

INTERVIEW

EVENSON'S TONGUE

A Conversation with Brian Evenson



BRIAN EVENSON

Often seen as controversial because of the violence and the apparent absence of morality in his stories, Brian Evenson speaks about the relation of his work to his faith. Evenson makes it clear that he is a responsible writer who explores the darkest sides of the human mind—showing in extreme what happens when we let our values go.

BRIAN EVENSON (evenson@jkhbhc.byu.edu) is an assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University and a writer of fiction. *Altmann's Tongue*, his first collection of stories, published by Alfred A. Knopf, has been given a powerful reception nationally and caused quite a stir in Utah. (See the news story, p. 70.)

This interview was conducted by Marni Asplund-Campbell (campbell@jkhbhc.byu.edu).

Is it better to present an idealized version of reality so that people can aspire to it, or to expose the seamy side of reality so that people can avoid it?

There is room for both. My book has reached people that idealizations will never reach. People recognize in the characters their own potential for evil, their own potential cruelty and lack of feeling. What they are afraid of is the darkness that they see con-

cealed within themselves.

I'm interested in looking closely at areas that most Mormon writers shy away from. It seems to me that there are as many types of Mormon literature as there are Mormons. I suppose you must have some limitations, but very few. Look at the range that Jewish literature has. It includes the Torah, but it also includes books like Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. Roth might represent that which many Jews repress, but the repressed is no less part of the culture.

You have said that you feel a spiritual responsibility to language.

First and foremost, as a Mormon, my allegiance is to God. But in writing, all I can feel is the language. Everything is mediated by words, including our expressions of faith. I think to understand anything, as mortals, we must understand it through language.

Gordon Lish takes great delight in the way your Mormon identity seems to contradict your writing, or even your persona as an author.

Lish is very aware that I'm an active Mormon, and he's trying to see that as part of my work, somehow. Of course, he knows little about Mormonism—his ideas of Mormonism come from Harold Bloom's *The American Religion*—so he doesn't know quite how to make it fit. I think that my Mormonism is connected to my writing, since it is so much of my life, even if not in the ways Lish suggests. But it is rarely present in the way people would expect it to be.

We've been very narrow in defining what Mormon literature is. *Altmann's Tongue* is seldom visibly Mormon, though some of my more recent work is. The "Mormon" stuff I write is difficult—there's a story about three killers who pose as the three Nephites, and there's another about a man who tries to bless his dog and ends up shooting it when it won't cooperate (a true story, by the way)—but I still think that it's a valid part of the Mormon experience. With the killers posing as Nephites, for instance, I deal with the very real issue of how prone we are to self-deception and how much we want to force a spiritual meaning on everything. The story perhaps suggests that such forced interpretations can have life-wrenching consequences.

We have a tendency to construct life into a kind of narrative where everything has to fit into place. Now, first of all, I don't think narrative works like that in the hands of world-class writers, and, second, I don't think life works like that. From a mortal perspective, some things fit, but most don't. One must acknowledge a healthy measure of chaos.

We have certain patterns we try to impose like cookie cutters on our existence, certain preformulated packets that we apply to ourselves and to others—the good man wrongly persecuted, the obedient women blessed by God, the man whom the Lord is punishing, and so on. I don't think mortals can ever see life with an absolute objective purity, but we can step away from derivative genres and patterns and try to operate according to less distorting principles of organization.

Would you look at someone like Jack Weyland, and that kind of fiction which consists of formulaic, romantic plots that end in happy marriages, as destructive?

Some ways we try to construct our lives are destructive, and the fictions that we make to let us understand life are ways of keeping

us from living in contact with reality. That's why we construct these things—to keep life at a distance.

Formula Mormon fiction is much more destructive than the fiction I write. It teaches people that if their life doesn't fit into the pattern, they should force it to fit. It gives people models for living that are harmful to follow and that make people feel guilty about their actual lives. Morally, such stories are troubling—they push as gospel-truth things that have little to do with the gospel.

I think that many Mormon writers have decided in advance what their characters are going to think. That does a disservice. Let the characters think about things themselves, and they'll take you places.

Also, a majority of Mormon stories give catch phrases or terms in the first sentence or first paragraph to let you know immediately that the story is Mormon; making the reader know this often seems more important than the literary effort. It is almost as if they are nervous that people are not going to recognize their work as Mormon. If Mormon writers would relax and allow Mormonism to enter into their work naturally, the work would be much stronger. I get the idea from their stories that too many of our Mormon writers are sucking on their pencils, wondering, "What can I write that will be Mormon?" and then forcing that onto the page.

I see some of Mormon literature as destructive. You have, for instance, the kind of fiction that is propaganda. Propaganda seems to me the most destructive sort of fiction, a kind of fiction which tries to block all thought. Or you have a fiction that is so eager to teach a moral lesson that it doesn't think about the ramifications of what it is claiming

to teach. It teaches people to live in ways that are unlikely, or it presents a picture of the world that collapses at a touch. Or we have writers who react violently against Mormonism and try to preach against it, perhaps because they feel they have been wrongly treated at some point—a sort of reverse propaganda. In all of these, the primary concern is how Mormon you are rather than what you are doing in terms of literature. So it never amounts to literature.

I should say, however, that there are a number of Mormon writers who seem to me to have real strengths and a great deal of potential, even if they partly fall under the purview of my complaints. Walter Kirn, Darrell Spencer, Tim Liu, Levi Peterson, and Robert Hodgson Van Wagoner, for instance. Neal Chandler, too, as well as Bruce Jorgensen, Margaret Young, and John Bennion. There are more that I am forgetting.

Should the literary effort in Mormon literature be more central than the Mormon content?

It has to be if we are to have a literature that is more than regional. If it's going to be Mormon literature, the emphasis must be on literature.

If you want to have an insular literature, in which the only people who are reading it are certain types of Church members, then Mormonism can be primary. But such surface expressions lack the strengths of good literature.

Why aren't there any Mormon Miltons?

As long as we continue to cater to the lowest common denominator, there will be

no viable aesthetics in Mormon culture. As long as a concern for image—a concern which we have learned from advertising—remains the strongest factor, viable aesthetics will be virtually impossible.

We're not very supportive of aesthetics as a Mormon culture. We are fairly naive when it comes to art and are willing to learn only grudgingly. Many Mormons, even those who actively attend the arts, are relatively unaware of what serious artists both inside and outside the culture are currently doing. A lot of Mormons think that rather than trying to make people understand difficult art, it is better to lower the level of aesthetic expectation.

Aesthetics make people think, and thinking makes life a lot more dangerous. The more of a defined aesthetic that you have, the more potential challenge.

Isn't it possible, through thinking too much, to get the Raskolnikov syndrome—to become so sophisticated that you think yourself above moral law?

That's true—that is what my story "Altmann's Tongue" is about. But there is a book by Dostoyevsky called *Demons*. What he talks about there is that our religious and political ideas are like demons that possess us. And we get so wrapped up in these ideas that they end up crushing our lives. Art can keep us from becoming wrapped up in a single set of ideas. Though art, too, can become a demon.

Dostoyevsky is a good example of the type of aesthetic I am suggesting. He's very religious, yet some of his characters challenge all notions of religion. Think of the under-

"ALTMANN'S TONGUE"

AFTER I HAD killed Altmann, I stood near Altmann's corpse watching the steam of the mud rising around it, obscuring what had once been Altmann. Horst was whispering to me, "You must eat his tongue. If you eat his tongue, it will make you wise," Horst was whispering. "If you eat his tongue, it will make you speak the language of birds!" I knocked Horst down and pointed the rifle, and then, as if by accident, squeezed the trigger. One moment I was listening to Horst's voice, his eyes brilliant—"the language of birds"—and the next I had killed him. I stared at the corpse next to Altmann's corpse. It had been right to kill Altmann, I thought. Given the choice to kill or not to kill Altmann, I had chosen the former and had, in fact, made the correct choice. We go through life at every moment making choices. There are people, Altmann among them, who, when you have sent a bullet through their skull, you know you have done the right thing. It is people like Altmann who make the rest of it worthwhile, I thought, while people like Horst, when killed, confuse life further. The world is populated by

