
PURITY OF ESSENCE

THE BACKSLIDER

by Levi Peterson

Signature Books, 1986, \$12.95, 361 pp.

Reviewed by Ron Bitton

MOST FANS of Mormon literature probably first became acquainted with Levi Peterson's works through *The Canyons of Grace*, a collection of short stories which came out in 1982. The quirky, brooding stories in this collection marked the debut of a highly distinctive voice in Mormon letters, and left many readers eager to see what Peterson would come up with next. Well, now they can find out by reading *The Backslider*, Peterson's first novel. The story he tells here is a significant step forward from his earlier short stories, covering some of the same themes in greater richness and detail. It may not be a book for everybody, but if you like this sort of thing then this is the sort of thing you will like a lot.

The eponymous backslider of the title is Frank Windham, a more or less Mormon cowboy working on a ranch outside of Escalante. As the book opens, Frank still regards his religious heritage as a fairly low-key, peripheral affair. He believes in God, and he believes that Joseph Smith was His prophet, but this belief isn't important enough to him to go on a mission or to enter the temple. Nor, in the early chapters of the book, can this belief keep him from pocketing a few dollars in a horse sale, or visiting a roadside tavern with his bunkmates, or fooling around with the boss's daughter. Frank feels bad about these activities, and he knows they are sinful, but somehow he finds himself doing them anyway. Then a horrifying, utterly unexpected tragedy upsets Frank's easygoing life and forces him to reconsider his values and his relationship with God.

Up to this point, *The Backslider* could be an exceptionally well-written but still fairly typical Mormon novel. Didacticism has long been the besetting sin of Mormon fiction, and formulaic plots in which a more or less "worldly" character is brought through tribulation to a strong gospel commitment are all too common. But this is exactly where Peterson shows his originality. When his brother Jeremy is horribly mutilated in a hunting accident, Frank is indeed jolted to a new and more acute awareness of the transience of mortal life and the presence of God. However, this awareness is very different from the world-view of mainstream Mormonism:

It gave him the sweats thinking how God harvested people when and where he pleased. People thought they could earn some credit by being good, by keeping the commandments. They thought they could buy a little more joy and a little more time to live. When it suited him, God dumped them, good and bad, into his mill and ground them into chaff. He hadn't sent an angel to warn Frank, as he had to Laman and Lemuel. He had wasted Jeremy (p. 145).

Frank makes a valiant attempt to satisfy the demands of his stern, perfectionistic, and utterly uncompromising God. He strives obsessively to live the commandments of the Church to the letter. He cuts himself off from his Lutheran girlfriend. He renounces every imaginable physical pleasure, from food to sex, and looks for new ways to mortify his flesh. But still, no matter how hard he tries, he continues to slide back. Frank's personal efforts are not enough to achieve perfection.

In his attempts to appease the requirements of an infinitely demanding God, Frank moves

deeper and deeper into social isolation and a Gnostic hatred of the flesh. He is rescued from this descent by his girlfriend Marianne. Significantly, Marianne is a Lutheran, and she is secure in the certainty that she has been saved, not by any merit she has earned, but by the grace of Jesus. Marianne's trust in grace, and the carnal desires she arouses in Frank, are two significant factors in the final, surprising resolution of his dilemma.

Peterson has dealt with the themes of redemption, grace, and the conflict between love of God and love of the world in his earlier works. In "The Confession of Augustine," arguably the best story in *The Canyons of Grace*, the narrator Fremont Dunham broods on these questions in terms very similar to those Frank Windham uses in *The Backslider*. "Mormons cannot ordinarily admit that moral volition is an illusion," he remarks at one point; and later, he asserts that "if it suits him, He [God] will feed me tragedy on the instant. He will shatter me, like a boy dropping an icicle on the pavement. . . ."

Although these themes and the attitudes behind them seem highly non-Mormon to me, my own experience has been in a corner of Mormon society very remote from the rural Great Basin Mormons that Peterson describes. Certainly they are weighty, important issues, and I suspect that Peterson himself has spent a considerable amount of time grappling with them. It is a mark of his skill as a writer that he can make it seem plausible and even natural for a Jack Mormon cowboy like Frank Windham to struggle with them too. The eventual resolution of Frank's conflict seems equally natural and unforced; moreover, both the problem and its solution are presented in a wholly non-didactic manner.

The didactic overtones in many Mormon novels stem at least in part from misplaced priorities on the part of the authors. All too often, it seems that the characters in a Mormon story are there primarily to exemplify some abstract quality: worldliness, for instance, or unrighteous dominion, or something. Beyond the borders of these traits, the characters tend to fade into nothingness. Fortunately, Peterson is more sophisticated than this. He recognizes that the characters that draw us deepest into a story are those most like real people; that is, they are complex, quirky and unpredictable. They cannot be encompassed within any brief list of qualities.

The major and minor characters in *The Backslider* are one of the book's most attractive features. Frank, his girlfriend Marianne, his brother Jeremy, and Frank's polygamist employer Farley Chittenden are just a few of the intriguing people in this book. Peterson probably drew heavily on his own background in rural Utah when he depicted these people.

RON BITTON is the associate editor of *SUNSTONE* magazine.

Surprisingly, he seems less successful at creating plausible academic or intellectual characters. Neither Wesley, the owner of the ranch where Frank works, nor the various collegiate types he meets seem particularly convincing. This lack of conviction may be due in part to a certain ambiguity of perspective in *The Backslider*. Peterson tends to leave unresolved the question of whether we are seeing *what* Frank Windham sees or seeing it *as* he sees it. Thus, the awkward, unpersuasive speech patterns of the intellectuals in this book may be an attempt to capture the way pompous intellectuals sound to a guy like Frank Windham. This ambiguity may also explain why it took me nearly fifty pages to place this story in some sort of time-slot. (It takes place in the 1950s.) But problems of this type only crop up occasionally in *The Backslider*, and do little to impede the flow of a powerfully told story.

At times it may be a little too powerful for some readers. When Peterson spoke "in defense of Mormon pornography" at last year's Sunstone Symposium, he rightly criticized Mormon writers for sanitizing their stories by leaving out some of the more carnal, complex, or just plain gross aspects of life. All of those aspects are here, and Peterson's descriptions of calf castrations and the like may be a little too intense for some fastidious souls. Peterson has also made a laudable attempt to describe the sexual side of life in a way that avoids the Bob Guccione-style porn fantasies that tend to dominate erotic writing. Peterson's description of sexual encounters are honest and affecting, but in his attempt to describe sex between real people and not fantasy figures, he tends to focus rather closely on his characters' physical imperfections. Possibly I am overfastidious myself, but the descriptions of knobby noses, protruding bellies, and asymmetrical breasts sometimes reminded me less of Bob Guccione's fantasies than those of Hieronymus Bosch.

After 150 years of existence and growth, Mormonism has yet to produce a Sholom Aleichem or a Gabriel Garcia Marquez to chronicle the lives of its people. It may be an inevitable fact of life that new social and religious movements are less concerned with producing literature than propaganda, and Mormonism has certainly been no exception. But Levi Peterson has shown that he is ready to struggle with the issues of life in a way that denies neither the difficulty of the struggle nor the steadiness of his faith. *The Backslider* is a significant addition to Peterson's own works and to the growing body of quality Mormon literature.

ANNOUNCING

1987 SUNSTONE SYMPOSIUMS

Washington, D.C.
May 15-16

Salt Lake City
August 26-29

Mark your calendars now and plan to attend one of the two symposiums the Sunstone Foundation is sponsoring in 1987. Proposals for papers and panels are desired on any topic relating to Mormon doctrine, culture or history. Finished papers must be submitted in advance and should be between 10-15 double spaced type-written pages, capable of being read in twenty minutes. Sunstone reserves the right (unless otherwise agreed in advance) to publish all papers presented, but is not obligated to do so. Send proposals and names to add to publicity mailing lists to:

DEADLINES AND ADDRESSES

Washington, D.C.
Proposal Deadline 15 Jan 1987
Paper deadline 1 April 1987

Salt Lake City
Proposal deadline 15 April 1987
Paper deadline 15 May 1987

contact:

