

There are almost no footnotes in Harline's book. But one carries a lot of weight: "Michael Sunbloom is not his real name; neither are the names, and some of the places, in the rest of his story" (45). One can understand why Harline—no doubt in consultation with his friend—felt the need to protect the identity of Michael, but the artifice may leave readers with an uneasy feeling, as if the "ideal" Michael, whom we learn to love throughout the book, is finally less real than Jacob. Where would the Bellevue deli be to order one of his superior sandwiches?

VI. A book with a message

Conversions is a remarkable book, one many people will be tempted to read rapidly because of the absorbing storyline—how will this end for Jacob and for Michael?—but next need to read again, more slowly, to discover its depth and to ponder its message. *Conversions*, indeed, wants to be more than the tale of two families and more than a history book. Not only is Harline very much present throughout the book with personal reflections, but toward the end he moves the book to an ethical level. History must teach us vital lessons about life.

The last two chapters and the postscript are, foremost, a cry for tolerance, or rather for plain mutual acceptance, covering some 30 pages. Though not explicitly condemned, proselytism does not seem to have a place in this context: "The religious moment, or impulse, lies not in the drawing of lines or in the defending of a position but in crossing lines and inviting the Other to meet on common ground" (249). Reconciliation is the key. The Good Samaritan and even Alma 7 from the Book of Mormon, with its insistence on humility, patience, and long-suffering, are referred to (268). And so, "Michael's story wasn't merely a gay or Mormon story, and the Rolanduses not merely a Protestant or Catholic story, but that they might have even wider resonance than I'd supposed: they were part of a bigger story about anyone seen as Not The Same" (271).

The Feeling of Knowing

Tyler Chadwick, ed. *Fire in the Pasture: Twenty-first Century Mormon*

Poets. El Cerrito, Calif.: Peculiar Pages, 2011. 546 pp. Paperback. \$17.99. ISBN-10: 0981769667; ISBN-13: 978-0981769660.

Reviewed by Brent Corcoran

For me, poetry's unique power is to hold in immediate suspension what we know and how we know it. Poets surpass philosophers in representing a harmonious tension of ontology and epistemology. We renew through the condensation of poetic language the *feeling* of knowing most authentically. The poems in *Fire in the Pasture* are not wanting. As a group of poems, *Fire* succeeds admirably in renewing our feelings of knowing.

With *Fire in the Pasture: Twenty-First century Poems*, editor Tyler Chadwick casts his net wide to offer readers some of the best LDS poetry produced since the millennium's turn. With his preface, along with Susan Howe's contextualizing foreword, readers are well-equipped to form their own opinions about the state of LDS poetry. Most readers will undoubtedly feel at ease browsing its pages, discovering old friends, and perhaps forming some new acquaintances. That is the typical way to read an anthology. As is also typical with any anthology, there is no way this single anthology will satisfy all readers all of the time. This, however, should not be an obstacle for serious readers.

To represent the interested reader, I begin by taking into account such things as copyright pages, tables of contents, prefaces, and forewords which all serve to place the work in its context. These preliminaries, specifically in the case of *Fire in the Pasture*, prepare us to sample "Mormon" "poetry." I put both words in quotes because in this relativizing, self-identifying twenty-first-century world, both terms are open to dispute. Chadwick himself has acknowledged that he erred on the side of broad inclusiveness when deciding where to set the boundaries of Mormon-ness:

... poets are Mormon if they've been initiated into mainstream Mormonism, meaning they were at least baptized members of the LDS Church, even if they no longer actively practice the religion or have had their names dropped from Church records. So they at least have some sedimental relationship with Mormonism, even if they don't worship as Latter-day Saints anymore.

