

The Truth is in the Middle

Stephen Carter and Jett Atwood. *Mormonism for Beginners*. Danbury, Conn.: For Beginners, 2016. 193 pp. Paperback: \$15.95. ISBN: 9781939994523.

Reviewed by Cristina Rosetti

Introductory texts often face the challenge of which topics to cover and how much detail to include. In *Mormonism for Beginners*, author Stephen Carter and illustrator Jett Atwood strike the perfect balance between comprehensive survey and accessibility. This is accomplished through both compelling prose and lively illustration. The first page opens with the exclamation, “It’s a religion! It’s a subculture! It’s a Broadway show!” To adequately demonstrate the multifaceted nature of Mormonism, the text aims to offer readers an introduction to both the religion and culture of Mormonism, including a brief history of the tradition, an introduction to LDS scripture, the life of Church members, and challenging topics. As an important contribution, Carter’s work demonstrates how history and theology are actively present within the lives of Church members. Rather than introduce the reader to an abstract picture of Mormon belief and practice, the text demonstrates the ways in which Mormonism exists as a lived religion that is both dynamic and evolving.

From the onset of the text, the author makes the important qualification that this book covers one of many traditions that trace their roots to Joseph Smith. Through this single statement, the author makes known the text’s wider aim of providing a comprehensive and inclusive representation of Mormonism. Too often, as the author states, introductions to Mormonism act as either propaganda or diatribe. In response, Carter asserts that, “The truth lies somewhere in the middle” (vi). Neither a tool for conversion nor an attempt to debunk the faith, this text succeeds at providing balance and understanding to a complex religious tradition.

While the book does assume some knowledge on the part of the reader, the author seeks to provide enough background to make the history accessible to those unfamiliar with the religion's past. The first part of the text provides this background through a brief sketch of Mormon history. Carter presents an incredible amount of information in a short section that covers the life of Joseph Smith, the translation of the Book of Mormon, Zion's Camp, Kirtland, Missouri, Nauvoo, movement to Utah, and much more. As early as the first part of the text, the author exemplifies an ability to present challenging topics well. A clear example of this is the explanation of the First Vision. Rather than focus on the 1838 version, Carter gives a brief description of all four versions as well as the significance of each. While noting the debate that stems from multiple accounts, the author places importance on the impact the narrative offers. Debate aside, the message held within the First Vision narrative remains the most repeated and transformative story within the Mormon tradition.

Throughout the historical chapters, Carter follows the early Saints from New York, Missouri, Kirtland, Nauvoo, and Salt Lake City. In order to present a detailed picture of each historical moment in the early years of the Church, the author breaks up the chapters by geographical location and the significant events that occurred within each settlement. From the beginning, the text finds strength in its balanced portrayal of Mormonism's history. Chapters are dedicated to topics such as polygamy, the diversity within the Mormon faith, and the Mountain Meadows massacre. At the same time, the author covers westward migration, statehood, and attempts toward assimilation. By following members of the Church through a journey of both success and hardship, the reader is left with the conclusion that Mormonism is both evolving and dynamic.

Following a historical introduction to the faith, the author spends the second part of the text covering the various scriptures used within the Church. As with the first part, the author is once again successful in tackling controversial issues with balance and nuance. A noteworthy

example is Book of Mormon historicity and the translation of the Book of Abraham. In the case of the Book of Mormon, the author notes that the importance of the text is not found in its historical accuracy but its success as a scripture regardless of origin. Turning to the Book of Abraham, the author points to the controversy surrounding the text while also incorporating the views of apologists and Church scholars. By providing multiple perspectives, the author creates space for a wide audience. Unlike many introductory texts that simply present the history and translation of the Book of Mormon, this chapter is significant because it offers the reader an introduction to the narrative and the primary figures held within the Book of Mormon. This section ends with a discussion of open canon and continued revelation through a brief look at general conference and the words of Church leaders.

