

REVIEW

A Spiritual Awakening Amid a Hippie Faith

Coke Newell. *On the Road to Heaven*. Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2007. 348 pp., \$11.52.

Reviewed by Neylan McBaine, native of New York City, author, musician, wife, and mother

When I received my copy of Coke Newell's *On the Road to Heaven*, my first impressions of the book could not help but be influenced by the critical praise from Richard Bushman on the book's cover: "I have never read such a gripping story of conversion and missionary labor." Well, I thought, my job as a reviewer is clearly done. Not only does Newell wear Bushman's endorsement on the outside of the book and Terryl Givens's effusions on the inside, but the book has already won the Association of Mormon Letters Award and the Whitney Award for best novel of 2007. What more could I add to this unequivocal praise?

It turns out that, although my praise may be incremental, I can add some thoughts about why this novel works so well, and, yes, where it falters. Newell has documented the story of his own youth and conversion to Mormonism in an "autobiographical novel," fictionalizing the events by giving himself an alter ego, Kit West, and giving pseudonyms to other major characters. But from what I can tell from my own research of Newell's life, the name changes are the extent of the book's fictionalization. This is confirmed in the press release from Zarahemla Books accompanying the release of the novel: "The guy is me and the story is mine," states Newell.

Newell's story winds through his spiritual pilgrimage in the late 1970s and early 1980s: his youthful, hippie days in the Colorado mountains, his conversion to Mormonism, and his gritty mission in Colombia, in South America. Part 1, "From Zero to Zion," covers the Colorado days, and Part 2, "On the Road to Heaven," takes us to the streets of Colombia. The plot is held together with an engaging and rewarding love story between Newell—or Kit West—and his teenage love, Annie Hawk.

Teenage Kit specializes in fixing up abandoned cabins in the Colorado Rockies around his family home and living in them with similarly minded companions. His upbringing can only be described as the rearing

of a mountain man, his typical attire consisting only of a pair of overalls (no shirt) and sandals. He learned the guitar at his father's knee and grew up knowing the bulk of the American folk repertoire: "Oh Susanna," "Tom Dooley" and "Long Black Rifle." With his typical wit and honesty, Kit (or Newell) reports, "Years later I would hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir tackle a couple of these, in the most incongruous coupling of intent and attempt in the history of sound" (31).

Despite his characteristic edginess, Kit's earnest search for the Maker of his beloved Earth is never in question. Initially dismissive of Mormonism because Annie has run away from her own staunchly Mormon home, Kit eventually lands on Jesus in his search—via Ram Das, Aerosmith, acid trips, and Native American rituals—for a transcendental power. In a fairytale turn of events, both Kit and Annie rediscover Mormonism's ethereal appeal, and Kit's reverence for nature gives him a kinship with Joseph Smith and the Americas' original inhabitants.

In Colombia, Kit embarks on the missionary's accustomed path of growth through teaching and trial. Sickness, poverty, death, and joyous teaching moments are in no shortage while he anticipates Annie's return from her own mission in Quebec.

Newell's writing is consistent between the two parts—engaging, colloquial, animated—and Kit's love for Annie sees him through trials in both locales; yet I couldn't help feeling that I was reading two separate books. The first half, the Colorado days and the conversion, is so refreshingly unique, so stark in its individuality and intimacy, that I often reflected while reading that this book hits the bull's eye of Mormon literature: brutally honest, edgy, yet achingly real in its reflection of God's presence in our lives.

Had I known the outcome of the romance with Annie at the end of Part 1, I would have been thoroughly satisfied in closing the book there. As it was, I had another narrative to go, Part 2, which I found equally well-written but far less compelling. Perhaps this was because "mission stories" constitute their own genre in LDS literature, and I've just heard so many of them (although Newell's tales certainly rank up there with the most dramatic). More likely, it was because I didn't feel that the motivations that drove the first half—the desperate search for truth, the passion for Annie, the inexhaustible reverence for the Earth and the human body—carried over into the second half. The plot stalled; the momentum

of the conversion was lost in the tales of stomach ailments, on-fire teaching moments, and hot Colombian babes.

What happened? I asked myself as I slogged through the catalogue of companions' names and transfer locations. I hadn't been able to put the book down for the first half, and now I felt as if the earthy but looking-toward-heaven Kit was buried under the grime of 1970s Colombia. Must all Mormon narratives inevitably arrive at mission stories? Must we default to the extremity of a mission—the two-year commitment, the lack of contact with family and friends, the often harsh physical conditions—to italicize our conversions to our outside readers? I believe that the power of Newell's story lies in the unlikeliness of his hippie faith and that he most convincingly communicates his spiritual awakening in that setting, not in the structured crucible of the mission.

Newell's title and chapter quotations, as well as numerous references throughout the book, make it clear that *On the Road to Heaven* is a tribute to Jack Kerouac, and perhaps the lack of momentum in the second half can be attributed to Newell's effort to honor the road-wandering style. But having succeeded in creating such a drive toward resolution in the first half, Newell's second half lost me, at least, once the search for truth had reached its triumphant culmination.

Still, the novel is a passionately honest tribute to the messy process of finding God and to the uncertainty that comes with trying to do the right thing even after we have a relationship with Him. I hesitate to call *On the Road to Heaven* a novel because its qualification as an "autobiographical" work is actually, for me, the strongest thing about it. We Mormons have great stories to tell about ourselves. Maybe it's the journal-keeping bug in us, or the sheer bizarreness of so many of our clashes with the outside world; but conversion stories and mission stories are usually too good to be made up.

Such is the case with Newell's stories, and to this end I wish that Newell had forthrightly claimed the conversion and missionary tales he writes about so exuberantly. Anyone familiar with the Mormon experience will recognize the authenticity of the events; but by positioning the work as fiction, Newell has diminished its plausibility as evidenced by the *Publisher's Weekly* review of the book which asserted that certain "miraculous episodes strain credulity."¹ Not surprisingly, Newell responds in a press release issued by the publisher, Zarahemla Books: "Every one of those 'miraculous episodes' is true."² In an age of Jon Krakauer's *Under*

the Banner of Heaven and Martha Beck's *Leaving the Saints*, why not put up our faith-affirming realities head to head against those "insider" exposés?

The success of this book proves that our narratives are perhaps most effective when they express our faith, even our "miraculous episodes," in the messiness, grittiness, and honesty in which they are experienced. Rather than trying to brush imperfections under the rug, confronting them with real character and wit is the best way we as a people can share our collective personality with others. We need more writers like Newell, but we need them to claim their atypical stories and say, "This, too, is a real Mormon life."

Notes

1. Quoted in "A Jack Kerouac-Style Memoir for Today's 'Mormon Moment,'" press release by Zarahemla Books, August 27, 2007.
2. Ibid.