

The poet, historian, novelist, and teacher Marguerite Young was born in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1908 and, after being raised by her grandmother, earned degrees at Butler University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Iowa, before moving to New York City in the 40's where she made her home in a small apartment on Bleecker Street, which she kept crammed with books and her collection of dolls, until her death in 1995.

Marguerite knew nearly every relevant literary figure of her day, and was well regarded by many of them as well—Truman Capote called Young ‘the one who taught us all’ and Flannery O’Connor called Marguerite ‘the greatest grand mere.’ Her fellow hoosier Kurt Vonnegut, called Marguerite an unquestionable genius—and Kurt didn’t just know her from the New York literary scene, Marguerite had been his High School homeroom teacher.

In the early 40's Marguerite published two collections of poetry and a history of the utopian religious settlement of New Harmony, Indiana before undertaking her first work of fiction, a book that would come to be known as *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*. Marguerite had told her publisher that she expected she’d need 2 years to write the book and that it should be about 200 pages when complete. Instead, it took Marguerite 18 years to write the 1200 page, 750,000 word novel—this word count being equivalent to 3 and a quarter *Moby Dicks* or one and a half *War and Peaces* or 60% of a *Remembrance of Things past*.

Biographical sketches about Marguerite overrun with information like what I’ve shared so far, but one detail that her fans, undergraduate theses on her work, *New Yorker* articles, Wikipedia, or the website of her most recent publisher cannot resist mentioning is that Marguerite was a collateral descendant of Brigham Young, the second president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Although there is no indication that Marguerite or her immediate family were members of the Church, today I wish to examine what influence this oft-touted relationship to Brigham Young

may have had on Marguerite and her work, particularly in how it might turn up in Miss MacIntosh, My Darling.

Well-received by critics and readers alike upon its initial publication in 1965, *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* is now largely known for not being very well known. Look it up on the internet and you'll find articles with titles like "The Most Unread Book Ever Acclaimed" (*Paris Review*), "Forgotten Masterpiece? Marguerite Young's Miss MacIntosh My Darling" (*The Antioch Review*), "The Longest, Least-Remembered Great American Novel" (The New Yorker), or "Sick of Streaming? Try This Really Long Cult Novel" (*Jstor Daily*).

The novel is narrated by one Vera Cartwheel, who grew up "left alone, screaming and wild" in a New England coastal mansion of such overwhelming grandeur that it would make Charles Foster Kane's Xanadu look like a carriage house—or, as Vera puts it in the book, "'I did not dream I lived in marble halls, for I lived in marble halls."

Vera also grew up nearly parentless, her father having disappeared climbing a perilous Himalaian peak that no one remembers the name of and her mother retreating into an opium addiction, spending her days lying in her bed "heavily laden with jewels like a Greek corpse" welcoming the figures of her narcotic hallucinations, spectral guests who leave her bedroom "as filled with visitors as Grand Central Station."

Seeing that Vera appears doomed to grow up unguided, one Miss Georgia MacIntosh is hired as her nursemaid and becomes the "hale companion of her lost childhood".

Hailing from humble What Cheer, Iowa, and possessing an "impatience with which she would dismiss all shades and phantoms", "Her heart as stout as hickory or oak, her mind so sensible that she could not be deceived by any illusion or enchantment", Midwestern Miss MacIntosh stands in contrast with the East Coast decadence of Vera's mother as the lone person Vera knows who is grounded in reality and "the last person who...would submit to no luxurious temptation of this old crazy house".

When *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* begins, we find the adult Vera Cartwheel aboard a bus in search of her childhood companion.

While Vera claims to be headed for Miss MacIntosh's hometown in Iowa, the bus she is on travels in endless circles through southern Indiana, never to reach Vera's professed destination. Whatmore, in the first chapter of the book Vera reveals that Miss MacIntosh is dead, yet Vera has undertaken this journey to seek her out anyway.

While *Miss MacIntosh My Darling* often draws comparisons to novels such as *Ulysses* or *Remembrance of Things Past*, I think the most apt comparison for it would be to *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* in the way both books absolutely refuse to stick to the story you thought you were going to read and, like Vera's bus through the midwest, seem utterly determined not to arrive at their professed destinations.

And much like Vera Cartwheel's bus circling southern Indiana, instead of going directly to the question of what evidences of Marguerite's Mormon heritage I found in *MMMD* I'd like to first take a tour through references to and evidences of Mormonism in her other works and outside statements.

Published in 1945, Marguerite's first book, *Angel in the Forest*, the true history of two utopian communities that made their homes, one after the other, in New Harmony, Indiana. Young draws connections between the Harmonists, the first of these two groups, and early Mormons several times during the book. The Harmonist were known for their celibacy, which Young contrasts with the polygamist Mormons who would found Nauvoo, Illinois "not an eagle's flight from Harmony" where "an angel named Moroni, would, within a few years" "bless polygamy in the temples" "of Nauvoo." (*Angel in the Forest*, 63).

