



Season 6, Episode 1: 1856 Mormon Book, Ithaca and New York City

Tukufu Zuberi: Our next story investigates an attack on a new religion in the old west. In the 19th century the nation is experiencing a resurgence of protestant Christian faith and spiritual fervor. At the same time, a new, homegrown religion emerges – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints – better known as the Mormons. This new faith is embraced by thousands, but its practice of “plural marriage” or polygamy alarms much of the country. Outrageous accounts of polygamous households circulate depicting depraved sexual behavior, female bondage and brutal punishment. And there are loud cries for federal intervention. Now Marcie Waterman Murray of Stanfordville, New York, has a battered 19th century book she believes may have played a part in this historical drama.

Marcie: I was very moved by this book. It really stayed with me a long time. I have become fascinated with it.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi. I'm at Marcie's house to see the book for myself.

Marcie: Please come in.

Tukufu: What do you have for me?

Marcie: Well I have this book from 1855 called “Female Life Among the Mormons.”

Tukufu: Now where did you get it from?

Marcie: There was an auction of a family that lived in the same house for eight generations. And I bought all the books, and this was one of them.

Tukufu: It looks old, doesn't it?

Marcie: It's very old.

Tukufu: So, what you know about the book?

Marcie: Well I only know what I have read in the book and it's a terrible story of a young woman who married a Mormon elder and she learned about polygamy the hard way.

Tukufu: Marcie believes it's an autobiographical tale, but there's no author's name on the title page.



Marcie: Towards the end of the book her name is mentioned, "Maria Ward," and the only time you get a hint as to who the author might be.

Tukufu: So what can I find out for you?

Marcie: I would like to know about the author, is Maria Ward her real name, who was she?

Tukufu: Can I sit here and just examine the book for a little bit?

Marcie: Sure

Tukufu: Ok, let me take a few notes here. We have a date of publication in the mid-1850's. This is very interesting, "this narrative of my life only proves what has so often been proved before, that truth is stranger than fiction." The story begins in upstate New York where the narrator claims to have married a Mormon man, referred to only as "Mr Ward". The text then claims the couple then trekked thousands of miles west to Utah, along with Mormon prophet Brigham Young. The narrator says she marries willingly, but when she arrives in Utah and observes the polygamous practices of the church, she's horrified. "Knowing as I do know the evils and horrors and abominations of the Mormon system, the degradation it imposes on females." Though she didn't live in a polygamous household, she paints a picture of a brutal life for the women who did. "One poor woman who had told an immigrant in the hearing of a Mormon elder that polygamy was a system of abominations was stripped nude, tied to a tree and scourged till the blood ran from her wounds to the ground". It lists rules the book claims polygamous wives had to follow, with punishments for various infractions. The one who commences the quarrel to receive the punishment, which varies in degree from 3 lashes to 25! Wow! The tale ends with Maria escaping from Salt Lake City and the Mormons, but there's no mention of where she went, or how her life ended up.

So the first thing I need to do is find out more about Ms. Maria Ward. There are some clues in the text that could help like these references to specific places Maria Ward lived. Spafford, Onondaga County, and a city, Utica, also in New York. I check out census records in western New York. This area was once home to a large Mormon movement. We come up with nothing. Maybe we'll find something for Utah. Let's try Utah. Also nothing. Perhaps Maria Ward is a penname to protect the author's identity? Let's see what I can find on the book itself. I unearth a review from an 1855 issue of the New York Times. "An anonymous work like this, making grave accusations against a body and against individuals, is not entitled to much consideration at any rate." The story's starting to get interesting here. "It strikes us being the worse fiction of the season". It's pretty clear from this review that there is at least one opinion which doubts the authenticity of the book.



And there are more inconsistencies when I search online library catalogs. Some call it a work of fiction; others identify the author not as Maria Ward, but as a Mrs. B.G. Ferris. I don't see anything on why this other name is attached to the book. But the census records show a Benjamin G. Ferris and his wife Cornelia from Ithaca, New York. That's about an hour from where our author claims she lived. So, Mrs. B.G. Ferris has to be Cornelia Ferris. Is she our author?

