

Journalist, novelist, poet

LINDA SILLITOE

IN MEMORIAM

A Tribute to Linda Sillitoe

by Levi S. Peterson

LEVI S. PETERSON is a former editor of *Dialogue* and author of novels *The Backslider* and *Aspen Marooney*, short-story collections *Canyons of Grace* and *Night Soil*, and autobiography *A Rascal* by Nature, *A Christian* by Yearning. He lives in Washington with his wife Althea.

THE FIRST THING TO SAY IS THAT LINDA WAS competent, and the next thing is that she was determined. Whatever she did, she did well, and she could drive herself with a relentless will. There was a personal magnetism about her, a quiet drawing power that elicited attention and respect. She was of medium stature and had a clear, clarinet-like voice. She had a round face and dark, deep-set eyes. Her personality was characterized by intelligence, irony, and a scorn for hypocrisy—qualities that her role as an investigative reporter honed to a fine edge. In that role, she insisted on evidence and went to great lengths to procure it, which is to say that the faculty of reason was well developed in her. But she also relied on intuition and was sensitive to spiritual emanations from both physical objects and persons.

Born a Mormon, Linda presumably grew up satisfied with the traditional notion that the role of women was not inferior to, but simply different from, that of men. Men were to earn money and make decisions; women were to keep house and nurture children. Eventually, however, Linda changed her mind on the matter. The feminists were right. The traditional role of women was, if not inferior, at least unduly restrictive, and Linda chose not only to keep house and nurture children but also to earn money and make decisions. By the mid-1970s, she was an experienced reporter and a budding freelance writer. But she was also becoming painfully aware that the all-male leadership of the LDS Church opposed the aims of feminism.

In June of 1977, Linda was assigned to report on Utah's convention celebrating International Women's Year. This proved to be a watershed event for Linda, opening her eyes to the male-dependent character of the average Latter-day Saint woman. The organizers of the convention had prepared a productive, educational agenda for an anticipated crowd of two

to three thousand women of various religions. To their astonishment, the convention was pre-empted by nearly 14,000 Mormon women, who had been marshaled by their male priesthood leaders. This horde of angry, poorly-informed Mormon women interpreted the prepared agenda "as an attack on the family and vigorously voted down such resolutions as equal pay for equal work" according to a report in the Spring 1998 issue of the *Mormon Women's Forum*.

A year later, Linda reported on another eye-opening event, the excommunication of Sonia Johnson for having criticized the Church for its opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. In state after state, Mormon women lobbied their respective legislatures, urging the defeat of the amendment. Linda refused to believe that the top leadership of the Church endorsed the lobbying efforts of local leaders until a phone call to the press secretary for the Church verified that they did. Reporting on her disillusionment in an article in *SUNSTONE*, Linda pondered whether being a Mormon meant adopting not only the spiritual beliefs but also the political views of the top leadership: "Can members do otherwise without becoming goats in a fold of sheep?" she asked. "How do we heal the splits in families and ward families? How do we still the anguished questions, 'Do I belong?' and conversely, 'Do you belong?'"

Early in 1982, Linda and John joined Althea and me and two other couples in a writing group, which met monthly for dinner and a friendly critique of one another's writing. When it came my turn to present a manuscript, I could count on Linda to offer helpful observations. When a chapter from *The Backslider* was under critique, Linda protested, with an edge of humor, against what she called "Levi's God," by which she meant the stern, punitive deity in which the protagonist, Frank Windham, believes. Although I remained uncertain for almost another year as to how to end this novel according to Linda's stipulation, eventually I did arrange character and plot in such a way that Frank arrives at a faith in a kinder, more forgiving deity. Obviously, that was the sort of deity in which Linda believed.

It was with considerable dismay that, on the last day of 1990, Althea and I received a letter from Linda announcing her withdrawal from the group—which implied John's withdrawal as well. She cited stress and lack of time to be herself as her reasons for retreating from what she called "the war



zone,” which meant, as she went on to explain, “investigating, writing, or speaking about Mormon issues, or anything particularly dark.” Why should this require withdrawal from the group? “For one thing, the [writing] group lives within the war zone both in writing and real life.”

