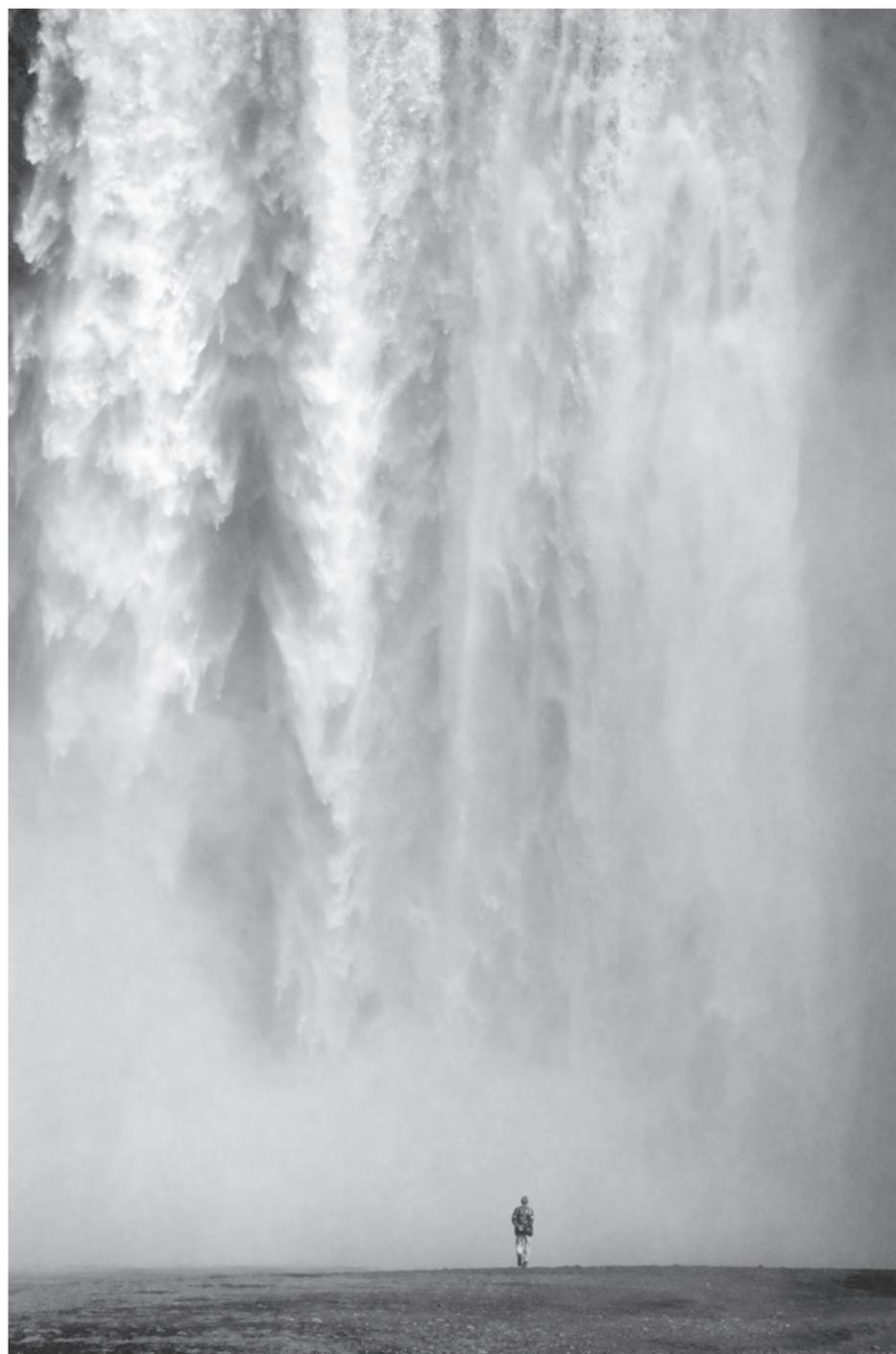


*Adventures*  
of the *Soul*



# Adventures of the Soul

The Best Creative Nonfiction from *BYU Studies*

Edited by Doris R. Dant

BYU Studies  
Provo, Utah

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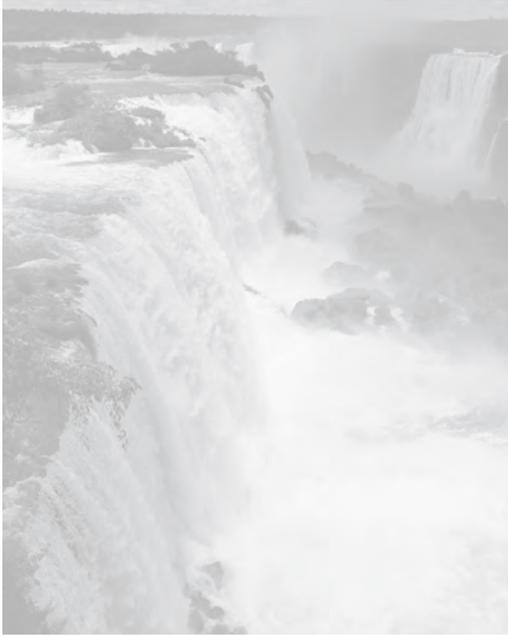
