

amous unions that defined the lives of the Woodruff family, would soon disappear completely from Mormon practice and nearly completely from Mormon consciousness.

Few documentary collections have captured the essence of the lived religious experience of turn-of-the-century Mormonism as deftly and adroitly as *Post-Manifesto Polygamy*. The richness and texture of this ambiguous and understudied period in Mormon history shine through on every page of this collection. Phillip A. Snyder and the late Lu Ann Faylor Snyder have done a commendable job of shepherding this important assembly of documents onto library shelves and into the hands of many interested readers.

Mormon Pulp with a Reading Group Guide

David Ebershoff. *The 19th Wife: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 2008. 523 pp. Paperback: \$15.00; ISBN: 978-0-81297-415-7

Reviewed by Mark Decker

Polygamy and blood atonement, whatever their real-world drawbacks, can make for profitable novels. If Zane Grey were still alive, he might be plotting another sequel to *Riders of the Purple Sage* in hopes of riding the titillation wave created by *Big Love*, Warren Jeffs, and the Yearning for Zion fiasco. Yet shifts in readership that have accompanied the media innovations of the last century have led the descendants of Grey's initial audience to spend much more time looking at flickering screens than at badly printed pages, greatly reducing the market for the kind of pulpy tales Grey wrote. It is not hard to imagine, however, that real money could be made today by writing fiction about polygamists that would interest book discussion groups. In general, people who join book discussion groups like a good story as much as anybody else, but they don't enjoy overly broad characterization, credulity-straining plot twists, or minstrel-show-derogatory portrayals of maligned or poorly understood ethnic and racial groups. Straight pulp won't do.

David Ebershoff attempts to capture the attention of this lucrative reading demographic in *The 19th Wife* by combining

well-rendered historical fiction with the kind of pulp that has always sold novels about polygamists. Employing the same scholarly sensitivity found in his first novel, *The Danish Girl* (New York: Penguin, 2001), a fictionalization of Danish painter Einar Webener's 1931 gender reassignment surgery, Ebershoff juxtaposes a credible re-creation of the memoir of Ann Eliza Webb, who advertised herself as Brigham Young's nineteenth wife (she was actually his fifty-third)¹ with the pulpy story of Jordan Scott, a contemporary "lost boy" evicted from a fundamentalist Mormon compound at fourteen. The adult Jordan is a gay, hip Los Angelino who finds himself back in rural Utah trying to clear his mother—who also thinks she is a nineteenth wife—of murdering his father, a fundamentalist Mormon apostle. It should not be surprising that *The 19th Wife* landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list in 2008 or that the paperback version of the novel—complete with reading group guide—held a respectable amazon.com sales rank of 1,069 in midsummer of 2009. Because the connection between the two stories is only implied at the very end of *The 19th Wife*, however, and because of the cleverly jolting juxtaposition between straightforward and thoughtful historical fiction and pulp detective novel, I will discuss each narrative separately.

Considering both the author's relative inexperience with Mormon studies and the national audience he is writing for, Ebershoff creates an even-handed and believable portrait of Ann Eliza Webb Young and her milieu. The author even includes an extensive bibliography of sources consulted when writing *The 19th Wife*. For readers of *Dialogue*, it is generally a list of the usual suspects—Leonard J. Arrington, Fawn Brodie, Todd Compton, Terryl L. Givens, Hugh Nibley, and Richard S. Van Wagoner (but not Brian Hales). It is gratifying to see this novel in serious conversation with several serious historical treatments of the era. Of course, this is a fictionalized account that, as Ebershoff notes, "follows Ann Eliza's basic biographical arc as she describes it," although the author admits that he often fills in "where she skips" and skips "where she digresses" (510). While it would be interesting to track all of the fills and skips in the novel, Ann Eliza's narrative is a responsible work of historical fiction that would give a book discussion group a way to talk about the Mormon migration

from Kirtland on, pre-Manifesto Utah, and the issues surrounding polygamy.

People familiar with Mormon studies—especially people who have some personal connection with Mormonism—will find Ebershoff's novel downright utopian. Of course, there is much criticism of the Church's stance on homosexuality, but Jordan eventually begins a tentative relationship with an excommunicated BYU dropout who is nevertheless still culturally Mormon in many ways and who takes Jordan to a gay-friendly church in Las Vegas that, though clearly not a Mormon ward, incorporates the Book of Mormon into its theology. But more importantly, Ebershoff's thematic approach suggests that truth—often truth arrived at through scholarly endeavor—can overcome fanaticism and make positive changes in previously repressive religions.

