

Expertly Built: Stories within Stories

Tim Wirkus. *The Infinite Future*. New York: Penguin Press, 2018. 400 pp. Hardcover: \$28.00. ISBN: 9780735224322.

Reviewed by Gabriel González N.

Okay, I'm going to let the cat out of the bag, so if you don't want the single, major twist of this novel spoiled, please walk away now.

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For those of you still here, my review:

About two thirds of the way into Tim Wirkus's *The Infinite Future*, the readers are informed that the career of one Eduard Salgado-MacKenzie, supposedly the author of a number of outlandish short stories and a mediocre, drug-induced novel, was a hoax. The story of Salgado-MacKenzie's admittedly modest rise is satirical, a not-so-subtle criticism of literary and art critics. It is, perhaps, a warning against taking *The Infinite Future* seriously. So, at the risk of doing the very thing the book mocks, I'll provide a (foolish?) review.

The Infinite Future is Tim Wirkus's second novel, and in a lot of ways it feels like something Jorge Luis Borges might have written had he ever written a novel. It has many of the trademark Borgesian elements: a mystical book, secret societies, a translator, summaries of stories within stories, labyrinths (both real and metaphorical), false identities, and surprising last-minute reveals. Except that had this been written by Borges, the novel's American setting would be transposed to Ireland, and Brazil would become Argentina. Oh, and you won't find lesbian nuns in Borges either.

While Borges's influence is very obvious in the text (with the Argentinian author being explicitly mentioned more than once), there is something about the telling of the story that is decidedly postmodern. The text is heavy with intertextuality, often making literary references

to the work of other authors, both real and imagined. Thus, mentions of the made-up Salgado-MacKenzie are intertwined with references to real-world authors like Clarice Lispector and Elizabeth Bishop. Like good postmodern novels, this one is heavy with a sense of irony, especially in the first half. Additionally, the plot is told through many narrators and multiple points of view. By my count there are ten narrators, and some of these are metafictional. The whole book is heavy with metafiction, in fact. This leads to a multilayered plot where the author introduces a translator, who then tells a story through several first-person narratives before providing his own translation of a novel which in turn has more than one narrator. The novel packs in all of it: a fictional introduction by “Tim Wirkus,” the translator’s personal quest, the translated sci-fi novel. And all throughout the intertextuality, irony, multiple narrators, and metafictional elements, the reader is treated to stories within stories galore.

The result is a complex and flat-out weird story. It is expertly built, the brick and mortar coming together in very satisfying ways. Due to the interplay between all these various elements, the novel can be given many different readings. It can be read as a novel about the meaning of literature, as a straight-up mystery, as a kind of road-trip novel, as an unforgiving satire (of academia or of religion, take your pick), as a critique of Mormonism, etc. For the remainder of this review, instead of juxtaposing these various possibilities, I will focus on this book as a Mormon novel.

As a Mormon novel, there are at least two possible readings. One has to do with the different types of Mormons that are out there and their relationship to their faith. Two key characters in this sense are Harriet Kimball and Craig Ahlgren. Kimball is an excommunicated historian whose story is explicitly linked to that of the September Six. She loses her Church membership as a result of some writing on Mormon history. She loves the Church and the restored gospel, but she is too honest to recant her writings. The whole excommunication episode is narrated by

Harriet to Sérgio Antunes, a non-Mormon, so sure enough, it sounds like it's meant to resonate with non-Mormon readers somewhere in New York. The villain in this story is her bishop, Craig Ahlgren. He comes across as an honest yet overbearing and uncompromising chauvinist. At one point he tells Daniel Laszlo, another Mormon, the story of how he came to be so committed to the Church, and that episode is told in a way that would resonate with an active Mormon somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. In the middle of these two types is Daniel Laszlo, who seems to just be cruising along in his relationship to Mormonism. He goes through all the stereotypical rituals (mission, BYU, temple), but finds no fulfillment in any of it. He is ever searching. He's not particularly committed to the Church or the restored gospel and mostly seems to drift along in life. All it really takes for him to remain active during this period of aimlessness is the promise of a good job by his stake president, who is none else than the overpowering Craig Ahlgren.

Overall, this division of Mormons into three types—the honest-and-persecuted, the drifters, and the well-meaning-but-overbearing—seems somewhat lacking. It's probably fair to say that most Mormons are far too concerned with trying to get through their day-to-day endeavors to devote their energies to issues of Church history or power struggles with the hierarchy. In my own conversations with most Mormons, these issues hardly ever come up. The energies of most members of the Church in terms of their religion seem to be devoted to matter of raising a family and finding the presence of the divine in their lives. In this sense, Daniel Laszlo is probably more representative of your average Mormon than the other two characters. Except it is never really clear what Mormonism does for him, if anything.

As a Mormon novel, this book can also be read as a critique of Church history. There is something in the story of the fictional Irena Sertôrian that sounds like an exploration into how individuals become religious icons. In this sense, the parallels between Irena Sertôrian and Joseph Smith do not seem purely coincidental. People pour into figures such as Sertôrian and

Smith whatever they need to pour into them (even if, for a select few, the real-life, flesh-and-blood person behind the myth is what actually matters). Along similar lines, another theme in the book is how sacred texts become sacred. In this sense, the parallels between Salgado-MacKenzie's *The Infinite Future* (the novel-within-the-novel) and Smith's *The Book of Mormon* likewise do not seem purely coincidental. These texts are more complex than we like to believe—they are ambiguous, but what believers want from them is exactly the opposite. And here's the thing about *The Infinite Future*: by the end everyone knows it's a hoax, but that doesn't keep Laszlo from having a spiritual experience when reading it and becoming a fervent enthusiast of this made-up story.

In the end, the novel touches on so many productive themes, both Mormon and non-Mormon, and can thus provide for many an interesting discussion. Those who identify with Ahlgren's simple moral compass will probably be turned off by the novel. Those who identify with Kimball's complex views of Mormonism will probably feel reassured by it. Those who simply read it for its literary value will more than likely enjoy this absolutely weird, multilayered, well-crafted yarn.



Nothing by Itself

George B. Handley. *American Fork*. Alresford, UK: Roundfire Books, 2017. 400 pp. Paper: \$22.95. ISBN: 978780995403.

Reviewed by Sheldon Lawrence

It's difficult to know where to start in discussing a novel as thoughtful as *American Fork*. Politics, religion, belonging, family history, ecology,