

## LIGHTER MINDS

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF MORMON HUMOR

By Edgar C. Snow, Jr.



GUSTAVE DORE (WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM ED SNOW AND MATHAN)

And Edgar Turned, and went down from Y Mount, and the two tables containing the immutable laws governing Mormon humor were in his hand . . .

ONE SATURDAY AFTERNOON in the fall of 1978, my freshman year at BYU, I climbed up Provo's "Y" mountain to seek illumination. I walked all the way from Helaman Halls to the foot of the mountain, climbed up about a quarter of the way toward the "Y" and decided to rest on a rock about 100 yards away from the last house on the way up. I wore a short-sleeved shirt, unprepared for the cool afternoon. As I



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sat there, I realized I really didn't need to climb all the way up to that whitewashed "Y," even though initially I had thought it symbolic of my questioning spirit. No, sitting on that rock became sufficiently Sinai-like for my purposes, and a lot less trouble.

For more than an hour, I pondered many questions, trying to get my life in order: (1) Should I go to medical school someday?; (2) How can I get out of my calculus for math majors and chemistry for chemistry majors classes even though the drop date has passed?; (3) If I can't drop the calculus and chemistry classes, what other professions might I consider?; (4) Is French-kissing wrong?; (5) If so, do I have to confess to my

bishop my occasional French-kissing episodes in order to be worthy of a mission?; and (6) How can I be funnier on dates?

After about two hours of shivering and pondering over these six questions, I decided I had studied these problems out in my own mind, and I readied myself for some inspiration. At that moment, I was interrupted by an unseen presence, an invisible, horrifying power, something my years in Sunday School and seminary hadn't adequately prepared me for: namely, a raging, out-of-tune rhythm guitar intro to "You Really Got Me" played by the band from spirit prison trapped in a garage somewhere on the mountain below me. They played it about 750 times, the beginning, that is, which was understandable: they really needed the practice. I was beginning to think I had been called to this mountain to pray not for myself, but for them.

But I digress. I quickly came down from that mountain, and even though I had not experienced an epiphany or revelation like Moses—or even prayed, for that matter—I at least knew two things: (1) I was going to make an appointment with my bishop, and (2) Mormon humor must be governed by certain immutable laws then unknown to me. I am happy to say today that I have since learned much more about both French-kissing and the laws of humor. What I've learned about humor I've condensed into what I call the "Ten Commandments of Mormon Humor." What I've learned about French-kissing will have to wait. Rest assured, that essay will be by necessity brief.



## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF MORMON HUMOR

COMMANDMENT NO. 1: THOU SHALT BE MORMON.

The old writer's adage, "Write about what you know," holds true for humorists as well. Everyone nods in reverence to this truism, as if some Einstein of creative writing theory had discovered it after years of experimentation. But, you know, now that I think about it, it's kind of idiotic. Have you ever written about something you don't know about? I can think of only one exception to this rule, and it happens to be what I will write about French-kissing.

Of course this first commandment is for the sake of our non-Mormon acquaintances

who might wish to become Mormon humorists. My friends, there are many ways for you to become a Mormon. I recommend the following convenient method.

Find a Mormon church. Go there on the first Sunday of the month, around 8:30 A.M. Find the big room without a basketball hoop. Sit down in the back. Be sure to wear long pants or a dress (hint: pants for men; dress for women). Wait until a lot of families start stacking into the pews and three beardless men, each in a white shirt, tie, and jacket, sit on the stand and some organ music begins. Observe the ensuing proceedings. When one of the whited-shirted, jacketed, beardless men wakes up, walks to the microphone, and says, "We will now turn the time over to members of the congregation for the bearing of testimonies," make a break for the podium. Graciously allow children and elderly people to go in front of you. The proper effect will be ruined if someone sees you elbow a child to get pulpit position, and facing off with a testimony-bound blue-haired sister is just asking for a bloodied nose or kick below the belt. When the children speak, smile approvingly; when the elderly speak, stay awake. When it seems to be your turn, stand at the podium, introduce yourself and say, "I don't know much about the Latter-day Saint Church ("Mormon Church" is no longer theologically correct. Oh heck! Neither is "Latter-day Saint Church!") Just say "The Church"), but I know what I like [pause here for a chuckle that will endear you to any Mormon artists in the congregation], and I would like to know more." Return to your seat.

