

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

away from God. God was always there, with me, helping me, nodding at my choices. I didn't need to do anything to be accepted or welcomed home. I only had to be myself."

—*The Book of Miri, The Women's Book of Mormon: Volume One, 55–56*

At the end of the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, having semi-retired from her fight for women's suffrage, decided to create what would come to be known as *The Woman's Bible*. This biblical production sought to academically redress gender as it was then seen in the primary text. By working with a group of scholars and translators to re-navigate the conceptions of gender in the narrative, Stanton sought to radically liberate women from their contemporary oppressions, which she saw as being caused at least in part by the machinations of religion. I begin this review by turning to Stanton's work because I believe Mette Harrison's *The Women's Book of Mormon: Volume One* is delving into similar territory by telling the story of the Book of Mormon through lenses, points of view, and characters that are rarely, if ever, seen in the text: the woman, the transgender person, the homosexual, the bisexual, the genderqueer, the asexual, the widowed, the unmarried, the demisexual, the nonbinary being, and more.

The narrative of the text is that of an oral history passed down from daughter to daughter (*daughter* used in an appropriately broad sense of the term). Like the Book of Mormon, there are various books named after the significant characters who helm the project of keeping the oral history in memory. Sariah begins the history, expressing her dealings with Mother-God while traveling through the wilderness to the promised land and the beginning of this matriarchal line of scripture. Sariah delivers the oral history to the care of her daughter Miri, who gives it to her niece Eva. Eva, motherless, does not give it to a direct familial connection but instead chooses to deliver the history to Saren, a transgender man watched over and cared for by Mother-God, who then passes it to Grissela and so on (dutiful to its source material, the

novel even contains a book that can easily be likened unto the Book of Omni). The text follows the narrative plot of the Book of Mormon, growing and advancing as the Nephites interact with the Lamanites, and culminates in the Book of Heshu, which ends with the people of Limhi reuniting with the Nephites, as told through the view of Limhi's wife. As Harrison explains in her introduction, this two-volume story will culminate in the coming of Christ and the bringing forth of this ancient record to give an accounting of the works of the lineage of Mother Sarah.

With these new voices come new themes that Harrison adeptly brings to the pages of her text. For example, as seen in the opening quote to this review, Harrison focuses on, rather bluntly, Paul's confession in Romans 8:38–39: namely, that nothing will separate God's followers from God's love. Instead of platitudes, though, Harrison gives us characters that actually struggle with feeling the love of God and describes how they go about still believing in this eternal love. She also adds themes of marital and gendered abuse, the love of Heavenly Mother, and the difficulties within marriage and singleness. Additionally, she interacts with themes that are present in the Book of Mormon: the pride cycle, nonviolence, anti-war rhetoric, and familial obligation. As she adds the stories of the non-male characters who must have populated the world of the Book of Mormon, Harrison's text fills in narrative holes that exist in the Book of Mormon; for example, she shows the interactions between the Nephites, the Lamanites, and the many people who were on the American continent before Lehi and Nephi landed, and the influence and interaction that various people had on the prophets who wrote or were recorded by Mormon and Moroni in the Book of Mormon.

It is with welcome relief that Harrison introduces the reader to a feminine God who is voiced, who is present, who is divine. With the recent debates sparked around artistic depictions of the feminine divine, Harrison's description of the Mother-God is reserved enough

to be open to a variety of interpretations and is thus very welcoming to any reader. More than the descriptions of Mother-God, Harrison's feminine divine is an active participant in the story, just as the more masculinized God—the God of Lehi, Nephi, King Benjamin, Mosiah, and Alma—is present throughout the Book of Mormon. Mother-God speaks to Sariah; she works through her daughters, preserving their special record. These special works are focal points for the text, but they also serve as scaffolding as Harrison's characters interact with their world on their own, sometimes without the divine intervention of God, which adds layers to her narrative.

Harrison humanizes the characters and voices that are not at first apparent—or are completely nonexistent—in readings of the Book of Mormon. For example, as stated earlier, one of the keepers of the sacred feminine history of the Nephites is a transgender man; Harrison handles this portrayal with care, doing as much as she can to invest the concept that God loves everyone into the tale of Saren. In branching out from the normative, cisgender female character, Harrison provides ample opportunity for readers to consider and relate, through fictive and imaginative meditation, to people in the world of scripture who are similar to them. This work seems to be the culmination of Harrison's own efforts at allowing herself (and others) to finally be a part of a book that she never saw as truly hers due to the lack of characters that exude the feminine, the non-masculine. The entire project subverts notions of how to interact with scripture while maintaining the narrative thrust, along with the versatile themes, of the primary text. In this reviewer's opinion, all who respect, enjoy, and laud the Book of Mormon will find joy in Harrison's approach—and perhaps even see themselves within the text.

To return to the invocation of Stanton at the beginning of this review, Harrison's text is an active effort to broaden the inclusivity provided by the scriptures. Whereas Stanton worked from translation and commentary, one cannot do that with the Book of Mormon since we

do not have the original words or records of those who wrote the Book of Mormon. This is why a fictive effort is needed and appreciated. One can only delve so deeply into the fabled “war chapters” of the Book of Mormon in an attempt to discover the complexities and nuances of personal identities only to come up short. The Book of Mormon is lacking and silent in areas and matters that need to be considered, nuanced, and interrogated if faith and spirituality are to grow. Harrison, I hope, is an angel on a hill, heralding in a new age of fictive reimagining of sacred texts in order to broaden the tent, invite others in, and find joy in the complexities of mortality.

Indeed, Harrison’s work shows one way for those not represented in the scriptures to shape their own stories and priorities, knitting them into the complex fabric that makes up the tapestries of Mormonism. She beckons with this work for those forgotten to join her at the loom and weave their myths and identities into the great work begun by a god in a manger, restored by a boy in the woods, and continued by the writer at the page, the reader of the word. Harrison is doing a great and marvelous work as she responds to Christ’s command to the Nephites: “Bring forth the record which ye have kept” (3 Ne. 23:7).

ADAM MCLAIN {adam.j.mclain@gmail.com} recently graduated from Harvard Divinity School with a master’s degree in theological studies, emphasizing in women, gender, sexuality, and religion. He plans to apply to graduate programs in law and literature. He blogs at *amclain.com* and socials @adamjmclain.

