

Commitment Beyond Custom

Michael Fillerup. *The Year They Gave Women the Priesthood and Other Stories*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2022. 284 pp. Paper: \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-445-6.

Reviewed by Heidi Naylor

I once had a bishop who was as guileless as he was faithful, a good and generous man who worked hard and loved us, his ward members, tirelessly. He liked to tell our ward's young men that if they'd serve a mission and give the Lord their best for two years, they'd come home and marry a gorgeous woman for eternity.

It was a cultural promise, of course, taking its traditional place in a long series of Latter-day Saint customs and sayings.

What I love about the new collection from Michael Fillerup is that he—Fillerup—is well-versed in these customs; he understands them top to bottom and inside out; and he's not really having them.

What happens, for example, when you do everything right, you sacrifice and obey and serve . . . and you don't get the spouse, the family, the life, the happy consequence of your dreams? “Psalm for the Man Who Has Everything” concerns a forty-seven-year-old, modern-day Shiblon who lives in the same ward as his pre-mission girlfriend. She Dear-Johned him decades earlier for the hometown hero: a “mannequin good,” successful future bishop and mayor, “all of which meant she [now] lived in the triple-decker on the hill and drove the biggest, shiniest sports utility vehicle in the country . . . [as] he was fast-tracked to the top” (149).

Our Shiblon, Brother Collins, settles into bachelorhood as a decent, neighborly, and hardworking cabinetmaker with a little condo. He nurses this private grudge for decades, while perfectly lovely women (and life) try to catch his attention. Still, Collins has eyes for little except

Pre-Mission Girlfriend, and one night he allows his obsession to get the best of him.

Inevitable personal shame ensues, along with a deific showdown: “Why the hell?” he pleads. “How?” he wonders. “What’s all of this *for?*” (159).

Fillerup says that he doesn’t “sprinkle fairy dust” on his characters but doesn’t “feed them to the Minotaur” either. What he does, and does so well, is insist that they take up the hard questions that many of us find ourselves asking, even if quietly, as we experience the pains and betrayals of ordinary life. The answers to these questions are hard-won. They arrive packaged in the earthbound, raw materials of daily living—the tools God uses to help us hear him: a rock song lyric, moments on the pitching mound “throwing sidearm strikes” to a kid (188), a third-world Catholic chapel in which the “pale Virgin” is “not exactly the same God [we] worship . . . but close enough for the moment” (106).

There are seventeen stories here, and the first two read like novels. I hope you’ll get the collection for the first (and title) story alone: “The Year They Gave the Women the Priesthood.” I laughed and laughed but also felt the sting of discomfiting truth as the story careened forward, upending millennia of cultural practice. After present-day women are ordained to priesthood offices and callings, young men and their fathers get “to act as . . . [baptismal] witnesses . . . [, which] seemed like a consolation prize” (16).

That’s the ousted former patriarch of his family speaking. Now he’s been demoted: husband of a bishopric counselor, watching as his wife confers upon their daughter the Aaronic Priesthood and speaks to her excitedly about her future in Church administration. A few weeks later, their son is baptized by his mother. He’d been looking forward to becoming a deacon one day but must now face a future in which his sister will be the one providing the ordinances of salvation. He . . . well, he’ll get to watch.

It gets tougher, as Husband learns that “worthy priesthood holders can now be sealed in the temple to additional husbands” (17).

Husband recoils by throwing a punch at the household addition of Second Husband, a twenty-five-year-old martial arts champ who “gave a bodybuilding workshop for the young women” (21). His wife steps in with a pointed verbal takedown of Second Husband: “You should know better than to pick on someone twice your age!” (38).

Sheesh.

It all rings so hollow and—yes—painful when these cultural tables are turned. Is this because I’m the devoted wife of a priesthood magnifier, plus the mother of beloved sons, and I feel for them?

Or is it because the long tradition of patriarchy really *is* that damaging and arbitrary, consequential and indefensible?

The second story, the heartbreakingly titled “In a Better County,” concerns the mysterious and unexplained death of a young missionary in Mexico. The young man’s mother has moved painfully through her grief, serving faithfully and with a willing heart. But the father can’t accept what has happened; he travels to a tiny Tarahumaran village to avenge, or perhaps simply to reckon with, his son’s violent death.

Fillerup doesn’t shy away from the blood-soaked consequences of this father’s actions as he confronts an arrogant young teen who is wearing his son’s “bright . . . brash . . . gold Rolex” (90). What follows is a grappling that is as much with God as it is with the violence of revenge—a contest dealing as fully with forgiveness of the self as with accepting both the presence and absence of divine intervention.

I love these stories for their passionate insistence, their energy, their humor, their pointedness, and their compassionate, practical wrestle with the earthbound nature of faith and devotion. It’s a struggle that impels gleaming glimpses of the divine. Can such moments sustain us? *The Year They Gave Women the Priesthood* is a collection you won’t want to miss.

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