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The mission of The Sunstone Education Foundation is to sponsor open forums of Mormon thought and experience. Under the motto, "Faith Seeking Understanding," we examine and express the rich spiritual, intellectual, social, and artistic qualities of Mormon history and contemporary life. We encourage humanitarian service, honest inquiry, and responsible interchange of ideas that is respectful of all people and what they hold sacred.

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BACKSLIDER REVISITED

I APPLAUD *SUNSTONE'S* DECISION TO publish twentieth-anniversary reflections on Levi Peterson's *The Backslider*, and I enjoyed Cherie Woodworth and Bruce Jorgensen's essays in the April 2006 issue.

When I reread *The Backslider* this summer, I wondered once again why it hasn't found a larger non-Mormon audience. It's a great read—believable characters trying to be or convinced they are good Mormons, humor (not all of it dark), sex and guilt, bigotry, polygamy, even blood atonement. Surely members of other faiths who have their own spiritual struggles can relate to Frank Windham's endeavors to please the super-critical God he envisions.

The Backslider hasn't yet found as broad an LDS audience as it deserves either. The humor strikes close to home, and laughing at ourselves is generally harder than laughing at others. My daughter found *The Backslider* subversive of Church values. I would have at her age, too. Now I relate to Frank's berating himself for real and imagined sins. Like Frank, I once set unattainable goals for myself and tried to reach them with skewed priorities. Where was my cowboy Jesus?

We Mormons excel at guilt. Like many of us, Frank and Margaret, his mother, insist they believe in the atonement but then condemn themselves when misfortunes and tragedies occur, believing those are payback for their lack of perfection. Margaret believes the deaths of her mother's babies were caused by her vanity rather than by the poverty of homesteading with a part-time husband. Frank, Jeremy, and the polygamists in the novel even take guilt and repentance to the realm of blood atonement.

Sexual morality is a tough issue to deal with, especially for young men brimming with hormones. Frank and Jeremy's extreme methods of dealing with normal impulses should make priesthood leaders who interview young men think twice about asking deeply personal questions. I asked my husband if he thinks probing questions about masturbation give boys an unhealthy fear. He assured me, "Nobody takes those questions seriously." Well, boys who don't have dads or reliable friends to talk to might take those questions seriously. My oldest son once said he always looked the bishop right in the eyes and lied, and all of his friends did the same. This experience did little for his testimony of the bishop's discernment. I suspect most of

us will lie if pressed to answer highly personal and embarrassing questions.

Sexual morality in *The Backslider* takes a hilarious turn when Farley Chittenden describes the unique method of repenting for past sins he has devised with his ex-prostitute plural wife, Gomer. While Farley is ludicrous, the lives of the other polygamists in the novel are sad, even frightening. The self-sacrificing plural wives bear firm testimony of the principle that makes their lives so difficult.

With Warren Jeffs all over today's headlines, polygamy is a hot topic and might be the key to getting this novel out into the non-LDS mainstream. Maybe Signature Books could talk the *Big Love* producers into writing Farley, Gomer, Bertha, and Hanah into an episode, then reissue the novel with a cover photo of Farley's plural family—including Gomer in full bloom?

It may be trickier to build a broader LDS audience for the novel. *The Backslider* portrays active Mormons who seem incapable of applying the Golden Rule in their own lives. Frank frets over his sins of vanity, gluttony, and skipping Church meetings, not recognizing that the shameful way he has used Marianne is his worst sin. Frank's down-to-earth bishop advises him to marry the virgin he has taken advantage of until he learns that Marianne is not Mormon and then dismisses her as probably "loose." Margaret burdens her sons with fear of any kind of pleasure. Stingy Uncle Raymond bullies his wife and takes advantage of family members in his cattle business.

Clara, Frank's mother-in-law and a devout Lutheran, is the nicest person and best Christian in the book. She completely forgives Frank for his initial abandonment of Marianne. She takes in the very-pregnant Gomer and arranges medical care while Farley is in jail, then welcomes Farley to the ranch upon his release. Clara even manages to be supportive when Marianne converts to Mormonism. For balance, her husband Wesley's self-importance proves that Mormons have no monopoly on human flaws.

I suspect it is not the sex and language that many Latter-day Saints find offensive about *The Backslider*. It is that the characters reveal an unpleasant truth about ourselves. Despite what we say and hear in Gospel Doctrine classes, other than the Word of Wisdom and temple garments, there is really not much difference in how we Latter-day Saints live our lives and how members of

other faiths live theirs. *The Backslider* reflects LDS culture as it really is, not as we wish it were. And this is why we should read this book. Instead of being subversive of Church values, it shows us the foolishness of our own inconsistency in applying Christian principles in our lives. Recognizing our own foibles through fiction might help us accept and tolerate not only our own shortcomings but also those of others. Acceptance and tolerance—that sounds like the basis of the Golden Rule. What could be more supportive of Church values?

