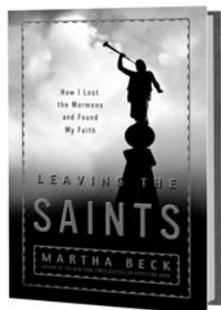


REVIEW ESSAY

AN EXHAUSTED MEMOIR OF
READING *LEAVING THE SAINTS*LEAVING THE SAINTS: HOW I LOST THE
MORMONS AND FOUND MY FAITHby Martha Beck
Crown Publishers, 2005
320 pages, \$24.95

Reviewed by Tania Rands Lyon



The daughter of venerable LDS scholar Hugh Nibley has written an explosive memoir in which she accuses him of sexually abusing her as a child. Is it just another boilerplate ex-Mormon diatribe or a thoughtful and inspiring faith journey? How is the reader to judge?

ABOUT FIVE YEARS ago, I devoured Martha Beck's first memoir, *Expecting Adam*, a moving, memorable, jaw-dropping, side-splitting account of how she and her husband were pulled up short in the middle of their high-powered Harvard graduate student lives when the child Martha was carrying was diagnosed with Down syndrome. I remember hunching over the book in an airport terminal en route from central Maine (where my new husband had a teaching job) to Princeton, New Jersey (where I was still working on my Ph.D. in sociology), embarrassed to find myself laughing out loud one minute and wiping away tears the next. I was as enamored with the book as I was with the existence of such a writer. Here was a fellow, Mormon-raised, Ivy League sociology graduate student (studying gender, no less—we even had the same subfield!), wrestling with religious truths, mystical experiences, and the tension

between a spiritual, family-centered life on one hand and a rarefied high-achieving academic environment on the other. It was like finding a smarter, more articulate, much funnier version of myself to whom very intense things happened all the time.

Halfway through the book, a one-sentence description of the author's father revealed that Martha was Hugh Nibley's daughter. It suddenly gave the humorous but stinging description of her family greater weight. I felt voyeuristic, like I was reading a tabloid exposé of a celebrity. I marveled at her cutting honesty and wondered what her relationship with her family (and her in-laws) must be like to publish about them so caustically.

Sure, there were some disingenuous moments, like the two women she "met at a party once" showing up suddenly at her door in time of great need. But she was obviously downplaying her Mormonism in the book, and maybe she didn't want to explain the in-

tricacies of LDS visiting teaching to a general audience.

And some of her stories of the people and culture at Harvard were so crazy, my mouth would drop open. Like the feminist graduate student who escorted her home from class one day after she had fainted from morning sickness only to excoriate her for faking something that made all women look weak (80–81). Or her husband's advisor who informed him in shocked tones that to keep a Down syndrome child would cost him his career—after all, the professor had decided his wife should abort her first pregnancy because it didn't fit in with his career schedule (205–07).

I had never encountered anything remotely so extreme at Princeton. But maybe Harvard was much more cutthroat. Or maybe things were different in academia in the late eighties and had mellowed by the time I arrived in my program nearly a decade later.

But what a wonderful writer—what sharp wit, what elegant turns of phrases, what profound insights into the meaning of life, and what a litany of enviable and dramatic encounters with the divine.

In spite of Martha's off-the-charts—but also very funny—caricatures of Utah, Harvard, and her family, I fell in love with the book and came away exhilarated and inspired.

In the years between *Expecting Adam* (1999) and *Leaving the Saints* (2005), I learned a little more about Martha and the Nibley family. I heard that many who knew Martha challenged the honesty of her narrative in *Expecting Adam*. Most notable was a letter from Zina Petersen, Martha's younger sister, written in response to a book review posted to the Association for Mormon Letters (AML) email list.¹ The letter described astonishment that Martha could have recast the events of those months and years leading up to Adam's birth in such a completely different way from how Zina had heard Martha describe them at the time. I remember feeling deeply disappointed that I could no longer quite trust my experience with *Expecting Adam*.

