what married people do. Whenever my fifth grader gets around to sneaking *Breaking Dawn* out of the bookshelf, I won't stop him. Although *Breaking Dawn* is fantasy, the depiction of pregnancy as a perilous internal assault by a life-sucking parasite, while perhaps upsetting to some, is all too accurate outside of those times and places with access to modern medicine (and, my wife tells me, even within them).

It is true that Bella's transformation removes much of the tension in the story, which might leave some fans disgruntled if they were expecting a thriller. Even the final conflict with the overlords of vampire society ends bloodlessly—but the point, I think, is precisely not that a new clan should claw its way to the top, as a coven of deposed Romanian vampires are hoping, but rather that greed and fear are powerless against ties of love and affection. Premortal and postmillennial wars between Christ and Satan and their followers figure prominently in Mormon cosmology, but there is never any sense that victory is in doubt or that the threat of violence is even at all serious. Meyer takes the same cue for the final conflict in *Breaking Dawn,* which is, to resurrect another Mormon trope, a battle of testimony.

One might object that vampires—murderous, ruthless, blood-crazed monsters—could never represent perfect immortal beings. But why not? After all, in the words of someone who was not Mormon but is frequently quoted as if he were, "The dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare."[1] The difference between the two is, in the Twilight series, largely a matter of proper diet.

Note

1. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001): 45.

Insight Inside

Kathryn Lynard Soper, ed. *The Mother in Me: Real-World Reflec-*

tions on Growing into Motherhood. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008. 256 pages. Cloth: $19.95; ISBN: 978-1-60641-014-1

Reviewed by Rosalynde Welch

At a climactic moment of George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda,* an adult Daniel meets the mother who abandoned him in his infancy. To this now-grown son, she utters an accusation and issues an ultimatum: "Shall you comprehend your mother, or only blame her?" Though Daniel assures her that he desires only comprehension, she goes on to insist that he can never understand her experience as a mother, the meaning of which she mingles with her experience of diaspora Judaism: "You are not a woman. You may try—but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out—'this is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt.'"[1]

Here Eliot invokes the theme that has animated women's personal writing about motherhood for as long as such writing has found paper: that there is a secret meaning of motherhood that somehow, always and already, exceeds its cultural representation—except in the volume at hand, wherein that meaning is finally captured, though not imprisoned—hence the duplex history of motherhood, at once linear and circular. While mothers' lived experiences move in relation to the parade of cultural and political forces across the decades, the perennial work of mothers' writing is to bring to light a truer, more authentic figure of the mother-and-child. And even if one's reflex is to qualify the very notions of experiential truth and authenticity with quotation marks, as mine is, that search for that hidden meaning can be compelling.

Deseret Book's new offering in the women's inspirational category, *The Mother in Me: Real World Reflections on Growing into Motherhood,* takes up Eliot's demand—"Shall you comprehend your mother, or only blame her?"—albeit in considerably gentler tone. In so doing, it joins with Daniel's estranged mother to partake of the genre's conventions. The book, edited by Kathryn Lynard Soper, comprises forty-three short, first-person essays and poems, illustrated throughout with a series of black-and-white

photographs of mothers and children. The authors, poets, and photographer Maralise Petersen are affiliated with the journal *Segullah*,[2] an outlet for LDS women's reflective writing: "We believe personal writing is a powerful vehicle for growth, for writers and readers alike," Soper explains in the introduction. *The Mother in Me* shares *Segullah*'s ethos and purpose (6).

The scope of the book is narrower: the essays and poems focus on early motherhood: pregnancy, childbirth, and infancy. Each piece addresses a passage of motherhood with its particular problem: Among the many essays, Melissa Young writes of miscarriage in "The Yoke of Wisdom"; Lani B. Whitney writes about debilitating pregnancy sickness in "Small Sacrifice"; Heather Harris Bergevin explores the challenges of mothering as a disabled woman in "Giraffes Kiss"; Lisa Meadows Garfield shares her experiences with adoption in "Grace and Glorie"; Maralise Petersen writes about caring for her chronically ill and disabled sons; and Heather Oman addresses her struggle with illness and infertility in "Tea Party Blessings."

As this list of topics suggests, the book aims for realism over sentimentality, readily addressing the difficulties of both mothering and mothering culture—but always concluding with an affirmative resolution. In this way, the volume represents a soft-edged episode in the genre of critical-personal motherhood literature that has developed in concert with feminism since the 1970s, a tradition that spans Adrienne Rich, Anne Lamott, and anthologies like *Mothers Who Think*.[3] The narrative voices of *The Mother in Me* essays are marked by an imagistic and lyrical sensibility, frequently rendered in the present tense, and strongly (if indirectly) influenced by writers like Rich and Lamott. Brittney Poulsen Carman's "Earthbound" is a skillful example. As such, they will be familiar to those readers who have explored the larger tradition.

But if this volume plants one foot in the critical motherhood genre, it keeps the other firmly in the tradition of Mormon letters. The personal essay, related as it is to the conversion narrative, has always been an important Mormon literary form; its conventions are well suited to the native optimism and cooperative individualism of Mormon culture.[4] The personal essay is not a uniquely Mormon form, of course, nor is its development in Mor-

mon literary culture necessarily faithful to the essay's origin in Montaigne. But the essay lends itself well to a climax centered on an insight—a sudden flash, a realization—and the insight is one of the enduring tropes of Mormon thought. The insight, as a way of knowing truth, provides a vocabulary and a psychological model for the experience of personal revelation, one of the two epistemological foundations of Mormon experience. The other, of course, is institutional revelation.

And in this sense, *The Mother in Me* is Mormon at the bone: Virtually every essay is structured around the revelation of an insight into a hidden, truer meaning of motherhood. These mothers come to know suddenly or slowly, as a flash or a dim thought, but always with certainty: "Motherhood, I now know . . . "; "Now I realize that . . . "; "Eventually, I came to understand . . . "; "It occurs to me that . . . "; "And suddenly, I knew . . . " (4, 42, 156, 172, 232). Again and again, the essays present themselves as midwives to a kind of esoteric knowledge born of the lived experience of motherhood: The infant offspring of the essay is not a squalling red newborn, but a shining nugget of meaning. This form is essentially therapeutic in nature, intended to offer solace amid hardship through understanding—"Shall you comprehend your mother, or only blame her?"—as Soper's introduction makes clear: "Our purpose here is to celebrate this season, to illustrate its unique challenges and delights, to reveal its deep significance. Let's face it: on those days when we do nothing but wipe bottoms and cook Ramen noodles, significance can be hard to find" (6). Like the golden plates lying hidden deep in a mountainside, only to be revealed to the chosen confidante, the insights at the center of these essays yield themselves to a kind of discursive excavation of the experience of motherhood, offering the spiritual riches of knowledge to the kindred seeker.

In many ways, this narrative form is not the most natural fit for reflections on motherhood. The central drama of early motherhood, after all, is the labor and delivery of the newborn child herself, and even the most penetrating of insights into the nature of motherhood pales in comparison to the charisma of a young child. Just as Mormon spiritual thought sometimes privileges a notion of revelation as propositional knowledge over the revelation of God in the person of Christ, these essays, it seems to me,

sometimes miss the rich narrative resource presented by small, sticky persons, by turning to private meaning-seeking. Brooke Olsen Benton's "That One in the Middle" is a notable exception, ultimately proffering her middle child himself rather than a middle-of-the-night realization as the ultimate revelation, and the relief the reader feels in encountering something different points toward the limits of the insight as a narrative device.

In placing so much emphasis on the recovery of a hidden meaning, the volume risks a particular kind of reader fatigue. After forty-two insights into the authentic meaning of motherhood—no matter how comforting, humorous, or profoundly wrought—one wonders how much more one can absorb. Furthermore, the reliance on personal insight can occasionally veer toward solipsism—stopping well short of it, I think, but nevertheless moving in that direction.

The visual rhetoric of Maralise Petersen's photography underscores the point: These photographs, like the essays, are tightly cropped around the faces of mother and child, the visual frame decontextualizing and isolating the pair in an intimate space. Any portrait of a mother and child takes as its inevitable referent the traditional Madonna and Christchild image. As in the traditional images, the mothers' gazes turn from the viewer toward the child, while the children gaze boldly out of the frame. The overall effect is one of intense personal absorption in a private world, the same absorption in finding a hidden personal meaning that structures the essays. In the end, though, and despite the dangers of the literary form, it's difficult to begrudge these likable authors their moments of meaning. Given the massive depletion of subjectivity that new motherhood requires, one can hardly criticize the gentle counter-assertion of the self between these covers.

If these mothers labor to bring forth their insights, what is the meaning of motherhood that they finally discover within? The answer requires the writers to leave their private work of discovery and enter, at least temporarily, the contemporary world of parenting politics, for they can only assert a truer meaning of motherhood in the context of the false shadows of the same—the impoverished cultural representations of motherhood—on the cave wall. These essays reach their insights through engagement,

however oblique, with two sets of cultural intertexts reappearing throughout the essays, most notably the childbirth and child-rearing bibles that offer expert advice to the expectant mother. These texts are repeatedly invoked and, repeatedly, found to fail as reliable guides to the experience of motherhood: "Nursing was supposed to be the epitome of womanhood, like *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding* had implied," Kristen Ridge complains in her essay "Expectations" (36). The real epitome of womanhood, one can assume, will be properly elucidated at the end of the essay at hand, and indeed at the conclusion of the essay the author Ridge realizes that "the only thing that matters [is] that we keep trying" (42). Whether persistence is in fact the essence of motherhood matters less than the fact Ridge reaches that insight through a critical engagement with the ambient mothering culture.

While these essays critically invoke mainstream parenting bibles as foils for their hidden insights, they turn affirmatively to another powerful intertext: the figure of Eve as the mother of all living. But this is no old-school Eve, beguiled by the serpent and sorrowful in childbirth. Instead these women invoke a proto-feminist Eve, the reinterpretation of whom has been such an important discursive tool in the ongoing Mormon renegotiation of gender roles and relationships. This Eve possesses a powerful will—an empowered Eve—the beneficent exercise of which ultimately brings fulfillment and satisfaction: "Like Eve," writes Johanna Buchert Smith, "I've discovered the Earth again on this seventh day: everything is fresh, alive, vibrant and new, beautiful and wonderful and created for me and my daughter. Everything is reproducing after its own kind—and now I know just how good it really is" (24).

And like this contemporary Eve, these mothers discover the true meaning of motherhood to be something very modern indeed: Motherhood is chosen, though it may sometimes feel like a forced choice; motherhood brings pleasure, though it may not always feel like it; and individual women, guided by the Spirit, have the inner resources they need to be good-enough mothers, though they may doubt their capacities. This benign coupling of humanism and genial hedonism informs the volume's reassuring mother-wisdom: "He measured me in an incomprehensible way and found me whole, good, faithful, growing," confides Kiley Turley. "That thought lifts and mystifies me" (199). Turley real-

izes that "the secret of enjoying motherhood is in the moments. To stop and hear the peals of laughter, to touch the tiny hands, to notice the organic smell of their sun-warmed bodies after they come in from playing outside on a hot day—and to be deliberate enough to enjoy it all" (237).

In discovering motherhood to be chosen, affirming, and pleasurable, these essays work to provide "imaginary resolutions to real social contradiction,"[5] to invoke the language of literary criticism; they work, in other words, in an ideological capacity, to clothe the naked material bones of contemporary lived experience in story and identity, to create a subject position for the contemporary Mormon mother. To understand these essays as ideological, to suggest that they conceal structural realities even as they reveal personal insights, is not to diminish their accomplishment; on the contrary, it is to acknowledge their active role in the real-time making of culture.

But if there is one channel through which the book reaches beyond ideology and toward the tragic—that is, toward the poetic—view of motherhood, it is its emphasis on an aesthetic enjoyment of the experience. Mormonism has developed no native language for tragedy, and yet tragedy is inscribed in the most basic bargain of motherhood: Children must grow or die, and they can only grow from something you love to something you lose. How, then, is a Mormon literature of motherhood to acknowledge the tragedy inherent in motherhood without the benefit of a tragic language? One solution is to approach the tragic indirectly, by way of the aesthetic: Tragedy works by spinning the straw of human suffering into the gold of human pleasure in beauty. These essays, at their best, suggest that this transformation can be worked backward, gesturing toward the tragic with an invocation of beauty. In the volume's closest encounter with tragedy, Megan Aikele Davies's "The Tree of Life," a moving account of her son's stillbirth, resolves optimistically, with a reference to Lehi's vision of that "most desirable" of all fruits (2 Ne. 15:36). These essays find in motherhood the "most desirable" of all human fruits—the sweetest, loveliest, most enjoyable—but, as in Lehi's dream, they sense too, if fleetingly, that desire always entails the possibility of eventual loss. Darlene Young's poem "Since You Were Born" narrates this risk: