

Dayna Patterson. *If Mother Braids a Waterfall*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020. 118 pp. Paper: \$10.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-280-3.

Dayna Patterson. *Titania in Yellow*. Cincinnati: Porkbelly Press, 2019. 44 pp. Paper: \$10.00.

If the purpose of this review is a plea for a) respect for our great poets in the form of b) a publishing system that helps our poets ascend their peaks and thus c) bolder Mormon-themed work, then Patterson's two collections suggest a possible way forward.

Both of these volumes include much previously published work. The chapbook was published by a small press specializing in such; the full-length collection was published by Signature, which, until the advent of BCC Press (with three solid volumes of poetry published in 2019), stood unchallenged as the premier publisher of Mormon-themed single-author collections, even if such publications were infrequent (infrequent, but perhaps accelerating—their seven previous collections came out in 2005, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2018—which is promising).

Patterson is part of the long tradition and current explosion of Mormon poetry on the feminine divine. She was a coeditor of the seminal *Dove Song* (Peculiar Pages, 2018), which demonstrated for a broad audience both that this history predates even Eliza Snow's "Invocation" and that the tradition is flowering and expanding today like the first three seconds of the universe.

Both collections present poems that can be arranged into categories. *Titania*, for instance, even with only fourteen poems, can be broken into goddess poems, ovum poems, and home poems, or self-portrait poems, classics poems, and nature poems. While *Mother*, being so much longer, can be unshuffled into more suits than I have space to consider—even (or especially) considering that poems will fall into more than one category. My first draft of categories consisted of post-Mormon, polygamy, Mother, missionary work, and Mormon childhood.

But that didn't satisfy. So then I tried thinking about forms—there are the letters to ancestors, for instance; there is defamiliarized nostalgia. I tried thinking of the collection as a series of interwoven love stories: the poet's, the gods', the ancestors'. That love-story angle was attractive and, if I had twenty more pages, I might tackle it. Instead, I've decided to simplify my task by returning to the post-Mormon category and tracking its development. But while I'll be focused on one, remember that the collection covers much more ground much more richly than this narrow focus may suggest.

Part of the reason I've selected the post-Mormon as focus is because Patterson's means of exploring the topic mature over the course of the book. I don't know if they are arranged as originally written or by some other strategy, but the effect is largely one of personal growth, if one interprets the poems as sharing a speaker. I'll briefly touch on nine poems, including the book's first and last.

"The Mormons Are Coming" is a four-page list of details (a poem type Patterson will return to). These details of Mormons seem friendly ("They surprise you with a two-foot Christmas tree, white / lights, red balls, and a golden star" [7–8]), but over the course of the poem, the details shift from positive to negative ("Alcohol, never" [16]) to othering ("white undergarments woven with folkloric / magic" [34–35]) to threatening ("The Mormons are coming. // Mormons put up Prop 8 signs" [78–79]). Each of these examples is at least ambivalent and possibly ironic, but the general swing is reinforced by the speaker's family's words—from reciting pioneer ancestry to questioning history to coming out as bisexual—alongside the litany of increasingly oppressive details.

"Post-Mormons Are Leaving," however, comes off not as a journey but a manifesto. But, while the phrasing is as if representative of post-Mormons at large, the speaker has an intensely personal focus, leading her to mistake her opinions and feelings as representing post-Mormons at large. This is perhaps most obvious when she tries to state authoritative distinctions between post-Mormon and ex-Mormon; or in claiming that, free of faith, each and all are now trying their first

margaritas and lattes; or that all post-Mormons are now religion-free rather than turning to Unitarianism or the Episcopal Church as (anecdotal evidence alert!) I have often observed. It is the voice of someone who, escaping a perceived authoritarianism, replaces it with one of her own.

“Ring Tricks” is not so much poetry as an essay with line breaks until a sudden volta appears, blossoming near-prose into poetry at its denouement (this is true of a few poems in *Mother*—one may debate whether it is a “good” form, but Patterson wields it effectively). The poem turns to the intensely personal, revisiting wife and husband’s exchange of rings imbued with section-132 power. The rings were to signify that, “if good enough, / we’d have each other. Always” (7–8) yet “We couldn’t foresee, thirteen years later, / our rings would end up on the fingers of // diametrically different people . . . our palimpsestuous selves” (37–39, 43).

