
REVIEW

GRIT & INSIGHT

BREEDING LEAH & OTHER STORIES

By John Bennion

Signature Books, 1991, \$14.95, 157 pages



Reviewed by Tim Behrend

DESPITE THE EARLY contributions of such authors as Don Marshall and Doug Thayer to the spectacular growth of serious Mormon fiction in the 1980s, it has been a long while since a full-time faculty member at BYU has published a major work (or collection) of fiction to critical acclaim. Marshall's and Thayer's powers appear to have dimmed with their surprisingly correlated, didactic novels of the eighties, and new talents in the English department, particularly the much-decorated Margaret Young, seem intent on following their lead into the cheap, happy landscape of sentimentality and moralism. John Bennion's new collection, *Breeding Leah & Other Stories*, is all the more praiseworthy against this background. Bennion, a new member of the English department at BYU, writes with grit and insight about people coping with the disappointment of imperfect relationships as lived out in a morally ambivalent world. His characters, for the most part, are invested with the body parts, the passions, the ignorance and faults, the "haphazard selfhood" (93), the bale-and-wire clunkiness of thought and behavior that make their predicament real, memorable, relevant. With this, his first published collection, Bennion has earned for himself a place beside Judith Freeman, Levi Peterson, and Pauline Mortensen at the forefront of Mormon fiction.

Seven stories comprise the collection: "Dust," "A Court of Love," "A House of Order," "Breeding Leah," "The Interview," "The Last Wonder of Nature," and "Jenny, Captured by the Mormons"; of these, all but the last two have appeared elsewhere in

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print. The best of the collection is the trio of interconnected stories (the first three), which deal with the same set of characters—principally Howard Rockwood and his wife Sylvia—over a span of years. "A Court of Love" portrays Howard's arrival home from a mission to discover that his father has fallen in love and begun an adulterous relationship with a neighbor; "A House of Order," set several years later, describes Howard's struggles with intimacy and the weight of family tradition, including his father's disgrace and excommunication, against the emotional backdrop of a deeply disturbed marriage; "Dust," far and away the best selection in the book, leaps ahead fifteen to twenty years to show Howard in eremitic seclusion, living alone in the desert, still pondering the burdens and difficulties of heritage, relations, and life in modernity.

The setting for these stories is the dry, desert basin and range country around "Rockwood," a fictional town set vaguely west of Rush Valley, that was pioneered by Howard's violent, polygamous great-great grandfather. The harshness of the land around Rockwood is a metaphor for Howard's experience of life: given providential conditions and the right season, ditches gurgle with water and light breezes carry the sweet scent of alfalfa. But the alkali and sage desert remain the natural landscape, held at bay only by endless labor carried out under the looming shadow of "Joseph's Peak." Bennion's characters live in a "lonesome world" (92) in which human nature seems "bound to destructiveness" (61). Sexuality is an endless font of bitterness; the unbridgeables in human relations are absolute; idealism and romanticism (Belinda) are delusional traps. Even rudimentary awareness of these human realities engenders fear, and in

his desert ruminations Howard confesses to himself that "I can establish no relationship with any point or person secondary to myself in space which is as important as [that] fear" (10-11). Yet in the face of such deep pessimism, Bennion's characters continue to labor, holding the desert at bay; under the right conditions they remain capable of experiencing joy, of achieving wisdom, and of living, on some days at least, with full, intelligent humanity.

Not all the stories in the collection are of the same high caliber. The last two pieces, previously unpublished, are the weakest and the most lacking in psychological subtlety. In particular, "The Last Wonder of Nature," a surrealistic fancy that follows Linda Sillitoe and Michael Fillerup into Navajo country, is out of character with the better part of Bennion's writing. Among other faults, its dialogue is overloaded with wooden attempts at witty or sarcastic exchange that simply fall flat. Its silly dialogue is compounded by weak characterization, the narratively haphazard wandering of the author though his surrealistic plot, and the adventitious epiphanies on the last two pages.

"Jenny, Captured by the Mormons" is technically more satisfactory, but its narrative exploits the exoticism rather than the humanity of its characters and so fails to engage the reader in the way the Rockwood stories and equally sensitive "Breeding Leah" do. The final story in the collection, "The Interview," falls between these two camps, more interesting for its subject matter (homosexuality discovered mid-mission) than for its technique or characters.

Finally, a word of criticism for Signature Books on the graphics in the book. On the cover and in the titles at the head of every story, each word—sometimes each letter in each word—is printed in a different font and pitch. There is a mixed use of upper and lower case lettering, a distracting decorative reliance on variously thick and thicker dots and lines for margins around the titles, and a fortuitous admixture of boxed prepositions in negative relief that together create a jumbled, adolescent, cut-and-paste graphic impression totally out of harmony with the literary content of the book. What is the point of all this artistic busy-ness? I hope that the graphics in John Bennion's next book—and may it appear soon—will be less cartoonish, less festooned with pointless colors and confusion than is *Breeding Leah*. I hope, too, that Bennion will continue to write at BYU with the same intense honesty and insight that typified his work during the past years at the University of Houston. ☞