

## Lessons from Baltimore's Black Mormon Matriarchs on Discovering God's Compassion

Laura Rutter Strickling. *On Fire in Baltimore: Black Mormon Women and Conversion in a Raging City*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018. 197 pp. Hardcover: \$34.95. Paperback: \$20.95. ISBN: 9781589587229 (hardcover), 9781589587168 (paperback).

*Reviewed by Patrick Hemming*

“Dear God, Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me,” Alice Walker’s main character Celie writes at the start of *The Color Purple*.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Georgia, a real-life Black Mormon woman in current-day Baltimore stands up in testimony meeting with a written poem in hand:

Heavenly Father  
I don't understand  
why my tears  
fall on deaf ears.

In Laura Rutter Strickling’s new collection *On Fire in Baltimore: Black Mormon Women and Conversion in a Raging City*, Georgia and ten other Black Mormon women impart to us an impressive set of personal and spiritual narratives. Along the way, she ties each story together with a thoughtful and accessible narrative of Baltimore’s racial history, of evolving Latter-day Saint racial attitudes and practices, and of the fire that drives conversion and commitment for these urban Black sisters.

These stories paint worlds that are both familiar and jarringly foreign to white suburban Mormons like me and many of this journal’s readers. Even for those of us who have lived in and loved Baltimore or similar American cities, wide gaps frequently separate our own lived

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1. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982).

experiences and the experiences of our Black urban brothers and sisters. Strickling describes the foyer at church with some women discussing trips to Disney World and others discussing food stamps: “On the one hand, mothers were troubled about securing bail for a son in jail, and on the other, worried about sending a daughter to Europe” (xvii). In presenting these accounts, Strickling provides lived examples from our truly American Latter-day Saint faith tradition, burdened systematically throughout its history—just like the city of Baltimore—by the fundamental racial inequalities of our society.

Strickling states that she became intrigued by the way the African American women at church initiated vocal prayers, speaking to God about informal matters as though the prayer was not given in public. She spent over ten years collecting interviews in the context of regular interactions in church callings and meetings. Strickling writes “I found that much of their conversion to Mormonism had risen from racially entangled events that produced a kind of despair that I had not experienced” (xx). She describes several of these harrowing experiences of dire poverty, violence, and addiction that mark these lives like a hidden scar. At the same time, the narrative includes testimonies, visions, miracles, and healings. She writes that “these Black sisters possessed a burning trust—an unquenchable spiritual fire—that I was not acquainted with.”

*On Fire in Baltimore* grapples with the inherent pitfalls that arise from a white person recording and synthesizing the voices of Black women who have historically lacked such a platform of power from which to speak. Ultimately, this tension remains throughout the book. Strickling reminds the reader often of her struggle to be aware of and moderate the filter of her rural Western Mormon upbringing, which unconsciously adds judgments and biases to her narration. My sense is that most readers will appreciate her honesty and see in her writing the earnestness akin to any Latter-day Saint seeking—sometimes uncomfortably—to provide ministering and service in a culturally-sensitive manner to her church brothers and sisters. Yet the serious problem remains of a book published by a white woman that draws entirely from Black words.

Unfortunately, the format of the book leaves its remarkable narrators under pseudonyms, giving no authorship or credit to the women who created so much of the manuscript. The historical context of power imbalances in academic work should not be ignored or glossed over. I hope that future efforts in this subject will better address these inequities and find ways of appropriately giving authorship credit.