Also in 1945, *The Nation* published "Joseph Smith, Mormon Prophet," a review by Young of Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*. At no point in this two-page review does Young even suggest that she has something of a connection to the subject of the biography—and Young doesn't have much to say directly about Brodie's book, either, instead, the topic of

Brodie's book serves as a jumping off point for Young to write a short history of Joseph Smith in her own style.

The earliest occurrence of a direct statement by Young concerning Mormons or Mormonism occurs in an interview with *Vogue* magazine in 1946, where she says:

As for the American myth, it is fabulous, too—I don't know why we should have ever been considered a plain people; our heads are in the clouds. Lately, I've been reading Fawn M. Brodie's 'No Man Knows My History', the brilliant biography of that wild-eyed Joseph Smith who, looking for lost treasures in the ground, stumbled onto the writing of an American angel, and founded, as a result of the encounter, the Mormon Church. No, America is not dull, and I'm tired of all the neat little books which describe it as dull.

After these early examples of Marguerite speaking on Mormonism, interviews, articles, and reviews are quiet regarding the church or any connection she might have to it until 1975 when, in an autobiographical sketch Marguerite provided for the Who's Who compilation *World Authors, 1950-1970*, she plainly and definitively states: "I am a collateral descendant upon my father's side of Brigham Young."

This was a point of pride that had eluded publication up until then and pride over her relation to Brigham Young is just how author Steven Moore characterizes Marguerite's view of her relation to the prophet. Having met with Young in the early 1990's to finalize a new publication of *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*, Moore recalls that "The 'business' part of our conversation lasted about five minutes, but she spent an hour talking about everything else under the sun, especially people she knew and who admired her work (She was rather vain in this regard; she made sure I knew she was descended from Brigham Young, relayed her "dear friend" Saul Bellows' opinion of her work to me, etc. etc.)

Marguerite would finally write extensively on Brigham Young in her last major book, *Harp Song for a Radical*, which was posthumously published in 1999. A biography of sorts of Eugene Debs, founder of the modern American labor movement, Young's strategy for this book "was to use historical figures of the times as the focus [to] create a palpable sense of the cultural climate" of Debs's days. And this focus leaves Marguerite with much to write about Mormons, who turn up repeatedly throughout her book with Marguerite describing the early life of Joseph Smith, the foundation of the church, the flight of the Saints from the east coast to Ohio and then Illinois—and the emergence of Brigham Young in the history of the movement.

I cannot help but sense a certain fondness for Brigham Young in Marguerite's writing. She introduces Young as "a man who could not spell the word "millennium", but with the spirit of reform on him could speak in bird tongues, angel tongues, foreign tongues, [and] tongues of prehistoric peoples" (HS, 31) Marguerite describes Brigham as "seeing nothing but truth" in the Book of Mormon when he first reads it, assured that "this truth was the pure gold of the spirit of God and not the gold of a fool." (HS, 121).

Marguerite describes Brigham Young's assumption of his role as the second prophet of the church in terms Latter-day Saints would recognize:

...the murdered prophet's suddenly refulgent, resurrected spirit had seemed to all but the black-garbed widow and her small party to descend upon Brigham Young, upon whose stalwart back with its excellent melon head it had been placed. (HS, 36-37).

The narrative also spends time in Brigham Young's Salt Lake City and takes critical aim at Mark Twain's account of the same, characterizing Twain as out of his depth in the undertaking, speculating that "the very thought of [Brigham Young] filled Mark Twain's somewhat porous brain with awe."

As to what Marguerite's Mormon heritage may have meant to her in her work, we get one comment by Marguerite in a 1988 interview where she remarks, in response to the question of what debt she might feel to the Modernist authors of the early 20th century:

"Theological, historical, philosophical—I'm as much influenced by Joseph Smith and the Mormons as I am, more so, than by [TS] Eliot. Actually, I'm much more influenced by the poetry of the Mormons."

The statement strikes the seeker of a connection between Young's works and Mormonism as just what they may have been looking for. Here it is, plainly stated, the claim by Marguerite herself that her work is much more influenced by Joseph Smith and the Mormons than certain modernist predecessors—of course, one is left hungry to know which Mormon poets she might be referencing..

And so now, finally, we return to *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* to see how that influence manifests itself there.

As it turns out, the word "Mormon" appears just once in the whole book, when we find a Mormon among a list of lovers taken by one Esther Longtree, the perpetually pregnant waitress at a small town diner.

Given the amount of Mormons and Mormonism included in her two other major works and the importance she attributed to the religion, this lone use of "Mormon" is definitely fewer references than I expected. But the search doesn't end with looking for occurrences of the word "Mormon" in the book. *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*, contains various details or statements that may strike a reader with an eye out for them as Mormon-coded, or in contemporary slang, "giving Mormon".

