

I've come to drop off this baggage of Sonia Johnson and Mark Hofmann  
I've carried so long, packed too tightly with too many heavy items.

## OFF THE RECORD: TELLING THE REST OF THE TRUTH

By Linda Sillitoe

FOR A LONG TIME MY FAVORITE credential—as announced at a Sunstone Symposium—was as the author of investigative poems. Recently a second favorite was added—the author of an award-winning nonfiction novel—and this by a corporation that teaches writing and editing! Then there's my least favorite identification—"the little girl who wrote *Salamander*." I wonder if Allen Roberts has ever been called "the little boy who wrote *Salamander*?"<sup>1</sup>

These first two capsulizations may be my favorites not only because of their paradoxical nature but because they describe my tendency to cross genres—from poetry to fiction to journalism and back again. Sometimes the truth can be best told in journalism, but sometimes a deeper, subtler truth can be told in fiction. A poem is a lie that tells the truth. All writing takes a point of view, for there is no such thing in history or journalism as true objectivity—we aim for fairness and accuracy. Of course I cannot tell "the rest of the truth" in one evening about my career in journalism or even about my two most challenging stories. But I can come closest by crossing the lines of journalism into other genres, and by presenting a personal as well as professional view.

My initial reaction when I was invited to speak tonight was



LINDA SILLITOE

**This talk is a symbolic act I need to perform. For in picking up the torch you also have claimed the baggage, even though you may not recognize it or understand why it's so heavy.**

LINDA SILLITOE authored several stories covering the excommunication of Sonia Johnson and co-authored *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders with Allen Roberts*. This paper was presented in Salt Lake City at the Mormon Women's Forum on 7 September 1990.

to run several cosmic subjects through my mind, discard them all for lack of expertise, and conclude that I really had nothing to say to this group. But then that parent who lurks within each of us interrupted my thoughts, saying, "What do you mean you don't have anything to say? You do have things to say and this is the group to which you need to say them." You see, I knew I needed to do this as a part of my own healing; but I also hope that this evening will contain some communal healing as well—a laser procedure hopefully, healing with light.

Now why did that internal parent identify this group? A few weeks ago at the Sunstone Symposium many of us heard a paper by Mormon Women's Forum founder Kelli Frame. The most memorable moment for me came when Kelli said, "Sonia Johnson was excommunicated so that the rest of us would not be." As Kelli spoke those words, the world stilled for a second, for I realized I was hearing—ten years after the fact—the truth. Later on I heard someone comment that Kelli's paper had been angry. Angry? That, too, was familiar; angry was what people always said about Sonia. Yes, Kelli had said she was angry and she had said why. But in so saying she had been funny, rueful, dignified, generous, and uncontrollable—and so had Sonia. But who ever said, "Sonia's funny"? Who said, "Kelli was generous and uncontrollable"? Neither had *ranted*—as, on occasion, I have seen patriarchs rant (when moved upon by the Spirit, of course). Neither had defamed or attacked. Each had opened herself to her audience, whether critics or friends.

The subject of anger, the "A" word, came up again as I discussed this talk with forum leaders. "I think I've said all this

before," I worried. "But we hear all the time, 'I can't look at these things, listen to these subjects, talk about them, because I get too angry,'" one forum leader told me. That clicked. Several times at the symposium I was told of women who were no longer dealing with issues but with relationships. Now my life is blessedly rich with relationships, but I've never experienced one that didn't have its issues. Nor have I ever known an issue that did not involve relationships.

I am going to tell you the two most powerful, censoring, guilt-triggering, silencing statements in Mormon culture. The first is, "You-she-he sound angry." Oh, no, not that, you think I'm angry? The second is like unto it: "You-she-he are really bitter." A cultural mortal blow. Better one should be a Son of Perdition—daughters aren't macho enough to qualify—than be detected as angry or bitter. Better to divert anger, as basic to human nature as hunger or sleep, into depression or some other illness before it is even felt, let alone expressed. Then every calm individual can help shovel any collective instance of anger, piling it in that invisible community silo that occasionally reaches meltdown—to everyone's astonishment—since we serenely forget the silo exists.

We should not be angry; we should be calm even when derided by outsiders, as was Mark Hofmann, for instance, on his mission. We should be pleasant and friendly, as was Mark Hofmann discussing and selling historical documents. Very few people ever heard Mark express anger once he became an adult. He was so calm he carried fully-armed bombs to their destinations. Yet bombs are rage, explosives contained, nicely-packaged, carefully-wired, and devastatingly deadly. Of course even as wood, plaster, concrete, clothing, blood, and flesh flew, Mark Hofmann was not angry, he didn't get spattered. He stayed on the calm, sanitary side of murder. And there are those who have rather admired that.

Again, why unburden to this group? About ten years ago, after Sonia Johnson had been excommunicated, after Reaganism had settled into the Capital and my eastern friends were assuring me that Washington, D.C., was "just like Utah," after it became clear that the women's movement would be lucky to hold ground in the 1980s let alone win much, I had a conversation with Sonia. In that particular conversation, Sonia was despairing, for although she had come very close to rolling the

Equal Rights Amendment on a reinvented wheel into acceptance, at that moment progress for women's rights seemed unlikely. Had everything been in vain?

In that conversation I shared with Sonia the image, vivid in my mind then, of a wave that had crested and crashed upon the beach, reaching farther than any previous wave; and then, as waves always do, receded. I reminded her that even as one wave receded another was building, and that some water seeped forward even as the momentum rushed back, that sometime there would be another wave and the next would reach farther as the inevitable tide of human evolution rolled in. Sonia didn't like my image—how long would such a wave take to build? How much would be lost in the meantime? Instead of waves she wanted ongoing transformation: I agreed with her wish, but all I had was my image.

Since then water has crept toward shore, nationally, locally, and within the LDS church. Yet last year when the Mormon Women's Forum asked me to read poetry at its open house, I pulled out some poems I wrote eight to ten years ago and found they shocked some and electrified others. I might have written them the morning of the reading, so little had changed. If little has changed for women nationally since 1980, even

less has changed in Utah where women remain vastly under-represented in the higher echelons of government, education, the judiciary, the arts, religion, and business. Those positions are overwhelmingly occupied not only by men, but by bishops and stake presidents—Church leaders.

We are a community that thrives on issues. A few of you have personally dealt with the things I will discuss; more of you were not present for them. That doesn't matter because this talk is essentially a symbolic act I need to perform, which is appropriate to such a community. For in picking up the torch you also have claimed the baggage, even though you may not recognize it or understand why it's so heavy. The title of this talk came first and apparently is more titillating than I anticipated. "Off the record" means material I will not associate with my source's name. Often such information is critical to a story and feels dangerous to the source and sometimes to the messenger. Almost without exception everything I received off the record, that was in fact important, I wrote. That doesn't mean it was absorbed. It may sound as new as my poems did.



SONIA JOHNSON

**I had gone to Virginia not as a witness for  
Sonia Johnson but as a witness for the community  
that wanted to know; I had seen,  
I had absorbed, and I couldn't forget what no  
one any longer wanted to hear.**

Every story also has a context and a subtext, some of which I will try to leave with you tonight. Occasionally promises of confidentiality or the laws of libel and slander draw additional lines in disclosing information. I am not here to break promises or laws, but nevertheless to be as honest as possible with you, a community that has urged me out on some very shaky limbs.

