

Caught in the Crosshairs

Maurine Whipple. *A Craving for Beauty: The Collected Writings of Maurine Whipple*. Edited and annotated by Veda Hale, Andrew Hall, and Lynne Larson. BCC Press, 2020. 599 pp. Paper: \$22.99. ISBN: 978-1948218368.

Reviewed by Heidi Naylor

The life of Maurine Whipple, lauded Mormon author of the 1941 novel *The Giant Joshua*, is one of the saddest stories in LDS literature. She loved her people, the tough and hardscrabble settlers of St. George and the Arizona Strip, greatly; she saw and understood them deeply; she shared their strife and tumults and ultimate triumph over the desert in service of the Grand Idea: brotherhood, the binding of the family of man, the power of community in the face of daunting obstacles. Critics then and now admire *The Giant Joshua*, and there was to be a sequel, and then another.

But Maurine—I feel such affection for her that I cannot bring myself to call her by her last name—did not anticipate the defensiveness and wariness, perhaps even the paranoia, that forced her community to turn on her and her published work. According to the editors of *A Craving for Beauty*, when *The Giant Joshua* was published by Houghton Mifflin and subsequently reviewed positively by critics and honored with a fellowship, Maurine faced painful backlash from her own father, who intercepted an advance copy from the local post office and pronounced it “vulgar.” Her mother’s friends in the Relief Society were offended by the book, and then-apostle Elder John A. Widtsoe wrote a mixed review in the *Improvement Era*. He said the book was “unfair . . . [and] straining for the lurid.”¹ Sales in Utah were hampered by such reactions.

1. Quoted in Katherine Ashton, “Whatever Happened to Maurine Whipple,” *Sunstone* 14, no. 2 (Apr. 1990): 35.

Maurine's subsequent writing career included a few notable highlights, but ultimately she could not surmount the negative criticism from her own family and community. Despite the encouragement of editors and others, despite fellowships and bequests of time and funding, she was unable to complete the sequels.

What was a tragedy for her and for LDS literature has been softened by this new volume. In *A Craving for Beauty*, her biographers and posthumous editors have turned our attention back toward Maurine with perceptivity and grace. The volume is a treasure trove. It shows clearly how astonishing Maurine's literary gifts were, and it reveals how her care for her heritage and its stories was foundational to those gifts.

Craving includes early works from Maurine's University of Utah years, during which she began to articulate her love for red dust and deserts: "it explains why I know more about rattlesnakes than finger bowls," one early essay notes (32). She detailed her admiration for the strength of her grandmother, who became the model for *Joshua's* heroine:

She was not destined for happiness. She entertained early-day audiences in Salt Lake with her singing [and then] . . . went with her father to help settle Sanpete County . . . [finding the] bitterest poverty and loneliness, even no shoes. Her memories are of the brief pleasantnesses, of the friendly Indians who came to her father for counsel and aid, and of the Big Chief who called her Canary partly because he could not pronounce Cornelia and partly because of her sweet singing. Her church said marry this man. And she married him, even though he already had two wives, was many years older and she hardly knew him. He was a good man and she learned to love him. (37)

Maurine's talent caught the attention of writer Ford Madox Ford. He showed her 1937 novella, *Beaver Dam Wash* (included in *Craving*), to New York editor Ferris Greenslet at Houghton Mifflin, who responded with eagerness and encouragement. *Craving's* editors note how Maurine's "family stories . . . unfolded in sharp and memorable detail . . . provid[ing] grist for Whipple's creative mill" (10). The "triumph" of

her resulting 1941 masterpiece “lay in its full portrait of all the Dixie pioneers, the saints and their Grand Idea, what men and women working together could accomplish for their God, their children, and each other” (9).

Other stories and essays in *Craving* feature Mormon folklore, including magical realism, spiritual intervention, and the vagaries and consequences of a desperate, abiding, and taut-stretched faith. In more than one story, the cost of this faith is death: “This tabernacle of clay ain’t important . . . [but] you know, Phineas, I needn’t of died,” says a feeble, faithful wife after a long-awaited but horrific childbirth. “You love your religion more’n me” (163).

