Faithful Transgressions In The American West
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Published by Utah State University Press

Bush, Laura.
Faithful Transgressions In The American West: Six Twentieth-Century Mormon Women's Autobiographical Acts.
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Chapter 3

**Truth Telling about a Temporal and a Spiritual Life**

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies

The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

—Emily Dickinson

The point is, I would like to be able to write, openly and unashamedly, to hire someone to come in and take over much of the routine of my home and set up where I could make a business of writing.

—Juanita Brooks, letter to Dale Morgan

One of the best examples of a Mormon woman’s faithful yet transgressive life writing is Juanita Brooks’s *Quicksand and Cactus: A Memoir of the Southern Mormon Frontier*. Regrettably, Brooks ends her narrative when she was thirty-five years old, at the beginning of her second marriage and before she became famous for writing *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (originally published in 1950), a meticulously researched history about how, in 1857, approximately one hundred California-bound pioneers were murdered by a group of Mormons and the American Indians the Mormons incited to assist them. The incident became a tragic blot that stained the history of Mormons’ colonization of the American West. Brooks’s determination to uncover fact-based details about the hushed-up story, no matter the personal cost, brought her significant attention, especially among those who admired her faith and courage to expose the truth.
Compared to the frank history Brooks writes about the massacre at Mountain Meadows, *Quicksand and Cactus* seems tame. However, the life stories she chooses to tell and the manner in which she frames them—ever drawn toward the "wide, wonderful untravell’d world" outside her insulated Mormon frontier community—indicate that she intends to demonstrate that she always had a mind of her own and "spiritual promptings" she had learned to trust. Constructing her identity from childhood as a person committed to telling the truth and willing to question authority when circumstances merited it, Brooks’s narrative is replete with moments of faithful transgression. Thus, while the autobiography is mainly a coming-of-age story that leaves out crucial portions of her mature life, she offers an important glimpse into the early years that shaped her liberal-minded religious and political views.

In 1944, at age 46, Brooks began her autobiography because, as her longtime friend and editor-colleague Dale Morgan pointed out, she was "a living remnant of the frontier" (Peterson 143). During the 1940s and then again in the 1970s, Brooks worked to write and publish her life story, but because of failing health and old age, she needed the assistance of friends, family, and editors to shape the book into its final, two-part form. Even though she was one of the most important and well-recognized Mormon historians of the twentieth century, Brooks underrated her autobiography, referring to the work late in life as a "silly little book" that "was never designed to be anything very exciting or important" (Peterson 406–7). Such disparaging comments, captured in letters to friends and colleagues, reveals more about her own insecurities as a creative writer than about the value of the autobiography itself. Granted, in the 1940s when she first began shaping stories about her Mormon childhood growing up in Bunkerville, Nevada, the sample chapters she sent to at least eight publishers between 1944 and 1948 were all rejected, sometimes for the writing and sometimes because publishers saw no market for the book (Peterson 155, 164). And indeed, historically, readers’ interest in autobiography, especially in women’s autobiography, has been limited, only recently becoming profitable for publishers. Brooks’s biographer, Levi S. Peterson, adds that “[u]nfortunately," despite her further development and revisions of the text during the 1970s, she “never prepared for publication the story of her dissent.” He notes, however, “she did provide the means for others to tell the story” (5). Thus, basing his research on her diaries and correspondence, he tells the rest of that story in his award-winning biography, *Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian*. By presenting ample evidence for the significant impact of her
life and writing, his conclusion also reinforces the importance of her autobiographical act. “Because of her,” he writes,

the collective mind of Mormondom is more liberal and more at peace with itself than it might otherwise be. . . . Juanita helped make Mormondom a little less suspicious about nonconformity in general. Voicing her contrary opinions unequivocally, she confronted scolding apostles with a courageous assertion of her faithfulness. The fame of her loyal dissent spread widely, and covert protesters of many varieties took heart. (422)

Brooks’s life writing adheres to all five conventions of Mormon autobiography: first, she provides numerous instances of God working in her own or other people’s lives; second, she depicts herself and her Mormon family and neighbors practicing or failing to practice basic gospel principles; third, she crafts a detailed ethnographic history of life in her close-knit Mormon community; fourth, she writes a defense of her small-town Mormon upbringing and, sometimes, of Mormonism in general; and fifth, she intends her life story to reach well beyond an audience of Mormon family and friends to the general reading public. Yet even though her autobiography follows these admittedly conventional Mormon life-writing patterns, Brooks repeats the conventions with significant differences, both in her narrative’s subtle but pervasive transgressions and in the literary quality of her style. The chapters in the first half of the autobiography especially “defy easy classification,” including memoir, folktale, short story, and personal essay. “If they seem unstructured and episodic,” observes Peterson, “they also offer pace, variety, and felicity of style. Their sentences are arranged in simple, harmonious rhythms; their concrete, wry diction is richly evocative of scene and setting. These chapters are clearly of a high literary quality” (167).

Taken as a whole, this seemingly conventional narrative is among the most subversive Mormon women’s autobiographies of the twentieth century. She writes faithful transgressions, small and large, from beginning to end, all the while depicting memories of her Mormon experience with warmth and good humor. In effect, she deftly portrays the benefits and drawbacks of growing up a young woman in a patriarchal community governed by strict religious codes. Moreover, she explores the challenges of balancing gospel principles and truths with the often temporal nature of her Mormon life and culture. As Peterson explains,

One surmises that conformity had an undeniable appeal to Juanita. Everywhere in Mormondom conformity was preached and practiced and
reinforced by an abundant folklore as to the dire consequences of dissent. Besides fearing excommunication, Juanita suffered the guilt of disloyalty. In certain moods she regarded her dissent as perverse and reprehensible. In short, she was a complex and ambivalent person. (179)

Similar to her writing foremothers, Annie Clark Tanner and Mary Ann Hafen (her biological grandmother), Brooks shapes the story of her life to inform insiders and outsiders about Mormon frontier history and culture and, in particular, to describe how the immediate descendants of polygamous families lived after polygamy was officially ended in the late nineteenth century. Different from Tanner, Brooks paints a mostly positive view of her experience as the granddaughter of polygamists, further explaining the dynamics of multiple-family relationships in “A Close-Up of Polygamy,” a brief but important autobiographical article she published in Harper’s Magazine in 1934. In contrast to Hafen, Brooks is more cautious about assigning miraculous or otherworldly emphasis to events that her grandmother would readily construe as God working in her life. She chooses, instead, to complicate issues of faith, avoiding Hafen’s more predictable and often didactic writing pattern of trials followed by inevitable blessings.

During the protracted illness of her first husband, for example, Brooks writes, “Time and again we had the elders in, and usually Ernest got some relief; a number of times he had experiences in which he thought he was out of his body and in beautiful gardens and among many people but I felt that perhaps the morphine was responsible for it” (236). Still, her caution did not mean she did not believe in miracles. She writes, for example, about the unexpected visit of a one-eyed stranger to their home during a particularly lonely evening when friends and family weren’t available to comfort or aid them. She describes how the stranger knocked on their door, entered, and immediately explained that he was prompted to leave his house that night, knowing that “he must go somewhere to someone in great trouble.” As she depicts the scene, the man then found the bathroom, washed his hands, came back out, and gave Ernest a blessing. That night she recalls, “Ernest slept well . . . and awoke refreshed and renewed” (237). Even though the stranger’s blessing did not heal Ernest, his mysterious appearance at their door that night and the relief Ernest enjoyed while sleeping was enough evidence to convince this wife that the blessing an unknown man bestowed on her needy husband was no mere coincidence.
Writing as a historian and storyteller, Brooks’s text demonstrates that she wants to narrate life experiences such as this one as honestly, persuasively, and entertainingly as possible. However, despite her willingness to cross many boundaries that other, more orthodox Mormon women autobiographers might not cross, she, too, feels bound, in part, by a need to protect herself or others from criticism or harm that might come through her autobiographical writing. During an interview with church historian Maureen Ursenbach Beecher on April 3, 1974, Brooks retells the story about the stranger blessing her sick spouse but expresses concern about sharing its details and about publishing an autobiographical account at all. “But I tremble at the thing I’ve undertaken,” she said, “I don’t want it to be ridiculous and I don’t want to presume to tell things that are better untold” (Peterson 392–93).