I also heard that Martha had accused her father of sexual abuse. It was a shock, but I knew enough stories of upstanding Mormon men molesting children not to write off the rumors based on Hugh Nibley's status alone. With no other information, I put it on the shelf along with other Bits of Information I Cannot Verify.

In 2002, I read Boyd Petersen's authorized biography, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*. It

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felt like a fair treatment of a complex person, respectful but not worshipful. Wondering whether Petersen would deal with Martha's claims of abuse, I was interested to find a brief mention in the text dismissing the claim, and a more extended rebuttal in a lengthy footnote.² According to Petersen (Martha's brother-in-law as well as Hugh's biographer), Martha used questionable means to recall repressed memories at a time when False Memory Syndrome was at its peak in the U.S. Although family members did not take the accusation lightly, ultimately none of them could corroborate it.

NOW *Leaving the Saints* has arrived, and Martha is telling her story her way. The gist of her second memoir is this: In 1988, after Adam's birth, Martha and her husband John left Harvard to finish their Ph.D.s in the more accepting and supportive environment of Provo, Utah. Both began teaching part-time at BYU. In response to the miracles surrounding her pregnancy with Adam, Martha began reading voraciously about mystical religious experience and how to attain it. She frames her personal journey in terms of the Buddhist phases: camel, lion, child. She says she decided to throw herself full force into Mormon religious observance (the camel phase). In 1991, after she observed a confessional classroom discussion of childhood sexual abuse, Martha hit a turning point. She had sudden hemorrhaging that sent her into emergency surgery, where she had an exquisite encounter with a White Light. When she got home, awash in the joy of that experience, she was hit with the first horrific flashbacks of being raped by her father. In her memory, she heard references to Egypt and to Joseph Smith and was under the impression that her father was performing a kind of Abrahamic sacrifice. That's when I had to put the book down for a little while.

Martha claims she meditated, prayed, cried a lot, and gradually found multiple memories and experiences coalescing into a more coherent picture of her past:

- Blood on her thighs and pain between her legs as a five-year-old while playing outside. (115)

- At age ten having nightmares and saying compulsive prayers to ward off Abrahamic sacrifices. (115)

- Pelvic exams during which doctors discuss extensive tearing and scarring that she says doesn't match the small episiotomies she had in childbirth. (116–18)

- Waking up repeatedly in the ensuing years to find her body in the same frog-legged wrists-crossed position of her memories. (119–20)

- A "life-long strange reaction to all things Egyptian," especially images of the crocodile-headed Amut the Destroyer. (146–47)

- A desire to commit suicide dating back to age six, and a life-threatening case of anorexia throughout adolescence. (62)

- A life-long inability to feel emotion, and the sensation of experiencing life through a pane of glass, one step removed. (200)

Over time, she came to believe that she had been ritually raped by her father over the

ring) and circumstantial evidence that her father was the perpetrator (210). She hypothesizes that his horrible deeds emerged out of a particularly volatile stress cocktail. The groundwork for her father's instability was laid by his own sexual abuse at the hands of his mother and posttraumatic stress from his experiences during WWII. The final straw, she suggests, came when Martha was five and the LDS church asked Nibley to translate the newly acquired Joseph Smith papyri and use his scholarship to defend the Church's claims regarding the Book of Abraham. Claiming that this put him in an impossible bind, as Joseph Smith's translation was indefensible, she suggests her father went crazy and she became the unwitting victim of his delusions.

Mixed in with this intensely personal

By the end of the first reading, I was persuaded. I hated most of the book, doubted many of the details, was disappointed in her relentlessly negative and ridiculous caricature of the LDS Church and culture, questioned some internal consistencies; but I believed that she had been abused by her father.

course of three years, from age five until right before she was baptized at age eight. One of the most damning accounts in the book describes a phone call she had with her mother not long after the memories hit and she stopped visiting her parents. Martha reports that her mother confirmed her own suspicions that Martha had been abused and seemed perfectly unsurprised to learn the details of how and when, attributing the problem to Hugh Nibley's own sexual abuse at the hands of his mother. But the next day, Martha says, her mother then reversed her position, denying Martha's claims ever after.

