Exploring Disenchantment

E. Marshall Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism among the Latter-day Saints* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018). 258 pp. Paper $34.95. ISBN: 978-0813592190.

Reviewed by Jana Riess

More Americans are leaving organized religion, and the fastest-growing faith tradition in the United States for some years now has been "no religion." The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has not been as adversely affected by this trend as some other religious groups, partly because of the commitment level it requires of its members and partly because its historically high birth rate has kept it out of negative numerical territory. Still, recent years have witnessed rising numbers of people who leave the LDS Church as adults, and it is refreshing to see that some scholars are turning their attention to this understudied—and often misunderstood—group. One such book is Marshall Brooks's close ethnographic study *Disenchanted Lives*, for which he interviewed many ex-Mormons in the Provo area between 2008 and 2014, attended their support group meetings, and listened closely as they attempted to make sense of the often profound shifts in their lives.

Brooks positions himself right away in the book, declaring that he has never been a Mormon himself and became interested in studying the religion ethnographically while in graduate school. This project began as his dissertation in 2008, and took ten years of work before its publication as a book in 2018. His goal, he says, is to represent "the disenchantment experience here equitably and reflexively, without unduly romanticizing or disparaging either religious or secular life" (vii).

In this he largely succeeds. The book is balanced and well-informed, driven not by ideology but by a desire to position the ex-Mormon experience with sensitivity and in the light of other scholarship on religious disaffection. It makes four primary contributions to advance the existing literature.

First, the book sets a high bar in its careful use of the scholarship of social theorists like Bourdieu, Durkheim, Žižek, Freud, Taylor, and Heidegger. I am not aware of any other study of either Mormons or former Mormons that offers such fascinating connections between the religious world of Mormonism and the contributions of these thinkers. Granted, at times it can be densely theoretical and wonky (this started as a dissertation, after all), but it also creatively applies the contributions of an intriguing range of religious theorists as they put a name to phenomena that might pass unnoticed otherwise. Whether he is discussing Bourdieu's concept of classification and how it relates to the way former Mormons choose to identify themselves (ex-Mormons? Former Mormons? Apostates, agnostics, atheists?) or Charles Taylor's notion of the buffered self, he puts classical theorists in conversation with very contemporary problems, with fine results.

Second, *Disenchanted Lives* is groundbreaking in the way it connects sexuality to our understanding of former Mormons. Previous scholarship on leaving religion, Brooks says, has focused so much on rationality—the intellectual reasons for losing faith—that it has neglected the embodied and emotional aspects of the experience (15). For Mormons in particular, this means that everything about their sex lives can be upended when they leave the Church. They have learned that their sexuality is literally the means to godhood and exaltation, and that the highest roles they can attain in this lifetime come through marriage and parenting. These could be interpreted as sex-positive messages, yet many ex-Mormons, especially women, have also internalized messages that sex is dangerous, even sinful.

And that bifurcation does not easily disappear upon leaving the Church:

> For ex-Mormon women, loss was a polysemic metaphor that pointed to feelings of not knowing how their sexual bodies worked, of realizing that for decades they had been unable to use their bodies as they wished and had been trained to look at them as an enduring source of sin, not pleasure. Ex-Mormon women described lifetimes of "not knowing" their bodies, feeling unable, or unwilling, to fully explore their pleasure potential (126).

It is a real strength of the book that Brooks illuminates this important aspect of reconstructing an identity outside the Church—not in a sensationalistic way, overemphasizing stories of a long-repressed desire for sexual experimentation, but as a responsible scholar attending to the ways that religion in general, and Mormonism in particular, can be embodied.

Third, Brooks's work helps readers understand why former Mormons are considered so dangerous to current church members, who have constructed multiple narratives to explain their disaffection. Most of these narratives place the blame squarely on the shoulders of those who left: they were spiritually lazy; they were too easily offended; they wanted to sow their wild oats. As Brooks points out, the realities are far more complex than such simplistic narratives would suggest.