In her youth, Brooks longed to learn to “talk like books” (169). As an adult, her numerous publications demonstrate that she achieved that goal. In particular, Quicksand and Cactus illustrates how she was inculcated with Mormon culture and values through storytelling, hymns, and personal as well as communal histories that, as a child, she loved to hear and tell herself. Numerous chapters of the life narrative are developed by telling stories within stories, giving a first-person voice to the individual whom she originally heard the story from. In general, the stories she tells about her own life intend to show that she was an adventurous, sometimes rebellious, but ultimately obedient girl, who was taught to submit to authority—but not at the expense of her own conscience and “inner guide.” In effect, she weaves together a narrative full of faithful transgressions that provide evidence for her progressive-minded nature, often revealing what other Mormon women autobiographers of her generation tend to suppress.

Growing up in “Mormon Dixie” during the early to mid-twentieth century, Brooks depicts both the spiritual and the temporal aspects of her communal life. She writes, for instance, about technologies such as the phonograph, automobile, and electricity making their way into people’s lives and consciousness. She herself was curious and impressed by such new technologies, but these modern miracles arrived late in Bunkerville. When a traveling husband and wife (“the outsiders”) came to her Mormon community and played recorded music for the townspeople, she observes, “Whatever it did to anyone else, the phonograph did something to me. It made me dissatisfied with myself and with things about me” (80). Her growing dissatisfaction, inquisitive mind, and Mormon
upbringing by parents who loved their faith but also respected individual agency became the foundation for her youthful willingness to cross boundaries when she felt justified. In “Old Tubucks,” for example, she writes about being ready to disobey her father and “use the Scripture about the ox in the mire on Sunday” to save a stray cow stuck in the mud, believing that finding the “poor thing” was, perhaps, “the hand of the Lord” (118). Although her father ultimately assists his young daughter in the rescue, this is not the only time Brooks narrates a story in which she considers transgressing some law to achieve what she perceives to be a higher good. Mormons would likely describe making a decision such as this one as following the spirit, rather than the letter of the law.

Brooks’s journey as a faithful transgressor is closely connected to her book’s most explicit theme: the pull of the “wide wonderful, untravell’d world” against the hold of a small western community. She writes repeatedly about feeling drawn to cross the border of her Mormon frontier lifestyle. A youthful Brooks thinks, “Surely, there must be many things on the Outside that we were missing here” (80). In fact, she begins the account of her life by narrating a story that illustrates how she was awakened on a “Saturday afternoon before Easter” to the limits of her present experience. Describing how a Sunday School teacher led Brooks and the rest of her Sunday School students up a hill, she writes about looking out over the approximately forty houses of Bunkerville, Nevada. As a young girl, she joins her friends as they locate each other’s homes in relation to one another’s, to the store, to the post office, and to St. George, Utah, a town situated hundreds of miles beyond their small settlement in Nevada. “None of us had been as far as that,” she writes (6). On this particular day, after realizing the narrowness of her own experience, she feels transformed by a new perspective. “[T]he place would never be quite the same again since I had seen it in relation to the Wide, Wonderful World” (10). From the outset, then, she frames her life story as a journey away from and subsequent return to her Mormon community. Her yearning for the adventure, education, and grand experiences that seem available only outside her small faith community will later be echoed in Phyllis Barber’s How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir, another coming-of-age story about a late-twentieth-century Mormon girl’s longing to move beyond her religious upbringing in the desert Southwest to some unexplored, more fascinating place in the world outside of Mormondom.

Brooks depicts her own upbringing by reciting lyrics to hymns, demonstrating the importance of music to her culture and conveying how songs are used to inculcate Mormon values. When her father was
gone from home serving a two-year mission, for example, Brooks writes about her twenty-four-year-old mother comforting her four children by playing her guitar and singing “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” a hymn that, Brooks explains, “had sustained every company of emigrants on their long and arduous journey.” The pioneer hymn is important because of its historical significance but also because it captures Mormon sentiment about Latter-day Saints’ ability to sustain faith and hope in a bright future, while struggling to survive present deprivations. About the hymn, she writes, “Through all the greetings and visiting, this melody ran like a subconscious expression of hope and faith. Where at the beginning of the service it had seemed to look to the past and to express the trials of the pioneers, now it was forward-looking and optimistic, a do-and-dare challenge” (254). Another conventional hymn that Brooks remembers her bishop singing reflects Mormons’ regard for rational self-control and wisdom: “School thy feelings, there is power / In the cool, collected mind / Passion shatters reason’s tower / Leaves the clearest vision blind” (138). When she attends Columbia University in New York, thousands of miles away from her home in the Southwest, she also writes about being comforted by hearing “Lead, Kindly Light,” a familiar song that captured her longing and need for God’s support. She heard the song as it played from a nearby church carillon: “Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling Gloom, Lead thou me on! The night is dark, and I am far from home—Lead thou me on!” (302).

References to hymns such as these are an important device Brooks uses to characterize positive Mormon material ideals and to articulate the subjective security the lyrics and music offer Latter-day Saints. During an early scene of her book, however, she relates an incident in which she heard a hymn that was “frightening” and “troubling” to her child’s mind. The threatening lyrics of “Let Zion in Her Beauty Rise” describe purported horrors to occur during the “Last Days” when “the moon be turn-ed into blood” and when “rebellious, wicked men, stand trembling at the sight” (22). According to Brooks, the warnings repeated in the hymn bothered her to sickness. Even as a child, she immediately realized that the threats were directed at people she loved. She writes about telling her mother as soon as she got home from the service, “I don’t know how the good can be picked out, because not all the goers-to-church are too righteous, and some who never darken the door are the most kind.” Little Juanita identifies her Uncle Weir as an example of someone who “never goes to church, but he helps us more than anyone else does. I’d hate to see him burned as stubble” (23). In a rare moment of the text, she draws explicit attention to the transgressive
nature of her comments in this scene, identifying her complaints as “my first open question regarding any of the church preaching.” Speaking retrospectively about the incident, she writes that even as a young girl, she realized her response was different from other church members’ responses. “Evidently,” thinks Brooks, “no one else felt as I did, for the testimonies were more prompt and fervent after the song” (23). Her subtle but pointed comment about this childhood experience sets the stage for more faithful transgressions to come and more attempts to balance the spiritual with the temporal aspects of her life.

Mormons’ colonization of the Southwest did not occur entirely by these pioneers’ choice. In actuality, many families were “called” by leaders such as Brigham Young to move to often hostile, dry environments such as Bunkerville, Nevada. All the Saints were charged with making the desert “blossom as a rose,” but those families who were eventually required to leave the earned comforts of Salt Lake City were often given little material assistance or support once they left the center of Mormonism. The remoteness and isolation of their lives forced them to fend for themselves. To persuade families to move on command and then to follow church leaders’ instructions when they reached their destination, Brooks’s autobiography shows in understated ways how the persistent message that members must listen and obey at a moment’s notice is reinforced.

