

WHAT'S A MORMON EXPERT TO DO?

Mette Ivie Harrison

When I sold *The Bishop's Wife*, a contemporary murder mystery set in Utah, to a national press in 2012, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what my “bio” would be. I had little say over how the book would be marketed, because that was largely decided by publishing professionals who would consult with me so as not to offend me, but little more than that. I didn't have approval over the cover of the book (which was a Mormon temple, though not the iconic Salt Lake City one), and even the title was something I waffled over because it (still) confuses people who are looking for the movie with Cary Grant. Did I want to be referred to as a “member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,” a “Mormon,” an “active member,” or a “practicing Mormon” or did I want to come up with some variation of my own?

At the time, I'd just come out of a five-year atheist phase, in which I reluctantly served in a Primary Presidency and then declined callings for my own sanity, following the devastating and faith-destroying death of my infant daughter in 2005. I was trying to come back to belief in God, though I wasn't sure what shape that belief would take, if I would in fact ever believe in anything again, or if it was even possible to go back to a more orthodox belief once one left. (I had multiple internet friends who assured it wasn't, even as family members were desperate to tell me that it was—as long as I was “humble” enough.) I originally sold the book as “M.I. Harrison” and not as “Mette Ivie Harrison” because I was concerned readers who had discovered my name through my young adult novels (very clean read romance/fantasy

books) would be disturbed by the more adult content (though they're still pretty clean). But Soho wanted my full name because they didn't want it to look like I was standing behind a pseudonym. And indeed, in every public event they asked me to speak at, I was very honest about where I was now, who I'd been in the past, and what I felt about just about any topic regarding The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (How tiresome that whole phrase is, sorry!).

Ultimately, the bio in the back of *The Bishop's Wife* reads simply, "a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." But on the cover of that book, and all the subsequent books in the series, it proclaims to be "set in Mormon, Utah." As if this is a place, like other books Soho Crime publishes, set in Bangkok, Thailand, or set in Paris, France. In fact, we've kept this bio to the present date, though I am currently on sabbatical from attendance in my local ward and have rejected some of the traditional markers of my membership.

I've been asked since then to help with several books by outsiders about the larger cultural movement of Mormonism including fundamentalism, and books with characters who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (phew!). In one situation, I told the author firmly that we Mormons do not refer to each other as "Saints," and assured her (before the new revelation) that we are fine with "Mormon." I thought we'd come back around to the nickname with Gordon B. Hinckley's successful PR campaign to position ourselves as "regular Christians" and not associated in any way with polygamy—or with having horns, and even no longer believing in the idea that the most righteous among us strive to become gods ourselves in other universes and in millennia from the current day.

It's a strange position to be in, seen as the expert about Mormonism, as for example when the BBC called me personally to ask my advice about a televised piece they were doing on MLM's in Utah. I spent an hour on the phone with the producer, despite the fact that I've never been part of an MLM myself, have no degree in economics, and am

basically just your average person observing the phenomenon. This was partly because of an essay I wrote for the *Huffington Post*, where, for a short time period between 2015–2017, I contributed regular pieces for them about contemporary Mormon issues. Similarly, an author from Australia who is shortly to publish an academic book on the “Prepping Movement” called me on the phone and then flew out to meet me (and go to a convention in Salt Lake City) to ask me about the Mormon version of this. (As an amusing aside, he asked me if Mormons thought that we’d be saved faster in the rapture if we prepped and I had to explain that we members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints don’t really have a concept of the rapture theologically.) Because I wrote another essay for *Huffington* about having been a Mormon Prepper who did yearly months of living on food storage but now saw that as harmful and damaging to my children, he thought of me as a “safe” person to talk to, and asked me to connect him to other “safe Mormon preppers,” including a friend who is into gardening, canning, solar panels, and generators, an interesting cross-section of religious belief and environmentalism.