ANN M. JOHNSON
Cedar City, Utah

A USEFUL MEDITATION

PHILIP MCLEMORE'S TAKE ON President McKay's thoughts about meditation, together with his own personal observations and practices, certainly gives a new meaning (for LDS, at least) to the word "mantras" and how they pertain to our individual lives (SUNSTONE, April 2006). After reading the article carefully several times, and with a bit of meditation on my own, I would be hard pressed to endorse the practice as he portrays it.

It would be interesting to have President McKay enlarge on his concept of meditation and the pondering of sacred things. I have personally heard his counsel on our need to study, ponder, and ask for the promise of Moroni to be realized in all areas of our lives. Other than that aspect, I would be hard up to quote any past or present prophet who has endorsed meditation.

Rather than McLemore's type of practice, I would suggest an alternate plan. Let's call it the "temple mantra." Instead of emptying our minds and thus becoming an inert and useless person, would it not be better to spend twenty minutes or so meditating upon the sacred truths of the temple endowment? This practice would, in addition to expanding our minds spiritually, mentally, and physically,



SUNSTONE welcomes a new cartoonist to its pages, Jonathan David Clark. Jon is a Latter-day Saint who lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, with his wife and four children. He's a full-time music composer for television and a part-time cartoonist whose strip, "Honest Jon," is syndicated in eight newspapers and three magazines.

enable us to offer the same gift to others. Doing so is often referred to as becoming a Savior on Mt. Zion.

MAX H. RAMMELL
Bountiful, Utah

OVERSTATED PRAISE

Boast not . . . for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth. PROVERBS 27:1

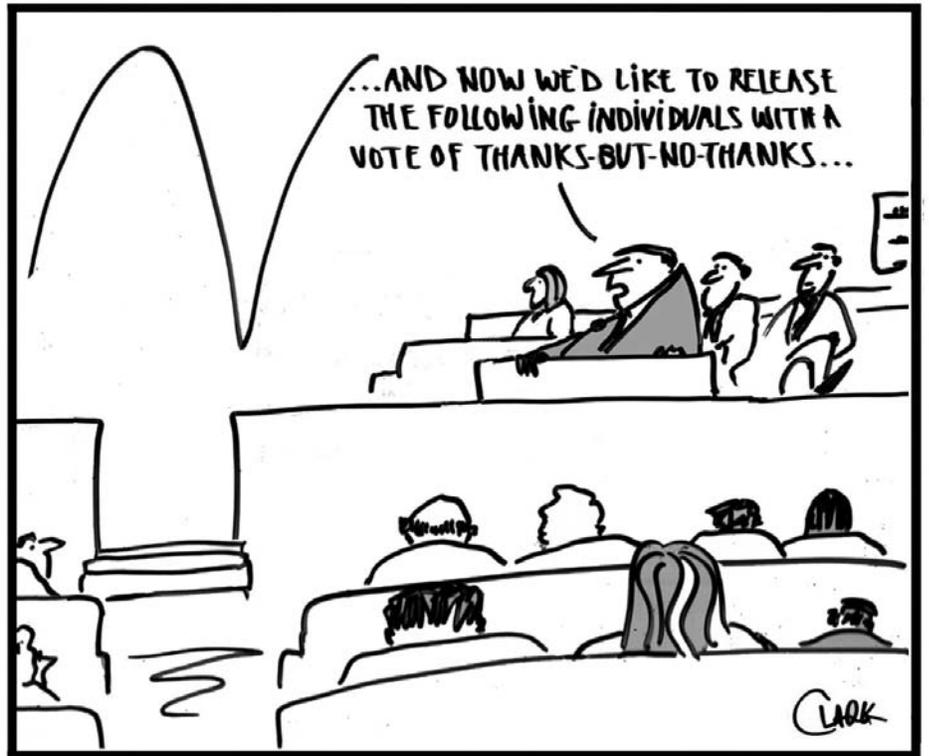
GERRY ENSLEY'S TRIUMPHAL assessment of Blake Ostler's two-part essay dealing with the logic of DNA arguments against Book of Mormon historicity and exchanges with some of his critics (Letters, SUNSTONE, April 2006) is not conducive to open dialogue, not to mention dreadfully misinformed and premature. All but one of Ostler's responses were to criticisms of his first essay, which were also premature, for the validity of Ostler's critique of DNA arguments depends a great deal on the validity of his defense of the local colonization theory in his second essay, which, to quote David A. Anderson, was "wholly unsuccessful" (Letters, SUNSTONE, September 2005). Anderson's critique exposed some of Ostler's faulty assumptions, logical lapses, and textual

manipulations. Ostler responded, to be sure, but despite Ensley's assertion, it was not "well-reasoned."

