

Running the (Selected) Gamut of Missionary Experiences

Mike Laughead and Theric Jepsen, eds. *Served: A Missionary Comics Anthology*. Mike Laughead Publishing, LLC, 2018. 160 pp. Paper: \$25.00. ISBN: 9780692197400.

Reviewed by Mike Lemon

Served: A Missionary Comics Anthology features short graphic vignettes about the contributors' experiences as LDS missionaries. It is the culmination of author Mike Laughead's and editor Theric Jepsen's Kickstarter campaign, which received \$24,902 from 419 backers in thirty days. When backers receive their copies they will encounter a variety of short graphic narratives that are simultaneously varied in their visual approaches and bound together by major themes.

The funded project includes twenty-seven stories by twenty-seven contributors. The anthology's stories range in length, from a single page (Benjamin Ritter's "The Coolest Man I Ever Taught") to its longest contributions at nine pages (Lance Fry's "Just Friends" and Joshua Abegglen's "The Drunken Ninja." Moreover, these vignettes vary in artistic styles. Readers will explore a myriad of graphic presentations, from cartoon and anime to photoshop realism and woodcut illustration. Because these vignettes are graphic narratives, contributors use panels and layout to compress their storytelling onto the page. For example, Jacob Douglas's "The Lord CAN Help" uses no dialogue. Instead, he uses a series of bordered panels to track food from a cannery to its delivery at a disaster site. Other contributors do not have traditional panels, but use other graphic techniques to convey their narrative. Annie Poon's hilarious "Whistle While You Work" has an open layout and changing color palette to break up her narrative. While the story opens in muted

colors, the page explodes in yellow when a male church member whistles his way across the room and into the arms of an adoring crowd. While some yellow remains in the final graphic moment, Poon presents the sister missionaries within the story's initial palette.

The age of contributors also become a fascinating point of variance. In a statement on the Kickstarter page, Laughead notes, "These stories take place in many locations around the world *over several decades*" (emphasis added).¹ A cursory look at the artists' social media and websites seems to indicate that most are millennials. The use of Kickstarter and Laughead's insistence on linking to contributors' social media and websites again suggest a millennial presence. However, several stories come from older generations. Darren Rawlings, Patrick Scullin, Scott Hales, Abegglen, and Laughead date their stories, placing them within Generation X. While he does not explicitly indicate when his story occurs, Brad Teare ends "Reason to Believe" by graphically depicting himself. Visual clues signal his age, suggesting that he represents an older generation than the other contributors. These examples confirm Laughead's intended goals: to share a myriad of missionary experiences through autobiographical narratives.

While these stories contain unique narratives, there exists several recurrent themes. In addition to faith affirming stories, many contributors explore humor, the juxtaposition of missionary life and the "real" world, and the difficulties of being a missionary. While some might argue humor is not a theme, many return missionary readers will recognize that humorous situations often occur. Moreover, laughing at an experience can become a survival mechanism for dealing with a mission's emotional labor. In *Served*, some of the stories highlight the funny differences in international Church culture and learning a new language. Brittany Long Olsen recalls in "Hikari" a giggle attack while

1. Mike Laughead, "Served: A Missionary Comics Anthology," *Kickstarter*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/mikelaughead/served-a-missionary-comics-anthology/description>.

singing an off-key rendition of “Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam” during sacrament meeting in Japan. American readers might recognize the cultural differences and find themselves giggling with Olsen. For “Windy,” Sarah LuAnn Perkins thinks she is learning the language, but discovers that the question “Is it windy outside?” means that she has messy hair. She in turn uses the phrase with a bald member, signaling that she has learned the language by joking with members. Some stories involve body humor. (I would argue that most returned missionaries have at least one bathroom story.) Anthony Holden’s “It Was a Dark and Stormy Night” opens with him and his companion braving a blizzard to tract. Instead of finding a golden investigator (perhaps the expectation for his illustrated audience, his children, and his expanded readership), they discover a drunk man who urinates on Holden’s companion. In Randy Bishop’s “Brownies,” the author and his companion bake laxative-laden brownies as revenge for another companionship’s “gift.”

