

## CELEBRATING *THE BACKSLIDER*

# FRANK WINDHAM AT FORTY

By Cherie Woodworth

WHEN I REALIZED, last year, that 2006 would mark the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *The Backslider*, I began thinking about my own history with the book. I first read *The Backslider* when I was nineteen, as a student at BYU, right after it came out. Tom Rogers, one of my literature professors, recommended that I read the book—an enthusiastic recommendation that was hard to resist. My husband read the book first, and he told me not to read it—or rather, to read it but to skip over some parts. “You’ll know what parts I mean,” he said. He was concerned that I would be shocked. And he was right.

When I read it, I was shocked and appalled—moved, yes, somewhat by Frank’s predicament, but concerned instead with his carnality, with his very male nature. And so I reserved my enthusiasm, and when I ran into Gene England at a reception not long afterward, I rehearsed to him my objections to the book. He listened to me patiently, carefully, charitably, and then, not the least bit cowed by my righteous indignation, said, “Well, what you say is all true”—Frank is sinful, Frank is carnal—“but it’s still a great book. You’ll get over all that.” He urged me to reread it, and then, he promised, “You will appreciate the real value of the book.” And he was right.

I have read *The Backslider* many times since then. There is scarcely a passage that I don’t recognize immediately if I pick up the book and start reading at any page. But even as I read it again and recognize it, I also read it in a different way. I have spent all my adult life with this book, and as I’ve renewed my acquaintance with it at intervals over those two decades, the book has affected me profoundly.

This novel is not just a personal read, but it has created a community of readers. The experience of reading and thinking through

this novel and its relation to the Mormon experience is naturally something I’ve wanted to share. I have passed it on to non-Mormon friends as well, and the response I got to my most recent “missionary” effort to a non-LDS friend was, “This is a great novel!”

BRUCE Jorgensen’s essay on comedy in *The Backslider*, published in this issue of SUNSTONE, kicks off a Festschrift—a “writing celebration”—to mark the novel’s anniversary. We hope more essays will follow.

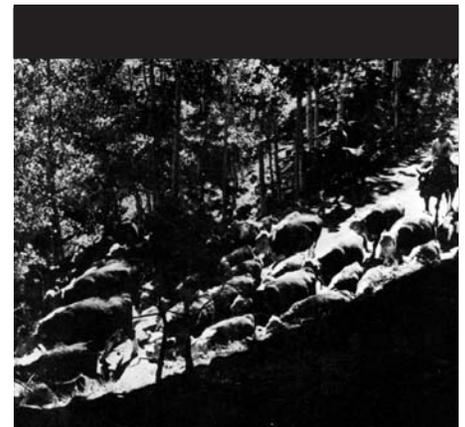
As Jorgensen explores in more detail, this is a funny novel—though my first time through, I didn’t find it funny because I was apprehensive about the darker undercurrents. At that time, I was disturbed not only by Frank’s struggle with his carnal nature but about carnal nature itself. Now, each time I read it, it gets funnier, but, paradoxically, the threat hanging over Frank also gets stronger.

At nineteen, I was appalled by Frank’s perversions. Now when I read it, I envy Frank his eternal youth, his passion. At nineteen, I thought Frank’s perversions were physical and sexual; he seemed to be wallowing in sin. I was ready to fall in with Frank’s own assessment of himself. Now I believe Frank’s real perversions are his view of God. Though it is funnier upon each rereading, it is also more horrifying because I feel more strongly what Frank has in him to do.

Although this comparison will make Levi Peterson uncomfortable, he reminds me of the great cowboy novelist Cormac McCarthy. Of all the great writers of literature of the southwest, McCarthy is the author who wins the crown for public and critical acclaim. Although he sets his stories in the same glorious landscape as *The Backslider*, in my reading, McCarthy’s view of humanity is bloody and dark, dispiriting and exhausting.

His novels do not draw me back in. *The Backslider* hints at this same bloody, damned human nature, but is perhaps even more horrifying because the world is not a godless one but one where God himself—possibly?—demands blood atonement. But knowing this possibility, Peterson pulls away from this conclusion, because despite the possibility that the world and mankind are irreversibly damned and fallen, Frank is redeemed at the end. And it is not an easy redemption.

So while others defend other, more renowned books, I will defend *The Backslider*. Great literature is hard; it bears rereading. It wrenches your soul. This book does that for me. I will pass it on to my friends and say, “Read it. And if it doesn’t affect you that way, you are missing something.”



JOIN US IN CELEBRATING *THE BACKSLIDER*. Send us your responses, ruminations, and personal essays about your experience of reading *The Backslider* or some aspect of the novel that you feel deserves attention. How has *The Backslider* affected the way you understand faith, life, or anything else?

PLEASE SEND YOUR submissions to Cherie Woodworth, executive director of *The Backslider* Festschrift project, at [CHERIE.WOODWORTH@GMAIL.COM](mailto:CHERIE.WOODWORTH@GMAIL.COM). Perhaps your essay will appear in a future issue of SUNSTONE.



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