

A Veiled Disappearing Act?

THE PUZZLE OF ANNALEE SKARIN: WAS SHE TRANSLATED CORRECTLY?

By Samuel W. Taylor

I^N THE SUMMER OF 1952, THE LOCAL BEST SELLER ALONG THE Wasatch Front was Annalee Skarin's *Ye Are Gods*. The book was something new in Mormon literature; some scholars considered it the first genuine approach to the faith on a metaphysical basis. The Saints loved it. The book's beautiful and inspiring author was in great demand for Church and fireside talks.

Then, abruptly, the book was denounced by Elder Mark E. Petersen, and Annalee Skarin was excommunicated and delivered to the buffetings of Satan for writing it. Two weeks later, she claimed to have become a translated being. As such, she produced eight more books, all of them still in print and selling briskly.

She has become a cult figure in New Age circles. I attended a lecture on the life and works of Annalee Skarin by Robert Coe Gardner of San Francisco. Though the Church has disowned her, her position as a cult figure is secure and growing. The East-West Bookstore of Menlo Park, California, which specializes in occult materials, reported her works are "going like hotcakes." *Sons of God*, which Annalee wrote under the pseudonym of Christine Mercie, went into its fifteenth printing in 1976.

She was born 7 July 1899 at American Falls, Idaho, the seventh of twelve children. (A seventh child born on the seventh day of the seventh month is significant in occult circles.) Her father was a sturdy Mormon farmer who died when she was nineteen. Annalee was a delicate child but developed into a beautiful young lady. A brief marriage ended in annulment. She then married unhappily again, an ordeal lasting twenty-one years, during which she had two daughters. After a divorce she finally married her true love, Reason Skarin, a police officer in Buffalo, New York. Her oldest child never forgave her for this, and turned against her. Linda, the other girl, remained close to her mother.

Such are the verifiable facts about Annalee Skarin. Everything else is controversial.

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ANNALEE claimed that *Ye Are Gods* was "written under the direction and power of God and according to his command," as the result of a vision. Her youngest daughter was dying of an undiagnosed ailment (years later discovered to have been consumption, a medical rarity in that environment). As the disease ebbed and flowed for more than two years, Annalee prayed that Linda be restored to perfect health, if meant to live, and taken without suffering, if meant to die.

Then one night after an unusually long siege I realized she was dying. I dropped to my knees beside her bed and felt that my heart would break . . . and in a wild, heartbroken panic I clung to her. I felt that I could never go on living without this little one. . . . A long shudder shook her tiny frame. She stiffened—then grew limp. . . . The agony of my soul was too deep to express as I felt that I could not possibly let her go.

It was then that Annalee realized "that I was thinking of myself, not of the little child in my arms—and a wider vision came. It was then that I truly prayed."

When she looked down "for the last time, as I thought, upon that tiny upturned face. . . . I was speechless with gratitude and awe. My child slept in peace, all fever gone." And then, "looking up in wonder, I seemed to see no ceiling in the room—the open dome of heaven shown above. And then, so near that I was startled, I saw the veil of heaven drawn back as the curtains of a stage—and He stood there—with all the glory, majesty and power of eternity stamped upon His brow, the Savior of the World."

Annalee claimed that her book was "written under the direction and power of God and according to his command." It really wasn't hers, "except that I had been called to be the scribe"; therefore she "could accept no pay or receive no royalties." When established publishers turned the book down, she borrowed \$5,000 to have it published by a vanity house, then she distributed the edition gratis. A Salt Lake book dealer, Eugene Wilson, disposed of 500 free copies for her. Truly, this was a labor of love.

As literature, *Ye Are Gods* stood out from the bland mainstream of Mormon literature. The Saints took it to their bosoms,

forming study groups to discuss it. Annalee Skarin became a reluctant celebrity in the Buffalo area. Any credit, she claimed, belonged to God, not herself. In fact, she and her husband went into seclusion for a while "because too many were seeking to take hold of us, expecting us to do their fulfilling for them." This was impossible; the Kingdom of Heaven dwelt in every bosom. "Each individual has the complete path of his own divine progress . . . right within himself."

