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# Q&A

with the author  
 of the new poetry collection *Hive*

## Christina Stoddard talks about poetry, Mormonism, feminism, gang violence, and revenge



I needed to write a poem  
 that was absolutely boiling  
 over with rage.

about a teenage girl who is doing exactly that: deviating from the path she's supposed to follow.

Utah's nickname is the Beehive State—even though they don't really raise bees there and Utah doesn't produce a lot of honey.

**I gather from the book that you did not grow up in Utah, however.**

No, I didn't. I was born in the Pacific Northwest and grew up in Tacoma, WA, which is where the book is set. But my father is from Utah, and we visited relatives there often, so I'm familiar with a few cities in Utah.

**How long did it take you to write the book?**

That's a little difficult to answer, because I spent many years trying to write it and mostly failing. Originally what I produced weren't poems, they were more like polemics. I was a very angry person in my teens and twenties, and I had to work through that anger first.

A few of the poems have existed in some form for more than a decade. But most of the book was written over a period of three years, 2010 to 2013, after I had taken some creative writing work-

shops from poets Claudia Emerson and Ellen Bryant Voigt. Those women gave me the keys that unlocked everything else.

**What sorts of keys?**

I took a summer workshop at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, from Claudia Emerson, and when she read the group of poems I had turned in for class, Claudia basically told me that it seemed like I was phoning it in. She said I wasn't pushing myself in either form or subject matter, and she challenged me to do better.

**Really?**

Yes. That hurt at first, certainly, but I decided there were two options: I could either give up and go sulk in the corner, or I could fling myself off a cliff of experimentation and see what happened. I chose the cliff.

I started trying to write lyric poems, whereas previously my style had been very chatty, straightforward and plain, very rooted in story, what are often called narrative poems. A narrative poem has a beginning, middle, and end, and there's usually a lot of context about what's going on.

I took that new lyrical work and applied the next summer to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. I had no idea if the poems were any good—they were way outside of my comfort zone. But I got accepted, and I took a workshop with Ellen Bryant Voigt. Ellen once

**Where did the title of the book come from? Why *Hive*?**

Beehives are actually an important symbol in Mormon culture, and have been dating back to pioneer times. The exact reason why is not known for sure, but there are a few theories. One is that honeybees embody many qualities that the Church teaches its members to prize: harmony, industriousness, order, communal labor. Everyone performing their assigned role and everyone working together for the common good. Bees are cohesive and single-minded, not individual. Bees don't deviate from the path they're given—and thematically that is perfect for my book, which is

again turned my world inside out: she told me that I was really a lyricist, and the sooner I realized it, the better. She advised me to stop concentrating on narrative, on what happened next, and just let the poems feel the way they felt. Working with Ellen is what made me realize I was writing a book, an actual book, instead of just writing a bunch of poems.

**Yes, I imagine there's a difference between having a group of finished poems, and ordering those poems into a thematic collection. Could you talk about that process? For example, *Hive* is something of a project book. Did you set out to write a project book?**

Oh, no. I did not set out to write a project book—though I do agree that *Hive* turned out to be a “concept album.” But the book was definitely not cohesive from the get-go.

There are 40 individual poems in the book, and I didn't start thinking of them as being related to one another until I had more than 20 of them completed. That was after two summers of workshops, as I described earlier.

One of the biggest turning points in writing the book was when I realized that a lot of these poems could conceivably be spoken by one persona. It hit me that many of them could be read in the voice of a teenage Mormon girl—and suddenly I'd found my narrator. But the minute I had that thought, I tried to suppress it right away. I figured the fastest way to invite writer's block would be to tell myself that the poems had to be a certain way, or that I had to confine myself to this one first person limited view. Usually those types of restrictions slam the brakes on the creative process for me. It's paralyzing.

I also never wanted the book to be overly monolithic. That can get boring. That's part of the reason why several poems in *Hive* are told from other points of view, like the one spoken in the voice of the Old Testament whale who swallowed Jonah. I've read a number of poems about that Biblical story, but I haven't run across any from



the perspective of how the whale feels about being God's kneebreaker. Looking at it from that angle was interesting to me.

**When you write a poem, how do you know it's finished?**

It's more of a gut sense than anything else. I read my poems out loud to myself, over and over, hunting with my ear for places where I could adjust the music or compact the phrasing. I try to ratchet down the language really hard and then check to see if I can tighten anything further.

