

Grappling with LDS Identity Formation: A Review of Recent Young Adult Novels

Rosalyn Eves. *Beyond the Mapped Stars*. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2021. 368 pp. Hardcover: \$17.99. ISBN: 9781984849557.

James Goldberg and Janci Patterson. *The Bollywood Lovers' Club*. Garden Ninja Books, 2021. 286 pp. Paperback: \$16.99. ISBN: 9798525195578.

Reviewed by Lisa Torcasso Downing

Identity formation is a challenge for any teenager, but when the hand-me-down identity a teen receives stretches beyond holiday expectations into realms fraught with eternal consequences, a high-stakes story is born. Because the formation of self can be a risky endeavor for LDS youth, it's not surprising that two recently released young adult novels, *Beyond the Mapped Stars* by Rosalyn Eves and *The Bollywood Lovers' Club* by James Goldberg and Janci Patterson, feature young Mormon characters who confront the identities they are expected to live. What is surprising, however, is the way each novel—though markedly different from one other in storyline and setting—offers characters who set boundaries *on* their Mormon identity rather than push the boundaries of Mormonism.

In *The Bollywood Lovers' Club*, Goldberg and Patterson craft the love story of Ohio transplant Amrita Sidhu, a high school basketball star who is both Punjabi and Sikh, and Ohio native Dave Gill, a third-generation Mormon whose family heritage is similar to that of his love interest. Their relationship innocently blossoms when a mutual friend invites them to join her at a movie night she affectionately calls (of course) the Bollywood Lovers' Club. The definition of star-crossed lovers, Dave and Amrita grapple with the cultural and religious

expectations they've inherited and the degree to which they will allow these pressures to impact who they love and what their future will hold.

On the other hand, *Beyond the Mapped Stars* opens in the 1878 polygamous world of southern Utah. Although it, too, includes a love story, the novel is more an exploration of the intersection of religion and secularism as seen through the eyes of Elizabeth Bertelsen, a sixteen-year-old daughter of polygamist parents. She feels pushed toward marriage by both her mother, who wants her to settle down as a second wife of an older man, and by her young love interest, whose patience may only last so long. And yet, her heart calls her to the work of astronomy. The protagonist doesn't call her Mormon theology into question but does question her obligation to its popularly accepted role for women.

So it is with *Bollywood's* Dave Gill. He loves Amrita for exactly who she is (and vice versa) and sees clearly how her Sikh background has formed her. He realizes she'd cease to be who she is were she to adopt his traditions and beliefs, just as he would cease to be who he is without his Mormonism. Dave's questions regarding his identity development don't revolve around whether or not he wants to be Mormon. He does. He just isn't sure that the life of mission, college, and temple marriage that his parents and church leaders present to him as the ideal is necessarily the ideal for *him*.

The great strength of *The Bollywood Lovers' Club* (besides its wonderful characterization) is its conviction that love celebrates differences without an expectation of change—or conversion. There is a delightful underscore of peace in the relationship between Sikh Amrita and Mormon Dave rather than a struggle for one to become more like the other. Goldberg and Patterson achieve the balance of creating a compelling star-crossed romance without making adversaries out of the couple's families or their cultures.

In *Beyond the Mapped Stars*, Eves has crafted a remarkable feminist treatise that deserves a respected place in the Mormon literary canon.

Elizabeth Bertelsen wants an education—a real one, the kind that will teach her about the stars and maybe, just maybe, allow her to become a scientist in her own right. However, as her mother would remind her, such dreams don't belong to a Mormon girl who loves God and her family. In this way, Elizabeth's story problem isn't vastly different from ones that play out in the lives of many of today's LDS young women.

When Elizabeth's quest for forbidden knowledge leads to a near-tragedy for the family, she finds herself feeling unappreciated in her home. Rather than enter into the plural marriage her mother favors, she jumps at the opportunity to travel to Wyoming and assist an older half-sister during a high-risk pregnancy. The journey leads to both adventure and romance, but it also brings Elizabeth to Colorado, where her passion for learning places her in the company of the era's most brilliant astronomers, men and women who have gathered to study a rare eclipse. As Elizabeth tries to fit in with the intellectuals—some with decisive prejudice against Mormons—she experiments with deception around revealing her beliefs and heritage.

Of the two novels, *Beyond the Mapped Stars* is more likely to find a mainstream audience. It is a feminist treatise, a story of the awakening of self-determination. Eves succeeds in showing her readers the peculiarities of nineteenth-century life for a Utah Mormon girl whose identity and life trajectory are predetermined by her birth. What is most intriguing to me about Eves's novel, however, is its potential to palatably present Mormon feminism to modern Mormon girls and their mothers. The drive to break free from staid expectations is a universal one, but it is also one that has left many LDS women bruised from the struggle. The role of women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to idealize the role of mother-nurturer as God's plan for all women. Many of today's young women continue to feel pressure to downplay career ambition and to forfeit career for motherhood. They long for careers that allow their talents to flourish.

If Eves had set her story in the Mormonism of today, its feminist themes would likely be perceived as threatening to the LDS patriarchal

order and rejected by faithful readers. However, by placing the story in the past, Eves positions her contemporary LDS readers at a safe distance from the difficult realities of female identity formation within the patriarchal society, one that continues to oppress women. In this way, *Beyond the Mapped Stars* is a brilliant and wise addition to Mormon feminist literature.

If LDS parents want novels for their teens with recognizable Mormon protagonists and relevant Mormon problems without challenging core theological tenets, both *The Bollywood Lovers' Club* and *Beyond the Mapped Stars* are wonderful options. Elizabeth Bertelsen is a stronger character and more satisfying protagonist than Dave Gill, simply because she takes full control of both her identity and destiny in ways Dave never quite manages. Amrita, however, is decisive, a leader destined for a successful life. Of course, there is a feminist charm in that, and it wouldn't be fair to fault Goldberg and Patterson for choosing to make their heroine stronger than their hero. Amrita is a fully-fleshed, lovely, and dynamic character I've all but neglected in my focus on identity formation of the Mormon characters, and Goldberg and Patterson crafted a stellar cultural bridge-building between Mormon and Sikh culture that I can't praise enough.

Both *The Bollywood Lovers' Club* and *Beyond the Mapped Stars* are worthwhile, thought-provoking reads for young adults, LDS or not. Each will tap into the Mormon angst of young LDS readers in important ways, giving them the practice field of ideas that fiction offers so well.

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