Another story recounts the advice of a Nauvoo farmer named Priddy Meeks to whom “the Lord had appeared . . . one day in the fields and counseled him to ‘quit a-plowing and go to doctoring’” (170). On the Muddy River, near Las Vegas, Meeks advises, “A very good practice for you mothers is to hold out your children to make water in the fire when convenient. . . . He picked up Tildy’s Book of Mormon and slipped it under [her] child’s pillow, ‘You can’t never tell what’ll scare a witch!’” (171).

Many of Maurine’s stories build fascinating, semi-fictional accounts of factual events, such as the construction of Boulder Dam (later named Hoover Dam), which brought stored water to the inhospitable desert. *Craving* also presents a 1952 feature article published in *Collier’s* titled “Arizona Strip—America’s Tibet.” This piece explains “one of the strangest wastelands on the American continent . . . divided politically by the pencils of an anti-Mormon Congress in 1896, separated physically from its own state by the vast chasm of the Colorado River . . . isolated and wild” (296). Here, where the “water is thick enough to chew,” there are two commandments: “Mind Thy Own Business. Then, Mind Thine Own Water Hole” (299). Two types of folk prospered on the Strip: “perhaps a half a dozen known killers and fugitives . . . [who] . . . hold target practice every evening” (303) and Mormons, who had “already [been]

stoned, pillaged, and hounded” (301). The Strip is hard country, peopled by Abraham and Ella Bundy’s descendants who founded the town of Bundyville (now Mount Trumbull) in a forbidding setting bordered by the Grand Canyon and cut off from civil services and law enforcement.

The Bundy clan today includes anti-government, militant extremist and folk hero Ammon Bundy, recent candidate for governor of Idaho.² Maurine detailed Ammon Bundy’s great-grandaunt and mythic matriarch Chloe Bundy, who in 1952 was “still beautiful at sixty-three . . . ‘Mom’ to 247 healthy Bundys . . . all beautiful, healthy, and intelligent . . . raised in a country that would discourage a rabbit. . . . The Bundys came to the Strip in 1916 seeking refuge, a Zion. But the desert, a Cinderella cloaked with flowers and grass under spring rain, is a dried-up witch later on” (306).

A Strip cowboy, according to Maurine, is “so bowlegged from life-long riding that Levi Strauss is said to cut out his pants with a circle saw” (304). She describes a meeting when the Taylor Grazing Act became law in 1934: “Judge LeRoy Cox of St. George and two government representatives met 75 Strippers at Zion National Park. Whiskered, holstered, implacable, they clanked into the lodge. Artillery forcibly checked, they listened to the heresy of ‘bob-wire’ . . . [of] imposters corralling, dividing, cutting out their unfenced immensities, hobbling their freedom” (308). Maurine’s article gave me a better understanding of Ammon Bundy’s perspective and mindset than did months of local (Idaho) and national coverage.

A particular *Craving* gem is Maurine’s 1953 feature article for *Collier’s* titled “Why I Have Five Wives: A Mormon Fundamentalist Tells His Story.” After an Arizona state trooper raid that shocked the nation, Maurine won the trust of remaining citizens in the polygamist

2. William Danvers, “The Passionate Intensity of Ammon Bundy and the People’s Rights Movement,” *Just Security*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/76636/the-passionate-intensity-of-ammon-bundy-and-the-peoples-rights-movement/>.

community of Short Creek, Arizona. Her article presents the first-person perspective of Edson Jessop, patriarch of the community. It is riveting, articulate, startling, and sympathetic and contributed to public opinion and questions of policy; by the spring of 1955, most of the families had been reunited (312).

“Why I Have Five Wives” is especially important to this story because Maurine’s treatment of plural marriage was largely responsible for the backlash against *The Giant Joshua*. Emma Ray McKay, wife of then-prophet President David O. McKay, wrote in a 1956 private letter that she was “disgusted” with Maurine.

