Chapter 6

Training to Be a Good Mormon Girl While Longing for Fame

We were something different inside a story; we had possibilities other than the ones in this yellow plastered room.

—Phyllis Barber, How I Got Cultured

Fundamentally, [autobiography] reveals the way the autobiographer situates herself and her story in relation to cultural ideologies and figures of selfhood. . . . Those figures are always cast in language and are always motivated by cultural expectations, habits, and systems of interpretation pressing on her at the scene of writing.

—Sidonie Smith, “Woman’s Story and the Engenderings of Self-Representation”

Even though Mormon autobiographer and professional writer Phyllis Barber grew up more than half a century after her Latter-day Saint forebears abandoned the practice of polygamy, she introduces the story of her Mormon childhood and adolescence in How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir with a comic scene that illustrates outsiders’ continuing fixation on Mormon plural marriage. Barber reconstructs the interchange between her eight-year-old self and four government rangers. The officers find her walking alone after a slumber party, hugging her teddy bear through the early morning streets of Boulder City, Nevada. Shaping dialogue between her and the four strangers, Barber captures Mormons’ usual protectiveness about their religion. She also depicts outsiders’ stereotyped notions about Mormon polygamy, a religious practice that many consider a church-sanctioned opportunity for men to fulfill their sexual fantasies.
“Ranger Johnson here says he might know your dad,” the driver said. “He’s not sure, but he’s not unsure either.” His laugh was more like a snort. “So what else can you tell us?”

“My dad is the bishop.” My voice quivered.

“The bishop of what?” the driver asked, snorting again. “Have we got a little Roman Catholic illegitimate here?”

“The Mormon bishop,” I said, swallowing what little saliva was left in my mouth. I knew some people didn’t like Mormons. My parents told us not to advertise.

“Those people with all the wives?” he asked as he rested his head on his arm and hung over the window frame.

“They don’t do that anymore,” Ranger Johnson said, leaning forward in the front seat and peering over the driver’s shoulder.

“Why not?” the driver asked, “Sounds like a good deal to me. Different girl every night.” (2)

Historically, an actual nineteenth-century polygamous wife writing about a similar event would usually defend polygamous relationships and remain silent about Mormon marital relations. In contrast, Barber humorously portrays outsiders’ sexual innuendoes without becoming overly defensive about her religion. Instead of justifying her faith, she allows perceptions between Mormons and non-Mormons to speak for themselves. In fact, an explicit desire to explain or defend any aspect of Mormon doctrine is absent from this late-twentieth-century autobiographical act.

Different from the life writing of Hafen, Tanner, Martin, or Williams, Barber's autobiography does not advance an overt argument with regard to her Mormon upbringing and beliefs. Instead, she tells stories about her personal experience with a good deal of self-reflexive irony that intends to explore the themes of Mormon female enculturation. As a teller of humorous stories, she is freed from the compulsion to justify or criticize her Mormon past. Intending to show more than tell about her childhood in Nevada, she leads readers through the process of her own development, narrating key incidents that depict her childhood yearnings for fame and culture (i.e., “high” Western culture). Barber’s longing for fame is tied to the dilemma about female sexuality that she faces as a result of her religious upbringing. Throughout the book, she neither idealizes nor condemns her characters. Instead, she portrays the human foibles and complexities of her piano teachers, friends, ward members, and her own parents with humor and respect. “My mother cried once
when she told me about the three books her parents owned when she was growing up, my mother, hungry for culture.” Her father, she writes, “could take culture, but not if the timing was off” (59–60). Comic subtleties such as this one permeate the book.

After placing her childhood self within the context of Mormon polygamous history, Barber moves readers from the past to the present. She purposely complicates the issue of Mormon female identity by telling stories about her personal experiences growing up a Mormon girl on the threshold of womanhood. In the past, Victorian-minded Mormon women autobiographers did not indulge the public’s curiosity about their intimate private lives. While they might have written about giving birth to numerous children and sharing their family life with other “sister-wives,” traditional Mormon autobiographies have been mostly silent on the subject of sexuality.

In her essay “‘Living the Principle’ of Plural Marriage: Mormon Women, Utopia, and Female Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century,” Julie Dunfrey explains, “For Latter-day Saint women, as for gentile women, questions about marriage arrangements were fraught with implications about women’s position in society, and implicitly, female sexuality” (524). Furthermore, Dunfrey observes, “In particular, the question of how Mormon women reconciled their conventional expectations of monogamy with their experience of polygamy raises issues about the social control of sex, reproductive versus erotic sexuality, and the relative benefits accruing to both genders from particular sexual standards” (525). So far, it has mainly been women autobiographers such as Fanny Stenhouse or Deborah Laake—considered “apostate” from the Mormon Church—who have divulged details about Mormon women’s intimacy from their own experience. Brooks’s Quicksand and Cactus also broaches several important issues with regard to women’s sexuality and sexual expression. Overall, however, the life writing of Mormon women tends to be discreet.

In the late twentieth century, Barber’s text, written from the perspective of an insider Mormon woman, begins to grapple more openly and sympathetically with the tension a young Mormon girl faces as she struggles to grow up under religious training that encourages strict self-control over her budding sexuality. Sexual restraint is, of course, an ironic contrast to the sexual smorgasbord implied about Mormons by the government officers of Boulder City, Nevada. In her memoir, Barber constructs herself as a young person confronted with common girlhood dilemmas about sexuality, gender performance, and small-town culture.
Each dilemma, however, seems exacerbated by her religious training at home and at church. She portrays her youthful, often naive yearnings for fame, culture, and beauty (i.e., sex appeal) as coming into direct conflict with her Mormon parents’ repeated warnings against the sins of pride, worldly pursuits, and sexual immorality. “I’d been taught,” she writes, “that being a good Mormon was the most important thing anyone could ever think of doing and that everything on earth was only transient, sandwiched between the preexistence and the hereafter. I’d been told to keep my sights set on eternity—the world beyond this veil of tears” (5).