Altmanns and Horsts, the former of which one should riddle with bullets on the first possible occasion, the latter of which one should perhaps kill, perhaps not: Who can say? I felt remarkably calm. I prided myself that moment on my self-composure, taking a minute to sit down next to the two corpses, Altmann and Horst, and to feel the calm to its greatest extent. This calm, I supposed, was not the result of killing Horst but, as one might expect, of killing Altmann. There are two types of people, I thought—type Horst and type Altmann. All people are either Horst or Altmann. I am the sole exception. I repeated the phrase *sole exception*, alternating it with *unique exception*, trying to decide which was the better, unable to decide. I flew blackly about, smelling my foul feathers and flesh. I stuttered, spattered a path through the branches of trees, sprung fluttering into blank sky.

This one-paragraph story is from the book, *Altmann's Tongue* (Knopf), and is reprinted by permission.

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ground man. Dostoevsky is, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, willing to let all sorts of voices speak. He's affirming his faith, but in very difficult ways.

Are you concerned about reaching out to a "Mormon" audience?

Not overly concerned. We become too obsessed with what others think. We make too many concessions to bad readers. Too much concern for audience has kept Mormon literature from being all it might.

After reading *Altmann's Tongue*, a friend called me on the phone and said, "You know what would be really nice is if you wrote, you know, Og Mandino. He takes an experience in the Bible, and he really fills it out so that you know the people and feel them. That's what you should do. You could really help people." I'm not interested in filling out biblical accounts—it seems to me a sort of falsification. I'm not here to help the people that can be helped that way—plenty of others are. I'm valuable for those people who will immediately dismiss stuff like Og Mandino, for those who think seriously about what they read.

Still, I know when I write certain things I might offend people because they have difficulty getting past the surface. For instance, I write things sometimes that I know my wife, Connie, will dislike reading. From a theoretical perspective, she understands what I do but doesn't always want to read it. I respect the difficulties she and others have with my approach. It isn't for everyone.

I value my membership in the Church. I believe in God and have a testimony of the Book of Mormon and of Joseph Smith as a prophet. I am doing work that does not harm the Church and which many people see as frightening but valid. But in some circles, I've already been ostracized.

Non-Mormons have no trouble discerning "Mormonism" in your writing. Are you trying to represent Mormonism to the world?

I think of myself as a faithful Mormon who's proud of being a Mormon, but do not consider myself a Mormon writer. I am a writer who's writing for a national audience that knows something about contemporary fiction.

I suppose that you do represent Mormonism if people know that you are Mormon. We're told constantly that we should be careful how we present ourselves. I think I have been careful enough.

What kind of "models for living" are you giving in your writing?

Well, I don't think of it in terms of providing models of living, though perhaps I am working against certain models of living. Though this is not my primary purpose.

Certain of the stories can be read as showing what happens to people when they begin to make minor compromises. A story like "Killing Cats" can be read as being about how if one gives in on small issues, one eventually ends up getting sucked in completely. Much in *Altmann's Tongue* is like that. In "The Father, Unblinking," you start lying about what's happened to your daughter, and you can't stop lying. You start lying about something, and you feel that you have to go on with the lies—and even that you are justified in continuing to lie. The stories show the moral barrenness into which such simple compromises eventually accumulate.

The characters in my stories I think of as having been Mormon. It's not obvious, but on a visceral level, I think of them as Mormon and often modeled them after people I knew growing up. The main character of "The Father, Unblinking," for instance, is partly modeled after an active Mormon I knew who kept his salary a secret from his wife, who controlled all aspects of his household. The story explores how such a person might react under more extreme circumstances. The main character in "Job Eats Them Raw, with the Dogs" is modeled after many Mormons I know who struggle between their allegiance to God and their allegiance to financial success.