#### INITIATION OF A JOURNALIST

**B**ECOMING a journalist undoubtedly revolutionized my life more than any other act. Like most of you, I learned in childhood not to point at people or things that made me curious, not to say what wasn't nice to hear, simply to shun anything different. But I was also a cop's kid during my formative years and the child of natural storytellers. I learned in Sunday School and Primary as probably you did to tell the truth, let the consequence follow (and it will). My parents urged and inspired a sense of integrity in all their children, seven-eighths of whom remain stalwart in Mormonism. Contradictions? Yes. Because in becoming a journalist I learned skills I still have to practice: to look straight on, to ask questions, to speak up, to confront in ways that poetry and fiction don't necessarily do. But then neither does journalism necessarily, certainly not in Utah where many questions are never asked, many powerful people are never interviewed by people they do not employ, and certain stories can find no home.

Looking at things head-on is not always pretty. Within the last month journalism has exposed me to the following subjects: financial and personal fraud, armed robbery, a lethal betrayal between husband and wife, child molestation, the torture and abuse of children in the desert, the enraged slaughter of pets, the enraged slaughter of children, and capital punishment. In each instance I did not initiate the contact: I received a telephone call, I was asked to read a manuscript, or I checked out a wobbly story. But in every instance, I admit, I went farther than I had to: I read more of the manuscript than necessary, I asked more questions than required, I found more than was expected. Whether I blame my low threshold of boredom or siren-chasing in my formative years, I do acknowledge my own choice in getting in deep, sometimes too deep, and in having to find my way through.

I am confessing here that I am better at digging in than letting go, but letting go is what I am trying to do tonight, and this is not my first attempt. Last year I gave my most superficial files from *Salamander* to Special Collections at the University of Utah and this spring gave them all the rest—my co-author, Allen Roberts, did likewise. Only then did it occur to me that I still had files ten and twelve years old from writing my baptism-by-fire story on the International Women's Year meet-

ing at the Salt Palace, writing an undercover series on the Freeman Institute, and writing a series of stories on Church politics around the Equal Rights Amendment, which culminated in stories on the excommunication of Sonia Johnson.

"What does it mean," I asked myself, "that I have held on to these files for so long?" Was I still hearing warnings, "Don't use my name," or "Don't write about this"? Did I still expect someone to knock on my door and ask to see the letter signed by then Apostle Ezra Taft Benson instructing bishops to send ten women from every ward in Utah to the



LINDA SILLITOE

**I had a recurring dream: I was in a house I had lived in as a child but was discovering rooms I had never known, sometimes whole wings. Why do I keep dreaming this? "There's more room in the house than you think."**

IWY meeting? Or the brochures and petitions placed in Virginia ward lobbies, linking Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum with the LDS Virginia Citizens Coalition in fighting the Equal Rights Amendment? Would someone want to see the newsletter of the McLean Virginia Stake announcing that President Spencer W. Kimball had enlisted the membership to fight the ERA? Or copies of Sonia Johnson's speeches to be sure she never asked for the priesthood nor applied the term "savage misogyny" to Mormon church leaders? Who had ever asked to see evidence that funds raised by Virginia bishops were laundered by a pseudo-account called FACT (Families are Concerned Today), that warehouses and church meetings were used in Florida to lobby legislators, that Church Boy Scout troops passed out anti-ERA literature to ward members in Arizona, that anti-ERA leaders were set apart in Missouri where Relief Society sisters were bused (wearing dresses and carrying sack lunches, as instructed) from stake centers to the state legislature? Who even now would want evidence that the national LDS anti-ERA movement was run by top Church leaders through the general authority special affairs committee in Salt Lake City?

I wrote all this information in articles published in *Utah Holiday* and later *Sunstone* in 1979 and 1980.<sup>2</sup> But for a long time after those stories on ERA politics were published, I entertained the fantasy that my parents and siblings, the

members of my ward, friends, or erstwhile friends, would come to me and say, "All right, Linda. Show us everything that caused you to write the articles you wrote. Show us why you changed." Of course, it never happened. Students and researchers examined the duplicate papers I placed in special collections and sometimes they called me to discuss the contents. Even if important people in my personal life *had* come to see my files, they would have found answers to only the tangible question of why I wrote what I did, not the question of what had happened to me, the journalist, or more accurately, the journey-ist. So let me tell a bit of the story behind the story.

#### THE TRIALS OF SONIA JOHNSON

**M**Y first awareness of Sonia Johnson came over the car radio; she had testified before a House Subcommittee on the Equal Rights Amendment and sparked a confrontation with Utah Senator Orrin Hatch. I was a nontraditional University of Utah student that summer of 1978 and in the throes of a full-fledged identity crisis. I was beginning to write fiction and Elder Boyd Packer had recently defined the arts as faith-promoting illustration of gospel principles. The article I had written the summer before about the IWY meeting had introduced me to notoriety and the realization that, while poets might be underexposed, they also enjoy peace and privacy, which still seemed valuable. So when I heard what Sonia Johnson had done, I was astonished: "Who," I wondered, "would ever willingly subject her life to such chaos?"

Six months later in early 1979 the Mormon anti-ERA campaign in Virginia became my story, one that mushroomed. Rather late in the process, I called Sonia Johnson, then spokesperson for Mormons for ERA, which had a membership of four. Sonia's musical voice and quotability had not made her spokesperson, rather she was chosen for her orthodoxy. Between stories early and late in 1979, I learned that Sonia and I had much in common. We were both gospel doctrine teachers, though she also was ward organist and taught in Relief Society; we were both married; she had four children, I had three of similar ages; we both had temple recommends but she had a two-year supply of food in her basement. Sonia was nothing if not committed: A devout if questioning Mormon, a staunch Republican, and a new convert to the Equal Rights Amend-

ment, which she had first heard about at an anti-ERA meeting in church. I had a journalist's strength but a citizen's weakness of seeing both sides of issues: I was a less active Democrat, a quizzical but intense Mormon, and comfortably undecided when it came to the Equal Rights Amendment. I was also poetry editor for *Exponent II* and published a few of Sonia's poems with lines like these:

Welcome to the race  
daughters of Sarah,  
human and to the  
finish.<sup>3</sup>

Within the last year I have had calls from two men unknown to me who were faced with excommunication. One, a married priesthood holder with children, had fathered an illegitimate child, refused to abandon it or its mother, and in frustration had shot up a Mormon warehouse; the other had amassed and publicized alleged "proof" of the homosexuality and immorality of a high Church leader. I had no interest in nor outlet for their stories; what astonished me was how much they had done to provoke

excommunication and how much consideration they received from their brethren.

When Sonia Johnson was called into a bishop's court, she had spoken publicly only a few times and she had picketed her stake conference. Yet she had mobilized many Mormon women—and some men—throughout the country, for their own reasons both personal and political. While organizing my papers I recently came across the list of women attending one meeting in Salt Lake City; it reads like a *Who's Who* of accomplished women. I wonder if you would take a moment to close your eyes and picture about two dozen of the most influential women you know of locally—in government, education, the judiciary, in the "helping professions," on Church general boards, in history, literature, and the arts. Add to their ranks similar but fewer prominent men; now add a variety of Church employees, grassroots Church leaders, family members of general authorities. Double or triple these ranks, to take in the national network.

Hold that mental picture of Sonia's supporters and ask yourselves what might have happened if at the time of her excommunication all those people unitedly had said privately and publicly, "We will not allow this to happen. Regardless of our feelings about the Equal Rights Amendment, we disagree



TWELVE-YEAR-OLD HOFMANN (CENTER) AND BOY SCOUT TROUP

**At the center of this tragedy is a child—a child who learned young that the best survival skill is to be bad but to appear good. If Sonia Johnson grew up believing too much in principle and not enough in compromise, Mark Hofmann took "the truth" another way.**

with using the LDS church for covert political actions, and we support freedom of speech for Church members." Imagine the impact on the media, the Church, the community. And imagine the impact on those individual lives; most of that initial group I asked you to picture are more prominent today than they were then—but most were never publicly linked with Sonia Johnson or the Equal Rights Amendment.