Despite Barber’s desire to please her parents and “be a good Mormon,” she also characterizes herself as a youth tempted to transgress, especially because she longs for public recognition. At only nine years old, Barber’s potential for distinction is foreshadowed when she is asked by several adult church members to accompany them on the piano as they sing or play instruments during a ward talent show. She writes that Brother Higginson complimented her on her sightreading skills. “You’ve got something we talk a lot about in the business,” he says. “It’s called promise” (37). Characterizing herself as a child and teen yearning to escape the narrow southwestern community in which she grew up, Barber strains most against the restrictive nature of her Mormon subculture. Her parents’ admonitions against immodesty or displaying unseemly pride over her precocity on the piano impinge on Barber’s young appetite for fame and personal autonomy. Her father warns, “‘Pride goeth before the fall; you know that’” (40). As an adult looking back on her young girlhood, she depicts herself jealously watching other non-Mormon females. To her, they seem to use their bodies as they wish. “Even as I spoke,” writes Barber, 

I thought of the bare skin beneath the show girls’ leotards and their freedom to do with it as they pleased. Lately at night, I’d been thinking maybe my skin could belong to me and no one else. Why did it have to be God’s temple when I lived in it? Why did somebody else make decisions about my body? It was mine, after all. (96)

The most explicit chapter Barber writes about her youthful experiences with sexuality and her Mormon cultural training to remain chaste until marriage is entitled “The Rose.” In this chapter, she reconstructs a ritual familiar to many teenage Mormon girls in which their “Mutual Improvement Association” (MIA) leaders work hard to persuade them
to preserve their virginity by passing around a single white rose on one special evening. During the "Rose Night" ceremony, Barber describes the circle of girls touching and contemplating the flower's beauty, which is damaged by all the handling. After focusing the girls' attention on the rose's drooping head, Sister Bradley "looked at us rather sternly." She then intoned,

> No one, I repeat no one, wants a used rose. Your husband will want a girl who's fresh as the morning dew, sparkling, alive, brand new. Don't let them handle your body. Don't let them touch you in private places. Those places are yours to save for the man who'll be your husband. . . . He'll reverence you above all women because you've saved yourself just for him and your eternal marriage, the kind that lasts forever. (156)

Following Sister Bradshaw's speech, Barber portrays her fourteen-year-old self thrown into a rapid review of her past, searching her memory for any sexual misdeeds that might require the need for confession. First she writes about playing doctor at five years old with her friend Marie; then there was the brief incident with her cousin Lee that occurred when she was nine and he touched her with his penis in the barn (157); and finally, at twelve, there was her neighbor Leonard "crawling" on top of her like a snail, “its body suctioned to my face” (158). Barber depicts herself that night coming to the happy conclusion that she had, in fact, remained unsullied—so far. “By the end of Mary Lynn’s closing prayer,” she writes, “I could honestly say I was a pristine rose. I’d kept all invaders away. Of course,” she admits, “not many had tried to bruise my petals, at least nobody I was interested in. But I was still an undefiled rose, an untouched one just beginning to blossom from a tightly wrapped bud of pale yellow” (159). Readers familiar with Juanita Brooks’s Quicksand and Cactus could not help but recall that she, too, was told similar stories in the mid–twentieth century of damaged roses and peaches by Mormon family and ward members anxious to constrain a young girl’s passions.

Barber’s own autobiography illustrates the often limiting, even repressive sexual and moral codes of Mormonism, with its distinctions between equally rigid proper gender roles for males and females. In addition, Barber constructs her life story so that it illustrates the equally oppressive dominant Western culture’s messages about all women being trained to look at themselves and each other for lessons in beauty (i.e., sexual attraction) to entice men’s attention. The teenage Barber
confesses, after all, that she, like many young women, “wanted someone to bend me backwards, inhale me, and kiss me for a long, long time” (161). In her classic feminist discussion of Hollywood film, Visual and Other Pleasures, Laura Mulvey argues that traditionally, the camera lens—which literalizes the cultural lens focused most often on women—was directed from a male point of view. Historically men have been positioned as active viewing subjects and women as passive objects to be looked at or taught how to perform their role as women. Similar to Mulvey, Luce Irigaray critiques the “dominant scopic economy” of Western society in “This Sex Which Is Not One.” According to Irigaray, women prefer the tactile over the visual to liberate and satisfy their own sense of self and their own multiple sexual desires. But instead, the forces of patriarchal culture have compelled women into one masculine scopophilic desire. “Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation” (101). Barber’s autobiography illustrates how, like many females, she, too, is trained to discipline her body to behave according to at least two seemingly opposite gender scripts for girls: one, sexual purity, from her Mormon culture, and the other, sex appeal, from the larger Western culture of which she is also a part. Living according to opposing messages such as these produces understandable emotional conflict, which Barber explores and illustrates through her autobiographical act.