After the meeting, if you survive trampling by the crowd, follow their directions carefully. In your conversations, be careful not to say something like, "I want to become a Mormon humorist."

Once you are a Mormon, stay that way. No excommunicated Mormon ever makes a living as a Mormon humorist. Well, okay, I guess you can say that for the non-excommunicated ones as well.

COMMANDMENT NO. 2: THOU SHALT STAY AWAKE AT CHURCH.

Although perhaps the hardest commandment to keep, it is the most important to your success. You will find that 95% of your material comes from Church meetings. Here's an example:

Let's say you were snoozing in my friend's ward a couple of years ago

when one of his friend's kids demanded that this father draw some pictures on the back of the program during sacrament meeting. This loving father dutifully sketched some people, and then tried to get his son to color the pictures so that he could use the remaining fifteen minutes to dutifully prepare his Gospel Doctrine lesson. But his son wasn't satisfied with the drawings and tapped his dad repeatedly on the shoulder trying to get his attention.

His son whispering: "Dad."

"Shhhhh, Son. I need to work on my lesson."

"But, Dad."

"SHHH."

"Daddy."

Then, at a moment when the entire congregation was dead quiet between speakers, his son, magnifying his vocal talents: "BUT DAD, YOU FORGOT TO DRAW HIS PENIS!!!"

My friend swears this is a true story. Let this little incident be a reminder to stay awake in Church, as well as not to teach your children correct anatomical references until they are, say, 28 years old.

COMMANDMENT NO. 3: THOU SHALT READ A LOT OF MORMON HUMOR BOOKS.

I recommend the following reading list and will pass over the temptation to pitch my own book, *Of Curious Workmanship: Musings on Things Mormon*, available through Sunstone, Benchmark Books, Amazon.com,

and other very intelligent outlets:

*Only When I Laugh* and *Madame Ridiculous & Lady Sublime*, by Elouise Bell, the queen of Mormon Humor. Okay, okay, so it's a small realm, but so!

*Sunday of the Living Dead*, *Wake Me for the Resurrection*, and *Pat and Kirby Go to Hell*, by Robert Kirby, Mormon humor's crown prince, illustrated by Pat Bagley, its royal caricaturist. Their books are specially designed to fit into your scripture tote bag, and funny as hell—which may be your destination if you keep reading his stuff, but you'll be in good company.

*Special Living Lessons for Relief Society Sisters* by Sister Fonda Ala Mode, by Laurie Mecham Johnson. Mrs. Malaprop's temple work has been completed, and she has been raised from the dead for one special Relief Society manual. DISCLAIMER: THIS IS NOT AN OFFICIAL CHURCH MANUAL. USE AS SUCH ONLY AT YOUR OWN RISK.

*What's a Mother to Do?*, by Ann Edwards Cannon. Like Kirby, she's a funny newspaper columnist, but a little softer around the edges. Kirby is like a home teacher, Cannon a visiting teacher.

*Fascinating Womanhood*, by Helen B. Andelin. I've never read it, but it's supposed to be the finest Mormon satire ever written, and it's been recently updated for the new millennium. I have never seen my mother laugh so hard as when she read it.

COMMANDMENT NO. 4: THOU SHALT HAVE THE GIFT OF HUMOR DISCERNMENT.



ROBERT KIRBY AND PAT BAGLEY, (From Family Home Streaming)

We Mormons have a lot to laugh about; we just haven't figured it out yet, or rather, it is that it hasn't been "translated correctly." By way of example, here are two Mormon events, one translated, the other left untranslated for you to practice at home.

*Event One: Seagulls eat crickets threatening Mormon pioneer crops.*

Translation: The seagull, rightfully so, is permanently nested as a hero in Mormon history because of its act of binging and purging, and then more binging and purging, on crickets to save the Mormon pioneer crops. These gulls are the Danites of the bird family, literally chewing up and spitting out the enemies of the Kingdom. Yet, there's a side to this story which has not been properly appreciated. Pardon me for being slightly revisionist, but I'm convinced if this miracle happened today, LDS Social Services would be available to assist these birds in overcoming their eating disorders and focusing on less personally destructive ways to eliminate crickets.

