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## REVIEWS

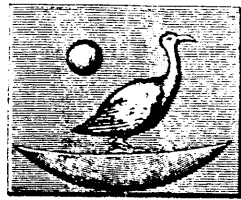
# THE RHYTHMS OF REFLECTION

THE LORD'S QUESTION: THOUGHTS ON THE LIFE OF RESPONSE

by Dennis Rasmussen

Keter Foundation, 1985, 113 pages, \$6.95

Distributed by Deseret Book Company



*Reviewed By John Durham Peters*

NORMALLY ONE DOES not review books that have been out for several years. But this book is an exception: its half-life should be much longer than most other books, LDS or otherwise. In fact, it may well be read many generations hence, and some of its sentences would withstand the erosions of time and fashion if they were engraven in granite. With this fine book of religious reflection, Dennis Rasmussen has single-handedly enlarged the Mormon literary tradition, opening up a genre that heretofore has hardly been explored: devotional writing. We do have a flourishing literature of soul-searching in personal essays and journal entries, but this book invites us to explore and make good the contemplative possibilities of our faith. For this and other reasons, the book deserves to be more widely known.

This short book consists of ten chapters, each one a meditation on a question posed somewhere in the scriptures, such as: Where art thou? Do I not fill heaven and earth? Whom shall I send? and Whom seekest thou? Rasmussen uses each question as basis for contemplating his own experience and, through that, the human condition. The premise of the book is that questions are central to human understanding and action.

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Questions are not only requests for information; they often invite a response and commitment from the whole soul. Our whole life, he suggests, is a question posed by God; we must not only find answers: we must become answers. Questions thus concern both knowing and being. Though "questioning" in Mormon circles is often a synonym for querulousness or lack of faith, Rasmussen shows how it can be both an art form and an act of worship: "Man learns his most serious questions from God. If anyone should doubt this, he may turn to those who question God most relentlessly. Who are they? Not the skeptics but the prophets" (94).

Rasmussen, who teaches philosophy at BYU, repeatedly casts his lot with the prophets instead of the skeptics, though it is his profound acquaintance with both (the scriptures and the history of philosophy, respectively) that gives the book much of its resonance. Rasmussen makes a quietly insistent case for the unity of reflection and faith, questioning and devotion. This synthetic task is clear already in the first pages. Chapter 1 introduces two traditions of reflection about human nature: the Greek tradition that says our essence is to question, and the Hebrew that says it is to be questioned by God. Rasmussen himself favors the divinatory stance of the Hebrews over the argumentative stance

of the Greeks, and this allegiance colors the style and substance of the book. Thus Prometheus, who has often furnished modern intellectuals with a favorite self-image, only defeats himself: "Man cannot rob heaven, not because God will defend it, but because he has already offered it to man" (5). Similarly Rasmussen sees contemporary ideals as potentially false gods, and Greek ones at that: "there are still those who seek to revive the gods of paganism, only now the gods have modern names: not Kronos but Progress; not Aphrodite but Sex; not Apollo but Culture; not Athena but Science" (48). His thought traces its genealogy sooner to Sinai than Athens. Though Rasmussen would choose the deserts of Yahweh over all the splendor of Greece, he has learned much from both.

Philosophical vocabulary does not appear in the text, but philosophical concerns frequently appear as hints and echoes (the interest in questions puts one in mind of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur; a line borrowed from Wittgenstein appears in the text; philosophical issues are often subtly engaged without a red flag marking them). Yet one needs no philosophical background to learn from this book, though perhaps what Rasmussen does not say is as important as what he does say. He has given us a set of philosophical prose psalms.

One of the chief themes of the book is the holiness of common things, the ways that ordinary things can be transfigured through love, service, or devotion. In considering the saying that the common people heard Jesus gladly, Rasmussen suggests: "As an artist takes common colors and blends them into beauty, Christ took common things and raised them up to sanctity. He led men to see, as they never had seen before, the hidden holiness in the world. Leaven and salt, wind and sea, publicans and sinners—all revealed before his eyes their inner goodness" (61-62). Yet Rasmussen's vision of the powers of transfiguration is not unearned. He continually gives the negative its due: "To find the glory of the Lord in his creation is not to indulge in sentimental ecstasy. The writers of scripture knew that the lamb and the lion do not yet lie down together. But this knowledge did not prevent them from finding God even in the world as it now is" (17-18). This passage displays the characteristic motion of the book: devotion passing through the flame of the hardest questions for the sake of purification and renewal.

