

“What if . . .?” and “How so . . .?” and
 “I wonder . . .” Mix with LDS Doctrine
 and Culture to Generate Each Story in
The Darkest Abyss

William Morris. *The Darkest Abyss: Strange Mormon Stories*.
 By Common Consent Press, 2022. 226 pp. Paper: \$12.95.
 ISBN: 978-1948218689.

Reviewed by Paul Williams

“Mormon speculative fiction” must surely be one of the most niche genres available, and William Morris’s new story collection, *The Darkest Abyss: Strange Mormon Stories*, published by BCC Press, is a standout and quirky addition to that small body. Comprised of eighteen stories, all ranging from five to twenty pages (plus one outlier at thirty pages), the book offers something for anyone with an interest in Mormon fiction. The stories are wildly diverse in theme, concept, style, structure, and general argument.

Speculative fiction (a catchall term for fantasy, science fiction, horror, alternate history, and other reality-defying modes) is at its best when it turns toward its subject matter and interrogates the basic premises thereof. Brian Attebery has shrewdly argued that these genres are particularly apt at this because they openly confess their fictionality, a rhetorical trade that allows the text to comment upon its subject matter in a safe but exacting manner.¹ This perfectly explains Morris’s project, as he takes bits of Mormon scripture, culture, and folklore as starting points to spin inventively strange stories that attempt to articulate and explore Mormon lore by combining it with lived experience.

Each story is based upon a question such as “What if . . .?” or “How could . . .?” which then provides its central conceit. As a result, these

1. Brian Attebery, *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2014.

stories are much more idea-driven than character-driven; readers who enjoy the stories of Borges or Kafka will feel at home, while fans of the Chekhov style might feel a bit alienated. These are thought experiments that take beliefs and suppositions and literalize them on the level of plot. The end result is a freewheeling ride that includes accusations of witchcraft, an elite (even magical?) group of Mormon *shinobi*, a fusion of the United Order with the teachings of Karl Marx, members of the Church blessing ordinary household tools as holy weapons, and more. Morris takes a bit of belief, fully manifests it within the story, and reshapes the world to accommodate the miraculous elements. Once a reader taps into the ways Morris plays with narrative and symbols, there is much to enjoy.

Readers should understand that the stories are shot through with a narrative logic informed by Mormon beliefs, not only folkloric but also scriptural and prophetic. The title story, “The Darkest Abyss in America,” is an alternate history in which the Church was driven out of Salt Lake City and North America entirely in the 1870s, eventually settling in Japan. This plays upon the mythology of the westward exodus taken to the extreme. Midway through, a character reflects that “This land [the United States] had long ago become full of slippery treasures” (13). Such commentary is not a shibboleth for Morris to prove his credentials to fellow believers but a clever problematization of certain assumptions found in the Book of Mormon and Latter-day commentary about the United States as a land cordoned off by God as the singular land of promise. The story reminds the reader that the Church is comprised of its people and is not tied to any specific location. This comes out when the story makes references to warnings in the Book of Mormon about the Gadianton robbers nullifying the blessings for the Nephites. Similar to Orson Scott Card’s speculative Mormon tale “America,”² “The Darkest Abyss in America” interrogates assumptions about American

2. Orson Scott Card, “America,” in *The Folk of the Fringe* (New York: Orb Books, 2010), 216–44.

exceptionalism and how certain Book of Mormon promises might work out differently than expected.

Other entries are more playful, and the most playful and ironic stories offer riffs on Mormon folklore. One of the best is “Last Tuesday,” which is framed as an oral story the narrator shares in bearing their testimony. It discusses some relatives of the narrator (compounding the folkloric aspect) who, while traveling in the Arizona Strip, found something they first thought was a child Sasquatch and then called the “fuzzy cherub.” The family adopts the creature, and hijinks ensue. The story plays with a number of speculations popular in LDS circles, such as angelology, as well as lore about a possible connection between Cain and Bigfoot. On the surface, the story is merely a short comedy that comments on the tendency for some testimonies to venture into the tangential and speculative. At the same time, it also hints that the storyworld has undergone some changes that have wrenched it away from our own world of experience, with ominous hints at a recent but unspecified cataclysm.

