

CELEBRATING *THE BACKSLIDER*

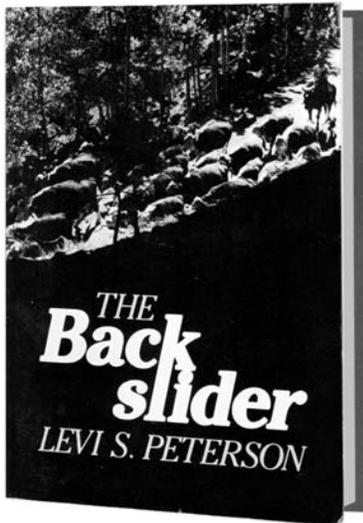
STILL LAUGHING WITH THE BEST COMIC MORMON NOVEL SO FAR

By Bruce Jorgensen

I'LL CONFESS THAT *The Backslider* got me into a little trouble in 1987. As the awards chairman for the Association for Mormon Letters back then, my practice was to find someone to serve as a judge in each category. I put the bite on one of my colleagues and said, "I want you to judge the novels from 1986." Mostly unbeknownst to me, she convened a committee, and I never knew who the members of the committee were, except for possibly one other person. At the awards

luncheon that year, I read the citation her committee had composed. To this day, I don't know whose words were which in that citation. Before reading the citations, I explained how I had left the judging up to the judges and that I wrote none of the citations though I exercised small editorial liberties with some of them. Afterward, someone from Signature Books asked me if they could quote from the citation for *The Backslider* in an ad. I said sure, and I think I reminded him that I was not the author of the citation.

When the ad appeared in a Salt Lake newspaper a day or two later, it had a brief quotation from the award citation, attributed to me. Part of what it said was that *The Backslider* was "a helluva good read"—which is true, and which I agreed with. I called Signature Books and reminded them those were not my words and I would rather not be cited as a source of words I did not write; the



quotation was, to me, anonymous. I said, "I don't know who wrote those words, but they are not mine." They apologized, and I thanked them and said they need not publish a retraction.

A day or so later, a high-level BYU administrator called me to ask about the ad, and I explained how it had happened. Did I think I should ask for a public retraction? No, because that would just make it a bigger deal than it was, and I was satisfied with Signature's apology to

me. If there was more to the incident, I never heard. It was brief trouble, it was less than a tempest in a teacup, or a teaspoon, but it might be illustrative of something or other.

THE BACKSLIDER WAS, and still is, "a helluva good read" (I now publicly endorse that judgment, and own it), as I learned again last summer re-reading about two-thirds of it to prepare for a panel discussion. I laughed a lot, laughed out loud, because *The Backslider* is funny and fun. Or at least readers who like it think so. There is a differential response, and it's not just dichotomous, it's probably trichotomous or hexachotomous or something. Even readers who have complicated reactions to the novel, reactions differently complicated from mine—like my old friend and Mormon literary-critical fencing opponent, Dick Cracroft—even some of those readers will

admit it is fun. Like Samuel Johnson (and after him, Virginia Woolf), "I rejoice to concur with the common reader."

I began my reading life (back when Frank Windham was in his early teens) as a common reader, and I think I remain one, though now I've compromised my amateur status by becoming some sort of professional reader, who has to try to explain to himself and his friends and students what's going on when he's having his fun reading. But that need not spoil the fun, and never does, at least for me.

The Backslider is fun because it's meant to be; it's made to be fun, if a reader will join in—and that's a huge *if*, I know. The first paragraph is fun; it's why you go on, if you do:

At three-thirty on a May morning
Frank Windham got out of his
bunk and said his prayer. . . .

What's the most clichéd way to open a story known to mankind? Somebody Wakes Up. The first rays of the morning sun penetrate or filter or slant through the etc., etc. Writing teachers do get bored with that one. Well, here's a Somebody Wakes Up opening like no other I've read.

"At three-thirty on a May morning . . ." Oh, on a *May morning*. Oh my, part of that first line is like hearing an echo of the first line or the refrain of an old ballad. "Frank Windham got out of his bunk and said his prayer." His *prayer*; not "his prayers" but "his prayer."

He reminded God of their bargain, which was that if God would give him Rhoda, he would live up to every jot and tittle of the commandments.

If you're not having fun by the end of that sentence, I'm sorry, your heart ain't in the right place; you're not quite reading.

Actually, it was Frank's bargain, . . .

It's endearing in Frank, as this narrator presents him, that Frank is this self-aware: it's his bargain,

. . . God never having confirmed it.

That was the way with God.

Now we're fully into the mode of "free indirect discourse." Sorry for the jargon (that's part of being a professional reader): our third-person narrator here is close to Frank, is friendly with him, and is "identifying" with Frank's consciousness. These could be Frank's words (minimally "translated" into third person, with the necessary adjustments of verbs and pronouns or nouns):

That was the way with God. He never offered Frank any signs, he never gave him any encouragement.