Many times in the narrative, she portrays herself gazing at the bodies of other girls or women, longing for the freedom that she sees expressed in their daring clothing and seemingly casual ease with nudity. In contrast, she feels the boundaries placed around her own body by her mother and the Victorian nature of her Mormon culture, which teaches her strict adherence to personal modesty and sexual purity. After being hired to play piano for a dance studio, Barber writes about a time when several show girls from the “Strip” in Las Vegas arrive at the studio. In the dressing room, she sees one of the show girls “unabashedly naked, her shorts pooled around her ankles.” Others were undressing easily in her presence. “I’d been drilled about modesty at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” she writes, “but I couldn’t take my eyes off their bodies sliding into their tights without any underwear. Then they dashed past me as if no etiquette had been breached, as if their bodies were everyday things, not sacred temples as I’d been taught from childhood.”
(94). For Barber, this and other moments of curious voyeurism create longing and awe in her young self as she watches women freely expose themselves to others’ view. She watches them use their bodies without being bound by the strict control she has been trained under. From the perspective of her youth, these women’s ease was vastly different from her mother’s and her Mormon culture’s teachings about bodies and sex. Contemplating the show girls, the young Barber thinks,

There was pure defiance beneath their stretched Danskins—a different world from canning peaches with my mother, baking bread, and sniffing golden loaves. Brother this and Sister that when we greeted each other at church meetings. A strange wind blew through the windows of my mind and shook the panes etched with the Sunday School words: “Choose the Right when a choice is placed before you.” (95)

Throughout the first chapters of the autobiography, Barber depicts various moments when her mother tries to persuade her daughter against trying out for the Las Vegas Rhythmettes, a high school dance team sometimes sought out for public appearances to greet dignitaries or perform on the Ed Sullivan Show. Barber’s mother valorizes Victorian ideals of female domesticity, motherhood, and sexual purity that have permeated Mormon culture from its beginnings. “Jesus didn’t need to be a Rhythmette to be loved,” declares her mother. “Neither do you. The real joy in this life is in God’s plan—being a mother and multiplying and replenishing the earth. Not in some trumped-up organization like the Las Vegas Rhythmettes. It’s phony” (131). As Barber writes about longing to make it into the Rhythmettes, she describes her experience within a context of body imagery. Just as she had watched the Las Vegas show girls, Barber is, once again, looking at other girls’ appearance, longing for their freedom, beauty, and what her autobiographical narrator implies is abundant sex appeal. “When I entered Las Vegas High School the next year,” she writes,

I watched the Rhythmettes in the girls’ locker room slip in and out of the sleeves of their Rhythmette sweaters. I watched them walk gracefully around the school with their long flowing hair and manicured fingernails. I watched them dance at the halftime of the football and basketball games. (130)

Besides gazing at them directly, she and other students are able to look at these girls’ pictures on the high school walls where the
Rhythmettes become models of beauty and icons of fame through their personal popularity and their occasional meetings with famous people or government officials. “I often paused at the bulletin board in Miss Stuckey’s office in the gym. She’d tacked up rows of pictures of her girls marching in parades and shaking hands with Frank Sinatra” (130). This gazing at other girls’ pictures hung up on her high school walls is reminiscent of women gazing at other women in fashion magazines. Diana Fuss observes that fashion photography “presumably” means for women “to desire to be the woman, not to have her” (716). However, she argues that the repression of “lesbian eroticism” in fashion magazines is “transparent.” This homospectatorial quality demonstrates how “women are encouraged to consume, in voyeuristic if not vampiristic fashion, the images of other women” (713).

 Appropriately, Barber uses multiple metaphors involving trains to describe her experience getting “cultured” or “trained” to be a good Mormon girl. With the determination and will of naive youth, she first depicts her young self as a train coming up against the religious dictates of her parents, who resist any hint that their daughter might express unseemly pride in her personal accomplishments. Barber writes, “Always right, father, mother, always right to stop trains in their tracks, trains chugging to somewhere, stop them quickly, suddenly, unavoidably, to remind them to be humble and not chug with too much bravado, not to make too much of any accomplishment lest the Lord take it away, lest the Lord frown, lest, lest, lest” (40). Another formidable Mormon “train” that Barber feels she must ride is the train that Mormon girls take to become proper wives and mothers, not the dancer Barber longs to become. She characterizes her mother as indignant over her daughter’s wish for something that could lead her away from the family lifestyle that her mother has been taught to value and that she now believes she must teach her daughter to value as well.

 Feminist theorist Nancy Chodorow argues that the compulsion to train daughters to become mothers does not occur because of biology or “intentional role-training” but rather through “social structurally induced psychological processes.” Using the “psychoanalytic account of female and male personality development,” she demonstrates that “women’s mothering reproduces itself cyclically. Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself” (7). When daughters such as Barber (and
Terry Tempest Williams in *Refuge*) resist the desire to mother, especially in Mormon culture, conflict erupts. One scene in particular illustrates the problems that crop up between Barber’s Latter-day Saint mother and her own rebellious self:

“Have you ever seen an old show girl? Marriage and family last forever, but legs, waistlines, and breasts don’t, your highness.”

“So maybe I don’t want marriage and family. It’s a moving train with no windows or doors.”

My mother sighed. “Young people think they’re different, that they can break rules. I’m telling you this to help you, my dear. We’re all on that train. Nobody gets off. Don’t kid yourself, because you’ll make things harder if you do.”

“But what’s wrong with dancing?”

“Nothing,” she said. “We dance here at home.”

“But I want to really dance. Leap up and fly out the window. That kind of dancing.”

