surprised, she writes in the acknowledgments section, that SoHo Crime, which mostly specializes in international crime stories, would want to publish a book set in small-town Utah. Her editor explained, "It's like Mormons are a different country. They speak a different language, and you're the interpreter" (343). Through her marvelous narrator, Harrison is a revealing interpreter of a world she inhabits both gracefully and critically.

Notes

1. Scott Abbott, "One Lord, One Faith, Two Universities," in *Sunstone* 16, no. 3 (1992): 21–22.

2. Andrew Hunt, *City of Saints* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2012), 321.

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The Mormon Murder Mystery Grows Up

Mette Ivie Harrison. *The Bishop's Wife*. New York: SoHo Crime, 2014. 352 pp. $26.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9781616954765.

Tim Wirkus. *City of Brick and Shadow*. Madison, Wisc.: Tyrus Books, 2014. 304 pp. $24.99. Paperback. ISBN: 9781440582769.

Reviewed by Michael Austin

Mystery fiction and Mormonism grew up together. The first modern writer of mystery tales, Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), was an exact contemporary of Joseph Smith (1805–1844). The most famous literary detective in the English-speaking world, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, got his start in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887)—a novel set partly in Utah among the Latter-day Saints. And during the twentieth and early twenty-first century, Mormon mysteries became a recognizable sub-genre in series by Robert Irvine, Gary Stewart, and Sarah Andrews, and in bestselling single installments by (among many others) Tony Hillerman, Stephen White, Karen Kijewski, and Scott Turow.[1]

Nearly all of these contemporary novels show that, while both Mormonism and mystery fiction have matured considerably since their birth, the Mormon mystery novel has been stuck in a particularly obnoxious adolescence for more than a hundred years. Virtually without exception, the Mormons in these books are cartoon villains based on nineteenth-century stereotypes. The mystery plots almost always involve secret polygamy, blood-atonement murders, or avenging Danites, and the Mormon characters all speak and act like they have been plucked out of the nineteenth-century desert, given a shave and a haircut, and sent into the twenty-first century to make their way in a world of gentiles.

Recent explosions in both self-publishing and in the Mormon market for fiction have improved the picture somewhat by setting dozens of three-dimensional Latter-day Saint detectives loose on an unsuspecting world. But given the limited distribution that such books have, the world still doesn't suspect a thing. For all the tilling that has been done here, the world of contemporary Mormonism remains virgin soil for mystery writers in the national market. Two books published in 2014—Mette Ivie Harrison's *The Bishop's Wife* and Tim Wirkus's *City of Brick and Shadow*—fill this niche admirably and, taken together, suggest that the Mormon mystery novel has finally started to grow up.

The Bishop's Wife introduces a new fictional sleuth, Linda Wallheim, who will hopefully have a long run in the national spotlight. As the title suggests, Linda is the wife of a lay Mormon bishop—a position with no formal institutional authority but a great deal of informal power as both her husband's chief advisor and as the confidante of many of the women in the ward (and some men, too) who feel uncomfortable telling their secrets to the bishop. And, as it turns out, Bishop Wallheim's ward has a lot of secrets.

The novel revolves around two strange disappearances—one that unfolds in the novel and one that occurred more than thirty years earlier but has never been solved. In the contemporary mystery, a young wife and mother named Carrie Helm disappears under suspicious circumstances, and her husband becomes the prime suspect in what may or may not be a murder case. Thrown

into the mix are Carrie's parents, who are solid and respectable members of the LDS community, and her father-in-law, an obnoxious Mormon fanatic whose views on gender roles come straight from the fourteenth century. These events are modeled on the 2009 disappearance of West Valley City, Utah, resident Susan Powell—though only very loosely and not in a way that will spoil the ending.

The historical mystery emerges as another ward member, Tobias Tortensen, nears death. Anna, his second wife, confides in Linda during her husband's final days. As they try to piece together Tobias's life, they discover that nobody quite remembers what happened to his first wife. When Linda discovers evidence that she could have been the victim of foul play, she tries to follow a trail of clues and memories to solve a thirty-year-old mystery. As these two plotlines wind through their various twists and turns, they reveal multiple layers of misogyny, domestic violence, and sexual abuse within the seemingly pristine Mormon world.

In an afterword, Harrison explains that Linda Wallheim has been crafted to appeal to two very different audiences:

> I hope there are many Mormon women out there who read this book and see parts of themselves in Linda. I hope that there are many non-Mormons who read this book and see how smart, thoughtful, kind, and powerful Mormon women can be, even if they seem to be following a traditionally feminine path, and even if you do not see them in the church leadership. (344–45)

The rhetorical objectives that Harrison identifies—1) giving Mormon women a heroine to identify with, and 2) showing non-Mormons how complex and powerful Mormon women can be—don't always exist comfortably in the same narrative. The first objective requires a lot of inside baseball—appealing to nuances of Mormonism that outsiders are unlikely to understand and drawing excruciatingly fine distinctions between doctrine and orthopraxy. The second objective requires basic explanation of Mormon beliefs, tempered by multiple distancing moves to show that neither the author nor the character is THAT kind of Mormon. Linda has no problem with gay people and didn't really

like what the Church did with Proposition 8 in California (247). And she doesn't go in for all the food-in-the-basement survivalist stuff either (273). And, just by the way, temple garments aren't as weird as you think; "there are new styles every few years to keep up with the expectations of each generation" (171).