Years into this journey, I’ve found that I believe even more firmly in God than I ever did in the past as a more orthodox Mormon, and that I find this belief more important to my everyday well-being. I used to feel “commanded” to pray regularly, but in a certain, prescribed way. Now I pray eagerly at night, as part of a meditative ritual. My experiences with the divine have been powerfully sweet and deeply meaningful and have sometimes meant me being awakened in the middle of the night with a poem that demands to be written down that I do not feel at all like I wrote, but came to me word by word, dictated from heaven. If that sounds blasphemous or arrogant, it is, in fact, my experience with God now. It is also one of the reasons that I found it more and more difficult to attend my local ward, because I couldn’t share with them the deepest spiritual experiences I had unless I was willing to change my vocabulary drastically and to let them correct me about who and what God was.

I have to admit that on some level, I think there is a parallel between the difficulty I'm having translating my larger experience of God into the rhetoric of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I'm not sure what the Church believes in, to be honest. It feels like there is so much of my childhood "Mormonism" that is no longer part of the Church: open talk about polygamy being practiced again in the future when it was legal, near worship of Joseph Smith but a hatred of Emma, talk about the Catholic church being the "whore of the earth," rejection of face cards and all caffeine, plus excessive modesty and saving for an apocalypse that was imminent and that I personally had been "reserved" for as a special spirit in the kingdom of God. What is uniquely Mormon about Mormonism now? The Masonic symbols and handshakes of the temple? The insistence that we are not trinitarian, which keeps us from being accepted fully into the body of Christ by other Christian churches? The belief that our leaders are somehow closer to the revelations of God than any other church's leaders? I really don't know, but it seems interesting to me that we're reading scriptures less and manuals written by nameless committees more.

Here I am in early 2019, looking at the publication of a new Linda Wallheim book in 2019 and in future years, wondering again what my bio should read. For now, I am technically still "a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." I'm on the records. I spent almost fifty years of my life attending church every week and held a calling until just a few months ago, when I handed in my last version of our ward's history to the stake. I've begun a podcast called *The Mormon Sabbatical* where I talk about my problems with Mormonism and also my new experiences with the divine. But after the year I've given myself, what will I be? If I'm not going back, am I still Mormon? Do I still get to write about Mormonism? Am I going to be an expert on Mormonism because I have a unique forum for explaining Mormonism to non-Mormons who make up the large numbers of my leadership (since Deseret Book refuses to carry my books in Church-owned bookstores)? Does my character Linda have to leave The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day

Saints if that's why I do? Or can she just be "Mormon"? I don't know the answer to any of these things. I've toyed many times with the idea of using the moniker "Mormonish," but it sounds a little twee.

The last year of my attendance at church was one of the hardest, as the new president, Russell M. Nelson declared it revelation from God that the name "Mormon" was no longer to be used. Everyone at Soho and all my readers were careful to ask me if it was all right to use that word casually with me and I always assured them it was. Trust me when I say that everyone else is still going to be using this name for us, no matter how polite some try to be when they talk to our faces or come to official public events. And why shouldn't they? It's awfully hard to use the full name of the Church and the shortened version "The Church of Jesus Christ" is not only a kind of editorial, it's also frankly not very useful in distinguishing us from anyone else. Is that what we want? To give up all the weirdness and wonder that I thought meant being a Mormon entailed when I was eight years old and proud to tell my friends that I'd been baptized?

In the end, I'm glad to see the Church focusing more on Christ. I don't know if it makes me see Russell Nelson as a prophet, though, since he declared the November 2015 policy of exclusion as "revelation" as well, and I have felt a strong spiritual impression to the contrary. I don't know if this new insistence on the full name of the Church will stick or if we'll be back to "Mormon" in ten years with a new prophet. I don't think that this will do anything to make us more palatable to other Christians. But other changes might. Certainly de-emphasizing the doctrine of God as man and man as God will help. So do the temple changes and genuine humanitarian efforts that I applaud the Church for engaging in. For now, I'm content to be a "Mormon," as in a cultural part of a movement that also includes Jello and funeral potatoes are with us, faith-promoting rumors about the Three Nephites and garment fire protection. These are quirky, weird Mormon things, and I guess I am, ultimately, more Mormon than I am "a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints."