Attempts to Be Whole

Scott Abbott. *Immortal for Quite Some Time.* Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016. 257 pp. Paperback: $24.95. ISBN: 9781607815143.

Reviewed by Scott Russell Morris

In *Immortal for Quite Some Time,* Scott Abbott meditates on his brother's death. That Abbott comes from a devoted Mormon family and that his brother was gay and died of AIDS is the tagline that seems to sell the book—and this review, too, apparently, as I am writing that first despite my best intentions—but really, this book is not about his brother John or about the homophobic culture of the LDS Church and many of its adherents, despite both of those being common motifs. It is about Scott Abbott. And, as all good personal nonfiction is, it isn't really about Scott Abbott either, but rather about what it means to grow up in a culture that is so overwhelmingly shaping that it "informs even your sentence structure" (89) and then to find that you no longer want to have a place in it. In the last few weeks as I've contemplated what I might say about Abbott's book and as I've discussed it with others (one of whom saw it on my couch and asked, based on the title, if it was a vampire novel), I've described it in a few ways: It is about a BYU professor who was in the thick of the academic freedom concerns at BYU in the '90s. Or, it is about a brother going through his dead brother's things and thinking about what that might mean about the two of them, both nonconformists. For those more interested in writing and less about the story, I've told them about the most interesting feature of the book: It is written mostly as a series of journal entries, but there are a lot of other voices; for example, a female critic consistently questions the stories and rhetoric in Abbott's entries, which he responds to in a separate editorial voice. There are also his brother's words, at first taken from found texts like

notebooks, letters, and book annotations, but then, toward the end, John actually speaks from the dead, directly to the narrator, though mostly to underscore the fact that he no longer has a voice, deflecting questions by responding, “You can probably answer that yourself,” and “I don’t really get to answer that, do I?” (207, 202).

Which is all to say that this is a difficult book to categorize. Even the book itself resists offering an easy categorization: “This is not a memoir,” the first line declares. “This is a fraternal meditation” (n.p.). Of course, the publishers still went with “Memoir” on the back cover (because who types “Fraternal Meditations” into Amazon?), but what these first lines are doing is setting us up for the fact that we aren’t here for the story. We’re not here for any salacious details—the details aren’t really that salacious, at least not from a worldly point of view, though we do learn that the author, while still employed by BYU no less, drinks coffee and even orders a beer at a bar, and that he wrote several damning speeches and articles about Church leadership and received damning letters and speeches from them in return. No, we’re here instead for the meditation. Or, as Abbott puts it, “This book is my own therapeutic attempt to dress John’s body, to feel the rasp of his cold flesh” (150). And though John’s cold flesh is certainly present in the book, the therapy is much more present as Abbott asks in various ways how he is supposed to respond to his brother’s death, to the rigid culture of the Church, to his mother’s faith, and to so many other little problems in a complicated life, family, and culture. Later on in the book, in response to the anonymous female critic’s charge that drinking coffee and not paying tithing will be seen as “proof . . . of your fall from righteousness” (230), Abbott replies, “That binary structure is deeply internalized in me: choices are either good or evil. And you know also that I have been trying to feel my way to a different kind of thinking” (230). Though categorizing this book’s publication genre is not what I really want to talk about, I think this passage and others would clearly place it in the category of the essay, that genre which is at the core an attempt and a trial, and also the genre

that allows for Abbott's meandering view and lack of concern for a coherence of story.

