

Can Faith Survive Choice and Circumstance?

Jack Harrell. *Caldera Ridge*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2018. 298 pp. Paper: \$29.95. ISBN: 9781560852704.

Reviewed by Heidi Naylor

Kail Lambert, the protagonist in Jack Harrell's new novel *Caldera Ridge*, stands in the front room of the small, older home he and his wife Charlene have bought in rural southeast Idaho. While Charlene works in the kitchen, Kail unpacks a dish made of carnival glass.

The glass is shiny and pretty, catching light even from the darkest corners of the room; but it's only an imitation of the finer, more valuable glass blown by artisans. Kail has been similarly captured by a dalliance that looked real and promising. His marriage grew stale, and he sought comfort in the arms of a former love. The experience shocked him, so he quickly confessed the attraction and moved his family of four from their Arizona home to safer ground: Charlene's hometown, near a new job at beautiful Caldera Ridge State Park.

The carnival dish as well as the park thus become apt metaphors for the world God created—which, in Mormon theology, is also the world God's children inhabit: gorgeous and full of light, but also flawed, fragile, and easily shattered. They represent an imperfect prototype of a world, an understanding, and a way of being that will one distant day be perfect, as God brings about his work and glory through the choices of his children.

Until that perfect day, Harrell reminds us, there's a truckload of trouble to work through. Here's a bit of his vivid prose, capturing Kail's first day at Caldera Ridge:

When they reached the truck, Kail stopped and turned for a moment. He looked out over Johnson's meadow, envisioning the elk, hearing the bugling of the bulls, imagining the crispness of the fall morning air on

his cheek. It was a beautiful thought. But as he turned to get into the truck, he had a strange sense of something else waiting in this meadow, in the soil, in the silent emptiness of the sky. This was the kind of place where things could go wrong. The smell of blood might waft on the morning air, the tall weeds quivering with death in their tiny cells. But Kail dismissed it, this sense so slight and gentle as the whisper of a still, small voice. (41)

We've got divine help—Kail has access to it—but it can easily go unseen, or misperceived and disregarded. This carnival world and his own flawed choices have shifted the ground beneath Kail and his family, and they've lost their footing. Despite his impulsive move, his new job, and his hopes to rebuild his marriage with the help of Charlene's parents, Kail endures stretches of discouragement where he can't see that he has agency, not at all; he wonders if God, being all-powerful and all-seeing, has determined everyone's decisions and behavior already, through his all-knowingness.

Kail's vision of such a God might be a tough, rather Calvinistic pill for a Mormon reader to swallow. Mormons ingest the concept of agency—choice and consequence—from infancy, like mother's milk. Yet, Kail is a convert, without the lifelong Latter-day Saint tradition and worldview; and Charlene is deeply hurt and resistant to his efforts. Time and despondency have chipped away at his perceptions of faith and possibility. This is where the novel rung most true for me. Doesn't that "chipping away" happen for each of us, in times of grief, trouble, or doubt? Isn't the resulting loss of faith and hope among the greatest risks and tests of the mortal experience?

Kail's particular re-vision of God's purpose and guidance may seem singular. But a similarly skewed perception of fate and destiny has become reality for lifelong Mormon Jonas Simmons, Kail's father-in-law. Here, the troubling yet hopeful novel turns darker. Harrell does a masterful job creating some sympathy for Jonas, a pedophile, because of his initiation as a child to the perversions of his "beautiful, tyrannical]

cousin Richard” (193), an anguished young man who’d come to live with Jonas’s family. Richard molested Jonas and convinced him that “no one will ever love you the way I do” (194). A tormented soul, Richard hanged himself in the barn; and young Jonas was left shattered. Through the ensuing years, Jonas develops rigid rituals involving fasting and personal “revelation.” He tries doggedly to resist his urges, to live life as a faithful family man; but eventually he allows his warped sexuality to alter his own perceptions of agency. “The mists had cleared,” Jonas felt, now an old man parked in a car within sight of a playground; and “now he could see . . . he was only doing what had been determined for him to do. . . . All his years of resistance meant nothing now” (194).

The similar shifts in perception—Jonas and Kail each wrestling with their predetermined fates as sexual predator and adulterer—each traveling away from foundational Mormon theology—may challenge some readers. But Jonas had much to do with Kail’s early beliefs as a new convert and son-in-law; Kail (not to mention Charlene) depended heavily on his mentorship and guidance. The most poignant and beautiful scene in the novel involves whether Kail and Charlene can come to hope for and rely on a “yet unmade future [with] movement and time” (288), where healing and redemption are “up to [them]” and—especially—on the love and guidance, but never control, of a God who “won’t give up” (286).

“If something is in need of redemption, it must be in jeopardy first,” writes Harrell, about the best art and writing. The parallel struggles of Jonas and of Kail jeopardize their marriages and children—along with their work, legacies, inner peace, even their souls. I couldn’t help turning pages faster, as *Caldera Ridge* explored the individual choices in each struggle—indeed, in each earthly journey, whether that of Jonas, of Kail, or of the reader—and how these choices move us inevitably toward tragedy or toward hope.