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*To my parents,  
Farrel and Della Ross*





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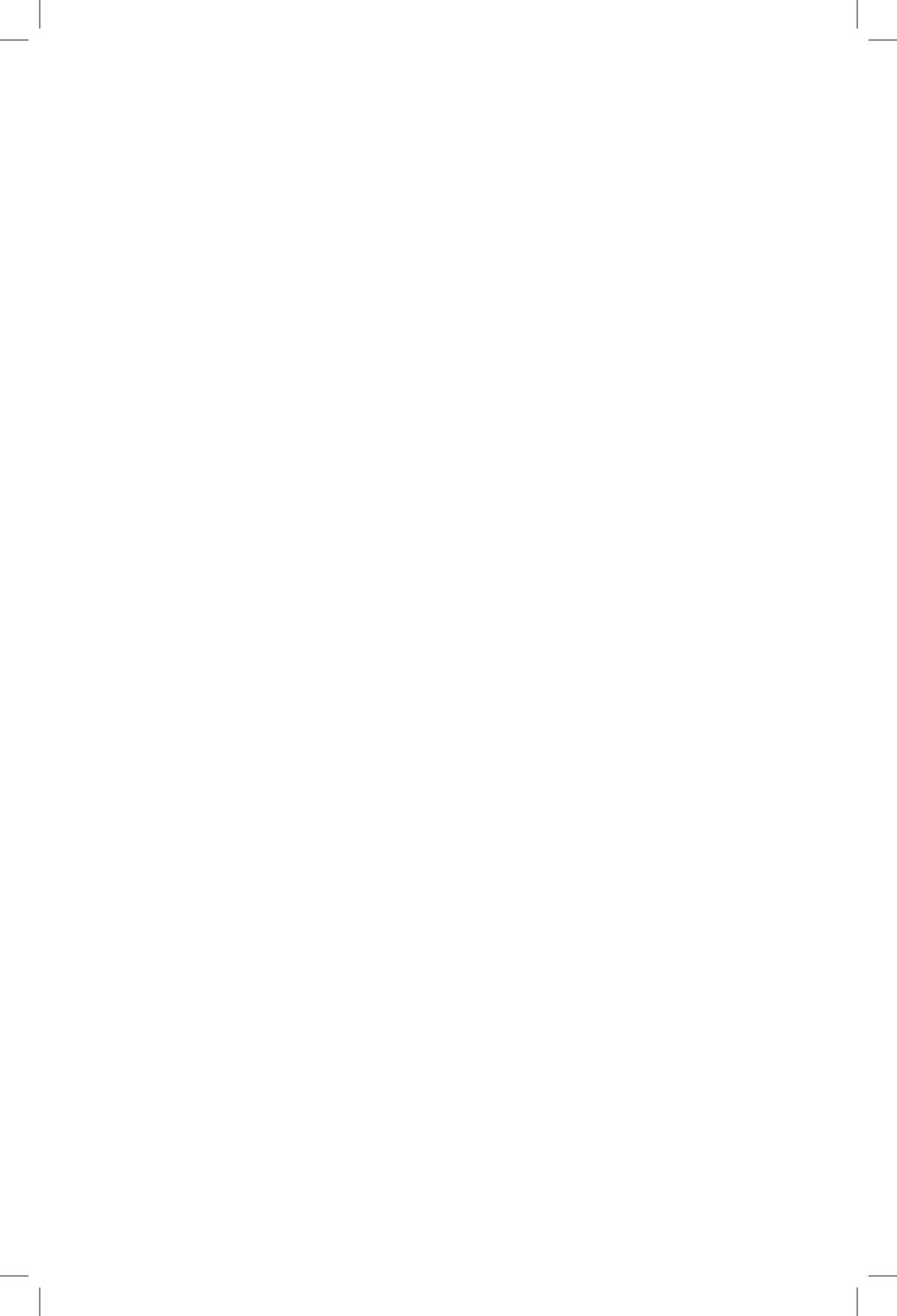
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# Adventures of the Soul

