

## BOOK REVIEW

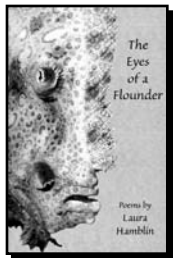
“THE NEXT WEIRD SISTER  
PUBLISHES A BOOK”

THE EYES OF A FLOUNDER

by Laura Hamblin

Signature Books, 2005

100 pages, \$15.95

*Reviewed by Stephen Carter*

*In The Eyes of a Flounder, we encounter a woman deeply sensitized to negative space, to the action outside the narrative . . . a prophet who sees things not as they are, as they were and as they are to come, but who hears the distant rustle and breath of unseen beings.*

TEN YEARS AGO, when I was just beginning my college education, I accidentally took a women's literature class from a strange new professor. It was a rocky affair to begin with: I was a newly returned missionary; she was on her way out of Mormonism. I thought feminism was some sort of illicit drug; her veins were burning with it.

One budding young philosopher in our class took immediate exception to the readings she assigned us.

"When I read Socrates, I laugh," he said, "there's humor, there's optimism. When I read this stuff," he held up the women's lit textbook, "I find nothing but bitterness and sadness."

Laura Hamblin stared at the young man for a moment. I'm not sure what her look said. It was either, "This is going to be a long semester," or, "One small step for man. One giant leap for mankind."

I admit it. I dropped that class. It scared me. *She* scared me. But a year later, something drove me to take it again. In fact, I ended up taking three other classes from her.

Why? Well, one day the Clothesline Project came to Utah Valley State College. It's an exhibit comprised of T-shirts decorated by women who have survived abuse. They're amazing, ghostly things. In the background, a stereo plays a series of noises, representing the frequency with which assaults, molestations, rapes, and even killings of women occur nationwide. As I walked through the exhibit, I felt myself taken apart little by little until I was completely eviscerated.

It was painful, yes. But when it was over, I felt like my moral vision had been sharpened and reconnected to my passion. I realized that the same thing had been happening in Laura's classes, and that I needed more of it.

I remembered that during one class Laura had said the places that scare us most are the ones we need to explore. She had a way of unfolding those difficult places in front of us, like the T-shirts at the Clothesline Project. In her classes, the subject at hand was so real I could smell it. I could feel it hard in my stomach. And undergirding it all was Laura's fierce sense of compassion.

Getting up the guts to dive back into the

Hamblin-o-sphere after my initial wimp-out started me into many remarkable conversations with Laura about religion. One day, in the time before my innocent fingers had even touched a SUNSTONE, I was walking with Laura toward her office, wrangling with her as usual about why she didn't cotton to Mormonism anymore. She finally turned to me and said, "Stephen, I stayed up countless nights agonizing over this."

"Then maybe you should think about it during the day," I said with all the earnestness of a kid with mission dust still clinging to his shoes. The reasons were obvious to me. During the day we can think more rationally, and, as we all know from Seminary, the Holy Ghost goes to bed at midnight.

Nighttime is for visions and dreams. Not doctrine.

IF Isaiah had been a woman, if John the Revelator had birthed children, *The Eyes of a Flounder* is pretty close to what they would have written. This is probably the reason Laura frightened me and my logical little brain to begin with. This is probably why it took me so long to understand her. Laura expresses her spirituality through the wombs of metaphors, through the waters of dreams. And what seraphim, what beasts, do they birth?

Hate "with sockets / of its once / obsidian eyes" (10). A "tailless rat / backbone twitching" (63). Riftia, deep sea worms, "less eye, less mouth, less heart" (61). A drowning man, "his body / repent[ing] of its image of god" (49). An aging woman, "mother of maggots. I lay the eggs of my brain / in night visions; there to incubate, molt and corrode" (4).

These are strange images of spirituality. They're surely not comforting. But then, is William Blake comforting? What do we see in the manic eyes of his angels? What leviathans swim through his heavens? Why do his earth, heaven and hell rage equally? As Ambrose Paré, a 16th Century surgeon and author, writes, "There are reckoned up many causes of monsters; the first whereof is the glory of God."

Laura's poems are not comforting, they are confronting.

For example, the poem "Mormon Conversions" juxtaposes a deacon passing the sacrament with a young woman experiencing her period: "Ah, dark skein— / unraveling girl" (14). "To Baptize" haunted me from the moment Laura read it to me a few months before it was published till the moment I put my own son under the water: "to bring him forth as something new, / as if there were shades of white, / as if he weren't



STEPHEN CARTER never did get an A out of any of the classes he took from Laura Hamblin at Utah Valley State College. He hopes she will not notice the dangling modifier buried somewhere in this review. Stephen can be reached by email at the following address: SUGARBEEETNIK@YAHOO.COM.

