

To read these three books together is to be invited into a trio of Mormon feminist poetics that explores how poetry can transcend time and delve into spaces of origin, how it can restore the severed dyad of mother and child, and how it can insistently defy ancient stories that define contemporary attitudes about gender. The three poets' voices—three magi—are vastly distinct, but they share a question that would be recognized by women familiar with a Mormon upbringing. Behind the many female icons—Emily Dickinson, Eve, Greek goddesses and Judeo-Christian literary women—the poems ask: *Where is the matrix, the Mother, and how can she be made more visible?* Thus, the unasked question in these poems is *Where did we come from? Where is the divine body through which women can hear the words: "Let us make woman in our own image, after our likeness"?*

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Salt That Lost Its Savor

Ryan Habermeyer. *Salt Folk*. Cornerstone Press, 2024. 244 pp. Paper: \$26.95. ISBN: 978-1960329349.

Review by Jacob L. Bender

Ryan Habermeyer lays down the gauntlet immediately in *Salt Folk* with “La Petite Mort,” a series of micro-vignettes about a professional

elephant masturbator (she is never referred to by any other appellation than “the elephant masturbator”) who cares for an elephant at what appears to be a near-future Hogle Zoo in Salt Lake City. What most gets under your skin as the story progresses, however, isn’t the repeated provocation of “elephant masturbator,” but the rather bleak milieu that forms the story’s backdrop: the Great Salt Lake has completely dried up, there are chronic water shortages across the region (hence why the elephant masturbator can only rarely indulge her charge in a mud bath), almost no one has children anymore (including the elephant masturbator herself), and the elephant in question appears to be the last of its kind (hence the need for a masturbator, since it can never mate). The French “Petite Mort” of the title apparently refers not only to the lonely orgasms of the elephant but to the “little death” that everyone globally is experiencing at both a literal and spiritual level; it is T. S. Eliot’s “This is the way the world ends / not with a bang but a whimper” in zoo-centered story form.

The rest of the stories in *Salt Folk*—a collection of experimental short stories set in and around Utah—continue in a similar manner: a Yeti is forced by the oil and gas companies into a retirement community in southern Utah after his Himalayan glaciers melt; a mysterious glacier appears in the barren lake bed of the former Great Salt Lake, but it only grows if we feed it our joy; a chemically induced “algorithm of happiness” is discovered “after years of blackening skies” and “melted ice-caps” in “what was then still called Utah” (113); a color librarian scrapes up flakes from a rainbow in a postapocalyptic Utah where God has retired—“not dead, not MIA,” the narrator carefully explains, “retired. From the old French. A strategic defeat, a falling away, a withdrawal into seclusion, into the cobwebs of the self” (211). Even when these stories are openly funny (e.g., “Book Fucker,” a series of parody library late notices, and “Forecast,” a satire of astrology readings, are two definite highlights of the collection), they are still of the Hermann

Hesse all-humor-is-gallows-humor variety. Though these stories are not exactly groundbreaking in structure (they definitely feel MFA workshopped), they draw from impeccable pedigrees: Habermeyer writes with the existential despair of Samuel Beckett, the nightmarish humor of Franz Kafka, the discomfiting imagination of Ben Marcus, and the dark precision of Gordon Lish and his acolytes (indeed, his closest analog on a prose level is probably Brian Evenson of *Altmann's Tongue*).

What's more, these stories do not appear to present such bleak futures in order to raise a warning voice against looming ecological catastrophe or impel the reader to environmental action or what have you; no, in true postmodern fashion, the stories proceed passively as though the apocalypse has already occurred and there is nothing left to be done but helplessly endure the aftermath. It is *Waiting for Godot* after Godot definitely never arrived. If Moroni writes, "whoso believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world," Habermeyer by contrast creates landscapes lacking the presence of God (at least an interventionist one), as well as any hope for a better world.

Here I cite the Book of Mormon because, after the climate crisis, the *other* through-thread that binds these stories together is their Utah Mormon milieu. Almost all these stories take place in the Beehive State and are littered with little references to LDS history, practices, doctrines, folk doctrines, and cultural mores, all presented with the confidence of an insider. Habermeyer has clearly lived in Utah before or was at least raised in the faith (he dedicates this collection to his "Mother, who birthed salt that lost its savor"). Like the climate crisis, these Mormon allusions form more the backdrop than the main thrust of most the stories in *Salt Folk*; although the author sometimes critiques the faith directly in stories like "Wife No. 57" and "The Jump Humping Handbook for Dummies," largely the Mormonism stays in the background. Also like the climate crisis, Mormonism is presented not as something to be actively resisted or fought against but merely another

fact to be passively endured—another facet of Utah that, like the Great Salt Lake itself, is slowly yet inevitably drying up.

Habermeyer may be a lot less broken up about the Church's plateaued growth rates than he is about the evaporation of the Great Salt Lake, but what's interesting to note here is that, unlike many ex-Mormon screeds, he doesn't ever offer anything more hopeful to go in its place—perhaps because, again, hope is only for people who still believe in the possibility of a better world. The Book of Mormon is also a postapocalyptic text, one narrating the utter self-destruction of two ancient American civilizations; yet even after witnessing the death of his people and his own father, the book's final editor, Moroni, still stubbornly insists upon the absolute necessity of hope. By contrast, the various characters populating *Salt Folk* have, like Lot's wife, been transformed into metaphoric pillars of salt, paralyzed into inaction after witnessing an apocalyptic destruction befall that *other* great city on a plain by a Dead Sea, helpless to do anything more than mutely observe all that they have lost and were hopeless to prevent. How much that description will appeal to you personally is left as an exercise for the reader.

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