

9. L. Gooren, "The Biology of Human Psychosexual Differentiation," *Hormones and Behavior* 50 (2006): 589–601.

10. Just the Facts Coalition, *Just the Facts about Sexual Orientation and Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators, and School Personnel* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2008), www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/publications/justthefacts.htm (accessed January 2010).

11. These organizations are the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Counseling Association, the American Association of School Administrators, the American Federation of Teachers, the American Psychological Association, the American School Counselors Association, the American School Health Association, the Interfaith Alliance Foundation, the National Association of School Psychologists, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of Social Workers, the National Education Association, and the School Social Work Association of America.

12. C. Ryan, D. Huebner, R. M. Diaz, and J. Sanchez, "Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults," *Pediatrics* 123 (2009): 346–52.

13. American Psychological Association, "Insufficient Evidence that Sexual Orientation Change Efforts Work, Says APA. Practitioners Should Avoid Telling Clients They Can Change from Gay to Straight," Press Release, August 5, 2009, <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2009/08/therapeutic.aspx> (accessed August 7, 2009).

Mormonism Goes Mainstream

Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin, eds. *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010. 196 pp. Photographs, bibliographies, index. Paper: \$24.95. ISBN: 978-087421-773-5

Reviewed by Randy Astle

In an article posted in September 2010 on Patheos.com, a website devoted to the discussion of religion and spirituality, Michael Otterson, managing director of Public Affairs for the LDS Church, wrote: "During the past few years, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has navigated a period of intense public attention and scrutiny rarely seen during any other time in its history." He buttressed this claim with the fact that for over a year

“media attention far exceeded even the considerable interest generated during the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.”¹ While *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen* looks at artistic productions rather than traditional journalism, its editors Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin agree with Otterson, stating that “Mormons and Mormonism have seen increasing scrutiny during the previous decade” (1). They even cite many of the same causes.²

While the media—meaning diverse entities such as journalism, film, television, literature, drama, and the internet—has been expanding its consciousness of Mormonism, scholarship on Mormon culture and media has been burgeoning as well. Building on a foundation of Mormon literary criticism, critics of audiovisual media have been publishing and presenting work in numerous journals, websites, blogs, and symposia, indicating that we are entering a renaissance of Mormon cultural studies and artistic criticism. *Peculiar Portrayals* joins recent luminous efforts like Terryl Givens’s *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Brigham Young University’s first annual Mormon Media Studies Symposium in November 2010 both to signify a new era in the study of Mormon media and also to indicate directions in which that study can go.

This peculiar historical position is, in fact, both the greatest strength and weakness of *Peculiar Portrayals*. On the one hand, the individual essays are universally engaging, erudite, and insightful. They apply strong criticism to remarkably diverse works to achieve, by and large, some of the best thoughts written about Mormon media in recent years, giving hope for criticism of the same and greater caliber in the near future. At the same time, however, in analyzing individual works in such scrupulous detail, the book lays bare the fact that it is missing a significant amount of material that might have been profitably included. It may be faint criticism to blame a book for being so good it leaves you wanting more; but the omissions, even though the editors acknowledge them (3), remain palpable and regrettable.

But more noticeable than the omission of any individual subject is the lack of an overarching systematic approach. Decker and Austin claim that “there has not [previously] been a concerted effort to explore the ways that Mormons and Mormonism have

been characterized in literature and film” and that their volume will attempt to provide that “broad perspective” (3). By “a concerted effort” it appears they mean a systematic investigation, one that covers all media and classes of portrayals of Mormonism throughout the spectrum. This is an admirable goal and would create a much-needed resource, but in their highly focused gaze on individual works not all of the essays here live up to that standard. If the goal is to systematically analyze how Mormonism is treated in media, one wonders why some of the essays, though good, focus on minor works such as the film *Pride and Prejudice* (2003) instead of on larger issues that affect many films, plays, or novels. Each of the essays has its own goal, of course, and should be judged accordingly, but only some strive for insights applicable to a range of works. Among these, J. Aaron Sanders, in “Avenging Angels: The Nephi Archetype and Blood Atonement in Neil LaBute, Brian Evenson, and Levi Peterson, and the Making of the Mormon American Writer,” examines how blood atonement is treated by these three authors. And in “Elders on the Big Screen: Film and the Globalized Circulation of Mormon Missionary Images,” John-Charles Duffy deals with the standardized image and use of missionaries in a variety of films. Duffy’s criteria in selecting the sample films seem somewhat haphazard, though, leaving out important pictures such as Danny Boyle’s *Millions* (2004) that would have supported his thesis (115).

