

but most likely this editorial decision involves the anthology's focus on the day-to-day happenings of LDS missionaries.

Even though readers will not encounter any salacious scandals or miraculous conversion experiences within the graphic vignettes, *Served: A Missionary Comics Anthology* offers a look into the lives of LDS missionaries. Readers might find the contributors' various art styles and sequential art methodologies disjointed, especially when reading through. Preferences in comic art and presentation are largely subjective. But recurring themes bind *Served* together effectively. When I did not enjoy a contributor's artistic style, I still identified with their experience. I suspect that many LDS returned missionary readers will react similarly to the anthology, because the contributions capture the small, common (and sometimes recognizably uncommon) emotions and experiences that come with serving.



Making the World Light for Others

Keira Shae. *How the Light Gets In: A Memoir*. Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2018. 268 pp. Paper: \$7.00. ISBN: 9781948218078.

Reviewed by Matthew James Babcock

The trouble with reviewing a book like Keira Shae's debut memoir *How the Light Gets In* is the reviewer finds himself in the position of assessing an account of suffering and survival, and in the case of Shae's story of desperation and deliverance, suffering and survival aren't literary topics for analysis, but states of being to be encountered, felt, and understood. This is a tough, important, and energetically written remembrance—at

times, heavy material for a book about the healing influence of spiritual light—but no child advocacy expert, book club member, student of nonfiction, or library patron nationwide (and especially no convert or fifth-generation Mormon in Utah County) should pass on the chance to read this jarring and rejuvenating recollection from one of the Rocky Mountain Northwest's grittiest women.

In terms of composition technique, music is Shae's muse and the bright and often harsh light of reality her preferred mode in this uncompromising outpouring of memories. Chapter headings employ an eclectic mix of musical sources: song titles and snippets from lyrics, a selection that ranges from *The New Children's Songbook* and Leonard Cohen and *Les Misérables* to Death Cab for Cutie and Wolfmother. Bruce Cockburn's "Lovers in a Dangerous Time" (too early for Shae's generation, but not her mother's) could have added an apt line to this chronicle of a shattered life restored: "Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight / Gotta kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight." *How the Light Gets In*, a fight in its own right, finds friendship and faith clawing toward heaven out of a domestic hell of children in danger, emotional darkness, a family bleeding and kicking to survive—from the disturbing, vivid account of Shae's mother, Sierra, kicking Shae's malnourished baby sister in the ribs to the day Shae kicks off her wedding dress following her temple marriage at the age of nineteen, just one year older than her runaway mother was when Shae herself was born.

In one sense, *How the Light Gets In* qualifies as a spiritual autobiography, the genre popularized by seventeenth-century English Protestant dissenters, in which a troubled soul journeys from damnation to a state of grace. In Saint Keira's case, her colorfully wrought post-grunge housing-project state of grace is achieved through fateful—and some might say, blessed—interactions with Latter-day Saints: bishops and ward members who provide sanctuary and sustenance, the missionaries who in the middle of Mormonia find her and teach her the gospel, and the "wholesome Mormon boys" Shae crushes on in her youth 155). Only Provo's most naïve resident could read this book and ask, "How