Citing her "love affair with evidence" and her rigorous Harvard training throughout the book, Martha claims to have physical evidence that she was abused (the vaginal scar-

story of abuse is Martha's description of her path out of the church of her heritage peppered with wonderful anecdotes, wise quotes, and spiritual insights. One of my favorites is her account of trying to get a famished Adam to nurse even though he lacked the muscles to do so effectively. She has a sudden insight of a God bursting with nourishment to give that we are too spiritually impaired to take in (28). The accounts of how she and her father would communicate entirely via literary allusions are brilliant (63–64). The description of her out-of-body experience during surgery is breathtaking (102–3).

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and ridiculous caricature of the LDS Church and culture, and questioned some internal inconsistencies; but I believed that she had been abused by her father.

I was persuaded but also exhausted and sick at heart. Martha managed to end on a note of “moving on, moving up” and did a nice job of carrying her Buddhist-spiritual-stages motif to a neat conclusion—but I did not feel uplifted or inspired. The book was filled with more anger than resolution. As it settled into the pit of my stomach, I realized how little I had benefited from Martha’s story in spite of going in with an open mind.

MARTHA’S story of abuse certainly leaves the reader with an impossible dilemma. Someone is lying, and we’re only getting one side of the story in this book. Either Hugh Nibley was a pa-

passee, an irresistible she-said force meeting an immovable he-said object” (20).

I decided to follow Martha’s own example and put my Princeton sociological training to work to learn what I could. I re-read the book using the content-analysis method I had put to good use in my qualitative dissertation work, watching closely for emergent themes and internal inconsistencies. I read more of Martha’s own published works, pored through what others had researched about her, interviewed family members, and finally spoke with Martha herself.

I soon found myself mired in fundamentally different interpretations of Martha’s life and character. Was she a bright but deeply mentally disturbed woman with an obsessive need to be admired and a mercenary approach to book publishing? Or had she been dogged by mental health problems all her life

then what started as questions began to turn into doubts.

OH, SAY WHAT IS TRUTH?

What exactly is Martha’s belief system on epistemology, truth, and memory? Her narrative contains the following statements:

Mormons tend to know a whopping lot of stuff beyond a shadow of a doubt. I envy them. My whole life is shadowed by doubt. The only conviction I embrace absolutely is this: whatever I believe, I may be wrong. (6)

So even before I grew up and saw for myself, I realized that memory—even the flypaper memory my father and I seem to share—is not the mechanical recording device people often think it is. Memory is anything but constant, anything but indubitable. . . . It fills this room where I sit with my father, who seems as certain of his version of my life story as I am of mine. I don’t know whether to accuse him of lying or accept that he really doesn’t remember. But he offers no alternative explanation for the scars I carry in my flesh, and I have only one set of memories that accounts for them. Of one thing I am absolutely certain: I haven’t invented a single thing. (21)

Her only conviction is that she could be wrong about anything, but she is also absolutely certain that she hasn’t invented a single thing. And although she observes in one breath that memory is not a reliable objective recording device and “anything but constant,” in the next, her own memories trump her father’s as empirical truth.

She also reasons that the very absurdity of the details of her ritual abuse validated it as fact: “The peculiar details of my memories had at first made me doubt myself—they were so weird—but in the end, reinforced my conviction that I hadn’t unconsciously made something up” (146). This thinking also shows up in the Author’s Note at the end of *Expecting Adam*, which was designed primarily to assure the reader that her memoir is “a work of nonfiction, meaning that it contains a rigorously factual account of real events” (327). The final sentences there read: “In other words, the harder something is to believe, the truer it is likely to be. The more I

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thetic, deeply disturbed man living in his own private hell, or Martha has woven such an extensive set of fictions as to defy the imagination. I don’t want to believe either possibility. Intelligent, witty, successful people with marvelous writing gifts aren’t supposed to be pathologically devoted liars. And neither are venerable, faithful, icons of intellect. What’s a reader to do? The book can only become a Rorschach test confirming whichever truth is more appealing to the individual. As Martha puts it herself, speaking about a hotel room confrontation with her unrepentant father: “We have reached an im-

because of the trauma of incestual abuse? Had she interpreted her own overwhelmingly vivid experiences as logically as she could and was now simply trying to heal and help others break the stifling silence that often surrounds abuse? No wonder God warns us not to try to judge each other. I simply cannot know exactly how certain events unfolded.