BRUCE JORGENSEN teaches literature and writing at BYU. His current Mormon literary anxiety is that he has turned up as a character in Levi Peterson's new autobiography. An early version of this paper was presented as part of a panel discussion at the 2005 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (tape SL05-236), which was also broadcast as the first installment of the *MormonLit* podcast.

He left him penned up with his own perversity like a man caught in a corral with a hostile bull.

Well, that's fun, it's true-to-life fun, too-true-to-my-life fun, and readers who like it are liking it right from the get-go because they're having complicated and very nourishing and encouraging and transformative fun.

A lot of the sentences in *The Backslider* are fun. The characters in the book are fun; even the minor ones, even in their names. There's Rendella Kranpitz, only peripherally alluded to in this novel (though she's a major character in Peterson's earlier story, "The Christianizing of Coburn Heights"). Or there's Dr. Washley at the state hospital, or Mr. Woorbeck from the College of Southern Utah. Names which Smollett or Fielding or Dickens might have made up; or Henry James on an amused afternoon. Any of these characters might have walked out of Chaucer, or out of Shakespeare, at least out of his gallery of clowns and secondary characters, and hiked right through southern Utah, maybe Tropic, maybe Salina. (Though my hometown is a very sober town, and we're very normal in Salina. I promise you, I knew no one in Salina like these folks, starting with my mother and me.) Right out of Chaucer or Shakespeare or Dickens and through Southern Utah and into the pages of this book.

I'll indulge myself from page two and read a bit about Clara Earle, the wife of Frank's rancher boss for the summer, and the mother of Marianne, whom Frank will meet before Chapter One is over. Clara is serving breakfast at the ranch to Frank Windham and Wesley Earle, her husband:

Clara had the shape of a tripod: fat thighs, big buttocks, narrow shoulders, a little head. She had tartarred teeth, ruddy cheeks, and cheerful eyes, and this morning she wore a blue kerchief over her uncombed hair. She was the sweetest, most motherly person on earth, and Frank wouldn't have traded her for six of Wesley.

Well, neither would I; and I wouldn't trade Wesley for six of a whole lot of people.

PETERSON'S plotting in *The Backslider*, which I've always envied, is grand comic fun. Moment to moment, right down inside of scenes, it's fun. It's kind of quiet—it's not as belly-laugh fun as some of the sentences and some things in scenes.

In Chapter One, "Marshaled in the Ranks of Sin," on that May morning, Frank has a complicated itinerary. In Howell

Valley, at the other end of the state, he would deliver the three mustangs and take on a load of nine milkgoats. The next day, coming back, he would stop at the Trailways bus station in Salt Lake and pick up Marianne, Wesley's and Clara's older daughter. He would also buy three fancy tablecloths for Clara to donate to the Lutheran church in Richfield, and he had to go to a building supply and get five cans of creosote for Wesley. Of course before he left Salt Lake, he would run his own little errand and have a talk with Rhoda.

Frank's itinerary becomes our own itinerary through the chapter, but after the fuel pump diaphragm on his truck splits outside of Payson and the breakdown delays Frank a day, his multiple errands generate comic surprise after surprise. One of the mustangs is a mare in heat, and while Frank is having his talk with Rhoda and getting his heart broken, "a bunch of frat rats on a toot" rustle the mare to play a prank on another house, and Frank contrives to turn a handsome profit when he finds her. And then, and then, and then. You read that chapter and (if you're liking the story) jump into the next one thinking, "Man, this guy knows how to do comic plotting."

"Plot is the representation of the action," Aristotle says. The action of *The Backslider*, though it includes at least one tragic deed (Jeremy Windham's self-mutilation), is fundamentally comic. The action here is how Frank Windham gets married, or begins to be fully married, to Marianne Earle. In 1956, the year this novel begins (we can date it by references to "the big airliner collision over the Grand Canyon" on 30 June 1956, and to the second Eisenhower election campaign), Frank is twenty, so he'd be about seventy years old now, and I'll bet he's still going strong with Marianne. Good for them.

At the end of this novel, the culmination of its action, here is its very last scene:

Going into his trailer, Frank turned off the porchlight. A ring of dim light radiated from the open door of the bathroom. He went down the hall. Marianne sat on the edge of the bed buttoning her nightgown. He sat by her and pulled off his shoes.

"I smell something."

"It's that perfume Dora gave me," she said. "I put some between my boobies."

He took off his tie and unbut-

toned his shirt. He started to rise, then sat back and tossed them on the floor. "I'll hang them up in the morning. I've never been so tired in my whole life. I haven't had any sleep in three days."