After I came back from my mission, I worked a midnight shift sweeping parking lots where I met people who had cashed in their beliefs for various reasons. Most of them were lost and unhappy when they weren't drugged up, and many were extremely destructive or self-destructive. Good people, but morally desolate. My characters are—all of them—lapsed, have taken a fall from truth. They occupy a landscape which

is largely internal and whose horror is brought about as a result of having turned away from God. I don't think it's that far from much of what goes on in Utah, both among ex-Mormons and among apparently faithful members who are ethically blind on certain issues. There is a small minority of apparently faithful Mormons who abuse their children, who are dishonest, who wear false faces. The Church fights against this, but it still persists. Why? In these stories, I suppose I am trying to understand the why, to show the kind of moral numbness that allows people to live outside of belief.

The Boly stories are the fragments of a novel I thought about writing about a group of crazed, lapsed Mormons, though I quickly abandoned the project. If they are still Mormons, they are Mormons of the worst kind, having left all of their saving traditions behind and being willing to beat the hell out of one another or even to kill one another for a few dollars. It is very much like that—a sort of family tree, which, once diseased, keeps twisting inward on itself.

Flannery O'Connor uses violence to indicate visitations of grace—Mary Grace throwing a book at Ruby Turpin, the mother being assaulted in "Everything That Rises Must Converge"—as well as the grotesque, as in "Good Country People." The spiritual message balances, or seems to justify, the disturbing images. But there is an absence of grace in your fiction.

I like O'Connor a great deal and have learned much from her. She's a moral writer, though often curiously so—initially she was seen as precisely the opposite, but then people learned how to read through the grotesquerie of the surface.

I go a step further than O'Connor. In my fiction, grace is present for the reader because of the immensity of its absence—the completeness of the absence makes it palpable, causing the reader to carefully re-examine his or her own moral notions. You are forced to bring your morals up against the immoral quality of the world.

This is the sort of world in which God has been forced out by the inhabitants of the world. The characters are on the run, afraid

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to feel, afraid to let God back into their lives because of their sense of guilt and because of the fear that they will be hurt. This extends to their interactions with others, making these interactions superficial or distant. I don't think God ever abandons us, but often people do everything they can to turn away from him.

Where are your characters coming from? Is it some kind of Freudian inner voice? Is it inspiration? A muse?

I think it comes from language—not so much Freud as Lacan. We are formed

through language, and in finding the idiosyncracies of a way of speaking and of formulating discourse and thought, we reveal character. As I write language, words begin to acquire an identity, and eventually through that identity, they begin to accumulate into a self. It is terrifying sometimes, as with "The Munich Window." From the first few lines, I knew the narrator was crazy because of the syntax he was using, but I didn't know how crazy. I've almost given up writing in first person, because I find it an incredible, emotional drain to have a close understanding of such people.



How do you describe violent acts so vividly if you've never seen them?

Some of them I have seen, though very few. It seems to me simply a matter of thinking about bodies and being accurate, establishing a sort of science or mathematics of physical interaction. This is the opposite of what Hollywood does. Hollywood's sensationalism and overabundance of blood and guts shows an unwillingness to confront violence for what it really is.

There's your writing—and then there's *Natural Born Killers*. Two national works, simultaneously, from BYU-educated Mormon men, both notably violent.

I haven't read enough of Dave Veloz's stuff to know for sure what he is after. Certainly, there are similar impulses in what I'm doing and what *Natural Born Killers* is doing, but a movie is much more immediate and affects more of the senses. I do a great deal to keep my readers from enjoying the violence.

Do you feel that insanity is all around us?

All order is based on chaos. Insanity rarely comes to the surface, but you see flickers of it often. If you are attentive in a certain way to human relations, you realize that people often claim a belief but blindly act in contradiction to it and that you have the same impulses in yourself.

Don't your stories of violence toward women perpetuate misogyny?