So rather than judge the empirical truth of Martha’s claims, I can only judge what she has set in the public eye: her book. As I read carefully, I was disturbed by an increasingly lengthy list of internal inconsistencies. And

think about it, the more this seems to be the way things are with life in general” (328). Although this approach to truth-finding could easily be cast as ridiculous, in all fairness, *Expecting Adam* told how Martha grew to reject her Harvard-style religion of scientifically verifiable truth and embrace a belief in God and miracles based on her personal, subjective experiences. I happen to believe that both pathways can legitimately lead to truth. But mixing them can be problematic.

In *Leaving the Saints*, Martha makes frequent mention of her Harvard credentials. She writes: “This strict sociological education served me well in investigating the return of my repressed memories” (209). She explains how she read thousands of pages on the upsurge in sexual abuse claims in the United States, passionately studied the repressed-memory debate, and “considered every possible reason for my experience” (209). In the end, she writes: “When I tried to dismiss the strange things I remembered, everything in my mind and body sent out a silent scream, It happened, it happened, it happened, it happened!” (210).

This may well be what her mind and body told her, but it is not an independently verifiable truth claim and falls well beyond the reach of her sociological training. Ironically, one of Martha’s shocking tales of BYU culture involves her futile attempt to teach one of her classes the difference between faith-based claims and verifiable-knowledge claims (221–22). Yet she herself plays both sides of the net at once, serving with her Harvard credentials and volleying with the assertion that the stranger the product of her mind, the more believable it should be.

The most glaring example of the author’s skillful use of innuendo (as opposed to logic, straight description, and recorded evidence) is the manner in which she extracts paragraphs of information from her interlocutors’ facial expressions. She employs this narrative technique most liberally in the hotel room interview with her father. Here are just a few examples:

“Of course,” says my father, his eyes sharp but a little squinty, like the eyes of a confused eagle. I know that expression from my years at Harvard: it’s the look of a smart person trying to appear familiar with something that has escaped his memory. (107)

His face tenses into an expression that looks like annoyance, but I recognize it as fear. (121)

“Here’s what I want to know,” I say, deciding on a direct frontal attack. “What were you doing with all that Egyptian stuff? I mean, when you were performing your ‘Abrahamic sacrifices’ on me?” The blow lands right on target; my father flinches, his face flashing an expression that tells me a great deal. It isn’t just frightened. It certainly isn’t confused. It’s knowing, in a way that both chills and reassures me. It tells me that while I can’t trust him, I can trust my own memory. (121–22)

He says nothing, but I see in his eyes that he remembers. (271)

In several places, Martha describes her careful preparation to set up a verifiable confrontation with witnesses listening behind closed doors and a tape recorder,³ but in her writing, it is not Hugh Nibley’s words so much as his facial cues that set the tone and provide the most damning evidence for her claims. Facial cues to which she alone is privy and which she alone interprets. This is a method for drawing conclusions unlikely to get past thoughtful readers, let alone any of the Harvard professors whose rigorous standards she repeatedly refers to as instructive.

I also struggled with Martha’s scholarly credential-waving when confronted with her narrative style of recounting lengthy conversations in dialogue. Of course it makes the story eminently more interesting to read, but I found myself distracted by the knowledge that these detailed conversations, complete with body language, were being reconstructed from memory. In the Author’s Note of *Expecting Adam*, Martha assures readers that she kept a meticulous journal during the years in question: “It was packed with every minuscule tidbit of my thought and experience, including the gist—and often the exact words—of important conversations” (327).