A Preview

Doris R. Dant

**T**HE PERSONAL ESSAY IS THE REALITY SHOW of literature. Always honest, sometimes brutally so, the twenty-three essayists in this book seek the truth, not through fiction, but through the reality of their own lives. Here, honesty must not shrink, not even from the possibility of being condemned. Melody Warnick, for example, bravely confesses that her daughter's tantrums "kindle" her own flare-ups of anger: "When Ella is angry, she kicks and hits. Worse still, she whines, the high trill of petulance ascending her throat like the curling smoke from a chimney. And when that happens, we become simply a scientific reaction: she is stimulus, I am response."

The miracle of the personal essay's implacable candor is that we don't judge Warnick (or any of the writers in this book). We join in her frustration; we may remember cupping a hand over a child's mouth to "muzzle her screaming." We understand how Warnick herself ends up screaming, and we follow her journey through Ether 12 to find peace. Then there is the certainty at the end of her soul's quest: one can become "healed and whole . . . for the moment." "For the moment"—a raw, almost unpalatable truth grounded in the reality of the human journey.

The honesty of these personal essays facilitates discovery. Rebecca Clarke confides how she “struggled for the answer [she] was seeking at the altar” but never received definitive divine guidance about her decision to marry. She was forced to discover trust and not just trust, but the truth about trust, that it requires us to choose: “I have not yet, in the fourth watch of the night, walked on the sea. I have not so much as walked on the water momentarily, as Peter managed. But I have leaned back into the water. I’ve let go of the safety of the edge and drifted from the side without the assurance of hands to hold me, without even an orange life jacket to buoy me up.”

In the personal essay, honesty can be bizarre, something so out of the ordinary that we are left breathless and feeling more than a little guilty for our hopeful voyeurism. But rather than leave the bizarre hanging naked before us, the personal essay, Mormon style anyway, baptizes the aberrant with love. That is what Rochelle Fankhauser does with her *tupe*, the family patriarch, who “at the age of sixty-seven . . . was not your average elderly man. He was off stealing bodies.” Well, one body to be exact. He recruited three helpers, then at three in the morning, “they crept into the living room towards Uncle Toby’s lifeless form. The room was warm with the regular sound of sleeping women, and condensation rolled off the windows onto the sills. Large breasts rose and fell, the women breathing a symphonic lullaby to their sleeping brother. The silent intruders stepped over and around the sleeping *kuia* as they made their way to the coffin in the center of the room.” Although he expected to be arrested, Fankhauser’s *tupe* undertook this extreme deed to return Uncle Toby to the man’s beloved island home. Love transforms the bizarre.

