

A Mormon "Pilgrim's Progress"

The Backslider by Levi S. Peterson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 361 pp., \$12.95.

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LEVI PETERSON'S first novel is an event eagerly awaited by all those who have come to appreciate such masterful, prize-winning short stories as his "The Confessions of Saint Augustine" and "The Road to Damascus," both republished in his prize-winning 1982 collection of short stories, *The Canyons of Grace*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press). It is therefore not surprising that the novel received the Association for Mormon Letters' Best Novel Award for 1986. It is indeed a memorable first novel which more than lives up to the expectations of those who had already recognized in Peterson a rising master of Western regional fiction.

What we have here is a sprawling, brawling narrative—at once Dickensian and Rabelaisian—which explores the highways and byways of Mormonism in a manner that is provocative, entertaining, illuminating, irritating, and, ultimately (at least for the reader who is open to its earthy candor), deeply gratifying.

The Dickensian quality is unmistakable in the rogue's gallery of memorable characters which the author describes with a sure hand, invariably zeroing in on that trait or mannerism which is most revealing and of which we would expect the character to be most self-conscious. Even the hero, Frank Windham, is caricatured as having "a square jaw, a big mouthful of white teeth, a button nose and a shock of brown hair which bounced above his shin-

gled temples like loose hay on a wagon" (p. 5). His future wife calls him "Horse-face" when she first meets him and immediately comments on the size of his hands even though "Frank's big hands weren't something he liked to have mentioned" (p. 12).

The names of Peterson's characters are as appropriate to southern Utah as Dickens's Pickwickian names are evocative of nineteenth-century London. Whether it is Clara Earle, the hero's future mother-in-law, who "had the shape of a tripod: fat thighs, big buttocks, narrow shoulders, a little head . . . tartared teeth, ruddy cheeks and cheerful eyes" (p. 2), or Jeannette, her younger daughter, who "had big woodchuck teeth, golden braids, and a chest as flat as a board" (p. 44), or Salsifer Jamison, the hero's uncle, who was "about seventy but looked older" whose "jowls and dewlap drooped" and whose "head was bald except for a little rim of bristle" (p. 80), or Farley Chittenden, the lecherous polygamist with a "redbrown walrus mustache and a shiny bald dome circled by a rim of wild prophetic hair" (p. 159), or Rossler D. Jarbody, the fee-conscious, jack-Mormon lawyer whose garish clothes "snarled and spit at each other" (p. 174), the net result is an unforgettable dramatis personae ideally suited to the colorful setting.

Although the characters are predominantly Mormon, the author varies the diet by including Masons, Fundamentalists, Protestants, and unbelievers as well. In making Marianne, Frank's girlfriend, a nominal Lutheran, he effectively uses their contrasting belief systems to highlight various theological issues and personal tensions. It should be noted that, despite the broad

humor of the novel and the occasional lapses into crude rural slapstick, the author avoids the extremes of callous ridicule and mawkish sentimentality in recounting the adventures and relating the foibles of his characters.

The Rabelaisian quality of the novel becomes apparent early on when the hero, Frank Windham, reflects on the anatomical proximity of the organs of reproduction and elimination, noting that "God had showed what he thought of people's sex organs when he put them in such cozy company with their bladders and guts. He had created people with sex organs so they could get married and use them once in a while to multiply and replenish the earth. But even before he started, God knew that people wouldn't stop at multiplying and replenishing the earth. . . . They'd lust and lascivate and tickle themselves any old time for fun and pleasure" (p. 44).

Peterson's unrepentently scatological approach to his story and his frequent graphic allusions to the whole range of bodily functions and sexual activity are sure to offend the prim and prudish and will doubtless elicit accusations of tastelessness and even prurience. I must confess that, at several points in the narrative, I was tempted to complain that the author had gone out of his way to remind the reader that living is firmly based in a series of crass physiological events—ingestion, defecation, urination, regurgitation, copulation, intoxication, expectoration, parturition, menstruation, masturbation, and expiration.

However, behind this endless sequence of bodily activities and physical events lies a value system of unassailable integrity which, for want of a better term, I would call holistic humanism. By that I mean that for Levi Peterson, the human experience is a seamless whole: just as reproduction and excretion are inextricably linked, so are the mind and the emotions, the body and the soul. Anyone who tries to separate the spiritual from the physical does violence to the human condition and must

suffer the unhappy consequences whether it be guilt-ridden hypocrisy, mental imbalance, or worse yet—suicidal or homicidal destructiveness.