In *Leaving the Saints*, she explains that she is able to render an accurate version of the classroom discussion on childhood abuse that led to her flashbacks because she was taking notes as an observer at the time. The conversation she relates covers three pages of text (95–97) during which she also describes a growing sense of claustrophobia and anger and excruciating pain in her hands making it difficult for her to write. As an experienced interviewer and observer myself, I find it hard to believe that even the most skilled

practitioner of shorthand could have captured such an interchange word for word, particularly under the conditions she describes. She relates other conversations in similarly lengthy detail without the benefit of simultaneous transcription (see, for example, 105–06, 130, 165–67, 184–190).

Her frequent efforts to reassure me as a reader of the accuracy of her reporting actually undermine her credibility in my mind. I don’t know of any competent sociology course on qualitative methods (i.e. interviewing and observing people) that doesn’t start out with a substantive critique of the subject/object split. Researchers no longer hide behind the illusion that they are reporters of “just the facts” (*Expecting Adam*, 327). They disclose their own cultural background, point of reference, ideological baggage, and pay homage to the accepted wisdom that all qualitative research includes some element of interpretation. I would be more trusting of the author if she were more forthright about the inherent biases she brings to her stories and more honest about how much her reported conversations necessarily relied on the filter of memory or simply served as a fictional narrative device.

One of the most glaring internal inconsistencies—something any good editor should have caught—is the account of her visit to the second therapist she consulted for help. She starts out with one of her many pseudonyms: “Let’s call her [the therapist] Rachel Grant” (234). One paragraph later, Martha is sitting in the waiting room having second thoughts and letting her mind wander: “I wondered if Dr. Grant was descended from former Mormon president Heber J. Grant.” She then shares an anecdote about one of her own ancestors accompanying President Grant’s awful singing on numerous occasions. My eyes flicked back to the part where the author had just mentioned that the name “Grant” was fake. I wondered if maybe she had changed only her therapist’s first name. Later research revealed that the therapist is in fact named Ruth Killpack (and is thanked openly in the acknowledgements for *Expecting Adam*). More than anything, this one self-evidently fictitious passage unsettled me about the way Martha chooses to narrate her life. I am left with the feeling that she never lets the facts get in the way of a good story.

DESCRIBING THE CHURCH

Another glaring inconsistency in *Leaving the Saints* is Martha’s excessively loose treatment of Mormon culture and the LDS

Church. As other reviewers have pointed out, her description of Mormonism seems to have the requisite cast of characters straight out of nineteenth-century anti-Mormon exposés (secret rites, blood atonement, murderous Danites, and, of course, polygamy). I have read many intelligent critiques of the Church, but this isn't one of them. It is often funny and saucily written—but not intelligent. The shallow account of her temple wedding experience seems shoe-horned into Chapter 2. I imagined her editor sending the manuscript back with a Post-it note: “We need more juicy details about some secret Mormon stuff to hype the book—see what you can do!” It felt like a livelier, wittier, but equally immature version of Deborah Laake's *Secret Ceremonies*.

Of her first temple experience, Martha states, “I'd read enough anthropology to

amples of Mormon culture as to strain the limits of credibility. I often read with confusion, wondering if we had really grown up in the same religion.

- When she goes to get her hair cut short in a Provo salon, the stylist notes her wedding band and requests her husband's approval before proceeding. (193)

- She describes BYU's requirement that men wear socks as originating in the belief that ankle hair is an extension of pubic hair. (77–78)

- A student in one of her sociology classes at BYU stands up to dispute her argument and states “You see, Sister Beck, . . . I hold the Priesthood, and that means I'll always know better than you.” (222)

I wondered why the author of a book that had championed inner peace, love, and the universality of the divine would consent to the marketing of the next installment of her spiritual journey in such hyperbolic and hackneyed terms.

know that a lot of cultures have initiatory ceremonies, and I was quite fascinated to learn the customs of my own people” (14). How can Martha invoke the field of anthropology, which has learned such hard lessons about respect for the culture of others, and then treat a religious ritual (even if it is her own) with such cavalier derision as to call the LDS initiatory ceremony “a lot of memorized, muttered incantations” (14)? She also makes little distinction between official belief and general practice on one hand, and some of Mormonism's most colorful folklore, on the other.⁴

