a position to help; he could do nothing else—but they also allow me to rejoice with the poet in the world around us. Bob may have come to poetry later than most, but he has more than mastered his trade. He tells us he is "Waiting for Morning," but as far as I'm concerned, he need wait no more.

It's Lonely at the Top

Ryan Shoemaker. *Beyond the Lights.* No Record Press, 2018. 192 pp. Paper: $15.00. ISBN: 9780983586029.

Reviewed by Alison Brimley

The train, where I do most of my reading these days, can actually be a hard place to read. It can be difficult for the characters in a book to compete with the characters I encounter in front of me—the patrons of mass transit striking up conversations with each other, and sometimes, at random, with me. Ryan Shoemaker's collection *Beyond the Lights*, published earlier this year by No Record Press, had no problem contending. His stories are immediate, accessible, and by turns humorous and heartbreaking.

The structure of *Beyond the Lights*—which is in fact divided into three disparate sections—makes you feel as though you've read three collections in one. The first chunk, consisting mostly of short, funny, fragmented tales of fatherhood and family life, contrasts sharply with the second section, in which one gets the sense that Shoemaker is stretching his limbs: these stories sprawl and dive deep into their characters' psyches. Many of the stories in this second section also center on Mormon characters, though I wouldn't say they deal deeply with Mormonism

itself. The title story, and one of the collection's strongest, reads like a blend of *American Graffiti* and T. C. Boyle's "Greasy Lake" with a little Mormonism thrown in: two boys nearing the end of high school and facing the prospect of missionary service spend one last night raising hell at the encouragement of their friend Bing, and while Bing is full of empty promises and false bravado, there's a heavy sense of nostalgia for the lost youth this tragic night represents. Young men poised on the threshold of adulthood are a favorite of Shoemaker's, reappearing in the other stories throughout this section.

The final section, though, reverts again to a more lighthearted tone (at first), and features a pair of stories that read like variations on the theme of an educator's dilemmas. The subject is treated almost satirically in "After All the Fun We Had" (which shares much in common in subject matter and tone with Donald Barthelme's "The School"), where unmotivated high school students "stare with dreamy, molasses eyes" and shout "'We're bored. . . . Bored!'" prompting administrators to hire "cool" rather than qualified teachers and implement regular school carnivals featuring rappers and inflatable bouncy castles. This same student boredom resurfaces in "Our Students," though here it is underwritten by a grittier reality. In this story, an aspiring law student takes a job teaching troubled teens for a year as a way to pad his resume, and what little idealism he may have arrived with is quickly challenged as he interacts with veteran teachers—men who once had aspirations like his own—who tell him over regular drinks, "This isn't Hollywood. These kids will break your heart, even the good ones."

Despite variations in theme and style, the thing that makes the collection feel truly united is that Shoemaker's main characters have most outward characteristics in common: they are all men, all fairly young, all fairly financially secure. Because of this, we sometimes get the feeling that we're following different permutations of the same character, dropped into different scenes and different stages of life. These varying visions of the young white American male emphasize the ways in which

a character in such a situation is both blessed and cursed. The theme of privilege—racial, economic, or both—appears frequently throughout the book, and while these stories' main characters enjoy social advantages of just about every kind, conflict often springs from their encounters with people outside their sphere. Again and again, characters are given a chance to reach out in some possibly meaningful way to someone below them, and, again and again, they squander it. It's easy to judge these characters for doing the clearly wrong thing, but after considering all alternatives, what they ought to have done doesn't become much clearer.

