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## **When Home Isn't Heaven on Earth in Mormon Literature**

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Latter-day Saint discourse, official and folk, creates a link between homes, temples, and heaven. We are told that temples are places where the celestial interfaces with the temporal and mortal, and that's reinforced by their quiet, lush interiors and the white clothes worn inside them. And then we are asked to make our homes as much like temples as possible. Places of harmony and order that can become heaven on earth. That can become like the only place that's truly become heaven on earth: the City of Enoch, or, in other words, Zion.

But if the vision for Zion focuses on homes that are heaven-like, that act as a refuge from the world, what happens when they fail to maintain harmony and order? Because as much as LDS homes can be a refuge at times, they are unable to fully escape the encroachment of the various forces of the world because none of the people who dwell in them, who are invited into them, and who leave or are cast out of them are free of the influences of the world.

This rupture between what an LDS home is expected to be and what it actually is creates a space that can be painful, strange, and even uncanny because holding onto a version of

home that is harmonious, eternal, Zion-like heightens our awareness of the rupture itself. This is especially true when the home becomes a place that must be defended from that which would make it less holy, less up to the ideal however tenuous and flawed that ideal may exist in a particular home. This rupture between the ideal and flawed is something that is sometimes acknowledged by official LDS Church discourse, but it's never fully explored, which creates another gap—a narrative one—and thus an opportunity for writers of Mormon literature.

This essay will explore how several Mormon writers have explored that gap to haunting effect.

### **Bringing the World into the Home**

In Danny Nelson's short story "The World" (2011), two women—identified as Sister Ma and Sister Schuester—discover a pornographic magazine while leaving their church building and come to the horrifying conclusion that they will need to take this "artifact from some powerful and loathsome civilization" into one of their homes in order to safely dispose of it (278). They settle on Sister Ma's home which "had the slightly overwarm, sun-drenched Sunday feeling widow's homes often build up over the years"—the kind of home that is a "swaddled existence" complete with "thick white carpeting and heavy porcelain decorations" (280). Sister Ma isn't entirely comfortable with the idea, but Sister Schuester has "a home filled with the hormonal rumble of teenage boys," and so she agrees even though she worries "could even her garbage become infected with this vileness, so that she would never again feel the simple satisfaction of cleaning the house, and taking out the trash?" (279).

Here in the first part of the story, Nelson draws upon the way some strands of Mormon discourse invests an object or idea with a certain agency and power as a way to emphasize the dangers Mormons—especially Mormon youth—face when encountering things like pornography. It's the world that invades your home and influences your children to sin; not your children who decide to come under the influence of the world.

The two women decide to burn the magazine in Sister Ma's "gleaming stainless steel sink." But although the magazine is destroyed, something appears in its place: "a small,

furry creature ... with unnaturally large, lantern-like eyes" and front legs "built backwards" the end "in a complicated snarl of clawed toes" (281). The creature sits down "next to a brightly colored statue of a mother reading to her child, and [begins] to lick itself" (281). The juxtaposition here, as crude and obvious as it may be, is precisely so crude and obvious because so is the way we use the rhetoric the story is commenting on. Because Sister Ma is able to identify the nature of the creature right way:

"Beth, Beth, it's the World," she said. "Think of what they said in Relief Society today, about the many ways the World can gain access to our homes. Think of how we found it—how it found us—and look how much it likes the phone." The beast was now tugging intently at the phone's white cord. "It's the World, I'm sure of it. It wants to get back out—out there." (282)

And with that identification the mission of the two Mormon women flips. Where they were loathe to bring it into their homes; now they have to keep it from leaving and influencing others. They chase it through the house, keeping it from escaping through the television and the computer (note how its' mode of travel is media). Finally Sister Schuester manages to tackle and pin it. Even though "The World [looks] up at them both with large, terrified eyes" and Sister Schuester notices that it's a warm-blooded creature, Sister Ma slits its' throat with a knife (284).

