

## “Babbling on toward Ephemeral Patterns”

Patrick Madden. *Disparates: Essays*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020. 186 pp. Paperback: \$22.95. ISBN: 978-1-4962-0244-4.

*Reviewed by Jonathon Penny*

*Alphabetize your  
karma, sever your qigong,  
jinx your wifi code.*  
—Disparates, 134

I want to suggest that *Disparates* is less disparate than it claims to be, that there is a running theme or a coherent message that bubbles up through the macadam of its thirty-one distinctive essays. But I think I only suspect this, perhaps in part because of the recurrence of devices (“dialogues” with other writers) and figures (family, mostly, and a friend or two who make more than one appearance), and a gainly insistence on strangeness throughout: if the collection has a rule, it is the Rule of Un-expectation.

The title of one of Madden’s essays, “The Arrogance of Style,” provides a clue to his overall sensibility: the rhythmic, omnipresent *contreculture* irreverence of the comic essayist. “Up yours, Strunk & White!” he seems to say.

His own style, even in playful departures from already playful variations on standard prose, is the perfect union of Victorian lugubriousness and modernist minimalism, which is *not* to suggest it is the proverbial lovechild of Dickens and Hemingway but is rather a *real marriage*: a tumultuous and somewhat practiced negotiation, and all the more productive for it.

The negotiation, as in “In Step with . . . Montaigne,” is expressed further in Madden’s “dialogues” with other writers. Madden “features” other writers, in much the same way a nineties pop diva might feature

a rapper, playing off ideas he likes, principles that capture or spark his own imagination, and difficulties that score and tend his stubborn play. Anxious of influence, torn between lovers, caught between *scintillae* and the charity of his disposition, Madden “plays” in and with the tension of style as a matter of choice, of intention, and not merely of accident or expression.

Ultimately this is a negotiation or a conflict (though “conflict” is too strong a word: the “play wrestle,” then, of the child uninhibited) in Madden himself. In “*Alfonsina y el Mar*,” he reflects on his own tendency to advise others to “[c]ontrol [their] metaphors” and “give them some relation to your subject, or at least a relation to one another” (59). Given Madden’s assiduousness, his confessed willingness to critique, his own writing feels like a surrender to forces more chaotic and divine, to the creative madness of allusion and the unstoppering of bottles, the wanton unwrapping of chocolates without consulting the key.

Game, illusion, or extended aside, the essays remind us or show us as if we already know what Madden is telling us: we supply the connections between the disparate things—our minds dream up connections, fill in the gaps in a Rube Goldberg machinery in which we are, simultaneously, parts.

For example, in “Order,” the essayist (not just Madden) tells stories, weaves phrases, and follows the leads of language and of life, of life and of language. This is discovery, not invention; this is equally invention, not discovery. I suspect that much of fiction is akin to this in its capturing and dissemination of truth, however unintentionally, and that much of what passes for truth is entirely a fabrication, or lifted from somewhere else: that the deeper truths of human telling are fictions or plagiarisms or both. Even when Madden’s play strains credulity, playfully or confessionally (143), it all *feels* true and of a piece<sup>1</sup> until, and

---

1. Borrowing, if perversely, from Shakespeare, Madden writes early on, “Your witness *makes real* these words and in effect transports, even (in a small way) *resurrects, me*” (32).

especially when, out of stubborn play, “the essay veers, requires both my and your consciousness to care and to make something” (104).

And the essays *do* veer, requiring something more of us and of him. In “Beat on the Brat,” Madden describes a brutal assault on a developmentally disabled teenage girl by peers and occasional associates of his (104), near enough to slam the screen door on an otherwise simple and sweet adolescence: hers *and* his (though mostly hers, he’s mindful). There but for the grace, we murmur, might we be both victim and villain. The event is marked in a rumination on a labored and half-assed celebrity repentance—a portrait of the essential and sometimes delayed acceptance of growth—but it has changed things, irrevocably (122).

You see, for much of the collection—in “Solstice,” for instance—one feels as if one is inside a complex, sustained, erudite dad joke. And then the joke ends, and shit gets real, and the only comfort to be had is the assurance that thus it has always been, and always will be: suffering is peppered, one can hope, with moments of relief or even jubilation that are themselves real and not figments of some powerful one’s imagination: real joy, real relief, even in and among suffering.

Elsewhere, near and far from me, my fellow beings spun other Poké-stops and attended other wedding receptions; joyed and sorrowed at goals and misses; sat writing staring at other mountains, or oceans, or forests, or brick walls, or trash heaps; made futile efforts to stave off the encroaching entropy. Others danced and drummed and sang, some at monuments long ago constructed to mark the northernmost place where the sun stood still in the sky. Underneath it all, the earth wobbled slightly as it spun unaccountably fast, imperceptibly fast, as it continued its seemingly interminable revolutions, barely noting the significance of once again leaning fully toward the sun. (148)

So while it isn’t true that the book is frivolous/playful right up until the end—“Repast” and “Expectations” are both meditations around Madden’s mother’s life and passing that precede the turn—it feels like it is. Perhaps this is because of the way these middle meditations are framed: against a backdrop of play, protectively, to stem the tears. Perhaps also

because Madden has already called his own sobriety of mood into question: “So what?/So there” (30); and, “Too aware, too intentional, have I become” (45).