Take, for instance, the cheerful games that she depicts her neighbors playing at community gatherings. During one such event, Brooks recalls gathering at the dance hall as a young girl with her Mormon neighbors to reenact “the story of a family who had been called to move to a different town.” With understatement, she writes that this was “a procedure with which many in the room were familiar” (28). The adventurous tale was overseen by a “Narrator,” “Teamster,” and “Judge,” and the point of the action was for all participants to act out the family’s “hilarious” escapades as narrated; however, when the signal came (a fruit basket was tipped over), everyone was to “scurry to a new seat.” Then the Teamster’s role was to collect “forfeits” from all the people who “failed to jump up promptly enough” (28). Although her depiction of the night’s game is lighthearted—she describes amusing “penalties” her neighbors had to pay by performing “athletic feats” and silly songs—her writing hints at the underlying tension she (and others) felt between obeying or disobeying authority figures and between following or not following community norms.
In his biography of Brooks, Levi Peterson’s research offers additional insight into this seemingly innocuous passage of her life story, revealing Brooks’s “inherited,” more critical feelings toward Brigham Young for requiring families to settle the barren desert of Bunkerville, Nevada, while Saints in Salt Lake were perceived to have had “all the advantages” and “thought they were superior to their wilderness brothers and sisters” (246). Peterson explains, in fact, that Brooks “held a lifelong grudge against [Brigham Young] for having sent her ancestors into an impoverished exile on the ragged edge of the Mormon empire. A recurrent minor theme in her historical writing, early and late, was Brigham Young’s callous treatment of his obedient followers” (Peterson, 246).

Committed to her faith and religious convictions, however, Brooks does not make this criticism either direct or explicit in her autobiography. Instead, she depicts humorous games played for the community’s enjoyment, hinting at resentment but always, in the autobiography, publicly reaffirming her faith commitment. “Much as we loved and respected our leaders, it was easy to see that many of our folk were a little jealous or resentful of the fact that the people of the north lived so much better than we and at less effort.” Although here she does not admit personally to feeling envious or resentful, this passage provides a glimpse into growing differences in economic class among Mormons themselves. Those in Salt Lake City enjoy greater wealth, material possessions, economic health, and security than those Mormons in variously developing subcommunities located in regions south of the center of Mormondom. Gospel principles would urge poorer Mormon communities to overlook or disregard material differences. In this passage, Brooks makes an effort to reinforce the spiritual and temporal nature of the gospel, working to explain, justify, or perhaps merely repress the resentment over the members of her Mormon community carrying the burden of building up Zion outside the Great Basin Valley:

And yet the church was everything to us. It was for the church that we were all here; it was the church that had drawn our parents from all the far countries. Even the building of the ditch and the dam, the graveling of the sidewalks, the planting of cotton or cane had its inception in the church, for ours was a temporal gospel as well as a spiritual one. (112)

From the beginning, Brooks lays the foundation of her own faithful transgressions in the faithful transgressions of her parents, mainly her
father, although neither her father nor her mother would likely use the term "transgression" to characterize their attitudes and behavior. Brooks repeatedly depicts her father as a man devoted to his faith but also as one who does not submit unquestioningly to church leaders' direction. In fact, she writes about several instances in which he teaches his daughter to trust her individual conscience, even if what she feels or believes differs from what Mormon authorities tell her.

To illustrate, after having just improved their lives by moving into a new, larger home and getting a more steady income from selling chickens and fresh vegetables, Brooks's father is called on a two-year mission. In order to support his mission, he sells his wagon, team, harness, mowing machine, rake, and cattle, but he refuses to sell the new organ he had just bought for his wife. Brooks records the refusal in order to demonstrate her father's love for her mother and his further refusal to give up everything for the sake of the church, even a possession like the organ that might appear to some settlers in the desert as "frivolous." Using indirect dialogue, Brooks writes, "Pa's answer was a firm NO! If a mission meant sacrificing Mary's organ, he would not go" (17). Simply recording her father's insistent "NO" to the possibility that he might be required to sacrifice everything for a mission illustrates her intention to demonstrate her family's high regard for self-directed choice—a subtle but pointed transgression among Mormons since saying "no" in most circumstances contradicts their religious training to say "yes" and to sacrifice all things to build up the Kingdom of God.

When her father returns after a two-year absence from his family, she once again captures her father's independent-mindedness by describing how he managed to get back many of the items he had sold. Then, when a bishop requested that he delay leaving the area to visit his aging parents, Brooks again uses indirect dialogue to illustrate her father's familiarity with church hierarchy, feistily proclaiming that "he knew that some Bishops like to be recognized and given a chance to alter a man's plans in order to show authority" (41). While he consents to the bishop's request in this instance, her father resists the bishop's call for him to take responsibilities in the ward immediately. Here, once more, she shows how her father asserts himself by telling the bishop, "Give me three months, and I'll accept any assignment you give me" (41).

While outsiders to the workings of Mormon callings and the pressures to accept them immediately and without condition might view the father's request as reasonable, insider Mormons would know Brooks is
signaling that her father trusts his own judgment, is unwilling to bow to authority without question, and works to make decisions based on his own conscience and his family’s material needs. In principal, most twentieth-century Mormons would agree that this reliance on one’s own spiritual promptings has always been a foundation of their faith, hearkening back to Joseph Smith’s independent-minded pursuit of God’s Will; however, in practice, most twentieth-century Mormons would also have to admit that they have been trained to privilege the spiritual over the temporal, to submit their own will to church authorities, and to not ask too many questions.

Clearly, Brooks cares about her father’s perspective, wanting to pass that perspective on to her readers through example and storytelling. As a child, she characterizes herself as one who was taught to respect parental and church authority while also paying careful attention to her own “inner guide” and “promptings.” Throughout the autobiography, she shows how her parents taught her to revere her elders but also to make her own decisions. Such independent-minded advice also often led Brooks to explore ideas and places outside her own narrow experience in Bunkerville, Nevada. For example, when her prized pony, Selah, is stolen because she failed to follow her intuition and bring him home out of the pasture one night, she records her father’s advice. “You did the best you could. That is all any of us can do. But you must learn that life is full of sorrow and disappointments. When it comes, we must take it with patience. This may teach you to follow your own inner guide in the future” (174). He, too, tempers this advice, however, with the caution typical of a man indoctrinated in proper submission to authority: “My girl, I think you should follow your hunches—that is, if you have a strong feeling you should pay attention to it, whether it goes against my counsel or anyone else’s. But be careful. In general, it is better to do your assigned duty” (174). In essence, Brooks shows how her father teaches his daughter to do what she is told but also to follow her “inner guide” because to do differently would be to deny her own spiritual intuition and self-determination. Recording her father’s advice serves to summarize what appears to have become her own often conflicted philosophy: trust your own judgment but also work to respect and fulfill your responsibilities to your community and to church leaders’ wishes.

Brooks shows how, in the past, she herself played the voice of church authority with regard to the doctrine of the Word of Wisdom. As a child, she took one of her father’s jokes too seriously and made prepara-
tions to warm tea leaves in a dishtowel bound around his stomach. The minute she realized she’d been duped, she writes that she was furious with her father. “I’ll never make another cup of tea for you again as long as I live,’ I screamed, ‘You shouldn’t drink the filthy old stuff, anyway. And you know it’” (115). In Mormon culture, one of the clearest outward signs of commitment to the church and its doctrines is strict adherence to the Word of Wisdom. Brooks shows how, from her youth, she was trained, like all Latter-day Saints, to view drinking tea or alcohol and consuming tobacco products as counter to God’s will and often indicative of a person’s good or bad character. She writes, for example, that church leaders in St. George, Utah, “wouldn’t think of hiring a teacher who wasn’t a member of the church or who didn’t keep the Word of Wisdom” (161).