Sonia once explained to me that the Mormons-for-ERA strategy was styled after the tactics of Gandhi and later Martin Luther King. You position yourselves against the patriarchy in such a way that the smiling, blue-suited, army-uniformed, or white-sheeted good-old-boys are forced to bring out the clubs, the dogs, the fire-hoses for all the world to witness. Patriarchy's brutality becomes unbearable to the givers and the onlookers as well as to the receivers, and change occurs. One of the most painful of all movie scenes to me is the scene in *Gandhi* when the Indians form ranks outside the salt mill and march into the rows of soldiers and their clubs. Row after row of Indians are beaten down and are carried away, but still they come, fear and courage in their eyes, still they come until the imperialist government falls.

Walking into the sticks is how it felt supporting the Equal Rights Amendment as a Mormon or even supporting free speech during that time. The crux comes when it occurs to the people approaching the carnage that maybe it's okay if the empire continues to make salt. Maybe the losses in Birmingham aren't worth risking again. If we march into the sticks it's going to really mess up our careers, our families, our plans for the future, our religious assumptions, our business prospects. And when the march stops, the sticks win. They may be a bit dented, they may negotiate; but they will negotiate from a position of increased power.

During the year preceding the excommunication, I was present at VIP gatherings and privy to VIP telephone conversations on condition that I protect those credible names. During that time my telephone was hyperactive with calls from Boston, California, Arizona, Missouri, Washington, D.C. Repeatedly I heard "When you talk to Sonia, please tell her..." what? To be careful. That we agree with her. That we don't support the amendment but we admire her. Not to go too far.

Not to make the brethren angry because we have our own projects to protect. Most often they said, "Give Sonia our love and support." If I was a reluctant and occasional journalist, our worn-out telephone that year and my recurring laryngitis bore witness that it is more efficient to write a story than to communicate with one person at a time. Sonia Johnson, her copy of *Rules for Radicals* beside her, would answer my litany of messages with, "Tell those women in Utah they are safer than

they've ever been. They are going to appear eminently credible and the men in power will love them in comparison to those of us on the front lines." She knew that few would join the ranks behind her once the sticks were raised, and she was right.

Many of you know that Sonia Johnson derailed one excommunication proceeding only to face another, this one on 1 December 1979. I went to Virginia mainly to see for myself, to judge for myself what came over the phone. I knew before I left that the Johnson marriage was in trouble. Sonia didn't know I knew. Church Public Communications knew also, presumably from another



MARK HOFMANN SHOWING ANTHON TRANSCRIPT  
TO N. ELDON TANNER, SPENCER W. KIMBALL, MARION G. ROMNEY,  
BOYD K. PACKER, AND GORDON B. HINCKLEY.

**Mark Hofmann wasn't nice, but he seemed nice. Among the orthodox he appeared orthodox; among the liberal he appeared liberal; among the curious he dropped tidbits; among the anti-Mormon, he told tales. He used everyone and everyone used his documents.**

source; during one conversation with Church Public Communications Director Jerry Cahill (who again protested to me that he only knew what he read in the papers regarding what went on in Virginia since all this was a local matter), he dropped the bombshell that someone had called his office with the rumor that Sonia's husband was having an affair. "Of course we don't deal with things like that," he said righteously. Of course not, except that he had just told one reporter covering the excommunication story, and possibly others. In fact, Rick Johnson was involved in a relationship but technically not an affair. Did he love Sonia? Yes, I believe he did. Did he support her cause? Yes, before, during, and after her excommunication and the divorce. Did he, in my observation, behave like a flake, considering the circumstances? Yes. Did Sonia love him? Absolutely. Would she deflect media and public interest in the Equal Rights Amendment via her threatened Church membership in order to concentrate on her personal crisis? Not a chance.

Visiting the Johnson home in Sterling, Virginia, I was struck by their commitment to principle. The Johnsons had spent time in third-world countries which was one reason they lived frugally, even austerely. Utah had not yet turned down its

thermostats during winter, and I shivered all the time I was in their home. The day of Sonia's trial every adult in the family fasted, despite the fact Ida Harris—Sonia's mother imported from Logan—was roasting a turkey for Sunday dinner. People who can fast all day while a turkey roasts are, in my book, devout in the extreme. Their youngest son, Noel, was a little younger than my middle child, Robbie, and like Rob used to, Noel dashed around in a Superman cape, making me suddenly homesick. As the day wore on, the national media arrived and I left. The evening before had been quieter. I sat in Sonia's study—her telephone rang twice as much as mine did—and had an eerie sensation of suspended time, of history. Later I wrote:

NOVEMBER'S END, 1979

Five women talking  
church and politics  
(religious politics)  
in a room lit yellow  
in a Virginia woods.

We laughed at the disaster  
that hadn't happened  
yet and held our breaths.  
Suddenly through the window  
a vast current of dark

swept in on us, a flood  
of event dry as dark air.  
I floated out on that tide  
and peered back from miles out.  
I saw us there, all of us,

women in a yellow room,  
and me seeing not the future  
but us where we were,  
a vast current of dark  
like dew on a slick leaf  
in the murmurous night.<sup>4</sup>

I have never, and may never, see anything as archetypal as that weekend in Virginia or anyone as fitted to an event as Sonia Johnson was during those months I observed her before, during, and after her excommunication. Her courage, fully aware of pain and cost, was amazing. I heard her agonize over what was coming; I heard her describe the collision course she was on and I heard her hope aloud, many times, that she wouldn't collide; I heard her grieve for her children who would grow up outside the Church. For weeks after her excommunication she would attend sacrament meeting and, on Saturdays, slip into the chapel to play hymns alone on the organ.

In her mind, though, the battle lines were drawn. The Church was fighting the ERA covertly and effectively; she knew it, she had exposed it, she had them by the short hairs, and she wouldn't let go. They could back down, simply admit they were fighting the ERA just as the Catholics fought abortion, lobby openly, and Mormons for ERA would deflate. But they wouldn't. And could she be deterred? No. Did she know

what she was doing? Yes. Did she love being at the center of a groundswell of women whose voices reached her in letters, over the telephone, in person? Yes—and she loved those women. Was she angry—yes, mostly outraged. Was she crazy? No. Was she out of control? Yes, men's control. Was she a radical? Not yet.

Sonia Johnson did not do the things she was excommunicated for—saying Church leaders were savage misogynists, disrupting Church programs including food storage and family home evening, telling people not to obey the prophet—except through “if the shoe fits” implications. But she did far worse. She and her fellow Mormons for ERA via the media exposed the highly organized anti-ERA campaign which the Church claimed was only the independent effort of concerned citizens who happened to be Mormon. For days her excommunication story was reported nationally just behind updates on the hostages in Iran. The scrutiny her excommunication focused on Mormonism unleashed a prolonged flood of investigative reporting on the Church's politics and its treatment of women. Worse still, Sonia challenged priesthood authority, from her own anti-ERA-fund-soliciting bishop to an ailing Church president, and she played political hardball, not a “girl's” sport.

Sonia Johnson didn't break the rules in the handbook so much as the unspoken taboos. She wasn't nice. She didn't conform. She didn't obey. She laundered the Church's dirty linen in public. By all rights Sonia Johnson should have died simply from taboo-breaking but she wouldn't, and so they held a witchburning. And then the witch, like some uppity phoenix, rose from the flames as Sonia broke the last taboo—the rule of martyrdom.

