

The Old Mormon Poetry

A Widening View by Carol Lynn Pearson, illustrated by Trevor Southey (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, c1983), 64 pp., \$4.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Dennis Clark, a librarian at Orem Public Library and poetry editor for *Sunstone*.

THE OLD MORMON POETRY is still alive and kicking, as this volume by Pearson shows. Some of the kicks and jinks are interesting, but some are too familiar to hold my interest — and some are just tired. A people's taste in poetry reveals its values as fully as does its taste in music or painting. What the popularity of Pearson's books¹ tells me about their primarily Mormon audience is that it exists, it wants poetry, and it has an undeveloped taste. Her work is good enough to find an audience interested in poetry, but not good enough to help that taste develop.

And I believe that she is to blame for that: she consistently writes down to the reader. I know that she writes down rather than just across because she does not do it with a *foolish* consistency. As evidence here is her two-stanza "Prophet's Feast":

He led us to the banquet
He blessed the food, and then
Gladly he raised his fork
And the Prophet's feast began.

We watched in awe, and still
We stand with empty plate,
Sincere and hungry, testify
That the Prophet truly ate.

Understatement makes that poem work. Pearson does not prod you with her elbow and say "We fools! Instead of getting personal revelations, we just stand up hungry and testify; how we deprive ourselves." The intelligence shows not so much in her

¹ The dust-jacket calls *Beginnings*, *The search*, and *The growing season* "best-sellers," without even adding the qualifying epithet "regional." Since *Beginnings* was reprinted by Doubleday, that may be true.

choice of a feast as metaphor for the gifts of the Holy Ghost as in the use she makes of it. By linking it with our practice of standing and testifying while fasting, and implicitly with the emblems of the sacrament, Pearson requires more of us than just "yeah!" The poem shows true wit.

"Getting Ready" (p. 60) shows less wit than irony. Rather than the bemused wonder of "The Prophet's Feast," Pearson observes with mild sarcasm this man of meetings:

He's always getting ready,
But never quite goes.
He's always taking notes,
But never quite knows.

He's touched by all the starving
But doesn't touch his wife.
His life is spent at meetings,
But he never meets life.

The wordplay in the poem, such as the rhyming of "notes" with "knows" which asserts a genetic connection between the two, shows intelligence. The use of the gerund *meeting* to oppose the meaning of its verbal form *meets*, uses intelligence wittily. And in both poems, Pearson heightens the effect of her wit by relying on formal verse, with regular meter and rhyme.

These poems are, however, the exception in *A widening view*. Pearson more often uses a free verse that relies on the free play of cleverness to carry the poem. That leads her to write down, as in "Unpinned," which begins:

I hope that humans
Never pin down
Love or God.

Things pinned down
(Like butterflies)
Lose something
(Like life).

The parenthetical comments, arch and obvious, show that Pearson places no trust in

her readers to follow her metaphor. Their cleverness ruins the witty and subtle braiding of the literal into the metaphorical meaning "to pin down." As a reader of poetry, I dislike being told how to interpret a metaphor; I'd much rather have a poet trust my intelligence to help the meaning emerge. The poet gives me a perfect egg; I hatch it.

I am not always comfortable with Pearson's occasional didacticism. However, when I read her poem "The Grade" (p. 58) carefully, I have a feeling that didacticism is not its worst feature. It opens:

God does not grade
on the curve,
I'm sure of it.

After describing our classroom competition for grades, it ends:

And God, I think,
Sits at the front of the class,
Holding A's enough for all,
Watching us
Work out our salvation
In fear and competition.

I like the thought, especially when I think back to the savagery of competition for grades in my high school classes. But Pearson fails to develop the metaphor fully enough to hold my interest. The poem deals strictly with the meanness of the feelings of class members for each other. She gives no idea of what the assignments in such a class would be, of what one would do between meetings of the class, of what the homework would be, of how the class would be run. And yet the metaphor would not only permit such development, it cries out for it.

