



CORNUCOPIA

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Belly of the Whale

“YOU CAN GO TO HECK”

In this regular *Cornucopia* column, Todd Robert Petersen (www.toddpetersen.org), the author of a new short story collection, *Long after Dark* (Zarahemla Books), muses on Mormon culture, arts, and politics from the perspective of a baptized outsider. Petersen teaches English and visual studies at Southern Utah University.

YEARS AGO, I LEFT THE WORLD OF YMCA SUMMER camping with the idea that if I tried hard enough, I could become two things: a writer and a college professor. Being a college professor meant getting a Ph.D., which after a summer of jackhammering the basement out of a grocery store didn't seem like bad work if you could get it. Being a writer is a totally different matter. Even though I don't like to say it out loud because it sounds smarmy and elitist, I believe you have to have a book to move from being someone who writes to being a writer. Well, I now have a published book of short stories, so, as far as I'm concerned, I'm now a writer, and I'm excited about the book.

Last September, I let the manuscript go out of my hands and into the pocket-sized world of Mormon publishing for editing and final review. Sanguine blurbs (they all are, aren't they?) started coming in. My editor liked the book, which was important because I'd been through the thing so many times in the preceding months that I couldn't read it anymore—really. I'd just stare past my computer at the blank wall above my desk and jiggle my computer mouse.

During one of my jiggling sessions, my email gong sounded, and to my surprise, my first tiger of criticism was crouching in the inbox. It was pretty toxic stuff. This critic thought the book would undermine the future of the press. He questioned the wisdom of using a foreword by my good friend and mentor Brian Evenson, because of the trouble in LDS circles Evenson's book *Altmann's Tongue* had stirred up. He said the stories were based on straw man arguments, were the work of a gadfly, and were veiled attempts to justify wild sex scenes (which he admitted were not quite explicit).

In some ways, this criticism felt satisfying to me because I tell my students that polarization around your work is what

you want. Middle-of-the-road insouciance spawns *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Eragon*. When you write in such a way that it will offend no one, you are also writing stuff that won't excite anyone. So, I'm fine with this anonymous critic's displeasure. In fact it's a boon. It strengthens the matrix of the book's identity, gives it some hard edges, makes it more like my favorite polarizing texts: *Raising Arizona* and the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon is so odd (and, for me, wonderful) that no one should be shrugging their shoulders about it. And only a fool would think that everyone will like it. The true story of God's working among his people *should* be a strange book. How would the opening lines of First Nephi work with Ray Romano standing around in Lynbrook, New York, in his bathrobe saying, “My parents were all right, and they did a pretty good job with me”?

I think a little outrage is just fine; this critic's vitriol just caught me a bit off guard. For all I know, this critic of my book could be right on the money. Maybe my stories are a bunch of empty theological placebos (my words), and I suppose I have to be ready to take the blame as well as the praise. At least all of my judge's guns were on the table. But I won't lie: it made me a little sad that this person didn't just criticize the work. Instead he chose to call me names and cast aspersions on a good friend. The tone of the criticism gave me a feeling I hadn't experienced much until I joined the Church in the late '80s. I don't have the exact word for it, but it feels rotten, like when you're in a grocery store watching a mom in the cereal aisle slap her four-year-old.

THIS LITTLE DOSE of critical venom stuck with me and metastasized into a question that unsettled me: Why do so many Mormons feel endowed by their Creator with the inalienable right to criticize others? I didn't come across this much in my Mormon pre-existence. I encountered lots of criticism, but what I mean here is different, and maybe the better word for it is “offense.” Mormon people are offended more than any other group I've ever come across—except maybe vegans.

The only other time I've experienced as much direct criticism was in a bar in Stillwater, Oklahoma. I played in a band during graduate school, and one night, we found a hundred-dollar bill in the tip jar. At first we thought it was a mistake, but the bartender confirmed that a certain dude would regularly do that kind of thing. Two weeks later, we had another gig in the same place, and the hundred-dollar-tip guy was there again. This time he walked right up to us and stood there, staring without blinking, and said, “You ain't got any soul,” then walked away.

All-seeing eye

HONEY, I SHRUNK THE GARMENTS



ACCORDING TO AN URBAN LEGEND, LDS QUARTERBACK STEVE YOUNG obtained a special dispensation from his bishop to play football on Sundays. Might other bishops give supporters of presidential hopeful Mitt Romney the leeway to wear this thong?