No essay in this book is more bizarre, though, than Thomas Draper’s “Spiritual ‘Reddyness,’” where the young Draper is described as desiring “spiritual heroics.” Determined to strictly heed any voice he heard, he followed a voice to a pile of manure. “‘Take and eat. Take and eat. Dig with your hands,’ [the] knowing voice incanted. ‘What you desire is at the bottom of this pile.’” Faced with “equestrian ambiance,” Draper

decided, “I wasn’t *that* ready . . . to obey heroic voices.” Though this is a spiritual moment probably no reader entirely shares, the essayist uses the particulars of experience to aim for the universal. Draper continues, “I had learned something important about the difference between being called and being chosen, as well as something about the developmental error of trying to precipitate premature revelation.” The particulars become mirrors. In one or more of them we recognize ourselves struggling to distinguish between voices and learning to be content with the “unheralded *spiritual usual*.”

Because any experience carries within itself the seeds of the universal, the personal essay is essentially democratic and global. A quick sampling of what is spread before us proves the point: Luis Silva of Uruguay; a Xhosa from South Africa; a young mother dying of liver failure in Provo, Utah; an adopted child, black in a white family; a German named James; a college student undergoing psychotherapy; an aged harmonica player in Idaho.

In keeping with its democratic nature is the personal essay’s “essential modesty.”<sup>1</sup> How can such modesty exist when the essay is about me and mine? Those pronouns are the hallmarks of egotism. As Phillip Lopate acknowledges, “It takes a fair amount of ego to discourse on one’s private affairs and offer judgments about life.”<sup>2</sup> And Joseph Epstein did admit about his first essay, “I found myself greatly elated in writing about that sweetest of subjects—my own experience.”<sup>3</sup> To “ward off potential charges of vanity or self-absorption,”<sup>4</sup> the protagonist

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1. Emily Fox Gordon, “Book of Days,” *American Scholar* 72, no. 1 (2003): 27.

2. Phillip Lopate, “Introduction,” in *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, selected by Phillip Lopate (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 31.

3. Joseph Epstein, “The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery,” in *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, ed. Joseph Epstein (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 15.

4. Lopate, “Introduction,” xxxi.

is often self-deprecating: Tessa Santiago, for example, whose children “learn there is one who will always come (sometimes very slowly) in the night to save them.” Or Roger Terry: “We tried tracting once after eight o’clock, and somebody threatened to call the police.” Or Pauline Mortensen: “The nurse puts the thermometer in my mouth, wraps my arm and pumps it up to take my blood pressure. They have to monitor the vital functions. I am alive. She brings the bedpan.”

But the primary contributor to the personal essay’s modesty is the confession. Marilyn Nelson Neilson confesses to the criminal thoughts she harbored and elaborated as a child: “I amused myself by thinking up alibis for misdeeds I had never done. I thought of ways I could get away with things: Forgery? I’m only seven, officer. We don’t learn cursive till next year.” This confession to her “secret badness” so offsets her obvious giftedness that we can revel with her in words instead of feeling aggrieved that as children we weren’t as gifted as she. Religious people generally have little trouble with confession, and Latter-day Saints, who every year are expected to revisit the pride cycle of the Book of Mormon, are no exception. For essayists who are not so religious, “the trick is to realize that one is not important, except insofar as one’s example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish.”<sup>5</sup>

Aiming to produce strong reactions and startling disclosures, these essays are structured to be revealing. George Bennion writes about his father, who had a “gentle, Victorian nature.” Yet by the third paragraph we learn that “encountering or thinking of him was accompanied by a nebulous sense of risk.” Just what that risk entailed is examined through stories the author tells from his viewpoints as a child, a young man, and a fully mature adult. “The essayist transects the past, slicing through it first from one angle, then from another,” Emily Fox Gordon said of such a process, “until—though it can never be captured—some

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5. Lopate, “Introduction,” xxxii.

fugitive truth has been definitively cornered.”<sup>6</sup> Each revelation about the “gentle father” explains, yet doesn’t, quite, until at the end it is a dream that “corners” the truth.