This style—multi-voiced and multi-modal—is what brings about the book's best moments and also what makes others a little less satisfying. In order to end on a high note, let's start with the few elements I found less satisfying, though complicatedly so. Because the story is not the main focus of the book, subservient as it is to Abbott's confrontation with culture versus personal identity, several elements of the plot seem less than smoothly handled. For example, though Abbott continually says he and his wife are distant from each other, he never actually talks about his wife. We eventually learn that they didn't share a bed for about ten years, but we only learn this after we learn about their divorce and after his constant mentioning that they are distant from each other, but without logistics as to what that means while still raising seven children. The other main plot point is that only at the very end of the book do we learn that as a graduate student—more than ten years before the main drama of the book—Abbott had had an epiphany that he didn't believe in God but that he would continue to raise his family in the Church. These plot problems come, I assume, from the way the book was written: piece by piece over the course of two decades, an entry here and an entry there, with the initial assumption that the book would be about his brother. There was no need to talk about his wife or his earlier epiphany in the early passages, and yet they become crucial to the way we understand much of the later discussion. When personal reveals like this are done well, it can feel like the author is becoming increasingly your friend, willing to tell you more and more of their deepest thoughts. But with these reveals, I felt put-off both times, as they completely changed the way I understood the vague references of emotional distance and his antagonism toward the Church's authoritarian leaders. The female critic—a voice I assume was added when reviewing the whole manuscript—brings up these issues, though Abbott's own editorial voice

doesn't answer them; this felt like a missed opportunity for emotional clarity that might have run through the whole book.

But this same structure that poses some story problems is also the key to the most pivotal moments of the book. One passage in particular struck me as incredibly honest and also intellectually exciting: "I can hardly write about John's desires, about the pleasures and consequences of his choices and needs, without revealing and exploring my own desires" (92). And throughout the meditations, confessions, and reflections, we learn a lot about Abbott's desires and biases: he tells us of sexual and/or violent dreams, that he struggled against his own feelings of homophobia, that he longs for a sexual and emotional connection he is not, apparently, achieving with his wife. But this slow reveal over time is most rewarding in the epilogue, the part of *Immortal for Quite Some Time* I have frequently returned to and reread in the last few weeks. The epilogue, written in 2015—three years after the last chapter and fifteen years after the journal entries stop—brings the whole book together. It focuses on Abbott's finding and translating a letter John wrote to a friend on his mission—a friend who apparently knew about his homosexual desires. John writes, "I am a man and I want to abandon myself to the pleasure of the body, of life, but at the same time my soul tells me that I must behave in another manner. How can a person live this way?" (253–54). Abbott responds in a letter of his own, addressed to his brother: "When I asked that question at perilous junctures of my life, the answer was that I could not live that way. That left, of course, the more complicated issue of how I should live" (254). Though the question is never really answered—how can it be, especially when each of us has such complicated desires and aspirations and expectations?—if the book comes to a conclusion at all, it can be summed up in a line I have already made into a poster to hang on my office door: "That we are seldom at our best doesn't invalidate our attempts to be whole" (255). That the book is fragmented and that the "characters are in flux, [and]

the voices are plural" (n.p.) shows perhaps that this wholeness is not really attainable, but that the attempt is still very worthwhile.

The History that Dares Speak Its Name

J. Seth Anderson. *LGBT Salt Lake.* Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2017. 96 pp. Paperback: $22.99. ISBN: 9781467125857.

Reviewed by Gary James Bergera

Seth Anderson's slim book, part of Arcadia Publishing's multi-volume I*mages of Modern America* photographic series, is much more than an important new contribution to Utah and LDS history. It is a revelation—a surprising, unexpected glimpse into a past that has too long been forgotten, discarded, and de-legitimized.

Anderson's book contains six chapters plus an introduction. The chapters are ordered chronologically as follows: "A Queer Beginning (1847–1969)," "Gay Liberation in Utah (1969–83)," "Activism in the Time of AIDS (1983–92)," "Political Incorporation and Legal Advancements (1992–2006)," "Marriage Equality, Proposition 8, and Its Aftermath (2007–2010)," and "A Queer New World (2011–2016)." Each of the chapters begins with a one-page narrative history of the period of time treated followed by a multi-page portfolio of twenty to thirty photographs of people, places, and events.

Anderson's brief histories are both surprisingly instructive and unexpectedly subversive. In each, Anderson manages to highlight some of the most significant events in Utah / LDS LGBT history as well as to