Strange Love

_The School of Love_ by Phyllis Barber (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 113 pp., $14.95.

Reviewed by Helen B. Cannon, USU English Department, Logan, Utah.

Disparate voices of contemporary short story writers, among them Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Raymond Carver, Louise Erdrich, and even Mormon author Linda Sillitoe, all use external situations to probe the inner life of characters. All are authors busy with nuances of the craft, sharing at the very least a concern with characters in credible, if sometimes minimal life situations. In this reading context, I found Phyllis Barber's collected stories in _The School of Love_ to present eccentric, strange territory in the land of current fiction. Though many of her stories begin in the "real" world, they drift into a landscape of dream and fantasy—worlds where the familiar suddenly becomes unfamiliar, where sanity approaches madness, where time warp defies chronology, where known intersects with unknown, and understanding takes on private symbology that calls for translation. Yet we've all traveled in these realms not real, and they reflect in an eerie way the deepest of our personal realities.

Many people read fiction to learn about human behavior; Phyllis Barber's stories call upon us to learn about the human heart—especially about our own hearts. That's why, the more I think about it, her title seems entirely apt, even though when I first read the collection I wondered. Surely someone looking for conventional boy-meets-girl romance would find the title puzzling, if not misleading. For here we are schooled in love that defies conscious expression—love that wells up from the subconscious and that we only half recognize.

Barber's dual epigraph, "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and "Love is strange" (Sonny and Cher), points to her indefinable mix of the sacred and the profane, the rarified and the downright strange. Take the story "Tangles" for instance. The nymphet child, Alice, sleeps with her teddy bears—palpable bears of gray and brown and white. The white bear even has a music box inside. And Alice's father is real enough too—no dream daddy at all, but one who types and scolds and gives advice, and whose balding head Alice kisses. But what of the figures who are less certainly real? There is the man who follows her home from school and who reappears at various points in the story. He wants to touch her golden hair—to braid it, she thinks, into a cord and to lead her away. What part of this man with "yolky" eyes is real, what part nightmare, what part a girl's surreal conception of the men her father says "only want one thing"? Is he archetype or actual; sinister or holy? One moment (in dream or in reality) the man narrows his unnatural eyes to scream, "Respect for the man"; the next moment he is kissing Alice's cheek, kneeling holily and whispering, "Love one another," and then, Christ-like, lifting her up while reassuring her, "Be not afraid" (p. 22).

Here is a girl on the brink of sexual love, frightened, confused, mixing the little girl love she's known with mysteries of sacred love and with the equally strange adult love to which she now must be initiated. The only male/female love she's known till now has been for her bears (who all seem to be Teddies) and for her
father—all of this getting bizarrely mixed
up in her rite of passage. We’re told that
Alice joins the circus. We’re told that The
Dwarf there fondles her with his “nubbed
digits,” “kneading” and “tweaking”
between her legs until The World’s Big-
gest Lady interrupts and they go back to
their game of canasta. Violation seems to
happen in a stuffy tent, or does it rather
happen in a nightmare enactment of
Everywoman’s fears? At one point in the
story, we do know for sure that Alice has
crossed the line between sleeping and wak-
ing. In this identified dream-vision, Alice’s
father becomes one with the bears, his
mechanical wind-up words proclaiming,
“I love you most of all”—something per-
haps most every girl subconsciously wishes
could be true—that love could be for a
known and gentle father rather than for a
strange and threatening man.

This father/daughter motif appears in
two other stories in Barber’s collection—
“Silver Dollars” and “The Glider”—where
it is again clear that father love goes
beyond filial devotion. This archetypal
theme is not one that women freely dis-
cuss or even consciously admit; it brushes
too close to the taboo. But it does well up
as a familiar in Barber’s impressionistic
tales; at least it did for me. Other readers
will find their own meanings; Barber
demands that sort of reader participation.
She says as much in her artistic credo
(“Mormon Woman as Writer,” Dialogue,
Fall 1990), implicitly embracing as her
own goal, Mario Vargas Llosa’s descrip-
tion wherein “the truth (one or several) is
hidden, woven into the very pattern of
the elements constituting the fiction, and
it is up to readers to discover it, to draw,
by and . . . at his own risk the ethical,
social and philosophical conclusions of the
story” (p. 110). This accurately describes
Barber’s own method. In her Dialogue
essay she reiterates that “much of the bur-
den of interpretation lies with the reader
who will make out of words what he or
she wishes” (pp. 112-13). If Barber’s sto-
ries, so wondrously diverse and imagina-
tive, have a formula, it is this—readers
must be engaged in the intricate weaving
process, must add their own strands to
the warp of fantasy, the weft of reality.

