

Wickies for the Lord

Ronald V. Huggins. *Lighthouse: Jerald & Sandra Tanner, Despised and Beloved Critics of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2022). 390 pp. Paper: \$24.95. ISBN: 9781560854548.

Reviewed by Jeremy M. Christiansen

Growing up in the 1990s in a strong Mormon household, I learned that my religion had its own Index Librorum Prohibitorum. It was not published for the faithful to see but transmitted orally, through hushed but stern warnings. And always among the names mentioned: “the Tanners.” They wrote anti-Mormon books. The kind filled with calumnies, the kind that make you lose your testimony and wind up like Elder Kinegar from *God’s Army*. Flash forward a couple of decades and as I was making my own way out of the LDS Church, I found myself reading a number of the Tanners’ publications, seeing their names everywhere, and coming to the startling conclusion that their work was not only much less sensational than I was led to believe but was as foundational to understanding Mormon history as the writings of more credentialed writers like Fawn Brodie or D. Michael Quinn.

As Ronald Huggins rightly notes in his remarkable new biography, *Lighthouse: Jerald & Sandra Tanner, Despised and Beloved Critics of Mormonism*, “given the large number of historical disputes the Tanners’ research contributed to, it would be impossible to trace the course of Mormon history and historiography over the past sixty years without an understanding of their involvement” (viii). Seer stones and salamanders, First Visions, alterations to the Book of Commandments and Book of Mormon, and the production and contents of the Book of Abraham—the Tanners were vital contributors on each of these issues and more, bedeviling everyone from Joseph Fielding Smith to Ed Decker.

Huggins sets out to provide us a “credible biography of the Tanners,” i.e., one that does “not involve breathing our love or hate into it” but rather, through scholarly detachment, presents “a depiction of what the world looks like from [the Tanners’] perspective . . . and how that vision moved them to think and act as they did” (x). He achieves his goal in spades. As Huggins recounts it, the Tanners experienced powerful personal conversions to Jesus in their early young-adult lives, conversions that took them from mainstream Mormonism to niche offshoot Mormonism to evangelical Protestantism. This spiritual journey is anticipated in Jerald’s and Sandra’s very blood, as Huggins traces their ancestries through a complex web of Protestantism and religious disputes. To see their progenitors go from Baptists to old Seventh Day Baptists and Freewill Baptists to miracle-seeking restorationists to Mormons, one is primed for, and perhaps unsurprised by, Jerald’s and Sandra’s own conversions from one faith to another.

Fittingly, those conversions are sparked by what would dominate the Tanners’ lives for decades to come: historical investigation. For Jerald, it was digging into David Whitmer’s 1887 pamphlet “An Address to All Believers in Christ.” For Sandra, it was reading the sermons of her great-great-grandfather Brigham Young on blood atonement. One is left with a distinct image of two young lovebirds in the late 1950s and early 1960s investigating Mormonism. (And I could not help but smile at Huggins’s description of their courtship, sharing their findings with one another—falling in love over Mormon history.)

Initially, the two retained their beliefs in the Book of Mormon and appear to have at least flirted with the modalism of the Missouri-based Mormonism led by Pauline Hancock. But I ask you, reader, did *you* know that the Tanners’ early tryst with modalism (something they later abandoned) played a role in the famous story of Joseph Fielding Smith unwittingly telling Sandra Tanner that the Church possessed the 1832 First Vision account? Neither did I, but *Lighthouse* is full these kinds of vignettes, and it is where Huggins’s work really shines. He transports us back to a Mormonism that seems distant, even quaint. We may take it

for granted that we can look at full-color, high-resolution images of the Book of Commandments published by *the Church itself* without realizing the absolute doggedness—and there is no other way to describe it—required for the Tanners to publish the first ever photo reprint of it. Neither the *Salt Lake Tribune* nor the *Deseret News* would advertise it. Too hot. It is impossible to read *Lighthouse* without having a deep sense of gratitude for the hard and sometimes risky work the Tanners (and others) did.

Lighthouse covers the topics you expect it to (all while revealing new and interesting information) like the salamander letter episode and the discovery and printing of the “Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language,” but also some unanticipated topics. Chapter 11, “Watergate and Wiretapping,” is a roller coaster of allegations of wiretapping by Mark E. Petersen on polygamist groups, Mormon connections to Watergate, an FBI file on the Tanners (“trouble makers and Communists” [175]), an appearance by Howard Hughes, CIA-connected operatives, and more. Huggins asks, “How were two people with a small printing business in Salt Lake City suddenly in the middle of charges and counter-charges by two men who may or may not have been CIA agents?” (188). Indeed.

Chapter 17, “I Just Need Some Rest,” is painful to read, bringing into all too vivid detail Jerald’s slow demise at the merciless hands of Alzheimer’s. There is a heartbreaking irony of “a brilliant analyst of detail, with an almost uncanny ability to spot textual inconsistencies that demand explanation” (321) being “no longer [able] to coherently write or perform basic math” (304). Your heart bursts for Sandra throughout.

Ultimately, *Lighthouse* is about the Tanners’ implacable mission of “getting at the truth” (xi). Whether you agree with their worldview or not, their conclusions or not, their methods or not, this is the best way to understand the Tanners—on their own terms. Like Augustine, whose zeal moved his unmatched intellect to write, and write tirelessly, against Manichaeism, so too the Tanners brought to bear all the gifts God gave

them to write on Mormonism. Rather than publishers, scholars, critics, or gadflies, the Tanners understood themselves as wickies for the Lord's lighthouse, sending out a beacon. Reflecting on their story and their ministry, wonderfully recounted by Huggins in a work that will hold an important place in Mormon historiography for years to come, I cannot help but faintly hear a men's quartet intone:

Brightly beams our Father's mercy
From his lighthouse ever more,
But to us he gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.
Let the lower lights be burning;
Send a gleam across the wave.
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.

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