Similarly, this book is structured to enable one essayist to clarify or exemplify or reinforce another. In spite of being published over almost the entire fifty-year span of BYU Studies’ existence, these superb essayists speak to each other. In Santiago’s essay about “Brother Wiseman,” even the “most vocal bigot” in her all-white, South African branch became willing to say of that branch’s sole black member, Brother Wiseman, “he’s just a man like the rest of us.” Marcus Martins, himself a black member from Brazil, explains such racism within LDS congregations. Marjorie Newton joins the conversation about race, “I look lovingly and with new eyes at my ward members, the preponderance of dark eyes and black hair symbolizing a new Australia.” And Mari Jorgensen examines another interracial connection, that between her and her adopted daughter. This is a “connection that goes beyond genetics, beyond the umbilical cord that never bound us together.” Indeed, her daughter is “my dream.”

Between the covers of this book, other essayists murmur among themselves about illness and death, missionary experiences, mothering and fathering, children leaving home, and, either implicit or explicit in them all, God’s ways with his children. An example of how God’s dealings implicitly enter the conversations, Marian Sorenson’s poignant essay is about a troubled son, who “flew south one day, on wings too weak and too unsure.” She continues, “He is still flying. Each spring I climb the promontory and looking at the southern horizon keep my vigil. Waiting. Waiting for his return.” Sorenson’s longing for her lost son affects me deeply every time I read this essay, and then my compassion turns to another being: the Father who also waits and waits for us, his prodigal children, to return.

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6. Gordon, “Book of Days,” 27.

I invite you to journey with all the conversationalists in this book and, if you feel so inclined, to join them in their adventures of the soul.<sup>7</sup> And an adventure it will be. “There is something heroic,” Lopate observed, “in the essayist’s gesture of striking out toward the unknown, not only without a map but without certainty that there is anything worthy to be found.”<sup>8</sup> What is certain is that within us—within the billions of complex, diverse lives upon our planet—there is enough matter unorganized for the essayist to mold into worlds without number.