In rejecting the material things of the world, in claiming that the only reality was the mind and spirit, Annalee was an ascetic in the pattern of mystics throughout the ages. She was a modern stylite, retreating atop her private pillar.

In the spring of 1952 Annalee was visiting friends, Chris and Sally Franchow, in Salt Lake City who lived on Ninth East, just across from the Hillcrest Ward. As news of her visit became known, she was besieged with invitations to speak at Church and fireside groups. Then without warning the axe fell. After addressing an enthusiastic congregation, she was ushered into the bishop's office where she was confronted by Elder Mark E. Petersen, a member of the Council of the Twelve. He denounced *Ye Are Gods* as inspired by Satan, and demanded that she repent and repudiate the book. "And then it was that I, who love Christ above all others," she wrote, "was acclaimed to be the great anti-Christ." When she rejected the ultimatum, she was tried by a Church court and excommunicated in June 1952.

Annalee called it a "kangaroo court," where "I was refused counsel. My efforts to bear witness to what I had written, or even to defend myself, were denied and silenced." When Sally Franchow tried to defend her, "For her courageous efforts she too was excommunicated."

FROM the Church's viewpoint, Annalee Skarin had sinned woefully, according to a fifteen-page, single-spaced list prepared by Elder Petersen, together with material of similar length and detail supplied to Annalee's older daughter.

The major thrust of Elder Petersen's reaction was that "Mrs. Skarin announces that she has received her books as revelations from the Lord." The Church believes in continual revelation, which only the president is authorized to receive for its guidance. Annalee "does not so much as mention the president of the Church," Elder Petersen charged, but "attempts to give revelations on her own part and defends this fact even though she is a woman."

Without challenging Elder Petersen's verdict, I will point out that every Latter-day Saint is authorized to receive personal revelation for his or her own guidance. Also, from an author's viewpoint, when Skarin says "This book has been written under the direction of the Almighty," she is speaking of the source of a writer's inspiration—which is a strange, elusive, and baffling force which seems to move the pen. Lacking this, an author may become unable to write anything at all—"writer's block."

Authors have various devices for courting the muse. One method of getting warmed up in the morning is to re-copy the

last page of work done the day before; that failing, copy two pages, then three, then four. Some writers can create only under specific circumstances, such as only upon the ironing board in the kitchen, only aboard a train, only upon an antique typewriter, only in a bathtub of hot water, only after a slug of whiskey. Annalee Skarin had to write on her knees. Long before the actual creation began, "the calluses upon my knees bore witness" to the search for inspiration. "When the book, *Ye Are Gods*, was scheduled to come forth I spent many anguished hours pleading with God to have someone important write that glorious record," she related, until she received word that she was chosen as author because of her faith. Thereupon, "under direction of God and according to his command," she wrote with "fire and tears as the Light of God poured through my being and out through my fingertips upon the pages placed in the typewriter."

Such was her creative process. The actual writing took only thirty days.

AT the Hillcrest Ward, where members had formed a study group of enthusiasts for her book, the verdict of Annalee's trial by Church court was announced in open meeting. "You can be sure these doings created a lot of excitement," James D. Wardle told me. Wardle is a barber in Salt Lake who maintains what might well be the finest private collection of LDS materials in the world. "I attended the meeting and heard it done. The hall was packed, with not even standing room in the wings." Wardle, a member of the Reorganized church, felt that the only thing wrong with *Ye Are Gods* was that the Utah church officials "just could not stand having a mere woman teaching their own doctrine and . . . having it accepted as inspiration through her, instead of themselves." He added that, "I consider her works the first *genuine* approach to Mormonism on a metaphysical basis."