While this assertion rests in part on the historically debatable claim that Ann Eliza Young “changed the lives of thousands of women by fighting to end polygamy, nearly bringing down the Mormon Church in doing so” (131), it also rests on Ebershoff's delightful characterization of Kelly Dee, a twentysomething returned missionary and candidate for an as-yet-unfortunately-fictional master's degree in women's studies at BYU. Kelly, whose honors senior seminar paper and proposal for her master's thesis are reproduced in full in *The 19th Wife*, is descended from a son Ann Eliza had with her first husband, James Dee. She seems to be motivated both by a recognizably Mormon desire to understand one's ancestors and a scholarly ethos that insists thinking Mormons “must look at” polygamy “rigorously, understand it honestly, and place it correctly in our heritage” (129). This commitment to honestly study polygamy will lead Kelly, by the novel's end, to help Jordan Scott tell the world about his experiences in twenty-first-century polygamy, carrying on by proxy her foremother's fight.

Yet for all the delight Mormon intellectuals might take in seeing such a character in a novel written for a national audience, Ebershoff ultimately will disappoint them because he is not familiar enough with the culture he is describing to avoid sounding tone deaf. Kelly's scholarly optimism, for example, makes her seem more like one of the founding mothers of *Dialogue*, sensing the new spirit that would lead to the opening of the Church's ar-

chives in the 1970s—a period entirely omitted in Ebershoff’s multiple references to research on polygamy—than a contemporary graduate student at BYU. Ebershoff also attempts to show that the Church is cooperating with and encouraging Kelly, yet his efforts often demonstrate his unfamiliarity with the way the LDS bureaucracy operates. For example, in a letter to President Gordon B. Hinckley, a Church archivist urges that Kelly be given access to the archives and directs the prophet to “encourage your colleagues throughout the Church to further assist Kelly with her scholarly requests” (228).

Ultimately, Ebershoff’s inability to nail down the nuances of Mormon culture is part of a larger weakness. For all Ebershoff gets right, it’s still pulp, and it shouldn’t surprise anyone that Ebershoff invokes the Hardy Boys (151) to describe Jordan’s efforts to solve his father’s murder. Ebershoff’s contemporary narrative arc relies too much on the semiotic shorthand of stock characters and commonplace assumptions for him to be able to say anything genuinely profound about the relationship between contemporary Mormons—fundamentalist or mainstream—and their collective past. Jordan Scott’s narrative contains many elements of popular detective fiction: a gory murder, prostitution, a defense attorney who may or may not be on his client’s side, corrupt police officers, and an abrupt surprise ending.

But it is characterization, not genre, that ultimately signals the primacy of entertainment over depth in *The 19th Wife*. The best evidence of this assertion comes in the portrayal of Jordan’s California love interest, Roland. Ebershoff, whose *Danish Girl* won the Lambda Literary Award—sponsored by a foundation that advocates for GLBT writers and readers—has Roland speak in a dialect that is best paraphrased as “Oh honey subject verb object,” bringing the flaming queen into a narrative populated with abusive polygamist patriarchs, dewy-eyed idealists, and children who look “like every kid in Utah: blondish, blue, a splash of freckles” (93).

To be fair, *The 19th Wife* should be evaluated for what it is: an attempt to create commercially viable fiction about polygamy, Mormon history, and Mormon culture that offers a balanced and historically engaged portrayal of a minority group with which its intended audience won’t be familiar. On these grounds, Ebershoff’s novel is an unqualified success. Ann Eliza Young’s narrative

is good historical fiction that could indirectly allow real scholars to influence public opinion. Jordan Scott's narrative is gripping and fun to read, and should guarantee a long print run.

Dialogue readers are a curious subset of the demographic Ebershoff aims for. Sophisticated readers who just might be members of book groups, they are also certain to be more familiar with the culture Ebershoff attempts to describe, and they will readily see the flaws in his narrative. But reading pulp fiction brings pleasure, largely because readers genuinely like, say, Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op since they identify with the Op and picture themselves fighting crime as effectively as the Op. It would be a shame if this review deterred anyone from the joy of seeing a character like Kelly Dee unabashedly inhabiting fiction that is intended for a national, instead of a Mormon, audience and imagining, just for a moment, that scholarly endeavor really could make a church less reactionary.

Note

1. Jeffery Ogden Johnson, "Determining and Defining 'Wife': The Brigham Young Households," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (Fall 1987): 70; confirmed by email from Jeff, September 22, 2009.