A MONTH or so after I returned from Virginia, I was driving my children home from school when again I heard a news report about Sonia over the car radio. I don't recall the story, only my irritation. Enough was enough. In reporting the excommunication and particularly in reporting the Church's anti-ERA politics, I had broken many taboos, too, and the person I had been was dying. *Utah Holiday* had run my story<sup>5</sup> only because editor Paul Swenson joined me as a co-author. That issue of *Utah Holiday* sold out, but ZCMI withdrew its advertising—a real blow to the magazine. SUNSTONE had asked for a story, which I provided and they ran;<sup>6</sup> later I was told the editors had pained deliberations about publishing on such a controversial event. As Sonia became a national celebrity, the Church launched its own publicity blitz nationally and locally. The polarity so familiar from the IWY meetings gathered strength; ranks formed, loyalty oaths were affirmed. Meanwhile Sonia Johnson was secretly waiting for reporters to go away so she could privately mourn her ruined marriage. Could she send them away? No. She had infused the Equal Rights Amendment with new energy, and her story was the fuel it ran on.

I already knew something about inner and outer chaos. While I wrote those two stories, our family blessing on the food extended to include the request, “Please help Mom to

finish the article.” A cat moved in while I was preoccupied and ate half of one final draft. Our nine-year-old wrote to President Kimball informing him he would not get away with the excommunication. Our five-year-old took a copy of *Utah Holiday* to kindergarten show-and-tell in a grocery bag, but returned from Junior Sunday School saying, “Mom, you are going to get excommunicated.” Our two-year-old expressed her anxiety by sitting on my lap as I typed or telephoned, and by staying awake nights. My brother who works for the Church wrote a letter to Sunstone defending the Church’s stand, certainly his right. My husband fortunately was no longer employed by the Church History Department, but still found himself frequently defending my honor, then Sonia’s honor, then the Equal Rights Amendment—which he had supported for years.

So why was I irritated that day to hear about Sonia on the news? Because I was exhausted. Because for months I had been informally interviewed every place I went. Because every relationship in my life had been wrenched. Because I had flashbacks of the candle-bearing priests, women clergy, legislators, government officials (including Congresswoman Pat Schroeder and Utah’s own Esther Peterson, then a member of President Jimmy Carter’s cabinet), Sonia’s children, and ordinary people who had gathered around an unlit, guarded stake center one frigid night in Virginia. Because I felt and understood the outrage of Sonia’s ward members, invaded by reporters and other gentiles. Because every time I walked into my chapel I had flashbacks of Sonia Johnson at the organ the morning after her trial, pumping confident strains into a room ugly with tension. Because the gospel doctrine class I taught was boycotted, until the deserting members found the *other* gospel doctrine class so boring they were forced to return. Because the arthritis that had dogged me for a couple of years moved into my jaws on Sundays until, by afternoon, I literally couldn’t open my mouth. Even I understood that metaphor. Once everything calmed down, I stopped teaching. And attending.

At that point Sonia Johnson, for me, was frozen in her poem that *Dialogue* would publish:

WRITTEN IN CHURCH

The church of my childhood  
was red brick, too.  
Small and warm inside, I’d  
watch the snow battling the windows  
or one cold star low in the cold sky  
and rejoice at being inside with Mama  
and the choir  
hymning the wintry day to its close.

In blue by the covered wagon,  
the pioneer woman poised above us  
on choir breath  
whispered, “Fear not.”  
God-wrapped in that singing room,  
what was there to fear?  
Tonight in maturity’s church

good-bye, goodbye who I was in the  
warm silent service with snow fighting  
to break through the windows of my youth  
and ghost voices forever echoing  
down the dusk and farewell of the wintry day.

Hello at last, cold star and blowing snow,  
and you, my pioneer sister  
with your grave and steady eyes  
who knew so well what there was to fear  
and feared not.<sup>7</sup>

What happened to Sonia Johnson echoed in the excommunications, disfellowshipments, releases from Church jobs, revoked temple recommends, voiced fears, hurt, and despair of scores if not hundreds of women, one of whom took her own life. Within months the burgeoning Mormons for ERA split in Virginia and splintered in Utah as fear and frustration ran rampant within the groups that could not affect the institution and could only self-destruct. Everybody I heard from seemed to be either blissfully oblivious or in pain. For years afterward individuals and groups turned inward, seeking solace and healing, not revolution. But Sonia didn’t even have the decency to stay dead.

I knew about martyrs, especially women martyrs; several years earlier I had written a paper on heroines in Mormon fiction and learned that on the last page they were, almost without exception, faithful but dead—right in line with the beautiful-but-dead heroines in American literature.<sup>8</sup> Sonia was not a good martyr. Thus the culture had to kill her again and again with rumors of the worst possible curses: she had gained sixty pounds, all her sons were gay, and she was bitter and miserable. “How is Sonia now?” people would ask me months later, years later. “She’s great,” I would say and watch their faces fall. Not only did she keep living, but she changed and kept changing, moving through causes and parties on her own radical trajectory as we fought to maintain our status; she became more outrageous as we became more cautious. We could not forgive her for that—but it made her easier to dismiss.

Survival is a strong instinct and we survived. Gradually the controversy joined into a refrain, eventually rising from pro and anti, orthodox and heretical, conservative and liberal. Those women launching banner-tows over general conference, saying things like “Patriarchy is Malarky” and “Mother in Heaven Loves Mormons for ERA,” were clearly crazy. Besides, as history became reshaped, only local Church leaders had been involved in anti-ERA politics and in the excommunication. The excommunication had been sad—poor Sonia—but it had nothing to do with any of us. Why progress was being made: statues in long skirts were being dedicated in a Nauvoo garden; auxiliary presidents were joining male authorities on the stand in general conference where the television cameras panned; women’s conferences were held at BYU, and in workshops lines were drawn, erased, reworked, avoided, redrawn; women were praying in sacrament meetings; in some wards mothers were asked to stand before handing over their new-

borns for naming. Many women and some men met privately to discuss their spiritual, emotional, and political lives. The culture was chewing up and digesting what had happened.

My problem was I had gone to Virginia not as a witness for Sonia Johnson but as a witness for the community that wanted to know; I had seen, I had absorbed, and I couldn't forget what no one any longer wanted to hear. I couldn't adjust enough to make many other people or myself comfortable. For a long time I felt the tension barometer rise every time I entered a room. Later, writing about Vietnam veterans, I realized what had happened. For many months I was under so much pressure so publicly that I had done, to a lesser degree, what soldiers do in combat: I froze my emotions in order to think and act more effectively. Now I had a good case of post-traumatic stress syndrome. "How do you feel?" people asked all through that time. How did I feel? Did I feel? Something hurtful or offensive would happen to me and then my husband, John, would blow up. I wouldn't feel a thing. Finally one summer day I said to myself, Okay, it's over. How do you feel? I didn't feel. But gradually I began to feel, and then I felt like a nuclear bomb; one jostle and I would explode the world.

I wrote:

oh how to be the wind  
blustering dust down chimneys  
sailing roofs like paper airplanes  
postponing airplanes in fine air spinning  
the world clean the world crazy the world gone

But here we hang by stems  
in our navels side by side  
here it comes and we wave  
like small anonymous hands<sup>9</sup>

and:

asking why  
and from here you can see  
the rows of women  
whose lowered veils round  
their heads like mushrooms  
paying homage to the god  
who has always been  
their enemy

During the aftermath I was excommunicated-by-rumor several times, and I began to dream of excommunication. One night I dreamed I was ascending through the floors of a large house in a throng of people, accompanied by my mother and sisters. The mood was sorrowful, even oppressed, and, as we inched upward through the rooms, I realized that this sorrow had to do with my own fate as it had with others' earlier fates. When we reached the top floor, I divined I was going to be plummeted down a long plastic tube and I was not expected to survive—they were putting me down the tube, quite literally. In the dream I protested this discovery to my patient-but-unmoved loved ones. It dawned on me that they were already

looking beyond this unhappy moment to the feast after the funeral, the dawn after the dark; yes, it was too bad about Linda going down the tube but it was a correct principle, after all, and life would go on. I found this fate unacceptable, and I escaped the only way I could—by waking up.