The third section of the text paints a picture of Mormon life. This includes an introduction to the organization of the Church at the ward, stake, and general level, the Church community, missionary work, temples, and family. Central to this section is the idea that the Church is more than Sunday meetings. Rather, it encompasses the entire life of the believer. Each facet of life, from birth, to adolescence, to adulthood, is marked by the Church community and individual involvement. For this reason, the author spends a significant amount of time addressing the difficulty of faith crises and the ability to rebuild following challenges to one's religious worldview. While not everyone will experience these challenges, faith exists on a spectrum and there are resources available for various stages of life and belief.

Few topics interest outsiders as much as Mormon temples. Carter presents the temple as the space where ordinances are performed and a core component of the Mormon religion is accomplished: the redemption of the deceased. He writes of temples: "They're the place where Mormons perform the herculean task of making up for thousands of years of apostasy by giving every single child of God a chance at receiving his or her temple ordinances by proxy" (131). Beginning with the temple interview,

the author traces the journey to the temple and offers a brief outline of the ordinances and their significance to believers. Without giving too many specifics, the author allows for an inside view of the temple and its centrality. Again, difficult questions are addressed—in this case, the Masonic origins of the ceremony. While the temple is often a point of confusion and interest for outsiders, the temple holds a central place in the religious life of the believer. For this reason, perspective becomes important for fostering understanding. In closing, Carter argues, “For many non-Mormons, temple ceremonies can seem strange, even a little sinister. But from an anthropological perspective, the temple ceremony is utterly normal” (142).

Currently, scholarship on faith crises has come to the forefront. Much of this work seeks to address difficult topics from Mormonism’s past and present. As a unique and important contribution to introductory texts, Carter devotes an entire section to the challenging questions that occupy a central place in current scholarship. Specific attention is given to the topics of race and the priesthood, women and the priesthood, LGBT issues, the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and the online essays produced by the Church. Because of the text’s recent publication, *Mama Dragons*, *Ordain Women*, and other topics not previously covered in introductory texts are addressed. This section sets this text apart as one of the most comprehensive and transparent introductions to Mormonism. At the same time, discussion of the contemporary challenges once again demonstrates the multifaceted nature of Mormonism.

The final section of the text offers an overview of an individual Mormon’s life from the conception of the spiritual being by Heavenly Parents to the hope of creating a world for oneself in the eternities. This section uses immense illustration and humor to depict significant theological doctrines, such as the creation of intelligences and the plan of salvation, as well as important events and milestones in the traditional Mormon life. In closing, the author presents the afterlife of a member of the Church as one of continued service in the work of salvation and progression.

Mormonism for Beginners is marked by its humor, transparency, and balance. Throughout its survey of Mormon history, scripture, Mormon life, and challenging topics, the author and illustrator accomplish the monumental task of covering a wide range of material in a way that is both compelling and engaging. Truly, the text accomplishes the arduous task given to introductory books of providing a rich and detailed portrayal of a complex topic. This text would serve as an important addition to both introductory courses on Mormonism and a starting point for anyone interested in learning more about American religious traditions.



[Invisible Men / Invincible Women](#)

Eric Freeze. *Invisible Men: Stories*. San Francisco: Outpost 19, 2016. 150 pp. Paperback: \$16.00. ISBN: 9781944853020.

Reviewed by Lisa Rumsey Harris

The gaze of the girl on the cover of Eric Freeze’s short story collection arrested me—stopped me. Her eyes, full of hostility, told me that if I opened the book, I would be intruding. Her bright knee-length plaid skirt, reminiscent of schoolgirl uniforms, belied the knowledge behind her glare. If it wasn’t for her posture, her arms embracing something, I wouldn’t have noticed the titular Invisible Man next to her on the cover.

Her warning wasn’t wrong. I felt like an intruder as I began to read. I could only take it in small doses—read, then turn the ideas over and over in my mind, like rubbing a smooth stone between my fingers.

I entered the book through the first story, “Duplex,” a fragmented narrative that unfolds in disinterested third-person (focused around a man named Garvey) as well as the up-close “I” of a little girl at the beginning of the narrative. The narratives merge, and the effect of piecing