

Two Trails to the Muddy

Dean Hughes. *Muddy: Where Faith and Polygamy Collide*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019. 373 pp. Hardcover: \$25.99. ISBN: 978-1629725857.

Phyllis Barber. *The Desert Between Us*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2020. 304 pp. Hardcover: \$27.95. ISBN: 978-1948908566.

Reviewed by Lynne Larson

The dry wasteland of early Nevada's Big Muddy Valley is the setting of two recent novels that capture the colorful era when Brigham Young sent a colony of Saints to establish St. Thomas southwest of St. George in the mid-1860s. Young hoped to grow cotton in the desert, taking advantage of the disruptions in the market because of the Civil War. It was a daunting endeavor. Rain was rare in the valley, and the few precious drops that did fall were soaked up quickly by the ubiquitous sand. The Muddy River was little more than a gurgling stream most seasons, barely able to support the sagebrush on its banks, let alone a few hundred desperate settlers.

Novelists Dean Hughes in *Muddy: Where Faith and Polygamy Collide* and Phyllis Barber in *The Desert Between Us* use this desolate area, smothered by heat, wind, and isolation to frame spiritual, moral, and psychological questions that required more from the early settlers than faith in the prophet and steadfast determination. Most dramatic is plural marriage, prominently featured in both novels and portrayed to be, at times, as intolerable as the land itself.

The frank exploration of polygamy is a rare and commendable step for Deseret Book, *Muddy's* publisher. Hughes has long been Deseret Book's best author of historical fiction and has often included material

challenging to Mormon sensibilities. Here he tackles the issue of plural marriage with appealing characters, genuine human conflicts, and a direct writing style that remains lean and crisp even as it covers every corner of the novel's theme and ultimate purpose: an honest exploration of polygamy for his faithful reading audience.

Hughes introduces us to newlyweds Morgan and Angeline Davis, a faithful young couple who are sent by Brigham Young with a group of pioneers to the Muddy Mission. Morgan and Angie endure everything from unbearable heat to backbreaking labor. They live with dust that seeps through clothes and into food, bedding, and every available source of water. They see outlying villages abandoned for fear of Paiutes. They watch many of their friends pack up and leave, unwilling to see their crops wither and their babies die. And yet Morgan and Angie stay. In spite of Angie's unfulfilled desire for a child, they are happy in their marriage if not their circumstances. They valiantly continue to endure and are determined to keep their pledge to Brigham Young and to the Muddy Mission. That is, until one day when the bishop comes to call. *Muddy* suddenly becomes an even more compelling story as Morgan and Angie face their greatest test of faith. "I won't do it," Morgan says, "And I'll leave this place if Bishop Morrison keeps pushing me" (210).

What Bishop Morrison is pushing, of course, is polygamy. A woman in the settlement, Ruth Nilsson, has been left a widow with a small son. "I'm not suggestin' you take Ruth as yer wife," the bishop tells Morgan, "I'm callin' you in the name of the Lord. . . . Will you accept God's will or go against it and live with the consequences?" (209).

Morgan is shocked and insists he has already promised Angie that he will have nothing to do with plural marriage. He is torn, for he loves his wife but he also loves and fears his God. The narrator tells us that Morgan "was haunted by the idea that if he turned the bishop down, didn't capitulate, some disaster would befall him—or, worse yet, would strike Angeline" (211). It's a very human admission from the faithful

hero of a Deseret Book–published novel. Hughes is forthright with his characters, covering every objection to plural marriage that enters Morgan’s mind, and many his readers may consider.

Eventually Morgan and Angie do agree to enter polygamy, and for the remainder of *Muddy*, Hughes explores the effects of plural marriage on the family and the Muddy Mission. Just as he described the uniting of the colony for Zion’s cause, so he describes the uniting of the new Morgan Davis family. Hughes paints a realistic portrait of two women sharing one husband in a three-room house and carefully includes the missteps and problems such a situation would provoke in spite of the best intentions. But Hughes also describes the comfort of friendship, the joy of having common goals and interests, of shared good fortune, and of mutual support in times of sorrow. He knows the literary soil where the seeds of love are planted and how to lead his characters naturally to that garden. Their faults are mostly petty sins, eventually overcome by good will and a common faith.

At some point on the fictional landscape in St. Thomas, Angeline Davis may well have been a neighbor of Sophia Poultney, the heroine of Barber’s novel, a young woman who shares Angie’s religion but finds little joy in the conviction. She is also a polygamous wife, but her husband, Charles, is uncouth, obnoxious, foul-mouthed, and verbally abusive, as different from Morgan Davis as the Muddy is from the verdant fields of Utah’s northern valleys where the Poultnes have previously lived. Sophia is his third and youngest wife and the pleasure of his older years, but what Charles really wants from her is more children, something she has not yet been able to provide. She is alone with him on the Muddy, away from his other families, who remain in the north while he serves a mission.