We get a tableau, which combines an Old Testament sacrifice with horror film tropes with elements that wouldn't be out of place in a conference talk on the power of Relief Society sisterhood:

For a moment, the two women sat kneeling next to each other, their heads nearly touching, their hands still on the World, the dark blood from the severed head staining the white carpet in a pool about their knees. And then Sister Schuester began to laugh, a low laugh shaking with relief. Sister Ma joined in. For nearly five minutes, they clutched each other, their foreheads pressed together, laughing helplessly. Their souls had never felt so pristine. (284)

The next morning "an unusually rosy Sister Schuester" brings Sister Ma lemon cookies, a bucket, and "a newspaper clipping on the best way to remove bloodstains from white carpeting" (284).

The humor of "The World" comes from Nelson taking Mormon discourse about the world vs. the home and twisting it into a schlocky horror story—a monster of the week episode. But the specific details of how the episode plays out are where the uncanny comes in. The way the creature is misshapen, trapped, trying to get out of the swaddled space it finds itself in. And the way Sister Ma and Sister Schuester sacrifice it and then feel so good about themselves afterward.

For here's the thing with the world: it's created by humans and full of humans. Yes, it can be cruel, licentious, dangerous, predatory. But perhaps by portraying the world as Mormons do, and by labeling it in that way, by being so afraid of the way it will infect our homes, we warp our perception of it in ways that lead to us reacting to it with greater (rhetorical) violence and stronger othering of it than is warranted.

Sure, Nelson lays it on a bit thick. The story is satire. And yet, as we reach the end of the story, it's not clear if it's the world that has tainted Sister Ma's home or her and Sister Schuester's reaction to it.

## **Leaving Home for the World**

In Donald Marshall's short story "The Week-End" (1972) we find another swaddled widow's house. But this one has an additional occupant. Thalia Beale has lived alone with her mother in their small house in Ephraim, Utah, for most of her 43 years of life—her father died when she was a small child, and she has never married. As her mother is on her deathbed, her last words are: *"You've been good, Thalia. Always stay—"* (11, italics in original). Thalia understands being good: *"But 'stay'? If her mother's last request had concerned her staying on in the little house in Ephraim, then here indeed was a problem of a different sort."* (11, italics original).

After this opening section, which is from Thalia's point of view as are all the passages the story puts in italics, the story switches to a first-person narrator that is conversational,

even gossipy, and also uses second person from time to time. The narrator is unnamed but appears to be a middle-aged woman who lives in the same ward as Thalia and provides us with the conventional Mormon point of view of Thalia and her situation. As the story progresses, we move back and forth between this unnamed narrator and the sections from Thalia's point of view and discover how Thalia is perceived and judged by the community, especially later when she decides that, in fact, she can't stay and takes a trip to California.

As she returns from her mother's funeral, Thalia expects to find the house "*unbearably empty*" and "*almost uncomfortably and unnecessarily large,*" but instead it feels different "*for its very smallness and for the uncanny impression of maximum occupancy, not spaciousness, that pervaded the four rooms, pushing at the yellowing papered walls and crowding the dark corners filled with ceramic knickknacks and tinted photos in their dusty cardboard frames*" and, indeed, "*what should have been conspicuously missing from the house now suddenly seemed overwhelmingly present*" (13, italics original).

And what is this uncanny presence? Yes, it's her mother, but more than that it's the opposite of the unwelcome presence in Nelson's "The World"—it's the lack of the world. Thalia has been sheltered so fiercely by her mother that once her mother is gone, she's still the only presence available to her. Indeed, we find out from the narrator that Thalia's mother went so far as to stop her attending church meetings simply because there was a man in the ward who showed a bit of romantic interest in her.

The narrator thinks that it's a naive desire to make up for this lack of access to men—or in other words for some sort of sexual experience—that makes Thalia travel to California. Thalia is indeed seeking experience, but that of a more abstract, artistic sort. One of the few interactions she has had with the world is taking humanities classes at Snow College, including a creative writing course, where the male professor responds to her short story with: "*Your work betrays a lack of experience*" (15, italics original). This humiliates her, of course. She yearns to become a published author. And she is all too aware of her lack of experience, or at least the type of experience that a male English professor would find interesting.