In this light *Fire* is really more concerned with Mormonism as a

cultural construct and less as a purely religious system of doctrines, rituals, ordinances, and beliefs.¹

With eighty-two representative poets, Chadwick provides an exhaustive look at the previous decade in Mormon poetry. For the obvious time and energy required both to assess available materials and to administer the project, Chadwick deserves high praise. He has also been active in promoting the cause of Mormon poetry through signings, readings, and many blog posts (see fireinthepasture.org). These engaging, thoughtful essays I recommend as counterpoint and anecdote to what will be my more widely focused view toward his anthology.

The “front matter” also situates *Fire* as a response to an earlier collection of poetry, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, edited by Dennis Clark and Eugene England (Signature Books, 1989). Essentially a generation has passed away between the two anthologies. The Baby Boomers are retiring; Generation X is grappling the reins. What’s to wonder that a new generation—a Facebook generation—wants a new anthology to represent their new poetic voices?

Here’s what’s to wonder: A comparison of the two anthologies seems to demonstrate that the terms *Mormon* and *poetry* have changed so dramatically over the past three to four decades that they no longer apply satisfactorily to both anthologies. The break which *Fire* exposes would almost seem to defeat its aim to be *Harvest*’s successor. In fact, nothing seems to tie the two together except the insistence on the terms “Mormon” and “poetry.” Comparing the 1980s’ “Mormon” to 2010’s “Mormon” is like comparing apples to oranges. And comparing twentieth-century to twenty-first-century “poetry” is comparing apples to . . . no fruit I can imagine. There’s no easy way to review a compilation of post-post-modern literature—especially poetry—without acknowledging the semiotic breakdown of terms over the past generation.

“It is true,” writes Howe in her foreword, “that the majority of these poems don’t have content that identifies them as specifically Mormon.” Indeed, this is so broadly *not* the case with *Harvest* poets that reading the two volumes side by side is a jarring experience. *Harvest* authors enthusiastically incorporate biblical and Book of Mormon references and incidents from LDS Church his-

tory into their poems. With *Fire*, one is hard-pressed to thresh much sacred grain from secular tares. Of course, there are exceptions. However, at the point of these exceptions, when any poet draws strong attention to any doctrinal theme, it seems to interrupt more mundane homilies, such as those poems which linger upon the dreariness of chores or every-day, factory-grade existential angst. Barely a dozen poems within *Fire* even reference Jesus; and when they do, it's in an almost off-handed manner, as if he were a passerby.

Howe insists, however, that even when we can't easily recognize the Mormon in the poetry, we yet pick up on the Mormonism: "I find that the content of many poems" in this anthology, she writes, "suggests the Mormon identity of the poets, even when that content is not specifically Mormon." But do they seem like the "Mormons" of *Harvest*? How easily may they compare as poets? Has there not been a profound break even between us and our most recent past?

I believe that *Fire*'s answer is a resounding "Yes!" Modern communications has become almost entirely visual. This post-modern world is awash with a kind of "scopophilia"—or "love of looking"—whose advent French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and his advocates might relate to inherent psychological instincts. A more culturally emergent turn of the concept might be found in the work of Walter Benjamin, especially within his terms of "*bildhaft*" ("image-making"). "Benjamin[’s work] elicits the technological nature of modern experience:" observes Jaeho Kang, professor at the New School in New York City, "that of the big-city dweller and his characteristic uneasiness, brought about by an over-stimulation of the visual sense through the urban spectacle."² From an evolutionary perspective we hear, "We are primates—highly visual creatures—with minds that evolve around this remarkable sense."³ That the Greek word has acquired primarily sexual connotations as a medical term is just the underbelly of the beast.⁴

The worlds of the oral bards are irretrievable to post-modern peoples. Poetry performance is limited to small gatherings of connoisseurs at coffee house slams. Published poetry is now the province of an even slighter market of silent readers. The old stan-

dards of poetry have been swept aside—"no more word inversions, multisyllabic words or Latinates, little rhyme and less form," say the new Grundys of post-modern verse. *Harvest's* poets consistently employed the form poem and the traditional devices of poetry—rhyme, meter, or at least a whiff of self-conceit, but these standards have been largely expunged in the twenty-first century poetry of *Fire*. In the late nineteenth century, the liberation from stilted adherence to prescribed forms encouraged fresh creative flourishing. But surely we have swung the pendulum far enough and now are free to revive some of the pure musical delight of verse. There is some flickering in *Fire* of that sort of frivolity, but not much of a flame.

