

EXPONENT II

SHARING MORMON WOMEN'S VOICES SINCE 1974

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

COVER ART
MOTHER IS WISDOM
L. Aerin Collett

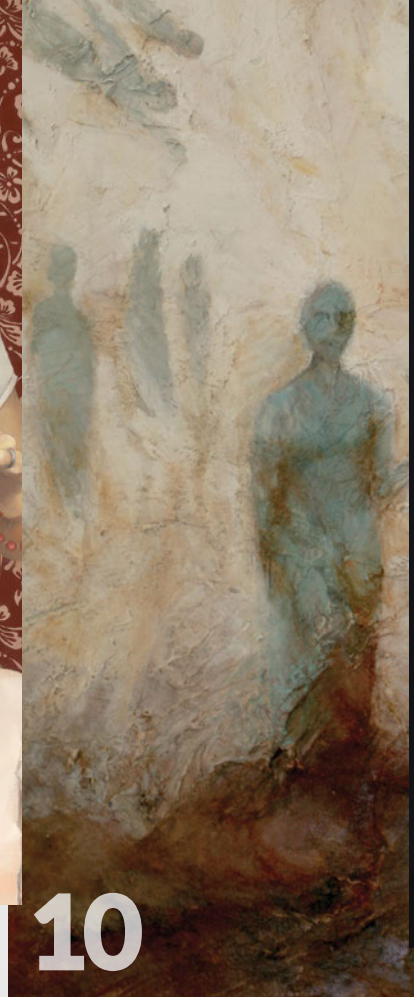


06

05
**LETTER FROM
THE EDITOR**
SPIRITUAL
FOREMOTHERS
Margaret Olsen
Hemming

06

WONDER WOMEN
Rachel Rueckert



10

09
MYSTICAL LEANINGS
Angie Long Petersen

12

ARTIST FEATURE
WORKS OF TRANSLATION
Megan Knobloch Geilman



13

16
BEYOND THE DASHES
Emily Updegraff

18
POETRY
THE DIFFICULT BIRD
Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

WHAT IS **EXPONENT II**?



Exponent II provides a forum for Mormon women to share their life experiences in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance. This exchange allows us to better understand each other and shape the direction of our lives. Our common bond is our connection to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and our commitment to women. We publish this magazine as a living history in celebration of the strength and diversity of women.



21

20

FINDING COMFORT IN
THE UNCOMFORTABLE
Hillary Campos

22

SABBATH PASTORALS
A LETTER TO MY
DAUGHTERS
Wendy Christian

26

IRENE
Amber Richardson



23

29

EXPONENT
GENERATIONS
SPIRITUAL FOREMOTHERS
Annie Wells Cannon, Deborah
Banford, Olea Plum

33

THE THREADS THAT RUN
THROUGH US
Ann Nelsen



30

35

POETRY
NINE MONTHS
POSTPARTUM
Kathryn Knight Sonntag

36

THINGS WE
HAVEN'T SAID
Kayla Roundy

38

GLOBAL ZION
PIONEER IN ESTONIA
Karin Roop



41

40

WHAT IT IS TO BE
A WITCH
Amy Sorenson

38

BOOK REVIEW
TURNING OUR HEARTS
TO THE MOTHERS
"Women Making America"
by Julie Hemming Savage,
Heidi Hemming
Review by Sarah Sumner

COVER ARTIST STATEMENT

As I search for meaning in my own life through studying women in scripture, I have been led to painting images of the divine feminine. This piece came from ideas found in Proverbs (3:13-20) along with scriptures found in the Nag Hammadi Library. Our Mother is the tree of life. She is light, She is grace, and judgment, the narrow path of peace. Her ways are pleasant, and is the source of the fruit which She gives to us. She is faith. She is wisdom. Some may want her to remain ambiguous and mysterious, but I understand her to be Pistis Sophia, and the more I learn of her, the more empowered I feel as a woman and a human. See more of her work: aerincollette.com



WONDER WOMEN

RACHEL RUECKERT



WINNING ESSAY EXPONENT II WRITING CONTEST

"If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves."

- JOSEPH SMITH

I paused to admire a Wonder Woman tiara for sale during the silent auction at the last Exponent II retreat. The wooden crown seemed well made, perhaps even hand carved. I wrote my name down on the bidding sheet.

"Ten dollars."

I checked back again later. My signature was buried behind several others.

"Twenty-five dollars," I wrote. I could justify the cost. This was all for a good cause, right?

I was outbid again.

"Thirty-two," I added with more hesitation.

I'm not one for spontaneous spending, but I surprised myself and kept bidding.

"Forty five," I scribbled.

Despite my detestation for princess culture, my heart raced as I competed to take the crown home. I knew I could get the same thing online for a fraction of the price, but something about purchasing the object from the sacred space I'd inhabited for two days propelled me to keep bidding.

The total kept going up. But I was relieved and giddy when, after negotiating with my fierce competition, I won. I immediately demanded all of my friends try it on. They

relented, put the crown on, and grinned. The joy over the crown was contagious.

I thought my shopping spree and moment of fun was the end of the whole affair. I was wrong. In the following days, I caught myself putting the crown on before starting a difficult writing project. Then after a long day at work. Then I put it on again before eating my breakfast one Saturday morning. My husband walked into the kitchen and found me in a robe, wearing the crown, eating yogurt. He smiled, then laughed. What are you doing?"

