

Mischief and Ethnography

Keith Norman. *BUC: A Boy among the Saints*. North Charleston, S.C.: Palmetto Publishing Group, 2020. Paper: \$12.99. 345 pp. ISBN: 9781649900333.

Reviewed by Linda Hoffman Kimball

BUC: A Boy among the Saints spans a “year in the life of an unregenerate 10 year old”—the endearing young rascal Wilford Bushman. Wilf, like most in his rural Utah community of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, is “BUC”—“born under the covenant.” Being “BUC” assures him of eternal life with his Latter-day Saint family. It also comes with an earthly inheritance of every (in)conceivable tenet and folk doctrine members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ever spawned.

Wilf himself (cough—Keith Norman—cough) in the clever introduction to this narrative insists this is not a “coming of age” story with an accompanying “loss of innocence” or any other literary structure as bold as a theme or deep meaning. He is apparently as puzzled as an adult (writing the preface) as he was as a ten-year-old about how righteousness works since he constantly feels either guilty or cunningly thrilled with his next devious exploit. He seems exhausted by trying to sort out all the “oughts” in his upbringing. The reader quickly discerns Wilf as a bright, inquisitive boy with a touch of testosterone poisoning but a good heart. Wilf ponders the inconsistencies, blessings, hypocrisies, and spiritual nurture he encounters as he navigates his life.

Keith Norman writes humorously and with a completely authentic juvenile voice, narrating the thoughts of the innocent, mischievous, and curious boy as he learns and wrestles with the consequences of his choices. While one can’t exactly say that Wilf grows “in favor with God and man” during his eleventh year, Keith Norman has created a very appealing—if not entirely compliant—character.

Because the book is a sketch of a community as well as one boy's story, we find well-drawn personalities with vicious streaks and jealousies as well as adorable citizens who—under a lesser author's hand—might be perceived as simply tropes. Norman's handling of scenes with Wilf's new "non-member" fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Sutton, is often hilarious, but also shines a light on the savagery of judgment, hypocrisy, and condemnation of others among the townspeople. This willingness to lay bare the destructive nature and impact that harmful ideas reap keep the book from being just a jaunty little wander down into a cute'n'quirky love nest of Zion. Like *Brigadoon*, *Anti-Nephi-Lehi* is out of touch with contemporary life and current social issues. The town is woefully "un-woke." And Wilf is waking up.

I had a slight worry about the pacing in the book. For a while it seemed to go from one episode of mischief to another, embroidered with vocabulary someone unfamiliar with the patois of the Saints might find hard to suss. The suspense picks up when baby Winona wanders off, when Wilf falls off a cliff, and when Mr. Sutton appears on the scene. And—oh my!—the outhouse scene! The pages were flying then.

I appreciate *BUC* not just for its assured tone and style. This book is also an ethnographic treasure. I am eager to know how well this book will fare among readers who are not familiar with the Intermountain West pioneer LDS culture that *Anti-Lehi-Nephi* still inhabits. With the Church expanding worldwide, how much of this culture Norman has captured will survive in an international Church? Perhaps copies could be sold with interpreters?

I am left with an awe of Keith Norman's skill at walking the tightrope that kept this book from being a catalog of LDS cliches or a presentation of endearing tropes. He sees. He hears. He wrestles with the logical fallacies of certain pseudo-doctrines and sees their dangerous fall out. He lays bare the bitter and the sweet, holds them up to the light as Wilf Bushman examines them with his (mostly) innocent eyes, and forces us to ponder the consequences. A bookshelf with books by Levi Peterson,

Maureen Whipple, and Mark Twain can make a little room for *BUC: A Boy among the Saints*.

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