The phrase "form poem" contains its own irony, for the term can refer either to a traditional construction of a poem, such as a sonnet, limerick, or haiku, as well as to a poem meant to be formalized typographically on the page, to some kind of visual symbol. The inherent irony is that the former is expressive of old-school poetry while the latter is a mechanistic innovation made possible by modern printing technologies. Perhaps, as reading poetry has become less a matter of public performance and more a solitary reading of the printed page, the introduction of typographic effects has seemed a good idea to many poets. Perhaps it does expand upon the potentialities of language. But this is not a characteristic of conversational language and can provide nothing unexpected in return. There are too many variables exposed by trying to make a picture out of words. A prime instance of this typographic fetish is indentation as an informal device—to what?—create diversion? Is it to break up the monotony of left-hand margins? Or is it an indication of reading pace? Because there is no standard for indentation, the reader must imagine how such spaces or blanks should be "read." Does it indicate a pause or encourage greater speed in reading pace? I can think of good cases to be made for both diametrically opposed options. And because this habit of indentation leads only to greater confusion, I consider the practice overly self-indulgent on part of poets who practice it. Unfortunately, it's clear that Mormon poets have not entirely escaped this propensity for typographic flamboyancy, either.

Perhaps there is an unconscious impulse driving this modern

stereotyping of contemporary “Mormon” “poetry.” Perhaps it’s just another example of Mormon rapprochement with mainstream arts and scholarship. Modern poets have intended by disowning traditional devices, to celebrate the “deviousnesses,” of poetry, but they have simply traded old devices for new. These modern devices draw heavily upon the plastic arts through the use of film, graphic arts, sculpture, and architecture (the scopophilic world). *Fire’s* poets must do more than merely write—they must paint with words. *Fire’s* poetry is rife with descriptions of essential color—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and all colors in between. Furthermore, paintings and painters themselves form the content of many of *Fire’s* poems. From artworks, thence, the Mormon poets’ obsession with vision extends across all the beauties of (typically western American) landscapes and peoples, back down to the putrid excrescences and detritus of cities, of material culture, and finally back to the stars. The modern Mormon sense of choice is externally directed toward sight, and hence, more toward rational taxonomies. Why resist this modern visual emphasis? Simply because the ways of knowing which partly comprise “the feeling of knowing” are many, and the poet owes it to herself and her readers to cull from the entire field of that ontology and epistemology, relating to any *gestalt* or experience, to present a reasonably integrated renewal of reality—“The Proustian Moment” in all its citrus-tea freshness.

As presage to the obsessive preoccupation with categorization, Howe asks us to imagine personality types for each of *Fire’s* poetic voices. Such a suggestion implies that the voices one may hear in the poems are not distinctive, original, emancipated, or authentically individual voices. Chadwick hypothesizes that his poets’ language is so consumed with community, which drives the requirement for perpetual self-reidentification, that solitude must be its abhorrence, its absence, its great blank. As *Fire* contributor Michael R. Collings observed in his review of this anthology: “Rather than being a compilation of ‘Contemporary Mormon Poems,’ with the implication that each of the poems contained therein will somehow reveal its inherent ‘Mormon-ness’ to a discerning reader, *Fire* shifts attention to ‘Twenty-first Century Mormon Poets’—the difference being that this collection concen-

trates on the poetry (and thereby the *poetics*) of *poets* who are Mormons. On *poets*.⁵ Chadwick, in what can only be a coda, standing untitled as it does at the end of his work, prefers to identify each poet with another poet whose work is likely well known. For my part, I saw (perhaps because several poems take art works as subjects) each poet as coming from a different school of painting—Expressionists and Impressionists here, Fauvists and Cubists there, and Surrealists and Situationists at the margins.