The belief that common things reveal the holy is not only a moral stance, but a literary one as well. Perhaps the most interesting and striking thing about this book is its voice. Its

philosophical sophistication, devotional intent, and literary style combine to make it an exemplary performance. I do not mean that the book assumes dramatic poses—few books are as unpretentious as this one—but that the book not only talks about the consecration of intellect, it *enacts* it. It is a running demonstration of what a consecrated mind might look like, of how intelligence can be the glory of God. Its literary style is thus not a mere ornament, but a philosophical and spiritual experiment. Questions of style have to do with what kinds of selves we create for ourselves and invite others to become in our

presence: like life, writing poses hard choices. Rasmussen carefully avoids the pomp of the academy and the specialization of the learned; his book combines the way of knowledge with the way of love. The short simple rhythms of the sentences—none longer than fifty words and most around ten or fifteen words in length—suggest the pausing for breath, the waiting for a response.

*The Lord's Question* should become and remain a milestone in Mormon devotional literature. It is a key corrective to a religious tradition that has made too little time for the self to explore itself in the presence of God.

He invites Mormons to step out of their beehive for a moment and to savor the marvelous works within as well as outside the soul. *The Lord's Question* is, consequently, an intensely personal book. It has an overheard quality: Rasmussen does not presume to talk about human experience in terms of a generalized “we”; rather, he invites us to eavesdrop on his own wonderings and even prayers. It is explicitly an “I” that speaks here, abstracted from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Like much traditional religious reflection, the book concerns a lone self face-to-face with God and the world. The book calls “time out,” which gives it much of its appeal and poignance. Transcendence from the mundane is a traditional mark of this genre of spirituality.

Despite the personal focus of the book, the reader does not learn much about the biography and daily life of the author/speaker: Does he have to grade student papers, change diapers, wash dishes, or home teach four families every month? How is his spiritual life shaped by his wife and children? These are questions left unanswered in these reflections. Is a price paid for such transcendence? We should recognize that the genre of devotional literature comes to us with a history: those who have most deeply plumbed their own souls have usually been those with the leisure to reflect in solitude, insulated from commitments of family and mundane life (by monasteries, for example). Not every self can find a voice that is separate from its ties to others: this feat of abstraction seems easier for men than women in our culture, for good and ill. I wonder if the solitary persona of most devotional literature, including this book, is not itself something to be questioned. This is not to reduce this wonderful book nor to deny the need for solitary reflection, but to suggest the need for a variety of voices, and to remind of our incessantly social selves. Might not a Mormon devotional literature explore the spiritualities resulting from our profoundly communitarian theology and forms of worship? What kinds of religious reflection could be written that make the wonders and trials and mysteries of kinship central—kinship with each other and with God? Time will tell.

*The Lord's Question* also raises interesting issues about the sociology of Mormon language. Its tone is utterly lacking in trumpets and cymbals: it ranges from wonder to rhapsody to commentary, and is always simple, plain, and accessible. Rasmussen treads lightly on the reader's attention: he is scrupulous in his accessibility, punctilious in his plainness. He does not harangue or preach; he suggests and wonders. His inspiration seems to be the

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speech of the scriptures, especially of the Hebrew poets and Jesus: he writes as one who has learned the lesson in Doctrine and Covenants 50 that joy and edification come from understanding. He repeatedly demonstrates a fine awareness of the dangers of self-assertion that accompany dramatic or ironic language. In the studied humility of its persona, *The Lord Question* fits the main patterns of contemporary Mormon oratory and discourse, while also going beyond them. Some of his anecdotes remind one of Sacrament Meeting material (e.g., 74, 83, 93), and some of his cadences are reminiscent of the polished General Conference addresses of a Neal A. Maxwell. He works within a familiar register of speech, and yet shows us the literary potentials of our habitual styles of talking. Yet, despite all the eloquent anti-Christ and "plain" prophets in the Book of Mormon, simplicity is not necessarily a virtue (though it almost always is): there is, of course, the case of Isaiah, and Jesus apparently told parables sometimes precisely so that he would not be understood. Rasmussen stays well within the circle of devotion: nothing in the book could cause a little one to stumble. But are there no benefits in difficulty? Is there not a place for irony, perplexity, and contradiction, humor and the grotesque, in our most deeply spiritual reflections? Again, time will tell: other writers may take the devotional spirit in new directions and find surprising ways of singing God's glory in language. Unlike Rasmussen, they may sometimes brush our linguistic habits against the grain. But whatever happens, I have no doubt that stylistic questions will be grappled with—properly—as matters of utmost moral import.

