

Patrick Madden. *Sublime Physick*.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Darlene Young

It may be no longer accurate to say that the personal essay is having a “moment.” If we can judge by the increase in publications and writing programs that feature it, the genre is here to stay, and its practitioners are beginning to get the popular and academic attention they deserve. Excitingly, several Latter-day Saint writers are making national names for themselves as important voices (critical and creative) in this genre. One example is Brigham Young University English professor Patrick Madden, whose second collection of essays, *Sublime Physick*, has just been published by University of Nebraska Press. While Madden does not necessarily write as a Latter-day Saint, he essays from a Mormon worldview, gathering scattered knowledge from everywhere and, as he discusses in his earlier collection, finding the sacred in the quotidian.

One cannot review a collection of personal essays without addressing the nature of the genre. Nor, judging by this collection, can an essayist essay for very long on any subject without coming to the subject of essaying itself. As Madden himself points out, an essay is the story of the essayist’s mind at work. Other masters of the genre (many of whom Madden quotes once, twice, or many times each during the course of the book) have variously described essaying as making honey from flowers (Montaigne, 201), the arrangement of a subject (Pascal, 136), new ways of knowing what is known (Martone, 200), the transmutation of a rude world into a finer one (Alexander Smith, 26), and self-analysis via writing (Michael Danko, 53). To these definitions, Madden adds his own: an essay is an observation on the passing of time (241), a deliberate enjoyment of the contact with others’ thoughts (154), a form of writing interested in middles (39), and an abstraction obtained through the concrete (25).

And it seems that this collection's project is as much to define and describe the essay as to explore each essay's given topic. Each essay is a digestion, a recombination of details of the world into art, from which the essay's subject issues (184). But Madden's style is to let the bones show, inviting readers into the essaying experience. We encounter his sundry details, meanderings, sidenotes, and discoveries the way we might encounter a mosaic, noticing close-up how each piece rubs against its neighbors and shines differently in their company, then stepping back to assess what they mean all together.

Take, for example, "Spit," the collection's first essay. Within the confines of this one essay, we get references to, among other things, the scientific formula of saliva, the 1970s cartoon *Wonder Twins*, the University of Illinois school song, Tom Sawyer, the rock band Rush, writer Annie Dillard, and a card game, in addition to several personal and family anecdotes. What do they all have in common? Well, the topic of spitting, of course. But Madden's arrangement of the details and his guiding narration create a sense that the essay is about more than its outward subject. By the end, the piece has become a meditation on what constitutes the essence of an individual, and whether people can actually change and move on from acts they regret. Like all good essayists, Madden resists the temptation to answer the question. He leaves the pieces out on the table in an artistic arrangement that is moving and more than the sum of its parts. The essay simultaneously satisfies and provokes, providing both a destination and an open door—which is, of course, exactly what great art should do.

At times, the wide-ranging meanderings and piling of details can be exhausting. In his sprawling, thirty-thousand-plus-word penultimate piece, "Independent Redundancy," Madden remarks that he is delighted when reviewers point out that his mind "wanders all over the place" (177), but I find myself wondering what Madden's work would be like without his easy access to the Internet. Madden himself admits that most of his writing time is not spent writing (65). But for Madden, essaying is sometimes as much a curating as a producing. He refers, in "Independent Redundancy," to David Cope, whose computer produces music in the style of famous composers. Cope claims that the productions, though assembled by a computer from preexisting ideas, styles, and themes, can be classified as art because a human (artistic) mind "listens to the output, and chooses what's the best" (179). Similarly, much of Madden's material comes from work originally created by others, but

his work achieves its delight and originality through inventive arrangement, framing, and pointing.

Not all pieces in this collection are as variegated and montage-like. Some are shorter, rooted more firmly in anecdote and containing a greater proportion of Madden's own narration in relation to quotes from other sources. An example is "Entering and Breaking," in which Madden describes the hours he spent believing his two young children were missing. Though these pieces still dip into other topics for the sake of juxtaposition—Madden brings quantum theory, for example, to bear on the thoughts of a frantic father—the less scattered narration is a narrower channel, cutting deeper and creating a greater intensity of feeling. I find myself wishing for more essays like this.

But whether Madden is presenting his intricate shadowbox-like montages and nesting-doll observations (about observations on observation), or meditating deeply on a single subject, the essays in this collection never fail to create a sense of journey. Experiencing a Madden essay is experiencing what it is like to be inside a person's mind: we cannot help but feel less alone in the universe, and more aware of the delight of being alive in time. In his final essay, Madden asks, "What good is time if no one is there to observe its passing?" These essays are his way of observing the individual moments of a life, the individual flutterings of a mind. Reading Madden's essays is a way of participating with him in those moments, and the result is a greater ability to notice our own time passing. I can't think of a better reason for reading a book.

Darlene Young teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University and currently serves as poetry editor for *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. She has published poetry and essays in various journals and anthologies, including *Fire in the Pasture: Twenty-first Century Mormon Poets* (El Cerrito, Calif.: Peculiar Pages, 2011) and *The Mother in Me* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008). She lives in South Jordan with her husband and sons. A review of Patrick Madden's first collection of essays, *Quotidiana*, appears in *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2011): 169–172.