But I suppose that groundwork—the core uncertainty that he is ever serious, or ever should be—is what makes the swerve all the more poignant. In “Inertia,” Madden “smile[s] at the incongruities of existence, the recursions and extrapolations, the way experience seems to close upon itself but refuses to shut” (87). Nay, I know not “seems,” I want to reply, grasping at certainty. But maybe he’s right. “Seems” is all we know, and—the ending of this one is masterful—*insisting upon* and *producing* open-mindedness, aperture, and the feeling that one has been invited to a party at which one might be the only guest, and quite possibly also the host.

We arrive, after all and perhaps, with “Chesterton, recognizing/describing/excusing/asserting the essay that ‘does not know what it is trying to find; and therefore does not find it’” (61). These essays—the essay/the *essay*—are embodiments of that principle: we still haven’t found what we’re looking for, perhaps because what we’re looking for evolves with us, in advance of us, and looking back makes that poignantly and sometimes painfully clear. So we don’t stop looking. We can’t. Essays—these essays—“juxtapose / mundane and queer, believe the / weight, reckon the fazing” (128). Incidents of tension and accidents of intention are all there is, even when there’s purpose.

The book doesn’t stay entirely serious once it veers, anymore than it had been altogether frivolous before: “Against the Wind” and “Pangram Haiku” are satyr play, and pleasant relief. “Plums” follows as well, with a little WCW thrown in to keep Shakespeare, Bono, and Seger company in ever-gentle and productive play: there is sweetness to soften the bitter taste of suffering, no more real than pleasure or joy, but always, as always, sharper and louder.

So take it as I give it: shit does, indeed, get real. And then consider that this settling into seriousness feels organic, though it may not be.

Perhaps Madden became self-conscious of the otherwise frivolity of his process and its conceit, or perhaps arrived quite naturally at something profounder—by the very form of association he had been following all the while. Perhaps these materials were already in the collection but dropped in other locations and one or the other, writer or editor, decided that their poignance was wasted where they were, that drawing this collection to a close was like drawing a life, or a screenplay, to an ending: less a denouement than a recognition that serious things live alongside the strange and playful. I don't know. But *Disparates* ends beautifully, the quiet seriousness of the last essays providing the strangeness that has pervaded and shaped the whole, even as they step away from play for its own sake and see in play a way to deeper and more sober reflections, the finding of truths and not just trinkets, even if it wasn't looking for them.

Q: So, Dr. Penny, should I purchase, borrow, steal, download, but in any event read *Disparates*?

A: Yes, and then be sure to send the author all your many questions, the less relevant or apropos, the better.

Or better yet:

Drink the water.

Memorize the lyrics, ideally inaccurately.

Weep when appropriate.

Laugh when natural.

Essay daily.

Enter into joy.

JONATHON PENNY {jonathon.penny@gmail.com} is husband to one and father to three and is an academic dean at the College of New Caledonia in British Columbia. In addition to occasional scholarly pieces, he has published short fiction and poetry and is the author of *Blessed and Broad, These Badlands*, a four-play cycle set in Southern Alberta, Canada. He is also the translator of Jad Hatem's *Postponing Heaven* (Maxwell Institute, 2015) and currently serves as president of Mormon Scholars in the Humanities.



## Call to Action: Hope of Nature

George B. Handley. *The Hope of Nature: Our Care for God's Creation*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020. 315 pp. Paperback: \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1-62972-726-4.

*Reviewed by Mette Ivie Harrison*

*The Hope of Nature* is structured with three sets of three (I might be tempted here to make a Star Wars three trilogies joke, but I will refrain for the sake of a serious forum). As a reader, I was surprised at the original trio because none of them attempted to convince me that global climate change is real through a recitation of facts or charts. That does come later, in the second trio, "Climate Change and the Poor," written with geology professor Summer Rupper. Handley explains in later essays that he doesn't feel that science and data are his strong suit. Thus, most of the essays argue that being an environmental activist is consistent with Mormon theology, and then further, that Mormon theology demands environmental action, going back to founder Joseph Smith and the retelling of the Creation story in the book of Moses.