Which is not to say that Thalia isn't painfully naive and doesn't lack experience. She has been stuck in a house in Ephraim for forty-three years. But she musters enough courage and money to head for California with the aim of having a "*little adventure*" (15) in Carmel-by-the-Sea, which she hopes will give her something to write about.

When Thalia arrives, she discovers she doesn't have enough money for a Carmel experience so she ends up staying in Monterey and busing over to Carmel, longing for the sophistication it seems to offer while lacking the funds (and gumption) to participate in it other than peripherally.

Thalia escapes the little house in Ephraim that is full of the presence of her mother only to find herself unable to exert herself as a presence in the world: "*walking quietly through the tiny [art] galleries, listening inconspicuously to others as they eulogized ... paintings she couldn't understand*" and ending up listening to a piano recital "*from the steps of the side door*" (18, italics original). However, Thalia economizes, saves up, and gives it one last try: a house in Carmel becomes available that she can afford for a final weekend stay before returning to Ephraim.

She rents it out even though it bothers her that the home and the street while "quaint as any other" in Carmel both lack the more colorful names of others she has seen. To compensate, she decides to dub the house "*Beau Monde*"—literally beautiful world—but even then she undercuts the symbolism and our confidence in her engagement with the world, by telling us she chose the name because it was "*something foreign that she had seen on a magazine at the library*" (21, italics original).

For the three days she has the house, Thalia attempts to enact what she imagines it means to be a writer, a citizen of the world of letters: "*whenever she left the house she carried with her the looseleaf in which she had jotted down her impressions, the beginnings of poems, even the idea for—the thought made her tremble—a novel*" (21, italics original). She walks the rooms of the house pretending she owns it. But "*although she had jotted down lists of things to do during here little week-end, she found it difficult deciding how to do them*" (21, italics original). She also discovers she actually doesn't like marinated artichokes, a bottle of which is the most exotic thing she buys on her "*little pilgrimages*"

to the shops on Ocean Avenue. She contents herself with the fact that no one back home has tried marinated artichokes, although that thought also makes her wonder about what's happening in Ephraim, and she quietly returns back to the haunted, unfamiliar yet familiar house she had fled from.

Marshall deprives us of Thalia's point of view after she returns from California. We end with the unnamed narrator describing her post-trip life. Thalia has "sailed forbidden seas and landed on barbarous coasts" (17), as she writes at one point in the story, but that month-long trip, including the weekend at Carmel, has not provided her enough experience with the world for her to launch any sort of literary career.

As the narrator explains, Thalia begins working as a typist, and when asked if she might sell the house and move to California, she says she has no plans to sell and doesn't "fit in there" (21). "There" specifically being California but more generally the world.

Thalia is now trapped in the little house in Ephraim as much of a ghost in it as her mother's still lingering presence. She attempted to experience a larger, more cosmopolitan world, but her very lack of experience meant she wasn't equipped to gain the experience she so desperately wanted in order to become part of that world.

### **Invited into the Home**

The cardinal rule with vampires is that you never invite them into your home. But if you're a Mormon family and a vampire rents a house in your "safe, quiet, and clean" (18) suburban development in Sandy, then, of course, you're going to invite them over for a Monday evening barbecue—it'd be un-neighborly and un-missionary-minded not to do so, especially when the dad of your traditional household is the local bishop. Which is exactly what happens in Eugene Woodbury's novel *Angel Falling Softly* (2008).

Woodbury makes the choice to fit both the vampire lore and the supernatural elements of the novel within the conceivable (if not believable) bounds of science and Mormon theology. This sets up a situation where the invitation to the vampire ends up leading not to a predator-prey relationship, but rather a mutual invasion and intertwining of homes and lives. The situation is this: Rachel Forsythe's youngest daughter Jennifer is dying of

cancer. A bone marrow transplant (using marrow from Rachel) is in the process of failing. Milada Daranyi, a vampire (homo lamia) and chief investment officer of Daranyi Capital Investment, is in Salt Lake City to explore the semi-hostile takeover of a local medical tech company. She rents a house a street over from where the Forsythes live. Through a series of events, Rachel realizes what Milada is, Milada chooses to not erase that knowledge (although she initially attempts to do so), and, as their relationship develops, they make a bargain that will bring them closer together in ways that challenge Milada's agnosticism and Rachel's Mormonism.

