

## A Not-So-Innocent Abroad

Craig Harline. *Way Below the Angels: The Pretty Clearly Troubled but Not Even Close to Tragic Confessions of a Real Live Mormon Missionary*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014. 281 pp. Hardcover: \$22.00. ISBN: 978-0802871503.

*Reviewed by Rosalynde Frandsen Welch*

Craig Harline's mission memoir, *Way Below the Angels: The Pretty Clearly Troubled but Not Even Close to Tragic Confessions of a Real Live Mormon Missionary*, is a hilarious, heart-of-gold account of the highs and lows of the author's experiences in the Belgium Antwerp Mission in the early 1970s. The story proceeds chronologically through the events of Harline's mission call and training period in the old LTM, his arrival in Belgium and subsequent travails with uninterested Belgians, and his eventual return home as a slightly-older and probably-a-bit-wiser young man. Throughout, young Elder Harline wrestles with his own unrealistic expectations of grandeur and occasionally encounters a moment of shimmering grace. The events and settings are, on the surface, highly entertaining but hardly exceptional. Non-Mormon readers, who are the primary audience for the book's publisher, Eerdmans, will come away with a lightly-seasoned glimpse of a Mormon mission experience in Europe; Mormon readers familiar with mission culture will respond with recognition and identification.

What makes the memoir exceptional, in addition to its wit and orientation toward an outside audience, is its willingness to tear down the icons of the Heroic Mission Story. This is not a book where the last house on the last block contains the golden investigator, conveniently gift-wrapped for the missionary's homecoming talk. This is a book where the last house on the last block very probably contains a hostile old man ready to literally kick the elders' butts off the porch. Harline is a canny storyteller, however, and realizes that tales of the Heroic Iconoclast are

nearly as hackneyed as tales of the Heroic Missionary. He avoids the problem by creating a confessional, conspiratorial narrative voice that is as game to humorously deprecate itself as it is to gently poke at parts of LDS mission culture. He achieves this appealing voice by blending past with present: equal parts “erudite history professor”—after his mission, Harline made the study of Belgium’s religious history his life’s work—and “clueless California teen” mixed with dashes of down-to-earth folksiness, droll humor, and spiritual reflection. The result is a readable hybrid that somehow shuttles us among early modern Europe, 1970s Belgium, and Harline’s present-day writing desk without a hint of jet lag.

Harline hits upon several strokes of narrative genius that manage to convey the strangeness of missionary life in a foreign country without compromising the clarity of the storytelling, all while keeping things fresh and funny. One of these is his habit of referring to the missionaries as “local businessmen”—a reference to the LTM president’s admonition to “blend in with the local businessmen” of Belgium. This is funny, of course, because shorn-headed, dark-suited, young men most assuredly did not resemble the local businessmen of 1970s Belgium. But it is also brilliant because it keeps both the conformity of mission culture and the essential strangeness of Mormon missionaries in Belgian society at the forefront of the narrative without tiresome repetition of the point. Another device is his syntactical rendering of Dutch into English: while he translates each word into English, he leaves the Dutch syntax intact, resulting in a comprehensible but thoroughly strange—and funny!—approximation of what American Dutch speakers must sound like to Flemish ears. His standard door approach thus reads: “Hello Mevrouw, my companion and I are Americans, here in Belgium for two years as missionaries in order a message with people to share, and we would very gladly with you and your man wish to speak” (78). Two hundred and fifty pages later, it’s still funny.

For a returned European missionary like me, the chief pleasure of the book is the simple *frisson* of recognition. Harline has a gift for sensing

the most universal of missionary experiences and capturing them with humor and insight. He makes fine hay out of something as basic as the elation and fellowship of a shared meal out with your district, or that cocktail of relief, superiority, and guilt you feel when your companion is sick and you get to stay inside. He articulates the difficulty of apprehending your companion's own inner life, minute by minute, and the labyrinth of unstated assumptions about the other's motives and moods that can tangle simple interactions. He skewers the "vending machine" mentality that so often accompanies an emphasis on obedience to rules, the simplistic expectation that God will dispense baptisms in return for obedience. He is razor sharp on the folly of status obsession and the eagerness with which one's fantasies scale the mission hierarchy: his account of the twenty-four hours he (mistakenly) thought he was AP—assistant to the president, or is it assistant president?—feels like an episode of *The Office*. But he is equally sensitive to the occasional moments of prophetic vision that settle on a missionary's gaze, allowing her to see the land and people around her as they really are: that is, glowing with an internal grace and sovereignty so vast that narrow categories of statistical success simply melt away.

Several points for reform are tucked implicitly among Harline's tales, though he never signposts them as such. Among these is his suggestion that missionaries be trained in a more sophisticated theory of conversion, one that acknowledges the wrenching social dislocation that Church membership requires of most converts. Elder Harline arrived in Belgium certain that only the devil, working through the Catholic Church, could account for the rejection he experienced; over time, he came to recognize what he calls the "Multivariate Theory of Conversion," the personal and social complexity of the decision to convert. Setting aside the question of whether young Elder Harline could *really* have been so naive fresh off the plane, it is certainly true that mission training materials, then and now, offer only the thinnest of sociological frameworks for understanding the conversion process. Harline writes:

[O]ur missionary teachers and the people teaching the teachers didn't like any talk about anything even resembling the Multivariate Theory of Rejection (or Conversion), didn't like any talk that structures might play a role in rejection or conversion or especially that those structures made conversion harder or easier in some places than in others, because teachers and people teaching the teachers were afraid that if they said something like that then maybe missionaries in hard places would quit trying or just give excuses for not converting anyone. But maybe those missionaries just would've tried differently. (116)

Together with his theory of conversion, Harline's approach to proselytizing evolved over the course of his mission. Initially obsessed with his discussion tally for the week, he came to value friendship and conversation over formal gospel instruction. By the end of his mission, he writes, "interest in hearing Discussions wasn't my big criterion for talking to people anymore" (233). He continues: "[W]hat I came to realize was that when I felt most connected to other people was also when I felt most timeless and most myself—like these people were seeing me for who I was, not who I was supposed to be. And I was doing the same for them. Maybe just to mutually feel that was what I'd really come to Belgianland for" (237).

I am skeptical that most young missionaries possess the social skills that young Elder Harline did—his extraordinary gift for friendship is apparent on almost every page of the book—and thus I suspect that some kind of formal scaffolding is necessary for young missionaries to organize their connection with investigators. But I certainly agree with Harline's call for a sane, humane, and humanistic approach to proselytizing.

Another critique weaves through Harline's narrative, though it is so pervasive that it is less a recommendation for reform than a central structuring device: that is, the conflict between the heroic mission ideal and the "real self." At the outset of the story, as Harline sets the stage for receiving his mission call, he frets about the legitimacy of his intentions. His reasons for going on a mission are hopelessly mixed, he reports, and it was difficult to discern "which of my motives for going

were pure and which came from all the social conditioning around me” (4). A vocabulary of sexual purity is commonly coupled with missionary service, but Harline cleverly turns the convention on its head in this passage: it is not a contest between lust and chastity that he will undertake but a struggle between the idealized cultural identity of the Mormon missionary and Harline’s “pure” self. The contaminant is not carnal lust but enculturation.

This struggle plays out through virtually every episode of the book. Beginning in the LTM and continuing throughout his mission, Elder Harline tumbles through an emotional spin cycle originating with grandiose fantasies of being Super Missionary, a blend of every heroic mission story he has ever heard. When he fails to measure up to the impossible ideal, he vows to be content with who he “really is.” Satisfaction with his own humility then sends him spinning back up toward Super Missionary, and the cycle begins again. The trouble, Harline seems to suggest, is that the cultural expectations surrounding missionary identity are too rigid, too totalizing, too idealized, too uniform. The individual self has no room to breathe, stretch its wings, or find its own way. To adopt the language of critical theory, we might say that the missionary subject position is overdetermined. Paraphrasing St. Augustine on this question, Harline writes, “If you were always doing and being what people whose opinions you cared about most wanted you to do and be (even supposedly good things), then you’d not only never figure out what you yourself wanted to do and be but would almost certainly end up doing and being a lot of actually dumb things” (203).

Elder Harline can only find peace, maturity, and true success on his mission when he musters the strength to throw off all the social conditioning, all the culturally-constructed baggage, and just *be who he really is*. He describes the happier, more secure emotional horizon he reaches by the end of his mission: “[I] started feeling . . . a sense of who I really was. I still wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, because *myself* could be a long and confusing business, but I knew it first emerged noticeably not

just among but because of the Friendly People of the Pajottenland. . . . [T]hese people were seeing me for who I was, not who I was supposed to be. And I was doing the same for them. Maybe just to mutually feel that was what I'd really come to Belgianland for" (237).

If this all seems a bit too cliché, a bit too pat, well, Harline agrees. A careful thinker and historian of early modern Europe, the seedbed of modern subjectivity, Harline recognizes that every element of his narrative is contestable—from the very notion of a distinct, unconstructed self to his eventual anti-heroic triumph over the oppression of cultural roles. As central as those tropes have become in contemporary personal narrative, they are neither inevitable nor universal. Think of Shakespeare's crafty Prince Hal, who plans a careful ascent from profligate youth to noble king: it is only when he steps *into* cultural expectations that Henry "please[s] again to be himself" (*King Henry IV* 1.2.189). Why is it, then, that Elder Harline—no Hal, surely, but a simpatico hail young fellow well met—can only become himself when he steps *out* of cultural expectations?

Harline acknowledges the problems in his formulation; indeed, he problematizes it himself. At an early crisis point in the story, young Elder Harline finds himself depressed about his spectacular failure to make converts in Belgium. In despair, he throws himself down on his mattress, too spent for prayer. As he lies there in empty misery, a spiritual awareness begins to dawn: "[T]he emptiness wasn't so much filled as reduced to something smaller and smaller and quieter and quieter, until finally it took the form of a totally silent thought/feeling that calmly but overwhelmingly entered the emptiness inside, and it was just this: *Just be yourself*" (120). Here it is: rather than struggling to conform to the impossible cultural expectations around him, Elder Harline should relinquish the struggle, look inside himself, and relax into who he *really is*. One imagines young Elder Harline harmonizing with Queen Elsa in her frozen castle, "Let it go, let it go, can't hold it back anymore."

It's a comforting thought, and Harline immediately begins to deconstruct it. "Just be yourself" is too syrupy, too hackneyed to be a message from God. Too vague. Too complacent. And anyway, who was Elder Harline himself? "[N]ot three minutes later," he writes, "I was mistrusting the *Just be yourself*" (124). After poking at it for a while, he comes to understand his small revelation not as an endorsement of a simplistic Elsa-style pop individualism, the triumphant self throwing off the straitjacket of cultural roles, but instead as its opposite: an acknowledgement that the self is *not* triumphant, *not* victorious, but rather limited, weak, imperfect. But that's okay. He explains:

[I]t turns out you don't always want to be you, because you know very well all the spectacular failures and character flaws lurking around inside, and you think that maybe it'd be nicer to be someone else instead, who obviously doesn't have all those failures and flaws. . . . Maybe it's only when that doesn't work out so well that you finally and mostly out of desperation get enough nerve to let out that teeny tiny odd-ball idiosyncratic part of yourself that actually might make you most you, the part that might allow you to make your own particular and possibly impossible-to-replicate contribution to life. (122–23)

As an acknowledgement of the essential limitation, partiality, unfinishedness of the human self, as a humane acceptance of that weakness, and especially as a comforting affirmation to a struggling young missionary that his earnest, imperfect, idiosyncratic efforts are valuable, Harline's contribution is a welcome, necessary addition to LDS missionary discourse.

