

## Revealing the Holy in Deja Earley's *To the Mormon Newlyweds Who Thought the Bellybutton Was Somehow Involved*

Deja Earley. *To the Mormon Newlyweds Who Thought the Bellybutton Was Somehow Involved*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2018. 88 pp. Paper: \$19.95. ISBN: 9781560852711.

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Don't let the book cover's scandalous bare navel dissuade you. Deja Earley's poetry collection, *To the Mormon Newlyweds Who Thought the Bellybutton Was Somehow Involved*, is well worth your time as she navigates the truths and agonies of growing up Mormon. Although the book is likely to resonate with Latter-day Saints, those not versed in LDS culture still have much to appreciate. Earley deftly handles everything from first kiss bliss and cringe-worthy roommates to aging parents and sexual naiveté. Her words speak from the page as if from a found diary, at times reminiscent of Anne Sexton and Sharon Olds, but throughout clearly Earley. Her clarified musings clothe the poems well as she draws us near with a conversational tone, keen observations, and fresh imagery.

Earley digs into the rich mulch of the self as the poems arc through three distinct sections: girlhood and adolescence, young adulthood, and housewifery and motherhood. In this slim volume, nothing is taboo: cat vomit, aliens, skunks, and a dream in which the author becomes a second wife to her own father.

Ensenada is the setting of the first poem, "Bunnies in Velvet" (3). As a girl on a trip to Ensenada, she naively wants the Playboy bunny earrings but her sister tries to discourage her. We join her as "the vendor, / smiling, took them from their velvet niche / and held them to my ears.

His hands smelled / / of sweat and silver, and his fingers were coarse / against my cheeks.” Such detail reminds us of a time in our lives before the world crashed in, a moment suspended when innocence meets reality, a theme revisited throughout subsequent poems. This poem reminds us that Eve leaving Eden was not only a biblical event, but one each of us have endured.

In “Lashes” (6), Earley unfurls defining moments with dashes of grit. She juxtaposes a dead cockroach with self-discovery, not sure what she’s looking at, thinking it, “a piece of shoe, / a fringe pulled from the rug, / a stale crust of toast.” We observe its death, followed by self-birth as knowledge of her own body grows. She ties together the disparate ends of the poem with a revelation: some experiences are a combination of grotesqueness, self-awareness, shame, and inexplicable memory.

The book moves into high school territory with “Chaste Dancing” (10) and I’m nodding as I read, remembering those awkward, dimly lit Mormon church dances. Diction such as “shared saliva” and “firstkiss”—a made up compound word à la e.e. cummings—expresses all the details we did (and didn’t) want to know about the intimacies of church foyer make outs. Here, thanks to Earley’s vivid word choice and alliteration, adolescence feels as near as the book’s page.

“Macaroni and Cheese” (14) is another enjoyable poem in this section. It spotlights the irritating issues of living with righteous but obnoxious roommates in love. She posits a fine, thumb-your-nose: “As I leave the room, she covers / his eyes during a pantyhose ad.” Earley acts as the observer here, witnessing their cheesy kisses that sound, ironically, like “someone is stirring macaroni and cheese.” You want to save her from it, if only you could.

As we move into part two of this collection, where some poetry books sag mid-point, this does not; it lifts to new locales, notably young adulthood and England. The poem, “Whatever Would Follow Hello” (27), takes place in London and speaks of wish fulfillment. A night alone at the ballet presents an opportunity to step out of herself. But she resists.

The reader may struggle at the confines of this poem, as perhaps Earley does too. It ends superbly,

Her laugh is like an advertising jingle and her leg is a  
long invitation, and the skyline out the window  
appears a tiny perfect city in her glass.

We observe an imminent affair, perfectly at place in the world, but through the eyes of an observer detect more: what appears to be perfect may be anything but.

Next, we have “Seducing Stonehenge” (28), offering a fresh view of the famous stones. This poem can be read as a creative description of the literal location, or an allusion to a boy crush. However you read it, Earley nails the last stanza, creating mystical images with, “Watch the spiders pace their dewy webs. / Come away with lichen on your lips.” I’ve visited Stonehenge a few times and am struck by Earley’s unique reimagining, taking a tourist locale and crafting it as an ode to intimacy.

Part three regales us with poems about adulthood. Sex, pregnancy, motherhood, and conjugal love feature prominently here. In the title poem, “To the Mormon Newlyweds Who Thought the Bellybutton Was Somehow Involved” (58), we find equal parts humor, truth, and incredulous wonder. The poem by far the longest in the volume, stretching in five parts across five pages. It ranges from Earley’s musings on how two naive individuals can marry and discover physical intimacy, to her personal experience, explaining, “Quietly, quietly, you make of every / mundanity a room, / and the two of you enter it.” And, “It’s a steady ramp, a passion no less promising if it begins in / wild misconception.” Perhaps I appreciate this poem most because it is gentle and scolding and personal. And because she takes on the topic of sexual intimacy in a Latter-Day Saint culture that rarely discusses it. Earley not only handles the topic well, but she unapologetically names her collection after it. Bravo. Thus we see, through her eyes, our youthful dreams fall away in marriage with “tub rings,” “the baby,” and “cat

vomit.” Yet despite wrinkles and the passage of time, we still seek physical connection which brings us back to ourselves, each other, and love.

In “Bobbing Fish” (66), Earley portrays her daughter’s preschool years. The tables are turned as her four-year-old wonders aloud, “And what, may I ask, are you doing here?” This moment distills the divinity of parenting: a multitude of lessons, of epiphanies, if only we slow down enough to see them. Child becomes teacher, as the balloon transforms in her hands, “And then she’s reeling it in as fast as she can./ It’s a fat, red, bobbing fish, and she’s laughing.” Here, a child whispers to us one of life’s secrets, finding joy in the simple, the mundane. Is childhood exquisite? Can motherhood be exquisite? This poem answers both queries with a resounding yes.

The collection ends with the poem, “Upon Attending a Yoga Class with my Husband” (68). It reads as a love poem, but more than that, appreciation and deep joy for life. True to form, Earley finishes with a brilliant, euphoric sigh, “Then we’re standing and lifting our arms high-high over our heads / and I can see his bellybutton, his small bellybutton, and he is / so young and I am so young and we both imagine we’re floating / in shiny bright bubbles of light.” Circling back to childhood again we see through our own middling lives, that imagination brings us to light.

Where current LDS poetry offerings such as *Dove Song* and *Mother’s Milk* draw Heavenly Mother and the celestial into our lives, Earley reveals the holy in our fallen state. Her writing offers something different: frank, cheeky, confessional poetry treating sex and the human experience as divine. Attuned to Mormon culture, she shares sacred truths through her personal lens, celebrating the self while inviting us, the reader, to do likewise.