

B O O K R E V I E W

THE NOT-SO-ANGELIC
ADVENTURES OF
TOOM TAGGARTTHE ANGEL ACRONYM: A MYSTERY
INTRODUCING TOOM TAGGART

by Paul M. Edwards
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232 pages, \$21.95

Reviewed by Craig L. Foster



In a fun and interesting novel, Paul Edwards, a former historian for the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now Community of Christ), offers readers a fascinating glance at the complex heart of a faith tradition during a time of intense re-evaluation and change.

PALMYRA, 1829. WHAT begins as a joke to discredit Joseph Smith goes awry with the accidental death of Abner Cole, frontier newspaperman and would-be practical joker, who takes to his shadowy grave the secret to the “angel acronym.” The incriminating documents created to humiliate Joseph Smith and discredit the Book of Mormon do not come to light again for more than a century and a half, but this time, the joke turns deadly.

The hero of Paul Edwards’s mystery novel is Toom Taggart, a coffee-drinking, authority-questioning, doctrinally skeptical curmudgeon who both laughs at and chafes under the ecclesiastical eccentricities and subtle nuances of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now renamed the Community of Christ). Taggart is administrator of the church’s Education Office, lay historian, and resident intellectual. In the process of solving an unholy murder com-

mitted because of a holy debate over the veracity of the the angel acronym, Taggart also becomes our unofficial guide into the complex heart of this faith tradition.

A GOOD mystery novel is more than just a cut-and-dried *whodunit*. It operates on several levels. The first level, obviously, is the mystery itself. The other levels examine and wrestle with the complexities of human nature—our emotions, hopes, fears, loves found and lost—good and evil, and even existence itself.

One of the best examples of a writer who is able to delve into these deeper levels is Ellis Peters. Her “Brother Cadfael” mysteries are well known for the imagery and character development she lovingly weaves into the complex fabric of her stories. Her works are not only entertaining mysteries but glimpses of people, places, and ways of life. Of her work and her interest in developing place as

a character in her stories, Peters once said that “in the course of creation, the blood gets into the ink, and sets in motion a heartbeat and a circulation that brings the land to life.”

Edwards’s novel hints that he may one day be able to accomplish something similar, for in this first novel, he shows a remarkable ability to capture such colors and depth. His depiction of the underlying tension and current of questions in the RLDS church’s recent shifts and evolving understandings of its history and doctrines alone makes *Angel Acronym* a fascinating read. In one musing, Taggart tellingly states:

There’s no passion in the church. Without passion, the acts become the reason for acting, and in time, the media becomes the message. We’re so busy balancing the bottom line we fail to remember that our only excuse for being a church is to expand the passion. I am not sure where it went. I suspect it’s no longer possible for an intelligent human being to believe the stories we tell each other (121).

EDWARDS has lovingly crafted some of his characters, especially Toom Taggart. The character is complex and multi-dimensional. Toom’s relationship with co-worker Marie Burke involves an intellectual commonality accented by an underlying passion. However, Toom remains faithful to his invalid and institutionalized wife. An example of Toom’s off-putting, yet strangely enduring dark cynicism toward conventionality and the status quo is reflected in a telling dialogue with fellow skeptic, Russell Williams (those of you familiar with RLDS historian William Russell will really enjoy this character):

When you say that some of the big daddies—the apostles, I guess—aren’t really believers, How can that be?

“Easy,” said Russ, “They’re environmental. It’s a job—a pretty good one, a way to use their skills, ply their trade—and their rewards are financial freedom, power, recognition, that kind of thing. They’re loyal, but they’d be lured away fairly easily if another environment proved to be equally user-friendly and offered more strokes.”

“Actually,” Toom mused, “I could be lured away by that kind of environment” (153–54).

Edwards’s depiction of Independence, Missouri, and its environs and, particularly,

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the inner workings of the church are also insightful and interesting. For example, in his descriptions of Dave Hodge, (fictional) secretary to the church's (fictional) historian, James Pincer, Edwards captures some of the special challenges that naturally arise in working within an ecclesiastical organization where different kinds of authority so easily collide:

Hodge walked in, eyes sweeping the office. Hodge was not only a snoop but a blabbermouth. Pincer would have fired him long ago if his mother hadn't been the sister of the Presiding Bishop (32).

Edwards's strength is also one of his weaknesses, and perhaps the most poorly drawn character is Pincer. In descriptions of him, Edwards reflects an obvious, preconceived dislike for the character that spills onto the pages and, in so doing, makes him one-dimensional, with few, if any, saving graces.

The novel's most glaring flaw, however, is the predictability of the mystery itself. Disappointingly, both victim and perpetrator are easy to spot quite early on. Creating a believable, well-written mystery is difficult. The plot line must be rational and well thought out, but at the same time, intricate and simple. In order to feel a part of the story, the reader must feel compelled to continue reading while still being able to piece together the clues. Edwards does not accomplish this. His mystery is too simple, leaving the reader dissatisfied with this aspect of the novel.

Ultimately, however, this book is valuable less as a gripping mystery than for the way it elucidates challenges the Community of Christ faces today. Readers familiar with the personalities of today's Community of Christ leaders and historians will enjoy speculating about "who might be whom" in the novel. But more than that, Edwards, like Ellis Peters, has graced us through his trust that even as we view flaws, quirks, competing motives—inspired *and* very human—and the difficulties of faith, we will learn to see hearts most of all.

In short, the novel's problems, notwithstanding, Edwards's introduction of protagonist Toom Taggart and glimpse into Community of Christ life and issues is, simply, a very good read, one worthy of attention and praise. I look forward to reading the further adventures of Paul, uh . . . I mean, Toom Taggart. I hope the next installment will involve better developed mysteries and continued character development, but this is a very promising start. 📖



AFTER THE FIRE

Earthworms bake on the sidewalk. It is a beautiful day.
Last night came the first rain after the fire,
church bells ringing the dry tinny streets,
soot sent upwards in the infant clouds
of newly turned season. I found ash close
on my breakfast, shading the soft egg rises
against the sun's bright burn. At eight,
I ate the bureau the boys told me about, the one
their father built by hand

I've always had problems with dust in this place:
wedged hard into the hill, our bed peeps out
at the grass and crawling things. We are always first
to see the shoots rise, curled damp at eye level, naked
as ourselves and our own unfurlings. Shameless,
their dirt creeps in. It filters into blankets, shading
us in folded shrouds, planting us lily-like in unturned earth.
With a good wind, my home smells of oak,
the stale scent of a gingko-gilded downtown,
or laurel after the final melt.

It's a common error to mistake the pieces for the whole,
or so I am told. So who could blame me for this meal,
this belief that I am eating my neighbor's lives
like pepper I could have bought at any supermarket?
They taste the same: the tart flip of the children's bedsheets
and the dry fire of the buried ground. Both coat my tongue
and won't let go; both give way to green things.
My dresser is a proving ground. The first straight leaves
of a new life show their heads there, hopeful,
stretched towards the unfilled space.

Those boys, I can do nothing for, their charred toys
flaking into new soil. So I plant flowers
on my porch and in my sills, in my bed
and on my table, drawing wild thin roots across the windows
as draperies. I see them seed unbidden
in my house. I breathe in silt, swallow
the choking urge, refuse to renounce
decomposition. I do not dust the furniture. I let the dirt
sift into my books, and will slide it deep into the spines
when I leave here. Funny how a place gets under your skin.

—BRANDY MCKENZIE