Tukufu: How you doing? Tukufu Zuberi.

Terryl: Terryl Givens. Good to meet you.

Tukufu: Professor Terryl Givens is an expert on literature and religion, and a practicing Mormon. Does he know who Maria Ward or Cornelia Ferris were? So I'm investigating this book, "Female Life Among the Mormons." do you know anything about it?

Terryl: Yes I do. This was a phenomenally popular book. I have a copy of it published just two years after the first edition and it indicates on the title page there were already over 40,000 printed.

Tukufu: But Terryl says that although our book was enormously popular, there was no Maria Ward. The book was fiction, as the New York Times had suspected, and is shot through with historical errors.

Terryl: Within the very first few pages, it's evident that the author didn't really have much familiarity with Mormonism. Most egregious of all is the account of the death of Joseph Smith.

Tukufu: The Mormon church had been founded in 1830 in Fayette, New York, by Joseph Smith, who claimed "The Book of Mormon" had been revealed to him on gold plates by an angel named Moroni. But the story of Smith's death in the book betrays real ignorance of the Mormon history.

Terryl: He actually died in a jail while under arrest by an armed mob in Carthage, Illinois. In this novel, he is shot on horseback while he's trying to rescue a woman from jail. So just utter fabrication.

Tukufu: Terryl says such anti-Mormon writings were popular during a surge of religious fervor in early-to-mid 19th century¹ America. This resurgence of Christianity is known as the Second Great Awakening, and is a reaction to growing secularism and industrialization in America. But it's coupled with a spike in religious intolerance aimed at all religious minorities...including Catholics, Jews and Mormons.



Terryl: there were a lot of doctrines in the Mormon faith that really went against the current of Christian thinking. Certainly as early as 1838 the Governor of Missouri had issued an extermination order against the Mormons.

Tukufu: Polygamy had been introduced as early as 1833, based on a revelation Joseph Smith claims to have received. Terryl explains how anti Mormon fiction, often featuring graphic descriptions of plural marriage, became best-sellers.

Terryl: There were at least 50 full-length novels written in which anti-Mormonism was a predominant theme. It became so popular that even fairly mainstream authors embraced the Mormon as a stock villain. The first Sherlock Holmes adventure by Arthur Conan Doyle "A Study in Scarlet" was an anti-Mormon novel.

Tukufu: So this supposedly autobiographical book appears to be a completely fabricated tale. Was Cornelia Ferris the author, as some library records suggest? Professor Givens doesn't know.

Terryl: Many of these novels written in this period were written anonymously. She wanted to conceal her identity and I think she succeeded.

Tukufu: I'm heading to Ithaca, New York where Cornelia Ferris lived. Maybe her hometown's archives can help. At the History Center for Thompsons County, archivist Donna Eschenbrenner and I are searching through collections of photographs, news clippings, obituaries and letters.

Donna: It's individuals and it's the "F"...

Tukufu: There's a goldmine of information on both Cornelia Ferris and her husband Benjamin. It says here that she was known to all old residents of Ithaca as a very charitable and estimable lady.

Donna: A pillar of the community.

Tukufu: It's perhaps a little hard to imagine a pillar of the community writing a racy fictitious memoir. But her husband's obituary makes mention of both of the Ferris' having published books dealing with Mormon history. One by Mr Ferris, *Utah and the Mormons*, and one by Mrs Ferris, *the Mormons at Home*, issued in 1856. But the more I read of Benjamin Ferris' obituary, the more he appears to have been a possible candidate for writing our book too. Look at this, he was appointed Secretary to the Territory of Utah, and he traveled there with his wife. After his return home, Ferris writes a stinging critique of Mormons in this 1857 letter to the New York Times. "The unscrupulous set of villains congregated in the valley of the great Salt Lake would put



pandemonium to shame. And the time has come when their crimes can no longer go un-whipped of justice without national disgrace.”