She takes dozens of pieces of Mormonism and gives them the worst possible spin, or describes them with an exaggerated humor that only insiders would understand, leaving outsiders to scratch their heads over what is a fair representation and what might be over the top. Martha also cites such extreme ex-

- She relates the story of a friend “who'd told her Bishop that Church doctrine made her feel like a second-class citizen. He'd looked at her with wounded confusion and said, “But, Sister, you *are* a second-class citizen.” (222)

All of these examples smell more of urban legend than of true events. In all fairness, Martha is not unrelentingly negative about her ancestral faith. In Chapter 11, she writes a touching tribute to the Oak Hills Fourth Ward, which embraced her family when they moved in shortly after their return to Utah. But this only seems to beg the question—how does she explain an institution that nurtures some and oppresses others?

She does raise a number of legitimate issues about the Church and Mormon culture—issues I continue to struggle with myself, such as: the legacy of polygamy, the

status of women in LDS culture, the Book of Abraham, the Church's response to dissent. But in the context of such a condescending, sweeping dismissal of Mormonism, and in the often exaggerated way in which she describes these complex issues,⁵ Martha damages the debate—a shame for someone with her intellect and spiritual insight.

Based on the life wisdom I had found in *Expecting Adam*, I was expecting a “post-Mormon” story and instead found an ex-Mormon version. A friend of mine who left the Church for extremely compelling intellectual reasons a few months into his mission coined this term and explained the difference to me: Ex-Mormons have left the church and are still angry with it. Post-Mormons have left the church but still appreciate all that the Church rendered them along their spiritual journey through life. Mormonism becomes part of a treasured past and textured spiritual landscape, rather than a source of bitterness to be wholly rejected. In a book with a subtitle about a journey to faith, I expected a more sophisticated, bittersweet memoir of Mormonism—not the jarring sensationalism of Martha's narrative.

Martha states clearly in the beginning of *Expecting Adam* that she had originally written the book as a novel, but that editors expressed interest in it only as a nonfiction memoir. She tells us that when questioned by editors and agents about the autobiographical content of her “novel,” she would respond: “[A]side from making John and myself sound much better-looking than we are, I didn't fictionalize anything. It's all true. . . .” (7). This statement has been contested by family members who were witness to the same events.

It turns out that Martha also first wrote *Leaving the Saints* as a 500-page novel with a male protagonist as the abuse victim (since she thought a male voice was more likely to be taken seriously than a female voice) and was again redirected by her editors to own her story and call it memoir.⁶

When I visited the book's website, I was immediately turned off by the wave of self-promotion that seemed to roll off the screen. Martha has now built a career as a life coach and columnist for *O, The Oprah Magazine*. Suddenly *Leaving the Saints* felt more like the latest product of an impressive money-making machine than a heartfelt memoir of spiritual progress.

The sensationalism of the back-cover write-up of my advance reading copy reminded me of a circus barker inviting the crowds in to see some sort of benighted exoticia:

While growing up as “Mormon royalty” within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day [sic] Saints, Martha Beck was raised in a home frequented by the church’s high elders—known as the Apostles—and her existence was framed by their strict code of conduct. . . . She saw first-hand the church’s ruthlessness as it silenced dissidents and masked truths that contradicted its beliefs. . . . [It] is an unforgettable memoir that offers a rare glimpse inside one of the world’s most secretive religions. . . .”

I wondered why the author of a book that had championed inner peace, love, and the universality of the divine (*Expecting Adam*) would consent to the marketing of the next installment of her spiritual journey in such hyperbolic and hackneyed terms.

Knowing that the book started out as a novel certainly explains the narrative style; unfortunately, the translation from fiction to nonfiction is problematic. It may have worked in *Expecting Adam* because the fantastic events readers were presented with tended to be small-scale miracles (people showing up in the nick of time to help), or deeply personal spiritual events (healings, encounters with beings from beyond the veil, etc.). In *Leaving the Saints*, Martha’s story is fundamentally linked to an empirical event—one that is troubling to a Mormon audience and devastating to the Nibley family. Her exaggerated sense of humor often feels misplaced. At which outrageous stories are we supposed to say, “Oh, what a funny joke,” and at which are we supposed to be shocked and overwhelmed?