Woodbury specifically parallels the two characters: when each enters the other's house for the first time, they both study and ask questions about the family photographs. When Milada's expensive suit is stained at the Forsythe's barbecue, Rachel gives her an old BYU sweat suit to wear home—and keep—and Milada asks Rachel to dry clean and keep her designer suit and blouse for herself. And each has a spiritual (supernatural?) moment when Jennifer's spirit (or some sort of manifestation of her) appears to them, unnerving them but tying them even closer together.

As the novel progresses, they keep showing up at the other's homes disclosing past traumas and current concerns and arguing over what can or can't be done about Jennifer. This culminates in a bargain where Milada agrees to take Rachel's blood (which is the closest HLA match for Jennifer's) and uses it to catalyze her victim-tranquilizing vampire venom so it can be used on Jennifer in the hope it will suppress the post-bone marrow transplant antigenic response that is currently killing her faster than the cancer.

In order for Milada to take a human's blood and make it optimal for transmuting, the victim needs to be in a state of sexual arousal. This is also how the vampires (or at least the non-murderous ones) justify their blood taking—viewing consent for sexual relations as a good enough approximation for a different sort of fluid swapping. But rather than re-enact a scene from *The Hunger*, Milada sends Rachel home to have sex with her bishop husband, and then, once he has fallen asleep, the transaction takes place. The bargaining began with Rachel (nicely) invading Milada's rented house, but the consummation happens in Rachel's home, transforming it in her eyes:

[Rachel] eased off the bed, pulled her bathrobe around her shoulders, and stole out of the room. There was something unearthly about a still, silent house at this hour. The hallway was a catacomb, the walls turned to cold, mottled stone. (130–131)

And then: "As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she descended to the family room. Milada stood there in her BYU sweats. The woman turned, and her eyes shone" (131).

This situation is horrifying, amusing, and touching all at once. A little too male in its point of view, perhaps (as are the previous two stories: they all seem more interested in scoring satirical points against their perception of Mormon culture than bringing depth to portrayals of the female Mormon experience), and, yet, Woodbury leverages vampire lore and Mormon cultural mores to create a situation where the described scene not only has the effect it does, but also illuminates the lengths Rachel will go to be able to bring Jennifer back to her mortal home and thus make it feel more like the heaven on earth she wants it to be.

Meanwhile, Milada, whose sense of family was warped when she was forced to protect her two sisters from their vampire sire by luring children for him to feed on, rediscovers a yearning for a home aligned with that of Rachel's: one with children in it. She agrees to help Rachel even though she is confident her venom won't heal Jennifer.

It doesn't.

So Rachel turns to an even more horrifying, but obvious solution: she wants Milada to infect Jennifer with the blood-borne virus that would turn her into a homo lamia. Milada is horrified by this proposition. This is something she and her current, progressive vampire family has sworn to never do. She's also horrified because she's feeling that same temptation. She tries to use scripture to argue against it, but Rachel says she's willing to be a Hannah and let Jennifer be her Eli. A blasphemous comparison. And yet, in the world of this novel where vampires have scientific explanations and Mormon theology is never contradicted (even if its' boundaries are pushed), it makes a certain sense. Milada

eventually succumbs to both her own desires and her fondness for Rachel and injects her blood into Jennifer.

Rachel has welcomed a vampire into her suburban home and found a way, perhaps, to restore her home. Milada has welcomed a bishop's wife into her rented house and made the decision to, perhaps, create a home of her own. The only question is which home will Jennifer live in if she survives the transformation?

But, of course, neither is suitable for the Jennifer who improbably survives her infection-induced change and emerges a vampire. Rachel realizes she is unable to meet the needs of her daughter. Milada (eventually) realizes she isn't suited to be a mother (for the very reasons that led to her willingness to turn Jennifer). The task falls instead to Milada's sister Kamilla. A medical doctor, Kamilla figures out what Milada has done and shows up at Rachel's front door and takes Jennifer away as the Forsythe family room becomes "still except for the quiet sound of Milada's weeping" (219). Both Milada and Rachel become Hannah figures and will live the rest of their lives with homes filled with the presence of the absent Jennifer (with the exception of occasional visits).