She squeezed lotion onto her hands and began to rub. "Do you want to tell me what was the good thing that happened to us?"

That's the comic spirit talking, by the way: "Something good is going to happen"; it's going to befall. We can't, all on our own, make it. We need grace, or we need the good fortune built into the way the world works (which is another name for grace, I take it, just a complicated one, and secular-sounding).

"If I can," he said. "I had a vision."

"A vision?"

"I don't believe I can say any more about it right now. Jesus is kind, just like you always said."

"Oh, lord, Frank."

He had unzipped his pants but he couldn't take them off because she was hugging him tightly. "We don't need to cry," he said.

"It doesn't matter. I'm all right, I'm just all right."

"Can I smell that perfume up close?"

"Sure. You bet," she said, unbuttoning her gown.

I don't know about you, but for me this ending in its "low mimetic" mode is as exultantly comic as the ending of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, the great transcendent comic ending in all the literature or art that I know.

Peterson disavows any influence from Joyce's *Ulysses* (though he confesses he did read it). But listen to Molly Bloom in the last lines of that novel:

... and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

Molly's inside her own head at the end of that novel, remembering her Yes to Leopold. But the ending of *The Backslider* is a dramatic scene, Marianne saying Yes to Frank. And Frank of course saying Yes to Marianne, at long last: "Can I smell that perfume up close?" "Sure. You bet." (Okay, so allusion-chasing is the kind of thing us professional readers will do; so forgive us, please.)

EVERYTHING I've said here so far about *The Backslider* is summed up in a scene like this final one. Or if, having put a cart before a horse, I back up a third of the way into the novel, to Chapter Seven, it's summed up in the scene where Frank, having made love with Marianne and gotten her pregnant, though he is certain he does not love her, proposes to her:

He was alone in the room. A gold-faced German clock ticked on the piano. From the radio came a calm, quiet voice advertising suits at Auerbachs in Salt Lake. A Belgian rug with a thick wooly nap lay in the middle of the room. Over the fireplace hung the head of a trophy desert ram; under it was a twelve gauge shotgun.

This scene makes me wonder if all weddings are shotgun weddings. One way or another, someone feels like: "Damn, I gotta do this." Do it or die.

Marianne stood in the doorway, her bare feet peeking from beneath her pink flannel nightgown. She said, "I didn't want you to come here."

"I've got to say one more thing. It isn't decent for that little kid not to have a name."

"It can have my name," she said. "It's been okay for me."

"I can't just walk off on that little kid."

"You aren't going to get to," she said. "Dad's planning on having a little talk with you about child support."

"He's already mentioned it," Frank said. "You bet, I sure will make payments."

"All right, now go home." She leaned against the door jamb. "Please, Frank, leave me alone."

"You hate me," he said. "You wouldn't want to marry me."

"That's right. I hate you a lot. You don't want to marry me either. You never did want to."

"That's true. I never did."

"Well, then, that about takes care of things, doesn't it?"

"What if we got married for about a year?" he said. "We could

live together like a brother and sister. We'd treat each other like Christians, like God wants us to do. Then when the baby has been here for a while and things are all settled down and people aren't paying much attention, we'll just get us a divorce. I'll keep paying support money and maybe once in a while you'd let me come see the little critter so it'd know it had a daddy somewhere in the world."

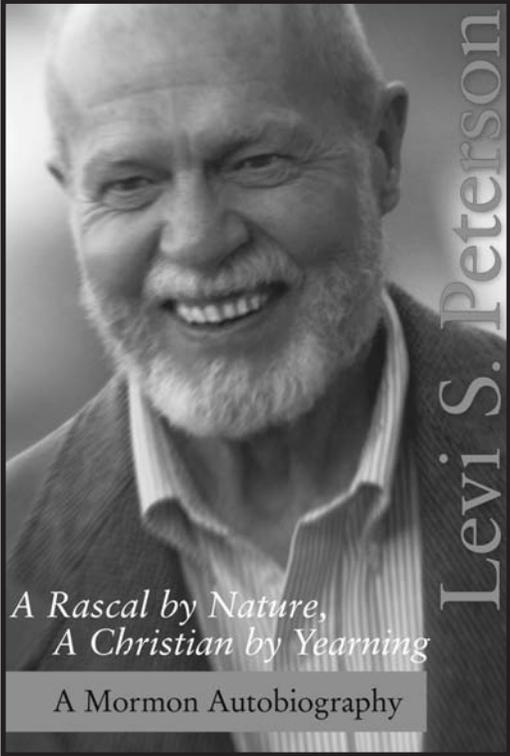
Marianne crossed the room and sat on the sofa, curling her feet under herself and adjusting her nightgown. She shook her head. "That is about the dumbest idea I ever heard in my life."

I rest my case.




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Levi S. Peterson

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