“You’re dancing any time you move to music, dear.” (97)

Barber characterizes herself questioning boundaries for women’s development set up within her family and Mormon community. She constructs her behavior and attitudes as those of a young person who listens to her mother but continues to push the boundaries and pursue dancing anyway. At one point, she even admits to wanting to “shock” her mother, “make her lose her balance on her white horse galloping toward the unmitigated certainty that the righteous would rule the world. Something was working on me,” she writes. “It wasn’t like me to use treachery. I was my mother’s girl.” Young Barber’s experience with her mother provides evidence for Adrienne Rich’s feminist theory that “we teach the girl that there is only one kind of womanhood and that the incongruent parts of herself must be destroyed. The repetition or reproduction of this constricted version of humanity, which one generation [Barber’s mother] transmits to the next, is a cycle whose breaking is our only hope” (xxxii). As soon as young Barber begins having “wicked” (i.e., “breaking”) thoughts with regard to her mother, whom she loves “more than my own skin,” the teen feels “for the first time that my mother was a choice—a flower with white petals that I could pluck from the center and say ‘I love you, I love you not’” (72). In her narrative, she portrays her mother as the firm symbol of Mormon culture and doctrine, “an unflinching believer in the restored gospel and a lioness of
God” (56). Choosing to love or not love her mother has become very much like choosing to love or not love motherhood and Mormonism. For the young Barber, making a choice for or against her religious belief never seems to have dawned on her fully until now.

Although at first Mormonism (represented by her mother) appears to be the only culture impeding the path to Barber’s dreams, her text soon reveals that other cultural training outside of religion also threatens to limit a girl’s personal freedom and expression. Perhaps, the autobiographical stories point out, Barber’s disapproving mother is not so wrong to be concerned about her daughter’s choice to become a Rhythmette. Perhaps such a teenage pursuit is not the ticket to freedom she expected as a youth. In fact, her coming-of-age story illustrates her narrow Mormon training toward domesticity, sexual purity, and motherhood coming into direct conflict with the similarly problematic training of young women in the larger Western culture to make themselves attractive objects for men. In other words, her teenage self may believe, erroneously, that other women enjoy the freedom to use their bodies as they wish. In fact, the stories that the adult Barber tells point readers toward equally unhappy conclusions for all women: no female, whether Mormon or not, is in complete control of how she uses her body. Depicting her adolescent female journey as an attempt to sort through these often conflicting and oppressive gender scripts, her writing illustrates the narrow ideals available to females both inside and outside the Mormon Church.

The minute that Barber makes the Rhythmette dance team during her second tryout, for example, she characterizes her younger self as having second thoughts about her seemingly remarkable accomplishment. In a fleeting moment of teenage insight, young Barber suddenly realizes that dancing with the Rhythmettes, like growing up a Mormon, may just be another ride on a different but similar lockstep train.

Squeezed between two other girls, shoulder to shoulder, I started across the floor. But a tiny moment of claustrophobia flashed through my head, so small I only remember it now. It had to do with eighteen dancing dolls and their choreography—always using the left foot to begin, turning their heads every eight counts, holding their shoulders back, tucking in their stomachs, smiling, always smiling as instructed by Miss Stuckey.

Crushed into my place in line and thinking in sets of four and measures of eight, I felt shut in for a brief second. What had I purchased? Another train ticket? For one small second I felt myself marching away from real
rhythm where dancers threw themselves against the shadows of fire while the earth and the moon beat the drums. (142)

Barber characterizes this teenage epiphany as only brief, but from her wiser adult perspective, she reflects back on it more fully:

We were Baby Rs on our way to being grown-up and bounteous and leggy and ready for the grown-up world where our prancing legs would someday spread apart to make babies and birth babies or avoid babies or wonder why we couldn’t have babies, all in accordance with the plan. We were being danced on our way by our hormones, by the mandate for procreation, by the rhythm of life, not knowing it was bigger than we were. (142–43)

With the advantage of time, this scene makes an ironic connection between her Mormon cultural training to adopt the ideals of pure motherhood and the larger Western cultural training for her to develop sex appeal in order to attract men. After mature reflection, the adult Barber admits the Rhythmettes were

Dancing fools, me first among them, kicking headlong into our purpose on earth—to multiply and replenish. Miss Stuckey doing her part by preparing us with manners and stage presence, but really preparing us as gifts for the men who watched, men subject to their own hormones as we strutted and paraded across the stage, displaying our wares for them, the particular curve of our hips, the winning smiles. (143)

Through personal storytelling, Barber shows that for her, a conflicted Mormon girl, the mandates to maintain sexual purity while also striving to achieve sex appeal were just two seemingly opposite but actually similar ways of training women to seek the attention and favor of men. “I was one of the girls,” writes Barber with irony. “A Las Vegas Rhythmette. I was somebody, and the football players and James Deans would have to reckon with me” (143).

As a teenager, Barber is just beginning to recognize the consequences of her situation as a young woman. “I suspected I’d be forever running alongside the wrong train while I could hear the whistle of the right train off in the distance” (98). Both locomotives chug on—the promised train of attention that encourages her to fashion her body for men’s pleasure and the opposing train of Mormon restraint that warns her to keep her body in check. “I, too, scented the major leagues,” she recalls, “a chance to jump the never-stopping train I was
on where the rolling wheels repeated mile after mile: ‘Obey God’s word, obey God’s word’” (131).

Toward the end of her autobiography, Barber depicts an experience in which she and her friend, Karin, begin modeling for Betty’s House of Furs in order to finance their first year of college at Brigham Young University. In this key scene, she writes about choosing to expose her thinly clad body to public view. During modeling lessons, she had learned how to “strike a pose” (185). At eighteen, she finally dares to perform an act that she has watched show girls, Rhythmettes, and other models perform all her life. When her friend Karin first models one of the fur coats wearing nothing but a bikini bathing suit underneath, Barber describes viewing her friend from a new perspective. “Suddenly she was an exotic hybrid—lush, intriguing. I’d never seen her like this before. She was beautiful. But the people in the restaurant had no idea that a flower had opened right in front of them. They busied themselves with their green, red, and yellow melon balls and the excision of the pineapple’s tough core from their tidbits” (185). Because the display of women’s bodies for public consumption is ubiquitous, Karin’s exposure goes mostly unnoticed by anyone other than her teenage friend Barber, who is beginning to realize that she, too, is experiencing her own blossoming beauty and sex appeal under the gaze of indifferent public appraisal.