Of course you can always show a poem to someone else to get their take, and I do. I have some great and trusted friends I use as first readers.

**The book is divided into three sections. In the middle section, you get into some more historical context of**

**the Mormon church. What prompted you to do that, or why did you think that was necessary for the book?**

I organized the three sections around different ways of knowing. In the first section, the poems are about personal knowing—what the first-person narrator is aware of or understands, which can be kind of limited. The poems in Section I definitely raise more questions than answers.

The second section is about historical knowing, or generational knowing, and particularly what is handed down from mothers to daughters. There's also a moment in Section II where I tip my hand in a different way—the poem “Westward” is a historical poem about a massacre of unarmed women and children at a mill in Caldwell County, Missouri in 1838. It portrays the Mormon settlers as victims of persecution. Which they were. The

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Stoddard  
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Selected by Lucia  
Perillo

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number of times the early Mormon settlers were driven out of town by angry mobs—I can't even count them. We call it the wild west for a reason, remember. And of course I'm talking about Illinois and Missouri here as the west, but that really was the western frontier in the 1830s.

Section III has most of the poems where the speaker is an adult. You get the sense that she has managed to escape, that she no longer lives in the same neighborhood and certainly does not worship god in the same way as before. This is the section that is more hopeful, where the girl is trying to create a life for herself.

**But there's one poem in Section I where it seems clear that the narrator has grown up. This is "I Am Thinking of Salmon."**

That's true. I did that on purpose. In four of the first five poems in the book, there's at least one murder. That's a pretty heavy opening! I chose to put the poem "I Am Thinking of Salmon" early on in the book because I wanted the reader to know that our narrator survives. Whatever awful things happen along the way, she does live and she does get to the point in adulthood where she thinks she might even have children of her own.

In Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games*, I was really struck by the moment where Katniss tells Gale that she's never having children. That she absolutely refuses to let there be any chance that her child could be killed simply for the amusement of someone powerful. That moment in the novel hit me hard, because I had spent the last twenty years feeling that way. So many people I knew as a kid are dead. Violently, in shootings and stabbings and beheadings and overdoses—often before they were out of their teens.

**Did you write this book as a way to honor the dead?**

The book is elegiac, definitely. And I think all elegies are attempts to honor the dead and to reckon with loss.

So many people I knew as a kid are dead. Violently, in shootings and stabbings and beheadings and overdoses—often before they were out of their teens.

**One unusual thing about this collection of poetry is that there are actual characters in it, almost like a novel would have. We've got characters with names who show up page after page—Maureen, Abby, Rita, Juan. What was the motivation behind using these characters?**

As I said earlier, *Hive* is in many ways a concept album. It's telling the story of a particular place at a particular time.

The book is set in the Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma, WA in the 1980s and 1990s. Western Washington is a very mountainous place, and downtown Tacoma is literally down a hill at the edge of Puget Sound. And Hilltop is the semi-flat area on top of the hill that overlooks downtown. It's about 100 city blocks, and in the 1980s it was taken over by Crips who had moved north from Los Angeles following the passage of stricter drug laws in California. The Bloods came too, and they took the East Side of Tacoma, which is separated from Hilltop by the interstate. When I was growing up in Hilltop, it was a war zone.

I decided to use names in the poems—to create characters—in large part because the poems are based on real people who really lived. And some of them died, and I wanted to honor that. Names have been changed, of course, and sometimes I've conflated several people into one character. It is a lot like what novelists do.

Another reason is that poetry tends to have a pronoun problem. Most poems max out with using three people: an "I," a "you," and a "he" or "she." If you have both a He and She, you can squeeze in four people. But still, it can get really awkward really fast to juggle all those pronouns. Then the reader loses track of who's who, especially if they're just listening as opposed

to reading along. . . . My solution was to embrace the fact that all the poems happen in one neighborhood with specific residents, and I named the characters.

**Can you give us an example of a poem that really happened?**

Sure. The poem "Jacks" happened pretty much as the story is told in the book. My friend and I were out on her porch playing jacks one summer night when a car came around the corner, turned up its stereo really loud, and shot up the house right next door to us, just a few feet from where we were sitting. The instant we heard the gunfire, my friend and I dove off the side of the porch—the porch was basically a concrete slab and had no railings, so we rolled right off the edge of it. I landed on top of a bunch of jacks and they punctured my skin, but we were otherwise unharmed. One of the kids who lived in the house next door was a gangbanger, and apparently somebody thought he needed killing. But his sister got shot instead.

