

“liked” online. They long for an affirmation of their worth larger than their grades or their résumé. They long for something that will ask more of them than their money, their fleeting attention, or a good review. The people with whom I have worked of any age, and frankly of any background, want a place where they can fully engage the complexities of belief, they want a community in which they can belong without having to hide a part of who they are, they want a vision and a mission that will demand nothing less than everything, and they want to behold something or Someone so wondrous that it will take all of this life and eternity to stand in The Presence.

In this book, Patrick is inspiring and instructing us to walk “the narrow path”—not a path between two theological or ideological poles, but the faithful path of being true to one’s self, true to one’s community, true to God, and yet able to fully embrace others. As one who is striving to follow Jesus, I pray that my community and I will have the wisdom, courage, and passion to follow this narrow path as well.



Mormonism from Varied Fictional Perspectives

William Morris. *Dark Watch and Other Mormon-American Stories*. A Motley Vision, 2015. 124 pp. E-book: \$2.99. ISBN: 1230000389716.

Reviewed by Jonathan Langford

Short story collections are a medium well suited to explorations of Mormonism as a culture and what it means to be Mormon. They allow for diversity. They impose few limitations. They permit an author to change focus and perspective as desired, zoom in on specific details,

follow a subject for just long enough to see him or her in an interesting context and then cut away.

William Morris's collection of sixteen Mormon-themed short stories (some of them very short indeed) takes full advantage of this potential. Varying in setting, style, and genre; with male and female, young and old, human and possibly alien/digital protagonists; and mostly without shared characters or settings, there is not much these stories have in common with one another. Even the Mormon element varies widely, from mainstream small town—Utah in the 1970s—to a dark-future setting where the Church is an outlawed body that must remain hidden even to its own members.

What all (or nearly all) of these stories have in common is that they are concerned with what it means to be Mormon and, in particular, the tension between the requirements of Mormon faith and competing identities and demands, whether of the academic world, middle school social hierarchy, or a post-apocalyptic “confederation” where Mormon belief must be explicitly renounced. All of the stories are about liminal experiences—except that the focus is not on moving into or out of Mormonism but on maintaining a sometimes-precarious position of holding on to both identities.

The collection starts with “Warning,” the story of a preteen accompanying his father, a lawyer practicing in a small town in Utah, on a home teaching visit that he slowly realizes has actually been arranged as a chance for his father to try to persuade the father in the family they're visiting to pay their taxes:

My father moved on to the threat of losing city services, including those of the volunteer fire department. I was astounded. It wasn't like my dad to be quite this forceful. I had never seen him try to scare people before. In every situation—at church, at work, at home, out in public—he was always the voice of calm and reason, of civility and dignity. . . . I felt sorry for him for lowering himself to such a coarse confrontation—for sullyng his integrity by enacting this argument in front of his son and in front of this man's family.

For the narrator, the incident provides both an introduction to a world-view that “seem[s] very foreign” to him as well as a new perspective on his father. At the same time, we as readers are invited to consider how gospel ministering somehow gets mixed up with other, more ambivalent agendas.

Particularly noteworthy in this 1,400-word vignette is its communication of the main character’s developing sense of social rules and the complex world of conflicting expectations. Here is what he writes about a daughter his own age in the family they are visiting:

Her family was poor and uneducated and proud. Therefore, in the cruel calculus of small town sexual politics, she was someone not to be encouraged romantically because the proper thing for someone of my status—the smart, shy kid who had the slightest hint of big city sophistication—was to admire from afar the unapproachable rich girls who were smart but not bookish, the ones who wore jeans and skirts instead of homemade dresses, who wore their hair feathered and with bangs.

Such recognitions are precocious for a (probably) eleven-year-old. And yet while the language is that of a highly literate adult narrator looking back on his childhood experiences, the perceptions are spot-on for the preteen Morris has created. Such skill in characterization is a hallmark of these stories, most of which feature characters who are intelligent, reflective, and aware of the ambiguities in their own faith.

Perhaps the most interesting realistic/contemporary story in this collection is “Lost Icons,” in which the narrator—Elder Esplin, a missionary in Romania—befriends Colin Petrescu, an “Irish-Romanian art historian” who is obsessed with the history of a peasant mystic icon-maker. At one point, Esplin and his companion enlist other missionaries to help Petrescu illicitly use Church equipment to copy documents for his research. After his mission, Esplin discovers—to his surprise—that following a miraculous healing, Petrescu joined the Church and (apparently) gave up his obsession after admonishment by a local priesthood leader.