Handley is, in my opinion, at his best when he talks about his own personal experiences. His recounting of his visit with writer Marilynne Robinson (along with poet Lance Larsen), his essay on the Provo River delta, and his final essay about his own engagement on the Provo City Council are strong and stirring essays. I admit my bias here as one who has stepped away from full activity in Mormonism, but I was less engaged with quotations from past leaders of the Church. I found myself actively jolted by quotations from Brigham Young, who is still revered as a prophet of the Church despite his violent racism. It is hard for me to take advice on environmentally sound practices from either Young or Joseph Fielding Smith. Joseph Smith himself is only barely

more palatable to me as a guide to a better spiritual life or relationship with God and/or nature.

Nonetheless, I appreciated the reminder of what were once core doctrines of Mormonism, including the idea that body and spirit are indivisible, that all physical things were created first spiritually, and that we have an obligation to build the kingdom of God on earth. I have written regarding statements by modern General Authorities about our obligation to be stewards to the environment and have been saddened by the political reality that most Latter-day Saints easily dismiss these exhortations because of our faith's attraction to the larger conservative movement in the US since the 1980s. Unfortunately, many LDS have decided that abortion is a higher crime than global climate change and its effects on the poor. When Handley reasonably asks why Latter-day Saints aren't moved by the obvious problems all around them, a part of me wanted to shout, "Have you never heard of *Saturday's Warrior*?" My childhood was blissfully safe after listening to the *Saturday's Warrior* songs dismissing global warming and exclusively blaming Satan for discouraging us from having children.

But really, Handley lays out a more nuanced view of the religious reasons that Latter-day Saints are inclined to reject global climate change in "The Restoration of All Things" (220). The parable of the talents leads some Mormons to believe that nature must be "improved" upon and not left to its original state. Then there is the problem that our view of the future is that the earth will be turned into a heaven. Also, there is the imperative to have children (cue *Saturday's Warrior*), so that is a priority over stewardship of the earth. Then, finally, many Mormons consider hastening the end of the world to be important work, as it is understood to be a form of ushering in the Millennium.

On the other side, Handley argues that there are doctrinal or theological reasons for Latter-day Saints to champion environmental

activism. The earth and humans and God are all “interwoven” spiritually and temporally, and thus the earth should be treated with respect as another spiritual creation of God, equal to humanity. Furthermore, it is wrong for some people to use up resources that others have no access to, especially if we are truly asked to embrace the law of consecration. King Benjamin’s speech reminds us that we are nothing in comparison to God, and to nature. We should be humbled by it instead, and our free will must be used to enact stewardship. Then there are “selfish” reasons, such as the pleasure of being in nature, and the warning that the end is near, which means that we will be called to account for our sins, including those against nature itself.

Overall, I found the arguments of the book to be persuasive. If I have one major complaint, it is the dearth of female voices quoted throughout the text. In the first trio of essays, I could not find any women quoted (though they are in footnotes). Later, in the essay with Rupper, we hear from more women, and Marilynne Robinson is quoted. I find myself frequently frustrated with this problem among progressive Mormon men and also progressive ex-Mormon or post-Mormon men. There is not enough reflection on what angle of truth is perpetuated. I feel like this may be my hobbyhorse, and people may tire of me bringing it up over and over again, but it’s true: women need to be quoted and treated as equal sources and authorities in every way, including in academics, history, and environmental science.

It took me some time to figure out who the intended audience of this book was, because it seemed clear to me that those who do not believe in global climate change or in being responsible stewards of the planet are unlikely to read it. Handley seems to be speaking exclusively to the small choir of Latter-day Saints who are committed to environmental issues. It only became clear to me in the last essay, “The Blessings and Paradoxes of Environmental Engagement,” that although Handley is speaking to this choir, he is also trying to get them/us to see



that local engagement in politics and engagement with those we see as being on “the other side” is the only way that change can be made. And this call to action is something I am still sitting with.

METTE IVIE HARRISON {ironmomm@gmail.com} is the author of the national bestselling Linda Wallheim mystery series (*The Bishop’s Wife*), as well as *The Book of Laman*, *The Women’s Book of Mormon*, and *Vampires in the Temple* with BCC Press. She is fiction editor for *Exponent II* and teaches as an adjunct professor at Weber State University. She’s also an *Ironman* junkie and has five brilliant children.



## Delightful Futuristic Mormon Morality Tale Offers Teaching Tool for Progressive Parents

Matt Page. *Future Day Saints: Welcome to New Zion*. Self-published, 2020. 58 pp. Hardcover: \$25.00. Color illustrations.

*Reviewed by Christopher C. Smith*

After his death and resurrection on Earth, Jesus Christ traveled to New Zion—a planet in the Kolob star system—and appeared to its six-eyed alien inhabitants, whom he named the Othersheep. He explained to the Othersheep that they had been created by Celestial Parents, and that on other worlds throughout the galaxy lived celestial siblings who would one day emigrate to New Zion. He commanded them to prepare the world for their siblings’ arrival (3). The first ship to arrive, in the year 2806, brought green-skinned creatures from the planet Siro. Nine more groups of alien emigrants followed, until the last arrived in 2841 bearing Earth’s humans (4–7).