

# A Reading Group

*Robert L. Egbert*

I had just hung up my topcoat and scarf and tossed my jacket on the unmade bed when the telephone rang. There was a time when I liked to hear that sound; it meant some new adventure. But that day had passed; the phone had rung too many times for me. I ignored the ring and took the unread morning paper from my battered briefcase.

The telephone rang again, then again. By the fourth ring I knew that neither Anna nor Shirley would answer it. Donald had already left for work. I picked up the phone, locked it against my ear with my shoulder, and continued to read the already stale news. "Hello," I said.

It was Evan Francis, first counselor in our ward bishopric.

"How are you?"

"Fine," I replied.

He cleared his throat and finally asked if I was busy.

This was my first evening at home since I returned from a week-long trip three days ago and I wanted to say, "Of course I'm busy. I'm going to read the morning paper and the evening paper and have dinner and watch an hour of television and then I'm going to bed and sleep eight hours and then decide whether to get up, or go back to sleep." But I didn't say that. Instead I asked, "What do you have in mind?"

"Well, there's this group of people that Brother Johnson got started reading the Book of Mormon together on Thursday evenings. He's moved and we still need someone to meet with them tonight. Provide a little leadership for the group. I wondered if you'd be willing to do it. They meet at Sister Bertha Stoddard's place at 7:30. You should be home by nine."

I groaned. Bertha Stoddard lived four miles away. If there was one thing I didn't want to do, it was to back my Datsun out of the garage and go to a

---

*ROBERT EGBERT, a member of the faculty of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and director of the National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education, divides his "free" time between fiction and family history.*

Book of Mormon reading session with a bunch of people on the other side of town, people I hardly even knew.

I needn't have worried about the Datsun. I wouldn't need it. The real reason my services were required was that someone had to pick up most of the reading group. The Datsun wouldn't hold them all.

Bertha Stoddard was a seventy-year-old widow. She had dyed black hair and a voice to match. Thick-tinted lenses held together by green plastic frames distorted her small eyes. She was not well coordinated and her squat body was a constant threat as she bumbled through our church's narrow aisles. I dialed her number.

"Hello." Bertha Stoddard's sand-and-gravel voice rattled in my ear.

"Sister Stoddard, this is Lindsay Beckstead. Brother Evan Francis asked me to meet with your Book of Mormon group tonight."

"Well, he sometimes meets with us but since Brother Johnson left, no one's been very reg'lar. Jody sez she can't come tonight. She's got the flu and Brother and Sister Welling's over to their daughter's place in Holston and I don't know about Bud. But I s'pose we can meet."

I could see her hitch her girdle and scowl at me. I jumped at the opening. "Well, if there's not enough to meet, I'll call Evan and tell him . . ."

She didn't even hear me. "There'll still be Grandma Jones and Beverly Hoksis. And maybe Tal Boyd. You'll have to pick him up at the Mission, You know where that is, don't you?"

"Yeah. Roughly." I paused while trying to figure out on just what corner of the downtown labyrinth that home for the homeless stood. "Mmmm, let's see now . . ."

Bertha Stoddard broke in once more — as one might with a young and rather stupid child. "It's on Second, between Tyler and Harrison. He'll prob'ly be in the lobby. He usually waits there on Thursday night until somebody picks him up. You know him, don't you? He's that blind nonmember."

My mind struggled. I remembered a cane, dark glasses, but I didn't dare admit ignorance again. Not this soon.

"Yeah, I know who he is." After all, there was no way I could miss a blind man in the Mission lobby.

I backed Anna's stationwagon from its secure spot in our two-car garage and drove downtown. Second Street runs one way — the wrong way — between Harrison and Tyler and I had to circle back to catch it. I stopped beside the Mission in the No Parking zone and looked inside. No blind man. Nor anyone else who looked at all familiar. The car behind me honked. Exasperated, I drove on, wondering why I'd said yes.

The next time around that crazy block I parked and left my car idling while I ran inside. The man at the desk called Tal's room. No answer. I looked outside. My car seemed safe. At the pay phone I dialed Bertha Stoddard's number. She was decisive. Tal must have gone some place else. I should pick up Grandma Jones and come on over.

Helen Jones lived in a three-room house on 68th Street — that half-town, half-country low place that flooded in the spring and baked all summer and was swept by blizzards in January and February, and sometimes March.

I had never been to Helen's place before and there weren't any house or yard lights and no regular blocks or numbers, but I finally found it. We drove back to town, talking about when she and Paul joined the Church and about their children and grandchildren. I knew her son better than I did Helen. He lived in a split-level in our part of town.

It was 8:02 when we pulled up in front of Bertha's house.

Beverly Hoksis, a tiny bird of a hunchback, came out to the front steps and squinted through the darkness. "I called the Mission, Brother Beckstead," she said. "You must of just missed Tal. He was in the lobby when I called."