The story fits well in the genre of missionary fiction, featuring the kinds of off-the-wall characters, zany experiences, and warm connections

many of us cherish from our time in the mission field. What raises this above the level of typical missionary vignette is the missionary's own conflicted feelings about Brother Petrescu's conversion, a nagging sense of loss for part of what had made him previously so unique. And yet if Petrescu is content, what right does Esplin have to wish otherwise for him?

It's perhaps a sign of a misspent graduate program in English that I find myself reading into "Lost Icons" questions about authenticity, privilege, and missionary work as cultural imperialism. Even if Morris didn't intend to raise these issues, it's a credit to the story's realism, complexity, and power of engagement that it did so for me.

And then there are the science fiction stories.

Morris's realistic stories (the first eleven out of sixteen in this collection, by my count) are well-crafted, satisfying, and insightful: the kind of thoughtful fare you might offer to anyone who is open to high-quality Mormon fiction. His science fiction is more challenging. A prime example is "PAIH" (short for "Praying Always In Heart"), which consists mostly of exchanges (real-time and electronic) among four "undercover" Mormons—two couples who appear to have banded together for mutual legal and economic support. The partnership faces difficulties because one of them is likely to lose his job, endangering their chances to have children. The best answer for them is to find another couple, also undercover Mormons, to join them in their partnership. But given the society in which they live, the chances for this seem slim and even trying to do so involves real (though mostly unspecified) risks.

The story is rife with potentially jarring details. One of the couples is gay. The inspiration to seek out another couple comes while attending a "pop-up temple." The story is interspersed with selections from *A Practical Guide for the Upwardly Mobile Mormon American*, a samizdat-style underground publication. An early scene features characters getting excited over the arrival of a sexbot, which they purchase solely for the sake of maintaining appearances in case they have to invite outsiders into their home. Late in the story, a member of one of the partnerships

communicates with the others about a couple she has encountered who might be willing to join them:

“I found a couple. Both high earners. Broke off from other partners recently.”

“Wow. The rare of the rare. Good find, Kat. But: how does that help us?”

“They are ready to prodigal. Re-covenant.”

“You sure? They could be scandalmongers. Plants. etc.”

“HG has confirmed.”

On the one hand, the language here is chatty, in-group, almost irritating in its apparently gratuitous insider-isms, such as the use of “prodigal” as a verb. Most jarring is that abbreviated invocation of the Holy Ghost in the last line. And yet that same line drives home for me the underlying seriousness of the characters’ attempts to bring spiritual reality into the aggressively secular idiom of their lives.

I first took this story for a clever science-fictional parody on Mormons trying to “pass” in an increasingly secular and materialistic world. Reading further, I realized that while this may be part of what Morris is doing, this particular story is also about real people in a seriously conceived future society where membership in the Church is genuinely perilous doing their best to live their faith in secret.

Morris’s experience as a missionary in former Soviet-Bloc Romania (and as a Mormon studying literature in Berkeley and San Francisco) may underlie his fascination with the theme of undercover belief and “passing” in a hostile culture, which features strongly in these stories. For example, in “Dark Watch,” a Mormon couple has to explicitly renounce their beliefs in order to keep assisting Mormons traveling to where (rumor has it) the Church may still exist in the tops of the Andes mountains. In “Release,” this is taken further, to a setting where membership in the Church must be concealed even from the conscious knowledge of its own members in order for the Church to survive.

Whether the strangeness and unlikelihood of these settings get in the way of enjoying the stories will depend largely on the individual taste of the reader. Case in point: while I found “Release” both powerful and heartwarming, three other members of my family (all science-fiction readers) found it too far-fetched. One, for example, thought that by acting subconsciously on its members, the Church in this story denies agency in much the same way as the hostile state—or Satan.

This illustrates why Mormon science fiction is such a fraught endeavor. Even among those of us who like science fiction and have no problem thinking about alternate futures and realities, the Church itself is to some extent a set value—one that can’t change in fundamental ways before it stops being the organization to which we owe our allegiance. (Which in itself raises interesting questions in light of our belief in ongoing revelation.)

And so I have to say, in the end, that while I think this is a very good, finely crafted collection, and one well worth reading, the science fiction stories in particular will appeal only to a subset of readers. Still, at \$2.99 (at the time of this writing), it’s certainly worth a try. And if a particular story doesn’t appeal to you, skip to the next one.



[A Cluttering of Symbol and Metaphor](#)

David G. Pace. *Dream House on Golan Drive*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2015. 300 pp. Paperback: \$24.95. ISBN: 9781560852414.

Reviewed by Eric W. Jepson

How to represent lived religious experience without either underplaying its reality or slipping into the magical-fantastical is an ongoing difficulty in Mormon literature. David G. Pace, in his novel *Dream House on Golan*