Besides illustrating the pervasive importance of this doctrine among Mormons, one of her motives for retelling incidents related to the Word of Wisdom is to capture the confusion she felt as a child over the issue of what Latter-day Saints choose or do not choose to take into their bodies. After hearing an adult matter-of-factly claim that church president Brigham Young himself violated a Word of Wisdom stricture, for instance, she writes, “I walked on, eating my bread and honey, but sorely troubled about the idea that Brigham Young used chewing tobacco” (111). By writing about her childhood confusion and potential disillusionment, she demonstrates the significance of the Word of Wisdom in Mormon culture. She also illustrates her own maturing process, showing how, as a child, she could be troubled by such potential hypocrisy but then, as an adult, come to view information such as this with more tolerance or even skepticism about its truth. She leaves this particular scene about Brigham Young’s chewing open-ended, inviting readers to examine how such outward signs of “righteousness” or “commitment” often influence Mormons’ positive or negative view of themselves, each other, and outsiders in general. Rarely, if ever, does she draw any explicit conclusions for her readers or assert any moral lessons derived from the stories of her life. As any creative writer would, she allows the stories to speak for themselves.

In essence, Brooks’s life writing intends to make following or not following religious strictures, such as those concerning the Word of Wisdom, a complicated matter. She demonstrates the ways that she and other church members—who feel great fondness for their often restrictive, authoritarian religion—work to negotiate individual choice and
personal sovereignty in the face of frequently strict spiritual boundaries. In one chapter, “Over the Shovel Handles,” for example, she introduces several tall tales, including one about a man announcing he was “looking for a second [wife]” as a courting tactic. Brooks reconstructs the scene in which she describes overhearing adult men’s conversation, unknown to her father, who is so engaged with the tall tales himself that he thinks his child has gone home. She describes the men telling tales such as of those who attend church services wearing a mask of silence. At church, they rarely speak, but when they gather together doing work outdoors, they chatter on, feeling safe from judgment or scrutiny. “What discussions developed during the noon hour!” writes Brooks.

Men who would shrink from speaking from the pulpit would wax eloquent over the shovel handle; men who turned to stone if asked to address the meeting could entertain the crows with ease. Here the cloak of sanctity was torn off, tainted jokes were told, testimonies of the overzealous were repeated amid hilarity that was suppressed in church. Here, too, originated tall tales that became legend. (108)

In other words, because these men were talking among like-minded friends in a nonreligious setting, they felt freed from the possibility of religious condemnation. Thus, they had no trouble expressing their views. And Brooks, an intrepid storyteller herself, recognizes that great Mormon folklore grows out of such conversations.

Among modern-day Mormons, criticizing leaders is particularly taboo, especially in public. She writes playfully, however, about how Bishop Edwards, a leader himself, admitted during supper one night that he was not sorry their congregation would miss an expected visit of a general authority from Utah. The bishop’s actual comment, made in a relatively private setting, must have been particularly memorable for her because she quotes directly the bishop’s public admission. “Apostle Smith is a good man on doctrine but he is not an inspirational speaker. . . . I, for one am not at all disappointed not to have a speaker from Salt Lake City. We’ll get along just fine” (202). As a writer determined to tell well-rounded stories about Mormon experience and attitudes, she crafts snippets of conversations like this one to portray various Mormon characters’ actual opinions, which they are more likely to offer in private, less-guarded settings.

Besides depicting Mormon relationships, behaviors, and ideas in authentic ways, Brooks also works to depict her own attitudes and
actions as honestly as possible. For instance, Latter-day Saints have always been expected to attend church meetings every Sunday. When she writes about the summer she spent with three friends studying teaching at the University of California in Berkeley, however, she readily admits that they found a Mormon Church, but after going to one Sunday service, they ended up skipping plenty of meetings thereafter. “As the members of the audience greeted us at the close of the service, we promised them and ourselves that we would come again. But we did not,” she confesses. Instead, she admits, “[W]e spent every other Sunday sightseeing” (201). Sightseeing would likely strike many devout Latter-day Saints as an inappropriate Sabbath-day activity, especially if a person also skipped church. Her admission is daring. Not only are Mormons expected to attend church without fail on Sundays, even when on vacation, they are also urged to participate only in contemplative or spiritually minded activities and to abstain from any material pursuit that would require them to spend money. Brooks, however, admits with little remorse to having succumbed to her temporal desire to see and experience as much as possible in the wide, wonderful world, even on the Sabbath.

In “Part Two” of the autobiography, “That Untravell’d World,” her written transgressions become bolder than in “Part One,” which should come as no surprise since she wrote the second part in the 1970s, after having grown into her adult life of what comes to be known as her “loyal dissent.” One significant transgression occurs when she narrates her first temple experience. Throughout Quicksand and Cactus, Brooks offers sufficient evidence of her religious convictions and devotion to Mormonism that, three-quarters of the way through the narrative, many outsiders might not notice the significance of how she describes her first experience attending the temple. When she marries Ernest Pulsipher, her first husband, on October 10, 1919, she confesses, “I was not well-impressed with the [temple] ceremony.” And she writes that her mother was “shocked and saddened by the fact that parts of it seemed medieval and repulsive to me” (234). While many insider Mormons pass along similar stories about being troubled by the content or nature of temple ceremonies, most devout Mormons would not write as frankly as Brooks does about their concerns in a account that was purposely shaped for public consumption. Her choice of the words “medieval” and “repulsive” are strongly negative ones. She offers only this brief passage about attending the temple and the subsequent interchange about the disconcerting experience with her mother. Throughout the rest of her
autobiography, she never elaborates on her views concerning ceremonies in the temple, even when she is about to be married to her second husband. Nevertheless, her succinct honesty about her initiation into temple rites is significant.

During the late twentieth century, Deborah Laake, another Mormon woman autobiographer, describes temple ceremonies in detail—one of the most transgressive acts of writing that any Latter-day Saint could commit. In contrast to Laake’s exposé autobiography, Secret Ceremonies: A Mormon Woman’s Intimate Diary of Marriage and Beyond, Brooks’s brief criticism of the temple seems inconsequential. However, by making a critical public observation, she purposefully calls attention to the concerns she and others have felt toward temple rituals at one time or another. Her writing strategies about this matter show that she does not intend to expose the church to ridicule and that she wants to avoid violating the trust of most temple-going Latter-day Saints, who view these ceremonies as deeply sacred. Her transgression is further mitigated by subsequent stories she tells about her continuing faith; nevertheless, this brief story would not go unnoticed by a Mormon audience.