Soon after her excommunication, Annalee Skarin vanished. According to eyewitnesses, she became a translated being. To the *Church News*, however, which devoted a full page on 3 November 1956 to demolishing her image among cultists, it was a "disappearing act" which she had used twice before in Buffalo. This was "her stock in trade, especially if the act can be staged with the trappings of the occult."

Such are the two versions of the controversy. The *Deseret News* materials, Wardle informed me, were supplied by the husband of Annalee's elder daughter.

During the twenty-one years following her translation, Annalee Skarin published eight more books, evidence that whether in this or another world, she kept busy. *Sons of God*, by "Christine Mercie" was her second book, after *Ye Are Gods*. This was followed by *To God the Glory* (1956); *The Temple of God* (1958); *Secrets of Eternity* (1960); *Celestial Song of Creation* (1962); *Man Triumphant* (1966); *Beyond Mortal Boundaries* (1969); and *The Book of Books* (1973). All of them are essentially spinoffs of *Ye Are Gods*.

With nine books in print after many editions, and with a

growing Skarin cult actively promoting her works, she very possibly is the most successful author the Mormon culture has produced. Though officially cast out, she maintained her faith in LDS doctrine. Annalee claimed that "I was to have the gift and power of the 'Three Nephites,' that I would be able to go forth . . . to serve mankind and help bring the world to light," while the "same promise is yours if you only lay hold of it." She believed in the literal promise "of overcoming death given in what is known as the 'WORD OF WISDOM!' . . . And, *I, the Lord, give unto them a promise that the destroying angel shall pass by them. . . .*" She claimed that "Death is the dreary, back-door entrance into the other world. It is the servant's entrance. But there is a great front door of glory for those who OVERCOME."

A friend of mind has the same faith as the promise of the Word of Wisdom, except he doesn't expect to be translated, nor immortal, but merely that he will live for 500 years. He retired at age 65, expecting that he would live on Social Security for 435 years. Whether Annalee will become the Fourth Nephite, and my friend live out his expected life span, I really don't expect to be around to confirm it.

Annalee waited fourteen years before telling her side of her trial and excommunication. In *Man Triumphant* she wrote:

I was not hanged as a witch. I was not crucified. I was stoned to death . . . And the great man who hurled those stones of mockery and falsehood had others hold his cloak while he did the stoning. . . . In the tragedy of my heartbreak and in the overwhelming grief of my sorrow . . . I went forth an outcast.

She fled to the mountains "to cry out my anguish in tears," whereupon "an angel of the Lord came to me and I was . . . taken away that they saw me not again for three years."

An "Editor's Note" on the flyleaf of *Ye Are Gods* says:

Soon after publishing the first edition of this remarkable book the author, Annalee Skarin, according to Affidavits in our files, underwent a physical change known as "translation," such as did Enoch of Biblical days.

TAKE it or leave it. Yet there is another aspect of the Skarin case which would catch the attention of any professional author. A book requires a contract. It requires a copyright (all of which were done in her name). As a successful author, Annalee should have received a substantial advance against royalties. Yet the legal and financial aspects of the case remain a mystery.

The metaphysical author Friend Stuart, director of the Invisible Ministry, interviewed the president of DeVorss & Company, publisher of all her books except *Ye Are Gods*, and confirmed that affidavits on file had been supplied by Annalee's attorney, George Morris of Salt Lake City. Morris also delivered the manuscripts of seven of the eight books published after her translation, while one was handled by "a woman agent."

In his pamphlet on the Skarin case, *Transition or Translation*, Stuart said his "main purpose was to determine to whom

the royalties on sales of the books are paid." He was told that "royalties are paid to no one. The firm has been instructed that all profits from the books be used to finance additional printings."

What Annalee needed—and badly—was an agent. The statement by DeVorss simply blows the mind. Ordinarily, royalties begin at about 12 percent of sales, and escalate according to volume of books sold. Annalee, as a successful author, should have been able to command perhaps 25 or 30 percent royalties. With nine best-selling books in print, published in many editions, while a growing Skarin cult promotes sales, we are talking of big money. And who, I wonder, got it?

