Alternate Narratives and Family Bonds

Mary Clyde. *Journeys from a Desert Road*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2024. 214 pp. Paper: $18.95.
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Review by Tamara Pace Thomson

Mormon doctrine plays a scant role in Mary Clyde's new novel, *Journeys from a Desert Road*, but Mormon narratives are intrinsic to her characters, their family bonds, and to the journeys of the title. As Darrell Spencer once explained in an interview for this journal (paraphrasing John Bennion's insights), while Mormonism may play a role in some of his stories, it doesn't "capture the narrative."[1] The same is true of Clyde's story. But the threads of ancestry, of pioneer attributes, and of unabashed optimism that inform Clyde's characters remind the reader that one's faith biography is nearly impossible to disentangle from lived crisis.

The particular crises that Clyde details are those of the Wilson family. One narrative is that of the son, Jack Wilson, recovering from a car accident that leaves him with a serious brain injury. The other deals with the aftermath of a nuclear bomb and the family's journey from Phoenix toward Payson, Arizona. These two narratives, and journeys, complement one another, because the first is mostly seen through the perspective of Ellen Wilson, the mother of the family, while the latter is mostly told from Jack's perspective. Even though Jack is unconscious in the story of his brain injury, the alternate narrative allows us to see his inner thoughts and concerns, thus complicating and enhancing what we get from Ellen's point of view.

Ellen is a former Mormon, raised by a mother who still sings hymns, quotes scripture, and believes that tribulations endured well

1. Douglas Thayer, "An Interview with Darrell Spencer," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 129.

will bring an eternal reward. Ellen's love of the rational led her away from Mormonism as a college student, but she still values the tenacity of her Mormon ancestors who settled in the harsh Sonoran Desert. She is also a rather benign rebel who, even in her middle age, won't drink coffee in front of her mother for fear of offending her. And while it may not be a central theme in the story, Ellen begins to wonder if her own beliefs are enough to sustain her during Jack's coma.

This kind of religious musing runs along the periphery of the story, and we are frequently reminded of Ellen's "pioneer stock" and of her own fortitude when faced with calamity. She is optimistic about both her son's dire situation and, in the alternate narrative, about the perilous reality of postapocalyptic Arizona. And unlike many post-Mormons, she isn't triggered by LDS hymns. In fact, she actually enjoys her mother's Mormon Tabernacle Choir renditions of "Lead, Kindly Light" and "I Know That My Redeemer Lives" because "the confident harmonies [lift] her spirits" (152).

Ellen as a protagonist is a curious and keen thinker. In the early days after Jack's accident, and well before she knows if he will recover or not, she observes a jet contrail in the sky: "Contrails are ice crystals, she thought, made from engine exhaust that forms where the air is colder. Information of all sorts seemed significant and relevant. Somewhat superstitiously, she wondered whether fragments of knowledge might be pieced together to heal her son" (45). But her concern that she is superstitious is unfounded, as she reads countless books and articles about brain injuries to fully understand her son's plight. And while the minds of many parents would dissolve into a tangle of confusion when faced with a child's death or permanent disability, Ellen's mind becomes hyper observant and analytical.

Ellen acts as the anchor for the entire family as they wait for Jack to awake. She constantly reassures her husband, Peter, whom she admits she loves "partly because he needed her" (39). Peter is anxious, insecure, and nearly paralyzed with fear when facing Jack's injuries. He tries to stay away from the hospital as much as possible and leaves the

nurturing of their son to Ellen. This means that the burden of understanding Jack's situation, and the burden of optimism, rests on Ellen.

Clyde's prose is not always remarkable or elegant. In the first few chapters, her language is unsure of itself. There are moments that feel unnatural or intrusive. One such instance happens before Ellen has even seen Jack after learning of his accident. She finds Jack's shallow, self-absorbed fiancée with a broken arm in the hospital on her way to see Jack, and Ellen thinks, "Lily wouldn't have made it across the frozen Mississippi River on the first night of the westward trek" (1). The idea that Ellen would be thinking of the westward trek while unsure of how dire her son's condition is feels unlikely.

