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Reviewed by Samuel M. Brown

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Jana Riess, *Flunking Sainthood: A Year of Breaking the Sabbath, Forgetting to Pray, and Still Loving My Neighbor*. Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete, 2011. Paper: \$16.99.

When someone asks, once again, whether Mormons are Christians, just hand them this book. Jana Riess, one of the freshest writers in the Mormon tradition, has delivered an elegant, exciting, and ultimately inspiring memoir of spiritual struggle that highlights the best from the traditions (largely Protestants and Catholics) to which Paraclete Press addresses its considerable output while quietly affirming the power of the tradition (Latter-day Saint) from which Riess writes. I see in this book several elements that affirm core LDS ideas and experiences, including a productive merger of “faith” and “works,” a tender relationship to communal rituals/ordinances, and a faithful eclecticism. Because this review is intended for a Mormon venue, I focus here on those Mormon elements, but I should be clear that this book is of great importance for people of any faith tradition.

As Riess eloquently explains, she began the project as an attempt to immerse herself in devotional literature from various traditions, tying the reading to specific spiritual practices. What she discovered midway through was that she was failing at every practice she pursued. With the help of her editor (and perhaps divine inspiration), Riess retooled the memoir into an honest assessment of what it means to yearn for sanctity and fail, repeatedly. In this frank and often playful assessment, Riess hits on the kind of balance of grace and “works” that can come from the productive merger of Mormon and creedal Christian sensibilities.

Though Mormonism has been associated with the Pelagian heresy (Pelagius was a British monk who waged and lost a war of words with Augustine of Hippo over whether humans could play an active role in their own salvation), Riess demonstrates just how effectively Mormonism can inform the traditional doctrines of Christianity without veering fully into the Pelagianism with which they are often associated. Work we must, but the lunch is free, to paraphrase the late

Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley in one of his best devotional moments. It is the failing struggle and the ultimate victory in Christ's grace that redeems us. The beautiful works are not necessarily the works completed but the projects undertaken in the light of God's power.

I was struck by how much ritual resonated for Riess and for me as I accompanied her on the journey. The practices that she saw as important enough to return to after the book were fasting and Sabbath observance. Both of these were less about the self-help psychologized religion so familiar from the American landscape and more about the meaning of physical activities in the creation and maintenance of community. Some of the prayer practices she describes seem like so much pop psychology, and her lack of engagement with certain types of self-focused prayer thus resonated with my own sense about similar practices. (She did, however, stick with the formalized Jesus Prayer.)

There is a self-aware eclecticism in this spiritual memoir that for me recalls the earnest quest for the fragments of ancient religion that characterized early Mormonism. Riess's eclecticism feels Mormon to me from beginning to end, an eagerness to find all that is good and true throughout the world.

The epilogue is a great thunderclap in this book. I won't give away all the details, but in retrospect Jana's year as an unsuccessful pilgrim prepared her for an emotionally taxing encounter with a deeply troubled man. We yearn for holiness, we hunger for Christ, and we find him at the bedside of an emaciated, moribund gambler who abandoned his family decades earlier. Loving the fractured means loving Christ, both because the fractured are Christ and because we are all of us fractured.

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