She herself, as with *Ye Are Gods* (published by another company, The Philosophical Library of New York), absolutely refused to take money for what she considered to be the word of God. However, she could have had royalties paid to some worthy charity, such as the Red Cross. The question of who *did* reap the windfall of this literary innocent remains unanswered.

In 1966, at the time her seventh book, *Man Triumphant*, appeared, an English author named Anthony Brooke arrived in Salt Lake to investigate the Skarin case which he published in *Revelations for a New Age*. Elder Mark E. Petersen told Brooke that Annalee was an anti-Christ and her book was filled with false doctrine. It was a question of deciding "whether the doctrines of the Church are true or whether Mrs. Skarin's doctrines are true." In his opinion, she was mentally unbalanced.

The book dealer, Eugene Wilson, who had distributed 500 copies of *Ye Are Gods* free of charge, "described her as charming and 'very sane,' possessing a keen sense of humor and emanating what he could only define as a high spiritual quality."

Brooke got a haircut at the shop of James D. Wardle, who "produced from an adjoining room a mass of" materials concerning the case. (I also had access to this file.)

Two important contacts were "with Miss Skarin's lawyer, who had known her since she was a child, and the lady, now elderly, in whose house the alleged translation took place." Both "accept the translation as a fact and have no doubt about it at all." The lawyer said "he wound up her affairs at the time of her translation and she no longer has any personal worldly affairs, though reports continue to circulate in regard to ways in which she still serves mankind as she takes up her body and leaves it at will."

How much time Annalee spent in the translated state is a matter of question. Over a period of years, she would materialize in the flesh at various locations in the Los Angeles area to review her books, then would vanish to a hideout under an assumed name. The books she continued to produce had to be punched out on the typewriter keys. And although the lawyer said she had no more worldly affairs, he was silent concerning royalties from a list of best-sellers.

There are contrasting accounts of how Annalee Skarin vanished. The *Deseret News* reported that "she broke the news of her forthcoming 'translation'" at the home of Sally Franchow on 16 July 1952; then when she vanished "many were

convinced that the woman had indeed gone heavenward. However, the departure was slightly marred when Mrs. Skarin, apparently losing something in the 'translation,' was forced to reappear secretly several days later to retrieve some personal belongings—among them her false teeth."

The teeth are significant in the account of what happened. Sally Franchow (called "Mrs. B" by Brooke) told a different story. She said on 16 June Annalee had mentioned that "the angels might be coming," and left instructions that if this happened her books and personal effects should be sent to her younger daughter, Linda.

In the night Mrs. B awakened suddenly "and went straight into Miss Skarin's room to find her gone, with her dentures on a table beside the bed and all her clothes left in the room. A strong yet delicate scent filled the entire house, and it was in fact this strong aroma which had awakened Mrs. B from her sleep."

The next evening around 10:30, when Mrs. B was in the living room with her son and two daughters, "Miss Skarin entered the home wearing a plain blue dress, with her hair seemingly rather disheveled and her legs covered with dust. She immediately spoke and said, 'Do you believe I have Translated?' Mrs. B and the members of the family replied at once in the affirmative, whereupon Miss Skarin invoked blessings upon them." Meanwhile, "according to Mrs. B and her family, who all testify to the same story, Miss Skarin was transformed before their eyes into a shining being with white raiment. Mrs. B noted that the transformed Annalee Skarin displayed her new and gleaming teeth and her hair shown with a golden light. She later disappeared from their sight."

Among Skarin study groups today, the overnight growth of natural teeth is taken as one of the strongest evidences of her translation.