The term “war zone” refers, of course, to such publications as *Dialogue* and SUNSTONE and to such gatherings as the annual Sunstone symposium, venues where liberal Mormons urge change upon the Church—a risky business since there is no easy way to predict the point at which the Church has reached the limits of its begrudging tolerance for vocal liberals. Showing it had reached those limits following the Sunstone symposium of 1991, the Church issued a statement against attendance at symposia and other unauthorized meetings, a policy that it proceeded to enforce through the ominously named Strengthening Church Members Committee. This group sent samples of suspect writings to stake presidents and asked them to interview authors regarding their attitude toward the Church. To my surprise, Linda’s stake president summoned her to an interrogation, an invitation she declined. Instead, she submitted a letter of resignation from the Church. For reasons I do

not entirely understand, Linda had chosen to re-enter the war zone. I am not certain of the precise publication that got her into trouble, but an article published in the Fall 1992 issue of *Dialogue* could have easily been the one. Originally delivered orally at the B.H. Roberts Forum in 1991, the article praises the unorthodox spirituality of the excommunicated Elder George P. Lee, a Navajo Indian who had served as a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy.

Linda was attracted to Native American spirituality as early as 1982, when she began to research and write about Utah’s Indians as a reporter for the *Deseret News*. It is not entirely inaccurate to say that she underwent something of a conversion experience. At least, she discovered that her own instinctive spirituality accorded closely with a traditional Native American spirituality that she found to be very much alive and in good health among both the Navajos and the Utes.

Linda ended her novel, *Sideways to the Sun*—which our writing group critiqued in manuscript form—with an episode set at a Navajo powwow in Four Corners country. Also while a member of the writing group, she did extensive interviews with a Ute shaman, Clifford Duncan, which have been published by the University of Utah Press. On at least one occasion, Clifford performed a healing ritual on Linda’s behalf. In June of 1991, Althea and I met Linda, John, and Cynthia at Window Rock, Arizona, and toured the Monument Valley area for a couple of days. As I wrote in my diary, “Linda was very happy that we could at last see this place so close to her heart, her emotional home.”

I will say of the past fifteen years or so only that Althea and I have continued to count Linda and John among our closest and dearest friends. During this period, I have often pondered why Linda would choose in 1991 to re-enter the war zone in which she said our writing group existed. It was indeed a risky business. Certainly she knew that by publishing her article on George Lee, she was throwing down the gauntlet before the Church.

In June of 1981—almost thirty years ago—Linda wrote a brief, poignant poem for her friend Lavina Fielding Anderson, who had just been fired from the staff of *The Ensign* for providing Peggy Fletcher, editor of SUNSTONE, with a talk which Hartman Rector had prepared for General Conference but was not allowed to deliver. The poem has no title, but it could appropriately be titled “For Lavina.” It reads:

One by one
they throw us from the tower.
And we spread our wings
and fly.

And that’s what Linda did. The ultimate testament of her life is that like Lavina and many, many other courageous women, she spread her wings and flew.

Fact of Her Life

by Paul Swenson

PAUL SWENSON has been a journalist for the *Deseret News*, an editor for *Utah Holiday Magazine*, and most recently author of *Iced at the Ward, Burned at the Stake: And Other Poems*.

IN JUNE 1977, ABOUT 14,000 UTAH WOMEN OCCUPIED the Salt Palace in Salt Lake City for the International Women's Year (IWY) state conference. Afterward, when I realized what had happened there, I as editor of *Utah Holiday* magazine, launched a search for someone who had attended and could write about it.

When I met Linda Sillitoe and John Sillito (she, but not he, used the final "e") in the 1970s, Linda was a poet and a fiction writer with a quick mind and a ready wit. Although she hadn't trained as a journalist, she had been at the conference and seemed a likely choice to report and analyze what she had seen and heard.

Within a week, she had organized everything on 3 x 5 index cards and proceeded to put together a clear, bold, and incisive story, which we published that summer. Her story disclosed how thousands of Mormon women, assigned by their ward Relief Society organizations as conference delegates, had helped to vote down dozens of propositions supporting equal rights for men and women. Linda reported that men with walkie-talkies patrolled the aisles instructing their charges how to vote.

Her work on this watershed event—more nuanced and in depth than any Salt Lake City newspaper coverage of the conference—launched a career. Almost immediately, Linda Sillitoe emerged as one of this state's most skilled and important investigative reporters—a writer of passion and power with instincts for thorough and meticulous research.

Recently I mentioned IWY and Linda's part in it to my friend and fellow writer Amelia Graehl; she immediately remembered how the IWY conference and Linda's reporting had impacted her.

"I was there too at IWY," she told me. "I had stood in fast and testimony meeting in my ward and told my sisters not to be afraid of equality. There had been some real fear. I wasn't assigned as one of the 10 women chosen from my ward, but that was okay. I was planning on being there anyway.

"I was so moved that Linda's story could capture the feelings of people like me. When it came out in the magazine, I locked myself in the bathroom with a bottle of cooking wine and read it start to finish. It did for me what I think it must have done for a lot of Mormon women."

