

At Ease with His Past; At Home with His Art

Goodbye to Poplarhaven: Recollections of a Utah Boyhood, by Edward A. Geary (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), 163 pp., \$8.95.

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I DISCOVERED ED GEARY'S ESSAYS by chance—a friend happened to mention them to me: "You've got to read them; they're about growing up in Utah, and they're excellent." Curious, but not so curious that I wanted to shell out \$8.95, I borrowed a copy of *DIALOGUE*, which contained one of Geary's latest essays, "The Ward Teacher." I got around to reading it a few nights later in a parking lot by the purple glow of a street lamp.

From the first paragraph I was involved in the essay. I was the newly ordained teacher walking along with Brother Rasmussen to make visits. I could see myself sitting in the kitchen with the Meeker brothers, who never married and probably never would, or wiping my feet on Sister Woodruff's doormat and catwalking into her impeccable living room, or shaking hands with Billy Evans and his blind wife, then listening enthralled to his stories about being protected from the unsleeping ghosts of Gadianton robbers:

They was moving along in the trees at the side of the road. . . . When I stopped, they stopped, and it was as still as death. When I begun to move again, they begun too. . . . Well, I begun to call on the Lord, you bet. . . . I told him that if he would help me out this here one time, I'd stay clear of beer joints and wouldn't do nothing to offend him. And lo and behold . . . A great light. It was something like the moon, but it wasn't no moon, it didn't shine nowhere else only just round about me. . . . I was protected you see, and they daresn't come any closer. Next morning, though, we found our sheep dead and not a mark on them (p. 141).

With that introduction, I hurried to the bookstore the next day and asked for a copy of *Goodbye to Poplarhaven: Recollections of a Utah Boyhood*.

As the title of the volume indicates, the twenty-three essays describe what it is like to grow up in Utah, specifically southern Utah. The first section deals with early childhood experience; the second traces seasonal rituals of a small farm town; the third develops diverse themes viewed from a more adult perspective. Many of the essays have appeared by different titles in both *DIALOGUE* and *Deseret News*. The volume itself is soft bound, cream colored, with a black-and-white illustration on the front cover, by Ralph H. Reynolds, showing a road and a few struggling poplars. Other sketches by Reynolds, a Utah graphic artist who died in 1984, are used throughout the volume.

The reference in the title to Poplarhaven might confuse some Utah readers since there is no town in Utah by that name. In an author's note Geary explains that the town he is actually describing is Huntington, nestled between Price and Green River. "I call it Poplarhaven," says Geary, "not to conceal a reality but to reflect my awareness that the place as I experienced . . . it will inevitably be different in some respects from the place that others have known" (Author's Note). And in another essay, also printed in Richard H. Crockett and Neal E. Lambert's anthology, *A Believing People* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), Geary explains: "Indeed, my private boyhood name for the town, replacing the prosaic Huntington, was Poplarhaven, and I used to imagine myself immortalizing it in fiction someday as Joyce did his Dublin or Faulkner his Jefferson" (p. 169).

Geary's range in these essays is impressive. One moment he is talking about predictable topics such as Christmas or the Fourth of July or high school basketball or harvest time; the next moment he is

telling how fun it is to poke around the flour mill or tease Retty Mott, the renegade lady of the town who once danced with Butch Cassidy. But throughout all the essays one notices Geary's sensitivity — the detail, the quiet voice, the carefully turned phrase. Geary is a gifted craftsman, but his talent goes beyond mere craft. Literary critic C. S. Lewis made an observation that perhaps sums up Geary's greatest strength: "No man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth . . . you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it" (1943, 190).

That is how Geary achieves his originality. He tells the truth. You feel as if you've just slipped on a pair of comfortable overalls (as a child Geary hated them as unglamorous — cowboys never wore them) and that you're walking around town and through the fields with an amicable farm boy who explains things as he goes. Blair West, a friend of my sister, heard excerpts read over KSL radio from Hillsboro, Oregon. Blair, who grew up south of Payson, said, "It was so real. That's just exactly the way it was."

I have never milked a cow or bucked hay; but after Geary, those experiences seem like my own. Below the surface details of the essays lie themes that *are* my own: the reality of family, work, and love; ruminations about religion; the fears of adolescence; the need for belonging; the more important need of becoming an individual; the reality of change and war. As I read about Geary's experiences, I found myself rewriting my own.