So many of us live life under the all-seeing eye of God and his commandments. The challenge of living up to this takes up the bulk of our labor and thought.



already water-born” (31).

Other poems touch on more general religious themes, such as “The Next Weird Sister Attempts Repentance” (sadly, the sister’s attempt is thwarted by pork), “Lament for Leah” (a meditation on marriage), “Some Faith” (in which we learn that the water-walking Jesus had asked Peter to *talk* with him, not walk), and “The Next Weird Sister Loses Light” (a reinterpretation of the parable of the ten virgins).

But despite contact points with Mormonism, diving into this book expecting to find a recognizably Mormon voice is probably a mistake. Well, it’s a mistake unless you think of William Blake as possessing a distinctly Protestant voice, or Dante and Hieronymus Bosch as possessing distinctly Catholic voices.

In a very literate review of *The Eyes of a Flounder* posted on the blog “A Prayer of Faith,” Naiah writes, “[Hamblin] gives powerful and toothy voice to an aspect of LDS womanhood to which I can not relate. . . . They were not only alien, but even unpalatable to me.”

Probably most LDS women would have this same reaction. And there’s probably a good reason for that. Though Laura is no stranger to Mormon letters, having published frequently with *Dialogue* and *SUNSTONE* (often winning awards along the way), as well as with many nationally distributed non-Mormon journals and anthologies, as far as she ever told me, she isn’t interested in being identified as a Mormon.

So what is the voice that speaks from these poems? Is it a bitter voice, or sad, as our budding young philosopher might charge? I think I found a few hints to the answer. In “Letter to No One in Particular,” Laura writes,

The story of poetry is the  
story of all the doors I have failed  
to open. (26)

And in “The Next Weird Sister Loses Weight”:

I wander  
spindle-legged  
through narrow  
columns,  
searching.  
Where did  
I go? Where  
did I go? (57)

In these and many other places in the text, we encounter a woman deeply sensitized to negative space, to the action outside the narrative, to the picture beyond the frame, to the immensity surrounding her; a prophet who sees things not as they are, as they were, and as they are to come, but who hears the distant rustle and breath of unseen beings.

This voice is of one crying in the desert.

**I**N this time of prophets that appear only in suit and tie, we can forget that there are other kinds, too. Prophets such as John the Baptist and Elijah, who simply couldn’t find a home in civilization. They fed on insects and the offerings of ravens. To find them, you had to take your chances and venture into the wild. Their vision didn’t fit into a good suburban neighborhood; it raged at inappropriate times, it cut too easily. It healed too prolifically.

I believe Laura’s voice grows primarily from similar habitations in the spiritual wilderness. So much of the imagery in her poems evokes the yin and yang of loneliness—“where the horizon rises up / to the sky but never touches”—and solitude—“lacing will and desire / measureless and lucid” (58). The main persona in her poems, the Next Weird Sister, embodies this sense of liminality.

There are three weird sisters in charge of the fate of the past, the fate of the present, and the fate of the future. However, according to such venerable “texts” as *The Clash of the Titans* and Disney’s version of *Hercules*, the sisters have only one eye amongst them, which they are continually fighting over. Thus they are never able to bring their entire knowledge together.

Perhaps the Next Weird Sister is the one who has given up on the eyeball, who has offered herself to blindness and allowed fate to work upon her own body, gaining a vision inaccessible to the sighted, a wisdom denied the unravaged, and a commission to “accomplish deeds without names” (4).

And perhaps this is where Laura Hamblin departs from the world of the average Mormon. Perhaps this is why she is so unpalatable. How much do any of us want to find ourselves in no-(wo)man’s land? So much of our worldview is based on culti-

vating certainty, as mine was when I first met Laura. So many of us live life under the all-seeing eye of God and his commandments. The challenge of living up to this certainty takes up the bulk of our labor and thought. But it is also our comfort.

Laura is reminding us of a paradox, one that seems to haunt her own life: on one hand “when labor / is too great—then is when a birth occurs;” on the other “a broken heart is the gift / and the wound” (4).

It’s true, these poems exude a guttural aroma; they lodge in your stomach; they inject themselves into your dreams. But they also stand in a thousand doorways at once. ☞



## RESOLVED

I resolve to get rid of  
the bull of rhetoric  
the salve of style  
the highflown phrases  
the polished syntax  
from the lyrical trashbin  
to kneel down in winter  
and bring you with my inexpert hand  
the lamb of snow.

—JAN TWARDOWSKI

(Translated by KATHLEEN SNODGRASS  
and JUSTYNA KOSTKOWSKA)