*Event Two: Pigeon completes aerial bombardment of missionary flipchart as elders are teaching an investigator in a park.*

Translation: [Insert your own translation].

COMMANDMENT NO. 5: THOU SHALT PRACTICE MORMON HUMOR OFTEN.

Try at little humor at home first; your younger children will laugh at anything, especially you, and this builds your sense-of-humor-esteem. (Don't try out your comedic talents in front of your spouse or teenagers until you've gained some confidence.) Next, try sprinkling some jokes into your talks and lessons at church. If someone other than you is to be the butt of your humor, make it a safe choice: the bishop. Bishops love this kind of attention, especially in sacrament meeting talks. A word of caution, however. Although an enormously popular brand of joke, don't tell jokes during sacrament meeting sermons about the bishop and Relief Society president having an affair. No, this type of joke should be told only in priesthood quorum meetings, or perhaps Relief Society meetings when the bishop and Relief Society president are out of town. And don't forget about Mormon activities outside the Church building. These are perfect opportunities to practice. Think about it. At the canary you have a captive audience trapped for several hours! Take advantage of it. Practice, practice, practice.

You might also find it helpful to join the Mormon Humorist Association (Mo-HA), soon to be founded by, well, me. I envision

Mo-HA sponsoring an annual Mormon Humor Festival in Salt Lake City. I'm not joking about this one. If anyone is interested, please email me.

COMMANDMENT NO. 6: THOU SHALT BE SLIGHTLY IRREVERENT, NO MORE, NO LESS.

Deity should be off-limits in Mormon humor. For example, roadshows involving God as a supporting character, cartoons in SUNSTONE depicting Jesus, and limericks about the Holy Ghost are very, very risky.

They are risky not just because they are rarely funny; they also offend. First, they frequently offend Mormons. Take George Burns portraying God in the movie *Oh God*. Since God had a Word of Wisdom problem, was short, and was dressed in degrading '70s attire, Mormons didn't warm up to this show. Second, making jokes about God might also offend the Mormon General Authorities (GAs), which is important not to do if you want to keep the first commandment of Mormon humor. Finally, jokes about God might offend, well . . . God..

Now, in speaking about God, be fore-



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EDGAR C. SNOW, JR.

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*Pat and Kirby Go to Hell*, ~~\$9.95~~ \$8.95

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## A test for this last commandment of Mormon humor might be whether God himself would slap his own knee when he heard your joke. (And this is entirely doctrinal since we Mormons believe in a God who actually *has* knees.)

warned that in some circles, especially in southern Utah, there is also some risk in telling jokes about Adam, but we don't have time to explore that right now.

Temple ordinances should also be off-limits, perhaps with a limited exception or two. For instance, the general topic of work for the dead seems okay. To my knowledge, Orson Scott Card has never gotten into trouble for suggesting that work for the dead is an important Latter-day work performed by many Mormons, especially by those who are nearly dead themselves.

Jokes about GAs may be made in only the following limited circumstances: (1) the joke about the GA had previously been told by that GA on himself, or (2) one GA told the joke about another GA, and the GA who told the joke is still a GA, or the GA who was the subject of the joke is deceased.

In general, though, examples of humor expressed by GAs should be repeated as often as possible, to be followed by admonishing your audience to "Follow the Brethren."

COMMANDMENT NO. 7: THOU SHALT NOT CURSE, UNLESS QUOTING SCRIPTURE OR A GENERAL AUTHORITY.

I'm a firm believer in "Biblical Cursing," that is, using "cuss" words from the bible, but only if the ox is in the mire and you have no other choice. And, don't forget that usage of "damn" and "hell" might even lead your conversation toward legitimate theological discussion.

Remember, if you can't find the word you need to use in the bible, feel free to quote J. Golden Kimball as the occasion might require. Every dispensation has a "J. Golden Kimball" for this very reason. You doubt this doctrinal pronouncement? Read about Peter in the New Testament, especially when the cock crows. He was the J. Golden Kimball of the meridian of time.