My friend and I really did think the cops would come, but police didn't venture into Hilltop very much and they never showed up. That was one of my great moments of disillusion early on, realizing that nobody was coming to help us. That's one of the moments I decided that I was getting out of Tacoma, whatever it took.

And I never told my mother what happened. The first time she heard about this incident was when she read it in the book manuscript.

**How old were you?**

I don't say in the poem exactly how old the two girls are, but in reality we were thirteen years old.

**You said you didn't tell your**

**mother about the drive-by shooting. Why didn't you? Did you tell anyone?**

At the time, I couldn't have told you why I didn't say anything. Even the other girl and I hardly ever spoke about it, although we were friends for years afterward. I guess on some level we felt like what would be the point? It might sound strange, but there was such a long list of horror stories that sometimes the bad stuff just seemed normal. It was our normal. Just another day in Hilltop.

As an adult, of course, I've read more about trauma and how people react to it in a variety of ways, and it turns out that frozen silence is a really common reaction. It's almost a shutdown.

**How about something that did not happen exactly as the poem describes?**

The villanelle in the book, "Raped Girl's Mad Song." This poem was mainly written for one of my friends. It blends elements of something that happened to me with elements of something that

happened to her. For example, there's a line about a stranger asking for directions—that comes from an incident where I had worked the closing shift at the mall, and on my way to my car through a mostly deserted parking lot, a man approached asking for directions. When I pointed and kept walking, he tried to grab me, but I screamed and then other people came out of the mall. He let go of me and ran off. He didn't have a weapon or anything. I was incredibly lucky. So partly this poem came about in thinking how easily it could have gone the other way. Then a close friend was raped by a stranger, and the man used a knife on her during the attack. All of that went into writing the poem.

But it isn't really a poem about rape. It's a poem about revenge.

The worst part for me looking on, in the aftermath of my friend's rape, was that I could not do anything to help this person that I loved, who had been hurt

hope that I've obscured things enough that it's at least a little difficult to guess who the real people are on whom the characters are based.

In terms of the poem that takes place in the middle of a Mormon temple ceremony baptizing the dead, yes—I'm sure that devout LDS church members will find that that poem crosses a line. I use a quotation from the actual baptismal prayer . . . and nothing that goes on inside the temple is supposed to be discussed in detail with outsiders.

With regard to the poem where the narrator's brother returns home from the Iraq War and repeatedly attempts to commit suicide, I suppose that my family might rather have me keep that quiet. But there are hundreds of other families with returned veterans who are going through the same thing, and our country is not giving veterans adequate access to the physical or mental health care they need. As an example I would cite the gross neglect that was uncovered at Walter Reed in 2007 and the discovery in 2014 of falsified records to cover up problems at VA hospitals.

In a lot of ways, I protected my family from reality for decades. Remember that I never told my mother I was almost shot at my friend's house because her next-door neighbor was a Crip. There was nothing my mother could have done, except forbid me from going over to my best friend's house. My parents didn't have a way to get out of that neighborhood—if they had, they'd have taken it.

Somewhere along the way, I decided that I'm done with silence. As Audre Lorde said, silence will not protect you. And if no one speaks out, nothing changes.

**Poverty and religion seem very intertwined in the book.**

Yes, they are somewhat inseparable to me.

I think there's kind of a traditional pop culture image of a Mormon family. They're white, with a mom and a dad, and four freshly scrubbed children

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so horribly. And my helplessness made me absolutely livid with anger. I knew if I ever found that scumbag, I would strangle him with my bare hands. I couldn't write a poem that talked about what happened per se—I wasn't there. But I needed to write a poem that was absolutely boiling over with rage—so that I had a place to put all my fury.

**Is that why you chose to write the poem in a form, a villanelle? There aren't very many poems written in formal verse in the book.**

Yes. When you have an ungovernable amount of emotion—especially a very strong one like anger—one of the ways you can shape it and contain it is to strap it into a form. Villanelles have a specific rhyming structure and repeated lines that act as refrains.

I think that forcing my subject matter to conform to those rules made the revenge story very clear and clean, and

it allowed me to skip over a lot of backstory. The reader goes straight to the emotional core of the poem and stays right in it.

And quite frankly, I kind of liked the idea that a raped woman would hunt down her attacker. I have written very few lines as emotionally satisfying to me as "I'll have your skull for a flowerpot."