The *Deseret News* reported that on disappearing, "Heaven for her turned out to be a little apartment at 210 South Flower Street" in Los Angeles, where she and her husband "changed their names. Mr. Reason Eugene Skarin became Mr. Raymond O. Janson, dutiful husband of the authoress Evon Janson." From this hideout "they could venture forth, attend a few meetings with the faithful, appear as if from 'on high' to keep up the act, and then suddenly retire from before the misty eyes of their followers, and hide again on Flower Street." Annalee continued writing, while Reason landed a job in the building maintenance department of the Aetna Company, paying \$250 a month. Whether this was a disappearing act or an attempt to put the responsibility of finding illumination upon the individual, rather than letting herself be used as a crutch, must remain a matter of point of view. However, whether right or wrong, Annalee was an ascetic who lived according to her own code of values. Her marriage relationship with Reason Skarin attests to this.

Before writing her first book, Annalee had had two unhappy marriages. After her first was annulled, "the forces of darkness," as she called them, prevented her from marrying her true love, Reason Skarin, with whom she had been soul mates for two years. So once more she married the wrong person, and "twenty-

one years of unfortunate, unhappy marriage" ended in divorce. At long last Annalee was united with her true love. For twenty-three years she had "lived with him in my heart, and he had lived with a small picture of me upon his dresser."

Annalee made the break from her unhappy marriage as a result of her vision of Jesus Christ, when her daughter Linda was healed. Both she and Linda experienced the vision. Linda told her mother that angels in white nightgowns came to take her away, but allowed her to remain because of Mommy's prayer.

Following this experience, Annalee began investigating spiritual matters, "and prayed that she might have the meaning of faith and all its wondrous works," her friend Martha Baker reported in her book, *Living Inspired Faith Everyday* (1974). "Out of this quest came the writing of a book, which Annalee titled *Ye Are Gods*."

When united with her true love, Reason Skarin, "we renewed our pledge to live as nearly perfect as we could," Annalee reported. "We covenanted to live in virtue, abstaining from sexual intercourse, that we might not be guilty of transgressing any of the divine, higher laws. And since I had been married, and was divorced, this seemed a most necessary pledge to us. Christ's injunction concerning divorce and re-marriage being considered adulterous on the higher level, we could take no other course than to make a covenant of complete abstinence."

She admitted that "It was easy to make the pledge for our souls were willing—but our flesh was weak." They were newly wed, "and we were in love. I loved him with every singing, vibrating cell of my body. I loved him with all my heart. I loved him with my mind and with all my intelligence. And our bodies were young and strong, for they had not aged with the years. And we were mortal."

Consequently, "We would spend half our nights upon our knees pleading with God to give us power to fulfill our covenant and to sanctify our lives in virtue, unto Him."

Where their strength was weak, "God gave us the power to subdue the flesh. And after a year the fires of our crucifixion were in complete control. And the problem of sex was taken entirely from our lives and all the desires of the flesh. And our love became even greater. Our love was unsullied and unmarred by any physical defilement."

In this condition, "Each caress was a sacrament of wonder. Each kiss contained a thrill of glory As Reason would hold me in his arms each cell and fibre of my entire being would vibrate and sing in ecstatic, melodious wonderment, and my whole body would sing in reverberating splendor, 'I love you! I love you! I love you!' " As their love increased, "Our hearts would open as wide as eternity in a melting glory of unspeakable, reverent, holy devotion," until "all physical mortal claims lost their hold and we were lifted beyond the human demands of the flesh into a condition of utter glory, of continual joy and ever increasing splendor as new fields of service opened before us in an ever upward, progressing of eternal wonder."

Quite obviously, we can thank the repressed sex impulse for the successful literary output of Annalee Skarin. She poured

the fire and the drive into her creative effort; her books throb with passion. Had she and Reason enjoyed a normal conjugal relationship, it is entirely possible her writing—if any—would have made no waves in Salt Lake.

Annalee and Reason had been in seclusion two and a half years after her translation when, on 26 December 1954, they were involved in a serious car accident, and their assumed names proved an embarrassment. When Reason reported for work four months later, a new regulation required fingerprinting. He turned and walked out. The *Deseret News* reported that Annalee gave her age as 30 at the time of the accident, though actually she was 55. With Reason unemployed, and owing hospital bills, the *News* reported that “they were broke and on public relief . . . they were unable to meet their payments on their home; none came to their aid. They had to leave. Where did they go? They left no forwarding address.”