Reflecting on the scene, Barber remembers the questions she had as an adolescent struggling toward the threshold of womanhood: “Was I blooming like Karen? Was I changing as I’d always been promised in my heart-to-heart talks with my mother? And just who was this underneath this fur, and why was she wearing a bikini?” (186). After contemplating her own motives and identity, she reconstructs the transgressive step she took of walking down a runway, daring to display her own body for an audience of people who barely notice. During this moment of exposure, she examines what she had been taught as a Mormon girl and how those teachings contributed to a sense of having multiple and emerging identities. “I wasn’t Thora and Herman Nelson’s daughter. She wouldn’t be doing this. I must not be a very good Mormon because I was wearing a bikini under this fur coat and was about to show it to everyone. I wasn’t anybody I’d ever known” (186). Here she also offers readers a glimpse into the emotional confusion of living in two different worlds—Mormon and non-Mormon—with two sets of rules, resulting in often conflicting identities.
Ironically, even though the audience does not seem to notice Barber or Karin, Barber writes about both teens being conscious of the threat of some Mormon leader seeing them, of being found out. “What if Bishop Huntington saw us doing this?” asks Karin (185). Despite the fear of Mormon surveillance and the disappointment over an audience’s indifference, Barber characterizes her moment of exposure as a mixed blessing since it comes as a moment of both wonder and fear.

I finally arrived at the staircase where I was supposed to reveal myself and my silver bikini to these passive people chewing on white bread and tomatoes. I climbed to the top of the three-stair case, smiling somebody else’s smile. I took a deep breath and slowly unwrapped the fox. Air, sweet precious manufactured air, vacuumed the sweat from my face and arms and rejuvenated my clammy skin as the fur peeled away. Goose flesh prickled my arms and stomach. (187)

After the announcer calls Barber a “doll” and a “lovely little model,” the sensation she relishes in is tinged with caution. Describing herself as having “turned on the staircase—a slow, languid turn as if I were a windup doll revolving on a music box pedestal” (187), the adult feminist writer and thinker constructs her former self as participating in a common feminine ideal for women: the beautiful doll on a pedestal, being mechanically rotated around for other people’s pleasure. Barber also constructs the scene as though she herself felt separated into mere body parts. She feels watched by an audience so saturated with the public exhibition of women’s bodies that this particular display seems unremarkable to them. In contrast, the moment feels literally and figuratively pivotal for the teenage Barber. “Slowly, slowly—the legs, the arms, one side, the back, the other side, the front, as people ate and talked and sometimes glanced. But no one was attuned to the fact that something important was happening, that a soul was swimming in unknown waters” (187). For the audience, a woman displaying her body in this way is to be expected. For a young Mormon girl, however, the act of display is transgressive. Barber’s purposeful use of the word “soul,” with its spiritual and moral overtones, emphasizes the border her teenage self chose to cross. Young Barber knows her blossoming sexuality is not supposed to occur in the public eye. She feels caught between two opposing impulses: enjoy and benefit from the moment of her “blossoming” or do what her LDS parents and leaders tell her to do by shielding her body and sexuality from casual exposure or use.
One of the final scenes of Barber’s book occurs after her climactic decision to throw off the “cocoon” of her fur coat in front of an audience. When spectators seem unimpressed, she deliberately seeks at least one affirming look from an appreciative male observer. He turns out to be an anonymous card dealer in a casino. She writes, “He shuffled the cards as if they were water and as if water were his game.” Elaborating on her feminine strategy for getting this man’s attention, she says,

I stood absolutely still until he lifted his eyes my way for one quick second. His eyes returned to the game, but I stood even more still until he looked up again. This time, the deck of cards in hand, he raised his chin slightly and kissed the air as if it were mine. He nodded his head in a slow yes. That was enough. (188)

To reinforce her nascent feeling of empowerment as a sexual being, she seeks affirmation from this man’s eyes. When she gets at least one approving glance, Barber constructs her teenage self as having been initiated into a world of womanhood. However, the text does not portray the male gaze neutrally nor her behavior to gain his validation without consequences. Rather, her autobiographical narrative critiques her own participation in a society of men looking and women being looked at. In contrast to Barber’s feminist critique of the motives and strategies she employed herself in this brief scene of female seduction, Helen B. Andelin’s 1969 book, The Fascinating Girl, offers a specific script for training girls like Barber to attract men’s attention. The handbook and others like it encourage females to perform their gender role according to a “feminine” ideal. Read by many girls contemporary to Barber, Andelin’s handbook was written to teach girls how to win husbands and achieve “celestial love” through cultivating ideal womanhood. Urging them to become “domestic goddesses,” who understood the art of feminine grace, charm, and dependency, the handbook reflects common assumptions about female roles often perpetuated in Mormon culture. In comparison, the life narrative that Barber writes conveys an ironic stance toward her training to become either a model of sexual purity and a goddess of domesticity or a sexual object for men’s pleasure.