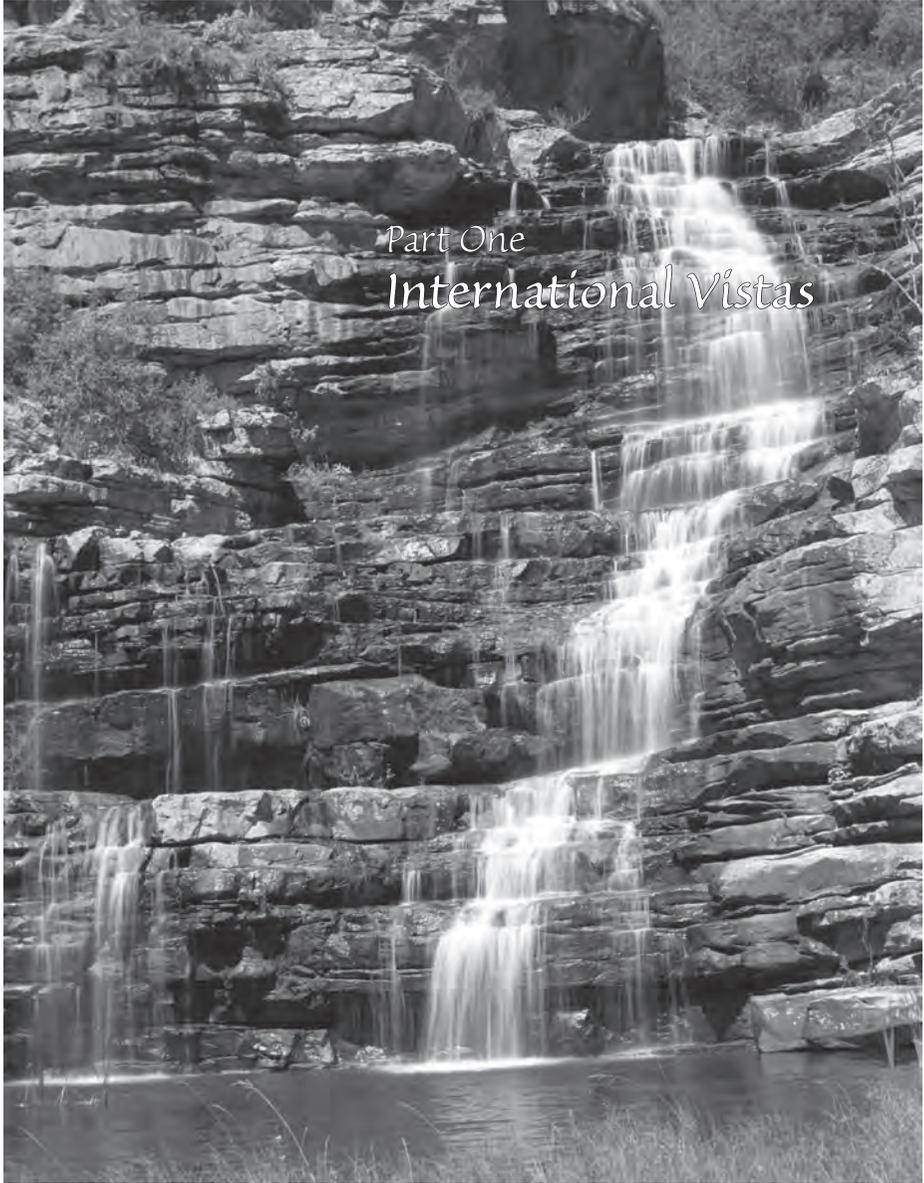
These innumerable possibilities are metaphorically captured by the waterfall—by its infinite variations on trickles, tiers, veils, plumes, plunges, cascades, cataracts, and cataclysms. Each one is an adventure, from those that soothe and refresh to those few that assault the earth with a thunderous rage so deafening it is best felt through the feet than heard with the ears.

I speak as an assiduous collector of waterfall adventures. And essays.  
Each adventure alters my soul.

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7. Everyone is invited to submit personal essays to the BYU Studies annual personal essay contest. Details about the contest can be found on BYU Studies’ website at <http://byustudies.byu.edu/Submissions/Detail/EssayContest.aspx/>. The deadline generally is December 31 each year.

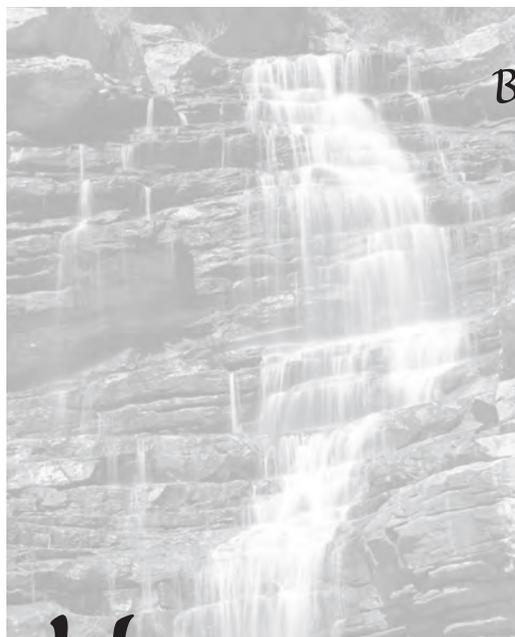
8. Lopate, “Introduction,” xlii.



Part One

*International Vistas*





## Brother Wiseman

Tessa Meyer Santiago

**H**E APPEARED IN OUR MIDST suddenly one Sunday morning. Hopped off a double-decker bus across the road from Wayne's Bakery just as they were pulling the first buns, five cents apiece, from the oven. Although, *hopped* is not exactly the word. More like he shuffled his little black body across the street and up the seven stairs outside the Mowbray Chapel, corner of Grove and Main, Cape Town, South Africa. Our problem was that he shuffled up those stairs, his three-piece suit folding dove gray around his ankles, about two years before the priesthood was restored to all worthy members, and twelve years before apartheid ended.

