such as the following were more distracting than melodic: “There is a graphic gravity to it, holding the letters together, making them a body—a space—where the convexities of convention converge with shivering content. That is to say the medium is the message” (48). My respect for Marshall McLuhan notwithstanding (this media theorist’s

legacy is “the medium is the message”), the unrelenting repetition was overwhelming. But I realize that is the point, so other readers may find that it delivers.

Otherwise, *Pleasing Tree* is a captivating and skillfully constructed collection of essays that will appeal to LDS and non-LDS readers alike. Larson explains Mormon culture and history so that the uninitiated will find her essays easily accessible. However, reading this collection with a Mormon background certainly does pack more punch into some of the stories. In fact, one of the most moving episodes of the entire collection resonated with my own feminist Mormon sentiments. Larson recounts her pioneer ancestress whose family reached a plateau in the Mountain West during a raging blizzard when she went into labor.

The husband tried to pitch a tent as she pushed. As the baby emerged, a hard slapping wind came and blew the tent upward. The woman reached up and held the pole down with one hand, the baby, now, in the other.

The desert is full of holy tents full of holy men and holy smoke of manly meats for the man-god behind the curtain. But when I hear the Lord dwelt in a tent, all I see inside is my foremother using her body as a stake as she pushes out human life. (32)

Larson identifies as an “ethnic Mormon,” which she explains is the “bland state” (17) between LDS and ex-LDS, and it is also, as she is likely highly aware, the term coined by David G. Pace in a 1999 essay published in *Dialogue*.¹ Although Larson’s ethnic Mormon identity is not the centerpiece of these essays, as an ethnic Mormon myself, I recognized myself in some of her experiences unique to that liminal identity. Many other readers will likely also hear echoes of themselves in Larson’s search for belonging. As the Church continues to grapple with how to make its community more inclusive to a wider spectrum of people, it is worth noting that Larson is making a meaningful contribution to the visibility of “ethnic Mormons” with this collection.

1. David G. Pace, “After the (Second) Fall: A Journey toward Ethnic Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 85–95.

Ultimately, *Pleasing Tree* is written by and for wanderers searching for meaning. She asks, “How did I get here?” and the answer seems to be “by contrasts.” We need absence to highlight presence, she contends. We need silence so we can hear. Plants need dark periods to get nutrients from the light. It is by getting lost that we can find ourselves. After walking through desert and beauty and loneliness and light, Larson beams hopeful. “And sometimes I feel it, when I’m filthy through and through with my own blackblue heartguts: the world is pleased with me. I am doing human alright” (72–73).

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Worthy of Their Hire? Mormon Leaders’ Relationship with Wealth

D. Michael Quinn. *The Mormon Hierarchy: Wealth and Corporate Power*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2017. 597 pp. Endnotes. Appendices. Index. Cloth: \$49.95. Kindle: \$9.99. ISBN: 9781560852353.

Review by Christopher C. Smith

Twenty-three years after *Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* and twenty years after *Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, the long-awaited third volume of D. Michael Quinn’s *Mormon Hierarchy* series extends his