With this settling understanding of self, “Former Mormons Catechize Their Kids” into this new faith/nonfaith. The catechism is a temple ritual-shaped Creation story borrowing without hesitation from multiple world traditions. Jesus is still part of the “pantheon of gods” (33), but this Jesus is “unscrolling the skin of his chest to reveal / his sacred heart, sword skewered and aflame” (44–45). The gods are followed by the goddesses, who are followed by the creation of humans, who are followed by their purpose, their relationship with the deity (as it grows to “that multihue ribbon arcing across the blue” [121]), their future, their redemption. And the teachers of redemption are Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Elijah, Joseph Smith, Miriam, Deborah, Anna, Eliza R. Snow, Emily Dickinson, Mother Teresa, Jane Goodall, Malala, parents (138–57). Teaching her own children of redemption, the speaker, rather than closing doors, has found a post-Mormonism defined by opening as many doors as she can find. This is an openness made possible by the realization of “a nude / *I don’t know*” (“Revision,” 27–28).

Unlike the other letters-to-ancestors poems, “Dear May” is not addressed to a blood ancestor but to an adopted ancestor, May Swenson,

whom the speaker imagines traveling a similar path (“Sister—can I call you that?—I wonder if it was hard for you / as it was for me” [16–17]), leaving her childhood faith to be “rebaptized . . . with language, reconfirmed a tongue / of fire settling Pentecostal on your word-wilding [*sic*, and gloriously so] art” (27–28).

This post-Mormonism’s foundational theme of Keats’s negative capability means a new “Study for Belief with Lines from *Star Trek: The Original Series*” makes ready sense, flowing as it does from the science-founded skepticism of *Star Trek* (as opposed to the religiously oriented *Star Wars*, which has always been about converting skeptics to its “hokey religions”). Patterson’s speaker has established that she watched this series with her father, and now it is the inherited scripture she catechizes herself with. The poem forms a loop; the final line’s punctuation appears at poem’s outset, meaning not only will this poem and “every sentence begin: I have been grossly mistaken” (1), but that—and every other statement of humility in the face of the awesome endlessness of space and discovery—will recur again and again as we return from end to beginning in one eternal (secular) round.

“We Christen the Canoe *Sunday School*” completes the passage from torture to rebellion to uncertainty to humility to peace. The poem takes the form of a prayer—perhaps a psalm, without the groveling—thanking an unnamed “you” for the beauty of the day and the pleasure of being upon the waters. In case the completeness of transition to post-Mormon is not obvious enough, the speaker then offers thanks for “a rainbow caught on a dry fly” (17) and the “careful knife inserted in the fish’s anus, / for a silent score to accompany the gutting . . . fish viscera drift[ing] off” (21–22, 24). I write as if the significance of this image is obvious, but, to be honest, I did not recognize *ἰχθύς*<sup>3</sup> until my third or fourth read. This is a far road from the early poems’ belligerent cries of pain.

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3. The Greek word for “fish” and the basis for the *ichthys* symbol, used since ancient times by Christians to represent Jesus Christ.

Which brings us to “Still Mormon,” the conclusive poem, where the speaker we have been travelling with now for fifty-two poems reveals she is “Mormon the way stars—rubbed out at noon . . . still burn” (1–2) or “The way a geode empty of its quartz / is still stone” (3–4). A new comfort and satisfaction—an understanding—has been reached. This final poem is broken into thirty-three pieces—not the first poem to reach this number, either in numbered portions or in the listed ages of its apostasy-bound characters—a final gesture in the direction of a Jesus who may now be little more than shadow, but a shadow by which we still define the edges of ourselves.

Of these nine cited poems, six were previously published: four in Mormon outlets (*Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II*), the other two in *Amethyst Review* and *Poetry*—a slightly different percentage than the poems as a whole (of the forty-four prepub credits, twenty were explicitly Mormon outlets). A cynic may conclude Patterson has had an advantage, developing her explicitly Mormon voice in the national space, as she is, after all, explicitly post-Mormon. But anecdote is not evidence, and some of her most Mormon works (e.g., “Hyrum Smith’s Death Mask,” “The Disposal of Mormon Garments”) appeared in non-Mormon outlets—suggesting that national audiences can have interest in well-crafted Mormon work.

Ultimately, the problem may not be with our poets—who are skilled and reveal a breadth of styles and angles and interests—but with their availability and us, their audience. With so few explicitly Mormon outlets for explicitly Mormon work, poets looking to grind themselves against the whetstone of editorial input must reach outward. Then, as they grow, whether we grow with them or not, perhaps they will finally publish the sort of valedictory collections they deserve and we so dearly require.

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