If the person I had been was dying, someone new was being born, and various friends helped with the birthing. During the first decades of my life, I had loved the Church and disliked God, who seemed to me an arbitrary and judgmental chessman. He was judgmental, but what I realized was that I had mistaken him for God. I remember one transcendent moment that came in the chaos of writing the excommunication stories. I was lying in bed in the dark, reliving the events in Virginia and in Salt Lake City. Suddenly I had another feeling of suspended time, an image of Sonia Johnson and her bishop, Jeff Willis, playing their roles in a drama that was at once archetypal and human. I saw myself, too, reflected in the window by my desk, typing there between the lamp and the darkness outside. In that moment, everything within me shone; I saw the play, the dance, we were all involved in, and I wasn't sorry to have a part.

Also that first year, I remember telling Sonia Johnson that Linda Wilcox had given a Sunstone paper on Mother in Heaven—a first—and that Grethe Peterson had responded to a hushed, large audience.<sup>10</sup> Also that summer Sonia called me because Hugh Hefner had offered her a First Amendment award, given to the likes of Martin Luther King, and it included a large cash prize (which she needed). But how could she accept *Playboy's* tainted dollars? "Thank him for the honor," I advised, "and turn down the money." She did just that, saying to Hefner, "I'll bet you'd like to excommunicate me, too." The story played small in Utah.

Around that time, I had a recurring dream. I was always in a house I had lived in as a child but I was discovering rooms I had never known, sometimes whole wings. As I awoke I would mentally reconstruct the house, establishing walls and dimensions. Then I went with my husband to the Mormon History Association meeting in Rexburg, Idaho, felt the tension barometer rise as usual when we walked in, had our familiar discussion over dinner about whether to leave Utah, the Church, or both, and then that night had the dream again. This time not only were there extra rooms, but also racks of costumes and clothing that I examined with amazement and delight. As I woke, instead of reconstructing the literal walls, I asked myself, what does this mean? Why do I keep dreaming this? In a moment a little answer teletyped itself like a fortune cookie message in my mind: "There's more room in the house than you think." More room in what house? The house I grew up in, the Church, the Mormon culture? How much room did I think there was? Absolutely none; I had acute cultural claustrophobia. But there were costumes in my dream. Did that mean there were other roles I could play? "There is more room in the house than you think," the message plinked. I decided to stay.

Late in 1980 while researching stories on the Freeman Institute for *Utah Holiday*<sup>11</sup>, a funny and fortuitous thing

happened: I was recruited and hired by the *Deseret News* to the surprise of many and the dismay of certain people “across the street” from the newspaper in the Church Administration Building. I took the job determined not only to survive but to succeed. My time at the newspaper is a story by itself. Suffice it to say that while Sonia Johnson nearly starved to death in Illinois as the Legislature considered the ERA, some kind but anonymous soul printed out the wire stories the newspaper did not run and dropped them on my typewriter. After Sonia survived her fast she waltzed into the newsroom and we went, appropriately enough, to lunch. Though the revitalization Sonia Johnson brought to the Equal Rights Amendment gave it a great surge forward, the Church’s campaigns in critical states and the ruling by yet another Mormon, Judge Marion Callister, defeated the amendment in a victory the Church didn’t dare claim. The day the amendment died, I was on the telephone getting reactions for a story due right before the annual Christmas lunch with the general authorities on the *Deseret News* board. Somehow my appetite wasn’t sufficient for the occasion.

Also around that time, President Kimball hovered near death. The *News* has its front pages for such occasions prepared years before the event, and one afternoon in the newsroom, it looked as if they would be needed. I remember sitting at my typewriter experiencing one emotion after another. Many Mormons like to think of the Church as a huge bureaucracy run by “middle level management,” which continually thwarts or deflects or perverts the loving intentions and edicts of the Church leaders, much as Americans like to think intriguing exploits emanating from the White House are run at arm’s length from the president. I knew from my journalistic experiences before and after coming to the *Deseret News* how intimately involved the top Church leadership is in public issues, dissent issues, and in media issues. During the years of the Equal Rights Amendment, a number of women had tried earnestly to reach President Kimball, believing he would support their cause if only he could hear their viewpoint. They were rebuffed by male secretaries. I had communicated with an immediate Kimball family member before and after Sonia’s excommunication. I had heard that Kimball wept while watching Sonia on the Donahue program. I also knew that he was firmly against the Equal Rights Amendment, apparently because he feared homosexual rights would follow. Whatever the reason, he would not hear women as he had loved Indians or prayed in behalf of black men. He would not act and no one more sympathetic waited in the wings. Now he was close to death. There in the newsroom, I typed:

an early elegy in lower case

i pay my respects by saying what’s true  
in love and anger

you served us crumbs, you see, and we hungered  
for our own bowls  
of bread and milk

love your silvery chains, my sisters  
we did we do  
for they are your redemption  
oh it is not so simple says my brain  
he let sisters too  
gowned in white into those clean chambers  
american brothers too are yoked unequally  
but it is too late now for anything  
but the oversimplification from my heart  
in this lush room where we keep prophet ghosts  
i want to fold you in  
like a child too sleepy to trust in slumber  
but say instead goodbye hopeflicker goodbye  
for my brothers’ sake i weep at your death  
for my sisters i keep my seat as you pass<sup>12</sup>

MARK HOFMANN

**D**URING my five years at the *Deseret News* I began writing about other cultures—a restful change and an immense challenge. As my cultural blindness cracked, as my head spun 180 degrees back and forth from one world view to another, I gradually began to understand my own culture and religion in new ways. I knew from teaching Church history with a feminist bent to my gospel doctrine class that I wouldn’t have had an easy time in Nauvoo. Now I began to suspect that I’d have a tough time as a Hopi, maybe as a Navajo, both communal cultures even more focused on group behavior than Mormonism, though less repressed. I began to understand why the Utes were known as a warrior nation. I listened to Mexican immigrants describe crossing the border under the back seat of a car, of standing in an assembly line until their legs or backs or kidneys would give out, of sending all their earnings home to their children, of hiding from Immigration Services.

This new perspective was enlightening and fortunate, for too soon I would come full circle. The events of 15 and 16 October 1985 hurled me into a murder mystery on the Church’s doorstep, and I was writing it for *The Deseret News*. Even for my life, this was strange. *The Deseret News* had never viewed as positive my connections with Mormon history, literature, and publications but suddenly they needed me for this, the most controversial story yet juggled. The new publisher would stop by my desk in the morning, teeter back and forth nervously while asking me what I was finding out. My usual response was to invite him to ask *his* sources and get back to me. In early 1986, I left the newspaper to write *Salamander*.

Researching that story, Allen Roberts and I came to feel it contained everything related to Mormon culture: gold plates, polygamy, puppets for Primary. But it was a long time before I saw the connection between the Mark Hofmann years and the Sonia Johnson story.

In April 1980 the Church celebrated its sesquicentennial. The sixteen-volume sesquicentennial history had been abandoned by conservative Church leaders, and Leonard Arrington's professional History Department had been dismantled. The Church was reeling from the excommunication and demanding that the media provide "good press." Spring conference that year was broadcast in part from the restored Peter Whitmer farmhouse. Feebly, President Kimball prayed from teleprompters, First Counselor Gordon B. Hinckley conducted, and mission president Elder Hugh Pinnock, who had raised the money for the restoration, played host. The next day Elder Hinckley appeared on NBC's "The Today Show," denying that the Church had bused Relief Society sisters to legislatures in Missouri and Illinois.

