

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,

sense of place, the high costs of love and our dogged willingness to pay that price over and over again—these themes are not just touched upon but probed with sensitivity and skill. Perhaps the reason for this daring breadth of concerns is found in the mantra of Zacharias Harker, an ill-tempered retired botanist and lapsed Mormon: “Nothing exists by itself and nothing exists without context” (13). For Mr. Harker, as he is known throughout the novel, it is folly of the worst kind to try to understand a plant species, or even an ecosystem, removed from its larger context. Instead, a plant is one component of a complex system of relationships and histories. If this is true of plants, then how much more so is it for human beings and their individual stories? While *American Fork* takes as its subject the friendship of Mr. Harker and Alba, a BYU student and talented painter of Chilean descent, the novel reveals an intricate ecosystem of interrelated stories set in the mountains of Utah and Chile. Only in understanding these stories—the context of each of their lives—do the characters see one another, and themselves, in truth and compassion.

At first, viewing Mr. Harker with compassion is no small task. He is cantankerous and opinionated to the point of arrogance, not the trope of the grumpy-but-harmless old man. Imagine a mixture of Hugh Nibley and Edward Abbey in their more irritable moments. His observations are often cutting, and his discourses on ecology devolve into full-throated diatribes against Mormon environmental indifference and nearly every technological development since the Industrial Revolution. He hires Alba to paint illustrations for a book that would be his life’s opus, a work that studies wildflowers of the Wasatch Mountains in their proper ecological context. The plants in his book must be painted in this context, and in this Alba proves an able artist who shares with Harker a sense of being a cultural outsider.

Mr. Harker’s exasperation with Mormons (or rather the sometimes painfully accurate stereotypes he rails against) comes up against a puzzle in Alba, whose life resists his caricatures in every way. She is not a

multigenerational white Mormon of Utah Valley mindlessly submitting to cultural inertia. Yet neither is she the disgruntled Mormon looking for ways to define herself against an oppressive majority. Her faith is intelligent, independent, and courageous. She doubts Mr. Harker's professed atheism, as well as his disaffection with the Church, and pushes back on many of his observations, but she has no aim to make him her reactivation project. Over the course of their budding friendship and lengthy conversations about the interconnectedness of life, Alba grows increasingly frustrated at the fragmented nature of her family's story. Unlike her husband who comes from pioneer heritage and boasts an extensive family tree, Alba knows nothing of her family's past. The story of her father who "disappeared" (a Chilean euphemism for being secretly executed) during the dictatorship of Pinochet remains a mystery closely guarded by her mother.

At four years old, Alba and her mother had come to the United States as political refugees after her father's disappearance. Alba is left to piece together a story in which she imagines her father as a heroic member of the leftist resistance to Pinochet's regime, a dangerous work that left thousands of Chileans imprisoned, tortured, and disappeared. At Mr. Harker's urging and financial support, Alba returns to Chile to discover the truth of her father and, more importantly, make contact with a culture and heritage she wishes to embrace, rather than flee, as she believes her mother has done.

At this point the novel came alive in a particular way for me, as I served my mission in Chile in 1995, just six years after the dictatorship ended. I was interested, and somewhat apprehensive, to see how Handley would treat the complexities of Chile's recent past. President Allende, a Marxist, was democratically elected in a close, three-way election in 1970. His efforts to nationalize major industries were met with strong opposition from the Chilean congress and military. The United States, fearing Chile would become a Cuba-style client state of the Soviet Union, supported General Pinochet's military coup and deposition of Allende on September 11, 1973.

Pinochet's brutal suppression of political dissidents is well-documented and not to be downplayed. The legacy of the coup, however, is more complicated than the story of noble socialists resisting a brutal dictator. Sweeping economic reforms jump-started the Chilean economy, and the dictatorship did come to an end in 1989. To this day, Chile is one of the most stable and prosperous democracies in South America, yet the deep wounds and division of the past remain. During my mission, I marveled at how the legacy of Pinochet was still a deep source of division. In one Chilean home, he was a hero who rescued the country from communism. In another, he was a tyrant who should be tried and executed. Would Alba's journey to Chile acknowledge this complexity? To that point in the novel, she had idealized what she imagined as her father's political heroism.