ProGOPgear.com, a company that sells a wide range of legitimate (not satirical) pro-Republican merchandise, including T-shirts, jackets, caps, and tote bags, includes in its catalog this revealing item. Made of ultra-fine combed cotton, this thong (cost: \$13.99) reads “Mitt Romney for President” and barely covers anything at all. “Panty-minimalists love our casual thong that covers sweet spots without covering your assets and putting an end to panty-lines,” reads the product description.

Does this product mean that Mitt might run as the candidate with “nothing to hide”? Is it a hint that his foreign policy will focus on “turning the other cheek”? Probably not, as

ProGOPgear also markets thongs emblazoned with promotional messages for several other leading Republican politicians.

What about Mormons who fall for this product but still feel bound to wear a much more modest type of undergarment? ProGOPgear.com proposes the perfect solution: Instead of wearing the thong, “toss these message panties onstage at your favorite rock star.”

Alas—where is Donny Osmond when you really need him?

What turned this guy from a patron to a pundit? My dad used to demand to see my college grades because he was paying the bills. Campaign contributors feel like they have the right to lean on lawmakers because their money helped put them in office. It’s all part of the same process. Mormon people, on the other hand, will criticize you without paying for it. And a Mormon would rather tell you you’re going to hell than tell you to *go to hell*. The phrases are close, but in the first one they’re not swearing, so it’s preferable.

When you tell someone to go to hell, it means that you’re sick of them. Which isn’t a nice thing to say, even if it’s true. I think we all know that with this statement, you’re not giving someone directions. On the other hand, if you tell them they’re going to hell, then as a Christian, you are burdened with the obligation to try to save them. Perhaps Mormons who feel empowered to pronounce about a person’s future destination consider it a missionary opportunity. Maybe they’re thinking: “People can’t repent if they don’t know they’re doing something wrong. But they are too wicked to have the Spirit with them so God can tell them what they’re doing wrong. So here’s where I can help.”

I was a little bit prepared for the criticism of my book because of my work with the *Sugar Beet*, during which all of us involved were regularly told that what we were writing was so abominable that we should just throw our temple recommends into the toilet and then dive in after. I believe these people believed they were doing the right thing by calling us on the carpet, that they felt their indignation was righteous, that being offended means that you’re more sensitive to the Spirit, and all that.

Imagine my delight, however, at Elder Bednar’s suggestion during October’s conference that we are actually able to choose *not* to be offended. When I got to thinking about my run-in with this critic’s utter disdain for my book (the first of many, perhaps), Elder’s Bednar’s talk helped me realize I could have

been outraged, too, but I didn’t have to be, even though people “can be inconsiderate and tactless” (David A. Bednar, “And Nothing Shall Offend Them,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 91.)

I still don’t know why so many Latter-day Saints get so ecstatic about being offended and why they continue to feel compelled to tell people about it. It doesn’t seem to solve very many problems. I guess my final position on the whole thing (a spiritually immature one but also strangely satisfying to my inner fourteen-year-old) is this: if someone is offended by me, this column, or my book, well . . . they know where they can go.

A Place for Every Truth

BOOKS NOT WRITTEN

This regular column features incidents from the life and ministry of Elder James E. Talmage as compiled by James P. Harris, who is currently working on a full-length biography of this fascinating Mormon apostle. The column title is taken from the statement inscribed on the apostle’s tombstone: “Within the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is room and place for every truth thus far learned by man or yet to be made known.”

ELDER JAMES E. TALMAGE IS REMEMBERED AS A prolific author, giving LDS members classic doctrinal literature. Talmage wrote books such as *The Articles of Faith* (1899), *The Great Apostasy* (1909), *The House of the Lord* (1912) and, of course, *Jesus the Christ* (1915). He also wrote two lesser-known doctrinal works: *The Vitality of Mormonism* (1919), a collection of newspaper articles he wrote in 1917–18; and *Sunday Night Talks* (1931), a collection of radio addresses he gave in 1930. Talmage is less remembered for science texts he wrote for the LDS School System, *Domestic Science* (1891) and *The First Book of Nature* (1893).

