

that is with him' (Deuteronomy 1:16); to be 'merciful into your brethren'; and to 'deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually' (Alma 41:14)" (389).

Notes

1. According to Blake Ostler's "expansion theory," Joseph Smith began with an authentic ancient source but made certain modern elaborations and expansions. Ostler thus proposes a mode of translation that represented "creative co-participation" between Joseph and divine revelation. Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 109. Similarly, noted non-Mormon biblical scholar James Charlesworth reminded students of the Book of Mormon that, even if the core text is authentic, it was redacted at least twice from the time of its primary material, once by Mormon and then later by Joseph Smith. James Charlesworth, "Messianism in the Pseudepigrapha and the Book of Mormon," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, edited by Truman G. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 125. Consider the influence of other writers and redactors, both named and unnamed, and one might perhaps have less confidence in the reliability of the English text of the Book of Mormon as a source for ancient history, language, or law. As noted above, however, Welch largely rejects this concern.

2. See, for example, Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

Between Silver Linings and Clouds

Abel Keogh. *Room for Two*. Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2008. 215 pp. Paper: \$14.99; ISBN 978-1-59955-062-6

Reviewed by Laura Hilton Craner

Why is it that so many Mormon books seem to focus on the silver lining and ignore the cloud? Mormon books—especially memoirs and biographies—would benefit from a little more time in the rumblings of the rain cloud. So many stories, characters, and ideas are shortchanged because writers or publishers, who often claim that they are simply giving the market what they want, are too quick to jump to the happy ending. Considering the narrative

price that is exacted, it's surprising that so many readers, writers, and publishers are so intent on playing Pollyanna.

Abel Keogh's memoir, *Room for Two*, which tells the story of how the author found love again after the suicide of his first wife, who was seven months pregnant with their first child, is a good example of the silver-lining dilemma. The first sentence grabs the reader by the heartstrings. "I don't remember the last thing I said to Krista that Saturday afternoon, but I know it was not, 'I love you'" (1). The narrative moves swiftly through Krista's tragic suicide. The sound of the gunshot, the smell of the gun smoke, the sight and the "sound of the blood hitting the boxes" behind her (2), the blur of police officers and EMTs, the confusion of talking with a detective, the delivery of his premature baby, whom Keogh names Hope, and the child's death, barrage the reader with their visceral detail.

As the back jacket points out, "This is Abel's story in his own words." This is the true story, the real thing. It is powerful. The lifeless blue eyes staring up from a pool of blood and a dead infant laid out in an impossibly small casket are not merely symbols or conventions of a postmodern tale. Reading about Krista's death and Hope's abbreviated life is a frighteningly soulful task that strikes at the atoning heart of LDS doctrine. They are real people, and their deaths are more than just physical losses. They represent spiritual losses and the implications of that spiritual pain are searing.

Room for Two is an important mark on the spectrum of LDS literature. Keogh makes a brave and laudable choice in telling his story. He risks a lot by associating himself with a troubled marriage and admitting the possibility that his actions played a role in his wife's suicide. The details he chooses to share do not always put him in a positive light, which suggests that he is more interested in imparting truth than making himself look good. The fact that his memoir was published by a Mormon publisher is also momentous. The subject of suicide within the context of eternal marriage is one that has probably never been broached in memoir. Cedar Fort made a brave choice in publishing a story that was not necessarily appealing to the Mormon audience.

But in some ways the book shies away from the very difficulties it raises. The memoir begins like a true crime story but quickly devolves into something more like a romance novel. It moves from the

dark cloud of his wife's suicide to the silver lining of a new, more functional marriage too briskly. The story refuses to explore the unavoidable pain of Krista's death. There is no discussion of her funeral or the mental illness that probably caused her death—and throughout the book, Keogh is never comfortable calling Krista mentally ill. When looking at a picture of Krista shortly before her death, he says, "I see a woman who's tired of life. She's sad in a way I don't think any of us can understand. But I don't see the ravages of schizophrenia or any other mental illness" (57). In an email exchange with me, Keogh said that he omitted a fuller discussion in an earlier draft about Krista's depression because it "slowed down the pace of the story and detracted from the story I was trying to tell—one of putting a shattered life back together. I have no regrets about cutting that material."

As another example, Keogh admits that he received but ignored three promptings before Krista's suicide: to remove the gun, to return to the apartment before Krista, and to enter the apartment quietly (61–62). Instead, he moves on with the description of how he forgave himself. About nine months after Krista's death, Keogh, at his girlfriend's urging, chooses to visit Krista's grave and says, "I still felt guilty about my inaction and wondered how different life would have been had I only listened to those quiet warnings when I had the chance. I needed a way to share my feelings with Krista and know that she had forgiven me. . . . Somehow I would have to find a way to do it without an apology. . . . I bowed my head and told Krista about the mistakes I had made the day she died" (182–83). Keogh obviously struggled with his choices, but the details of those struggles are glossed over

In short, this book was in a hurry to get to the happy ending. The emphasis is not on the process of grief but on the triumph of love and the possibility of finding happiness no matter what happens in this life—an inspirational, important, and frustratingly oversimplified message.

In the last fifteen years, during which the LDS/Mormon market has seen major growth, countless novels have been published and sold with the same implicit message. Many readers and writers lay the blame on Deseret Book's desk but other publishers, like Cedar Fort, fall prey to the same problem. No matter what

happens in life, if a character is righteous enough he or she will get a happy ending and will *be* happy—both now and forever.

