

Wandering Souls in a Familiar Valley

The Tabernacle Bar. By Susan Palmer (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997).

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IN PROSE THAT CAN HUM ALTERNATELY with the wry empathy of Barbara Kingsolver and the lyricism of Leslie Marmon Silko, Susan Palmer's *The Tabernacle Bar* explores the spiritual dilemmas of the citizens both in and outside of the Mormon fold in Bridger, a thinly disguised version of Logan, Utah. As Jessie Cannon, the novel's protagonist, runs short of the bullying bravado that has sustained her in a one-woman resistance movement against the Mormon hegemony of her happy family, she searches for something else to give meaning to her life. Living as a thirty-year-old, single, alcohol-using, sexually active woman with the venerated family name of Cannon, Jessie feels at the novel's opening as if she has almost run out of things to do to shock her family. Having defined her life for so long as one who was not Mormon, not reverent, not worthy, she begins to have an identity crisis when her behavior ceases to rankle.

Lucky for the reader, her grandfather, a stake patriarch famed for his wisdom and prescient patriarchal blessings, dies and, to her family's horror, leaves her his house and all of his assets. Initially horrified at the

thought that he is working from the grave on some elaborate plot to bring her back into the fold, Jessie uses her inheritance as the perfect opportunity for the *coup de grace* of her anti-establishment behavior. She not only buys the infamous Tabernacle Bar, just a stone's throw from its religious namesake, but in an act of blasphemous defiance, orders a stone replica of the angel Moroni to sit above its door.

The ensuing turmoil fuels the bulk of the novel's subsequent action and provides the synecdoche for the spiritual struggles of all of the main characters in the story. Like Jessie, they have all found that the strategies that have patched together the first halves of their lives are not close enough to sustain them into middle age. Their various quests cross paths at the door to Jessie's infamous watering hole. Nephi, Jessie's high school sweetheart and sometime lover, is a Native American of mixed blood who faces the trauma of his abandonment and his mother's alcoholism through a haze of Jim Beam and marijuana. Melody Stardust (one of Palmer's more heavy-handed names), daughter of a New Age psychic, comes to the desert with Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* as a map and finds herself in a whirlwind romance with both Jessie's returned missionary brother Daniel and the Book of Mormon. Max Logan, ex-navy submariner and active Lothario, comes to Bridger to score

with the blonde Utah beauties who starred in the stories of his fellow sailors and finds himself lost without the rules of the military to order his life. Ben Cody, Korean War vet and Zen bartender, tries to find serenity in the splash of the water in the bar sink, but needs more than his Tai Chi and Bridger can offer.

Palmer's strength is her characterization, as she deftly plots the paths of her searchers without creating a Cache Valley *Pilgrim's Progress*. She makes especially good use of her omniscient narrator, taking us on one particularly illuminating journey into the dreams of all of the central characters. The dreams themselves are recounted in lush, fantastic detail and, they provide leading, but not obvious, foreshadowing to the novel's falling, final action. Jessie, especially, recalls Taylor Greer from Kingsolver's *Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* as her defiant, tomboy exterior only partially masks the troubled female heart that is easily and often wounded. Early in the novel, Palmer seems to almost overdo the sarcasm that Jessie levels at the Mormons and, for a couple of pages, the reader (even a non-Mormon one raised in Utah) feels almost compelled to defend them against her venom. As Jessie's character evolves, however, Mormonism is totemic of the search for a kind of instant meaning that all of the characters seek. Neither Mormonism nor Buddhism, nor alcohol, nor any packaged remedy is going to cure the spiritual nausea that these characters feel. It is only through their various and individual combinations of vulnerability and action and faith that these characters start down paths that feel genuine to them.

The Tabernacle Bar could verge easily into the kind of novel that

preaches, but it doesn't. Although at times the plot dances around the edges of melodrama, Palmer saves us from this soapy fate by putting believable, human doubts and rages and confusions into the mouths of her characters. Maintaining a perfect level of ironic distance from her initially anti-Mormon protagonist, Palmer adroitly questions the place of spirituality, divine guidance, and faith in the lives of people at the end of the twentieth century. Mormonism in the novel receives its share of criticism, especially for the kind of judgmental version Jessie's family tends to practice, but the Buddhism of Ben, the shamanism of the ironically named Nephi, and the hedonism of Max leave them equally empty. Nephi's Native American mentor at one point in the novel muses that Nephi doesn't know where he hurts and that is why he cannot make any spiritual progress in his life. All of the characters share the same fate. Each one must acknowledge what hurts and make peace with the paths the others take to find relief before any of them can stop fighting with themselves and move on.

Palmer's narrator takes an ecumenical view of things spiritual, believing in the power of spirituality itself, but never really privileging the paths of organized channels people choose as a route to the spirit. She provides an insightful and often hilarious, often sad look at the wandering souls in a valley that looks physically familiar to Utahns, but contains profound and complicated spiritual and psychological mystery that is definitely worth a second look.