Brooks also writes boldly about how she handled a disagreement she had with a bishop over tithing. The second half of each year, Mormons meet with their bishop in a private setting to declare or “settle” whether they are “full” or only “part” tithe payers. Those who pay ten percent of their earned income to the church are fully tithed, while those who offer anything less are only “part” tithed and are not given full access to all religious privileges, including temple attendance. Temple attendance is strictly controlled by issuing only “worthy” members an admittance card, called a “temple recommend,” that must be shown to temple workers each time a church member wishes to enter the building. Nonmembers are not allowed inside a temple, except when it is opened to the public prior to the structure’s official dedication. During this scene, Brooks records her tithing figures in meticulous detail as proof to all readers that she was an honest and full tithe payer. When her bishop interprets the figures differently, she writes that she openly defied his conclusions: “I’ll argue it out before St. Peter when we get there. . . . I believe he’ll agree that I’m making quite a liberal donation to the cause” (264). She further describes how the bishop tried to appeal to another male authority figure, her own father, “thinking to get more.” But true to the character she has fashioned throughout her text, she records her father matter-of-factly assessing his grown daughter’s integrity. “Pa only said that I was an adult, and could manage my own affairs” (264).
Living with Gender Trouble and More

For a mid-twentieth-century Mormon woman, Brooks writes in ground-breaking ways about sexism, sexual harassment, spouse abuse, and even rape, although she never uses those terms to characterize the incidents she depicts having occurred in her own or other women's lives. The restrained language and often cryptic manner in which Brooks narrates these scenes reflects much about her own upbringing in a Victorian-minded religion. Yet she still dares to speak what her peers often omit or gloss over.

In several passages, her writing demonstrates how a relatively liberal-minded father still trains his daughter toward strict sexual abstinence. She explains the methods he used for her sex education: “. . . without seeming to do so, he kept me conscious of my relations with the boys by occasional comments made as we stood together at the corral fence or waited for a horse to finish his grain” (185). Like the Mormons whose attitudes he is meant to represent, he believes girls who indulge in sexual relations before reaching adulthood and before marriage are to blame for being talked about or even victimized by boys. During a key chapter about adolescence, loss, and her journey from innocence to experience, Brooks reconstructs an illuminating scene during which her father assures his daughter that if she behaves herself, she will be safe from an unknown man she saw in the pasture. From a twenty-first-century perspective, his views sound frighteningly naive and blatantly sexist:

You don't have no call to be afraid. No grown man is going to harm a little girl like you. No man will molest a girl who don't invite it. If you know where you're going, and set out to go there, ain't no man going to stop you. It's the girl who dawdles along and giggles and accidentally drops her handkerchief that gets picked up. The girl that gets taken advantage of usually gives a come-on herself. (171)

In another scene, Brooks continues using direct dialogue to capture the vividness of her memory about his opinions: “I'd hate to have the fellows discuss my daughter like they did one girl this afternoon. If she knew the things the boys say about her, she'd be less free with her favors” (185). This father's backhanded “admonition” to his daughter illustrates much about Mormon cultural views concerning young women's chastity and the responsibility they bear to maintain the sexual standards set down by their religious community. Brooks narrates the
scene without reflecting on its potentially sexist implications. The dialogue between them also depicts a pervasive metaphor common in one form or another among Mormons up to the present day. “Nobody wants a girl that everybody can handle,” says her father. “She’s like a peach. After a few have squeezed it, it gets soft and rotten and nobody wants it. If a fellow respects you, he may learn to like you; if he doesn’t, he’ll still respect you.” According to Brooks, “[w]ithout elaboration, without further preaching, Pa dropped such remarks and changed the subject, leaving me to ponder them as I might” (185). The open-ended nature of these interchanges leaves her own adult views ambiguous; she never expresses clear agreement or disagreement with her father’s position, leaving readers to wonder about her own adult views on these matters.

Similar to this scene in which girls are trained to protect their virtue, limit their “favors,” and beware of boys in their own community, Brooks demonstrates how girls were taught to be wary of outsiders as well. In this scene, she describes a Danish brother rising during testimony meeting to warn the congregation about male strangers tempting Mormon girls to stray from community standards. “Brothers and sisters,” he said, “there is one thing which I would like to call to your attention, and that is how our young girls take up with these strange drummers who come here, men of the world who would only lead them astray. It is not right. It is not wise. It is not pleasing in the sight of the Lord” (113–14). The hyperbole that she reconstructs in this man’s warning is unmistakable, illustrating yet another scare tactic used to keep girls chaste: “Beware of them, young women! They are as dangerous as rattlesnakes! They are more dangerous, for the rattlesnake does have a rattle on its tail which he can shake as a warning to you, but they do not!” (114). Although the text indicates that she recognizes the exaggerated and, thus, humorous nature of his warning, Brooks chooses once again to let the story speak for itself.

Many chapters later, she revisits these gender issues when writing about the sexual exploitation of a female student whom she counseled briefly while serving as dean of women at Dixie Junior College in St. George, Utah, a then church-sponsored school that would have primarily consisted of Mormon students. In this story, the narrative reinforces traditional sexist notions about women’s obligation to take sexual responsibility for community standards. In her classic treatment of sexual politics, Kate Millett explains the long, historical nature of this concept in all patriarchal societies: “The large quantity of guilt attached to
sexuality in patriarchy is overwhelmingly placed upon the female, who is, culturally speaking, held to be the culpable or the more culpable party in nearly any sexual liaison, whatever the extenuating circumstances” (54). In this particular story, Brooks relates the “case” of a “little girl,” who had been nicknamed “California Rose.” “She was small, and so pale as to be ashen, though her hair, too, was light. She looked so out of place in that audience of healthy, vigorous young people” (310). Devoting only five short paragraphs to the story, Brooks documents yet another poignant but understated page in the history of women’s sexual oppression. Unfortunately, at various moments, the brief scene seems to reinforce the sexist notions of her father and the Danish brother, who believe that girls who are taken advantage of by boys deserve what they asked for. A new metaphor also recalls her father’s admonition against becoming a “peach” that has been handled too much. Only this time, the peach has become a “rose” that had given at least six boys a “disease,” which everyone said they got from her. In other words, the boys, not the girl, are figured to be the victims. In fact, the community had dismissed this supposedly wayward young woman as having been “[r]otten before she was ripe” (311). Using clipped language and indirect dialogue, Brooks writes,

I asked her about the charge that she had gone out with boys. Yes, they would whistle for her and she would go out and get into the cars. Did she know their names? No, they just called each other by their nicknames. Where did they go? To a building in the field just a little ways away; it was empty now but it had been shelter for a hired man. There was a quilt folded on the floor, and a cot in the corner. Then what happened? They would each take a turn. Did they pay anything? Once when she held back they gave her a dime; other times they gave her a candy bar. (311)

Relating this event is significant because Brooks makes public a story of scandal at a Mormon-sponsored college, although the religious background of these students is not made clear in the text. The most disconcerting thing about the narration, however, is that the tenor and focus of the account does not show Brooks taking a clear stand on the girl’s behalf. She does write that she was “disappointed not to get the names of the boys involved, but,” she notes, “Doctor McGregor said that was not necessary; he had them all. Everyone had come in for treatment. . .” (311). She also does not explicitly or implicitly write about having much concern for the girl’s reputation, which has clearly been destroyed.
She does, however, mention the doctor’s apprehension about the boys’ good names. “He seemed concerned, for one or two were from prominent families.” Overall, Brooks concludes the incident with restraint: “[N]o matter who they were, it was a bad situation for everyone” (311). While this ambiguous retelling of what amounts to sexual exploitation or even gang rape seems overly sympathetic to the boys and bordering on mere pity for the girl, the choice to include the account is uncommonly frank for a Mormon woman’s life narrative. Once again, she crosses over a border, daring to tell the truth about life as a woman living in Utah’s Dixie.

One of the most personal stories that Brooks tells about gender relations involves the sexual harassment she endures herself at the hands of a man she calls “Judas.” Most women who read her chapter entitled “In the Virgin Valley” will recognize the age-old problem of having to deal with uninvited, unwanted, and aggressive sexual advances by a recalcitrant man. From the narration, it appears that her encounters with “Judas” begin as annoying or unsettling incidences and then soon escalate, as such things often do, to threatening episodes in which she feels afraid and vulnerable. One purpose in telling the story is to share what she had previously kept private; another purpose (which is only implied, but which she makes clear through strategically placed details) is to provide evidence of God’s help and protection on her behalf.