And while Jennifer emerges cancer free, she is also blessed with and doomed to an extended mortal probation alongside Kamilla: a third home created because neither Rachel nor Milada could let go of the absence they felt in their own.

### **Uninvited from the Home**

"Thanksgiving," the lead piece in Angela Hallstrom's novel in stories *Bound on Earth* (2008), opens with Beth Palmer standing at the doorway of her parent's home saying goodbye to her grandmother. They've eaten their Thanksgiving dinner, and the older members are all leaving to return to their homes. Beth, as we soon find out, will be remaining where she is. She's recently left her husband Kyle and moved back in with her parents along with her new baby. And although Kyle hasn't been invited to Thanksgiving, or, more precisely, was un-invited since he would naturally have been there if he and Beth hadn't separated, his presence was felt. As Beth reflects on their meal:

No one has said his name, but in his absence he seems just as powerfully present as he always has been. Everyone feels it. ... Really, they may as well all just be saying, "Kyle, Kyle, Kyle." A big family chant. (2)

Kyle wasn't invited because he's gone off the meds used to treat his bipolar disorder and has exhibited behavior intense and erratic enough to concern Beth and her family. As the story unfolds, it hops among the points of view of Beth, Kyle, and other members of the Palmer family. And it turns out that Kyle has been sitting parked down the street in his car, dressed up (he'd shown up under-dressed to the baby blessing the previous month), and with a bouquet of roses for his mother-in-law Alicia, ready to show them that everything's okay with him—even though it clearly isn't.

Kyle feels the presence of his absence as much as Beth feels his absence as a presence:

Kyle imagines the family inside the house, laugh, eating, Beth and her sisters teasing each other and telling their inside jokes ... All of them pretending they don't miss him, that he never existed, that they're better off now without him. (2)

Hallstrom gives Kyle's narration an edge that the other point of view characters don't have in order to represent his mental illness. The result is hyperbolic and overdramatic—"the family that acted so charitable and kind but they really were just waiting for him to slip up" so they could say "we measured you and found you wanting" (3)—but it's also not entirely wrong. He wasn't invited to Thanksgiving, after all.

But also because the Palmer home represents a successful Mormon home (although that success gets complicated by the later stories in the novel) it is, in fact, judging him. Or at the very least, it projects an ideal that feels to him like it's judging the imminent failure of his temple marriage. Beth feels this as well:

I am in a house of couples: halves of wholes, yin and yangs, eternal pairings ... Everybody's touching each other, even my mom and dad. Alicia and Nathan. I've heard it so many times it's almost one name. (6–7)

The irony is that although Beth feels the lack of her own wholeness as one half of a couple, her parents are anything but unified. Although it's Alicia who keeps going out to

the front porch and looking up and down the street—Beth notices this and knows she's looking for Kyle—it's Nathan who leaves the house, semi-purposefully runs into him, and gives him the impression he can come over. Alicia, upset by this failure to protect her daughter, retreats to the master bedroom while the rest of the family agrees to let him come inside.

When Nathan tells Beth that Kyle is just down the street, she isn't surprised: "[I]n a way, I knew he was out there too. I could feel him from the minute I woke up" (15). That's the thing with un-inviting someone: they end up as a guest anyway, a ghostly presence and one often more vividly present to the other guests than if the invitation hadn't been rescinded.

When Kyle arrives, they all do the best to act as if things are normal even though they clearly aren't. Kyle is still in the middle of a manic episode. Moreover, they all relied on Alicia (who remains in the master bedroom for the rest of the story) to be the key enforcer of the home's peace and chief handler of Kyle. Everyone plays along, awkwardly trying to re-conjure the normality that had pervaded the home earlier in the day. But it's all a bit forced, of course, and when it begins to snow, Kyle asks to take his and Beth's infant daughter Stella outside so she can experience snowfall for the first time.