**Are you worried at all about making private things public, or about backlash—I mean, some of the poems talk about things that might be family secrets or sacred rites. I'm thinking particularly of the poems about Mormon religious practices, such as the one that I believe takes place inside a temple, and also the poem about the suicidal brother.**

Well, part of that goes back to how the book has characters with names. All the names have been changed, of course. I

sitting down to a family dinner that mom made from scratch. But that wasn't my experience growing up LDS.

Our church congregation in Tacoma was incredibly poor because our neighborhood was poor, and it was racially mixed because our neighborhood was racially mixed. Pews filled with freshly scrubbed worshippers in suits and Sunday dresses—that was something I only saw when we went out of state to visit relatives. In Hilltop Tacoma, people showed up for church with holes in their shoes and unwashed hair because their water had been cut off. But they showed up to church anyway—that's what faith is.

We also had a lot of Vietnamese members and the service was translated for them live via headset. A missionary who spoke Vietnamese would sit in the front row and quietly translate into a microphone, for all the people who didn't speak enough English to understand. There are very few scripted prayers in an LDS church service, but for the blessing of the sacrament—what other churches call communion—the prayer is scripted. It would be said first in English and then again in Vietnamese.

I think I was lucky in that way.

**Your family was prominent in the early days of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, is that right? Tell us a little about that.**

Yes, my great-great-grandfather was Heber J. Grant, who was the seventh president of the Mormon church. The president of the church is also considered to be a living prophet, just like Moses was a prophet and Abraham was a prophet.

Heber Grant's father—who died when Heber was a baby—had also served in the First Presidency under Brigham Young. The First Presidency is the name for the two men who rank directly under the president. So Heber Grant's father was one of the top three most powerful leaders in the church until he died, and then later Heber himself became the prophet—the most

powerful person in the church.

In Mormonism, the appointment as president of the church is one made for life. Sort of like the pope. The prophet is always a man, and he is divinely appointed. Anyway, Heber Grant was the church's president and prophet for 27 years, from 1918 to 1945.

But if you think about U.S. and world history from 1918 to 1945, that encompasses a lot of the major events of the first half of the century: the aftermath of WWI, the Great Depression, and onward through the all of WWII. My great-great-grandfather was in charge of the entire LDS church worldwide during those periods of turbulence.

**What are some of the things that he did that were special or that proved lastingly important?**

Well, Grant is the church president who really enforced the 1890 Manifesto, which outlawed polygamy. Despite the fact that in the 1800s before the Manifesto, he himself had practiced polygamy and in fact had married three wives.

It's his third wife, one he married in 1884, through whom I am related to him. I inherited both his nose and his notorious tin ear. I cannot carry a tune to save my life, and neither could he. He was famous for it—and he also liked to sing really loudly, to everyone else's chagrin.

In 1935 something happened that led to a split in the whole church. Heber J. Grant excommunicated some LDS church members in Short Creek, Arizona, because they had been practicing plural marriage, unbeknownst to the church leaders in Salt Lake. They refused to sign a pledge saying they would renounce the practice of polygamy. Nobody knew it at the time, but this excommunication marked the formal beginning of the Mormon fundamentalists. Some of those who were excommunicated in Short Creek went on to found the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

So I suppose that it is partly thanks to my great-great-grandfather that we have TV shows today like *Sister Wives*!

**Since you mentioned polygamy, let's talk about that for a second. I noticed that that subject is absent from the book. You talk about a number of subjects that I can only imagine are taboo to disclose, but why the omission of polygamy?**

I realize that polygamy is one of the things that people associate most strongly with the LDS church. But the truth is that it has been cut out of most Mormon religious practice for 125 years. Whenever the church finds out that people are practicing plural marriage, those people get excommunicated. Nobody I know ever practiced polygamy, and I don't have any direct experience with it. So I really didn't have anything to say on the subject.

But I think polygamy is so fascinating to people because it seems so bizarre in contemporary society—nowadays people are putting off getting married, or couples can stay together for years without feeling the need to legally formalize their union. And plenty of people are willing to have sex without expecting to exchange rings first. So the idea that a man would voluntarily take on not one, but two or three separate households of women and children, which he must then earn enough money to support, seems kind of nuts. The fascination endures.

