Mormonism and the Natural World

Karin Anderson and Danielle Beazer Dubrasky, eds. *Blossom as the Cliffrose: Mormon Legacies and the Beckoning Wild*. Salt Lake City: Torrey House Press, 2021. 250 pp. Paper: $21.95. ISBN: 978-1-948814-42-3.

Reviewed by Gary Ettari

This collection of fiction, essays, and poetry is a timely and necessary one, reflecting a growing Mormon interest in and concern for the natural world. The theme of the 2019 Mormon Scholars in the Humanities conference, for instance, was "Ecologies," and there has been a steadily growing scholarly interest in the relationship between Mormonism and the environment. Given Mormonism's belief that the earth itself is a gift from God, such an interest is to be expected. The complication, however, is the fact that the institutional church remains largely silent on the matter. As Patrick Q. Mason notes, "As an institution, the modern church has typically taken a laissez-faire approach to the environment."[1] The reasons for this are legion, not least among them being a skepticism regarding both political activism and regulatory solutions proposed by the government, as well as an emphasis on personal accountability and the ethics of individual agency. Indeed, as the very existence of the book itself suggests, Mormons may be more inspired to honor the earth by reading personal responses to the natural world than by sifting through the byzantine and partisan rhetoric of environmental policy debates.

The question regarding the comparative dearth of a Church-wide commitment to ethical and sustainable environmental stewardship is

1. Patrick Q. Mason, "'The fulness of the earth is yours': Environmental Politics in the Mormon Culture Region," in *Religion and Politics Beyond the Culture Wars: New Directions in a Divided America*, edited by Darren Dochuk (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 94.

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/dial/article-pdf/55/3/154/1990112/154ettari.pdf by guest on 20 April 2024

framed this way by one of the editors: “Why is environmentalism seen as an enemy to many followers of the Mormon Church rather than as a way to honor divine creation?” asks Danielle Beazer Dubrasky in the prelude to the volume (9). That question strikes at the heart of one of many Mormon paradoxes, one that has to do with how Mormonism views the earth, the constellation of ideas surrounding the meaning of stewardship, and competing political ideologies that exist both within and outside of the LDS Church. For the most part, the selections eschew political rhetoric and instead narrate unique and deeply personal attempts both to connect with nature itself and to see a reflection of the divine in it. Dubrasky herself notes the varied significance that the natural world may hold for Mormons—its potential to be both “a sacred reflection of our divine origins” and “a desolate landscape, a range of mountains and an open sky that call to us from a source even deeper than God” (15).

The complexity of the Mormon environmental question toward which Dubrasky gestures is reflected in the variety of voices and perspectives contained in this book. The pieces offer no final or easy solution to the dilemma confronting the fact that Mormon environmentalism still appears to contain a morass of unresolvable paradoxes; instead, they offer a multitude of encounters with nature, with memory, and with faith. It’s an approach that is both wise and generous. The table of contents features a variety of headings, some of which (“Revel,” “Intercede,” “Unveil”) appear to be suggestions about how to both interact with and honor the natural world. Many of the pieces are ruminations on each author’s experiences with both the wilderness and with family. Jennifer Champoux’s “Maternal Eternal,” for instance, notes the connections not only between the familial and natural worlds (“I have stood with my children in awe before the petroglyphs” [100]) but also between the natural world and the divine. The concluding sentence of her essay knits into one whole family the individual, the environment, and God: “Like the parachuting spider I saw on the pond, we glide through our days,

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/dial/article-pdf/55/3/154/1990112/154ettari.pdf by guest on 20 April 2024

finding signs of God's love all around and learning to reflect it back to the world," she writes (105). Sarah Newcomb, in her essay "Where Grandmother Walked," brings an Indigenous perspective to themes of nature and family, chronicling her decision to leave the LDS Church and the difficulty of establishing (or reestablishing) family ties in the wake of such a separation. Despite the challenges facing her, Newcomb recounts taking her children to visit extended family in Alaska and describes the strong memories of older family members she experiences there. Newcomb, too, looks to nature for connections, at one point seeing "eagles flying high" and realizing that "the beautiful life within the community had not changed in all the years I had been gone" (286). Nature itself serves to remind Newcomb of community and familial connectedness, yet another of its functions in this collection.

It is heartening also to encounter so much poetry in a volume such as this. One of the standouts is Kimberly Johnson's "Goodfriday," which includes the lines "O happy deformation, / spunky verb, I embrace you in my / degradation, my shoddy embodiment / making thunder endless: impossible: sublime" (114). Johnson's solution to the fraught relationship between Mormonism and environmentalism is decidedly both rhetorical and bodily; the muscularity of her language matches the thunder's rolls, and the body itself, "shoddy" though it is, becomes a means whereby the poem's speaker experiences the sublime and endless echoing of thunder. Another poem, Lisa Bickmore's "Vesper Sparrow on a Fence Post," emphasizes the role that language itself plays in our encounters with the natural world. Bickmore observes that language is a reminder of both familiarity and estrangement, that the complexities of the natural world demand an equally complex rhetorical response, demand "a language that is both / home and exile, that scatters and gathers / an antiphon in my ear: noise of water- / clatter, a dun bird on its shorn tree" (326).

As Bickmore's poetry and as many of the other pieces remind us, solutions for bolstering Mormonism's anemic record on environmentalism

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/dial/article-pdf/55/3/154/1990112/154ettari.pdf by guest on 20 April 2024

perhaps ought not to be sought through institutional channels at all. If this book communicates anything to us, it is that a personal connection with nature and an awe in the face of its grandeur are more likely to produce both a love for the environment and a sustained commitment to caring for it. The concept of stewardship is based as much on subjective experience as it is on the communal good. Such a vision of stewardship is hardly surprising, considering that the core of Mormon belief (obtaining a "testimony") is, in theory, almost entirely subjective; one approaches the divine with questions and, it is assumed, if one prays often and sincerely enough, one receives a direct answer from beyond. In that way, the writings here offer a similar dynamic: The journey to the knowledge of and appreciation for nature begins with an individual encountering its vastness, engaging with it through language, the senses, memory, etc., and then gaining a deeper understanding of its significance. In that context, *Blossom as the Cliffrose* is an exemplary volume in more than one sense of the word. The writing here is not only generally quite good but also serves as a template in many instances for how to encounter nature and hold it sacred. The variety of voices also serves to enrich a collection such as this. The diverse perspectives provide thoughtful and mostly successful attempts to not only commune with nature but also to see within it a reflection of both the divine and ourselves.

GARY ETTARI {gettari@unca.edu} is an associate professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. He is the author of several articles on Mormonism and the book *Mormonism, Empathy, and Aesthetics: Beholding the Body* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/dial/article-pdf/55/3/154/1990112/154ettari.pdf by guest on 20 April 2024