Approached on the purely physical level, the novel seems disarmingly picaresque. We follow the hero in his peregrinations across the width and the breadth of Utah, with a little hell-raising in northern Arizona for good measure. On a deeper level, we realize that Frank is engaged in a spiritual pilgrimage, which, while not divorced from his efforts to become a rancher or his courting interests or his concern for his deranged brother, nevertheless goes beyond these purely physical pursuits which it encompasses and to which it gives meaning.

It is significant that the novel opens with Frank deep in prayer trying to confirm a bargain—a "pseudo-covenant"—which he thought he had struck with God. "Actually, it was Frank's bargain, God never having confirmed it. That was the way with God. He never offered Frank any signs, he never gave him any encouragement. He left him penned up with his own perversity like a man caught in a corral with a hostile bull" (p. 1).

So Frank begins his pilgrimage trying to get a response from God, which, when it is not forthcoming, leads him to rebel by resorting to riotous living. Then he has a vision of a vindictive God observing him through a celestial gunsight, and, out of sheer dread of retribution, he adopts an austere life-style. His heroic efforts to renounce all vanities and pleasures—especially those of the sexual variety—only lead to the disheartening episodes of recidivism which give the novel its name. Finally, just when his sinful backsliding has all but destroyed any sense of self-worth he might have had and he is besieged with self-destructive impulses, he has another vision in which Marianne's Savior, the "cowboy Jesus," sets everything right in a life-affirming, surprise ending.

It should be clear by now that, although Frank Windham is neither John

Bunyan's Christian nor a typical Mormon, he is engaged in a pilgrimage which is instructive to Christians generally and to Mormons in particular. For all of his joshing and parodying, Levi Peterson's basic message seems to be clear and simple: the human challenge lies in avoiding the all-too-human extremes of debauchery and asceticism in favor of a balanced way of life through which we can celebrate our humanness while pursuing moral and spiritual betterment—a kind of ethical Word of Wisdom which prizes moderation in *all* things. Theologically speaking, Peterson shows equal disdain for God as the "celestial chief executive officer" with whom the faithful can make redemptive business deals and for the vengeful God of the Old Testament.

Although the novel has enough universal human appeal that it can be read with profit and enjoyment by anyone, only the Mormon reader can fully appreciate the wide range of insights into the Mormon experience which the novel affords. In this connection, it is significant that the hero is introduced spiritually before he is described physically. After first meeting him on his knees prayerfully—and fruitlessly—seeking confirmation of his "pseudo-covenant," we are told that "Frank would be lucky to inherit even the Telestial Kingdom. A fellow who belonged to the true church and who believed in God but wished he didn't was in big trouble" (p. 5). This is a significant departure from the typical fictional Mormon protagonist who is either riddled with doubt or has left the fold completely. However outrageous his conduct or observations may be, Frank Windham is a Mormon "true believer" who accepts the divinity of the LDS faith in spite of himself and whose only issue is the nature of his relationship to his maker and whether he is doomed to perdition.

In introducing us to Frank Windham, Levi Peterson turns the tables on those who expect the heroes of fiction about Mormonism to be either pious frauds or hope-

less renegades. Frank is simply a red-blooded Mormon cowboy who feels he has been cursed with insatiable animal appetites and an unshakable testimony which at first bedevils him but with which he eventually comes to terms.

Indeed, it is the process of coming to terms which Levi Peterson employs so skillfully not only to tell an entertaining and often touching story, but also to compile a veritable encyclopedia of the varieties of Mormon religious experience. He includes not only mainstream Mormonism in all its diversity—Sunday meetings, interviews with the bishop, baptism, ordination, anointing of the sick, scripture reading, private and public prayers, viewings and funeral services ("Sure as daylight's somebody at a funeral always had to say the corpse looked natural . . . Salsifer didn't look natural unless, of course, natural meant looking shrunk, fallen, and dead" [p. 213])—but also the more sensational, fanatical, and heretical undercurrents of Mormonism such as polygamy and blood atonement ("Ross Drummer gave himself to men . . . they cut his throat . . . he had a black witness . . . he asked to be cleansed by his own blood" [p. 334]).

Very much in the humorous tradition of Mark Twain, Peterson has a special knack for carrying certain aspects of Mormon belief to their absurd conclusion, a knack which is bound to exasperate the orthodox as much as it will delight the heterodox. Frank remembers how, as boys, he and his brother had led their dog Rupert into the waters of baptism noting that "he won't make the Celestial Kingdom unless he's baptized," after which they nearly drowned the poor beast: "If his foot comes out of the water, we've got to do it over" since "God will send you to hell if part of you ain't under the water" (p. 108). When a black raven appears on the scene, Frank shouts "Keerummm, it's the Holy Ghost!" and the parody is complete. Is this irreverent and even blasphemous, or is it a good-humored and creative adaptation of idiosyncratic Mormon prac-