Whatever connection there are in the novel to Mormonism, I'll argue that the strongest are to be found through Miss Georgia MacIntosh herself. Miss MacIntosh was the source of young Vera Cartwheel's moral upbringing, as she says "Miss MacIntosh was the missionary and i was the dreaming savage"

Miss MacIntosh's teaches her a purpose of life that bears a resemblance to the Latter-day Saint Plan of Salvation: "we were put here to be tested... This earth was the testing ground, and there was nothing but the test, so far as could be realized" and God "had wished to leave man free, and also, it was the testing ground for man with all his fleshly weaknesses about him, all those temptations which he must ignore, for he must develop his strength and character." (MM, 51)

From Miss MacIntosh, young Vera learns that "the light which came from within was the only light by which to steer our way" (MM, 46)—similar to the Latter-day Saint doctrine of every human being being born with "the light of Christ" within them, to help them make correct decisions in their lives.

Miss MacIntosh taught that it "behooved us at all times to be simple and direct with our minds made up and our conscience clear and our shoulders to the wheel, helping those who were not the children of fortune" (MM, 46)—putting one's shoulder to the wheel being a popular Latter-day Saint expression and the title of a popular Latter-day Saint hymn, and this need to help those who were not children of fortune a recurrent topic of Miss MacIntosh's instructions to Vera.

Miss MacIntosh teaches that in life, "Every shining moment must be filled with action, ideally for the good of someone other than ourselves" (MM, 51) and "We must prepare ourselves to live in the service of others, the cold, the starving, the poor, the maimed, the crippled, for the opium paradise was never God's way of life." (MM, 51) These sentiments bring to mind Mosiah 2:17, "when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God." Vera describes Miss MacIntosh as having the "profound conviction that one soul was as worth saving as another" (MM, 53), which resembles the Latter-day Saint belief, as expressed in Doctrine and Covenants 18:10 that "the worth of souls is great in the eyes of God."

Miss MacIntosh's favorite books were those "good for the growing soul, such as *Pilgrim's Progress* which she preferred to even the Word of God, for the Word of God was that which should be taken with a grain of salt and was that which could be subjected to so many contradictory interpretations and laid over with so many human exaggerations" (MM, 56) To her, the King James Version of the Bible "was not to be trusted because [it was] made for the vanity of earthly kings and for the unification of the British Empire" (MM, 268). Intentionally or not, Miss MacIntosh has a neighbor in the Latter-day Saint stance on the translation of the Bible, as stated in the eighth Article of faith: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly", and the belief expressed in the Book of Mormon that over the course of history, "there are many plain and precious things taken away from the book, which is the Book of the Lamb of God." (1 Nephi 13:28).

Miss MacIntosh teaches Vera of an age of accountability for children, though MacIntosh sets the age at 12, not the 8 of Latter-day Saints:

"My twelfth birthday, Miss MacIntosh said, was the dividing between my irresponsibility and my responsibility, for I had reached the age of wisdom in both the eyes of God and in the eyes of man. She had always promised that after I was twelve, I was to make my own decisions, for she should not be responsible and held to account in the book of life." (MM, 172-73) This sentiment of Miss MacIntosh also resembles the Latter-day Saint belief that parents bear the responsibility for a child's decisions after the age of 8 if the child is not baptized (Doctrine and Covenants 68:25).

But where do these beliefs and teachings of Miss MacIntosh's come from?

Miss MacIntosh's particular religious beliefs are never named beyond "Christian", "she being the youngest of a large Christian family" (MM, 167). We know she was not Catholic, for "in her plain opinion" Rome was "a heathen and monstrous city idealizing the dead...a place which good Christians should flee from as from a plague, a place of cinders, one where she would not be seen" (MM, 59).

Vera describes Miss MacIntosh as having “originated in Iowa among the primitive Christians of great works and little faith, not of great faith and little works.” (MM, 59). From its origins, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints identified with the primitive Christian church, the lengthy name of the church indicating that the origins and originator of the two were the same, all that separates them being their era.

Like Latter-day Saints, the Christians of What Cheer baptized by immersion, in What Cheer “baptisms were total immersion in a cold or ice-bound stream, a great hole being chopped in the ice, and sometimes the baptized were drowned” (MM, 59) — and late in the novel we learn that young Georgia MacIntosh was herself nearly drowned at her childhood baptism (MM, 888).

The Christians of What Cheer were a missionary people, Miss MacIntosh’s “own dear brother” Richard “had gone out as a primitive Christian bishop from Iowa to convert the heathen of the Easter Islands and had never returned” (MM, 62). During a directionless period between her youth and maturity, Miss MacIntosh “thought of going to look for her dear brother Richard among the Polynesian head-hunters, where he was still preaching the old religion” this, it is explained, “was before Richard’s disappearance, which had so long baffled the elders of the church.” (MM, 923).