Such poverty of development underscores one of the greatest faults of the book: Pearson relies too much on stock emotion and cliché to carry her poems. Two of the best poems in the book, "The Touch" and "Laura and the Empty Tray," are flawed by sentimentality: they rely on emotions which the author assumes are sufficient in themselves. Rather than evoking fresh response, Pearson nearly spoils

"The Touch" by letting currently fashionable sentiments about touching carry the narrative. Robert, at the stricken father's bedside to touch him, reviews their life together:

Do you remember that I would
never go out
To a real barber, Dad?
Do you know why?
Because once a month, when
you gave me
A haircut in the kitchen —
you touched me.
And it felt so good.

The detail here is convincing, but their relationship is not believably developed in the rest of the poem, partly because Robert is so self-absorbed. His desire for affection is natural and understandable, as is his need to give affection. But the tone of his voice is a whine that grates on the ear, rather than ingratiates. The poem would read well as a dramatic monologue, but it lacks the emotional honesty of great poetry.

Pearson's dramatic training along with an air of self-amused detachment, makes "Real Tears" (p. 46), on the other hand, a far better poem than "The Touch." The same qualities also guide "Laura and the Empty Tray" far more successfully through the jungle of sentiment Pearson invokes. Largely because of the wealth of detail, I sense more real life behind the poem than with "The Touch." Laura is a too-busy Mormon mother:

There had been two cans of paint
Beside the tub for months,
White eyes staring accusingly
At the walls that were slowly
peeling
And at Laura; who was running
in and out
Trying not to think
About the paint and the tube
of calking
For the sink.

Her husband asks what she'd do if she had a whole extra day in the week. "The downstairs bathroom," she says. He forces her

to take a day off from such service, arguing "What can you serve from an empty tray?" The poem is about that day off and what she does.

What she does, like clean out her purse, fascinates me. And vindicates my bibliomaniacal instinct. She saves herself (after

the purse fidgeting) by reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which she finds in a library. A girl riding in her car the other night had complained about having been assigned to read "thirty pages a day." Needless to say, such an excellent example of bibliotherapy thrills me.

A Window on Utah, 1849-50

A Forty-niner in Utah: With the Stansbury Exploration of Great Salt Lake: Letters and Journals of John Hudson, 1848-50, edited by Brigham D. Madsen (Salt Lake City, Utah: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1981), xvii+227 pp., \$22.50.

Gold Rush Sojourners in Great Salt Lake City, 1849 and 1850 by Brigham D. Madsen (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1983), xvi+178 pp., \$17.50.

Reviewed by S. Lyman Tyler, professor of history and director of the American West Center, University of Utah.

IT IS A PLEASURE to discuss these two books edited and written by Brigham D. Madsen, professor of history at the University of Utah. Their primary subject matter is the westward migration during the California gold rush era and its impact on newly established Salt Lake City.

Although most readers are aware that thousands stopped in Salt Lake on their way to the gold fields, it comes as a surprise to be reminded that possibly a third of the 75,000 who reached the Pacific Coast in 1849 and 1850 traveled by way of the Mormon city. Some 10,000 arrived in 1849, the first year good crops were produced in the valley, and about 15,000 in 1850, the last year of heavy migration related to the gold rush.

Considering that the Mormon population was only 6,000 to 7,000 and that most of the travelers arrived in need of provisions and fresh animals to continue their journey, their presence was certainly felt,

even if they remained only two days (the minimum) or a week (the average). However, some stayed several weeks because of sickness or to engage in lawsuits with troublesome traveling companions. Others arrived late in the season and remained through the winter months. A few converted to Mormonism and took up residence in this mountain-basin region.

Looking at these two publications together, *Forty-niner* is the particular and *Sojourners* is the general. In the process of completing the background research on the letters and journal of John Hudson, Dr. Madsen, a mature and able scholar, examined numerous forty-niner diaries as well as Mormon diaries and journals to get a balanced view of this two-year period. For the *Forty-niner* book, this information was used as introductory material and notes. For the *Sojourners* book, this collection of general information became the source for a view of Mormons through sojourner eyes and a view of sojourners through Mormon eyes.

John Hudson's letters in *Forty-niner* give us views of the school he taught under frontier conditions in a crude house that was also his residence, the dispensing of frontier justice seen from his vantage point as clerk of the court, a 24th of July celebration staged by a grateful people, and the religious gatherings of the Mormons as experienced by one who would become a convert. His sketches provide us with views of Salt Lake City and the Great Salt Lake as he saw them in 1849-50, and his journal enriches our understanding of Stansbury's exploration of the lake.