Another of my favorite Linda stories: On a mid-afternoon in the 1980s, when her reputation as a feminist and award-winning journalist had reached the attention of not only thousands of ordinary Utahns but also several General Authorities of the LDS Church, she heard a knock at her kitchen door.

On her threshold stood John Carmack—not the well-known software programmer, but the member of the LDS First Council of the Seventy, accompanied by Linda's stake president. Had they come to take her membership? Or were they perhaps seeking further light and knowledge about their Mother in Heaven?

Neither, as it turned out. After Linda had invited them to come in, they asked if she might be willing to tell them anything she had learned about a young document dealer named Mark Hofmann, who had recently been charged with murder.

Then they noticed their fearsome feminist hostess was wearing an apron, and the room was filled with the aroma of fresh baked goods. So at the kitchen table, Linda served her visitors cookies and milk while they picked her brain about forgery and murder.

Feminism, food, fiction, poetry, a female deity, and good reporting—they were all part of the same mix for Linda. They all personify how naturally she could blend opposites and complexities in her poem, "Fact of My Life," a favorite of mine.

FACT OF MY LIFE

My job was once threatened if I published a poem.
I lived in another place
but in America and knew my rights.
I let the poem wait. Oh, I read it aloud once
and silence swelled in the room like fog;
then someone said, read it again.

My job was once threatened if I published a poem,
a fact of my life I forgot,
one my children don't know.
A journalist, sworn to truth, nothing but,
I wrote it at city desk
unassigned to the story.

My job was once threatened if I published a poem
for a public figure, no libel there,
nothing false or obscene, only love
and anger, dignity and crumbs.
The second time I read it, silence rose
and his relative, who questioned me later.

After I left my job I published the poem,
then left the place and forgot
the threat. Remembering, I ponder
the knots lodged under my shoulder blades,
asking if one truly can leave a place
where poems hold such power.

—LINDA SILLITOE

IN RIVERDALE

We returned to our beginnings
 in August, with its crayola green
 trees and grass, blue sky,
 and yellow light so certainly imposed
 that desert light and night and hues
 wavered within us.

We settled near the mountains,
 opening our windows
 to crickets wooing a canyon breeze.
 We tried to believe
 we can fit this time among our dearest
 and darkest demons. We unpacked and sorted
 our souvenirs and tales

of treading the back trails we tread still
 even as we merge into traffic.
 People don't request those stories.
 they say, Welcome back
 (to this, the right place).
 Crickets translate:
 About time.

—LINDA SILLITOE

Recapturing Linda

by Phyllis Barber

PHYLLIS BARBER is the author of many books, including *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, and, most recently, *Raw Edges: A Memoir*.

MANY YEARS AGO, LINDA AND I BOTH WROTE for *Utah Holiday*, both fledgling writers. We often had stories appearing in the same issue of the magazine and brushed against each other in the doorways to *Utah Holiday* as we delivered our manuscripts. We both had an exceptional editor in Paul Swenson, who possessed a great deal of faith in the writers who came to him with I-want-to-be a writer stars in our eyes, our unique/never-heard-before (or so we thought) ideas, our hopes for publishing some of our precious words, our pie-in-the-sky aspirations. We ate canapés at *Utah Holiday* Christmas parties and exchanged a few bits of information about our lives.

Those were the days before our paths diverged: I going off to study fiction at the University of Utah and at the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA in Writing Program; and Linda to write for the *Deseret News*, to set out toward a Ph.D. at the University of Utah, to write her novel, *Sideways to the Sun* and to investigate, with Allen Roberts, the story of Mark Hoffman in *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*.

When I think of Linda Sillitoe, I remember dark eyes, a

quiet, measured presence, a sense that here was a woman who had a great deal of internal debate and wondering that jostled with each other at all times of the day. I wish I would have taken more time to understand who she was, what mattered to her on a daily basis, what she cared for above all else. As I think of those eyes and what they said about her soul and her interior world, I wish I could recapture those moments when we were together; I wish I could recapture Linda.

But, in the way of writers, we leave words behind, words that we've manipulated, crafted, stretched, examined, tossed and turned with at night, words that we tried so hard to lasso, to make them say what we so deeply wished to say. There are the magazine articles, newspaper articles, the books, the poems, that collection of words that we've employed to hold the dam of the self, to collect together the chaos of being alive and to bring sense of it. The trying to understand what it's all about and why we are here doing what we are doing and whether or not there is something beyond our mad scrambling for the right words at the right time and place.

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

—LINDA SILLITOE