For all its personal richness, however, Harline's message feels intellectually unfinished. While he fruitfully complicates the first half of the "real self" vs. "cultural expectation" dichotomy that structures the book, the culture half remains relatively unmined. This is surprising because his sophisticated deconstruction of the self is so deftly—lightly and wittily—handled. But culture, in this book, remains largely under-developed as a category: by the end of the story, the "cultural expectations" with

which he inaugurated the central conflict are still largely understood to be unrealistic myths and unnecessarily rigid roles that deform the real workings of the self with grandiosity in attainment or depression in failure.

Yet doesn't Harline's own nuanced account of the self as weak, imperfect, and unfinished suggest, precisely, that humans need culture, need roles and scripts and norms, at least as a starting place for a life? If the self does not come fully equipped for autonomous operation, how are we to make our way through life, or a two-year mission to Belgium, without recourse to the distilled collective experience of those who have gone before? Indeed, isn't the self in some sense *produced* by the culture in which it exists? Humans produce culture because culture first produced us.

This is not to suggest that cultural roles and expectations can never be too rigid or too overbearing or simply ineffective: they can, and they should be adjusted when they are. It may well be that LDS mission culture needs to be revised to better acknowledge the individuality of each missionary and the folly of perfectionism in Christian discipleship. But such an adjustment is best understood not as an attenuation of culture but as its elaboration; not as a liberation of the "pure" self from the contamination of culture, as Harline frames it, but as culture's more attentive nurture of the self.

I suspect that Harline would not object too strenuously to the foregoing; indeed, he could no doubt frame the idea more elegantly than I. The emphasis on the "real self" in *Way Below the Angels* is probably just that: an emphasis, not a salvo in the subjectivity wars. As an historian, Harline is keenly attuned to the changes in culture over time. He recently wrote an article for *BYU Studies* subtitled, "How Things That Were Never Going to Change Have Sometimes Changed Anyway, and How Studying History Can Help Us Make Sense of It All," and that partial title summarizes his argument pretty well.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it is as an historian observing an ever-changing parade of cultural efflorescence that Harline develops his sense

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1. Craig Harline, "What Happened to My Bell-Bottoms? How Things That Were Never Going to Change Have Sometimes Changed Anyway, and How Studying History Can Help Us Make Sense of It All," *BYU Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 49–76.



of the self as a privileged observer, separate and in some sense detached from culture's never-ending, always-changing spectacle. It *is* useful, perhaps even crucially important, to be able to occasionally step back and observe one's culture with critical distance—not only as an historian but as a member of any community. But then, with the wisdom and perspective you've gained, put your stainless-steel missionary suit back on and step back into the parade. Shake hands, lock arms, throw candy, eat the street food. Come on, what's the worst thing you could catch?



## Peck's Peak

Steven L. Peck. *Wandering Realities: The Mormonish Short Fiction of Steven L. Peck*. Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2015. 220 pp. Paperback: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-0988323346.

Steven L. Peck. *Evolving Faith: Wanderings of a Mormon Biologist*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2015. 211 pp. Paperback: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-0842529440.

*Reviewed by Michael Austin*

If someone ever asks me what kinds of things Steven Peck writes, the best answer I can give goes like this: the BYU biology professor and raconteur writes primarily in the fields of evolutionary biology, speculative theology, literary fiction, computer modeling, poetry, existential horror, satire, personal essay, tsetse fly reproduction, young-adult literature, human ecology, science fiction, religious allegory, environmentalism, and devotional narrative. You know, that kind of thing.

Given the volume and the scope of Peck's recent writing, we should not be surprised that he published two retrospective volumes in 2015. He is not the sort of writer for whom a single collection would make sense,