Usually the Church does not advertise May's annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, but in 1980 Church Public Communications sent out a press release. The media was recruited en masse to hear discus-

sion of a brittle old paper found in a Smith family Bible. The paper contained hieroglyphs ostensibly copied by founding prophet Joseph Smith directly from the gold plates that Smith claimed to use in producing the Book of Mormon. This amazing artifact verifying Smith's translation story had been brought to the Church by a pre-medical student. This young husband was a returned missionary and priesthood holder, softspoken, deferential, not female or strident. He was susceptible to the Church leaders' suggestions and amenable to publicity. He was about to change Mormon history in more ways than one. Seven years later, he would not be excommunicated for more than six months after he pleaded guilty to killing two people. In fact, in writing the afterword for the paperback edition of *Salamander*, I was able to get Church Public Communications to confirm that excommunication only by reminding them that a general authority, who just happened to be Navajo, had been excommunicated publicly. Certainly the Church wouldn't want the public to think Hofmann, whose name had remained on the records so long, was still a member in good standing.

Mark Hofmann wasn't nice, but he seemed nice. Among the orthodox he appeared orthodox; among the liberal he appeared liberal; among the curious he dropped tidbits; among the anti-Mormon, he told tales. He used everyone and everyone used his documents—in glossy photographs in Church

magazines, in firesides and Church classes, in scholarly papers and journals, in attacks on Church history. He was not disillusioned by his dealings with Church leaders, as he implied to some; he was gratified to find he could fool them. He had been a counterfeiter before he became a missionary, a forger before he married in the temple. He "forged for a living" but it was also a creative process.

During my years at *The Deseret News* I had realized certain

major crimes spoke loudly and graphically about Mormon culture in ways we did not seem to decipher fully. Joseph Paul Franklin could and did gun down blacks associating with whites anywhere, just as he did in Salt Lake City. But Arthur Gary Bishop and Ron and Dan Lafferty were homegrown. What did their crimes mean culturally? Nothing, people said; they were fringy, excommunicated, perverse, crazy people. They had nothing to do with us.

I took on the project that later became *Salamander* because I felt deeply—and Allen Roberts did

too—that this was one tragedy we needed to understand. Mark Hofmann was one of us, someone we could not disown. A few weeks ago I spent a session of the Sunstone Symposium sitting alone in the hotel lobby watching conference-goers and thinking. Only five years before, the symposium had been dubbed "the salamander symposium." In numerous sessions and hallway debates historians and history enthusiasts took on Mark Hofmann's discoveries; and Hofmann, who attended only those sessions and the banquet, was the elusive darling of the document drama. Steve Christensen, who sometimes underwrote the symposium, had told his bishop jokes that year, already deeply involved in the secret McLellin transaction that had floundered once or twice but had not yet turned ugly. This year on the eve of the symposium, Mark Hofmann overdosed on a drug but again failed to end his life. The only regret I heard expressed at the symposium was that he had not succeeded, and I understood that sentiment from his victims. But sitting there I marveled at how quickly people can vanish who had once been admired—Sonia Johnson, George Lee, Steve Christensen, Mark Hofmann—even though their friends and family members, and, in Mark's case, victims, still circulate in the lobby. Down the tube, but life goes on. Did we even understand our fascination with Mark Hofmann and his documents? Or had we simply as a culture come to our familiar unspoken consensus: He had nothing to do with us.



DALLIN H. OAKS, GORDON B. HINCKLEY, AND HUGH PINNOCK  
AT PRESS CONFERENCE.

**Did we even understand our fascination with Mark Hofmann and his documents? Or had we simply as a culture come to our familiar unspoken consensus: He had nothing to do with us.**

TOM SMART, DESERET NEWS

What was his genius? Here's part of it. Mormon culture unlike many cultures had never had a trickster, just the good and the wicked—insufferable Lamans and Lemuels, self-righteous Nephis and Sams. In one of his most ingenious forgeries, Mark Hofmann created a trickster, a cunning white salamander that captured the imagination of a community squirming beneath authoritarianism and overdosed with conformity. No one knew that the salamander was not only impudent but deadly, that when it is threatened a salamander exudes poison, and few wanted to believe it. No one knew that Hofmann had created this trickster in his own image, that he was the trickster, a deadly one, and that he would eventually come to resemble his creation.

On 16 October 1985, when Hofmann became a bomb victim, a whole community panicked. Why? Because he was one of us. We identified with him, the intrepid document scout. The night he turned from victim to suspect, I and other reporters on the story heard the word forgery from a variety of sources, but the suspicion was just as quickly denied. Mark Hofmann was a very unpopular suspect. Gary Sheets was nominated; the mafia was nominated; fundamentalists were nominated; Church Security was nominated. Why? That depended. Because Hofmann's documents were the "sexiest" to stimulate the new Mormon history. Because he hobnobbed with the general authorities. Because he supposedly knew what was in the Church's safes. Whatever, he could not be a killer. And then as evidence mounted, the defensiveness shifted in a most interesting way: well, maybe he was a killer, but not a forger! Anyone could kill given bad enough circumstances but the documents, goshdarn it, were genuine. Interesting priorities.

Throughout the years this story dominated our lives, it had two halves: the document story and the murder story. The document story was fascinating, appalling, scandalous, intriguing, damning, intricate. In fact sometimes the people entranced with the paper chase brought out my ornery streak; mid-discussion I was likely to mention that Steve's necktie was found down the hall or that his heel stayed in his shoe. Why? Because I was offended by those priorities. Because I lived with the murder story every day; I saw photographs of the victims, I visited their homes, I talked with the people they loved and the investigators who tried to vindicate them. Because for more than a year after the bombings with no one in jail, I, among others involved with the case, looked over my shoulder and warned my children about picking up packages. Because I sat for five weeks in a room with the Christensens, the Sheetses, the Hofmanns, and the officers of the court. Everyone was nice. The tension and grief were palpable. During a break in the preliminary hearing, I wrote:

#### DURING RECESS

Spring sneaked into town while court convened.  
One noon, I walk from my office to my  
old neighborhood and find it well-kept.  
The ditch I'd hurtle galloping home  
from school has been curbed and guttered.

Jack's shop is owned and run by Asians now  
who mop, exchanging Vietnamese. I buy candy  
from the uncrowded shelves and return to work  
tracing my old route to junior high, now a shell.  
Behind me, my grade school hollers its recess.

Listening back, I hear my own voice, my own  
shoes on the hopscotch, swiftly recalling how  
to ignore the bell until the line forms,  
then beat the blood in my face to the door  
where I assume that Miss Blunt still waits.

No one supposes I am walking back to my ugly notes  
on a double murder, a naturalist losing spring  
to unearth a spider web. Extricated, it must gleam  
geometrically, word by word. Sunstreams, continue your  
hard green in the surprised leaves; give me, unjustified,  
what killing cost; more sky, more time.<sup>13</sup>

#### MIXED MEMORIES

THE plea bargain was in the works almost as soon as the preliminary hearing ended. Defense attorney Ron Yengich called an old friend and mentor, a former officer of the federal court, not a Mormon, and made a request. "The state is going to do a psychological evaluation of Mark Hofmann when this plea bargain comes down," Yengich said in effect, "and we want to have an independent evaluation prepared to counteract it." The friend agreed to meet with Hofmann at Yengich's office. "Hofmann was cold," he told me later with obvious distaste. "I said to him, 'I guess I've heard everything bad about you. What can you tell me about yourself that's good?' Hofmann said, 'Well, I'm a Mormon.' After talking to him about ten minutes I left and told Ron, 'I'm not interested in writing your evaluation.'"

Ironically the state's evaluation was performed by a psychologist at BYU who saw Hofmann in a far more favorable light: he was incensed that Hofmann was being labeled a sociopath or psychopath, nor, he told me, was Mark psychotic. "He's confessed to blowing up two people," I reasoned, trying to find a way into an interview, and trying to prevent the downfall of yet another expert. "What's left?" "I won't talk to you without Mark's permission," he said stiffly. That night, rechecking what I already knew, I learned of a murder Hofmann had planned and discussed in 1977 but had not committed—who to kill, why, and how to get away with it.