W.G. Reed
Alison Bethke Gayek
4233 Leland Street
Chevy Chase, MD 20815
(301) 654-3323

contact:

Lynne Whitesides
331 South Rio Grande, Suite 30
Salt Lake City, UT 84101
(801) 355-5926

Please send my issues to:

Phone: _____

- \$18.00 — 6 issues
- \$32.00 — 12 issues
- \$60.00 — 24 issues

Enclosed please find my tax deductible contribution in the amount of \$ _____

Total enclosed \$ _____

SUNSTONE REPRINT SERVICE

ORDER FORM

Photocopied reproductions from out-of-print issues of Sunstone

— \$.15 per page —

- _____ 3 pg. Divinization: The Forgotten Teaching of Early Christianity by *Keith Norman*
- _____ 18 pg. Utah's Unknown Pioneer Architects: Their Lives and Works and More Of Utah's Unknown Pioneer Architects: Their Lives and Works by *Allen D. Roberts*
- _____ 5 pg. Past and Present: Some Thoughts on Being A Mormon Woman by *Maureen Ursenbach Beecher*
- _____ 2 pg. About the Sunstone by *Peggy Fletcher*
- _____ 6 pg. Early Book of Mormon Texts by *Stan Larson*
- _____ 5 pg. Working Mothers by *Francine Bennion*
- _____ 6 pg. "These Licentious Days:" Dancing Among the Mormons by *Davis Bitton*
- _____ 10 pg. The Saints On Celluloid: The Making of the Movie Brigham Young by *James D'Arc*
- _____ 6 pg. Endangered Species: Single Men in the Church by *Lavina Fielding and Jeffrey O. Johnson*
- _____ 2 pg. The Weightier Matters by *Dr. Lowell L. Bennion*
- _____ 6 pg. Echoes and Foreshadowing: The Distinctiveness of the Mormon Community by *D. Michael Quinn*
- _____ 2 pg. On Arts, Morals and Morality by *Orson Scott Card*
- _____ 12 pg. E.E. Erickson: Loyal Heretic by *Scott Kenny*
- _____ 3 pg. Thoughts on Faith and History by *Dean May*
- _____ 7 pg. Henry Ward Beecher and The Mormons by *Gary Bunker and Davis Bitton*
- _____ 3 pg. Confession of a Tolkien Addict by *Fredda Stairr*
- _____ 5 pg. If Thy Brother Sin Against Thee by *Janice Allred*
- _____ 3 pg. Moroni 8 as Rhetoric by *Mark Thomas*
- _____ 6 pg. Heavenly Signs and Aerial Combat by *Daniel Petersen*
- _____ 2 pg. Scripture, History, and Myth by *James Faulconer*
- _____ 6 pg. Writing about Modern Mormonism by *Jan Shippy*
- _____ 8 pg. Mixed Messages on the Negro Doctrine : Interview with *Lester Bush*
- _____ 4 pg. Bringing the Humanity to the Gospel by *Stephen L. Richards*
- _____ 8 pg. Priesthood and Philosophy: by E.E. Erickson Responses by *Lowell L. Bennion and Carlisle Hunsaker*

