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

printmaker and educator Carla Jimison. They, along with Scott Hales and Merrijane Rice who each contribute a "guest poem," have created a multilayered reading experience that, in many ways, embodies much about Latter-day Saint history and culture.

The project draws on Parshall's deep knowledge of the more obscure, less celebrated figures and events of LDS history and braids together her short, informative essays with Goldberg's riffing poetic experiments and personal reflections, along with Jimison's lovely though unfinished symbolic imagery. Broken into twenty-two short sections, each begins with Parshall's clean prose offering context with titles like "Church History in Syria and Lebanon" and "The Ebola Epidemic in Sierra Leone." She writes about unknown figures in Church history in corners usually far from Temple Square. Whether it is Goldberg's own grandfather, Gurcharan Singh Gill, the first known Sikh convert to the Latter-day Saint church, or Tsune Nachie, a woman who worked as a cook and housekeeper for missionaries in Japan for two decades before relocating to Hawaii to do temple and missionary work full time, the figures in *Song of Names* are far from the stereotypical image of blonde farmboys from Utah that are often associated with the LDS church. This inclusion embodies what the Latter-day Saint church aims to be—that stone cut out of the mountain that fills the whole world, not just the Intermountain American West. More importantly, Parshall's contextual essays also show real people interacting with the thorny complexities of faith in the real world. The stories aren't "faith affirming" in the sanitized, vetted-by-correlation manner often featured in official church talks and publications, but rather they are uplifting in grounded, authentic, sometimes mundane ways that many readers will recognize from their own lives. Her work embodies the real, sometimes ambiguous experiences most Latter-day Saints have as they experience faith in the real world.

After each contextual essay, a poem by Goldberg (or Hales or Rice) follows, and it uses varying forms to riff off of the information we just

learned. Goldberg uses the Japanese tanka form for Tsune Nachie's poem and a Middle Eastern ghazal for his grandfather. He also uses a triolet, a sonnet, and a villanelle among other forms. Despite the formal virtuosity, the poems are not flashy or grandiose. The language is often simple and direct, and the poems allow the formal elegance and the power of their subject to do most of the work. The book's longest poem, the six-part "The Ballad of Ith Vichit," follows a young Cambodian man fleeing his home country during the beginning of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1974 all the way to his return to Phnom Penh in 2014, a converted member of the church witnessing blessings from heaven replacing the falling bombs he saw forty years before. Goldberg uses repetition to give the poem a dirge-like feel at first, echoing "Fire falls from the heavens like rain" and "Is this war or the end of the world?" By the sixth section of the poem, the repetition eventually becomes hymn-like with "Twelve thousand saints worship in Cambodia / Twelve thousand saints worship in Cambodia." Goldberg's poetry is simultaneously ambitious and humble, beautiful and plain. In that way, his work is an excellent parallel for a people who believe in perfection while knowing they'll never attain it, who build opulent temples and simple churches. The combination of simplicity and straightforwardness combined with an almost cosmic ambition is Mormon to its core.

Goldberg follows up each poem with a brief reflection. These pieces synthesize the straightforward facts of Parshall's essays and the beauty of the poems to offer up insight into what it all might *mean*. It is in reflection that *Song of Names* embodies its Mormon-ness, its Latter-day Saint-ness the most. The book, like the people and faith tradition it represents, is a combination of historical fact, mythmaking, mundanity, art, craftsmanship, hands-on labor, and striving to make something holy. The reflections are sometimes based in scripture, sometimes in personal memory. Often, Goldberg draws on ideas and comments from other writers to shed light on his intersections between history, poetry, art, and spirit. In the reflection that follows the poem "Imperfect Sonnet

for Vienna Jacques," he quotes LDS artist and scholar Faith Heard's criticism of Mormon visual art for "offering a vision of 'discipleship minus the hard parts.' In attempting to communicate the overall goodness of the gospel, we often omit the heights and depths that give meaning to our lives . . . If we only celebrate the pleasant in the gospel, we fail to find meaning in the range of experiences God gives us" (49). He then goes on to describe what is essentially the thesis of the book and, in my opinion, the heart of how *Song of Names* embodies LDS experience: "If disappointment, uncertainty, and apparently unfulfilled promises are all essentially components of a disciple's life and not simply statistical flukes of the spirit, we need to find ways to honor them in art" (49). The book highlights miracles, certainly, and stories and figures that could be considered traditionally "faith affirming," but that is far from all that it is. On the contrary, *Song of Names*, in its history, its poetry, and its reflection, focuses on the beauty of the common, the miraculous nature of the earthbound and the striving, the divinity of whole lives rather than just the shining, easily understood moments from them. *Song of Names* celebrates and commemorates the wholeness of the Latter-day Saint experience, not just the well-known or easily digested parts of it.

The other aspect of the book, Carla Jimison's illustrations, also dovetails nicely with the theme of the book and with Mormonism. In the book's introduction, Goldberg explains how he and Parshall invited Jimison to create six prints that would exist "in conversation with the text." With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, each of the writers was able to continue their work, but Jimison, a professor at BYU-Idaho, was blocked from the printmaking labs on campus due to quarantine and therefore couldn't actually finish her part of the project. The book features her preliminary drawings instead. I'm sure it's a frustrating situation for Jimison and not what any of the book's contributors planned, and yet, in a way, it's appropriate that a book celebrating the uncertain and the unfulfilled should be released during one of the most uncertain times in recent world history and feature illustrations that have

the promise of so much more. What is more in keeping with Latter-Day Saint theology than art that is good but that, with the right tools and time, has the capacity to be so much more than what immediately meets the eye? Jimison's spare pen-and-ink sketches hint at a much richer, more fully realized possibility in the future. Her drawings in the book, like the figures written about in *Song of Names*, have divine potential.

Each individual component of *Song of Names* is worthwhile and expertly crafted, but taken as a whole, the book goes beyond interesting historical fact, well-made poems, insightful reflection, and artfully composed illustrations. In the best tradition of poetry, the book takes something lovely, vast, and somewhat abstract, in this case the large, varied, profoundly human Latter-Day Saint experience, and conjures it into concrete, compact existence, casting light into some of its lesser-known corners and celebrating the delayed blessings, mortal foibles, and quotidian miracles and victories that make it up.

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