One summer, she explains, with the help of her husband’s brother, Howard, she took a position as a “second cook” for about one hundred employees at the “Gyp Camp in lower Nevada” (265). By this time, her first husband, Ernest, had died, and she needed to work to support her young son, Ernie. Brooks and Mable, the head cook, had begun to refer to one of the hired men as “Judas” because they “disliked him heartily” (267). His first target, writes Brooks, was her new friend. “He would want to pinch her or get hold of her whenever he could. She avoided him like the plague and so did I, though I must admit that he had never yet had an opportunity to get near me” (267). Soon, however, he corners her “in a supply room digging out lard for the day’s cakes.” Fortunately, she had been using a “long butcher knife to cut out chunks” of the lard from a deep barrel. Then the drama of her account begins. “I thought I heard something behind me so I pulled myself up and at the same instant heard him say, ‘Oh-ho! So now I’ve got you just where I want you! You’ll not get away so easy this time!’” After recognizing his voice, she writes, “I turned around quickly, the butcher knife still in my
hands, and faced him.” Working to capture the intensity of the encounter, she claims to remember her exact words:

“Damn your dirty heart!” I said slowly, “You dare to touch me, and I'll split you from stern to gudgeon!”

“By God! I believe you would!” he said, backing off. “I just believe you would!” And he walked away. (267)

Trying to maintain the usual decorum of her text, she concludes this incident by remarking that she didn’t know where she came up with “that phrase or what it actually meant, but I find from the dictionary that it was exact and appropriate” (267). She also notes that her firm tactic worked to warn him away, and she “studiously avoided him” from then on. It turns out, however, that the drama does not end there. Two pages later when she must find a ride home north, the disturbing tale of Judas continues. This time he returns with a vengeance.

Although she tells the story in her autobiography about her difficult experiences with Judas, at the time she does what many a woman has done in similar circumstances—she chooses to keep the encounters to herself or shares them only with a close woman friend, trying to manage a badly behaving man on her own. As the mail truck driver, Judas is the only driver with a car that she could get to take her to Moapa on her way back to Utah, where she would be teaching during the school year. “I hadn’t told Howard of my experience with this man,” she admits, “nor indicated that I had any reason to be afraid of him.” In fact, she believes she will be safe traveling with her son for a “less-than-three-hour trip” (269). Not surprisingly, she is wrong.

According to Brooks, they aren’t very far on their way when the trouble begins. The paragraph she writes about his shocking insistence on having sex with her at a “fine little grassy area” along the way is memorable, not only for his appalling audacity, but also for the frank details she includes in her autobiography. In this scene, she does not fictionalize the dialogue. Instead, she focuses on the nature of his conversation using indirect description that portrays his matter-of-fact attitude and outrageous justifications for sex during what she characterizes as a frightening situation for her.

We were started when Old Judas began to tell me that it was his custom to take one short rest stop on the way out; there was a fine little grassy area with a forest of old, spreading mesquite trees and a pool around a slough with
flags and grass and blackbirds—a very pleasant stop. And this time he didn’t
mean to be cheated as he had been once before. Had I forgotten what an
exciting experience it was to “have connection”? I had been married; I ought
to know that some sex experience was necessary for good health. It was the
finest, most genuine thrill that life could offer. (269)

Unlike the previous alarming encounter in which she fortuitously
held a protective knife, Brooks writes, “This time I had no defense; I did
not care to argue or discuss this matter; I could only pray silently: ‘Dear
Lord, God help me!’” With her son asleep on her lap, she recalls that
when they arrived at the “oasis,” she had determined that “[I] would
remain where I was; he would have to drag me out” (269). Once they
did stop, Brooks has heightened the suspense and fear of her story to its
climax: the unexpected and fortuitous rescue by a stranger, who had no
inkling (and never would) about the distressing situation he had just
walked into. He and his lame horse would save Brooks from her sexual
nemesis just by showing up:

“I’ll put some water into the carburetor,” Judas said, picking up a gallon brass
bucket from the back. “It’s nearly empty, and we might want to get off in a
hurry.”

Before he had the cap screwed back on, help came. A man leading a
limping horse rounded the base of a knoll just ahead.

“How lucky can I be!” he called out. “To find water, and a man with a
bucket, besides. We were jogging along when she reared back, and wouldn’t
put her foot to the ground.” (270)

Of course, the dramatic irony in this passage is that both the man
with the mysteriously lame horse and Brooks herself are “lucky” to have
crossed paths at just this moment. Yet her passionate plea for the Lord’s
help, recorded just four brief paragraphs earlier, implies that Brooks
attributes the stranger’s appearance to more than mere chance. “Looks
like I’ll have to leave her here and go on to Moapa with you.” Brooks
recalls, in fact, that “[h]e didn’t ask permission; he just assumed that he
could go along with us” (270). She reconstructs the palpable relief she
felt in the chapter’s denouement, writing that she sensed Judas was
“annoyed by the baby,” took a “ten-dollar bill” from the young man for
the ride, and overcharged her five dollars for the trip when she had
“heard him tell Howard that the regular one-way fare was two dollars.”
After such a narrow escape, she concludes the story about Old Judas
with characteristic understatement: “I did not question [his charging]. I
was just too happy to reach Moapa, which had not changed much since I had been here so long, long ago” (271).

Less frightening, although no less telling, are episodes Brooks writes that illustrate early Mormon views on sexuality, including their squeamishness about women “showing” during the later months of pregnancy. Brooks writes, for example, about the ward organist who must, in essence, go on leave from her church duties for several months until after she had her baby: “[T]he folkway in our town demanded that after a woman began to ‘show,’ about the fifth month, she did not appear in any public program. She might attend, and usually did, but she remained seated in the audience; she did not give a lesson or stand in front to be conspicuous” (197). Thus, well into the mid–twentieth century, Mormons, who were committed to marriage and large families, ironically maintained Victorian attitudes toward pregnancy—clear evidence that a woman had, indeed, had sex. Brooks writes, of course, about no such similar restrictions on Mormon men.

Although church president Wilford Woodruff called for an official end to polygamy in his 1890 “Manifesto,” the practice continued into the twentieth century. For one reason or another, Mormon women cannot escape discussing the issue in their autobiographical acts. Many Mormons work, though, to discourage outsiders’ fixation with the church’s polygamous past. In Quicksand and Cactus, the most intriguing story of modern-day polygamy is the story Brooks narrates about a kindergarten and first-grade teacher in Bunkerville, Nevada. She was living with Brooks’s parents when Brooks herself was away studying at Brigham Young University. Her mother took care of the woman’s six-year-old son while she taught school during the day. This particular woman is one of the few characters in Brooks’s narrative whose identity she protects by referring to her only as “Mrs. M.” Besides concealing her name, she builds further the intrigue surrounding the woman by telling readers that Mrs. M. was sending her “brilliant” husband $50 per month to support his own study at BYU. When the Christmas holidays arrived, she explains that Mrs. M. arranged for Mr. M. to drive Brooks and her siblings home as a way of paying for months of free babysitting services. Brooks builds suspense about this woman by characterizing Mr. M’s demeanor in the car as “so silent that we hardly knew how we should conduct ourselves” (290). Describing his visit to see his wife as similarly mysterious, she writes, “They went out nowhere in Bunkerville, so Mrs. M.’s husband did not exist so far as anyone knew or cared” (291).
The climax of the brief, but pointed, story comes when Brooks reveals that this man is seeing another woman while studying at BYU. Interestingly enough, rather than by way of other women or even by way of her mother, who apparently did not know anything more than her daughter, Brooks writes that she came to learn more about the couple through her brother. From this example, one might assume, then, that the secrecy surrounding new polygamous relationships was often passed among men rather than women. “Later, when we were alone,” she writes, “I commented to Melvin about the silence of the driver—no more mention of either his wife or baby than if he had none.” And then comes another faithful transgression. She speaks the truth that many orthodox Mormon autobiographers would likely suppress: at least some Mormon men, even in the twentieth century and even in the mainstream Mormon Church, were still pursuing polygamous relationships.