Interestingly, where both collections come together is in the lack of humorous poetry. In response to *Harvest*, the *Deseret News's* Jerry Johnston commented, “more humor could have been showcased without sabotaging the seriousness of the project.”⁶ Howe notes the absence, as well. Once again, there’s always the exception to prove the rule. In this case, humor can be found in Nicole Hardy’s “Mud Flap Girl” (202–203) duo of poems which are also distinguished by forming the closest things to the classic sonnet in the entire repertoire. (Glenn’s “Ye Shall Be as Gods” [187], and Alex Rex Mitchell’s “Road to Carthage” [285] are the rare others.)

These were my own thoughts as I pondered not just individual poems but the anthology in its entirety. Other readers will come to other conclusions. But what is beyond dispute is that while poetry’s market share is drying up among the general populace, the composition of poetry is not in danger of dying out. Indeed, self-publication and on-demand books via Kindle and other media devices allow modern poets greater freedom to independently disseminate their works than ever before. This anthology is well worth its moderate price and it is easily accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. If readers want truly thoughtful and articulate expressions of and insights into the many voices with which modern Mormonism speaks one would be hard-pressed to locate a more convenient source.

If there are lines which seem to encapsulate the whole of *Fire in the Pasture*—which resonate long after with that feeling of knowing I’d mentioned in the opening—I would choose these from Sharlee Mullin Glenn’s “Blood and Milk” (190), excerpted below. Within this poem many of the generalizations stated above coalesce: the post-modern preoccupation with self-identification, and, for peculiarly Mormon concerns, the horrors of mortal infertility or sterility versus the sacred imperative to reproduce, the

concordance of that idea with human creativity, and the “holy bondage” derived of the whole program, whether it be encouraging the fertility of corporeal kinsmen or of our “kinsmen of the shelf”:⁷

There’s freedom in the bleeding;
bondage in the milk
Do not be deceived.
Ah, but it’s an empty freedom;
A holy bondage,
A sweet and holy bondage.

Notes

1. “Tyler Chadwick Uncut: ‘Fire in the Pasture’ and Mormon Poetry in the Twenty-first Century,” <http://www.low-techworld.org/2011/12/tyler-chadwick-uncut-fire-in-pasture.html> (accessed April 15, 2012). That Mormons engage in attempts to control the term “Mormon” goes without documenting.

2. Jaeho Kang, “The Spectacle of Modernity: Walter Benjamin and a Critique of Culture (*Kulturkritik*),” <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2010.00621.x/pdf> (accessed April 17, 2011).

3. Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (W. W. Norton & Co.: New York, 1997), 214.

4. This sexual application of the term is especially prevalent in the medical or psychiatric sciences. Most medical dictionaries explicitly define “scopophilia” as a sexually disordered state; or even more simply, as in the *American Heritage Medical Dictionary*, we read under the entry for “scopophilia,” “See *voyeurism*.” <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/scopophilia>; *The American Heritage Medical Dictionary* (Houghton Mifflin Company: New York, 2007).

5. “Fire in the Pasture: Gleaning after the Harvest,” <http://michaelrcollings.blogspot.com/2011/11/fire-in-pasture-gleaning-after-harvest.html> (accessed April 15, 2012). Chadwick gave his endorsement to Collings’s description in the interview “Tyler Chadwick ‘Uncut.’”

6. “Reviews, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*,” <http://signaturebooks.com/2010/07/reviews-harvest-contemporary-mormon-poems/>.

7. R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Reading Edition), 232, poem number 512, “Unto my Books—so good to turn”—(Belknap Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1999). “I thank these Kinsmen of the shelf—/ Their Countenances Kid/ Enamor—in Prospective—/ And satisfy—obtained—.”