Richard MacIntosh’s departure to preach in Polynesia *brings to mind* Latter-day Saint missionary efforts in those same islands. Richard’s departure, and sub-suh-qwent disappearance, also conjures up the story of Hagoth from the Book of Mormon, who set out by sea to the west and was never heard from again (Alma 63:5-8). And it also seems worth noting that the organizational structure of the primitive Christian church of What Cheer, Iowa included “bishops” and “elders”—also offices in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

There are also stylistic and story elements to Miss MacIntosh, *My Darling*, that hint at Mormon influence...

When Vera Cartwheel introduces herself to the reader, she does so with language bearing a resemblance to Nephi's opening lines of the Book of Mormon, with both narrators introducing themselves in an "I, (name)" form, then they describe their parent(s), what the parent may or may not have provided for them, and then move on to summarize the journey of their life so far.

Vera says: "I, Vera Cartwheel, I, the imploring daughter of a mother under the sway of opium, a mother more beautiful than angels of light, I, Vera Cartwheel, had wandered through the streets of great, mysterious harbor cities... (and then she continues with a long description of these great, mysterious harbor cities) while Nephi writes in the first lines of 1 Nephi "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days...."

Next, in a key moment of the novel, on the night of her 14th birthday, Vera bursts into Miss MacIntosh's private quarters without permission, resulting in a rupture to the relationship between the two that leads to the death of Miss MacIntosh—Reflecting back on the incident as she narrates it, Vera asks "Was it murder or the key turning of itself in the lock? Whose hand at the door knob? Was it God's hand, and if it was God's hand, was it still murder?" (MM, 166).

This brings to mind the experience of Nephi being directed by the Spirit of the Lord to slay Laban early in the Book of Mormon, Nephi being absolved of guilt because the death of Laban was God's will—"Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands; Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes." (1 Nephi 4:12-13).

Estimates of Nephi's age at the beginning of the Book of Mormon often put him at 14-17 years of age, so he and Vera cross a similar threshold at a similar age, a threshold which would lead them into their adulthood and journeys to the west in search of that which their homes could no longer offer. Also, just as Nephi is brought to Laban led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which he should do, Vera is brought to Miss MacIntosh's bedroom astride

her horse (like I said earlier, Vera lived in a very big house), remarking that the horse “seemed to know the way” – both of our narrators are brought to these pivotal experiences as if guided or carried (figuratively or literally) by forces outside of themselves.

But, in spite of these possible references and connections, weaving references to Mormon beliefs, practices, scripture and history into a reading of *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* could very well be asking too much of *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*. We have found bullet holes, but not a smoking gun, and many of these references I've cited are not uniquely meaningful to Latter-day Saints.

Finally, thinking that a family tree showing Marguerite's connection to Brigham Young would be an excellent visual aid for this presentation, I found that just as *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* does not burst with the overt mentions of Mormonism I had hoped to find, it's also difficult to determine exactly how Marguerite Young was related to Brigham Young—if in fact, she actually was.

Marguerite's genealogy on the Young side tracks easily back three generations to her great grandfather, Peter H Young, who was born in “Ohio” in 1833 and died in Decatur, Indiana in 1899. The trail of Marguerite's ancestors stops cold with Peter. With no parents listed, it's up to conjecture as to how Peter Young might have been related to Brigham Young.

While with his 1833 birthdate, Peter could have conceivably been a son of one of Brigham Young's brothers And his “Ohio” birth location does match up with the migration of the Saints to Kirtland in 1831. The problem is that, unless there is some Davinci code-like conspiracy going on in their genealogical records to hide their relation to Marguerite, none of Brigham' brother's is listed as having had a son named Peter, and I feel confident that the progeny of Brigham Young's brothers has been thoroughly accounted for by their descendants.

If there is a family connection between Marguerite and Brigham, it seems likely it would have to be a few generations further up their respective family trees, which would leave Marguerite collaterally related to Brigham Young, but not descended, as she had described

herself and the relationship itself more tenuous than her prideful declarations or the inclination for its repetition would suggest.

With what we have seen, I am inclined to say that Marguerite was interested in Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, the Angel Moroni, and Mormonism for how they connected to her interests in angels, the interplay of the seemingly real and seemingly unreal, and the religious utopian communities of the nineteenth century. Brigham Young's embodiment of the utopian spirit—first in leading the Saints from Nauvoo to Utah, then in the development of Salt Lake City—must have appealed to her. What Young learned of Mormonism from learning about Brigham Young and Joseph Smith may prove to have provided character details for her stalwart Miss Georgia MacIntosh, whose Midwestern character stood in contrast with east coast decadence in the same way the early Latter-day Saints stood apart from the world around them.