

Sisterhood and the Divine Feminine

Twila Newey. *Sylvia*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2020. 292 pp. Paper: \$15.95. ISBN: 978-1948218344.

Reviewed by Rebecca Bateman

Like a mother opening her arms to embrace her children, the span of mountains and trees that look over my childhood home in Salt Lake City extend to the south and cradle also the homes in Provo, Utah. Those two sister cities have different personalities, and Provo has sometimes felt difficult to understand. But the mountains, the trees, and the gospel connect us, and, like a daughter knows the bedtime stories her mother tells to all her siblings, I find familiarity in the novel *Sylvia* by Twila Newey.

The focus of this story, set in the foothills and canyons near Provo, is the relationship between four sisters—Mary, Roxcy, Eve, and Anna—at the death of their mother, Sylvia. As each chapter progresses, through individual perspectives in flashbacks and reveries, the sisters' struggles and heartaches unfold. We get to know their personalities, strengths, and weaknesses by their own admission—and we gain just as many insights from their silent judgments and allowances for each other.

Newey's women all have a distinct relationship with their membership in the Church, and this has relevance to their characters. Each sister is named for a woman in the gospel: Mary, the mother of Jesus; Eliza Roxcy Snow; Mother Eve; and Anna the Prophetess. This spiritual inheritance serves as both a blessing and burden for each of them. But each of them finds strength and support by returning time and again to the arms and wisdom of their mother.

At face value, this novel is an enchanting, heartfelt depiction of a family affected by loss and drawn to each other for comfort. But there's

more to it than this. Newey has woven in layers of symbolism and meaning that allow for reflection and introspection. Much like Jesus constructed his parables with a foundational narrative and deeper meaning for those looking, Newey has crafted an engaging novel that also serves as an allegory to the divine feminine.

For proof of this, one needn't look further than the title character. Newey has graced the mother in this story with the name Sylvia, meaning "forest" or "woods," and with dreamlike fluidity her posthumous presence is often felt in the rustle of the trees outside. We see the interconnected influence she had in nourishing each of her daughters through her words and embrace, her roots and branches. As Eve mused, "If Mom was the first tree, the beginning, we're just shoots she sent out, the little grove. We're all one thing, really" (153). Sylvia represents a Heavenly Mother, and the reader is invited to gravitate to the daughter whose personality most resonates with her, knowing that no matter her situation and life experience, she is a branch of the tree, a growth of the root, a part of the grove. This spiritual underpinning gives the story a poetic cadence. Newey is especially skilled in the things left unsaid, the quiet between responses, the piecing of memories.

Because there are many references to Latter-day Saint culture and especially to the city of Provo, while reading I often wondered who was the target audience for this book. There are pronounced attempts to explain unfamiliar or confusing aspects of Mormonism, such as temple garments, while other mentions of local culture, such as popular landmarks, are taken for granted. I know enough about Provo to catch some of these—the prestigious family names, the Tree Streets neighborhood, and the canyon road leading up to Sundance Resort—but I'm not sure most people living outside of Utah County would. Some members of the Church might take offense at the language and subject matter, though I assume this was not Newey's concern. My biggest criticism of this book is the frequent typographical errors that surely could have

been resolved by a few good edits. They were a distraction but not an impairment.

In all, this book is lovely. Twila Newey is a gifted writer. Her imagery is clear and sensual. She touches on the profane and spiritual moments familiar to many women with a grace reminiscent of Emma Lou Thayne. The struggles of the sisters in *Sylvia* raise difficult themes, and Newey approaches them bravely and with empathy in a way that women—through sisterhood—need. She invites us to understand the hearts of these women and reminds us that we are all connected together through the Mother Tree.

REBECCA BATEMAN {rebeccabatem@gmail.com} is currently the community relations director for a U.S. senatorial campaign, was the executive director of LDS Earth Stewardship, an International Rescue Committee refugee family mentor, an organizer for the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions, and staff for the Utah House of Representatives. She loves travel, the arts, language, and good food.



The Dark Side of Devotion

Robert Hodgson Van Wagoner. *The Contortionists*.
Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020. 358 pp.
Paper: \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1560852896.

Reviewed by Shayla Frandsen

When a five-year-old boy tragically disappears from a quiet LDS neighborhood, grief-stricken family members, detectives, ward members, and suspects all struggle to find their footing in the agonizing aftermath.