Mel knew all the time: this man was courting a young lady from a prominent and wealthy Provo family, while he accepted fifty dollars a month from his wife. Soon after school closed in the spring, he would be married to her. If his wife learned of it while he was down, she said nothing to it to our mother, who continued to love and care for the baby until they left. (291)

This characterization of the woman’s situation shows that at least the women of her family disapproved of what they viewed as a wife being exploited by her husband while he also pursued a relationship with another potential wife.

Within Mormon culture, Brooks depicts her own status as a young widow having both benefits and drawbacks. She explains that the “Mrs.” in front her of name gave her a “sort of prestige” because, she explains, being a married student “put me into a class by myself, as I knew it would.” On the other hand, she also met at least one man who didn’t like the idea of sharing his wife with another man, even if the man was dead. One potential lover told her, “I could really go for you if you hadn’t been sealed to another man” (276). This passage gives her the opportunity to make a brief, but pointed, jab at the sexism underlying some Mormon men’s view of temple marriage and sealings. According to Mormon doctrine, even after polygamy was abandoned, a woman may be “sealed” for “time and all eternity” only to one man. If that man dies or the couple divorces, she may remarry, but she will not be sealed to the second man. In contrast, a man may be “sealed” to more than one woman. However, in the mainstream modern church, these
sealings may occur between a man and only one woman at a time, meaning the previous wives must have died before he marries another wife. Although modern-day Mormons do get divorced civilly, they may receive a cancellation of their temple sealing only by appealing to the highest church authorities, who extensively review the couple’s relationship and circumstances before determining whether or not to grant such a cancellation.

Telling the Truth about the Mountain Meadows Massacre

Quicksand and Cactus is a significant Mormon woman’s life narrative, not just because Brooks writes engaging stories that provide an ethnographic history of life in a small Mormon community in the early to mid-1900s, but because Brooks’s storytelling offers key background and insight into the incidents and characters that led to her now classic Mountain Meadows Massacre. While writing the book that would ensure her place in Mormon history, Brooks suffered substantial fear of excommunication. In a letter to Dale Morgan, her longtime colleague and friend, she writes, “I didn’t want to be called in by the Authorities, and I was afraid I would be. I don’t want to be branded as ‘an old apostate,’ ... and I didn’t want them to say to me, ‘Sister Brooks, we command you in the name of the Lord to stop this’—because I know I couldn’t stop even were I so commanded” (Peterson 129). Church leaders, suspicious of her motives for publishing the book, repeatedly blocked her requests for affidavits pertaining to the massacre (Peterson 168, 176). Other leaders wondered why a longtime Mormon with “a record of devotion and service” to the church would want to “recreate such a sad chapter in the history of southern Utah” (Peterson 219). Despite the criticism from general authorities and other members of the church, including her own sister, this plucky Mormon woman refused to be controlled or silenced. As a Latter-day Saint “in good standing” and one who always cherished her faith, she believed she was the best person to tell what had been untold or silenced (Peterson 167).

In her forthright and painstakingly accurate record of the event, she depicts the motivations, rationalizations, and subsequent cover-ups concerning the murder of approximately one hundred men, women, and children. The reported number of emigrants in the wagon train ranged from sixty-five to ninety-six to one hundred twenty-one, with eighteen children who were saved because they were not yet old enough to speak.
Despite her thorough research, however, Brooks concedes, “The total number remains uncertain. We can be sure only that, however many there were, it was too many” (Mountain Meadows Massacre xxiv). Her historical research uncovers the horrific details and recounts a story that, like the story of polygamy, most Mormons would rather forget. Her own grandfather, Dudley Leavitt, played a role in the massacre, making the culminating account of her historical research an even more personal one.

In Quicksand and Cactus Brooks backtracks from Mountain Meadows to fill in for readers the details about how her own family and Mormon community tried to rewrite, forget, and even erase details concerning the incident and their collusion in its cover-up. As to her ultimate conclusion about the event, she repeats in the autobiography what she came to believe in her investigative work as a historian documenting the massacre: “But men did not gather here by chance or mere hearsay. If they were here, they had come because they were ordered to come. And whatever went on was done because it had been ordered, not because individuals had acted upon impulse” (255).

Despite misgivings about her ability to write good fiction or poetry, she clearly had the imagination to construct an autobiography that often reads like fiction. Especially with regard to Mountain Meadows, Brooks builds suspense by withholding information that creates ambiguity and piques reader’s interest, foreshadowing further exposition and drama to come. Take her first, provocative passage that hints about a dark secret that members of her family and Bunkerville community would like to bury in the past, away from inside or outside scrutiny:

“Toquapp, Toquapp,” I kept saying to myself. Where had I heard the word before? Then suddenly, as Pa climbed back into the buckboard, I remembered.

“Is this the place where Grandpa Dudley and the other boys helped the Indians stampede the cattle?” I asked. “They scattered them so far in a half an hour that it took three weeks to gather them up again.”

“Where did you get that?” Pa’s voice was almost sharp.

“Wasn’t you there? I thought he was telling it to you, but maybe it was just to Grandma Thirza and Aunt ’Ress. But that’s what he said—that he blacked his face some and tied a red handkerchief around his head, and with a mighty WHOOP led out in it.”

Pa sat silent for a while. Then he said quietly, “Grandpa is a very old man. He has had many experiences in his life. Sometimes he gets mixed up. You
should not repeat what he says. It could as well have happened during the
Indian troubles at Tooele, or out at Hebron, either.” But I knew it was
Toquapp. I also knew better than to contradict my father or press the point,
especially right now. (68)

In a subsequent chapter, she continues to build suspense about what
must have occurred during an event that no one wanted to talk about.
Specifically focusing on Dudley Leavitt (whose biography Brooks later
wrote), she recalls her grandfather sitting by the fireplace speaking to
himself, ruminating about his life:

“I thank God that these old hands have never been stained by human
blood,” he said in a deep, earnest voice.

To me, that meant that he had never had to kill an Indian. Why else
should he shed human blood? It was many, many years before I learned the
real meaning of that statement and that it referred to the massacre in 1857
of the Fancher party by Mormons and Indians at the mountain Meadows.
(152)

Here Brooks depicts how, as a child, she incorrectly interpreted her
grandfather’s allusions to human blood as somehow connected to the
murder of supposedly hostile Indians. As a child, she, like others, had
been led to believe that savage Indians rather than Mormons were
responsible for murdering other white pioneers. This particularly
provocative passage serves to lay the foundation for later scenes in her
narrative when she will explain more about the truth she later learned
as an adult researching and writing about the history of this tragic event.