could something like this happen here?" And yet, the bulk of Shae's story probably should strike more sheltered readers as shocking, considering the time period and location. The church members Shae encounters (her "holier-than-thou, thrifty, educated, and financially successful religious neighbors") do reach out to her, exerting a positive influence on the young troubled teen and her family, only occasionally appearing as doltish deployments of do-gooders doling out rolled oats and flour in bulk to her household of feral, starving siblings (119). Regardless of religious affiliation, self-professed believers and non-believers will see Shae's personal grappling toward God as authentic, including her bouts with depression as a young mother of three boys.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Shae's offering is the way it provides an insider's blow-by-blow breakdown of a dysfunctional family and the personal dynamics that make that environment so destructive: her meth-mad mother, the sex abuse and beatings and cyclical abandonment, the guilt-induced devotion of the girl forced to play caregiver, the endless entourage of tattooed boyfriends and deadbeat husbands (with the occasional good guy), and the way the more permanent players in the drama insist on blind loyalty, a kind of loyalty of the damned, where you are "shunned" for threatening the family when you seek outside assistance—as Shae does when she turns to her bishop and finds herself attacked by her prostitute mother and her mother's latest male companion for allowing government and religious influences to fragment her family. Later, a viewing of *Les Misérables* helps Shae see her mother's plight more clearly, and as a more mature woman Shae vacillates understandably between love and hate toward the woman who gave her life and took her life from her—in some ways, the bond between Shae and Sierra parallels the relationship between Valjean and Javert (with Shae's book ending far less tragically). Somehow, amid the appalling scenes of violence and neglect, the most heartbreaking violation seems to come when Sierra punishes Shae by using kitchen scissors to cut off her ponytail and hand it to her:

I tried not to scream in horror. I cried as silently as possible with my handful of my beloved Disney-princess length hair. I touched my head and covered my neck, trying to solidify what had happened to me with evidence. I didn't feel very beautiful as a child, but I loved my hair. My favorite feeling was taking a bath with it. I loved feeling the hair tickle my bare back. I loved the feeling of how heavy it became in the water, yet it floated around my head like a mermaid's. To lose this part of my identity was crushing. I had only a moment with my hair before my mother chased me through the kitchen and living room to spank my rear end raw; Sierra was red from hairline to toenail beds. (29)

Despite the difficult beginnings, this is a book that moves from darkness to light, from the story of a broken life to the story of a life healed by the light of God and love, though we are not spared any of the necessary details in tracing Shae's rocky upward path. Shae and By Comment Consent Press are to be commended for producing a book that brings together such raw and religious reading, a combination very few books of this kind achieve (in fact, I would say in all my years of reading, I have never read anything that compares to Shae's memoir). Too often, spiritual memoirs fall into the camps of saccharine institutional propaganda or iconoclastic apostasy fests, either avoiding the tough facts or wallowing in them, leaving readers unable to appreciate either the struggle or the salvation because they've been given too much of one side and not enough of the other. Shae's technique is a kind of lyrical chiaroscuro, describing her abusive mother's eyes that "burned like cigarettes" (120) and, at the moment her siblings are taken from her, delivering a litany of all their beautiful qualities: Ashley borrowing her favorite black shirt; Becca giggling on the bed with stuffed animals; Brandon making chef-quality ramen noodles; Alex's jokes. By reading of all that was lost, we appreciate everything that was gained and understand—from the perspective of someone who truly made the difficult journey—the cost and reward of breaking away from darkness and finding light.

“You can’t get common sense from a book!” (183). Shae’s mother shouts at her, an utterance that strikes readers as monumentally ironic, since by that point in Shae’s life story, we have gained so much from the published and bound record of her uncommon life. Shae’s theme, taken from Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem,” is that life’s cracks are what let the light in, and the cracks in her narrative are what make her writing so illuminating. Why, for example, does Sierra not try to find hope in the Church when her young daughter does? What were the circumstances that led this trio of lonely women—Shae, Sierra, and Shae’s “Granny”—to find themselves abandoned in the heart of Utah? How does Shae’s biological father re-enter her life when, years earlier, he was the one who tried to pay her teenage mother to have an abortion, only for Shae’s mother to turn around and spend it on baby clothes? These questions aren’t indicators of faults in the book, but places where we can shine our own lights of curiosity on the fault lines in the human landscape Shae so vividly reveals to us. The common act of reading, in this case, cracks open our views of the lives of those who have lived in our neighborhoods for years, so that greater empathy and understanding can seep into us.

How many blows does it take to crack a life until it breaks? How many lumens fill a life with transformative, healing love? Keira Shae’s *How the Light Gets In* gets it absolutely right, turning the full light of personal and spiritual truth on the misery that made her a mother determined to make the world lighter for others.