

Humor and Pathos: Stories of the Mormon Diaspora

Benediction: A Book of Stories by Neal Chandler (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), 194 pp., \$14.95.

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A LATE REVIEW has the advantage of calling a good book to the attention of anyone who may have missed it the first time around, and of reaffirming what time has already proved—its lasting qualities. Such is clearly the case with Neal Chandler's ironically titled *Benediction*, a superb collection of stories about Mormons outside Zion who are very much in the world and increasingly of it, and show the strain. Chandler gives us not warmed-over servings of the Mormon past but delectable helpings of the Mormon present—contemporary urban middle-class Mormondom hardly to be distinguished from middle America until their speech betrays them, their congregational language rich in collective memory and allusion.

A chief delight in Chandler's stories is the way he puts a new spin on clichés of Mormon thought and diction, working them into startling secular contexts, now comic, now sinister, that give familiar words and phrases new currency. Thus we get "the spiritually attuned public relations and marketing specialist" in a corporation merchandising "free-market Christianity," and we get "a sort of spiritual wellness spot check" in a teenager's interview with his bishop, "doctrinal punch" at Mormon socials, a smug Sunday School teacher sounding "like Dan Rather in the last days," a maverick intellectual "who poses a serious environmental hazard . . . to the fragile spiritual ecology of the ward," a student "pure and

unspotted from math," an executive's "zippered leather scripture case . . . so immense, so oiled and polished to so deep an Abyssinian hue, it seemed worthy of the golden plates themselves," and we get "the courage of their delusions" in the tentative cynicism in a sister's letter to her brother about Vietnam. In Chandler's creative combinations and applications, a pyramid scheme with a strong resemblance to Amway becomes "God's own plan . . . the only divinely authorized plan for financial success in this life or the next," and Diane and Marvin Chisolm, husband and wife, about to make love but repeatedly interrupted by importuning children, console each other: "You don't have to perform," she says. "We don't have to do this at all." "Yes, but faith without works is dead. . . . And I'm not dead. Not yet." It doesn't take an initiate to savor such refreshing allusions. Even a phrase like "latter day technologies" rings bells.

With the wit and sensibility of a Jane Austen, and in a diction as crisp and precise as hers, Chandler holds up his concave/convex mirrors at various angles to give his Mormons distorted but familiar images of themselves. We glimpse their morals and manners in a succession of characteristic interiors within the circumscribed cosmos of the ward and the homes of its members: the bishop's office in "The Call," where Emmett, the "casually insurgent" teenager with one leg hooked over the arm of his chair during an interview, looks straight into the eyes of authority to say, "I don't know about a mission. . . . But when I get out of school, I'm going to be a writer"; the Chisolms' family room in "Space Abductors" where they try to monitor a science fiction video "up to the blouse scene"; Carmen Maria

Stavely's kitchen in "The Only Divinely Authorized Plan . . ." where she presides over the breadboard "as if it were a pulpit"; a Gospel Doctrine class where Kevin Houston, the new teacher in the title story, is a sensation and debates Damon Boulder, the disturbing academic he ousted, on the meaning of obedience and the linguistic and symbolic ramifications of Peter the Apostle's name.

In "Roger Across the Looking Glass," the locus is the room in the Talmage house where Roger's wife, more gifted and intelligent than he, secretly writes the poetry he cannot understand or appreciate. In "Mormon Tabernacle Blues," it is Rachel Holbein's house where, after her drunkard husband is "overtaken in the midst of his vagrant sins by a state gravel truck resolute in its decreed course," she believes "the Lord has put her in control," only to have an irascible father move in and plague her with his disbelief in a literal resurrection. In "The Righteousness Hall of Fame," the interior is the board room of the Freedom's Holy Light Foundation where the values and methods of corporate America and corporate Mormonism merge to develop an "institution dedicated to . . . the promotion of revealed principles in our inspired constitutional republic."

In "Whole Life Premiums," the interior is Harold Potter's condominium after he has sold his house and held a garage sale (with its marvelous inventory) only to have a daughter on the edge of divorce move in with her children. In "Conference Report," the setting is a stake conference which Carmen Stavely attends with her reluctant son Walter, Jr. In Carmen's eyes Brother Showalter, elevated to the stake presidency, is "a marvelous speaker . . . a marvelous man," but in Walter, Jr.'s, he is a clone, "an exact genetic replication. . . . [I]f you've heard one, you've heard them all." Walter can't decide whether Showalter's long-winded confession of faith is "a feat of self-promoting humility or of self-deprecating arrogance." In the penultimate story,

"Thelma in the Sky with Diamonds," the scene is a Special Interest dance, where Thelma Rydell and Damon Boulder, hesitant at first and skeptical (both have been burned by previous marriages), discover each other in a comic tangle of accidental touching in Damon's new car, an awkward moment which Thelma redeems with a maternal gesture.

In "The Last Nephite," which could be anywhere but centers on a parking lot at conference time, Chandler gives us a tall tale as entertaining as Benet's "The Devil and Daniel Webster." The mysterious stranger, a "beatific delinquent," Mormonism's ultimate confidence man, has become an embarrassment to the Church, which is uneasy about his old-fashioned meddling, his legendary healings and warnings and wonder-workings (they have a "file" on him) and is eager to "release" him from his mission. Chandler gives his fantasy, a compendium of Mormon folklore, a contemporary prop: the stranger's final beneficent act before disappearing is to leave Harlow Havens and his hungry family (Havens has given the stranger his last \$5.00 for a bus ticket) a gift certificate for a Family Fun Feast at McDonald's. Chandler's Last Nephite and Levi Peterson's Cowboy Jesus (in *The Backslider*) spring from kindred fecund imaginations.

Benediction, though just as irreverent, is no *Saturday's Voyeur*. Chandler's humor is affectionate, not disdainful, even when most devastating. Hypocrisy, cant, venality, "general authority," smugness and bigotry among the powerful are easy targets for the aroused satirist. More difficult objects are the tender-minded faithful unaware of their own vulnerability who would be perplexed at being made fun of and whom the satirist needs to handle with care. While some portraits verge on caricature when Chandler's comic hyperbole and high spirits take over, others are poignant, even painful, probings of intellectual and emotional crises, as in "Borrowing Light," a girl's memories, in the form of a moving letter, of a mother she