One key character to emerge from Quicksand and Cactus is Nephi
Johnson, a church patriarch, who comes to represent Brooks’s personal
guilt with regard to the massacre. She takes pains to describe her
encounters with Johnson because, in him, she missed the opportunity to
hear a firsthand account of the massacre. Usually, she reconstructs their
actual conversations to capture the immediacy and importance of his
request, which she ultimately failed to act upon. “Leaning with both
hands on his cane, he said impressively, ‘I want you to do some writing
for me. My eyes have witnessed things that my tongue has never uttered,
and before I die, I want them written down. And I want YOU to do the
writing’” (227). Even after such a direct appeal, Brooks admits to having
put the old man off, not understanding at the time the significance of
what he might want to say. She portrays the regret that she has felt all
her life and that likely motivated one of the major investigative projects of her life: “Silly, foolish me! Why didn’t I just reach for a pencil and pad, settle myself and say, ‘Go ahead?’ Instead I hedged” (227). Brooks develops this scene by describing how she “forgot all about Old Brother Johnson” until a call came to the house months later, letting her know that Nephi Johnson was dying and “calling for the little schoolteacher, all the time” (227). When she arrives, she characterizes herself as naive, not only about Mountain Meadows, but also about the process of dying. If, in her youth, she had taken his first request seriously, she might have learned much more about the massacre from a man she portrays as guilt-ridden. Now, however, Brooks can only listen to his incoherent ravings. “He seemed troubled; he rambled in delirium—he prayed, he yelled, he preached, and once his eyes opened wide to the ceiling and he yelled, ‘Blood! BLOOD! BLOOD! BLOOD!’” (229). Midway through her narrative, she provides exposition about the massacre that is necessary for readers to begin to understand—just as she herself was beginning to understand—the gravity of the missed opportunity to hear this significant confession. Through her own storytelling, she begins by narrating the cover-up or “standard story” that her generation had been led to believe about the death of the California pioneers. Then she repeats her regret at not having heard Johnson’s contrasting version:

“What is the matter with him?” I asked Uncle List, who waited outside. “He acts like he is haunted.”

“Maybe he is. He was at the Mountain Meadows Massacre, you know.”

No, indeed, I did NOT know. I had read and been told our standard story: that some emigrants had been massacred at a place called Mountain Meadows, far away from the Mormon settlements, but it was the work of Indians. They were stirred up because some of their number had been killed by these emigrants, and they wanted revenge. A few of our people who lived in the area had tried to restrain the Indians, but were able to save only about seventeen children, who were sent back to their relatives in Missouri.

Fool, fool that I was, not to have taken the opportunity to write it when he was eager to talk, all ready to tell it all! (229)

If Brooks achieved nothing else by having written her autobiography, one senses from passages such as this one that her autobiographical act is an occasion for confession and redemption, not only for Nephi Johnson, but also for Brooks herself (because she ignored his plea) and for her Mormon community. After all, what appears to bother her most
about the event is her discovery that the community colluded to protect guilty Mormons and to cover up the truth. Telling the truth is one of the deepest religious values held among Latter-day Saints. In the end, it appears that Brooks wrote her own autobiography, as well as Mountain Meadows Massacre, for four main reasons: first, she needs to alleviate her frustration at missing a significant opportunity to hear one participant's firsthand account of the massacre; second, she wants to expiate the guilt she felt for ignoring an old man's plea; third, because of her blunder, she feels compelled to give Nephi Johnson his due, making his adamant desire to tell the real story public in her own autobiographical account; and fourth, she tries to partially redeem her Mormon community for the murders and subsequent cover-up by writing what amounts to two published confessions meant to expose the truth about the event.

On a family trip to celebrate Pioneer Day on July 24, which commemorates the entrance of the Mormons into the Great Basin, Brooks visits the scene of the 1857 tragedy for the first time, using the occasion to resolve the mystery and tension about the murders that she has woven throughout her life story. “So this was the Mountain Meadows where the massacre had taken place—the crime which had troubled Brother Nephi Johnson on his deathbed” (250). Later in her life narrative, she writes about how she and her soon-to-be second husband participated in the dedication of the monument at Mountain Meadows on Saturday, September 10, 1932. She captures the solemnity of the day by writing about her motion sickness on the drive to the ceremony and then about the sobriety of the event itself for her as an adult. “[T]he monument was still swathed in red and white bunting, awaiting the unveiling. With all the expanse of rolling hills with a distant backdrop of jagged peaks, I couldn’t help remembering Brother Johnson’s shuddering cry of ‘Blood! Blood! Blood!’” (325). If Brother Johnson was haunted by the event itself and his need to tell it, this scene and others in Quicksand and Cactus give clear evidence of her own haunted conscience about not having heard and recorded his story. Still, she attempts to right (write) that wrong and to tell truths about her own and her Mormon community’s past.

Juanita Brooks depicts herself as a person born to hear and tell the “truth” in stories, like the most important one she ever told concerning a “horrid” event. For her own life narrative, each chapter is crafted in such a way that almost any chapter could stand on its own with a clear thematic focus tied to the book’s overall thesis about her longing to
cross the borders of a small-town upbringing and venture into the wide wonderful world. By fictionalizing the events of her life, she writes a coming-of-age story that teaches while also entertaining readers. One early chapter, entitled “Flax,” foreshadows the faithfully transgressive nature of her life and the temporal desires that impinge on her equally compelling desire to remain true to her Mormon faith.

Even though her father had forbidden it, she takes his large, “high-spirited” horse “Flax” out of the pasture when he is away from home. The horse breaks into a gallop, and she’s unable to control him. Although determined “to ride him out,” she’s still a frightened young girl on top of an enormous horse that had been bred to run. Then, she writes, “something happened to change everything.” At that moment, a thought “flashes audibly” in her mind: “You can’t stop him, but you can turn him” (91). Like palpable guidance from a place or a being she could not identify, this audible suggestion helps her make a crucial decision to take the left-hand fork of a road rather than the usual right. When she’s able to regain control of Flax after he has run himself out, she realizes how close she came to disaster, endangering her own life and the lives of other people on the road through her foolish choices. “My blood ran cold to think how it would have been had we taken this, the regular road to the field” (92). After confessing to her father one week later, knowing that she already “knew that he knew,” Brooks uses the story to illustrate an important lesson she learned about disobeying her elders. Reconstructing the conversation she broached with her father, she writes,

“Do you know what saved my life when Flax was running away with me?” I asked, and then without waiting for his answer: “It was something that said to me, ‘You can’t stop him, but you can turn him.’ After that I knew I was safe.” (92)

In order to show readers that she knows very well how much control a storyteller/writer/autobiographer maintains over her narrative, she ends the chapter about her foolhardy ride on Flax with the following brief, but intriguing, paragraph, offering readers a mysterious, almost postmodern ending. “At home, we had talking materials for a long time, both among ourselves and with the neighbors. Only one incident I never told . . .” (98).

One senses in this chapter that Brooks sympathizes with the younger, more naive, and eager self she was—the one who likely identified, at least in part, with her father’s horse, which had been bred and trained
for running but had been “cooped up in the corral for a week” (91). Energetic and inquisitive, Brooks, too, feels fenced in by her father’s orders and her small-town Mormon life. Still, with this story and many others, she illustrates the lessons she had learned about how and when to cross boundaries set by her elders and, then, how to have faith in God’s all-knowing protection, as well as her own judgment, to make good decisions in life. Her writing provides evidence that she understands and has the ability to depict the complexity of human experience. The appeal of her autobiographical text itself is how she teaches frequently contradictory lessons through artful storytelling, rather than through didactic homilies that moralize in simplistic ways about human experience. In Quicksand and Cactus, Brooks purposefully reconstructs and recounts the challenge of balancing both the temporal and spiritual yearnings of her transgressive yet always faithful life.