These comments on the book's transcendental stance and style are not meant as criticisms. If the book was not, essentially, the inauguration of a new genre in Mormon writing, I would not be justified in speculating about directions that genre might go. Besides, Rasmussen has not claimed to write anything but a personal book (his one-sentence preface renounces any authority to instruct): in his intensity, generosity, and profundity we can all rejoice.

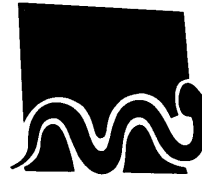
"Whereof one cannot speak," said the philosopher Wittgenstein, "thereof one must be silent." He meant that things of ultimate concern—the mystic matters of wonder—should not be spoken about lest they turn into nonsense. Reading Rasmussen makes me want to revise this dictum: Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must sing. More people should know of his fine voice. ☞

# A WALDEN FOR THE AMERICAN WEST

DESERT SOLITAIRE

by Edward Abbey

University of Arizona Press, 1988, \$24.95



Reviewed by B. W. Slaughter

LET ME START this review by admitting that *Desert Solitaire* is one of my all-time favorite, special-place-on-the-shelf books. Quite frankly it changed my life—and it wasn't even published by Deseret Book. So you may ask: if it's not *Deseret Solitaire*, why review it in *Sunstone*? Well, because (1) Elbert Peck asked me to do a review, (2) it takes place in Utah, (3) Abbey talks about us Mormons (or, excuse me, those "other" Mormons), and (4) this book can help us understand the importance of our relationship with nature—which should be of utmost importance to Latter-day Saints with our insights into our Heavenly Parents' plan.

With this beginning you know my bias. *Desert Solitaire* is considered the anthem of the outdoors, a classic argument for the need to experience nature. Many say it is the book that began it all: the demonstrations, the ecotage, and the new consciousness that wild lands must be saved for their own sake. First published in 1968, when America was more preoccupied with matters in Vietnam, a place far removed, both spiritually and physically, from southeastern Utah, it was *not* a best-seller—at least not at first. But by 1971 both Simon & Schuster and Ballantine Books republished *Desert Solitaire* in paperback, and as Abbey states, "both editions continue to burrow along like seditious moles a few feet underground, hidden but alive, the first now in its twelfth printing, the second in its six-

teenth" (11).

The reason for this review is that *Desert Solitaire* is now published in a beautifully illustrated twentieth-anniversary clothbound edition by the University of Arizona. Abbey tells us of the book's beginning: "This book was begun in the summer of 1956—thirty-one years ago. Hard to believe but true. For me that time seems like a different age, almost a different world, a pattern of events archaic to antiquity. I was working that summer as a ranger at a little national park in southeast Utah called Arches. The place was remote then, the roads rough and rocky, the tourist travel sparse. I worked and lived alone, twenty miles from Moab, the nearest town, and my duties were light. I spent much of my time watching cloud formations, praying for flash floods, exploring the canyons for new and undiscovered natural wonders. With much free time on my hands I kept a diary, or more exactly a journal, since I did not make entries every day. I recorded my observations of life, wildlife, books, flowers, ideas, birds, emotions, and sensations—particularly those feelings that came with prolonged solitude" (9).

A solitude and a book very much in the tradition of Thoreau and his book *Walden*. In fact, Larry McMurtry (of *Lonesome Dove* fame) has called Abbey "the Thoreau of the American West." As with Thoreau, Abbey spent much of his life in the defense of nature, particularly in the West. In this effort he tried to convey to his readers an appreciation of the wilds in the hope that we too would take up the fight, and in doing so also pass the word for others to join.

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B. W. SLAUGHTER, an incurable naturalist and former *Sunstone* staff member, compulsively hikes the Wasatch Mountains.