A more subtle and grounded story in the same vein of Mormon folklore is “The Joys of Onsite Apartment Management,” about a young couple who oversee an apartment complex while attending graduate school. They start to notice a peculiar paint stain that moves from one apartment to the next, and it comes to haunt the couple. In time, Maria (the wife) uses this mobile stain to locate someone to serve, though all she does is offer the person her BYU hoodie. The story ends with a deliberately contradictory observation: “Maria grew cold as she walked home. Cold, confused, and oddly joyful” (82). The cold is a physical consequence for Maria’s inexplicable act of charity, but the joy she feels is coded as a spiritual reward for having heeded what she accepts as a spiritual prompting. The story echoes the sentiments of the Mormon hymn “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” in which spontaneous acts of altruism result in profound happiness and eventual salvation for the narrator.

Other stories are more openly fantastical. In “Uncle Porter’s Revolver,” Caleb, a single adult in the big city, inherits a revolver his deceased uncle wielded during World War II. At the same time, Caleb begins to experience a powerful and vengeful impulse toward violence. The story is filled with references to complicated issues: the Church’s teachings about peace and cooperation that are at odds with warfare in the Book of Mormon; questions about the morality of violence as a response to certain actions; the emotional struggles of living alone, especially in a big city; and more. While the story could present these struggles merely as a metaphor, the conclusion affirms a supernatural dimension, though one firmly rooted in the doctrines of the priesthood and the spirit world. It is an especially haunting but also hopeful tale.

Perhaps my favorite story is also one of the longer ones, “A Ring Set Not with Garnet but Sardius,” which appears near the end of the book. The story is overt in its strangeness: a BYU student volunteer at an orphanage in Romania is commissioned to smuggle one of the children off to a new life with his grandpa. The contradiction is obvious: the heroine, Michelle, is presented as lawfully good, but she must do something that, by all accounts, is illegal and potentially sinister, using a skill set foreign to a child development major. When divine aid comes, it does so in a manner opposite to what we might normally expect such assistance to take.

More interesting (to me, at least) is how the story bounces around in time. Or, rather, the story stays focused in the narrative present, but the narrator constantly mentions events in the protagonist’s future and past and suggests that all events are interconnected. Collectively, this creates a cohesive whole vision of Michelle. I suspect the story is supposed to act as a Urim and Thummim, meaning it beholds all facets of Michelle’s life simultaneously, creating a coherent sense of how the totality of a person’s life makes them who they are. Moreover, it’s hinted that this adventure in Michelle’s life is an important stepping stone toward other miraculous adventures she undertakes, but only

when seen as part of the panorama of her full life can we see the interconnectedness of her experiences. I recommend readers pay special attention to the story's comments about Michelle's future and look into the biblical significance of the sardius stone.

Still, the collection has its weaknesses. Some are cosmetic, such as a number of grammatical and typographical errors. Some challenges will be a matter of audience. As I've already said, readers who specifically want plot and character may struggle to enjoy these. And the stories require both a familiarity with Mormon lore and a willingness to accept this lore as cultural material open to playful commentary, even through heterodox speculations. Also, of course, even for the mindful reader, not every story can work—I felt "Ghosts of Salt and Spirit" tried too hard to be provocative at the cost of emotional impact, and I found the penultimate story, "Certain Places," puzzling and opaque.

Granted, how we read greatly informs the experience we have with a story. It's possible that I just need to find the right way into the stories that challenged me, which will come with reflection and rereading. These are stories that require that sort of trust and effort because they're too loaded with references, commentaries, and narrative sleights of hand to be fully apprehended on an initial reading. Furthermore, I recommend reading these stories in isolation from each other, taking time to let the questions and subversions of one story settle within you before starting another. What the collection does offer in terms of explorations and intellectual/spiritual probing is a fine treasure indeed.

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