This message is understandable, considering that happiness is an important LDS doctrine. Mormon readers grow up on “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:2); the eternal fruit of Nephi’s tree that is “desirable to make one happy” (1 Ne. 8:10); and Lehi’s epigram: “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25). The entire plan of salvation—the plan of happiness—was put in place so that the sons and daughters of God could be happy. It is tempting to think that, if happiness is the purpose of life, it should be the purpose of our literature.

Unfortunately, happiness is seldom as simple in real life as it is in popular literature. For while it is clear what happiness isn’t (wickedness and worldliness) and it is clear what happiness is (righteousness and godliness), it is not clear how we spiritual beings having our human experiences are to exist in both spheres at once. After all, the plan of happiness itself is not simple. It is built on obstacles. “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, [neither] happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility” (2 Ne. 2:11). Happiness is something to work toward, not something to stumble upon. And sometimes, perhaps for people like Krista, no matter how hard she works, happiness remains elusive until it is awarded in the next life.

The works that endure in Mormon literature thrive on the tension between what brings happiness now and what will bring happiness in the eternities. Book of Mormon stories like that of Alma the Younger or the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi; hymns like “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief” and “If You Could Hie to Kolob” (*Hymns*, 29, 284); and classic Mormon novels like Virginia Sorensen’s *A Little Lower than the Angels* (1942; rpt., Salt Lake City Signature Books, 1997) employ different literary techniques and call on different genres, but each one derives its narrative tension from the existential opposition of joy and pain that propels Latter-day Saints forward and holds them back.

Keogh’s story wavers between telling the truth about his pain and making his story palatable to an audience hyper-focused on happiness. The book ends on the one-year anniversary of Krista’s death. Keogh and his soon-to-be fiancée, Julianna, decided to stay

at Keogh's home, instead of spending the day with his family. When Julianna questions this decision, Keogh replies, "The month after Krista died, I had a lot of support from friends and family . . . but they haven't made the same progress I have. . . . I feel that being with them would take me back instead of forward" (211). As the hour nears when Keogh heard the fatal gunshot, his memories overcome him and he weeps. Then he and Julianna visit the cemetery, after which Keogh reflects, "Krista and Hope would always be a part of me. Memories of them would forever linger somewhere in the back of my mind. But if I wanted this relationship with Julianna to work, I needed to look forward to the future without regrets or memories of the past holding me back. All of my energy needed to be directed toward making a new life and new memories with Julianna" (214).

While recognizing the power of the clouds in his past for himself and other widowers like him, Keogh also knows the necessity of the silver lining—both for his second wife and for his book. He focuses on maximizing it. When I questioned Keogh about the silver lining dilemma, he expressed surprise that "you thought I should focus on the storm clouds more. The feedback I generally receive from LDS readers is that the book was too dark, heavy, and depressing for them. Non-LDS readers generally feel the book strikes a good balance." Keogh's audience wants a story of hope and happiness, and that want supersedes the importance of Krista's story, one that has never been told and, if publishers continue on their current path, never will be. Her story is too sad.

That is why the silver lining dilemma matters. Stories—powerful stories—are being lost and forgotten. Mormon culture and Mormon letters are being narrowed. When a publisher decides that something is "too hard" to be worth reading or when a writer decides that a story is "too sad" to be written—especially when that story is a true story—it implicitly limits the Mormon experience. Shying away from some of the sad truths that surround Mormon publishers, writers, and readers implies that it is not okay to be sad, that it is not okay to struggle, that sadness and struggle are inherently un-Mormon.

But it is through the struggle that progress is made. It is a well-known tenet of LDS doctrine that suffering and struggling

can be instructive, but only if the process is attended to. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “The sharp, side-by-side contrast of the sweet and the bitter is essential until the very end of this brief, mortal experience. Anne Morrow Lindbergh wisely cautioned: ‘I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable.’ Certain forms of suffering, endured well, can actually be ennobling.”¹ It is the process of grief and the partnership with Jesus Christ that suffering engenders that teach eternal truths. Without the process, those priceless truths become cheap truisms.

It is interesting that Keogh’s book contains no “come unto Christ” moments. The book contains no narrative of any struggle Keogh may have had with anger at God. He works through anger at Krista but not at the being who created her—faults and all. Keogh said this was an intentional choice because of his large non-LDS radio audience: “I didn’t think I could get my message of rebuilding a life and moving forward across if I continually brought up a lot of LDS doctrines and beliefs.” He also told me, “As far as reconciling everything with God—I don’t know if I really ever did. My conclusion at the end of the book was that there are some things that happen to us that we’ll never have the answer to in this life. However, a lack of answers as to why bad things happen is NO excuse to wallow in sadness and self-pity. We still have an obligation to ourselves and our family to move forward.” There is little talk of testimony or how Keogh’s experiences brought him closer to Christ. Keogh relates an emotional story but doesn’t necessarily relate a spiritual one, making the book feel incomplete in light of the eternal ramifications of Krista’s death.

Mormon stories at their hearts are not about romance or murder or history or any other plot device. At their hearts, Mormon stories are about LDS doctrine. They are about how what is learned on Sundays interacts with what happens in real life; about how the promises of the eternal conflict with the realities of the temporal; about how happiness in this life relates to happiness in the next and how Christ makes the leap possible. To be powerful, our stories must encompass our doctrine. There can be no eternal