Other weaknesses of the novel include characters that are not fully drawn. Jack, despite the central role he plays within the nuclear bomb narrative, comes off as ineffective, both as a convincing character and as a participant in the drama. His desires and motivations are not always clear, and he tends to be acted upon rather than being an actor in his own fate.

However, Clyde employs plenty of enticing language as the novel progresses as well as characters that feel fully developed and alive. A minor character named Andy is vivid and authentic. He is a survivalist teenager who befriends and helps the Wilsons on their trek to Payson. He is gritty, energetic, shrewd, and endearing. His fearless escapades breathe life into the surreal situation the family finds themselves in.

And, about a quarter of the way into the book, Clyde's prose flows more naturally and pleasingly, as when Ellen returns home for the first time after four days of sitting with Jack at the hospital. Clyde writes, "Outside, she watered pots of withered geraniums. Oranges were ripening on the trees, and the fig tree was losing ugly, crumpled leaves. She felt she'd been gone a long time and remembered someone saying that experience is measured in intensity, not duration" (49).

In an essay for the Association for Mormon Letters blog, Clyde laments that her literature students often complain that assigned reading is "sad." She makes a strong case for reading complex, sad, and

even bleak literature, writing, "literature [is] not to entertain but to enlighten, to open minds, to introduce questions, to offer new vistas, and to foster empathy and understanding."[2] (This is the same case I have made countless times to my own students.) And she also defends *Journeys from a Desert Road* against her brother's judgment that her story is sad. She admits that not many literary families are saved by love but that her novel is indeed one of familial love and loyalty.

Which brings me to the great strength of this sad but hopeful narrative. Ellen Wilson is the center of the novel because Ellen Wilson is the center of her family, as innumerable mothers are. Like Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, Ellen keeps her family from splintering by loving them in all their flaws. Her fearlessness will not allow Jack's daunting recovery to undermine her patience, loyalty, or optimism. It isn't Ellen's faith in dogma that stabilizes her family, it is her love.

Shortly before reading Mary Clyde's book, my husband suffered a moderate brain injury from a fall on ice. For four or five days, I wasn't sure if he would recover. And while Jack's injuries in the novel are far more serious, I certainly feel empathy for Ellen. I also admire her. I happen to be a Mormon who didn't inherit the fortitude of my pioneer forbears, nor do I possess much optimism about our world or the future. But reading of Ellen's calm, rational, and patient handling of her son's terrible condition, I feel genuinely inspired. Wives and mothers are expected to be stalwart and cheerful and irrationally buoyant. But Ellen is smart, skeptical, and doubting while also being genuinely devoted to her family.

We may read postapocalyptic books, as one character says, to prepare ourselves to face our fears, but when we are already living our greatest fears, whether watching our democracy be dismantled or witnessing our loved ones suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous

2. Mary Clyde, "The Question of Sad," *Dawning of a Brighter Day* (blog), Oct. 8, 2024, https://www.associationmormonletters.org/2024/10/the-question-of-sad-by-mary-clyde/.

fortune, it is stories of family devotion that might help us through. Mary Clyde's novel is just that.

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Mormon Transhumanists: Their Origin and Destiny

Jon Bialecki. *Machines for Making Gods: Mormonism, Transhumanism, and Worlds without End*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2022. 368 pp. Paper: $35.00. ISBN: 9780823299362.

Reviewed by Megan Leverage

Circles of light crown the peaks of red rocks against black skies. Are they sacred halos gleaming or artificial lights beaming from a UFO? The beautiful cover image of the book *Machines for Making Gods* draws the reader into the "rhymes" of the Mormon Transhumanist Association (MTA). Despite the anti-scientific attitudes of conservative forms of Christianity, including and especially Mormonism, anthropologist of Christianity Jon Bialecki explores the complex relationship between religion and science, through the "foldings, inversions, and twists" of Mormonism and transhumanism (49). For those unfamiliar with the term, Bialecki defines transhumanism as "the positive anticipation of the possibility that increases in technology will allow *Homo sapien*