I wasn't sure.

At therapy a few weeks later, I decided to take a break from talking about my mother's debilitating psychosis and the legal steps I was taking towards guardianship to process what was happening with the Wonder Woman crown.

"Can you say more about why you admire Wonder Woman?" my therapist said.

The list was easy to generate. "She is kind, strong, compassionate, fierce, confident, capable of learning, beautiful, an advocate..."

Then there was a pause, a burning in my throat.

"She is a goddess," I said, mildly horrified when my eyes sprung tears. I thought of Heavenly Mother, whose vague presence I have felt at

various points in my life, especially during times when I felt an absence of female role models and mentors. The parallel finally hit me.

You, I, and the box office all agreed that the 2017 Wonder Woman movie featuring Gal Gadot spoke to us. Part of the film's resonating success can be attributed to depicting a powerful woman in cinema; the world needs more female representation. But there was another layer, a deeper draw within me. After my therapy session, I decided to learn more. What was it about Wonder Woman I found so meaningful?

I read a book called *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* by Jill Lepore; I was certain some of my admiration would be challenged. Wonder Woman was created by Dr. William Moulton Marston, the inventor of the lie detector test.

Marston, a staunch feminist, became a failed academic before turning to comic book writing. Wonder Woman was influenced by the early suffragist ideals and political cartoons featuring women escaping bonds symbolizing the patriarchy.

Marston also secretly practiced polygamy. He married two brilliant, consenting women who had a tremendous influence on Wonder Woman: Sadie Holloway and Olive Byrne. Byrne's mother, Ethel, gained national recognition in a hunger strike to bring awareness to birth control access. Byrne's aunt was Margaret Sanger, founder of the early version of Planned Parenthood. These strong women inspired and, at times, even wrote the character of Wonder Woman.

Lepore's book paints a messy history. Wonder Woman has been through a lot since her creation in 1941. People critiqued the length of her skirt, criticized her reluctance to marry, objectified her body, sexualized her bondage and struggle against evil men. But people also praised her hatred of guns, valued her commitment to truth, applauded her enthusiasm for women's education, praised her moral courage, and celebrated her promotion to the Justice League of superheroes during WWII (though, much to Marston's dismay, the editor only allowed her to serve in the war effort as a secretary).

Obsession with modesty? Occasional aspirational shame? Polygamy? Built on the backs of strong, forgotten women? This all hit home. Wonder Woman, in all her complex history, only became more real to me. Much like people's nervousness about discussing or defining Heavenly Mother today, people fretted over whether Wonder Woman's influence was for the collective good.

But one thing is certain; Wonder Woman to date has been one of the most popular comic book superheroes of all time, despite the relentless debates about who she is and what she stands for. Our craving for the Feminine Divine is here to stay.

My mother continued to spiral, and if I had to admit it, I felt I was spiraling too. I had spent hours salvaging her mortgage, gathering evidence, and calling different lawyers to take on our contested guardianship case. I needed something else to look forward to in October. So for Halloween, I hunted down a convincing Wonder Woman costume to go with the crown. I got a velvet cape, gladiator sandals, and epic body armor. Then my spontaneous spending resurfaced. At a costume shop, I caught sight of a plastic sword from the 2017 movie adaptation. This time my husband, sensing my excitement, insisted I go for it.

As I walked home from the costume shop, I kept swinging the sword around, a bit thrilled by a sense of power. For the first time in my life, I felt like I understood the scriptural messages about the "armor of god." I now had a visual for an ideal female warrior. The physical sword of truth in my hand somehow made me feel as if my figurative truth had more weight and meaning, even if the sword was only plastic. I could see it! I could swing it! I could point the way! I could

hold onto it for dear life. I could feel less afraid. I could fight for what was right.

But as I brandished the sword on Cambridge Street, not caring what the passing cars were thinking, I remembered a key moment in the film. After spending a lifetime relying on her sword for strength, Wonder Woman reaches a crisis point. She learns it isn't the object that possesses power, but herself.

She realizes she is a goddess, stronger than she ever believed.

Maybe Wonder Woman is no more than a sexy comic book figure, a money-maker for the capitalists in Hollywood. Maybe my pull towards a mysterious Heavenly Mother is nothing more than an earthly pining for the motherly void in my current life. But I don't think so. Like everyone, I have crises to face. I want an inspiring woman to channel on the days when I don't want to get out of bed, call another lawyer, or continue on the harrowing path of rescuing my suffering mother without her consent. And if there is a goddess looking out for us, a goddess we are all supposed to emulate, I think she'd act like Wonder Woman.

Lepore insists that Wonder Woman "wasn't meant to be a superwoman; she was meant to be an everywoman" (220). I see that kind of divinity as I watch the women in my life — I want them all to try on the crown. I see glimpses of the divine in their lessons at church, in their bravery in standing up for what is right despite opposition, in their courageous careers and parenting. I see the divine in their art, in their unspoken care, in their academic achievements, and in their written words. I see the divine in their broken hearts, their best efforts, and their unique intuition. Collectively, they are wonder women. And they remind me that I too have divinity within myself. There is strength inside of me, and I don't even need a costume.

But after the cape, armor, and sword go into storage, I'll keep the crown on my desk, ready at a moment's notice when I need the reminder.