I hesitate to share this private letter from Sister McKay. It was addressed to a family member of LDS writer Eric W. Jepson, and with his permission, I’d like to include one of its paragraphs here. Emma Ray McKay expressed a sentiment that many LDS readers of the mid-twentieth century likely held (boldface type is mine):

The narration of the many little things that made up life in those old days is very interesting and too sacred to be printed for the public which I hope you will never think of doing. I am so disgusted with the author of *The Giant Joshua* that I can scarcely contain myself. **The outside people or rather nonmembers of our church do not understand our life during polygamous days and personal experiences of this kind should never be given to them.** The publishers must always have something disgusting to tell even if they have to add something themselves.³

The narration Sister McKay refers to is an eighty-five-page biography of southern Utah pioneer and midwife Mary Lee, which was printed privately by Lee’s (and Jepson’s) family in 1955; a copy was sent to Sister McKay as a gift. Nearly fifteen years after *The Giant Joshua*’s publication, Sister McKay felt that the sacred experiences of the Mormon pioneers,

3. Quoted by thmazing, “Too sacred for public consumption, or, Disgusting the prophet’s wife,” *A Motley Vision* (blog), July 9, 2009, <https://motleyvision.org/2009/07/09/too-sacred-for-public-consumption-or-disgusting-the-prophets-wife/>.

particularly “during polygamous days,” were not to ever be shared with “outside people.” Maurine saw this differently. She was ahead of her time.

Today we are closer to an understanding that truth and facts will out: that obstructing them inflicts great damage. Elder Dallin H. Oaks said in a 2007 PBS documentary that “we’re emerging from a period of . . . writing within the Church [of] adoring history that doesn’t deal with anything that’s unfavorable, and we’re coming into a period of ‘warts and all’ kind of history. Perhaps our writing of history is lagging behind the times.”⁴ Gospel Topics essays appeared on the official Church website in 2013, with the goal of explaining historical problems in forthright language, employing a “refreshing frankness . . . that has surprised many readers.”⁵ The remodeled and modernized (2015) LDS Church History Museum has placards that clearly state how Joseph Smith translated the gold plates while sometimes peering into a hat. At my monthly Boise chapter meeting of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, whose lesson books are collected in my state university library, we both wonder and commiserate over troubling details of pioneer and polygamous life. Times have changed. There are reasons to believe that as a people we have evolved from the view that what happened in our past is “too sacred” and “should never be” shared. Instead, we feel we should avoid promoting the exclusivity, separateness, and isolation that our early LDS history certainly necessitated.

Perhaps mid-century Mormons were right to be wary: Many of them well remembered the days of the federal crackdown on plural

4. “Elder Oaks Interview Transcript from PBS Documentary,” Church Newsroom, July 20, 2007, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/elder-oaks-interview-transcript-from-pbs-documentary/>.

5. Jana Riess, “For Mormons in a faith crisis, the Gospel Topics essays try to answer the hard questions,” *Religion News Service*, Oct. 27, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/10/27/for-mormons-in-a-faith-crisis-the-gospel-topics-essays-try-to-answer-the-hard-questions/>.

marriage, including depts (“federal polygamy chasers”) who threatened their communities and split up their families (196). Mid-century Mormons were much closer than we are to the persecution that destroyed bodies, buildings, and benevolence, that cruelly drove beloved and cherished ancestors into the desert with government sanction. Also, mid-century Latter-day Saints may not have ever realized that the outsider response to *The Giant Joshua* was not only positive but sympathetic, interested, and tilted toward understanding. Non-LDS critics were receptive in ways that could have—that should have—given pause to insular reactions, that might have encouraged American acceptance of Mormon people, and that could have shored Maurine up.