Now what about the use of coarse humor? While not strictly profanity, it may still offend your average Mormon, so take due care in handling this kind of hazardous material (or else you may end up stepping in what you

just joked about). I recommend the use of indirection in the presentation of something that might appear vulgar. At least don't use the common word to describe something so common; use a lesser-known cousin. People will appreciate knowing that you're trying to be careful. But the bottom line is, if it's really funny, your audience will be so magnanimous you won't even need to ask for forgiveness.

COMMANDMENT NO. 8: THOU SHALT NOT LAUGH AT (1) OTHER PEOPLE, (2) THEIR SPOUSES, (3) THEIR COWS [EVEN IF YOU CAN'T TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN (2) AND (3)], (4) THEIR CHILDREN, OR (5) THEIR DOMESTIC HELP. HOWEVER, THOU SHALT LAUGH AT THEIR JOKES.

As Elvis said, quoting Nietzsche, I believe, "Don't be cruel." Derision should not be a part of Mormon humor. This was a lesson my mother always taught me as she quoted, I think, David O. McKay: "Fun isn't fun unless it's fun for everyone." I suggest if you must laugh at others, at least, out of respect, do it behind their back.

Laughing with someone is always preferable to laughing at them. To tell a joke is human, but to laugh at someone else's joke is divine. Laughing at others' jokes is a form of the purest love, an act of charity, especially if they are *my* jokes. And I have a testimony that you'll get blessings in heaven for doing that—laughing at my jokes, that is.

COMMANDMENT NO. 9: THOU SHALT LAUGH AT THYSELF.

We can and must laugh at ourselves. For instance, we are allowed to take our own names in vain. This commandment reminds me of a story told about President Benson. Apparently, after new GAs were set apart, President Benson would often take them aside to give them some pointers. At the end of the conversation he would say something like, "And finally, don't take yourself too darn humorously." (Wait . . . Oh fetch! That's the wrong story! It was President Kimball who


used to take them aside and say, "Don't take yourself too darn seriously").

COMMANDMENT NO. 10: THOU SHALT BE FUNNY.

In formulating this commandment, I was tempted to say "funny as hell" or "damn funny," although neither of these statements is translated correctly. "Funny as outer darkness" or "exaltation-impaired funny" would perhaps be more theologically correct. I leave the translation of these statements to the reader. Perhaps the test for this last commandment of Mormon humor should be whether God himself would slap his own knee when he heard your attempt at humor. (And this is entirely doctrinal since we Mormons believe in a God who actually has knees.)

**I**N conclusion, I might as well tie up a loose end and tell you about my meeting with my bishop concerning French-kissing. He was very cordial and sat next to me instead of behind his imposing desk. I asked him why it was called "French-kissing" anyway. He said it was like the term "French-fries," and that it had been derived from the peculiar French culinary habit of trying to eat anything that is or had been organic. I then asked him if it was morally wrong. He said I probably shouldn't do it again, for it was rather promiscuous outside of the bounds of holy matrimony. But, he wasn't exactly sure if it violated the law of chastity or the Word of Wisdom or perhaps both.

I then confided to him my concerns about not being very funny on dates. "Oh," he said, and laughed. "Oh! You should have told me that at the beginning." He composed himself and said: "Yes . . . now I understand. You're the one they are talking about. Yes, yes. I've heard about you. Tell you what . . . I'm going to make an exception here and advise you if you want to be funny on dates to just keep trying to French-kiss the sisters of our ward. They tell me it's the most hilarious thing they've ever experienced." ☺

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## B O O K R E V I E W

## THE CRUEL IRONY OF ORTHODOXY

RIPTIDE

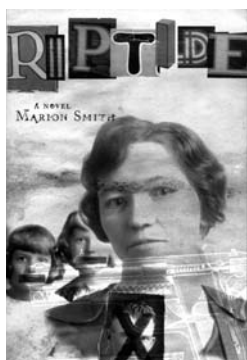
by Marion Smith

Signature Books, 1999

191 pages, \$14.95



Reviewed by Holly Welker



*What happens when an abuser  
well versed in Mormon  
understandings turns faith  
and trust into tools for evil?  
What happens when a faithful  
grandmother discovers that evil?*

IMAGINE THAT THE old woman in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* kills Raskolnikov before he even dreams of killing her. Imagine that she isn't a money-lender this time, and he's not a poor intellectual. Instead, she is 63-year-old Laurel Greer, wife of a wealthy Salt Lake City investment banker. He is 30-something Clint, a successful lawyer and a counselor in a bishopric. Money isn't at stake. At stake is the fact that Clint, Laurel's son-in-law, raped and sodomized his wife's two youngest sisters, his own three children, his nieces, and any other child he could get his hands on. Further, Clint told his victims in language they recognized from Sunday School as authoritative and "true" that it was God's will for him to teach them about procreation, because in Heavenly Father's plan they would some day have to be mummies and daddies, and in order to prepare they needed to have someone help their bodies stretch and learn.

This is the scenario of Marion Smith's novel, *Riptide*, a philosophical reflection on

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"the word," the questions that arise when those who believe in that word discover it is false, and the options for action that remain when one is forced to live without that word.

This morality play opens with the murder: Laurel waits for Clint in the back seat of his car, pulls a gun, convinces him to drive to a secluded road, and blows his brains out. In a second car, she then drives to Palm Springs to meet her husband. The time on the road affords her the opportunity to reflect on Clint's crimes and her own. She ponders very weighty questions of good, evil, complicity, culpability, damnation, and redemption, and although Laurel seems at times to be a mouthpiece for the author's ideas, it is her courageous pondering that gives this work its substance and worth.

Despite its billing on the back cover as a psychodrama, this is not a novel exploring a particular character's psyche. For instance, we get very little of Laurel's internal reactions when Elizabeth, her seven-year-old granddaughter, first describes the "baby parties and baby videos," the gatherings at which Clint and other adults use treats and Primary songs to coerce the children to perform sex

acts while being filmed. The narrative focus is on the words themselves and the weight of those words in Elizabeth's account.


The novel contains a host of characters, few of whom are clearly defined as individuals—most appear like types in a morality play: Elizabeth is "Everyvictim," Clint hovers just beyond "Everyabuser," and only well into the novel do we learn enough of Laurel to see her as more than "Everygrandma" with a gun. Other characters seem less like literary creations and more like figures in a news story. This lack of nuance in the characters is a weakness if one evaluates this work only by the standards of contemporary psychological fiction. But certainly there are other valid criteria by which to judge this work. In particular, *Riptide* can be measured against the concerns and voices of women's memoirs and journals, which it seems to echo.

Marion Smith is the co-founder and former director of the Intermountain Specialized Abuse Treatment Center in Salt Lake City. One of her goals may be to dramatize stories of abuse in "good Mormon families" that she has heard through her work. Another goal may be to raise questions about the Church, its denial of culpability, responsibility, and of the abuse itself, as well as the denial the Church seemingly seeks to cultivate in its members. Laurel and her husband Duncan discuss at length "the cruel irony of this orthodoxy" they subscribed to for so long: that if you do as the Church tells you, you will be protected from evil. Ultimately The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—like many other churches—is unable and unwilling to help its members deal with profound trauma and evil if doing so threatens its own authority. After all, institutions don't become institutions by exposing and exploring their inadequacies.

Even people who think they are sensitive to the crimes committed and punishments meted out by an abuser can miss the most obvious manipulations, sometimes for years, until something wakes them up. *Riptide* is a wake-up call. I couldn't put it down; I read it in one sitting, and after I finished, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I reflected again and again on how Clint and his cohorts strangle a kitten in front of a three-year-old and tell her God will want her to die and they will have to kill her if she ever reveals their secrets. The idea that vows of silence can be extracted from people in the name of righteousness has thoroughly permeated the Church, almost from its inception.

Although Smith does not make explicit the connection between Clint's rhetoric and LDS ceremonies and history of oath-taking,

*Riptide* is nonetheless an exploration of how such vows can be exploited. My question is whether anyone should feel obligated to keep a promise extracted under such coercion. Out of loyalty to the idea that promises matter, I have kept many silences through the years, but I wonder now if such oaths should be binding. The fact that *Riptide* has prompted these questions and insights is an indication to me that the novel has done its work. *Riptide* should be appreciated by anyone interested in the intersections of faith, betrayal, truth, evil, and agency. ☞

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## EMMETT DEEP WITHIN ETERNITY

Nothing hurt worse than the fear,  
not the fists, not the boots,  
but it was the fear of being  
beaten by men who loathed  
me that tortured most.

Even when they kicked my eye in . . .  
nothing hurt worse than the fear;  
the eye caused my legs to twitch,  
and I couldn't stop myself,  
my legs, then my arms . . .  
and in the end, I'm sure it  
was this that caused them  
to put a bullet through my skull . . .  
and that didn't hurt either.

Even dead I see myself,  
see those who ravaged my muscles.  
Save me . . . save me . . . I am dead,  
and my body is gone, I am  
ahead, and I am long ago,  
I am never going to come back,  
and I am never leaving.

—WARD KELLEY

## BOOK REVIEW

# BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

### FALLING TOWARD HEAVEN

by John Bennion  
Signature Books, 2000  
312 pages, \$19.95



Reviewed by Eric Freeze



*How should LDS society deal with sexual abuse? Is it wrong for a woman to use the priesthood? What does it truly mean to believe? Bennion's characters may not have definite answers, but they do point in interesting directions.*

**I**N HIS RECENT novel, John Bennion focuses on one of the most complicated aspects of Mormon mission life: the transition from the outwardly sequestered and confining world of the mission field to the return home. The novel starts with an indecisive time in Elder Howard Rockwood's life. His wavering faith carries him through almost two years of service in the Texas Houston Mission, but in what is supposed to be his last area, he meets Allison, a computer programmer and soccer player. As a result of their chemistry, his mission president transfers him out of Houston to spend his last month elsewhere, worried that Rockwood's affections may get him into trouble. And they do get him in trouble; in the airport going home, Howard decides to pursue his feelings and returns to Allison's apartment.

The characters in *Falling toward Heaven* carry the novel. Howard resists easy defini-

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tion or categorization. On one hand, he is deeply melancholy, doubting "even his doubts of God." On the other, he is witty, engaging in coquettish banter with the more liberal Allison. The moral complexities of the situations he encounters develop from interactions with his "apostate" mother and Allison. These three characters and their intertwined relationships are the centerpiece to the novel. Of the three, however, the most complex and intriguing character is Allison.

Bennion characterizes Allison as an irreverent "lone wolf" who is intent on following a job offer to work for a software company in Alaska. She leaves her intellectual, sex-therapist boyfriend Eliot and invites Howard to go with her. He concedes on the condition that she spend a few days in his hometown, Rockwood, a fictional Utah ranching community founded by his ancestors. Rockwood is also home to four of the seven tales in Bennion's earlier short-story collection, *Breeding Leah and Other Stories*. This scenario becomes the sounding ground for larger questions about life, love, happiness, and faith.

B O O K  N O T E*DOWNWINDERS:  
AN ATOMIC TALE*

by Curtis Oberhansly and Dianne Nelson

Oberhansly

Black Ledge Press, 2001

425 pages, \$14.95

Reviewed by M. D. Nelson



ON 27 JANUARY 1951, the atom bomb returned home. Not since 1945, when the first atomic bomb had been tested at Trinity, New Mexico, had a nuclear weapon been exploded over American soil. This new place was

a dry lakebed directly upwind from the scattered Mormon settlements of southern Utah and Nevada. For twelve years, the mushroom clouds from more than one hundred atom bombs rose into the sky, at night or early dawn, an eerie glow visible for hundreds of miles. Approximately 800 underground tests followed, continuing to this day, making the western Shoshone land the most bombed place on earth. Fifty years later, on 27 January 2001, the Utah state legislature, the governor of Utah, and the mayor of Salt Lake City declared this anniversary a “Day of Remembrance” for those who had been sacrificed in the name of “national security,” those who call themselves “Downwinders.”

Dianne Nelson Oberhansly is a past winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for fiction, and her husband and co-author, Curtis Oberhansly, is a Utah lawyer and active outdoorsman. Their novel, *Downwinders: An Atomic Tale*, is set near Dianne's childhood homestead outside the Utah town of Motoqua. Their combined real-life experiences help them bring alive the novel's characters, events, places, and legal wranglings. They understand the rugged, austere setting. They know and love its people. They effortlessly transport readers into the story with many examples of the dry pioneer humor still typical in that region today.

