

of the images discussed therein are represented only by long URL links that were clearly copy and pasted from someone's web browser. But then again, the entire production has a sort of informal, conversational air about it—much like the conference proceedings themselves were, I imagine. This collection is not intended to provide the final word on anything, but rather to stimulate the conversation, to keep it going, as we continue to wrestle with what it means to be a Mormon, to be an artist, and to be both and neither at once.



## As the Savor: The Poetry of R. A. Christmas

R. A. Christmas. *Saviors on Mt. Disneyland: New and Collected Poems*. Self-published, Lulu, 2017. 180 pp. Paper: \$20.00. ISBN: 9781365463686.

*Reviewed by Dennis Clark*

If you have never read a poem by Bob Christmas, this book is your chance to catch up. Take it.

If you have read poems by Bob Christmas, this book is your chance to enjoy yourself all over again. Plunge in.

If you have no interest in reading poems by Bob Christmas, it's only because you haven't yet read any. This review is your introduction.

I like reading poems by Bob Christmas. This is not because they are pretty, fluffy, light-filled evocations of young love, true faith, or the beauty of nature. You do not inhale fresh mountain air through these poems. Reading a Christmas poem is more akin to changing a flat tire on your Ford Fairlane in the grit of the shoulder of I-15 as eighteen-wheelers and

giant RVs whizz by just past your butt, and you have to breathe their exhaust. But the experience is exhilarating, and you are glad to escape alive with your aesthetic sensibilities intact. And when you continue down the road, it's with a greater appreciation of the journey.

These are confessional poems by a convert to Mormonism who struggled, and still struggles, with the strictures of his faith. He says what people hesitate to say in testimony meeting, and he says it fast and formally. But not in traditional verse forms. A running theme in this collection is poetics, ten poems Christmas calls "Bunk-House Poetics" deployed throughout the collection, in which he explores various statements on poetry he's encountered in earning a PhD in English via Stanford, Berkeley, and USC, and then applying what he learned from his study and teaching, both in the classroom and at his desk.

These bunk-house poems are of interest in helping the reader understand what seems at first a very flat aesthetic behind the poems, with a lack of formal structure. This is an example of the whole shebang:

Saviors on Mt. Disneyland

His second wife constantly called for  
cigarette money. Two of their grand-kids  
lived with his first wife. He and his third  
were living with a daughter divorcing  
her husband and sending their boy  
on a mission at the same time.

His gay actor brother played Grandpa to  
his gay oldest son's three. His first  
was "Grandma" to the grand-kids by  
his second (the bummer of smokes);  
and he was Bob, "Dad," or "Grandpa"  
(depending) to the tribe of his third.

In hopes for all he partook  
of broken bread and a sip of  
water each week in remembrance  
of the One who descended below

and rose above in order to  
redeem him and these people.

He'd heard a tall tale about a place  
so cold words froze—in mid-air.  
Folks couldn't hear, but kept shouting.  
In Spring all those icy words broke  
loose at once—it took a while  
before things got cleared up.

Maybe their lives would thaw out.  
Maybe Jesus was about.

Not all of the poems are this serious. He includes humorous poems like “Do You Have a Sister Named Mary?” and “Playing Softball Against the Polygamists.” These are not stand-up routines, they are not “light” verse. But Christmas never loses sight of the ironic nature of much of his life, as lived, and some of the matter of his poems is funny.

But in addition to humor and irony, you will find, as noted above, some general guidelines about verse, and especially about his practices, in “Bunk-House Poetics”—which may be of more interest to someone like me. For example, in “Bunk-House Poetics 1” he asks:

Why not get some emotional distance by  
writing in the third-person? Why don't we  
tell our stories, or make statements about  
interesting subjects, without constantly  
repeating “I,” “I,” as we go along?

Since these are clearly poems about poetics, he addresses his audience as writers of verse. But if you love to read poetry without having ever tried to write it, it will help you appreciate these poems if you understand his use of this strategy.

Christmas reveals a second strategy he embraces in “Bunk-House Poetics 4”—the use of free verse. He says of it:

Free-verse, so to speak, has now been written  
for so long—and so well—that there's no  
turning back. . . .

But he goes on to emphasize:

The bottom line is—always has been—  
beauty and meaningfulness.

This is bad news for readers who prefer traditional forms, rhymed verse, a fairly regular meter, and a sense of being part, as a reader, of the “great tradition” of English poetry. I resist that preference, for reasons explained in a blog I write for the Association for Mormon Letters, under the title “in verse.” I’m working on the eighty-seventh post now, and I began with Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse in the first post, so I was gratified to read this in “Bunk-House Poetics 6:”

The closest thing to a natural metrical norm  
in English would seem to be a Germanic  
line of four accents (with the accents falling  
on either side of a caesura) held together  
by alliteration, consonance, and assonance.

This is a more accurate description of verse in English, and Old English, than the “iambic” verse introduced into English from French, using a bastardized concept of classical Greek verse. Chaucer was the first great poet to employ that meter, and for a hundred years or so it wrestled with alliterative verse before emerging triumphant, essentially with the English adoption of the Italian sonnet by poets like Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Given that burst of poetics, here is another of Christmas’s poems in which you should be able to discern all these elements at work:

At Point of the Mountain, Utah

To the east, the freedom  
of hang-gliders; to the west

the State prison. This isn’t  
the place; this is only

a place between two valleys,  
where the wind blows

harder, the snow flies faster—  
where even in summer you feel

lucky to have gotten through  
 without crashing, or getting  
 pulled over, or breaking  
 down—where just as you  
 come around, going either  
 way, you feel a kind of  
 relief, a blessing—like maybe  
 the pioneers felt, sort of.

To dissect only the first stanza, I hear the stresses (indicated by italics) as “*To the east, the free-dom* [2 stresses] / *of hang-gliders* [2 stresses]; *to the west.*” The prepositions have a lesser stress than the nouns but are not unstressed—they take the stress a tour guide might give them. And indeed, Christmas is acting as a tour guide in this poem. In addition, the rhyme of “east” and “free” and the consonance of “east” and “west” tie the stanza together. The stresses and ornaments are what make this poem a pleasant reading experience—but the “beauty and meaningfulness” of the poem are what make it linger in the memory.

To those of you who enjoy Christmas’s poems, this review may seem like overkill. I am not writing for you, although I appreciate your reading this far. I am writing to encourage those of you who skip over the poems in *Dialogue* to slow down, train your ears by reading poems aloud, and revel in the subversion poetry makes of this instrument of communication we call language. Art is not always pretty. Like life, it happens at inconvenient times and with a coldly-calculated indifference to your readiness to indulge. So I urge you to learn to approach poems not as an incidental distraction from the serious scholastic fare of this journal, but as the savor that makes the rest of the contents endurable, if not interesting.

That’s the review. I have but one remaining duty here: you have to buy *Saviors on Mt. Disneyland* online, but it’s not offered through, say, Amazon. You have to buy it here: [www.lulu.com/spotlight/rachristmas](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/rachristmas). It is self-published. And it is a shame that a poet as fine as Christmas has to publish his work himself. Give him some encouragement and order a copy of this book today. Now. Before you finish reading this review.