

ies of orthodoxy and faith. Although Partridge was not alive to see the culmination of his work, this volume will surely serve as a foundational resource for anyone interested in Lyman, the Godbeite movement, and Spiritualism in Utah.



On Apple Seeds, Rats, and the State of Mormon Literature

Steven L. Peck. *Gilda Trillim: Shepherdess of Rats*. Alresford, Hants: Roundfire Books, 2017. 272 pp. Paperback: \$16.00. ISBN: 978-1782798644.

Reviewed by Shane R. Peterson

Steven L. Peck has long been seen as a pioneer in the field of Mormon letters, because of his ability to move beyond the usual clichés and expectations that often come with fiction about the faith. In two of his previous novels, *The Scholar of Moab* and *A Short Stay in Hell*, he successfully moved the genre into the twenty-first century because of his willingness to push boundaries, embrace the unorthodox, and explore difficult themes. His latest contribution, *Gilda Trillim: Shepherdess of Rats*, follows this same vein by branching out into even newer territory, but unfortunately, it often gets lost along the way.

The book itself is not a simple, straight-forward narrative; Gilda is presented not as a point-of-view character, but rather the subject of MA student Kattrim Mender's thesis, which she describes as "an academic work disguised as a novel disguised as an academic work." With limited commentary in the preface, at the beginning of each chapter, and at

the end of her dissertation, she compiles her research with a series of vignettes describing Gilda's exploits across the world, from competing in badminton tournaments to spending years in a Russian abbey painting a single apple seed the whole time to becoming a prisoner-of-war in Vietnam and befriending the rats that infest her cell (hence the title of Peck's book). As a whole, Kat creates a character study that attempts to reconsider Gilda's fame and legacy as a once world-renown author, who reached heights that no other Mormon writer has before. Over several decades, many Western and Eastern fans and academics attempted to interpret her unusual prose and philosophical meanderings like an entire ecological study dedicated to the contents of a junk drawer, but Kat attempts to shift the discussion toward who Gilda actually was in hopes of reviving the reputation of "this astonishing woman . . . whose name and work deserve to come out of obscurity," particularly among the faithful.

The entire book can be read as meta-commentary on the state of Mormon literature and whether or not it will ever reach its full potential. It's a question aspiring LDS authors have been asking themselves for more than a century since Orson F. Whitney predicted that we would someday have "Shakespeares and Miltons of our own." No one of that caliber has emerged yet, not even Gilda. The most successful Mormon authors of recent years like Orson Scott Card, Stephenie Meyer, and Brandon Sanderson have written mostly genre fiction, usually science fiction and fantasy, that rarely address anything to do with Mormonism (among the few exceptions are memoirs like Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*). Despite their successes, critics like Michael Austin believe that they have not "penetrated very far into the larger Mormon culture, much less the larger American literary culture, in a way that makes them comparable to the kinds of works" found among canonized authors like Shakespeare or Milton.¹⁰ Any of their ties to the faith come in the form

10. "Scholar to Scholar: On Mormon Literary Studies: A Conversation between Michael Austin and Scott Hales," *The Neal A. Maxwell*

of mere references to it that remain in the background or generic themes of mortality and immortality that their religious upbringing may have helped inform but can be found in almost any work of fiction stemming from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Fictional accounts primarily about the Mormon experience that have been successful among non-Mormons have largely come in the form of theater, film, or television, like HBO's *Big Love* or Broadway's *The Book of Mormon Musical*, and they either focus on extreme aspects of the religion or outright satirize it. In a sense, however, some contemporary Mormon authors have embraced some of these absurdities but with an insider's sincerity. According to Scott Hales, they have chosen to embrace "an approach that perceives the whole of the Mormon cosmology as a kind of playground where one can tell offbeat and fanciful stories that revel in the chaotic now of an information-age Mormonism."¹¹

This is Peck's approach to a tee, mainly by including Gilda's musings on the theological mysteries that church correlation unfortunately leaves unanswered. In one episode during a long stint outside of the church and her travels through South America, she takes hallucinatory drugs, contemplates the origin of God(s), hears the original Adamic language that Joseph Smith could only allude to, and follows various anthropomorphic guides (including Charles Darwin appropriately embodied as a beetle and a tortoise) through the spirit world in the hereafter, back to "the universe and its birth in a fiery flash," and well beyond to eternity's most conceivable beginning. There she finds the foundation "from which all Being sprang," where even gods evolved from matter, took new form, and gained consciousness over untold eons. The book's primary strength lies here in these deeper consid-

Institute for Religious Scholarship (blog), Dec. 15, 2014, <https://mi.byu.edu/scholar-to-scholar-on-mormon-literary-studies/>.