Beth reluctantly agrees. After a bit of time passes, she moves to the patio, stuck between Kyle, who sits with Stella in his lap while the snow falls, and the voices and laughter of the rest of her family inside. Beth decides to retrieve Stella. Kyle has strewn the roses for Alicia along the backyard—making a trail from Beth to him. As she approaches him, she realizes he is singing a round from the Children's Songbook: "For Health and Strength." Kyle asks Beth to sing with him. He says: "It's such a pretty song. But we have to sing it together" (20). Kyle understands what Beth had sensed earlier—that the Palmer home is one of couples, of two halves made whole—but is unable to grasp why he isn't currently fit to be one of the halves.

Beth insists it's time to take Stella inside. Kyle continues to misunderstand why the two of them aren't together. And then we get this remarkable passage where Hallstrom

reinforces how alien or elvish (or even vampiric) Kyle has become—or to put it more charitably—how strange to Beth his mental illness has made him:

"We love each other," he says. He turns to me. His eyes are wide and luminous in the moon-light. His face shines, smooth and white. I reach out and touch his hand. His skin is like ice. "I've got to get her inside, where it's warm," I say. "I remember," he says. "You've always been afraid of winter." "You should come inside too. You're freezing. I can feel it." He shakes his head. "I don't feel the cold." "Kyle." "And the snow is very beautiful." (21)

Beth has no choice. She takes Stella from Kyle's arms and:

I leave him out on the swing. I walk with my daughter toward the house, and it's lit up and warm, a deep yellow gold against the night. I hear Kyle's voice rise again in the air, singing, and I hear the creak of the swing and the scuff of his shoes on the hard ground. I don't look back at him. The roses have disappeared in the snow. I tuck my daughter up tight against my chest, open the door, and take her inside. (21)

Kyle will continue to swing out in the cold if he doesn't go back on his meds, excluded from the Palmer home while Beth waits inside haunted by the presence of his absence. And, in fact, a major thread of the rest of the novel is about his journey to salvage his relationship with Beth. Because the only way to banish the presence of the un-invited is to re-invite them in.

## **Losing then Creating Home**

While the four fictional examples focus on the unusual in their depiction of what fills the gap between the ideal Mormon home and the real one, with only *Bound on Earth* providing any real sense of restoration, Tracy McKay's remarkable memoir *The Burning Point* (2017) shows how the rupture between the ideal and reality, the world and some sort of Zion, can be successfully navigated, albeit only with an seemingly unending amount of hard work, patience, and support from community. Indeed, *The Burning Point*

explores the many different places that can be a home, the different uses a home can serve, and the way homes can be violated or sanctified or simply survive.

The book opens with McKay's husband David relapsing right before she is supposed to fly to Houston for a quilt show. Luckily, McKay's brother was visiting her at the time, and he agrees to take her three children to stay with her mom in California. As the car containing her children drives away, McKay writes:

I stood in the driveway for a long time—maybe part of me is still there—staring at the place the car vanished on the horizon, the pale pavement was warm on my bare feet. Time was stretched and compressed, silent and roaring that day. The sky was blue. The leaves were starting to change. My children were safe. (19)

Her children are safe, but the home she had worked so hard to build no longer is. David agrees to an intervention and hospitalization, but a search of their home turns up stashes of illegally purchased prescription narcotics and several guns.

The rest of the memoir recounts McKay's divorce from David and her struggles to create a new home for her three children. It also offers the back story of her relationship with David, giving us a sympathetic yet unsparing portrait of him and their relationship as well as her and (to a lesser extent) his journey to becoming Mormons. Home—living spaces, relationships, religious community, childrearing, anxieties about—pervades *The Burning Point*.