Ex-Mormons are dangerous because they occupy a curious liminal space that unsettles current church members (167). Brooks writes that when non-Mormons say critical things about the LDS Church, their views are easily dismissible as being incorrect or based on poor information. But when the criticisms come from former insiders, the "poorly informed" rationale begins to wear thin; ex-Mormons are often people with years of intimate experience of the religion—sometimes more experience and knowledge than the people who remain (17). They may be close friends and family members. As such, their insights are

difficult to ignore. One contribution of Brooks's work is his observation that current Mormons' level of uneasiness about former Mormons seems most intense when the church itself is changing (155). This would be a fascinating thesis for historians to test as they study various epochs of LDS history.

Finally, and on a related point, Brooks's concluding pages offer important insights into what might be possible for "pastoral apologetics" in the church—in other words, what it would mean for current members to truly listen to former ones. In particular, he singles out the tendency of current church members to judge the decision to leave the church as either a pathology or as proof of a virulent anti-Mormonism. If some former Mormons are angry, if they appear zealous to demonstrate that the church's historical and theological claims are incorrect, that is a logical and even healthy response to the behavior orthodox Mormons have modeled for them. "As I have attempted to show, these behaviors must be recognized as a by-product of, and reasonable response to, the combination of a lifetime of church membership and a litany of social and psychological traumas inflicted on them as apostates" (220).

For all the book's many contributions, something important is missing: it is based on selective interviews, not representative data. The experiences of ex-Mormons in Provo do not necessarily reflect the experiences of former Mormons nationwide. Brooks acknowledges this briefly near the beginning of the book (18), but does not repeat the caution. Let me do so here. Outside of Utah, the Church includes a significantly higher percentage of converts as opposed to those who grew up in it. For converts, leaving the Church may be somewhat less traumatic than it is for those who were raised in the faith, because they do not have all of their milestone experiences connected with Mormonism—adolescence, college, marriage, childrearing—and their family ties are comparatively less affected. The experiences of former Mormons in Provo, the very heart of Latter-day Saint culture and education,

are not as likely to include those who were converts to the faith, stopped attending after a short time, and were the only church members in their families.

Brooks's interviewees also appear better-educated than former Mormons nationally. According to the Pew Research Center, only one in five former Mormons in the United States has a college degree, but in Brooks's interview pool, a majority seemed to be college-educated, some at BYU. His pool is in keeping with the educational profile of that segment of former Mormons who are involved in ex-Mormon social media groups more generally: among those who participated in a snowball survey shared in ex-Mormon affinity groups online, only three in ten did *not* have a college degree.[1] The subgroup who are active in the ex-Mormon community, which as Brooks notes was the main source of his interview pool, were also more likely to be white than former Mormons nationally, less likely to still believe in God, and less likely to get involved with another religion after leaving Mormonism.

That is in no way to undermine the fact that this is a significant and groundbreaking book. Throughout *Disenchanted Lives*, Brooks allows his interviewees to speak for themselves and name their own experiences. In fact, he observes that the church has only itself to blame if some former Mormons seem especially vocal about their feelings about leaving. The church gave them a script in which they were taught to discuss their religion constantly, and then it recoiled when they proved similarly vocal about their *loss* of belief (162). Brooks does a fine job of not only allowing his interviewees to tell their stories in their own words, but of positioning those stories in a larger context that is informed by both classic and recent social

1. Jana Riess, "This Is Your Brain on Mormon Facebook," Religion News Service, September 18, 2019, https://religionnews.com/2019/09/18/this-is-your-brain-on-mormon-facebook/.

theory. As such, this is a welcome addition to the libraries of people who are interested in both Mormonism and the rise of nonreligion in the United States.

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Embodied Mormonism: Casting Poetic Light on a Worldwide Faith

James Goldberg and Ardis Parshall. *Song of Names: A Mormon Mosaic*. Mormon Lit Lab, 2020. With artwork by Carla Jimison. 205 pp.

Reviewed by Mark Sheffield Brown

Poetry is a kind of embodiment, a conjuring. Through writing, poets can materialize anything whether it's a hammock in Pine Island, Minnesota or a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain. But in addition to creating wordy, mental approximations of specific people or objects, poetry can also embody larger things—concepts and abstractions, cultural entities, traumatic experience, contact with the Transcendent. This year, a new book of poetry has come out that embodies specific elements of the Latter-day Saint experience in ways that are new, artful, and important.

Song of Names: A Mormon Mosaic is a unique collaboration between multi-hyphenate writer James Goldberg (novelist, poet, essayist, playwright), the historian and blogger Ardis Parshall, and master