Thus, though its insights are unique and compelling, the book is far from systematic in covering Mormon film, drama, television, and literature—indeed, no single volume of 196 pages could be. That is not to say that *Peculiar Portrayals* does not contribute to the larger dialogue about Mormon culture; certainly it will immediately become an invaluable addition to the field. It’s just that, if the trees it studies are excellent, it still does not have the capacity to synthesize the entire forest.

Part of this result is because of the breadth of the works included for analysis. My first impression was that it was somewhat foolhardy to group written, performed, and projected/electronic media together in a single volume. In fact, the variety is somewhat overwhelming. Individual authors and subjects, in addition to those mentioned above, are Cristine Hutchison-Jones on Mormons and Americana in *Angels in America*; Michael Austin on politics and

polygamy in *Big Love*—arguably the best essay in the book; Kevin Kolkmeyer on cultural tolerance and *Under the Banner of Heaven*; Mark Decker on postdenominationalism in *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*; Juliette Wells on aesthetics and adaptation in the Mormon film version of *Pride and Prejudice*; and Karen D. Austin on the phenomenon of Mormon characters in reality television.

But the unity between the essays is remarkable, and what ties them together is their emphasis on the *depictions* of Mormons and, by inference, their *reception* by diverse viewers and readers. Here the insights can be especially keen: Karen Austin's evaluation of how Mormonism takes on narrative significance in reality TV (184) is akin to Duffy's on how Mormon missionaries have become standard cinematic tropes, even when the evangelizing characters are not even meant to be Mormon (114). Hutchison-Jones's analysis of the sexual and political mores of the Mormon characters in the theatrical and filmed versions of *Angels in America* and how playwright/screenwriter Tony Kushner uses Mormonism politically echoes Michael Austin's thoughts on the sexual and political mores of the fundamentalist Mormon characters in *Big Love* and how that show's creators use Mormonism to make a political statement. Polygamy, blood atonement, and other familiar issues each receive new life as they are examined across multiple invigorating essays.

Given this emphasis on how Mormons are portrayed and received by audiences/readers, all of the essays can be seen as social evaluations. Any formalist analysis is done at the level of the text or script, dealing with issues of plot, theme, and character, rather than with filmic features like image, sound, *mise-en-scene*, acting, music, or editing. Perhaps the closest thing to an exception is Duffy's description of missionaries' physical appearances. Given that Mormon cinematic criticism has essentially grown out of literary criticism over the past ten years, this characteristic is not surprising and represents a trend that has thus far been endemic to the entire field. With books and articles of this caliber in circulation, however, we have now hopefully reached a point in our critical maturation that we can soon begin focusing on film's other salient features besides those included in the screenplay.

Still, with publications like this one, the future of Mormon media studies—and all of Mormon cultural studies—looks very

bright. As studies of interactive media and the internet are added to criticism like that included here, our concept of the history and capacity of Mormon media will enlarge, audiences and creators will come into closer contact, and the quality of new works will improve. Decker, Austin, and their contributors have created an invaluable resource to bolster the growing field, and one can only hope that the critics who begin to fill in their gaps will do so to the same standards upheld throughout this book.

Notes

1. Michael Otterson, "The Church's Reputation: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunity," Patheos.com, August 9, 2010, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Churchs-Reputation-Progress-Challenges-and-Opportunity.html> (accessed August 11, 2010).

2. These include Mitt Romney, Warren Jeffs, and Proposition 8; also see Austin's discussion of polygamy in his own essay, pp. 37–61.

Pirouettes on Strings

Phyllis Barber. *Raw Edges*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2010. ix + 268 pp. Hardcover: \$26.95. ISBN: 978-0-87417-807-4

Reviewed by Kathryn Lynard Soper

A mobile hangs from the ceiling above Phyllis Barber's writing desk: tissue-paper ballerinas suspended in midair, light and delicate, twirling in currents of warmth from the nearby fireplace. As she labored to finish *Raw Edges*, Barber often glanced up from the computer screen for the dancers' wordless encouragement. *You need to finish your book*, they reminded her (1). I'm glad she listened, for this memoir shares a compelling story, often poetic and sometimes heartbreaking, rich with the makings of wisdom.

The narrative cycles repeatedly through conundrums of identity and intimacy which surface during Barber's "seven lean years of being lost" (1); she writes to find herself in the shreds and patches of three love relationships, including a marriage of thirty-three years to a man ill-suited for the obligations of monogamy. The result is a weaving, sometimes frayed but still effective story