

and want to make changes that lead all of us toward something closer to Zion. This is the point from the very start of Davis's essays: We are all included in world-building/disassembling/meaning and finding creative ways of being in a religious system whose goal is to elevate all humankind.

One last note from Davis: "[If] somehow or other, the universe deals you a chance to respond to someone in a way that affirms, understands, or even shares in the way they value themselves, then you are in a position to give them a very special gift" (175). Amen.

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Whispers from the Poker Table

John Bennion. *The Dead Fathers: Grief and Poker in the West Desert*. By Common Consent Press, 2025. 512 pp. Paperback: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-1961471238.

Reviewed by John Engler

The triumph of *The Dead Fathers* is an ending that I don't dare spoil; it lands as an epic culmination of a subtly expanding panorama I hadn't seen coming. John Bennion spends nearly five hundred pages in Utah's West Desert—spare, wind-scoured, abandoned and rediscovered—and then, in the final movements, he opens the aperture until a hermit's private grief feels communal, even cosmic. If that sounds grand, it is. Bennion delivers the unexpected.

Readers first meet Christopher Twist living alone in a derelict camper trailer whose door is nothing but a blanket. This isn't poverty chic. Bennion inventories the scene of graphic indigence—filthy bedding, foul body odor, perpetually barren fridge, collapsing walls—to be honest about the cost of isolation. Twist, an aging, cantankerous, relentlessly philosophical, disaffected Latter-day Saint, has little to live for. Separated from his wife, estranged from much of his family and friends, his days crawl past in a kind of hollow, dusty silence. At first blush, there seems little reason to keep reading beyond curiosity about how low a man can sink; the early slow pace of the prose matches the long days of a lonely existence. And yet I found myself drawn in. Perhaps it is the hermit in me, or some ancestral echo that occasionally imagines such a stripped-down existence. Bennion, however, is clear: this is not Thoreau solitude fantasy but suffering of body and mind.

Then the dead fathers appear. Literally. Night after night, Twist's ancestors materialize around a shambly table to play poker and dispense advice. This posse of Dead Fathers (abbreviated DF in the novel) range from his own father to great-great-grandfather, eventually joined by dead mothers and aunts, too. Their conversations meander but always circle back to what they think Twist should or should not do. The catch: their motives remain elusive. Sometimes their tactics are comically petty (stealing his pants so he can't leave the trailer). Other times they are cryptic, contradictory, or maddeningly incomplete.

This device is gutsy. Part campfire metaphysics, part family court, the poker table becomes the stage where faith, memory, and grievance are shuffled and reshuffled. On one level, Bennion uses a tried-and-true tactic—depriving characters of complete information—to generate mystery and conflict. The DFs hint at a spiritual crisis, some calamity in the unseen world that Twist can help avert, but then refuse or are unable to provide him with details. Bennion challenges the assumption that voices from beyond must be omniscient. Here, the dead are partial, partisan, sometimes laughably wrong. The refusal to make them oracles gives the book both tension and authenticity. Readers, like Twist,

are asked to proceed without certainty, to navigate conflicting signals. Should the DFs be trusted or treated with suspicion? Is their counsel wisdom, mischief, or something else entirely? The literary tactic can feel heavy-handed at times, but it also mirrors the experience of grief and faith: half-clues, partial revelations, fragmented authority.

Readers beware: the number of characters in the book is utterly overwhelming. The sprawl is as something found in Dickens, Tolstoy, or Rushdie. Helpfully, Bennion does supply a partial family tree at the front, which I flipped back to constantly, but still I felt unmoored by the sheer number of names. In addition to more than a dozen dead relatives, there are fellow desert dwellers, estranged family members, moonshiners, mining executives, polygamists, government officials, off-roaders, and more. Admittedly my own weariness with the masses may be a result of sheer classroom fatigue—learning scores of new names for decades of semesters. But truly, the desert cast could swamp a reader.

Pacing is another sticking point. The early chapters move slowly, partly because a lonely man in a destitute trailer lives lonely, slow days, and partly because with the story told in first-person, readers are subject to Twist's extended, rambling, philosophical musings precipitated by a lifetime of indulgence in literature, LDS doctrine, and overthinking. For readers used to plot-driven page-turners, Bennion's disinterest in the conventions of a tight storyline may test patience. Scenes sometimes surface with a randomness that made me wonder if Bennion was throwing darts. Yet, in retrospect, that meandering feels intentional: a life without obvious arc, slowly shaped by interruptions, until a larger pattern emerges.

The book occasionally opens into moments of action: clandestine trips to photograph illegal moonshine operations, legal threats, strained collaborations with the ex-wife, explorations of abandoned mines. These episodes inject suspense and funnel into an evolving theme of discovery—of the land, of relationships, of self. These threads are woven slowly, almost stubbornly, into a single line that always runs back through Twist and his spectral visitors. True to life, Twist's ties to family and community are messy, full of argument and backtracking.

The result is frustrating at times, but it adds authenticity and prevents the relationships from collapsing into cliché.

With patience, the sprawl at long last reveals its purpose. A story that begins with a lone man and a blanket-door gradually admits more and more people—until Twist's life is crowded again. The book enacts the very thing it is about: isolation yielding, fitfully, to life-changing connection. Those prone to ascribe the early symbolic scenes of water and fire to a transformative baptismal moment might be left as confused as Twist when there is little of transformation then. Yes, those moments do embody the shrugging off of an old life, but the real invitation to be born again, to authentically reconnect with the divine, is yet to come. For a character who has given up on human contact, it's the burden of names and faces that is offered as the gift, an invitation to salvation.

By the final stretch, the book's slow burn pays off. Without spoiling the particulars, I can say this: the closing sequence reframes everything—the poker table, the vast circle of characters, the meandering scenes—as a rite of communal accounting. What looked like randomness begins to read as hospitality. Bennion invites more of the living and the dead into the circle until meaning can be made in company. The result is audacious, even visionary.

The Dead Fathers is not a book for everyone. Readers who crave taut plots and streamlined casts may chafe. But for those willing to trust Bennion's long game, the rewards are substantial: a tenacious, sometimes exasperating, but ultimately moving meditation on grief, family, and reconnection. It is a novel about poker, yes, but also about what it means to sit at the table—messy, crowded, alive—with the living and the dead.

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