- _____ 3 pg. Underconsumption: A Lifestyle by *Douglas and Elaine Alder*
- _____ 5 pg. Speculative Theology, The Key to A Dynamic Faith by *T. Eugene Shoemaker*
- _____ 3 pg. An Interview with *Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton*
- _____ 19 pg. The Book of Abraham Facsimiles: A Reappraisal by *Edward Ashment* The Book of Abraham Facsimiles: A Response by *Hugh Nibley*
- _____ 12 pg. Problems in Universalizing Mormonism by *Sterling M. McMurrin* Problems in Universalizing Mormonism: A Response by *Truman G. Madsen*
- _____ 7 pg. The Upstream Swimmers: Female Protagonists in Mormon Novels by *Linda Sillitoe*
- _____ 6 pg. Some Reflections on the Mormon Identity Crisis by *Richard J. Cummings*
- _____ 8 pg. Church Politics and Sonia Johnson: The Central Conundrum by *Linda Sillitoe*
- _____ 5 pg. An Interview with *Wallace Stegner*
- _____ 5 pg. Personal and Social Morality in a Religious Context: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Mormon Experience by *Scott G. Kenney*
- _____ 6 pg. The New Mormon Mysticism by *Marden Clark*
- _____ 5 pg. The Book of Mormon--A Literal Translation? by *Edward H. Ashment*
- _____ 6 pg. Community Celebrations and Mormon Ideology of Place by *Steven L. Olsen*
- _____ 7 pg. Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology by *Kent E. Robson*
- _____ 5 pg. Scholarship and the Future of the Book of Mormon by *Mark Thomas*
- _____ 4 pg. The Gospel Beyond Time: Thoughts on the Relation of Faith and Historical Knowledge by *Richard Sherlock*
- _____ 9 pg. Heroic Nostalgia: Enshrining the Mormon Past *Paul L. Anderson*
- _____ 10 pg. Reflections on the Role of the Prophet: Parts I & II by *Michael T. Walton, Irene M. Bates, Max H. Parkin, Arthur R. Bassett, Richard J. Cummings, Gerald E. Jones*
- _____ 4 pg. The Majesty of the Law by *Melody Moench Charles*
- _____ 5 pg. An Interview with *Wayne Owens (1980)*
- _____ 4 pg. Ritual as Theology by *John Sorenson*
- _____ 8 pg. The Institutional Church and the Individual by *J. Bonner Ritchie*
- _____ 11 pg. Defending the Keystone by *Madison Sowell and George D. Smith, Jr.*

Total number of pages _____ x \$.15 = _____ plus \$1.00 postage = TOTAL _____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

mail this form to: SUNSTONE REPRINT SERVICE, 331 Rio Grande Drive, SLC UT 84101, make checks payable to Sunstone

JOIN THE SUNSTONE VOLUNTEERS!

Tuesdays are Sunstone Volunteer Nights. If you'd like to help keep Sunstone running smoothly—proofreading, filing, updating our subscriptions, etc.—fill out the form.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

PHONE _____

SPECIAL SKILLS _____

Phone or mail to:

SUNSTONE

331 South Rio Grande, Suite 30

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH 84101

355-5926

SUNSTONE'S 1987 NEW TESTAMENT LECTURE SERIES

TWELVE MONTHLY LECTURES PROVIDING AN INTRODUCTION TO NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP

7:30 p.m.

\$2.00 admission

University of Utah

MARCH 31

MARRIOTT LIBRARY AUDITORIUM

METHODS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

STAN LARSON

Ph.D. in Theological Studies, University of Birmingham

APRIL 28

MARRIOTT LIBRARY AUDITORIUM

JESUS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

BLAKE OSTLER

Ph.D. psychology, B.A. philosophy, BYU; J.D. U. of U., co-author of *Stewardship and Allegiance*

MAY 26

MARRIOTT LIBRARY AUDITORIUM

TBA

JUNE 30

FINE ARTS AUDITORIUM

THE BOOK OF HEBREWS AND JEWISH SACRIFICE

DAVID WRIGHT

Assistant professor of Hebrew and Near Eastern Languages, BYU

JULY 7

FINE ARTS AUDITORIUM

THE RESURRECTION NARRATIVES

ANTHONY HUTCHINSON

Ph.D. candidate, religious studies, Catholic University

AUGUST 4

FINE ARTS AUDITORIUM

JESUS AND JUDAISM

JOLENE ROCKWOOD

MTS, Old Testament, Harvard Divinity School

SEPTEMBER 29

FINE ARTS AUDITORIUM

TBA

OCTOBER 27

FINE ARTS AUDITORIUM

THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

PHILIP BARLOW

THD, Harvard University

NOVEMBER 24

FINE ARTS AUDITORIUM

THE IMPACT OF HELLENIC THOUGHT ON THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

STERLING McMURRIN

Professor of History, University of Utah, author of *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*

DECEMBER 15

FINE ARTS AUDITORIUM

TBA