

Familiar People

Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories. Edited by Eugene England (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

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IN LEWIS HORNE'S SHORT STORY, "The People Who Were Not There," the young Mormon protagonist looks at the notebook of Clifford Wellington, an Indian boy from a local reservation, and declares, "The pages gave off drumbeats" (65). The Mormon boy is "pulled . . . away, off into a world of wide skies and hot mesas" as he scans "the designs, the drawings, even the scribblings" (65) that Clifford has sketched. Likewise, the twenty-two short stories collected by Eugene England in *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories*, which includes "The People Who Were Not There," pull the reader into the world of Mormonism or at least its echoes as the characters disclose the meaning of their lives through their faith, revelations, and relationships.

In the book's preface, England says these stories, taken together, "are not only valuable because they are skillful, the product of natural gifts, careful training or apprenticeship, and good understanding of the traditions of classic short stories and contemporary innovations. They are also valuable because they are written by people with a recognizably Mormon

background which leads them through their stories to express, reveal, develop, and challenge the shape of Mormon beliefs" (xvii). England has chosen most of the stories from previous collections and publications, and he has succeeded in representing the origins of Mormon fiction as well as tracing its evolution and giving a sense of the directions in which it is heading. The stories' settings encompass Utah pioneer towns to futuristic African settlements and comprise styles as disparate as Virginia Sorensen's "critical but nostalgic and loving" (viii) recreation of her childhood Utah town to Orson Scott Card's cold, careful, practical tone that reflects a community where individuals are ruthlessly sacrificed for communal goals.

While the authors' styles, settings, techniques, and purposes vary significantly, the stories together show how diverse individual Mormon experience may be, and yet how homogenizing it is, especially when clarified through characters who have no compelling interest in the belief system. In Sorensen's "Where Nothing Is Long Ago," where water is "the unmistakable sign of the Kingdom" (4), Brother Tolsen kills a neighbor by hitting him on the head with a shovel because the man, one who has "fallen away from the faith" (6), has stolen his water turn. The community forgives Brother Tolsen and justifies his actions by

asking, "Is it not true that he who steals water is stealing life itself?" (10)

Levi Peterson's hysterically eccentric Rendella Kranpitz appears in an East-bench Salt Lake City stake spouting the Articles of Faith verbatim, quoting Isaiah, and calling various church members to repentance. She also shoplifts candy bars from Albertson's, poses as a Deseret Industries agent, and scandalizes the neighbors with her poor hygiene. A trial of Rendella's magnitude has never before hit Coburn Heights Stake, and the members crumble under her assault. No one ever imagined that "the least of these" could be so repulsive or relentless.

In Sibyl Johnston's "Iris Holmes," baby Iris, born blind, deaf, mentally retarded, and cerebral palsied, forces those around her to face all of the unanswered questions she embodies (325). Iris's presence allows them no protection. Some respond in compassion and love, others in clichés, and some just turn away.

Another homogenizing element, and a theme from which the book takes its name, is the elusive touch of the divine on relentless, often exhausting lives. In several stories the touch is palpable and life-saving, such as in Maurine Whipple's sentimental story, "They Did Go Forth." In this story, Tildy Elizabeth sitting alone and "frantic" (15) with a desperately sick baby dares to pray for a Third Nephite to come and save her child. He appears, looking strikingly like Joseph Smith, blesses her child, and disappears, taking a freshly baked johnny cake, which, miraculously, Tildy's hungry missionary husband stumbles over as he walks down a snowy street in England.

The angels' look and modus

operandus in Walter Kim's "Whole Other Bodies" aren't so flashy but are equally miraculous. "Two young men in tight dark suits" (328) arrive on "beat-up bikes with baskets in front" (329) at the home of a floundering family. The missionaries ask questions from canned discussions, show a tired film, and talk sports with the sons. Through these lead-footed missionaries the family quits "looking straight ahead with pinched, busy faces . . . and look[s] up." In that moment, "God [takes them] in entirety" (331).

In Judith Freeman's "Family Attractions," the angel is sixty-three-year-old George with age spots on his hands and poor dental work who brings humor, calmness, and security to his new wife and her precocious nine-year-old daughters. They, in return, bring energy and a future to a life he thought was "going another way" (222). While no part of this story is overtly Mormon, the comfort and meaning that come from joining lives into families has unmistakable Mormon overtones.

Divine and worldly relationships and experiences form the core of these stories and define the characters' lives and faith. While distinct, for the most part these relationships and experiences are those encountered by people who have the time, education, security, and ability for articulate introspection. In addition to the characters depicted, I longed for characters, relationships, and incidences that articulated Mormon belief in a way that wasn't quite so familiar, so Western, white, middle-class. It was also a bit disconcerting that many of the most fully realized, interesting, and original characters were those who had no share in the community. It seems that the nuances and borders of Mormon

belief and the people they create are just beginning to be uncovered.

While limited in its depiction of Mormon faithful, even in its variety, this collection is an important contribution toward tracing the evolution of

the art. The volume's stories are well chosen, and the bibliography at the end of the collection is an invaluable resource for those who want to continue to explore the mesas and wide skies of contemporary Mormon fiction.