I glanced at my watch. If I went back to the Mission, it would be 8:30 before we even started reading. The entire evening was shot. "Do you want me to go and get him?" I asked distantly.

With an even deeper squint, Beverly said. "If it's not too much trouble, Brother Beckstead. I hate to inconvenience you."

Without a word, I turned and headed back to Anna's station wagon and the Mission.

This time a man with dark glasses and a cane was waiting outside. Once I caught sight of him, he seemed familiar. I stopped the wagon and reached across to open the door. "Hello, Tal," I said. "Get in and we'll be on our way." His skilled cane found the door and he joined me in the car's front seat.

Bertha Stoddard's house was old and small. Her furniture was early post-Depression. Greenish-brown upholstery, stained and frayed, covered two easy chairs and a studio couch; the carpet threads showed clearly through in well-worn pathways. The easy chair assigned to me was just right; I could sink slightly and relax but not completely disappear. Helen Jones sat at the end of the studio couch nearest me. Tal was next, and then Beverly. Prussian-like, Bertha Stoddard sat on a chrome and plastic kitchen chair and glared. "We want to welcome Brother Beckstead. Brother Francis asked him to be here tonight. Last time we disgusted the thirty-seventh chapter of Alma. Tonight we'll do chapter thirty-eight."

We all opened our Books of Mormon — Beverly shared hers with blind Tal — and took turns reading.

Helen Jones read first. Clear, precise words, each period and each comma put properly in place, every written nuance accurately reflected. Beverly's turn came next. She read like a bright young child, a child who had learned to read from listening to a nineteenth-century romantic read poetry aloud. She hesitated over the hard words, and raised her pitch to end a phrase or clause and lowered the volume. She made Alma sound like my Greataunt Elva did Edmund Waller.

When it came time for her to read, Bertha plunged recklessly through the text, maiming words and meaning alike, dismissing commas as if they didn't exist, and pausing only when she ran out of steam, which occurred most frequently in the middle of a two-syllable word or a prepositional phrase.

I listened to Bertha's drillmaster tones with one corner of my consciousness while with another I read ahead of the group to review any difficult names or terms that might fall my lot to read or discuss. I raised my eyes absently and

suddenly focused on two hands, Beverly's and Tal's, clasped tightly beneath the leather-bound Book of Mormon that they shared. Guiltily, I glanced around. Mine were the only eyes on that half-hidden tryst.

At the end of verse ten Bertha stopped, and I completed the chapter, stumbling only slightly when I thought of those two hands. When we finished the reading, I tried to lead a "disgustion," but it was clear that only the still-young mind of Helen Jones was interested. She alone pushed beyond the individual words and phrases to comprehend how Alma's message related to that of Mosiah and to see that they both helped illuminate the Sermon on the Mount.

We went back to reread a verse or two and then Bertha and Beverly excused themselves and went to get refreshments — doughy oatmeal cookies, some kind of tasteless yellow cake; and light green punch with too little flavoring and too much sugar. I'm a jogger, perpetually dehydrated. I drank three cups and stole a glance or two — or three — at the once-more-hidden hands.

We talked about the weather and our families, the Church and who was missing from the reading group tonight, and why. All the while I watched, and never once did Helen Jones or Bertha Stoddard violate the trust of Tal Boyd and Beverly Hoksis.

About 10:30 the conversation began to wane. I yawned and suggested it might be time to leave. We found our coats and thanked Bertha for her hospitality, and for the cake and punch — Beverly had brought the cookies — said goodbye, and left. Bertha Stoddard shut the door firmly behind us.

Helen Jones and I sat in the front seat of the big brown stationwagon and visited while I drove; in the rear view mirror, Beverly and Tal sat side by side. They talked about how nice an evening it had been and Beverly tried to figure out when next they might be together. Tal wasn't much help but now had one arm around her, holding her hand with his free one.

It would have been five minutes quicker to take Beverly home first, but that would have cut short her time with Tal. We drove to Harrison and Tyler, found the Mission, told Tal goodnight, and watched him go inside to his surplus army cot in the second-floor room he shared with an alcoholic. Their bathroom was down the hall.

On the way to her home, Beverly told us about her father and how he would have come tonight if he hadn't had the flu. He worked — laboring work — ten hours a day in the cold. He was still paying for his wife's funeral. Beverly cleaned and cooked and worked when she could, but not many people wanted to hire a hunchback who couldn't type or drive or even lift very much. I walked her to the door and waited till the light went on inside.

On the way to 68th Street, I asked Helen Jones about her husband, and what he had done for a living before he died two years ago. I remembered Paul. He was small and kind and couldn't hear very well and he was always the first to volunteer when there was work to be done, if someone else would drive. He didn't own a car. Helen said that Paul did pick-and-shovel work and sometimes helped a carpenter or plumber. After they joined the Church, they saved three years to get enough to ride the bus out west to the temple.