

been resolved by a few good edits. They were a distraction but not an impairment.

In all, this book is lovely. Twila Newey is a gifted writer. Her imagery is clear and sensual. She touches on the profane and spiritual moments familiar to many women with a grace reminiscent of Emma Lou Thayne. The struggles of the sisters in *Sylvia* raise difficult themes, and Newey approaches them bravely and with empathy in a way that women—through sisterhood—need. She invites us to understand the hearts of these women and reminds us that we are all connected together through the Mother Tree.

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## The Dark Side of Devotion

Robert Hodgson Van Wagoner. *The Contortionists*.  
Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020. 358 pp.  
Paper: \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1560852896.

*Reviewed by Shayla Frandsen*

When a five-year-old boy tragically disappears from a quiet LDS neighborhood, grief-stricken family members, detectives, ward members, and suspects all struggle to find their footing in the agonizing aftermath.

In *The Contortionists*, the new novel from Robert Hodgson Van Wagoner, alliances shift, secrets are withheld, and readers are immersed into a propulsive, suspenseful mystery, chilling from beginning to end.

One of the novel's most compelling devices is the twining of past narratives with present, which Van Wagoner handles with a deft touch. Every structural move builds upon the last, a fine example of construction and pacing. His characters' choices in the aftermath of the boy's disappearance stand in stark contrast to—or confirmation of—the dubious actions of their past selves. The author has created characters who toggle between sympathetic and loathsome in a way that renders them entirely human, and few are spared his critical eye. The climax of this taut mystery is shocking in its revelation of the profound unknowability that lies in the human heart.

*The Contortionists* takes a surgeon's scalpel to LDS culture, picking apart the ways in which religious zealotry can drive families and people to ruin. Rarely has the dark underbelly of the quest for perfection—or, at least, the appearance of perfection—been so painfully, meticulously examined, nor the outcome so tragic. Sometimes the division between the sacred and the profane balances on a knife's edge, and other times it stretches across a chasm. In *The Contortionists*, it's both. It's uncomfortable to realize that, for several of the characters in the novel, all it takes to shift from acceptable Mormon orthodoxy to unhinged, maybe even murderous, fanaticism is—well, not much. A dangerous interpretation of doctrine is only the beginning. Is Van Wagoner trying to point readers to the fact that there might be something within the genetic makeup of the LDS Church specifically that, when pushed to its noxious outer extreme, could elicit more damage than good? Or is *The Contortionists* a grim fantasy in which the LDS Church is merely the backdrop, and not the catalyst, of such tragedy?

“We're all contortionists living one lie or another,” Melissa, the mother of the missing child, says in a flashback. “Sometimes it's the only honorable thing to do” (141). She's on a long-distance phone call

with her sister Karley, who quit her mission to live with a Norwegian man that she and her companion met on the stairwell in their apartment building. Although Melissa's poison-laced words are her attempt to talk some sense into Karley, the novel is titled *The Contortionists* for a reason: it explores the ways in which imperfect humans contort themselves into shapes that will best defend their worldviews from attack. Sometimes their contortions are determined by the people or events around them—purely reactionary moves driven by placation, disbelief, misery, or anger. Other times, the contortions are a solo effort, stemming from an individual obsession with fulfilling God's plan. Reading this book was like watching a performer contort their body on a stage and subsequently probing not only the shapes their limbs made but the negative space around and in between. Van Wagoner notes every glance, silence, and gaze, and readers will quickly learn that *everything*, both said and unsaid, can be a clue.

The love scenes are many and necessary, and Van Wagoner withholds nothing from the charged, intimate moments. The interrogation scenes at the police office—my favorite scenes in the book—are no less meticulously tracked. Every new page seemed to bring as many questions for me as it did for Detective Craig, the welcome beacon of humanity in a book full of moral and spiritual bleakness. There is substance abuse, trauma, and the crumbling of institutions once thought unshakable. While at times the dialogue felt unnatural and it is clear that Van Wagoner has a few favorite turns of phrase that he returns to often, the prose of *The Contortionists* is, overall, impressive. Van Wagoner has managed to write a lyrical mystery novel, sweeping both the Utah landscape and idiosyncrasies of Mormon culture into his sphere of literary depiction (lines like “If the gods sweat, it was sure to smell like the Great Salt Lake” and “Melissa's relief could have filled a Mormon temple” are a delight).

I will admit that mysteries are not the typical literary fare I turn to. When child endangerment is thrown into the mix, I recoil even more.

Yet I was surprised by how much I enjoyed *The Contortionists*, and fans of dark, suspenseful thrillers will enjoy it as well.

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## Book of Mormon Poetry

James Goldberg. *A Book of Lamentations*. American Fork, Utah: Beant Kaur Books, 2020. 161 pp. Paper: \$15.99. ISBN: 979-8667443285.

*Reviewed by Edward Whitley*

A few years ago I was researching poems written about the Book of Mormon. I had read Eliza R. Snow's "The Lamanite" (adapted from a poem she wrote before becoming a Latter-day Saint titled "The Red Man of the West"), so I suspected that there were probably a few dozen other poems that either touched on Book of Mormon themes or retold Book of Mormon stories. In the end, I found several hundred of them.<sup>1</sup> It is with some confidence, then, that I can say that the handful of Book of Mormon-themed poems in James Goldberg's remarkable new

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1. Edward Whitley, "Book of Mormon Poetry," in *Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon*, edited by Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).