Despite these shortcomings, Strickling does demonstrate her clear love for words and language to make the stories of these women come alive. Drawing on her graduate studies in sociocultural linguistics, she replicates the speaking patterns of women. Each woman's voice is distinctive, and given flesh in descriptions like the following of ninety-four-year-old Dee, the oldest woman in the ward: "When she talks, she touches whoever is close by with a series of gestures. She caresses your arm when she is giving you background information; when the narration picks up she pats you with her fingers, and at the climax of the story, she'll give you a little push while simultaneously exclaiming, 'but I lived through it, yes indeedy—I sure did!'" (40). Street corners, public housing projects, and familiar sites like Baltimore's Washington Monument come alive in Strickling's prose:

Baltimore saw record snowfall the winter Dee passed away. . . . There were no rowdy teenage boys walking home from Digital Harbor High in front of my window, no tourists that occupied sidewalks or puzzled over parking signs. The cars that lined the street were transformed into unblemished, white mounds and a blanket of unusual calmness settled over every neighborhood. (52)

Each of the eleven chapters (with enigmatic titles like "Ain't Nobody Going to Drift Me," and "You Don't Serve God Then Drink With the Devil") stands well on its own. Dee's story, with its broad historical sweep incorporates many elements of the Great Migration: upbringing in the deeply segregated rural landscape of Maryland's Eastern Shore; the move to the city for economic opportunity; experience with the flourishing of Black urban culture; the decay of urban neighborhoods into unemployment and crime; disrupted family relationships all along

the way. Older women like Dee step in to raise children when parents fail. Dee shares the strange, macabre, and miraculous story of finding a baby crying in a dumpster and raising the child herself.

I must note here that I am not merely a casual reader of *On Fire in Baltimore*. I lived in the ward described in the book for several of the years when Laura Strickling was doing interviews, and I know her and each of the women described. One of the powerful themes of this book is the description of three of the ward's matriarchal figures (Sheera, Clara, and Helen). Sheera leads as a member-missionary who brought many family members into the Church. Clara, the long-term Gospel Doctrine class president, presided over each week's lesson connecting the reading assignment with the most recent events in Baltimore then summarizing the teacher's lesson before choosing the closing prayer. Finally, Helen—who in her early eighties always presided over fast and testimony meeting through opening the hour by always being the first person to hurry to the pulpit and bear her testimony. The final chapter of the book, "Pray for These Three Things," brings Helen vividly to life. Helen raises her hand in a Relief Society lesson on modern threats to the family to say "Mothers can't get government assistance if the father is living in the house. He has to leave in order for the mother to get food stamps. . . . This is an attack on the family" (147).

The political and racial dynamics of "On Fire in Baltimore," such as Helen's comments about government assistance, lay bare uncomfortable tension between the traditional proud self-reliance of Western Latter-day Saints and converts from marginalized communities like Helen's. Helen acknowledges the tension, but shrugs it off as a byproduct of a fallen world: "Lots of people, even here, at our Baltimore church, don't like Blacks. But that's the way life is. You have to go along with the program, try your best, and ask forgiveness. We're not going to see peace until Jesus Christ comes" (158).

These sisters simultaneously embrace bleak realism and transcendent spiritual deliverance. Georgia, as she stands to read her poem in fast and testimony meeting, begins by echoing Alice Walker's character Celie. Georgia reads:

So, tell me why my life is so hard.  
 Are you listening?  
 Where are you God?

But her answer contrasts sharply with Alice Walker's Celie, who writes bitterly "you must be sleep" in her last written message to God.<sup>2</sup> Georgia continues, narrating her Heavenly Father's response:

I will always mend  
 But you will be my masterpiece  
 In the end.

For white and suburban Latter-day Saint readers, *On Fire in Baltimore* may seem like attending their church meetings in an unfamiliar and foreign place. You may have never heard someone read a poem like Georgia's in a testimony. You may feel threatened when a class member in Relief Society shares a story about recently using cocaine or scratch your head when the woman closes class with a prayer thanking Heavenly Father that we all "woke up in our right minds" (xviii). But Latter-day Saint readers of diverse backgrounds will find themselves in deeply familiar territory as they listen to these Sisters faithfully implore an approachable, personal God. No matter what your geographic, religious, or social location is, many will find a warmth and connection to the stories of these women and the grace that they have welcomed into their deepest struggles.

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2. Walker, *The Color Purple*, 163.