Ostler may have scored some points early in the exchanges, but he was beginning to lose ground and credibility when the discussion was pushed out of the limelight and into the outer-darkness of Sunstoneblog.com (see announcement, SUNSTONE, November 2005, 7). There, at the top of the "Book of Mormon Historicity" thread, one can find my response to Ostler's second essay, which I recommend Ensley read (after he rereads Anderson's critique) and carefully contemplate.

While Ensley asserts that critics have used "fraudulent arguments" that rest on "problematic foundations," he should consider the fact that critics have formulated their arguments based on the views and interpretations held by a majority of the LDS community, which apologists have yet to convincingly demonstrate are wrong (which is different than showing that they are unrealistic). The critics are well aware of apologetic inventions such as the limited geography and local colonization theories; they just don't buy them and believe that many LDS, once informed of the issues, won't either. If DNA arguments are "fraudulent" and "problematic" because they assume the traditional view and reject

HONEST JON by Jonathan David Clark



JONATHAN DAVID CLARK

apologetic innovations, then how can Ensley think that Ostler's syllogisms are valid when they are built on the question-begging assumption that the Lehighites represented a local colonization?

Admittedly, some critics have overstated what DNA evidence means to Book of Mormon historicity and have underestimated the resourcefulness of the apologists to make adjustments, but there can be little doubt that DNA has changed the contours of the debate. Who can deny that there is much less wiggle-room than there was before DNA arrived? Ostler might scoff at what he considers illogical DNA arguments, but can he deny that his general acceptance of DNA evidence has contributed to the way he now reads the Book of Mormon?

DAN VOGEL
Westerville, Ohio

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If you wish to write letters to authors, address them to that author, care of SUNSTONE, 343 N. Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah 84103. We will forward them unopened.

CORRECTIONS

READERS HAVE POINTED OUT two detail errors in the April SUNSTONE.



ON PAGE 47 of her essay, "Irreconcilable Differences," Emily Pearson inadvertently cites a review in the *San Francisco Examiner*. The review is from the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

ON PAGE 49 of his essay, "The Golden Boy of Rosario," Brett Alan Sanders attributes the authorship of the hymn "Come, Come Ye Saints," to William W. Phelps. The hymn was written by William Clayton.

SUNSTONE apologizes for these errors.

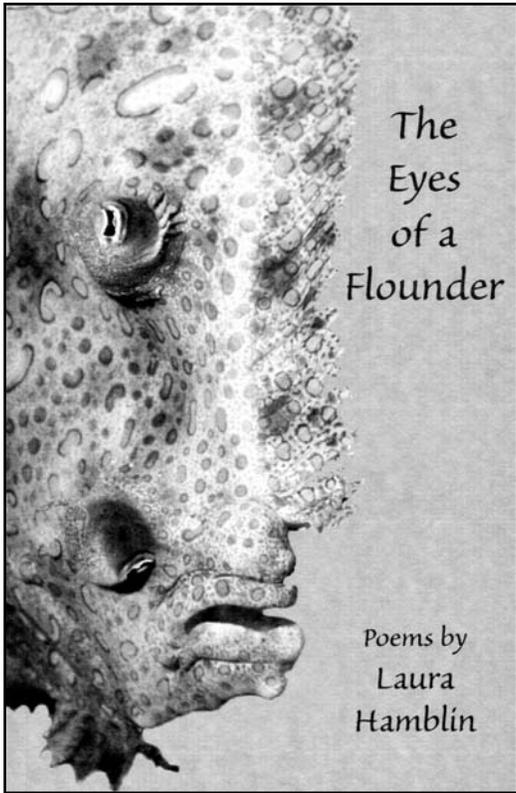


SUNSTONE Podcast update:

SUNSTONE Podcast

10. **MORMON MANTRAS**
Interview with Phil McLemore
11. **IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES**
Interview with Emily Pearson
12. **A GAY MORMON'S TESTIMONY** Interview with John Gustav-Wrathall
13. **THE GRAND FUNDAMENTALS OF MORMONISM: JOSEPH SMITH'S UNFINISHED REFORMATION**
Interview with Don Bradley





The Eyes of a Flounder

Poems by Laura Hamblin

Laura Hamblin's poems roam widely and notice everything, and sometimes a witch speaks them; the poems convince us that a truth-telling wise woman's voice is just what we need to hear. She alone can name the hates we keep "in a shoe box, buried / in the back yard / under a tree," or remind us that in our raging loneliness, each of us can become a "midnight hag." And because she recognizes prettiness for the lie it is, she can the more plainly show us beauty: the goddess of wisdom, Sophia, "singing the song she teaches, / in a language I never heard, / in a language I never knew."

—LISA BICKMORE, author of *Haste*
(Best Poetry Award, Utah Arts Council)

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