When the plea bargain came and Hofmann the forger made a deal that benefitted Hofmann the murderer, it made perfect sense to many in Utah. The 400-page discussion of paper and ink he gave to the prosecutors pleased those interested in the forgeries. However, Hofmann lied and stonewalled when it came to the murders, adding insult to injury for those people who never understood reducing his sentence based on his agreement to talk. Partly because prosecutors would sit and discuss the forgeries for hours on end, rather than marching in, demanding a complete list of forgeries, and grilling Hofmann on the murders as the defense expected them to do,

the defense attorneys concluded that the Church was behind the whole deal. In fact, those Mormon prosecutors were fascinated with Mark's creative process in forging the documents and appalled by their damage to the Church.

But blowing people up is so messy. Why not forget the tragic deaths and concentrate on the fascinating forgeries? Because denial hurts. Let me share a few memories: One of Kathy Sheets's daughters is holding the program for the popular 1987 symposium at BYU on Hofmann's forgeries, which played to overflow crowds. She scans the sessions again then says in a voice somewhere between puzzlement and pain: "What I can't understand is that there isn't anything on the program about us." (Allen Roberts had been asked to give the luncheon address; after I told Allen of that incident, he made sure there was something about the murder victims on the program.)

Later I'm at George Washington University being interviewed by a black broadcaster for a radio audience. He has described *Salamander* and asked me questions, then he takes calls. One black caller begins talking about executions in South Africa; it takes me a minute to connect his comment with Hofmann's plea bargain, but what he is saying makes sense: "One of us could not have made such a deal." He is right.

Six of Hofmann's cousins are talking with me the evening after the plea bargain. They discuss the forgeries and the murders; they talk about Mark's wife and children. Then one by one they say he should have gotten the death penalty for two reasons—for his own good and because he deserves it.

I am sitting beside Allen facing the Board of Pardons, listening to Mark Hofmann discuss his murders. He has just referred for the third time to the Sheets bomb as a diversion, a game. For a moment the Sheets family is present in my mind, hearing his clipped description; simultaneously I am back on the walkway where Kathy died—and it was only a game. The room turns airless. Allen glances at me curiously as my hand stops taking notes.

Another memory—Jess Groesbeck, a psychiatrist, is reading a paper on blood atonement at a Sunstone Symposium; like many scholars, he had used Hofmann documents in his own research. Not only had he thought they were for real, he confessed, but he had wanted them to be real. Hearing that is a first.

Later I introduced myself to Jess and thanked him for his

honesty. I told him how many people privately confessed guilt during interviews and how Allen and I struggled to give absolution. No one could have changed what happened by a different comment or an unwritten letter. Yet that feeling of complicity, communal guilt, persists in the silence that now surrounds the subject. Jess said, "It's too bad we're too sophisticated to sacrifice a lamb and atone. We need a ritual cleansing."



MARK HOFMANN BEFORE BOARD OF PARDONS

**Very few people ever heard Mark Hofmann express anger. He was so calm he carried fully-armed bombs to their destinations.**

said. That they chose to pick up boxes labeled with their names had little to do with him.

You see, at the center of this tragedy is a child, a child who learned young that the best survival skill is to be bad but to appear good. If Sonia Johnson grew up believing too much in principle and not enough in compromise, Mark Hofmann took "the truth" another way. In his home, everything was black and white, truth or error, gospel or damnation. For Mark, truth became knowing the trick, not being tricked; truth became knowing science, not being illusioned by religion; truth was reciting the scriptures one day and torturing cats the next; truth was saying, "I didn't do it," and being believed.

If the Church could ask his family to bury the facts about his grandparents' polygamous marriage, and excommunicate a relative who talked, then Mark could turn truth on paper back against the Church. Truth was selling a document containing history the way Mark thought it happened to a Church

For months after the preliminary hearing some Mormon historians continued to maintain that Hofmann's documents were genuine; that's understandable, he also fooled the FBI, the Library of Congress, and a few prophets, seers, and revelators. But with acceptance of the forgeries came only a new form of denial, not only among historians but generally. "This tragedy has nothing to do with us. Hofmann's documents didn't really affect Mormon history except maybe to spur more interest. The forgeries didn't hurt Mormon historians. The deaths were tragic—poor Steve and Kathy—but they could have happened anywhere. People get killed every day. Besides, who knows what Steve Christensen was up to." Look away from what isn't nice; don't talk about it; it has nothing to do with us.

Chillingly, Mark Hofmann echoed the extreme of that sentiment at his Board of Pardons hearing. His bomb-setting meant nothing really: his victims might have died that same day anyway, from a heart attack or in a car accident, he

TIM KELLY: SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

leader who would hide it; truth was promising him no copies existed, then leaking it to collectors and historians. That locked the truth in and let the truth out, and turned a profit that could be passed on as long as no one found the truth was forged. Later truth was saying, "I did it," and making a good deal. Truth was manipulating appearance in order to control reality. Truth was fashioning a humble mask that could protect a narcissistic personality that did not fully mature. Very young, Mark learned to deny his pranks, his feelings, later his opinions, his beliefs, still later, his crimes. He learned to protect his damaged inner self by fashioning an outer self that he thought would appeal to others.

He became, and is about as dangerous as a human being can be to others and to himself. But he is no stranger to us. We were taken in by him because we understand him better than we are comfortable admitting. Allen and I went through many phases regarding Mark Hofmann, often depending on who we were interviewing at the time and the various aspects of the story. I didn't personally come to terms with Mark until after *Salamander* had been published. Returning from Navajo country the summer of 1988, I wrote a poem that represented a personal breakthrough:

#### KILLER

Sometime before it became too late,  
you should have been brought here  
and doused in red and blue  
(some green)  
until your inky caverns emptied  
poison on the red clay  
and left you whole.

poison to be powdered  
like burned bone  
under the Navajo sun  
then swept on a long tangent  
by the dark wind.

nor could you approach  
this land unrecognized: here

a sane man lives by his heart.  
a crazy man lives in his head.<sup>14</sup>

For several years when Allen and I spoke about *Salamander*, we looked into the faces of document collectors, historians, Kathy Sheets's friends, Steve Christensen's friends, Mark Hofmann's aunts or cousins, police officers, attorneys, book collectors, members of the Board of Pardons, the loan officer at First Interstate Bank, Church employees, but once, just once, I wanted to have everyone together in the same room. My fantasy was to introduce everyone to each other—all the people who, after interviews, asked questions or sent messages through me to one another. I wanted to give the Hofmann relatives, the scholars, the Church employees, all of us who ever laughed at a salamander joke, or argued about a document, or defended Mark, the opportunity to say, "I didn't know, I had no idea, but I'm so sorry." Of course that never

happened.

So why talk about these things now? Talking won't erase my mental pictures of Sonia at the organ, Steve dead on the floor, Mark beside me in the elevator, Bill Hofmann listening to his son plead guilty, Kathy's daughters ducking to miss seeing pictures of their mother's death, Brent Ashworth explaining how his son died from injuries received in the aftermath of the bombings. Why talk about them? Because you wanted to know. I wanted to find out. Because we are all related by blood, by culture, by homeland. Because denial is one of the primary survival skills in this culture; as Sonia Johnson once put it, our innocence is reborn every morning.

All the unsavory subjects I mentioned earlier took place also in a Mormon context: from fraud, so common in Utah that the economy is damaged, to child abuse, so common in Utah that the prognosis for the future is frightening. Denial is key in the flourishing of both problems. Looking away has its costs; denial protects the more secure and exposes the more vulnerable.