The story's main protagonists are a rancher, Dallas, and his niece Christine, whose lives intersect with Uwanda, a colorful character whose mother witnessed the tests. The story follows the lives of Uwanda and her daughter, who are molded in tragic and permanent ways by Uwanda's mother's reactions to the atomic events. Through


Uwanda's struggles, we gain precious, insightful looks at the depths of human self-sacrifice, vulnerability, and strength. We come to glimpse what makes people good or evil, but the novel allows us to sort the reasons out for ourselves. It does not explicitly condemn any actions, but we do feel the arrogance of those who inflicted mortal psychological and physical wounds on fellow humans who were just too naive, innocent, and trusting.

The book's other characters are likewise well-drawn and are united by common denominators: the fallout, the Mormonesque lifestyle—sometimes abandoned because fellow Mormons lack compassion and empathy—Communist hatred, war propaganda, and fabricated fear. The writers depict sex, teen rebelliousness, alcoholism, and homosexuality in a gentle and caring way, placing them within a community and geographical setting ostensibly devoid of such things. The landscape eerily reflects the characters; the canyons and crevices are recognizable metaphors for scars which will never go away.

This kind of book likely could not have been written until now. We need time to pass before we can approach true understanding of any event. *Downwinders* provides this wider perspective yet is also able to transport us back a half-century to a time when patriotism and military activities were glorified and the government could do no wrong, to a time when a prophetic church kept silent, more absorbed in its rituals than in protecting its flock from the invisible evil floating into their lives. We understand the mindset in which fear of the “enemy” overrode common sense, when nuking one's own people and causing pigs to suffer in the name of national security seemed (almost) natural.

Fifty years later, this tale of people who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time may seem strange or even surrealistically bizarre, yet given the possibility of a new atomic bomb testing program on the horizon, *Downwinders* is a warning, a reminder of the fragility of life, the human face of our government's decisions, and the resulting victimization which no one dares to call murder. ☞

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Bennion's descriptions of the days the couple spend in Rockwood are among the funniest and most endearing—from a fervent ride on a creaky chastity bed, to an awkward meeting with Howard's old fiancée, to Allison's brief stint at the local speakeasy, Bennion paints a comic picture of Mormonism's foibles and fixations. But the story doesn't stop with bucolic representations of LDS idiosyncrasies. The novel explores potent issues of patriarchy, priesthood, and personal revelation in a changing church. The story is open, honest, and plain-speaking about problems and relationships and doesn't offer pat answers to probing questions.

The relationships between the women in the novel prove to be the most enduring and complex, asking that we look more closely at how people communicate—particularly men and women. The second half of the novel shifts its focus onto Allison and Howard's mother. The two discuss a Rockwood male propensity toward ownership and control. Rockwood's mother encourages Allison to keep Howard away from the ranch, to have a different, less traditional life. And they do. Howard follows Allison to Alaska to live with her on her own terms, and he gradually comes to accept that he can't exert dominion and control over her. But, even as their relationship breaks some traditions, it upholds others. Howard and Allison feel themselves pulled toward a nuclear family in which their happiness is tied to a monogamous, interdependent relationship and a desire for children.

As a whole, *Falling toward Heaven* is a delightful read, one that would appeal to individuals all along the spectrum from conservative to liberal. A reader looking for easy, feel-good Weyland-esque resolutions will be disappointed. But someone intent on asking larger questions about life, faith, and understanding in Mormon culture will find plenty to please the palate. Bennion's style is rich and flavorful, his dialogue and descriptions crisp and delightful.

Bennion's work complicates and adds life to common “Mormon” issues; he truly pushes the envelope of several major ideological questions: how should LDS society deal with sexual abuse? Is it wrong for a woman to use the priesthood? What does it truly mean to believe? The novel's characters, whose lives reflect our own human weaknesses and problems, may not have definite answers to these questions, but they do point to some interesting possibilities.

*Falling toward Heaven* serves up a peculiar slice of life that will resonate with any serious observer of LDS culture. ☞