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Abbey's writing challenges us, makes us laugh, makes us mad, and mostly makes us feel and think. The first sentence of *Desert Solitaire* is such a challenge: "This is the most beautiful place on earth." Prior to reading this, conventional wisdom told us that the desert was an ugly, useless wasteland. Abbey teaches us to see the grace and beauty of all nature, of all wilds for their own intrinsic worth—not for their scientific value, not for tourism and not for economic gain. For example:

"If Delicate Arch has any significance it lies, I will venture, in the power of the odd and unexpected to startle and surprise the mind out of their ruts of habit, to compel us into a reawakened awareness of the wonderful—that which is full of wonder. A weird, lovely, fantastic object out of nature like Delicate Arch has the curious ability to remind us—like rock and sunlight and wind and wilderness—that *out there* is a different world which surrounds and sustains the little world of men as sea and sky surrounds and sustains a ship. The shock of the real. For a little while we are again able to see, as a child sees, a world of marvels. For a few moments we discover that nothing can be taken for granted, for if this ring of stone is marvelous, then all which shaped it is marvelous, and our journey here on earth, able to see and touch and hear in the midst of tangible and mysterious things-in-themselves, is the most strange and daring of all adventures" (52).

In the relatively mundane, sterile, workaday world, reading Abbey's words brings one back to life—feeling the excitement of being alive. *Desert Solitaire* is full of humor, wit, sarcasm, and even meanness, but all to make a point. Abbey is sometimes hard, sometimes soft—but always honest, maybe brutally honest at times.

Additionally, the book is visionary, sometimes romantically so. (Any book that begins "this is the most beautiful place on earth" must qualify as somewhat romantic.) Yet at other times Abbey is an Old Testament prophet, booming: "My God! I'm thinking, what incredible shit we put up with most of our lives—the domestic routine, the stupid and useless and degrading jobs, the insufferable arrogance of elected officials . . . the foul, diseased and hideous cities and towns we live in . . . while patiently enduring at the same time creeping strangulation of the clean white collar and the rich but modest four-in-hand

garrote!" (154). Surely, as the *New York Times* stated, *Desert Solitaire* is "rough, tough, combative . . . a ride on a bucking bronco."

What does Abbey have to say of us Mormons, you may ask—is he hard or is he soft? Is he humorous, or does he take us seriously? The answer is yes: he is all of the above, and he even throws in a little Old Testament doomsaying. On the hard side: ". . . racially prejudice . . . what can you expect of a sect which gave Utah a governor like J. Bracken Lee and . . . a secretary of agriculture like Ezra Taft Benson . . . whose founding father Joseph Smith claimed to have carried about under his arms solid gold tablets which, if they were the size he said they were, weighed about half a ton?" (223). On the soft side he states the Mormon pioneers "achieved a way of life in which there was much to be admired. . . ." (223). Specifically he points to mutual aid, cooperation, and sharing, to name a few qualities. Abbey the doomsayer

bemoans the fact that the old Mormon communities are now disappearing as they become "swamped" by American industrialism, commercialism, and urbanism. He warns us (and remember this was published in 1968): "Certainly in Salt Lake City itself there is no lack of intriguing social problems—air pollution, traffic jams, angry adolescents, babies born in sinlock and all the rest of it . . ." (225). It certainly sounds like the 1989 Salt Lake City I live in.

Edward Abbey died in February 1989 at the age of 62. The verse he wrote with his life is found in *Desert Solitaire*: "we need the wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it" and "it is not enough to understand nature, the point is to save it." I challenge you to read this book, Abbey's masterpiece, and if you do you will go on a wonderful bronco ride of an adventure that will make you upset, mad, make you laugh, think and feel. It will force you out of your ruts! ☞

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#### TEFNUT

Tefnut, the Great Mother, came weeping to Egypt  
In those before times, but soon laughed,  
For through her sons a new line began,  
Not the father's line, but Pharaohs called her  
Mother, sacrificing children, seeking  
The secret of the patriarchal key word.

Hathor, Ishtar, Freya, Durga, and Kali,  
She was Anath, consort and mother of Baal,  
Ashtoreth over Moloch. She was Eve.  
What secrets did she insist on knowing  
When she took the fruit? Made to be a  
Helpmeet, she helped Adam out of Eden.

Mother of all but that parentless power he forfeits  
When dominion and compulsion weigh  
The soul, how can she make him just—as she  
Would be? Wrestle an angel? What did Hagar  
Want from Abraham for Ishmael that the  
Father saved for ancient Sarah's son?

Is it the power to throw upon a wheel  
A world? To set the time for stars to burst  
As signs to man? To spin the earth in space,  
To make the sun stand still and mountains move,  
Practicing not on mountains but on clods?  
What is such power to one who makes the mover?

—PENNY ALLEN