For instance, literary critic Bernard DeVoto wrote in the *Saturday Review of Literature* that “*Joshua* is excellent reading and it catches a previously neglected side of the Mormon story and that is the tenderness and sympathy which existed among a people dogged by persecution and hardships, forced to battle an inclement nature for every morsel of food they ate, and to struggle for every moment of genuine happiness” (quoted in *Craving* 10). Editor Avis M. DeVoto, Bernard’s wife, wrote that *Joshua*’s heroine, Clory MacIntyre, was “one of the most appealing women in modern fiction”; she praised the novel’s “engrossing details of living, the clothes, the food, the remedies, the deaths, the births, the preparing of bodies for burial. These people live in the round—a tough, hardy lot, rough of tongue, bursting with vitality” (quoted in *Craving* 10).

Unfortunately, Maurine Whipple—authentic in her artistry and believing that her ancestors in the red dust deserts of St. George had never been properly celebrated—was caught in the crosshairs of the polarized views of her work. She gave her time to lecturing during World War II and to smaller-scale written works for as long as she could—and nearly all of this work is collected, for our delight, in *A Craving for Beauty*. We get features and articles that appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Look*, and *Collier’s* into the 1950s. And there is

the pleasure of five energetic chapters of the sequel to *Joshua*, with the evocative title *Cleave the Wood*.

But after the 1950s, Maurine lived a life tinged with sorrow and dejection. Biographer Veda Hale, one of the three editors of *A Craving for Beauty*, wrote that Maurine “endured fifty years of disappointment, loneliness, and poverty, sometimes so paralyzed by despair that she was incapable of working.”⁶ Her final years were brightened by the 1983 sale of film rights to *The Giant Joshua*, which provided her a living. She was eighty years old. And in 1991 she received a lifetime achievement award from the Association for Mormon Letters, which cited *Joshua* as the novel widely considered to be “the finest work of Mormon fiction.”⁷

When Eric Jepson shared the 1956 letter from Emma Ray McKay on the website *A Motley Vision* in 2009, reader Kjerste Christensen shared this insight: “if we don’t tell our stories, someone else with their own agenda and bias will tell them for us.”⁸ Maurine was perfectly positioned to tell the story of the settlement of Utah’s Dixie. She was captured by it her whole life, despite the hardships and despair that dogged her steps. Her prose is nimble, generous, vivid, and sharp. Her particular faith in the Mormon project—what she termed the “Grand Idea”—remained intact throughout all her years, despite the efforts of Mormons in power to dissuade and destroy it. Buy this book, read it, and send up a prayer of thanks and support for Maurine. Ask God and his angels to help her see: *No, really, we—your people—love you. Well done, thou gifted, spirited artist! Thank you for telling our stories to those outside our faith and beliefs. Indeed, you followed the injunction of our Savior with uniquely pure intent, Maurine, by sending your keenly*

6. Veda Tebbs Hale, “In Memoriam: Maurine Whipple,” *Sunstone* 16, no. 2 (Aug. 1992): 13.

7. Wikipedia, s.v. “*The Giant Joshua*,” n. 21, last modified Apr. 20, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Giant_Joshua.

8. Katya, July 9, 2009, comment on thmazing, “Too sacred for public consumption.”

observed edition of this fiercely powerful, transformative gospel beyond its borders, with lively language and robust, energetic craft and skill. Your work is invaluable. In fact, it is priceless to us.

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“Womanho”: A Beehive Girl Perfects Her Womanhood

Mikayla Orton Thatcher. *Beehive Girl*. BCC Press, 2013. 311 pp. Paper: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1948218825.

Reviewed by Brittany Chapman Nash

Beehive Girl is a delightful book. Mikayla Orton Thatcher takes the reader on her journey completing the 1915 Beehive Girls program—an invigorating and intensive achievement plan for young women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was the first in a long line of recognition programs in the Young Women organization. Introduced to Beehive Girls through an article in a Church magazine, Thatcher located their manual online and was enthralled by the full-bodied approach to growth in its antiquated list of requirements. They were a stark departure from the requirements in the Personal Progress program she knew as a young Latter-day Saint, where spiritual development was emphasized. The original Beehive Girls program demanded an intentionality that Thatcher found simultaneously charming, challenging, and grounding. Thatcher learned that the Beehive watchword was “Womanho” (“wo” for work, “man” for mankind, and “ho” for