

natures, there were others who eventually lauded and praised him for such clear-eyed spirituality and integrity. The Church eventually trusted him with deeply responsible positions, as he was called to be the mission president for the Russia St. Petersburg Mission and was assigned as the traveling LDS patriarch in eastern Europe.

In the short term, spiteful fate seems to punish honesty. Yet the long arm of God's grace catches up with such injustices. *Let Your Hearts and Minds Expand* is some of the fruit of Rogers's authenticity and true-eyed faith. As Terry Givens writes in the foreword, Rogers "reminds us, without saying so explicitly, that Latter-day Saints too often forget our legacy that sets us apart: we are supposed to believe the adventure loomed *outside* the Garden" (xiii). Knowledge may lead to penalty, but it is also the first step on the road to eternal life.



Lapsing into Daredevilry

Shawn Vestal. *Daredevils*. New York: Penguin Press, 2016. 308 pp. Hardcover: \$27.00. ISBN: 978-1-101-97989-1.

Reviewed by Julie J. Nichols

It's a hard truth: you have to be damn smart to be a writer of good fiction. If you're dumb, forget it. You have to hear words in your head—and who doesn't? But you also have to know how to put them together in a sentence that's not only grammatical but original in its context, truer than any other sentence could possibly be. Then you have to do that with paragraphs and chapters in the service of a whole whose shape knocks readers right out of unconsciousness, makes them alive, blasts their eyes open so they see the world new.

Shawn Vestal is smart. He's so smart he could write *Daredevils*, which is about three daredevil kids on the run, two of the daredevil bad guys they're on the run from, and Evel Knievel, who was the quintessential iconic daredevil of the United States in the 1970s. He figures just enough in this story to be real. Or almost. One of the best episodes (248) in this book comprised of sharp, quick episode after sharp, quick episode is itself comprised of a series of questions, whose culmination is: is this guy Evel Knievel or isn't he? At first Jason is sure he is. But then he's not so sure. The excellence of the novel as a whole lies at least partly in moments of shifting certainty—wary recognition that the answers to life's most piercing questions aren't what you expect. Nevertheless, the questions must be asked. Ultimately the answers, though unexpected, are inevitable and must be reckoned with.

The three daredevil kids are Loretta, fifteen-year-old youngest daughter of struggling Mormon fundamentalists, who “wants to fly into her future, but . . . feels she must be very careful, must be precise and exact, or she will miss it” (7); Jason, a high school senior in Gooding, Idaho who has spent his mission money on “eight-track tapes [to play in his Chrysler LeBaron] and hamburgers at the Oh-So-Good Inn” (50), son of goodly Mormon parents but grandson of a rule-breaking grandpa who believes in “a little fun when you get a chance” (21); and Jason's half-Native-American friend Boyd, more street-savvy than Jason, a little less obsessed with leaving Gooding, a little more willing to fly. Evel “addresses an adoring nation” throughout, until he actually shows up. Or not.

One of the daredevil bad guys is Dean, Loretta's father, a “stern but halfhearted” half-caste (7) who left his fundamentalist home in Short Creek, Arizona when he was a teenager but came back with his family when his last daughter turned eight and he saw he couldn't baptize her into “normal” Mormonism. The other bad guy is Baker, who has another name at the beginning of the novel. These two are in uneasy cahoots, partly because of Loretta. Dean is dealing in rotten business, and Baker

knows it. He sticks with Dean partly because he's pretty sure he can profit from Dean's fraud but partly, also, because of Loretta.

All these characters, and an excellent supporting cast as well, come together because of Loretta. Will she escape them? Will she thwart their designs on her? Even the good kids have designs on her. Even Evel has designs on her. But she's a daredevil, and we learn not to doubt her resourcefulness. It's believable. She's not a superhero. Neither are the boys she runs with. Dean and Baker (well, and Evel too) have a certain authority just because they're grown men, but one of the questions the book requires us to ask is: is that condition by itself ever enough? Is there legitimacy in confronting and upstaging that tiny modicum of authority if there's nothing behind it but weakness and self-absorption? And of course, the more insistent question is: if not, what must be done?

What Loretta and Jason and Boyd collectively feel about the lives that have been thrust upon them drives them to run; what they collectively know may be all that will save them. Props are judiciously employed: cars, motorcycles, hidden cash. Brains. From the first page, where Evel addresses the nation, to the first appearance of each character, to the perfectly-structured crisis growing between the kids, who know they must flee, and the bad guys, who want them for their own purposes—all the way to the painful, glorious, barely-in-control climax, Vestal's writing is in marvelous control.

Daredevils does not show epiphanies or moments of enlightenment hard-won and hard-fought (though it is about kinds of wisdom, and how some kinds facilitate the future while some certainly do not). This is not a story about crises of faith and joyful returnings. In an Amazon.com interview with Jess Walter, Vestal says that his "lapsed Mormon faith" figures in his fiction "more in the lapse than the faith." But, he says, Mormonism is his heritage, and he appreciates its richness.⁴

At the end of the day, *Daredevils* is, deliciously, a great story about the seventies, about kids growing up in Mormon communities where

4. Shawn Vestal, "A Q&A with Shawn Vestal and Jess Walter," <https://www.amazon.com/dp/0544027760>.

they don't fit, a couple of men who can't even get their wrongness right, and one quick-witted young woman who cuts the Gordian knot. At one point Boyd says to Loretta, "I don't get you. How do you become you, living the way you've lived?" 'I'm creative,' she says. 'I'm smart'" (222). If there's a theme in this book more emphatic than the theme of striking out to meet your future head on, it's the theme of being smart. The dumb ones might make it partway down the road, but the smart ones get away, however they can.

Daredevils is a smack-your-lips-with-pleasure kind of read. Every sentence is intact, every image finely balanced with its corresponding action, every scene the only one that could follow the one that came before. It's a must-have. I can't think of anybody (except maybe a die-hard plotless-enigma Beckett fan) who wouldn't be highly entertained and pleasantly excited by this novel. It makes you smarter, more able to meet your future. It keeps you turning pages, not wanting to miss a beat, smiling all the way through. Don't miss it.



A Book Full of Insights

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870*. New York: Knopf, 2017. 512 pp. Hardcover: \$35.00. ISBN: 9780307594907.

Reviewed by Benjamin Park

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is one of the most decorated historians of early America. Her book *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Knopf, 1990) earned her both the Bancroft and Pulitzer prizes, as well as a MacArthur Fellowship.