In the few stories that do have women, they are often cast as victims, mainly because I see violence and abuse as linked to masculine notions of power. From the outside, women seem to me to have different ways of postulating power, since often they have different ideas of how interpersonal relations function and of language's purpose. I haven't learned enough yet to think I can assume that sort of perspective and voice. I suppose the book tries to show what happens far too often to both women and men who are trapped in a system of competitive power gone mad. The prospects are grim for both sexes, but on the whole, are grimmer for women.

Certainly my writing depicts misogyny, but does so to let misogyny condemn itself. The problem with misogyny is that it is often veiled as a sort of kindness. What I try to do is bring it to the surface and show its ugliness, which might make me open to charges of perpetuating it. My intention, though, is to unmask it and allow it to be condemned.

It seems more like the women in your stories are inert. It's odd, as a woman, to read the stories.

I would think it would be disorienting, but I am surprised by how many women have recognized in the stories extreme versions of situations that they feel they have faced. Perhaps I am suggesting that this inertness is simply the dark side of putting women on a pedestal. In both cases, there is a severe limiting of possibilities for women.

Is it dangerous to present women this way?

Of course. I walk a difficult line. The stories aren't pleasant. They are difficult, but they are worthwhile. There's always a risk, and I've been open to that for a long time. I think it is a risk well worth taking, especially since it has been so scrupulously avoided by Mormons to this point.

What was it like to write the Joseph Smith opera?

I never really thought I could write an opera on Joseph Smith. But working with Christian Asplund has been very interesting and productive. I began writing the libretto as a favor to him but soon found that I was very much involved in the project. I learned a great deal about Joseph Smith and the martyrdom. The whole martyrdom was never as real to me as it has become by writing the opera.


One thing that I was very surprised about, once I began reading about the martyrdom, was that the things that were going on are very much in line with my own fiction. It's a volatile moment. You have a world turned against Joseph Smith—everybody on every side seems to be working against him, and people both for and against him are involved in acts of violence. I wasn't interested in questioning whether Joseph Smith was a prophet—I know he was—but in revealing the intensities, both spiritual and physical, of a certain moment. The libretto is an expression of faith, as spiritually genuine as anything I have ever done.

We talk about Gethsemane as a happy fact—which it is. But Gethsemane is also the scene of the most intense suffering ever known. I don't think we should gloss over

that. Our salvation from suffering only comes from Christ's pure suffering for us.

We gloss over a good deal of what Joseph Smith and other martyrs went through. It's not polite to talk about violence. I don't think we need to become gloomy or forget the positive role that Joseph Smith's death played, but we shouldn't forget that here is a man who watched people killed all around him, who was subject to intense physical and mental persecution by people both inside and outside the Church, who saw his own brother killed, and who was murdered himself.

Do you think of your writing, ultimately, as a depiction of the Last Days?

Certainly my work is apocalyptic. The Last Days in some ways have always been occurring on a smaller scale for individuals. We have the Last Days, but the grace and redemption does not come inside *Altmann's Tongue*. It comes outside the book, in the readers who, like Dante, have passed through the Inferno unharmed, have seen what Hell is like. It is up to them to judge what they have seen and move upward. 



POETRY READING

The service-bay intellectuals
shouted that mankind has declined,
raged that classic poems are racist myths

then tucked their yellow foolscap
and stained chapbooks.
I buttoned my coat,
watched them stagger out
or knot aprons to continue wiping
tables, stack greasy plates and filthy
ashtrays. Final squelch of abused
microphone, loud
crowd milling for last call—
hands extending cocktail
chalices for alcohol sacrament.

Poetry is *not*
this angry vulgarity
paraded as Art these times,
these places.

Outside the Tavern of Poets
I stood under stars as Yeats, Whitman,
Frost, Blake, Dickinson, and Keats
have stood other places,
different times—breath fogging,
limbs trembling in half-warm overcoat
those moments spiritually vast
where the dark and cold
do not frighten, where the poet
reaffirms life not for the sake of ease
but for those at the edge
who need a god in front of themselves

—SEAN BRENDAN-BROWN