McKay fills the pages of her book with specific, lively, sensory details, from the mundane to the poetic, especially as she finds her way as a single mother in a small rented house, juggling college, a small business, and caring for her children. And yet the memoir is still haunted by David and the home they build together and then lose—first metaphorically as McKay goes through the process of divorcing David, and then literally when the house they had lived in is foreclosed upon. McKay senses this haunting early on:

The wind rustled through the trees in the backyard, but instead of giving me familiar comfort, it exacerbated my aching heart. The small blue and

green parakeets were chirping happily from their cage in the sunroom, but it all felt wrong ... There were whispers of memory on the edges of my vision everywhere I turned, but they were fleeting, transparent, veiled and yellow, like old photographs curling in the sun. Nothing seemed real. (21)

This is the great irony of mortal existence: when the tragedies of life fall upon us, when the rupture is the most obvious, when things become the most real, they feel the strangest, the most *not* real. And this is only exacerbated, the gap widened, by the ideal of home as a heaven on earth.

But while McKay's memoir is haunted, it also proceeds with warmth, persistence, and candor. What's more it pushes back against any version of the Mormon ideal that doesn't work for her and her three children (including an autistic child) while at the same time making clear that McKay both sought out and accepted help and counsel from her LDS congregation and other Mormon and non-Mormon friends.

There's a moment in *The Burning Point* where McKay and her oldest son, Jeffrey, visit Salt Lake City. They walk from their hotel to eat dinner at a restaurant. It turns out to be a long walk. It's July and very hot outside. On the way back to the hotel they pass by the LDS Church's Conference Center. Jeffrey wants to go inside. They do so and discover that the Tabernacle Choir is practicing. McKay writes:

[W]hen I walked through the doors and smashed completely unprepared into a wall of my own emotions, I was blindsided. Standing there, looking out at the arc of seats and the smattering of people, I felt connected to my faith in a way I never had before. (216-217)

As the tears flow and they find a seat, McKay realizes:

*Holy crap. This is my faith, my home. This isn't just an experiment. This isn't something I'm just trying out, until the next interesting thing comes along.* (217, italics original)

This moment doesn't remove all of the struggles still ahead, of course. Creating a home is a constant struggle, especially for single mothers in a church that prioritizes and preaches

the traditional nuclear family. Nor is *The Burning Point* a self-help book meant to provide a blueprint for the rest of us to arrive to the same feelings and successes in the face of adversity. Instead, McKay's memoir is another proof point in Eugene England's proposition that the personal essay has "the greatest *potential* for making a uniquely Mormon contribution both to Mormon cultural religious life and to that of others" due to Mormonism's "theological emphasis on life as a stage where the individual self is both tested and created" (xxvii).

But there's something else *The Burning Point* does—something that links us to the four fictional narratives mentioned above and does not contradict so much as complicate England's claim. *The Burning Point* is mostly composed of chapters written in first person, each opened with a quote from McKay's blog *Dandelion Mama*, which she posted to during the main events of the memoir. The blog sections give us a sense of how McKay was processing the events of her life real time—and presenting them to the wider world. The first-person writing is what one expects from a good memoir: candid, raw, straightforward, at times lyrical. But McKay interrupts this flow six times in the book to present an interlude where she writes about herself in third person, referring to herself as "the woman," to her ex-husband David as "the man," etc. The interludes present moments of everything from major trauma (another relapse) to small epiphany (at a car wash) to major embarrassment (applying for child welfare) and so on.

These interludes invite the reader to see McKay as not just the author, but also as a character in a story, thus linking her to the rest of Mormon literature and the broader world of narrative. That is, the interludes are there to create distance for us the reader rather than to preserve the dignity of the author—who relates plenty of traumatic, epiphanic, and embarrassing moments in the first-person chapters. By inviting us to view her as a character in a story, they remind us that each individual story connects to other stories. Through these interludes, McKay links herself to all other women, real or fictional, LDS or not, who struggle to create the kind of home they would like to (and the kind of home they are expected to).

This in turns reminds us that Mormon literature, especially Mormon fiction, exists within this corpus of memoirs, personal essays, journals, diaries, and letters that England

identifies as our cultural heritage—every work a record, a witness of mortal experience. And in the case of the five works discussed in this essay: a witness of how the Mormon yearning for a heavenly home brings with it the possibility, perhaps even the inevitability, of a rupture between the reality and ideal. For home isn't always heaven on earth. Zion has fled and yet to return. And sometimes we experience the gap between as haunted, uncanny, or—at the very least—not quite real.

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