It is this meta-commentary on Mormonism, more than the plot or the setting, that most distinguishes *The Bishop's Wife* from *City of Brick and Shadow*. Wirkus's characters are Mormon missionaries, but they don't spend much time thinking about what it means to be missionaries or trying to explain missionary-ness to the average reader. Average readers are not likely to read *City of Brick and Shadow* in the first place, as it is the sort of experimental novel usually produced by academics (Wirkus is a PhD candidate at USC) and touted in the trade journals as "serious" and perhaps even "artistic." Like most books so touted, it focuses less on what it appears to focus on and more on the standard post-modern questions about the nature of truth, the reliability of experience, and the role of stories in shaping our memories and our perceptions.

This is not to say that *City of Brick and Shadow* is a work of abstract philosophy masquerading as a mystery novel. It is an extremely well-written and engaging book, but it is not the sort of novel that comes to a definite closure where the mystery is solved, the bad guy is punished, and the detectives get to bask in the glow of a job well done. It is not, in other words, very much like a mystery novel. It subverts those conventions, even as it uses them to tell a story. At the same time, though, it invokes other conventions that will be quite familiar to those used to reading academic fiction designed to subvert genre expectations and question the reliability of things like truth and story.

The novel's detectives are Mormon missionaries in Vila Barbosa, a particularly unsavory neighborhood in São Paulo, Brazil—where Wirkus himself was a Mormon missionary from 2003–2005. Elder John Toronto is a brilliant but obsessive and socially awkward missionary with a penchant for deduction. His companion, Elder Mike Schwartz, is the "normal guy" whose point of view structures most of the story. These loving gestures to Sherlock Holmes aside, the narrative is fragmented, non-linear,

and multi-perspectival—but it goes something like this: soon after Elder Schwartz arrives in Vila Barbosa he sees one of their recent converts—a man named Marco Aurélio—running through a marketplace as if he were being chased. Soon after, Marco disappears, and, when they start looking for him, the three people who might have known something about his disappearance end up dead. We eventually learn that Marco was once a successful confidence man, whose ex-wife and ex-partner also ended up in Vila Barbosa, where they help the missionaries reconstruct Marco's past.

Throughout the novel, Wirkus mixes the story of Marco's disappearance with brief chapters about "The Argentine," a shadowy underworld figure who is said to have taken over Vila Barbosa and then disappeared into an underground labyrinth to study the forms of human cruelty. These stories begin as myths, but, gradually, they merge with the story of Marco Aurélio to become a single narrative that defies both comprehension and closure. Marco's disappearance may (or may not) be part of an elaborate con game in which the Argentine may (or may not) be the ultimate mark. The Argentine may (or may not) be controlling the entire story through minions pledged to his service. Toward the end, when the elders meet a man claiming to be the Argentine, they must decide (as must we) whether he is a harmless crank, or a near-omniscient being in whose mind the entire story is taking place—or, perhaps, something completely different.

The great pleasure in a book like *City of Brick and Shadow* lies in the way it asks questions and manipulates expectations. This places it on the other end of a spectrum from books like *The Bishop's Wife*, which present intellectual puzzles and which solve them according to a fairly standard set of genre conventions. I do not mean to make a value judgment here. One author has chosen to work within a set of conventions that the other author has chosen to subvert, but these are differences in taste, not talent. Both books accomplish what they set out to do, and, in the process, significantly enrich the ways that Mormons are portrayed in the national market.

The modern mystery novel is as much about anthropological tourism as it is about solving puzzles. Readers expect their favorite

authors to teach them things about times and places that they know nothing about: Tony Hillerman and the Navajo reservation, Ellis Peters and medieval England, Janet Evanovich and New Jersey. Mormonism works in this formula today for the same reason it worked in 1887: for many readers, Mormons are exotic, unknown, mysterious, and a little bit weird. Dozens of mystery writers in the past have exploited this otherness in ways that do not give a true picture of the culture. For all of their differences in style and tone, both *The Bishop's Wife* and *City of Brick and Shadow* bring realistic and informed portraits of Mormonism to the national reading public. And they are both very good books whose authors, I hope, will be around for a long time.

Notes

1. See Michael Austin, "Troped by the Mormons: The Persistence of 19th-Century Mormon Stereotypes in Contemporary Detective Fiction," *Sunstone* 21, no. 3 (August 1998): 51–71.