Getting Cultured

Barber’s exploration of how a young woman like herself is taught to perform her gender and “get cultured” as a Mormon is inseparably connected
to her longing for a different kind of cultural training and exposure. “If I try to remember how the idea of culture began in my mind,” she writes, “I could mention a thick black seventy-eight-rpm recording of Peter and the Wolf” (54). While her enculturation to be a good Mormon girl is primary in their minds, Barber’s parents also want to develop and refine her tastes for “culture” beyond the amateur talent shows put on at church functions. She depicts Mormon performers’ fumbling toward greatness in her chapter entitled “At the Talent Show.” Similar to many upwardly mobile, middle-class American parents, Barber’s mother dreams of her daughter becoming something greater than she became herself. Her mother is even willing to postpone her daughter’s domestic training for piano greatness. “I’ll help you with your chores,” she says. “You don’t have to do any housework if you’ll keep playing” (73). According to Barber, her mother possesses an admirable singing voice herself, but it inevitably fails her by cracking with fear when she performs at church. Both of them aspire to have Barber perform at some place other than an amateur Mormon talent show, where participants make numerous mistakes and the audience is satisfied with humorous mediocrity. Yet all the while that she and her mother wish for Barber’s entry into a life more “cultured,” Barber also confesses to feeling an impulse to run away “back into the desert sunshine where it didn’t matter whether I was cultured or not, where I could laugh and run and not worry about what kind of musician I was” (81).

Although she characterizes herself as a young person of achievement, Barber ends her coming-of-age story at the threshold of her adult life and professional accomplishments. Throughout the life narrative, she shows readers that as a young person, she could already play a show tune that would dazzle any audience or a more sophisticated piece of music that might be appreciated only by the musical elite (81). Even as a child, she knew the difference. But as an adult reflecting on the idea of “culture,” she is less convinced of the hierarchical distinctions she once made between “high” and “low” culture:

If I had to choose the most long-lasting impression regarding culture it wouldn’t be the artificial insemination of recorded music or music lessons which, in some sense, are like the decals of the happy children on the phonograph: colored, plastered on, glued to make a finished product, but only embellishments in the end, never a part of the real machine. It would be the memory of my mother’s beautiful, clear, Idaho farm-girl voice and the fact that she didn’t believe in it. (55)
In addition to giving honor to the important “culture” that Barber can now hear in her own Mormon mother’s voice, this passage implies that what has come to matter most to her is family.

In the middle of the book, Barber includes several photographs illustrating the poignant, and ironically humorous, aspects of her contradictory life growing up a Mormon girl. The photos include professional portraits of her young attractive parents; a portrait of her Mormon family with father, mother, and children; a grade-school photo of Barber with classmates; a group picture of her MIA Maid girl friends in white ruffled dresses on Rose Night; a photo of the Mormon temple (“Every Mormon girl’s dream”); photos of her modeling school and high school graduations; and finally, pictures of the Las Vegas Rhythmettes giving Leonard Bernstein “a wild west welcome at the McCarran Airport in Las Vegas.” Both Barber’s writing and the inclusion of these particular photos invite readers to view her pursuit of culture and public recognition with an ironic eye. A photo of chaste Mormon girls in white dresses next to a photo of the Las Vegas Rhythmettes perfectly and ironically illustrates the perspectives vying for her personal identification. In total, the combination of stories and pictures provides evidence for Barber’s self-reflective life as a creative writer. Her autobiography portrays a young girl growing up to better understand where she came from and how she “got cultured” amid the competing interests of Victorian Mormonism, Las Vegas show girl glitter, and highbrow classical music.

Telling Stories

Ultimately, Barber’s achievement as a writer, rather than as a pianist or a dancer, indicates that her life in the arts after age eighteen must have taken a different direction from the one she had anticipated as a child and adolescent. Whatever change occurred that brought her to professional storytelling is only foreshadowed obliquely in her chapter entitled “Stories.” This section consists mostly of Barber recounting various anecdotes routinely told by family and community members. The stories reflect the diversity of their experiences through folklore and gossip they share among themselves. This particular section recalls the storytelling and Mormon folklore that Juanita Brooks shares in her own autobiographical writing. Barber, too, wants to reconstruct the stories of her Mormon childhood, including “Tommy and Herman’s Famous Story” about her father and uncle’s teenage escapades; “A Sunday School
Story” about Joseph Smith’s First Vision; “Aunt Raity’s Story” about oranges and Santa Claus in a flatcar, which turns into a story about ladies of the night; “A From-the-Pulpit Story” about the need to pay tithing; “Under the Quilt Stories” that captures the gossip and Mormon folklore women share when quilting; and “The King of Stories” in which Barber reveals a dark side of her family through the half-truths her drinking grandfather tells. “Standing outside the stories,” she writes, “I could feel them colliding with each other. They tumbled from everyone’s mouth and filled my ears until I was confused by them. But every time I was inside a story, there was no confusion, only the clarity of a tale spun and the sound of the spinning wheel” (126). The life narrative itself intends to clarify her childhood and adolescent confusion, yet the artistry of Barber’s storytelling complicates her own and her characters’ experiences. As a writer influenced by postmodernist ideas, she multiplies meanings and prevents readers from coming to any simple or stereotypical conclusions about her life growing up a Mormon girl.