This again brings up the question of royalties from her two best-selling books at this time. Evidently personal need wouldn't allow her to touch remuneration for work “written under the direction of the Almighty.”

Although cast out by her own people, with “a gestapo spying system to find who had copies of the book” and to threaten the membership of any who accepted its teachings, Annalee Skarin was taken up on a national basis by the Gentiles. She published a total of nine books, the final one in 1973, *The Book of Books*, which she announced would be the last, at age seventy-four. All of them are still in print, after many editions. There are still study groups devoted to her works although almost exclusively non-Mormons. There are self-appointed torchbearers who still give talks about her works to interested groups, and supply copies of her books. However, I am unaware of any formal sect or organization. This is in agreement with her basic thesis that each individual must personally make communication with the kingdom of heaven within.

In assessing the question of whether she was translated correctly or merely employing a disappearing act, I will refer to Eduard Meyer's classic discussion of those whose spiritual lives “have belonged more or less among the mentally unbalanced, the fanatical, the visionaries and dreamers, the seers and workers of miracles.” Among “countless varieties” are prophets such as Amos or Isaiah; or fanatics in whom the spirit creates rapture . . . such as Saul, or Elias; further, there are these who were actually mad, and are to this day revered as Saints in the Orient. But common to all is the fact that the every-day world of the senses merges with the supernatural world of spirits and dreams, and that . . . awareness of the border line between the two worlds is lacking, along with the distinction between reality and fact which the normal human possesses.

Professor Eduard Meyer of the University of Berlin was a man of vast learning with a particular interest in ancient religions. He came to Utah in 1904 to spend a year studying the modern American phenomenon of Mormonism. When Joseph Smith stated that sometimes he spoke as a prophet and sometimes

as a man, Meyer was willing to accept his words at face value, as typical of the double nature of prophets.

“God's ways are not those of men, and a human scale of values may not be imposed,” he stated in his *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen* (1912). “Does not the Bible tell of grave sins and misdeeds committed by Abraham, Moses, David, and Solomon, men who were nevertheless chosen prophets of God? God chooses whom he will, without having to give an account of himself.”

While Annalee Skarin was considered by some to be a prophet without honor in her own land, quite obviously she had the dual nature of the mystic. Whether or not translated correctly, she herself believed her books were written by the finger of God. If her religious ecstasy sprang from a suppressed sex drive, this was necessary preparation in courting an author's muse. She could write only upon her knees.

The question must be whether all this is evidence of mental disturbance, a deliberate “disappearing act” to hoax disciples of the various study groups devoted to her works, or does it indicate the typical pattern of mystics and prophets?

She wrote a final letter to DeVorss from Redding, California, in 1981. A friend reported meeting her there in 1982 at a health food store. At that date Annalee Skarin would have been 83 years old, earth time. Further affiant knoweth not.

Her books still live, all in print. She put her soul into each volume. The surviving body of her work may well be the translated Annalee Skarin. ☞

THE BELLS OF BOSTON

Hidden between the skyscrapers,
The old churches sit like aged women
Veiled in lace, who settle in worn pews
Next to the tall slim girls with direct eyes.
Theirs is the grace of a tree bent by wind,
But still nearing quiet, delicate blossoms.
When they speak with their bells,
They call us back to a century no less harsh
Than our own. But in those years grew
More arbors of the old belief where we
Could walk ad bring our joy and grief.
I think of the child I was, so eager for mass,
To hear the bells calling us in. I wanted
To sit by Grandpa who was quiet, strong as stone,
But who touched me as though I were a flower.
When he and Grandma bowed their heads,
I wondered what they were saying, for what they asked.
Now, in my hotel room, I hear the bells ringing in a chorus
All over the Back Bay of Boston, from Copley Square,
Echoing over Cambridge. They sing, waking
An answering voice in my breast, gathering like angels.

—CARA M. BULLINGER