He had shuffled his slow way from Sea Point, a wealthy Jewish enclave on the sea front, from a small dark room in the basement of a tall apartment building where he was the night watchman. I've seen those rooms in the basements of tall buildings or out back next to the dumpsters and the storage sheds—used to look in while playing hide-and-seek in friends' apartment buildings. Windowless brick walls, paraffin stoves to heat meals and water in blackened tin cans, a thin-mattressed bed in one corner, maybe a broom or a row of clothes hooks

in the other, but always an adult black face that stared as my white curiosity invaded his privacy.

Apparently, Brother Wiseman found a Book of Mormon in a dustbin (before it was the fashionable way to find a Book of Mormon). He took it back to his windowless room to read. It took him awhile, years, I think—the book was in English; he was Xhosa. Then one morning he appeared in the white suburbs, at what seemed to be a white church, and holding that book in his hands, asked to join.

My friends and I thought he was a beggar at first, albeit quite a nicely dressed beggar. Or perhaps he had lost his way—the Methodist church, where red-cassocked, black lady deacons kept audiences in check every Sunday afternoon, was just behind us and started services in the afternoon. So we slid off the iron railings and ran, calling for the branch president to deal with him. He was no beggar; neither was he lost. He just wanted to be a member of our church.

I was young, still in Primary but at the stage where I would be embarrassed by Primary programs. I heard only snatches of his story: found book—read it—wrote to Salt Lake City—read more books—wife and children in Transkei,<sup>1</sup> sees them once a year—gets only one Sunday off every two months—saved money for bus fare—wants to be baptized.

And he was. Then he took his seat, three seats from the back door. A perfectly round, black head, melting slightly at the jowls, atop a short, black body. As I passed him on his Sundays, he would nod his head, stick his pink palm out to be shaken, and smile, showing three teeth and startlingly red gums. “Yes . . . yes,” he smiled to me. “Yes . . . yes” became his refrain as we spoke at him at deaf-person’s volume, as if louder English would help this Xhosa man understand. I think it helped him see only how awkward we were with him there.

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1. an area on the eastern cape of South Africa, one of two that were set aside for those who spoke Xhosa

His presence reminded us simultaneously that this church must really be true and that our lives were pharisaical. Why else would an elderly black man spend precious time, even more precious money to spend time with people he had nothing in common with, linguistically, socially, legally? How else could he climb to the pulpit one fast Sunday morning to bear his testimony in broken English: "I love God's church. I know Joseph a prophet. I know Book Mormon. I love church. I happy." He became a talisman of sorts. Our Brother Wiseman. Our black member of the Church.

But his membership only confused us white members living comfortably in that prejudiced land: his worthy black hand took the sacrament from the same tray as ours; his pittance of worthy tithing paid Brother Martin, suffering from black lung, to care for the chapel; then his legally unworthy body climbed to the top of the bus and returned to his windowless basement, a paraffin stove, and a plodding night watch while the white people slept.

Once after church, waiting in the parking lot for the missionaries, I asked Brother Rigby, the most vocal bigot in the branch, what was wrong with black people. "They're just different, inferior, not capable," he replied almost jokingly, as if he had an "I didn't really mean it" waiting in the wings should I take offense.

"But what about Brother Wiseman? Is he inferior?" I asked, pushing the point.

His face straightened for a minute. "No, he's different. He's just a man like the rest of us."

Brother Wiseman had to be different for us. There was no other way we could allow him to stay. In South Africa at the time, we had a legal label: *honorary white*. It was granted to visiting dignitaries, to foreign ambassadors, to blacks who needed to be in white-only places without fear of harassment or arrest. I think we made Brother Wiseman an honorary white for the few short hours he worshipped in Mowbray chapel. If not, then all other blacks must be just like him: worthy, faithful children