In this respect, Brooks, Williams, and Barber have many things in common as Mormon women autobiographers. All three are professional writers who artfully reflect the diversity of Mormon women’s experience. Their writing pioneers a distinctly twentieth-century style of Mormon woman’s autobiography that is influenced by their formal educations in writing and literary studies. They all signal an initial difference between their autobiographical acts and more traditional early Mormon women’s autobiographies by titling their books and chapters in nontraditional ways. For example, unlike Tanner’s, Hafen’s, and Martin’s autobiographies, neither Williams’s nor Barber’s autobiography, while grounded in a Mormon upbringing, contains the word “Mormon” in the book’s title or subtitle. They also use chapter titles metaphorically and sometimes ironically. For example, Williams’s chapter titles correspond to the names of birds that represent some idea central to the theme of each chapter. She also includes numeric data that record the changing elevation of the Great Salt Lake as the epigraph for each chapter. Likewise, Brooks and Barber use chapter titles that focus on theme. Barber’s second chapter, for example, is entitled “Oh, Say, Can You See?” The title indicates her ironic view of Mormon and Boulder City, Nevada, patriotism over the glories of the Hoover Dam—a monument to United States citizens’ industry and success controlling Mother Nature while generating jobs for workers to support their families. Similarly, “Sketches from the Keyboard,” a chapter that Barber writes to
explore the issue of culture, is subtitled with music terminology: “Cantilena Con rubato Op. 1, No. 1”; “Etude Allegro, sempre legato Op. 1, No. 2”; “Romance Dolce Op. 1, No. 3”; “Capriccio Agitato, ma non troppo Op. 1, No. 4”; “Elegy Lento Op. 1, No. 5”; and “Coda Moderato semplice Op. 1, No. 6.” This chapter’s six subtitles reinforce Barber’s education in classical music and suggest, to musically informed readers, how her audience should “read” each section (rubato, sempre legato, dolce, etc.). Her clues to tone and meaning given in the titles also intend to give readers a sense of how she is using her education in music to inform and influence the art of her writing.

Barber, Williams, and Brooks all use metaphor at length. Tanner, Hafen, and Martin, on the other hand, stick to a relatively plain prose style, using only an occasional metaphor to illuminate the stories of their lives. In contrast, Brooks sustains the metaphor of the wide, untravell’d world throughout major portions of her book, using it to focus readers on a central theme of her life. The metaphors Williams uses are grounded in the natural world. Barber draws from any aspect of life. Her rich metaphors roll out one after the other in almost every paragraph and every page of her text. Describing the fear she felt when auditioning to become a piano student of Mr. Slomkowska—“the best piano teacher in Las Vegas”—she writes that her “fingers felt like Siamese twins joined at the sides, great awkward things dabbing at the keys” (79). In addition, whatever ease she felt at home when playing a waltz had become “dammed up behind the twigs and fallen branches of my mind that kept telling me this was no place for me, no contest I should enter, that Mr. Slomkowska was a great squawking condor who’d scream at me and peck out my eyes for every wrong note or any sign of disrespect for the past” (82). The quantity and quality of Barber’s metaphors and her complex narrative structure distinguish her text from conventional autobiographies. Many Mormon women writers keep to a relatively strict chronological story line that begins at childhood and then moves through important moments or junctures in her life. This is true of Hafen, Tanner, and Martin. Barber, however, experiments with structure, beginning her story with a scene from childhood but then using flashbacks and flashforwards between and within chapters to narrate the story of her life. Brooks uses flashbacks similarly but not with the same frequency as Barber.

Barber, Brooks, and Williams also craft direct dialogue to reconstruct key scenes from their life experience. One especially important moment of dialogue in Barber’s text comes when she challenges her father about
the issue of pride. Before the ward talent show, she writes about how her father had cautioned his nine-year-old daughter against feeling too self-satisfied over adults asking her to accompany them during their performances. He does not want her to get a big head. When this same father, the bishop of his Mormon ward, performs a hula dance in drag, earning him the greatest laughter and applause from the audience that entire night, young Barber watches her dad try to “mask his eagerness” but then puff up with pride (51). She depicts the night as entertaining and enjoyable, but eventually the evening builds toward a climactic confrontation between her and her father. After Barber’s bubble is burst when she learns that the adults called her to accompany them because Sister Earl and her father recommended it, she feels deflated.

“Nobody called me just because they thought I was good, did they?”
“That’s extreme.”
“And you told Sister Earl to tell them, didn’t you?”
“You got to perform didn’t you?”
“It’s not the same.” I stomped the stage with one foot. “Now I feel stupid, stupid, stupid! I wish I’d never learned to play the dumb piano.”
“Come on, Phyllis. Settle down.”
“And don’t start preaching pride to me. You liked how everyone told you how great you were tonight. I watched you. You like being a star for yourself, not just for God. You can’t fool me.” (53)

Here she demonstrates an early willingness to confront the authority of her father, who is also an authority of the LDS Church. Even as a young person, she speaks her mind but ends the scene with contrite regret for accusing her father of hypocrisy:

His grass skirt rustled in a draft that seeped through the wood frame of the Boulder City Ward house into the room where everyone’s props were waiting to be taken home and put back in closets. And it seeped into me and my father’s suddenly sad eyes as he excused himself. “I’ve got to change clothes,” he said. “Wait for me.” (53)

Barber’s carefully fashioned dialogue in this emotionally charged scene shows more about the pain of this parent-child drama than she could ever have told about a difficult incident between her younger, righteous self and the father she chastises but loves.

Besides the literary quality of their styles, both Williams and Barber address similar themes when they criticize governmental abuse. For example, Williams writes ironically about the Utah government celebrating
how they had controlled the Great Salt Lake. Barber writes with equal irony about Nevadans’ satisfaction over “harnessing” the Colorado river with Hoover Dam (16). In addition, Williams focuses directly on condemning 1950s above-ground testing of atomic bombs in Nevada because of the tragic consequences it visited on her family. Barber, too, writes about the tests' contributing to her own gradual disillusionment with the government and with her growing doubts about the positive assurances her Mormon faith has always provided. “If I had to stop time,” she writes,

I’d stop it there where we were united in our certainty. . . . My father was happy; my family was sure of our place. I’d stop time right at that moment, before the test jets from Nellis Air Force Base began splitting the sky every day with a sonic boom, before the test sites and the atom bomb clouds that flowered on the early morning horizon, too big for me to comprehend. But soon after that, the certainty to which I’d given myself began to warp and shift. (8)

Here Barber’s growing doubts allude also to the religiously patriotic zeal of late-twentieth-century Mormons who unfailingly support the American government. Such zeal is a notable contrast to the suspicions and fears of their nineteenth-century ancestors, who were forced to protect themselves against the United States’ disenfranchisement and physical persecution of the Saints.

