

More than a Long Letter from a Dear Friend

Katie Ludlow Rich and Heather Sundahl. *Fifty Years of Exponent II*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2024. 405 pp. Paper: \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-477-7.

Reviewed by Rebecca de Schweinitz

Katie Ludlow Rich and Heather Sundahl’s “first-ever comprehensive history” of *Exponent II* is a deeply researched and engagingly written volume that reads as much like “a long letter from a dear friend” as the original publication (xix, xvii). Crafted from dozens of oral histories, the pages of every issue of the periodical, thousands of blog posts, the *Exponent II* archival collection at Brigham Young University, and their own experience with *Exponent II*, Rich and Sundahl trace the origins and evolution of *Exponent II*—encompassing its roles as a quarterly newspaper/magazine, retreat, and blog—while highlighting the key figures who shaped its history and whose own lives were transformed in the process. They explore *Exponent II*’s evolving relationship with modern feminism, its interactions with centers of LDS power, its connections to other “unsponsored sector” initiatives and movements, and its responses to broader social, political, and technological changes.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part offers eleven short but multilayered chapters that chronicle *Exponent II*’s history from its beginnings among Boston-area women grappling with the emerging feminist movement in the context of their personal and religious lives to a geographically dispersed and more diverse cohort similarly seeking and sharing knowledge about themselves and their faith in the twenty-first century. With pithy yet descriptive titles such as “Wonderful Darling Upstarts,” “Editing Out the Anger,” and “Mormonism’s Stealth Alternative,” chapters build chronologically, each outlining key transitions and successive editorial teams’ main challenges and accomplishments.

Throughout, Rich and Sundahl show that whether *Exponent II* women were dealing with pressure from LDS apostles, technological revolutions (or limitations), critiques from other liberals, or with internal blind spots and betrayals, the women who founded and shepherded *Exponent II* over the last fifty years made “agentive decisions” that affirmed their values, questions, and understanding of their “duel and dueling identities” as Mormons and feminists (xx, xix).

The second half of the book presents a diverse collection of writings from *Exponent II*, organized into six “units,” each corresponding roughly to a decade of the publication’s history, with an additional chapter dedicated to material originally posted on the blog. Each of these begins with a visual selection of *Exponent II* covers and a short introductory essay: the first three written by the volume’s authors, and the rest by editors who served during the respective periods. These essays highlight key developments in *Exponent II*’s history, frame the selections, and offer points of analysis while providing further insight into the unique voices, goals, and challenges of individual editors and editorial teams.

In unit 4, for example, Aimee Evans Hickman discusses her team’s efforts to engage a new generation of feminists in digital spaces while also moving to produce a full-color magazine. During her and Emily Clyde Curtis’s tenure—marked not just by technological changes but by demographic shifts in Church membership, the rise of “the Mormon moment,” and public campaigns advocating for the ordination of women to the LDS priesthood—*Exponent II* increasingly integrated the perspectives of visual artists and amplified the voices of those representing the global Church alongside the diverse, intersectional identities and experiences of Mormon women and gender minorities.

Rich and Sundahl suggest that their anthology represents a “sampling of *Exponent II*’s best writing, dominant themes, and most memorable and historically significant pieces” (xix). Notably, almost all the works included in the anthology section are by different authors. Rather than privileging particular voices or more prolific writers, their

selections reflect the editorial care taken by successive editors and align with one of the publication's core purposes: to provide a space where diverse Mormon women (and, more recently, gender minorities) could share their lived experiences and perspectives. The anthology features a range of genres and includes work by writers closely associated with *Exponent II* and Mormon feminism as well as contributions from authors whose experiences and impact on LDS feminist thought might otherwise be overlooked. As Hickman suggests, "the quiet voices," often outside the spotlight, "may be where the biggest cultural shifts are manifested in the end" (249).

