

is marginal at best, placed there to reinforce their male counterparts' decisions and actions. This omission may be explained by Nelson's dependence on mission records, in which women usually only make a peripheral appearance, but it is a meaningful—and telling—absence in a book of this scope.

This area of study has been long dominated by faith-promoting narratives that do little justice to the complexities of life—and religion—in wartime. This book, however, ultimately swings too far the other way: Nelson seems determined to counter the existing narratives by systematically interpreting historical evidence in the worst possible light. Nevertheless, I would urge readers to ignore the book's sensationalist cover: the branding does not accurately reflect the book's content and more careful readers may still find much to interest them in the book.

### Notes

1. Further complicating his status in Mormon memory, Reschke, a branch president, was eventually excommunicated for adultery—not exactly the conduct becoming of a hero featured in the *Ensign*.

2. Here, as elsewhere in the book, while the rank-and-file face questions of culpability (Nelson brings up Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" [113]), it is Church leaders who are condemned—as men in the position to know more, there is less room for moral ambiguity. Nelson does say that after the *Kristallnacht*, favorable articles in the *Deseret News* about genealogical research in Germany no longer appeared and "Mormons on both sides of the Atlantic then began to take another view of genealogical research in Hitler's Reich" (115).

## Families are Forever and Ever and Ever

Families Are Forever, DVD. Directed by Vivian Kleiman. San Francisco: Family Acceptance Project, Marian Wright Edelman Institute, San Francisco State University, 2013.<sup>1</sup>

*Reviewed by Robert A. Rees*<sup>2</sup>

*Families Are Forever* is a short film about a Latter-day Saint family, the Montgomerys, living in central California who have a gay son

who came of age during Proposition 8, the California initiative to affirm the definition of marriage as being between one woman and one man. Explaining their active involvement in supporting the initiative, the mother, Wendy, says, “If the Church asks you to do something, you do it.” Her son Jordan, whose homosexuality was unknown to his parents at the time, overheard them talking about the “disgusting” and “horrible” people who opposed Prop 8. According to his father, Tom, this led Jordan to believe that “his parents hate gay people and his Church hates gay people.” Looking back, Jordan says, “I had a plan set up in my head that when I finished college I would move somewhere where my parents couldn’t find me so that they wouldn’t find out they had a gay son.” It wasn’t until several years after the initiative had passed that Jordan’s parents discovered he is gay, when his mother read an entry in his journal about his role in the school play, *Beauty and the Beast*: “In my dreams I would be Beauty and the other boy would be the beast.” Reflecting on these words, Wendy says, “I felt like the son I knew was not the son I knew and that I had to get to know this other boy who felt a little like a stranger to me. What I saw his life would be—what I expected his life to be—as a Mormon boy was now gone. I saw him preparing for a mission for our church, gone. I saw a temple wedding, gone. I saw him being a father, gone. Having grown up Mormon, that is the plan, that’s how it is. So I didn’t even know how to parent that kind of a plan.” Tom adds, “You can’t just leave some void for a young child to wonder whether God has a plan for them.”

Assuring Jordan that they love him and that his being gay “changed nothing,” Tom and Wendy began searching for answers. As Wendy says,

Needless to say, this revelation turned our neatly-ordered Mormon world upside down, causing an intense emotional and spiritual upheaval not only in our immediate family but in our extended family and our congregation. The next few months were critical as we searched desperately for accurate information in the polarizing world of LGBT issues. There was so much I thought I knew about homosexuality but quickly discovered that

most of it was wrong. The Spirit couldn't help me until I was willing to listen and be guided. One thing that was repeated in multiple priesthood blessings I received during this time was that I would be blessed with the power of discernment and would know truth when I found it. As I researched and read through mountains of materials both inside and outside the Church, I was able to determine what would benefit my son and what would be a detriment to him. This happened to me again and again and is a testament to me of the power of prayer and personal revelation. We haven't done everything right, but I would have been utterly lost without the Savior's help.

Initially, the Montgomerys found little that was helpful. Their bishop and stake president told them that Jordan was "just confused" and "not really gay," and that they shouldn't label him as such. They went to eight different therapists looking for answers, including LDS therapists who wanted to change him, "reverse what he was," which increased Jordan's depression, suicidal thoughts, and despair. Their instinct was to reject such messages and to keep looking. Eventually, they were led to the scientific research of Dr. Caitlin Ryan and the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Ryan is a social research scientist investigating the influence of the family on LGBT children. Her research and its application have had a profound influence on the Montgomerys as well as tens of thousands of other families, including many Latter-day Saint families. What is significant is that, based on her decades of work in Utah, Dr. Ryan understands the special place of the family in LDS theology and culture. Through extensive research and field studies, the Family Acceptance Project has identified more than one hundred parental behaviors, both accepting and rejecting, that can have a dramatic, determinative impact on the lives of their LGBT children.

What Tom and Wendy learned and began applying in their own family was that they could create an affirming, accepting culture within their family without sacrificing either their faith or their devotion to the Church—although it is important to note that

striking this balance has not been easy. The cultural biases against LGBT individuals and their families are still deeply ingrained in Mormon culture. For example, some members of their congregation refused to take the sacrament from Jordan; others said hurtful things both to and about Jordan and his parents. At one point it was necessary for them to move to another, more accepting ward.