Also like Williams, Barber uses irony throughout her life story to explore Mormon orthodoxy and resist rigid obedience to religious faith. Barber’s autobiographical act exhibits more ironic humor and less overt anger toward Mormon male hierarchy and the subordination of women than Williams’s story. Nevertheless, she, too, portrays herself as a rebellious child and adolescent, always pushing against the boundaries of her mother’s restraints and religious fervor. When visiting Hoover Dam, she writes about running away from the tour group as a child to a site where she could “spread-eagle across two states.” After the tour guide shouts a warning, Barber says, “My mother jerked me back into Arizona, told me to stop wandering off, to stay with the group” (15). The scene humorously foreshadows Barber’s early wandering nature and resistance to group thinking and behavior.

Ultimately, Barber’s narrative follows the tradition of Mormon women’s life writing by repeating many of its common conventions. She writes about Mormon doctrine (polygamy, tithing, Word of Wisdom,
Joseph Smith’s First Vision) and culture (talent shows, quilting, family life, ward activities), but she repeats the conventions with a literary style that enlivens the familiar stories and makes them feel new. For instance, a traditional convention in Mormon women’s autobiography is a writer’s retelling of a faith-promoting story about a miraculous event she witnesses. Barber tells her own moving account of a childhood spiritual experience.

The incident occurs after seven-year-old Barber listens to her Sunday School teacher, Sister Austin, relate Joseph Smith’s First Vision. “The most important heavenly-being-appearing-out-of-thin-air story was about Joseph Smith, the first prophet of the church.” Barber recalls the class listening to Sister Austin describe how Joseph Smith read the King James Bible and was assured that if he asked God, he could know which church to join (105). She recalls Sister Austin telling each child that God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost visited Smith in the Sacred Grove. “It was a real vision,” insists Sister Austin, “not just a dream” (106). The Sunday School teacher then tells the children about the Angel Moroni also visiting Smith to help him find the Book of Mormon buried in the Hill Cumorah in New York State. “She sat there blinking, staring out at us, lost in the far-away world of the Sacred Grove where she seemed to be witness to the first vision herself” (107). Barber portrays herself and the other children as “waiting like trees” for their teacher to “come back to our classroom” (107). Intending for readers to take Sister Austin’s meditation on the First Vision quite seriously, she remembers asking her teacher,

“Would God appear to me if I prayed hard enough?”

“You can talk to him all you want and he’ll answer you,” she said, “but no ordinary human can see God—as much as we might wish otherwise. His glory would make you faint dead away on the ground.”

“But Joseph Smith was a person like us,” I said. . . .

“He was chosen,” she said. “Ordained by God. ‘Many are called, but few are chosen,’ the scriptures say. Joseph was a prophet, and we must listen to the voice of our prophets above any other voice we might hear.” (107–8)

The dialogue Barber reconstructs between these Mormon children and their Sunday School teacher illustrates the obedience to authority conditioned in Mormons from youth. That night, with the faith of a child who longs to see God, young Barber prays fervently in her head “where no one could listen.” Inventing her childhood language, Barber
writes, “I want you to come and see me, Heavenly Father and Jesus and the Holy Ghost. I love you as much as Joseph Smith did, honest” (108). Then, with some chronological distance but without the least degree of irony, Barber describes what she experienced as a child that night, testifying to the reality of her supernatural experience.

Just at the brink of sleep, I saw two feet, followed by legs, and a transparent body. I think it was the Holy Ghost because I heard the faintest flutter of wings and the smallest whisper: “I love you, Phyllis. I’ll help you find the truth and the way.” The being stood beside me, though I don’t think he stood on the floor. He leaned over me, so small in my bed, his face the softest outline of gentleness. The light from his eyes and his arms bathed me in waves of love.

As my eyes began to glaze over with a contented sleep, I saw the shimmering outline of a transparent foot exiting through the ceiling. The Holy Ghost had slipped back into the night to listen for other praying children, but he had come to me. He had. (109)

Such extraordinary visions of encountering beings who live beyond the veil regularly show up in the life writing of many Mormon autobiographers, beginning with Joseph Smith. Despite the overall comic and sometimes critical tone of Barber’s life writing, passages such as this one capture the sobriety and sincerity of her spiritual experience and convictions. In effect, her personal narrative reflects a mixture of doubt and belief; transgression and faith in her Mormon upbringing.

Ironically, through writing—rather than through playing the piano professionally, dancing, or modeling—Barber achieves a kind of fame that she never tells about having considered as a child or adolescent. Readers are given no indication about when Barber discovered the writing talent that would lead her to publish this memoir, teach creative writing at the University of Vermont, and receive the Associated Writing Programs Award for Creative Nonfiction. Yet through her autobiographical act, she becomes one of the women writers whom theorist Sidonie Smith speaks of when she declares, “[T]here have always been women who cross the line between private and public utterance, unmasking their desire for the empowering self-interpretation of autobiography as they unmasked in their life the desire for publicity” (“Woman’s Story” 44). Barber’s writing achievement exemplifies just such an unmasking of desire and rightfully earns her the public recognition that she always sought. Similar to the poetic prose that Terry Tempest
Williams offers in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Barber, too, constructs a late-twentieth-century autobiography that provides a new, finely crafted literary model for Mormon women autobiographers to follow in decades to come.