11. Scott Hales, "Review of Steven L. Peck, *The Scholar of Moab and A Short Stay in Hell*," *Mormon Studies Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 180.

erations of Mormon theology and even everyday exercises in faithful worship, which are only made possible through the surreal adventures of a character like Gilda Trillim. This may be the product of Peck's training as an evolutionary biologist; I like to think that he begins each book with a hypothesis and treats each one as an experiment, with Gilda being his latest subject. No other Mormon writer would dare go as far as either of them do.

With that said, her story is inhibited by Peck's choice to present it through a secondary narrator's thesis. It causes the book to fall short both as a dissertation and as a fictional account. Other than the fact that Kat's thesis would never work in any grad school literature program because it's merely a depository of someone else's writing, most of the story feels more like exposition than anything. It also doesn't seem necessary for any other reason than to play with genre. Although it's an intriguing idea in theory, I don't think it pans out as well as one would have liked. For one thing, there's hardly any dialogue or interactions with other characters in the book because we hardly experience things as Gilda experiences them. Instead, she'll narrate them to another reader or a recipient of her letters. This puts her at a strange distance from us as an audience and turns her into a less intriguing enigma. Perhaps as a result, I became bored with Gilda's exploits after a while and was often tempted to skip ahead to more interesting sounding sections. This also made it harder for me to accept, let alone believe, most of her quirks as a character, especially when she spends too much time investigating more irrelevant topics like Emily Dickinson's cookbook. Finally, it makes much of what comes before and after the primary story about Gilda becoming a POW feel more like filler. The focus should have been here more than anywhere else with more connections leading up or back to it to give us a greater sense of her struggles other than those involving her LDS identity.

There's no doubt that Peck's latest work is creative and unusual as far as Mormon fiction goes. He has championed many unorthodox LDS protagonists, Gilda only being the latest entry. That said, due to the fragmented structure and framing of this book, many readers may find it less

accessible or engaging than his previous novels, especially if they're not as captivated with this heroine as he hopes that they'll be. Even then, it's hard to know who this book is actually for. Casual readers may find the character's eccentricities off-putting. Non-LDS audiences will only be confused by all the theological references to Mormon doctrine. Traditional Mormons may be offended by its occasional instances of profanity/violence or explicit discussions of taboo topics like Heavenly Mother. And for former Mormons, a lot of the philosophical tangents on the deeper intricacies of Mormon doctrine will only ring hollow. Those who are interested in the evolution of Mormon literature may be more willing to examine this piece for academic purposes, though it is up to them whether or not it succeeded—and of course, that is a limited readership.

I think what many hopeful LDS writers and readers fail to understand is that Mormon literature may always be a very niche market because the Mormon experience is often too obscure to outsiders who find it unappealing unless it involves the Church's more troubling history and unusual beliefs or practices that are, quite honestly, stranger than fiction. And those who do write fiction about Mormonism often have no choice but to emphasize intense inner-conflicts about each member's true devotion or stretch the realities of the day-to-day faith to absurd extremes (as Peck does in his book) since the daily lives of practicing Mormons are too often filled with musings or epiphanies that Gentile readers will find pedantic, whether that be through the sharing of testimonies or scripture study, and actions that they'll only find tedious like the endless hours of church meetings. It's a religion that is difficult to translate into fiction because its realities are polarizing and perplexing.

With that said, Peck remains one of the foremost author of this tradition because he avoids the pedestrian and embraces these perplexities by toying with them as gleefully as a novice scientist in a new laboratory. At times, that experimentation is just as enjoyable and enlightening for readers to witness unfold on the page. So even if he is not the one to fulfill Whitney's prophecy, Peck deserves credit for the ways he turns it on its head.