Though Barber’s stories in their wild
imaginative flights defy ready classifica-
tion, each does have commonality with
what Carlos Fuentes has called the
“privileged” language of fiction—provid-
ing access to life centers that we do not
and cannot read discursively. People who
choose not to understand fiction deny its
unique psychic language—symbology that
can bring us a deeper understanding of
things we may not always want to hear,
helping us to discover qualities and mean-
ings not always apparent even to our-
selves. Another commonality is that all
central characters are girls or women
involved in a quest for some aspect of
love—females in archetypal stages of love.

Each of the stories in this collection
deserves separate and close analysis: each
deserves time and engagement. Meanings
are not readily or conventionally accessi-
ble but require tapping of our deeper,
sometimes suppressed sensibilities. While
the story “Tangles” is unique within this
set of unique stories, it does typify some
aspects of the whole. In “Silver Dollars”
and in “Tangles,” we see teen girls on the
brink of passage to womanly love, trying
to use father love as a model, yet trying
to break away from that familiar love as
well. In “Love Story for Miriam” and in
the brief impressionistic piece, “Almost
Magnificence,” we see spinsters who for
one reason or another have been denied
the passage to romantic love. In “Baby
Birds,” we observe mother-love that is
unstinting. “Anne at the Shore” (a won-
derful self-creation myth), “Criminal
Justice,” and another mere glimpse,
“White on White,” all explore self-love
thwarted, discovered, or created, and in
the three thematically related stories,
“Radio KENO,” “Oh Say Can You See,”
and “The Argument” (another fragment),
we read of love that has run amok in
motive and manifestation.

Again, Barber’s discussion of her own
technique defines her approach as can-
didly as any author's confession of method I've seen. Read her collection with the following apologia in mind:

I like to explore time warps, the edges of sanity, impressionism, experimental language, oblique approaches to the subject of humanity. I like subtlety more than dramatic intensity. I believe that truth is found in small places, not always in heroic epics. I am attracted to stories with barely discernible plot lines. Maybe this is because I, as a woman, have learned to survive by not being obvious. It threatens me to be seen too clearly. Sometimes I adopt bizarre imagery and situations in my fiction, maybe hiding behind a veil of obfuscation. Maybe this could be considered a female ploy—an invitation to “Come in and find me.” (1990, 118-19)

If Phyllis Barber's fiction is deliberately obscure, it is never coy. Go into The School of Love and find her; go in and find yourselves.

Kimball's Diaries


Reviewed by Ronald W. Walker, senior historical associate, Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History, and professor of history, Brigham Young University.

A CLERGYMAN VISITING Salt Lake City was invited to the Tabernacle where Heber C. Kimball addressed the congregation. The minister was so disturbed by Kimball's impish and impious ways that had his own family been seated in the Tabernacle, he claimed, he certainly would have led them out of the building. It was easy for those who scarcely knew Kimball to be offended by him. Robust, eager, at times utterly unrestrained by convention, Brigham Young's first counselor did not fit the mold of traditional sanctimony. But those who knew him best generally held a favorable opinion. In a 14 July 1867 sermon, Brigham Young recognized and praised Kimball's more traditional qualities. "Does he always speak the words of the Lord?" he asked. "No, but his honesty and integrity are as sterling as the Angel Gabriel's" (Historical Department Archives, Brigham Young Papers, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City).

Sometimes admiration for Kimball came from unexpected quarters. Intellectual dissenters William S. Godbe and E. L. T. Harrison held him in high regard. When the Godbeites began their 1869 "reform" of Mormonism, they sought the guidance of Kimball's departed spirit in fifty New York City séances.

Stanley B. Kimball's edition of Elder Kimball's holograph diaries (diaries written in his own hand) helps modern readers judge the man for themselves. Kimball kept four journals, scrawled between 1837 and 1845 in common writing notebooks, four by six and a half inches each. To these, Professor Kimball adds three supplements. The first is the record of Elder Kimball's brief and occasional musings, jotted down during and after his arrival in Utah in 1847. The second appendix has the churchman's 1835 memories of Zion's Camp and the calling of Mormonism's first Twelve Apostles, while a third records Kimball's reminiscences of the Missouri turmoil. Although outside the scope of Professor Kimball's self-imposed "holograph diaries" restriction (most of this supplemental material has been heavily rewritten by others), these addenda have been included pre-