It is also notable that the anthology features largely complete pieces, with only a few expertly excerpted for brevity. Taken together, these selections not only highlight recurring issues central to LDS women throughout *Exponent II*'s history but also showcase the diverse ways in which Mormon women have engaged with these issues in their personal lives. The anthology further underscores the dynamic nature of Mormon feminism, tracing its evolution across time, place, subject, and perspective.

Several selections from the anthology particularly stood out to me and offer a glimpse into its diverse and thought-provoking content: Victoria Grover's poignant essay examining the tensions within "the Mormon view of the dispersal of spiritual power" (220); Kylie Nielson Turley's moving poem about pregnancy loss (229); Linda Hoffman Kimball's interview with Black Latter-day Saint Cathy Stokes, a "woman of smarts and spirit," who forthrightly claims her place within the faith (233); Page Turner's compelling exploration and artistic rendering of "the sacred history of remnants" (263); Ellen McCammon's haunting midrash on Jael (299); and Hannah MacDonald's (pseudonym) powerful reflection on the conditioning she experienced in suppressing her queer identity as a young LDS woman. A different reading at another time would likely yield a different list, and readers from across the spectrum of Mormon experience could undoubtedly highlight other pieces that reflect the breadth and depth of the feminist work cataloged here.

Rich and Sundahl recognize that their book, which includes a helpful timeline of key events, an excellent index, and wonderful photographs, represents a first step in telling and analyzing the history of *Exponent II*. I join them in anticipating that this volume will encourage other scholars to fill in the gaps that 110 pages of historical narrative could hardly begin to cover. *Exponent II* and the many women involved with it over the years are certainly deserving of more attention in the annals of Mormon, religious, and feminist history.

Still, *Fifty Years of Exponent II* is a remarkable achievement that directly and indirectly shifts our understanding of LDS history, particularly in relation to the history of LDS women and Mormon feminism. As Rich and Sundahl explain, *Exponent II* faced criticism from both the LDS establishment and from members who feared even mild challenges to institutional authority and gender norms as well as from those who felt it wasn't feminist enough. Scholars have long called for greater recognition of diverse feminisms and for attention to the varied origins and paths of feminist thought and organizing. Rich and Sundahl's volume invites us to reflect on the ways Mormon women, over the last half century, have crafted their own brands of feminism—and their own ways of being Mormon.

The authors—and the work they feature from *Exponent II*—demonstrate Mormon women acting collectively to improve their condition. They show how these women identified and challenged the contradictions and tensions in their lives, offered alternative frameworks for understanding themselves and their faith, and did so in ways that privileged women's ways of knowing and resulted in genuine knowledge production. It is fitting that women from a religious tradition centered on a new book of scripture—an upstart tradition that once allowed space for women to express their own authority, theologize, cultivate spiritual gifts, and create programs that met both their individual and communal needs—would produce a written record that features their own faith journeys.

This history speaks to us not “from the dust” nor from the heart of what most would identify as “the Church.” It speaks from the ordinary moments of women’s lives and from the often heavily managed margins of the institutional church. If *Exponent II* has often felt “like a long letter from a dear friend,” this volume makes its history and content even more accessible and helps us to see *Exponent II* for what it truly is: an uncorrelated Latter-day Saint history of lived religion, evidence of the agentive persistence of LDS women, and fifty years of feminist theorizing by a much-maligned group of women of faith. Mormonism’s “stealth alternative,” indeed (xviii).

REBECCA DE SCHWEINITZ {rld@byu.edu} is an associate professor of history at Brigham Young University where, since 2006, she has taught a range of classes, including American girlhood, US women’s history, African American history, Mormon women’s history, and a transnational history of women’s rights. She mostly writes about youth in American history and serves on the Dialogue Foundation Board.



The Long Road to the “Long-Promised Day”

Matthew L. Harris. *Second-Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 460 pp. Cloth: \$39.99. ISBN: 9780197695715.

Reviewed by Benjamin E. Park

Matthew Harris has provided the Mormon community with a gift: *Second-Class Saints* is a substantial work of scholarship based on enormous archival research and makes a compelling case concerning the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ racial policies since World War II. While the parameters of the story are well known, the