**Why was polygamy instituted? I've never been clear on this, and I get the sense that people inside the church don't want to talk about it.**

Yes, it's not something that church members like to talk about. I remember being told as a kid that polygamy was something people might ask me about and might find bizarre. I was taught to give a specific answer if I were ever questioned. I can't remember the exact wording I was encouraged to use, but it was something about how Abraham's wife Sarah gave him her handmaid Hagar so that he could have a son, showing that plural marriage existed in the Bible.

At one point I had a Sunday School

teacher who also pointed out to us that at the time polygamy was practiced, the church desperately needed to grow. And marrying more than one woman was a simple way to produce lots of newborn members.

There are, of course, many other reasons why polygamy served the church's interests. Women could not own property, so if their husbands died they usually lost everything. Guess what happened between 1840 and 1890, the dates that polygamy was practiced? The westward migration of the Mormon pioneers, for one thing. Did you ever play the computer game Oregon Trail? Your character always died of dysentery, or drowned fording the river! That happened in real life, and plenty of women were left without husbands. There was also the Civil War, which decimated a generation of men. It's pretty handy to have your surviving males be able to marry multiple widows and thus become the legal owner of those widows' money and property.

It's also important to remember that only a very small percentage of the church members actually practiced polygamy. You had to be selected for it, you couldn't just marry whoever you wanted. And the prophet himself was the only person who could perform the wedding ceremony, so the rubber stamp could only be given from very high up.

**On the topic of women, issues of violence, in particular sexual violence against women, is a major theme in your book. Do you consider yourself a feminist writer?**

Yes, absolutely I am a feminist. And I don't happen to think that's a dirty word. Issues of social class, race, and feminism are never far below the surface in my work.

When people find out you're a writer, the next question is usually "oh, what do you write about?" I think the shortest answer to that question that I've ever given is that I once told someone I write about violence, women, and God. Which is pretty much true.

**Did you feel, growing up in the Mormon church as a girl, that female members were in any way oppressed or seen as second class citizens?**

I think "oppressed" is too strong a statement, though the church definitely encourages very traditional gender roles.

I think it's accurate to say that the church tends to narrowly limit women's choices and then sometimes add a layer of guilt on top for good measure. It is constantly reiterated in sermons, Sunday school, lesson manuals, and scripture study that women's purpose on earth is to have children, preferably a lot of them. End of story. If a passel of kids doesn't happen to be your biggest dream of how your life will go, then too bad—because pursuing anything else is tantamount to defying God's will.

I knew a girl who majored in Middle Eastern Studies in college. As part of her degree, she learned Arabic, and the CIA recruited her straight out of college. This was after the Gulf War but before 9/11. She had gotten married as an undergraduate, as many Mormon girls do, but suddenly she had this exciting job where she was doing really important things, and she loved it. A few years later, when the decision was made—however it was made, whether she agreed or whether it was handed down to her, I don't know—but when the decision was made that it was time to start a family, she quit her job. And when I saw her again, she was miserable. She was miserable at home with her children, she was depressed, she felt hopeless, she said she didn't know what to do.

There are many potential solutions to the problems she was experiencing. But I've seen women in the church get locked into thinking that things can only be one way, because that's the way God wants it.

Mormonism doesn't really allow for the possibility that a single life plan might not make every woman happy. And in the event that a woman does follow the plan—she's obedient, she marries and has children—but if for whatever reason she isn't automatically

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fulfilled and overjoyed, she often believes herself at fault. Not her choices, but her soul. Her soul is inferior or unworthy. I think that's damaging.

**What effect does your writing have on your family? Are you considered to be a kind of bad apple?**

I didn't ask anyone's permission when I was writing the book. I didn't show my family any of the poems, although one of my sisters told me that she read the published ones that are linked to on my website. So at least one family member had an inkling.

But I wanted the book to have its own integrity, and I didn't want outside pressure shepherding me into any decisions. I stand by the subject matter and experiences that I chose to include.

During the process of compiling the book and shaping its narrative arcs, I certainly took some poems out. Writers tend to be obsessive creatures, and I've found myself writing certain things over and over in different ways. You end up with more material than you need for the book. You always have to let some things go—with a novel it could be a chapter that doesn't really move the plot forward, or in my case it was poems that fit thematically but perhaps weren't as polished, or they were unnecessary because the same subject matter had already been covered.

If you're asking whether I took out any poems because I thought they'd upset my family, then yes. That was one of several criteria I used when culling poems from the manuscript. Because the subject matter is kind of intense, I wanted the book to be lean and tight. A little goes a long way.