Several contributors depict the strange, often humorous juxtaposition of missionary life and the “real” world. Bethany Stancliffe’s third short adventure exemplifies this. Readers follow a sister missionary on exchanges as she wakes up. Stancliffe uses excellent sequential storytelling to depict her look of sleepiness, to awareness, to focus, as she encounters a shirtless, mustached man smoking just outside her window. When she finally speaks, Sister Bates (most likely Stancliffe) responds in a non-plussed manner, “Oh yeah, that’s our neighbor Cruz.” Cruz becomes part of—and yet apart from—the missionary experience (20). That Stancliffe ends with Cruz waving to readers speaks volumes. It invites them to consider those strange, incongruous moments in their own lives and to find the friendly, amusing connections. Cam Kendell’s “döner Kebab” ends with a similar moment. Kendell and his companion check on an inactive member. David/Daisy Day opens the door in a burlap dress and painted nails, and rips a two-minute electric ukulele solo. Kendell portrays the missionaries’ visual reactions as perplexed and shocked.

However, they do not condemn Daisy. Instead, Kendell ends the comic with the elders smiling, agreeing to return and visit.

For all its humor and exploration of being a missionary in the world, *Served* also includes a large space for illustrating the difficulties of being a missionary. B. C. Sterret recounts receiving a Dear John letter. Josh Ferrin begins with humor in “Lesser-Known Gifts of the Spirit,” before recalling a former companion’s death. Josh Talbot uses backgrounds to portray his anxiety about being a missionary. Whenever he feels the “darkness” come, his backgrounds become jungles. Encouragement from his companion and renewed faith dispels the jungle. In “Small and Simple Things,” Normandie Luscher recounts her feelings of anxiety being a new missionary. She dislikes tracting and expresses her frustration to her companion. Like Talbot’s companion, Luscher receives encouragement to find the simple things. The comic ends with Luscher commenting on the clouds, suggesting that she is following her companion’s advice. Finding the humor in missionary work, exploring the juxtaposition of missionary life and the “real” world, and discussing the difficulties of being missionaries are major recurrent themes with the anthology, often combining within individual stories, but they are not the only themes that reader may identify.

There are some themes intentionally, or perhaps not, excluded from *Served*. An article for the *Deseret News* notes that Laughead’s “only limit . . . was they didn’t want stories about sex scandals.”² And true to this limit, there are no contributions about sexual indiscretion. Additionally, the anthology largely overlooks conspicuous references to baptism. When a story does mention baptism, the event is not the focal point, such as in Rawlings’s and Benjamin Ritter’s stories. Finally, *Served* does not include any stories about missionaries losing their faith or returning early from their mission. This could indicate the contacted contributors,

2. Michelle Garrett Bulciewicz, “A look at ‘Served,’ a new comic book anthology about LDS missions,” *Deseret News*, May 12, 2018, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/900018219/a-look-at-served-a-new-comic-book-anthology-about-lds-missions.html>.

but most likely this editorial decision involves the anthology's focus on the day-to-day happenings of LDS missionaries.

Even though readers will not encounter any salacious scandals or miraculous conversion experiences within the graphic vignettes, *Served: A Missionary Comics Anthology* offers a look into the lives of LDS missionaries. Readers might find the contributors' various art styles and sequential art methodologies disjointed, especially when reading through. Preferences in comic art and presentation are largely subjective. But recurring themes bind *Served* together effectively. When I did not enjoy a contributor's artistic style, I still identified with their experience. I suspect that many LDS returned missionary readers will react similarly to the anthology, because the contributions capture the small, common (and sometimes recognizably uncommon) emotions and experiences that come with serving.



Making the World Light for Others

Keira Shae. *How the Light Gets In: A Memoir*. Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2018. 268 pp. Paper: \$7.00. ISBN: 9781948218078.

Reviewed by Matthew James Babcock

The trouble with reviewing a book like Keira Shae's debut memoir *How the Light Gets In* is the reviewer finds himself in the position of assessing an account of suffering and survival, and in the case of Shae's story of desperation and deliverance, suffering and survival aren't literary topics for analysis, but states of being to be encountered, felt, and understood. This is a tough, important, and energetically written remembrance—at