Phyllis Barber’s *The Desert Between Us* gives us Sophia Poultney’s story, and though the Big Muddy Valley with its drifting sand and its desolation is the stark panorama behind the narrative, Barber spends more time in the psychological wilderness where her characters find

themselves than in the valley itself. Her prose is dense and multilayered, her descriptions of the desert exquisite: “Bursts of red—the sand turning pink and red rocks eroded into hoodoos as the hills rise” (159). And as she reveals these human beings and the desert around them, Barber goes beneath the surface to explore the eternal mysteries of both.

Sophia is a plural wife, but polygamy is not this novel’s theme. There is no crisis of faith or climactic decision to be made. Polygamy has been embraced as God’s plan long ago and is an accepted part of daily life in the Big Muddy Valley. The settlement’s success is an obsession of Charles, his key to divine approval. These challenges are merely trappings for Barber’s main themes—loneliness; the need for freedom, accomplishment, and beauty; the yearning for approval, both from God and those we love; and love itself with all its mystery.

Self-awareness begins for Sophia when she meets a handsome road builder named Geoffrey Scott who rides up one day as she is outside hanging clothes, a particularly astonishing occurrence since his “horse” is a large camel, Adababa, a regal animal whose presence helps to reveal Scott’s engaging idiosyncrasies. Scott is flirtatious, kind, and fascinating to Sophia, whose years with her boorish husband have been as brutal as the landscape around her. She has not been seeking or expecting to find relief from her situation in a tryst outside her marriage. Sailing from England with a group of Saints, she married a man she loved while the ship was still mid-ocean. But he deserted her once they got to Utah, claiming he no longer believed in Mormonism. Jaded by the experience, she has passively accepted her position as a third wife, believing her duty is to forget herself and bear children for her husband and for the Lord. The arrival of Geoffrey and his camel stirs Sophia and reminds her of ambitions long buried. Her skill at hat-making had brought zest and beauty into her world, and her decision to embark to America was prompted at least in part by a desire to expand her horizons. Now she remembers those feelings once again.

Geoffrey Scott has his own demons. His mother has been murdered by marauding Indians, and he is estranged from his father. He has come west to be a road builder, to find freedom, to gain the approval of the father who abandoned him. But what he yearns to build is not only a pathway for horses and wagons, but trails between people—Native Americans, the newly freed slaves, and the Arab herders who have come with their camels to master the American desert as they have their own. Geoffrey Scott's efforts have brought him a tall Paiute friend, Kwami, a Syrian guide named Hadji Ali, and, most important of all, Adababa, the camel itself, a symbolic connection to the desert and its mysteries. Throughout the novel Adababa stands like a god, silently observing his mortal companions floundering around him.

Eventually, Sophia and Geoffrey's flirtatious friendship ends in a single illicit act. Sophia is tired of coping with Charles, tired of his calling her meals "slop," tired of his unresponsive awkwardness when she tries to flirt or be playful with him. He is an old man with only one thing on his mind—patriarchy. He must please God and the Brethren at all costs. Still, the transgression brings guilt to Sophia, who is committed to her faith. When a baby arrives that might belong to Geoffrey, Sophia has genuine sympathy for Charles when he suspects the truth. Even stubborn, blustery Charles, Barber reminds us, will eventually wither when he has no self-respect, no desert to conquer, and nothing left to sacrifice to God. Barber has created rounded characters who demand our compassion as well as our recrimination.

Despite their significant differences in tone and content, these are both excellent novels. Near the end of *Muddy*, Morgan Davis's bishop counsels him, "Brigham thought this valley might be a good place to grow cotton, and he was right. Still, things didn't work out. But that doesn't mean God had nothin' to do with the decision. He sent us to earth to do hard things and come back to Him humbled—and stronger. So how can you say that it wasn't worth comin' here?" (362). The bishop,

of course, is talking of polygamy as well as cotton when he speaks of hard things making people strong.

The last chapter of *The Desert Between Us* is more open-ended. There is no bishop to sum up the value of Sophia and Geoffrey's experiences, and there is still a desert between them and the elusive resolution that lonely mortals seek. But Sophia is hopeful as she finally leaves the Big Muddy Valley, walking through the sand for the last time, where she "watches the sky spin with stars" (289).

LYNNE LARSON {lynne.larson@gmail.com} is a retired English teacher and a freelance writer. Her essays, articles, and short stories have appeared in *Irreantum*, *Utah Holiday*, *Journal of Mormon History*, *Ensign*, *Dialogue*, and other regional publications. Covenant Communications has published five of her novels. She is a graduate of Brigham Young University and holds an MA degree from Idaho State University. Together with Veda Hale and Andrew Hall, she recently edited *A Craving for Beauty: The Collected Writings of Maurine Whipple* (By Common Consent Press, 2020).



The Tapestry of Mormonism, Woven Larger

Mette Harrison. *The Women's Book of Mormon: Volume One*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2020. 204 pp. Paper: \$9.99. Kindle: \$6.99. ISBN: 978-1948218283.

Reviewed by Adam McLain

"It was only in this moment that I realized that God felt the same love for me—that nothing I had ever done could remove me from the love of God. Leaving Jerusalem had only brought me closer to God. Losing my hope of a future as a wife and mother had brought me closer to God. Everything in my life had brought me closer to God because it was impossible to move