SO why did Martha write this book? Who is her intended audience, and what does she hope they will gain from her story? These questions are not easily answered from the text. The subtitle, “How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith,” points to a saga of surviving organized religion. But the structural framework of the book is her hotel-room confrontation with her father. Mormonism becomes the exotic background for a tale of surviving childhood sexual abuse.

In my conversation with her, Martha described how over and over again Mormons have responded to her story not with sympathy and concern for her welfare but with a knee-jerk questioning of its implications for their own testimonies.⁷ She says she was not writing to Mormons at all, and indeed expected to barely cause a ripple in Utah: she

assumed her book would be summarily dismissed. As she puts it in *Leaving the Saints*:

[M]ost of my people, from near-and-dear relatives to the most far-flung Latter-day Saints, will never listen. . . . They will certainly judge me without hearing my case, and it’s virtually impossible that anything will change their minds. (220)

I am a faithful Latter-day Saint who did hear out her case and was even willing to believe her at first blush. I live with the legacy of incestual sexual abuse in my own family (thankfully one generation removed): it is insidious and serious as a heart attack, as Martha might say. It leaves a lot of wreckage behind. Just three days before I opened *Leaving the Saints*, an LDS friend and mother confided to me that she had spent the previous year spontaneously recalling repressed memories of sexual abuse at the hands of her Mormon father. In her case, the abuse was corroborated by other siblings who were similarly molested. I know that incestual abuse in LDS families is all too real, and that even recalled memories can be valid. Unfortunately, Martha’s case against Mormonism is so exaggerated and shallow, the accuracy of her narrative style so suspect, and her use of hyperbole in such a devastating accusation so misplaced, that I believe she is doing the worst possible disservice to the painful issue of abuse. Since Martha’s own reliability does not stand up well under the weight of close scrutiny in the public eye, this book can only damage the credibility of abuse survivors. ☹

NOTES

1. Text of this email letter by Zina Petersen in possession of the author.

2. Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: “A Consecrated Life,”* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 400.

3. She never states that a tape recorder is present but implies that some kind of device is in view: “. . . suddenly realize that he [Nibley] thinks I’m recording our conversation in order to turn him over to the authorities. . . .” (3).

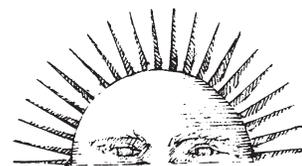
4. See, for example, page 15, where she writes that endowed mem-

bers become “an irresistible target for Satan’s minions” and that garments are said to “repel these demonic spirits.” She also recounts the “faith-promoting rumor” of the naval officer whose head and limbs burned off in a bombing attack while his garment-covered torso remained intact, and the instructions she received about some members who choose to always wear the garment in some fashion, even while bathing.

5. Her statements on many of these sensitive topics are just a little over the top and deserve more context for the non-LDS reader. For example, “eternal unions are expected to be polygamous” (18). Yes, some readings of Church doctrine do in fact imply that eternal unions can and will be polygamous, but most Church members I know would not say that they are “expected” to be so. I will leave an analysis of how Beck treats the Joseph Smith papyri and the Book of Abraham to others who know more about that subject than I do.

6. Phone interview with Martha Beck, 22 February 2005.

7. *Ibid.*



HENDRICKJE STOFFELS

(*Rembrandt*)

I have stolen the gesture
of your arms always at that moment
of opening your body as if it were a baker’s cabinet—
warm, damp from the breads and pies cooling.

Old habits are harder to break than bone.
I nap on the studio floor
though I can feel every crack, every cold day endured
in the crown of my bones
bearing my weight against the wood.
You haven’t said a chiding word.
Instead, the smell of your zucchini bread I love
fills the house and wakes me.

You work long hours,
your forearms dusted with flour,
your hands smeared with butter.
I am impatient with the oven and the long wait.