Without revealing too much, I will say that Handley skillfully avoids an abstract historical debate by focusing on the human toll of the dictatorship, the concrete way in which it tore families apart, both physically and ideologically. Alba discovers, through those who were no friends of Pinochet, that healing and reconciliation will best come through keeping alive the stories of those who suffered, by bringing to light the names and faces of the "disappeared." Understanding her own family story in Chile, Alba is set free to love her mother and forgive her secrecy. Freed from the mystery, she is empowered to define her own place in her family and community in America and find belonging in it.

Mr. Harker's restlessness is a different kind of problem, entrenched by years of regret and pain. Unlike with Alba, it is not the sins and stories of others he must make peace with, but his own. A significant portion of *American Fork* consists of lengthy letters written to his absent daughter, letters he will not send but continues writing for his own healing. The letters reveal a softer and more vulnerable Harker, one who loved his daughter and her mother deeply (the reason for their absence is not revealed until later in the novel) but who is haunted by failures for which he has not forgiven himself. We see a man whose passions will not leave

him in peace. He withdraws into his home mountains for peace, but even this withdrawal does not bring him comfort. The intensity of his devotion to the landscape and its ecology turn him into a fretful, angry parent whose children—the mountains and valleys of Utah—are under constant threat of global warming and overdevelopment.

The Mormons receive the brunt of his anger. Joseph Smith bequeathed a doctrine that could have allowed for a radical theology of environmental stewardship. Instead, the Mormons squandered this birthright for a mess of American consumerism. Apart from old-fashioned greed, there is the problem of an eschatology that has Jesus cleansing the Earth with fire and setting everything straight. What is the point of caring given such a prospect? Harker's anger at God and Mormonism is not the sneering of a true secularist so much as the pain of one who lost his faith through crushing disillusionment. That he is not resolved in his renunciation of God or the Church is evident in his mixed use of pronouns. Harker sometimes forgets himself as the hardened outsider and refers to Mormons as "we" rather than "they."

American Fork is a novel rich in deep and thoughtful dialogue. This strength could also be viewed as a weakness. The characters' extensive conversations at times resemble well-composed essays. It may require a suspension of disbelief that so many of the novel's people are capable of the kind of heady and articulate speech that is put into their mouths. But for those who relish in such depth of discussion, this aspect of the book will be a delight.

I don't often get choked up when reading fiction, but by the end of *American Fork* I found myself blinking back tears to keep the page in focus. The final chapter indulges in no easy sentimentality, but the tenderness and authenticity of seeing flawed people loving one another imperfectly, turned my attention to my own wife and children. The book caused me to reflect on how much I need their forgiveness, and how fearful it is to love deeply when we know that at any moment, through accident or choice, love can turn to pain. Indeed, every moment of affection and vulnerability is juxtaposed with the threat of loss or

rejection. And yet we sign up again and again, because nothing exists by itself, and as the novel beautifully illustrates, life only flourishes in the context of our relations to others. *American Fork* is a moving and thought-provoking work that makes a significant contribution to not only Mormon literature, but the literature of ecology and place in the American West.



“Twisted Apples”: Lance Larsen Takes on Prose Poetry

Lance Larsen. *What the Body Knows*. Tampa, Fla.: University of Tampa Press, 2018. 83 pp. Hardback: \$25.00. ISBN: 9781597321594.

Reviewed by Darlene Young

What makes something a poem? How do you recognize one, even if it has no broken lines? For most of us who read and love poetry, the answer is, “I just know.” There is the buzz of new vision from a surprising metaphor or imaginative framing, the sensual delight of rhythm and rhyme. But even more, there is the feeling. A good poem sends sparks through our synapses, makes us feel more alive. “I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off,” says Emily Dickinson. It’s visceral.

It seems appropriate, then, that poet Lance Larsen has titled his latest (fifth) collection, which consists entirely of prose poetry, *What the Body Knows*. What the reader “knows” after experiencing this collection is what poetry feels like, even when it’s in paragraph form. Because Larsen, former Poet Laureate of Utah and winner of the Pushcart Prize (among others), is a master of poetic language—sound, imagination, image, and metaphor.