

(“Klaus the Diatomist . . .,” *The Brain’s Lctionary*, 83) that will move, challenge, and inspire the careful reader. The publishers, By Common Consent and Mormon Lit Lab, deserve praise and support for nurturing these writers and publishing their works in such well-designed, affordable editions.

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A Very Bad Dog

Steven L. Peck. *Heike’s Void*. By Common Consent Press, 2022. 352 pp. Paper: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1948218559.

Reviewed by Jennifer Quist

Among the benefits to reading authors with large, proven oeuvres is trust. We can trust Steven L. Peck. Remember that through the provocations of the opening of his astonishing new release from BCC Press, a novel called *Heike’s Void*. Its unsettling opening has two parts, beginning with an epigram from title character Dr. Heike Marquardt’s *Theology of Nothingness*. Here, she attempts to define “the void.” It is an attempt to use ontological reasoning to range outside ontology, like an apocryphal sixth verse, an anti-verse scrawled upside down in the margin at the end of “If You Could Hie to Kolob,” composed during W. W. Phelps’s angry years. It could have happened . . .

In her book, which we see only in short, digestible excerpts, Heike says, “The void is an unimaginable place, unimaginable because to

imagine it is to negate its possible non-existence by creating a reference to it" (2). So it continues in a series of impossible statements, made in spite of themselves. The second part of the opening is the introduction of a character far more familiar in Mormon fiction, an elderly straight anglophone Euro-American man, looking out over a Utah canyon feeling nostalgic, a little disenchanting and regretful of something he can't quite name. This is Elder Holmberg, a contemporary apostle.

Stay with us. Trust Peck and keep reading. Though his Holmberg character is familiar, his introduction of him is not. "One person God hates is Elder Holmberg" (4). This position is insisted upon with scriptural precedents and references, ones that may have made us personally uncomfortable from time to time. From them, the narrator concludes that "No flighty changeable being is [God]. If God hates you, you are stuck with it. This doesn't mean you can't go to heaven? No, no, no. God is not a monster" (3). Here arises another bit of first philosophy in the opening of what is about to become a literary page-turner of a novel. If a God like this is not a monster, then what is he? And what would it mean to be saved by him?

Heike's Void is a radical experiment with whether or not the atonement of Christ, as preached in the Church, is truly infinite and eternal, without limits, or whether it is something else. And *if* it is something else, then how can any of us hope for it to ever be enough? There is no arithmetic of salvation in this novel, no neat economies or equations, not even any variables or functions with which to express them. There is no bicycle to be paid for with piggy bank pennies. Instead, there are urgent but impossible questions about whether the mercy of God indeed, as the Book of Mormon says, "overpowereth justice" (Alma 34:15), and if it does, do any of us actually believe it. If God hated someone, would it keep them from his infinite grace? Could their suicide? How about accidental homicide? Planned and deliberate homicide? Mass planned and deliberate homicide then? Is not this endless?

At the heart of the story, adding warmth to its urgency, is in the character of Arrow Beamon, a man with terrible judgment led by his

appetites and aversions, making ridiculous miscalculations, noble and ignoble gestures, and yet holding my wholehearted support every moment he is on the page. When faced with a hard question, he comforts his wife with assurances that “When we get into the Celestial Kingdom we’ll watch the movie and figure it out” (202). It’s a pat answer we may have heard before, trivial, a “cringe” answer especially in the context of the exacting reason and thoughtfulness of the rest of the novel. Yet in Arrow’s meek and hapless voice, it is somehow poignant, one of the most subtle ways the novel considers what could possibly contain all the knowledge and power and mercy of a being who is actually God.

Heike herself is terrifying, driven by appetites of a different sort than Arrow’s. She answers the violence and terror of the tragedy in her life with violence and terror of her own making. She courts, grieves, and subverts “envoidment” (43). In the end, the most pressing and obvious questions about her remain unanswered. Does she choose to stay where she is for love, or for more and more brutal revenge?

The least satisfying of the novel’s characters is a pair of guardian angels who interact and interfere without the mortal characters knowing anything about it, like a writer’s workshop tool that would have been better left unseen in the workshop. Perhaps we should count Peck himself among the people who ought to trust him to be able to tell this story without this heavenly pair acting as a narratively disruptive and unnecessary chorus. This novel is the second I’ve read from BCC Press where Book of Mormon Nephi is cut down to size, a character who beat them to it by already confessing himself “in canon” (as they say in fan-fiction studies) to be “wretched” and droopy. Maybe that’s why neither recutting has been satisfying for me. We’re ready for Arrow’s story now.

What is satisfying for me, especially after years of reading fiction for *Dialogue*, is finding a charmingly written and characterized, gripping story about what is, ostensibly, the thing that makes the Church different from other backwater conservative religious American subcultures. It goes beyond the same kinds of accounts of prejudice and oppression we could find following the #churchtrauma #exfundie tags on TikTok.

The novel addresses contemporary and timeless social and spiritual grievances to Christianity itself, not to some pasty American simulacrum of Christianity. Through Peck's literary artistic experimentation come questions about God and grace for which we have no vocabulary, no syllogisms, only stories. Such as this tiny story about Heike and her dog in the park, which may be the whole story after all.

[The dog] would not come, and she spent fifteen minutes chasing him around the dog park before she could snatch him by the collar. She sat down on the ground crossing her legs and pulling the dog's nose into her own as she rubbed the back of his head. "You are a bad dog." She said, rubbing his back vigorously with her hand. "A very bad dog." (154)

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Experience with Religion, Experience with the Spirit

Matthew Wickman. *Life to the Whole Being: The Spiritual Memoir of a Literature Professor*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University, 2022. 227 pp. Paper: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-0-8425-0061-6.

Reviewed by Madison U. Sowell

Frankly, I am not sure why I was invited to review Matthew Wickman's *Life to the Whole Being*. It is not an opportunity that I sought or for which I volunteered. I have written very little on Mormon topics. My traditional area of scholarship has long been the Italian epic tradition and, more recently, the iconography of pre-twentieth-century ballet performers.