*Families Are Forever* is both powerful and poignant because it captures the real-life experience of a Mormon family caught in what they perceive to be a “Sophie’s choice” between their faith and their family, between their devotion to their religion and their devotion to their highest calling as parents. Ultimately, I don’t believe these are choices God intends for us to face, but in Mormon culture they are sometimes presented as such. Fortunately, the Church’s new website, [www.mormonsandgays.org](http://www.mormonsandgays.org), counters this misperception, assuring parents that they can be true both to the Church and to their families. In speaking of the Christian imperative to love everyone, the site states, “But we can’t truly love the neighbors next door if we don’t love the neighbors under our own roof. Family members with same-sex attraction need our love and understanding. God loves all his children alike, much more than any of us can comprehend, and [he] expects us to follow [him].”<sup>4</sup> That imperative includes, by the way, gay and lesbian family members who choose to live a different lifestyle than that prescribed by the Church. As Elder Quentin L. Cook says on the website, “As a church, nobody should be more loving and compassionate [than Latter-day Saints]. . . . Let’s not have families exclude or be disrespectful of those who choose a different lifestyle. . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Without his parents’ love and support, Jordan could easily have become one more casualty of an unenlightened Mormon culture. Hearing so many negative messages about gay people, he contemplated suicide. He said to his mom, “What’s the point of my life?” Wendy says, “I can’t tell you what that does to a mother’s heart to hear that. There’s something not right with a thirteen-year-old having to think that. And I found myself being angry that he even had that thought in his head and how unfair those emotions were to him. It’s hard enough being a teenager, without all of that.” In one of the most powerful scenes in the

film, Jordan says, “Our most important value as a church is the family. And being together forever and being sealed in the temple for time and all eternity. But I wasn’t sure I wanted to be with that family forever and ever and ever. Because what if they hated me for eternity?”

The Church’s new website shows that we have come a long way in the past decade. *Families Are Forever* suggests that we still have a very long way to go. It is a blessing that we have friends like Caitlin Ryan who are willing to travel that journey with us—to help show us, to use Paul’s term, a more excellent way.

Philosopher of art Susanne Langer says that film is most like our dreams. Both create a virtual present; in both we are “equidistant from all events” and experience the “immediacy of everything.” Thus, the camera and soundtrack are, respectively, the mind’s eye and ear, which project “a poetic composition, coherent, organic, governed by a definitely conceived feeling.” Film, according to Langer, is “a poetic presentation [that] accounts for its power to assimilate the most diverse materials, and transform them. . . . Like dream, it enralls and commingles all senses; its basic abstraction—direct apparition—is made not only by visual means . . . but by words, which punctuate vision, and music that supports the unity of the shifting world.”<sup>6</sup> Like dreams, films have a point of view. That is, film is an arranged reality, a constructed narrative. If it is artfully constructed, as is *Families Are Forever*, we see the world presented approximately as the filmmakers intend us to see it. They invite and guide us in seeing the world from their collective point of view.

That point of view in *Families Are Forever* belongs essentially to Caitlin Ryan. Because of her deep and extensive clinical, scientific, and personal experience with the sexual identity and orientation of adolescents—and her concerted commitment to understanding Mormon culture—she has made a film that can help Mormon families, leaders, and members understand the complicated, often treacherous LGBT landscape, showing us that the gospel of Jesus Christ is always about love—love emancipated from erroneous doctrines, untethered from destructive

practices, liberated from cultural mythologies, and undergirded by sound scientific research.

Subtle, artistic elements of the filmmaking in *Families Are Forever* contribute to the construction of the world from this point of view. For example, the film begins with the Montgomery family (which includes five children) decorating their Christmas tree and placing the angel Moroni on the pinnacle, a fitting symbol for a family whose whole life centers on the Church. Early in the film we see Jordan standing pensively in front of a crèche showing the birth of a son who was despised and rejected and wounded in the house of friends, and we wonder what he is thinking.

The film ends with a powerful image of Jordan riding his bike down the middle of the street. That image can be interpreted variously: does it symbolize ambiguity, balance, or indecision? It certainly suggests danger since powerful machines (like automobiles and trucks) barrel down the real streets of our cities, and institutional machines (like churches) dominate the metaphorical streets of our lives. As his father says, “You can’t just leave some void for a young child. . . . I want to make sure that [Jordan] can get to adulthood and not have made huge mistakes that compromise his health and his happiness. And there’s [sic] a lot of land mines along that road, you know. And that’s true about heterosexual or homosexual kids. Figuring all of that out’s not easy. But, if you take your family’s support away, I don’t know how you do it as a kid.”

Jordan, an adolescent Mormon boy, also symbolizes the vulnerability of gay youth alone in a culture that has for decades demonized LGBT individuals. As he looks ahead, what does he see? What future lies ahead for him and all those like him? That future is not in their control but in ours—their parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and Church leaders who believe that families are indeed forever.

## Notes

1. *Families Are Forever* is available from the Family Acceptance Project with discussion guides and educational materials in versions for families, for education outside the home, and for institutions at [www.familyacceptanceproject.org](http://www.familyacceptanceproject.org).

The Family Acceptance Project has also published Caitlin Ryan and Robert A. Rees, “Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Latter-day Saint Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children.” For additional information, contact: [fap@sfsu.edu](mailto:fap@sfsu.edu) or [faprequest@gmail.com](mailto:faprequest@gmail.com). *Families Are Forever* has won twenty awards at film festivals across the United States and abroad, including Affirmation’s inaugural Tree of Life Award.

2. Full disclosure: The author was a consultant on the film and study guide and co-author with Caitlin Ryan of “Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Latter-day Saint Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children.”

3. “The Family Acceptance Project™ is a research, intervention, education, and policy initiative that works to prevent health and mental health risks for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) children and youth, including suicide, homelessness, and HIV—in the context of their families, cultures, and faith communities.”

4. “Love One Another—The Great Christian Imperative,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.mormonsandgays.org>.

5. Quentin L. Cook, “Bishops made incredible sacrifices,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.mormonsandgays.org>.

6. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner’s & Sons, 1953), 411–14.