Donna: It's a pretty strong statement.

Tukufu: But would a presidential appointee really have penned a piece of pulp fiction? And, why has his wife been linked to the book? I'm meeting a colleague, Sarah Barringer Gordon, who teaches American Constitutional and Religious History at the University of Pennsylvania. I'm investigating this book called "Female Life Among the Mormons," what do you know about it?

Sarah: It is one of the earliest and perhaps the single most important of the novels written to oppose polygamy in Utah.

Tukufu: Sarah tells me a minority of Mormons practiced polygamy, and the practice was controversial even within the community.

Sarah: There was always dissent about polygamy from within Mormon society, always apostates, people who claimed that they had been tricked into joining the faith, or tricked in to plural marriage. So there was something for the novelist to draw on. Kernels of truth there. And that, in part, explains the power of the novel.

Tukufu: Sarah explains such anti-Mormon novels helped politicians advance other social agendas.

Sarah: And especially those reformers who came together to make the republican party in the 1850's, dedicated themselves to abolishing the twin relics of barbarism, polygamy and slavery in the territories. Polygamy was easier to oppose politically than slavery, because you could say, "look at what slavery and polygamy produced together, the enslavement of white women".

Tukufu: That's a very powerful connection. Cornelia Ferris was one of the few non-Mormon women from the east to have visited Utah at that time, and was therefore suspected to be our mystery author early on. But Sarah can't tell us who wrote the popular text.

Sarah: It's a pseudonym, Maria Ward. People often wrote pseudonymously in the mid-19th century. But for the next century and a half, we have wondered who he or she really was.

Tukufu: This mystery has long perplexed historians. But I have access to technology that they didn't. Professor David Hoover of New York University uses computers to solve literary mysteries. His so-called authorship



attribution software can determine if books were written by the same person. Similar software has been used to analyze writings by the Unabomber, and to disprove many literary frauds.

Tukufu: So how can we determine if Cornelia Ferris wrote this book?

David: We are going to look at frequencies of words and look for patterns where two books by the same author use words in the same basic frequencies.

Tukufu: Every author develops a distinct pattern in their choice and use of words. The program analyzes 900 of the most common words from each text, and compares how often they're used. We're comparing "Female Life Among the Mormons," to those other books on Mormons written by Cornelia and Benjamin Ferris. Other books have been entered as a control.

David: So you get a tree like this, a dendrogram as it is called.

Tukufu: The books appearing next to each other at the bottom of the tree have the most similarities in their writing styles. The farther apart the books appear, the less likely they were penned by the same author.

David: Over here in the corner we have our Ferris.

Tukufu: The results leave no doubt. David's software has laid to rest a question that has stumped researchers for decades.

Your question about the identity of the author has been a puzzle that people have been looking into ever since the book was published some 150 years ago.

Marcie: Wow

Tukufu: One thing for sure though we know that this is a book of fiction.

Marcie: Oh, I'm actually a little disappointed. But I'm glad to know the truth.

Tukufu: I tell Marcie how my search for the author led me to the names of Cornelia and Benjamin Ferris, and to David Hoover's authorship attribution software.

So how likely is it that Cornelia Ferris wrote this book, given the investigation you've just done?



David: Well I would say it's extremely unlikely. And here's our Ward texts, which are way down in the middle of this graph.

Tukufu: They're nowhere near the texts written by Cornelia or Benjamin Ferris.

David: Very unsimilar. I would say, there is as close to no chance as I could make it.

Tukufu: I am pretty confident that Maria Ward was a pseudonym and Cornelia Ferris did not write the book.

Marcie: Who wrote my book?

Tukufu: We don't know. We don't know. It's an original copy of a popular 19th century book, but the mystery of the author's true identity remains.

Marcie: That's so interesting and I am just, I am thrilled to have this information.