Then you, suddenly, at my door,
having skipped the third step that creaks—
why wait so long after knocking?
The door is open—step in and be my wife.

—STEPHEN FRECH

COMMENTARY

TO BELIEVE, OR NOT TO BELIEVE?

By Cherie Woodworth

WOMEN (AND MEN) who have been abused, especially as children, often feel that they won't be believed. Such things are not supposed to happen in families (especially when the Mormon ideal is "families are forever"), and a potential confidant would, understandably, shy away from hearing or facing such a disturbing account.

When our reviewer, after weeks of struggling with the book, eventually came to the conclusion that Martha Beck's claims of abuse were not, on careful examination, credible, we both were concerned about the larger impact this discussion might have on other women's claims of abuse.

In January 2005, after the Sunstone office had received an advance copy of the book *Leaving the Saints* but before the book (and the claims of its author) had received media attention, I spoke with a family counselor who has worked in Salt Lake City and Utah Valley for three decades. The interview, conducted in confidence and summarized below, provides a serious caution for evaluating (or, more particularly, dismissing) claims of sexual abuse.

Do women make up claims about sexual abuse?

In general, such claims are not made up. In hundreds of cases over many years, this counselor found only two cases where he thought the woman was lying. In the cases where there were doubts about the accusation, what was it that raised red flags?

(1) The accuser had a specific and strong motive—as in a divorce settlement.

(2) The story told during counseling was inconsistent.

Why do people often reject an accuser's claims of abuse?

(1) The whole rest of the family denies it.

(2) People believe that this doesn't happen in good Mormon families, or a re-

spected priesthood leader couldn't do this, or "this particular" priesthood leader couldn't do this (because we know him and respect him so highly in other contexts).

(3) The accuser is obviously messed up, and therefore untrustworthy.

In discussing the first reason, the counselor stated that it is not uncommon for accusations by one member of the family to split the family apart because other family members may completely reject the accuser's claims. Although in some cases the family members may be covering up for a situation they knew was wrong, in other cases, the family may in fact be telling the truth—they had no knowledge of the events and, based on their own relationship with the accused, cannot imagine them happening.

How victims remember trauma, such as early childhood sexual abuse, is one of the most controversial issues in psychology today.

In discussing the second sensibility, the counselor forthrightly claimed that Mormon families are *not* immune to child abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual). We have no accurate way of saying whether child abuse is less common among Mormon families (because there is no way to gather reliable data); but abuse does happen. It happens in families of respected priesthood leaders, and this counselor dealt with at least one case where the bishop strongly protested that the accused, as a highly respected priesthood leader, could not have done it. But the accuser's account was still credible. The general rule the counselor suggests we should

follow is: despite objections, believe the accuser is telling the truth.

In answer to the third objection, childhood abuse often leaves people with emotional and personal instability. Being clearly and obviously "messed up" could just as plausibly be taken as evidence *in support* of the accusations (that is, abuse is the reason the person is so messed up).

From his accumulated experience of counseling hundreds of abuse cases in Mormon families, this counselor maintains that before discounting *any* claim of sexual abuse, one should expect to submit it to a very high standard of disproof. Our SUNSTONE reviewer held to this very demanding standard.

RECOVERED memories do happen—with the events coming to consciousness sometimes even after years. However, memories "recovered" through hypnosis have been shown to be very problematic. Under conducive circumstances, false memories of the past can be created through suggestion that feel just as real as lived events—hence the term "false memory syndrome." How victims remember trauma, such as early childhood sexual abuse, is one

of the most controversial issues in psychology today. The latest research argues forcefully that genuine traumas are never forgotten.¹ Nevertheless, "dramatic examples of suggestibility have been documented in which individuals seemingly recover vivid, even traumatic memories of events that never happened."²

NOTES

1. Richard J. McNally, *Remembering Trauma* (Harvard University Press, 2003).

2. Daniel Schacter, "When Memory Sins," *Essays in Social Neuroscience* (MIT Press, 2004); see also the extensive research on this in McNally, cited above. The "sins" the author refers to are metaphorical: times when memory fails.

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