For instance, recently I discovered that social service reports in Utah rarely mention race or ethnicity as if color or minority cultures are defects, deformities. Elsewhere in the country programs are funded for Cuban Females of Hispanic Heritage and are culturally specific. In Utah our reports don't discuss why drunk driving ratios soar near reservations, for instance (that wouldn't be nice). Thus minority programs have a hard time proving need, getting funded, or becoming culturally relevant. As the dominant culture, we think that we are universal; thus what works for us works for everyone. Sending a Native American to a "generic" health agency in Utah is the equivalent of sending a Mormon businessman having anxiety attacks to a peyote meeting on a reservation. To extend our crosscultural perspective, E.T., the extraterrestrial, informed us that the first step to healing is saying, "Ouch." Saying "we don't hurt" only embeds our pain.

Benjy, one of my myriad nephews and nieces, recently had a bout with an anemia that required blood tests every other day. As children we learn early to "be brave," to suppress our pain; sometimes we even tell children that the needle doesn't hurt. Ben is a baby who at two-and-a-half can articulate almost anything that enters his head. One day as the needle plunged into his vein, Ben shrieked, "This is tew-wible! This is tew-wible! This is tew-wible!" His protest was a healthy and justified reaction, something we all probably need to do when similarly wounded. However Ben goes daily to child care and on Sunday to church and is quickly learning the mores of the society. He recovered his health quickly and the next time I saw him, he had a new saying. Any time someone did or said something he didn't approve of, he chirped, "Be noi-mal! Be noi-mal!"

Anger is normal and if it is expressed it soon becomes something else: validation, energy, insight, growth. Within the last decade Mormon culture has learned, as perhaps Ben has not yet, that the range of normality is wide: there is more room in the house than we think. Within the last decade diversity has become acknowledged, symposia have become en-

trenched, spiritual power has become decentralized. Through large and small encounters like this one, we are learning to see ourselves, know ourselves, enjoy ourselves. We understand better the forces in this world and the ways around them.

A few weeks ago as I skimmed through the notebooks I wrote in Virginia, preparing to give them away, the telephone rang and a voice said, "Hello, Linda? This is Sonia." "This call is my fault," I told her. "I'm finally giving away the files on your story and I've conjured you up." She had not called me from out of state for years—maybe five or six. As if we had talked only a week before, she explained that she wanted my opinion regarding a bad situation she and a friend were facing that could be confronted legally or through the media. After we talked for a while, I suggested she simply walk away from the problem, though it seemed odd for Linda Sillitoe to be saying that to Sonia Johnson. I added, "I have a feeling I'm not telling you anything you don't already know." "You're not," she said in that voice that was once so familiar, "I just needed to hear it."

Things change; people change; times change. Confronting the issues in our lives frees us to move on, to take new journeys. In fact it leads us to journeys, as Robert Frost wrote in "The Road Not Taken": "Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted that if I should ever come back."<sup>15</sup>

For the last ten years during the question-answer period following a talk, people have asked, "What has covering this story done to you?" Arms and legs crossed in front of their bodies, they often were speaking their fear: "If I did what she has done, I'd lose my job, my husband, my testimony, my family." So I'd hedge in order to bolster their courage; or because I was tired of streaking naked among clothed strangers; or because I didn't know myself what the story had done to me. For once let me try to answer that question honestly.

Writing the excommunication stories bent the world out of shape for me and my family. It also freed me to write because I knew I had committed the ultimate sin and would not likely equal it. Writing that story, I paid my dues as a journalist. That story also displaced my spiritual center from activity in the Church to the silent sense of a caring God who was indifferent

to guilt, fertility, and hangups, but who occasionally let me glimpse the silver thread weaving through the dense fabric of my life and let me know I was still on its trail.

I have nearly recovered from writing *Salamander*. It challenged me on every level and taught me a great deal; it was the adrenaline-high of my life. It cost like hell. It stretched my capacity to intuit, to understand, to analyze, to doubt, to interpret experience and personality. It confirmed my unhealthy ability to sit in front of a computer fourteen hours a day seven days a week. It made me a better writer. It taught me the reality of evil. It confronted me with myself at every turn. It improved my ability to spot predators. Ultimately it led me to seek the sources of spiritual power that people then turn toward good or evil.

One Sunday night, after working on this talk, I dreamed I was in a car with a friend when we noticed a helicopter nearby that seemed to be in trouble. It dipped toward the earth but was unable to land; it rose again but was unable to really fly. Huge handles

extended on either end as if it should be attached to some cosmic amusement park ride, but was not. My youngest child had joined the crowd watching the struggling helicopter, I noticed, and I got out of the car to call her name and get her inside beside me, out of danger. Obviously there could be casualties inside the helicopter and on the ground if the thing crashed.

Then the helicopter began traveling and now with my family I followed it in the car. We found it had landed outside my home ward. Passing it slowly, we spotted my brother and his children seated on the lawn beside the helicopter and realized some of them were probably even riding inside. Yet they smiled and waved cheerfully, as if nothing was wrong. We circled around and stopped at my folks' house. My mother was preparing a family dinner and I told her what I had seen, how we had worried about a crash or that someone might get hurt. As I talked, I realized her attention was only polite. My brother and his family had been around all day; clearly no one else shared our concern about the floundering helicopter. And my alarm and precautions had accomplished no purpose except to engage my afternoon.

Waking up, I considered this dream and again asked myself what it meant. Again came the fortune cookie message by



LINDA SILLITOE AT SALAMANDER BOOK SIGNING

**Why talk about these things? Because we are all related by blood, by culture, by homeland. Because denial is one of the primary survival skills in this culture. Anger is normal, and if it is expressed it soon becomes something else—validation, energy, insight, growth.**

teletype. It read: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

Free for what? Free to leave alone a helicopter I can't save, influence, or applaud. Free for more journeys, maybe lighter luggage. But first I've come tonight to drop off this baggage I carried so long, packed too tightly with too many heavy items; now others can unpack it if they wish to, sort it out, put it away.

Many of you sitting before me have been a part of this journey; while I can't mention all of you, those who have been close to me during the time of the excommunication or writing *Salamander* know there is one person I really must thank—my husband, John. Throughout both challenges and in between he has been there for me in numerous practical, strengthening, and encouraging ways. In trying to describe his support, I decided I could best describe the range of his help by saying that no man could have done better—and neither could any woman. Finally, in unburdening to you, I can honestly say that I have no regrets, only gratitude for the courage I have witnessed, the trust that has been entrusted to me, and the many challenges that have demanded that I grow. ☞

## NOTES

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5. Sillitoe and Swenson.
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12. *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, Eugene England and Dennis Clark, eds. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 186.
13. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 22: 1 (Spring 1981), 69; also anthologized in *Harvest*, 190.
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## ONE YEAR

What would I do with it? Somehow write a great poem, at least make my life live up to its miracle? All the things I want are so slight they can disappear in one afternoon: the great poem half-composed in my head soon forgotten by the lake when a little boy falls through the ice, crying out because I happened to be there trying to save myself. I give him my hand after skating my heart across the ice over the parts where I have danced before. He takes my hand, a hand that's never known how to write the great poem now saving a life. The boy runs home against the wind with sunlight ringing in his hair as I disappear into the quiet afternoon.

—TIMOTHY LIU

## SING A NEW SONG

By the rivers of babylon  
we hang our harps  
on the willows and weep  
for we would keep Zion  
in this strange land  
of tinsel homes,  
dead dry trees and gods,  
wall street saints with honeyed smiles  
holding mangers full of money  
for the rich who starve,  
the poor who covet  
those who chant with babylon.

Who will tune the strings,  
take harps down from the willows  
to sing a new song?  
And who will write the words  
to those hushed rhythms lapping  
at the river's edge?  
For unto us is born  
is borne  
ever a new He comes  
and comes  
to sit with us and sing.

—CAROL CLARK OTTESEN