As a female reader, I was particularly drawn to the multiple incarnations of the wife/female-love-interest character that appear throughout the book. These women, at least as presented through the perspectives of their husbands, are not as complex or intelligent as the men see themselves to be. Sometimes this is played for laughs, as in "A Stay-at-Home Dad Documents His Sex Life on a Fitbit—Here's What Happened," where a sex-starved husband prepares his wife's favorite dinner, nibbles her earlobes in bed, then listens patiently as she "recounts the entire plot of Vampire Chronicles Vol. 1" in hopes of putting her in a "sexy mood." Sometimes it's more serious, as in "The Crossing," where the lawyer-narrator's nervous, pregnant wife Kendra, speaking of the Mexicans moving into their middle-class Arizona neighborhood, delivers lines like, "Don't you see? These people want what they want and they don't care how they get it." What the proliferation of female characters like these really speaks to, though, is the essential isolation at the heart of almost any short story. As writer Frank O'Connor famously said, "There is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness. Indeed, it might be truer to say that while we often read a familiar novel again for companionship, we approach the short story in a very different mood." When Kendra makes this easy-to-judge comment about Mexican migrants, she has no idea that her husband (our narrator) has been dealing at work with ethical dilemmas and physical threats stemming

from hiring illegal aliens to clean his law office. And why doesn't she have any idea? Because the narrator hasn't told her. Clearly, he doesn't feel he can. This story and others emphasize the terrible loneliness of keeping a part of yourself from the person you've chosen to be closest to.

But being cut off in some essential way from a lover isn't the only kind of loneliness the book foregrounds. For me, one of the collection's most intense moments comes in the story "The Righteous Road," which follows Derrick, a young Mormon boy passing through childhood and teenagehood alongside his magnetic friend Reed. While Derrick is mostly content to live by the rules he's been taught, ruffling no feathers, Reed develops an "ecological and humanitarian consciousness" that spurs him to take riskier stands in life—skipping school to attend protests, vandalizing butcher shops, and smoking a lot of marijuana in the process (which Derrick loyally accompanies him in)—ultimately discarding the religious teachings of his youth. In an affecting moment in their teen years, Reed seems shocked and disappointed to realize that Derrick actually believes in the "angels and gold plates" they've grown up learning about—but according to Reed, that's not the worst of it. What's worse is that Derrick seems to have no aversion to stepping into the "Mormon factory" which churns out identical people, dressing, talking, and thinking exactly alike. Derrick's response speaks to his sense of isolation from both communities: on one hand, the environmentalist rebels he spends his time with but doesn't feel wholly part of, and on the other, the "Mormon factory" symbolized by his family, which he is intrinsically part of and yet doesn't want to be, fully. "But what if we do it differently?" Derrick says. "What if we did it our way and still believed?" It can't be done, Reed tells him: "They don't want that." Indeed, the development of the story seems to bear out Reed's confident conclusion: over time, Reed and Derrick separate to different sides of the fence, neither of them able to straddle it for long. But we're left wondering if this is the only way things could have gone. For any Mormon reader who has felt pulled in similarly opposing directions, Derrick's question and Reed's

response linger, leaving us wondering who—if either of them—has it right. Can it be done differently?

Shoemaker's strength is concocting impossible situations perfectly suited to the weaknesses and contradictions at the core of each of his characters. We have here well-intentioned misogynists and benevolent racists, a cast of not-always-sympathetic characters who comfortably look down in judgment on the rest of the world. By the end of the story, their pedestals have often been knocked out from under their feet. Whether they'll stay low or scramble to rebuild them, though, remains unclear.

Priesthood Power

Jonathan A. Stapley. *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xii + 184 pp. Photographs. Endnotes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth: $29.95. Kindle: $9.99. ISBN: 9780190844431.

Reviewed by Gary James Bergera

For the past decade-plus, Jonathan A. Stapley (b. 1976) has authored or co-authored a series of peer-reviewed article-length essays treating various aspects of LDS priesthood ritual (expressions of what he defines as liturgy). Though Stapley's academic background is in science (he holds a PhD in food science from Purdue University), his interests have gradually shifted from developing bio-renewable natural sweeteners to tracing the serpentine contours of LDS liturgical history. This, his first book, represents an expansion of Stapley's scholarly interests as well as a significant new contribution to LDS history.