Geary's literary triumph is muted by the diminishing status of the personal essay as a serious literary form. According to E. B. White, whose essays were published regularly in *The New Yorker* until his death in 1985, "the essayist must be content in his self-imposed role of second-class citizen. . . . A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other earthly triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play" (1977, vii).

Despite limited interest in the genre, certain critics of Mormon letters see the personal essay as possibly the truest form for Mormon writers. Eugene England, whose collection of essays, *Dialogues with Myself* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984), won the Association for Mormon Letters prize in 1985 as Geary's did in 1986, thinks the personal essay is "most congenial to the Mormon vision and experience" (1982, 132). Columnist Clifton Jolley calls the personal essay "utterly responsible, its point of view is owned. In it, one may take neither comfort nor refuge in the satisfaction of pose or form; one must face the beast, naked and alone" (1978, 138).

E. B. White also speaks of the essayist's integrity, for although he has freedom "there is one thing the essayist cannot do . . . he cannot indulge himself in deceit or in concealment, for he will be found out in no time" (1977, viii).

Geary meets this test, in my opinion, in "The Girls across the Valley," an essay that captures the rush of adolescent love and longing: "I remember the airiness of summer dresses as a crowd of girls walked arm in arm up the Bench Road on a Sunday afternoon, girls with skinny, coltish limbs, and features still forming, beauty in the bone in process of becoming beauty in the flesh" (p. 100).

"Hying to Kolob," my personal favorite, explores a boy's understanding of the mystery and marvel of immortality:

Then the undertaker pressed a lever, and the coffin sank smoothly into the straight-sided hole. I remember with a special clarity how straight and clean-cut the sides of the grave were, like the walls of a house, or rather, since the grave was so narrow, like a hallway leading from one room to another, perhaps a part of a great subterranean mansion whose dim, cool chambers stretched on and on (pp. 46-47).

Geary's essays stay with me. I keep remembering certain people: Len Wight, the hired man with a devilish grin; Jim Wilson, the farmer who made an art of swearing; and Mr. Nagelvoort, the transported

New Englander who wore tweeds and flannels instead of overalls. These, coupled with vivid images and cadenced phrases, leave me with a portion of Poplarhaven's richness, which Geary sums up in "Harvest Home":

"Nothing is nicer," Grandpa used to say, than a full barn and a full granary." . . . Abundance is what remained when the threshing was done and the mellow Utah autumn slid gradually into winter . . . evidence that we reap as we have sown. And abundance in the memory which lasts long after the barn and granary are empty hulks, for sometimes

we also reap where others have sown (p. 109).

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The Code Revealed

The Great Code: The Bible and Literature by Northrop Frye (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), xxiii+261 pp., \$14.95.

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NORTHROP FRYE, perhaps North America's pre-eminent literary critic, is not a name ordinarily associated with scriptural exegesis. Yet his name virtually assures that this volume will be read and analyzed by those in literary fields, no matter what one may think about the topic or approach. Frye describes the Bible similarly: "Whatever we may think about it . . . it insistently raises the question: Why does this huge, sprawling, tactless book sit there inscrutably in the middle of our cultural heritage like the 'great Boyg' or sphinx in *Peer Gynt*, frustrating all our efforts to walk around it?" (pp. xviii-xix)

To appreciate fully what Frye has given us, readers should keep the book's subtitle in mind. This is clearly not a volume that deals with the Bible as literature. In *The Great Code*, readers will not encounter discussions of the similarities between biblical stories and later works of

fiction and poetry. Instead, they will be treated to an analysis of how the Bible serves as the repository of much of the Western world's cultural mythology.

Frye himself describes *The Great Code* as neither a work of biblical scholarship nor of theology, but rather as "a study of the Bible from the point of view of a literary critic" (p. xi). His original intention seems to have been to examine some of the ways in which the Bible has influenced its literary readership through the ages. Instead, he has surpassed that aim and has written an enlightening discussion of the structure of the Bible's narrative and imagery and of the linguistic conventions that make quite different demands on a reader of the Bible than are made on a reader of current fiction.

The book is divided into two parts, entitled "The Order of Words" and "The Order of Types." Part one contains chapters dealing with language, myth, metaphor, and typology; in part two, Frye presents the same four topics in the opposite order. This chiasmic structure makes it immediately apparent that he intends to demonstrate an interrelatedness and symmetry to all the topics he will be covering. Frye is a great believer in cycles, loops, reflection, and doubling back. The very struc-