In his journals, Talmage mentions two books he had been commissioned to write, but for reasons unknown, he never completed them. On 7 September 1915, he wrote in his journal:

Today the First Presidency renewed an appointment originally made about five years ago and suspended because of press of work—that I prepare as soon as possible a work dealing with the Restoration of the Gospel, the book to be in the nature of a companion volume to “The Great Apostasy.”

My research has yet to uncover a typed copy of such a book by Talmage. Unfortunately, due to the “press of work,” Talmage had many uncompleted projects.

The second book he was asked to write is mentioned in his journal entry of Tuesday, 4 May 1920:

I was called into conference with the First Presidency, and was appointed and requested by them to prepare a book for use in our theological classes and among our people generally, on the subject of “Priesthood.” The exact title of the work is yet to be determined. Already a number of small boxes have been published by members of our Church, some with official sanction and others as purely personal undertakings, dealing with different phases of this great subject; but the need of a comprehensive work to be issued by the Church has long been felt.

Talmage’s 1923 journal contains numerous references to

talks he gave on priesthood that year; however, he never indicates if any of the talks are extracts from the proposed work. For example, on 28 February 1923, he wrote: “I went by morning train to Provo, where I delivered the first of a series of lectures on ‘Priesthood and Church Organization,’ before the student body of the Brigham Young University.” On 14 March 1923, he wrote: “Went to Provo by early train and lectured before the student body of the Brigham Young University on ‘Priesthood and Church Government.’”

Talmage finished his ministry with a series of radio addresses on priesthood in June-July 1933. The addresses were delivered on Sunday evenings. Talmage passed away on Thursday, 27 July 1933. The final priesthood-themed radio address he wrote was read by his son Sterling on 9 August. The address was titled “Priesthood in Ancient America.” Collectively, the eight addresses could comprise chapters in a book about priesthood, but, again, a work with such a title was never published by Talmage or, at least, is not among his papers.

In 1939, Elder John A. Widtsoe, Talmage’s colleague in the Council of the Twelve, published a book titled *Priesthood and Church Government*. The book was apparently written under Church auspices and for many years served as a de facto Handbook of Instructions. We can only speculate that Widtsoe was asked to finish the project that Talmage was unable to see to completion.

Jots and tittles

THE NEWLYWED GAME—MINUS THE WHOOPEE

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF THE RACY TV SHOW *THE NEWLYWED GAME* HAD censored all references to “making whoopee” (the show’s euphemism for sex) and turned itself into a Mormon board game?

Wait no longer for the answer, for here comes *The Celestial Companions Game* (Cedar Fort Publishing), now being sold through Deseret Book for \$17.99.

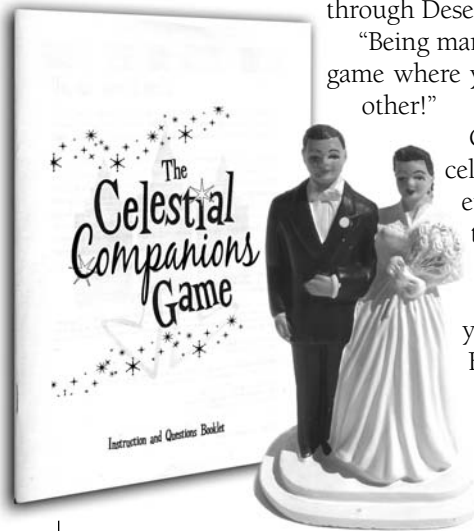
“Being married is fun!” the blurb on the box informs us. “Couples go head to head in this hysterical game where you and your spouse will find out how much you actually know (or don’t!) about each other!”

Calling the game “hysterical” *might* be a stretch, but that depends on what you and your celestial companion normally do for fun when you have other couples over. Packed with references to LDS entertainers, politicians, authors, books, bookstores, films, and church life, the game is supposed to test how well you know your spouse, but it might be a better indicator of how well acculturated you are into Mormonism—*Utah* Mormonism especially.

In Round 7, women are asked: “Which of the following church-sponsored events would your husband most enjoy? (A) Lighting of Temple Square, (B) Christmas devotional by the First Presidency, (C) Concert by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, (D) Your home teacher coming over? In Round 13, men are asked: Which of the following LDS authors would your wife be most inclined to read? (A) Anita Stansfield, (B) Susan Easton Black, (C) Sheri Dew, (D) Neal A. Maxwell. These two examples alone indicate the gender stereotyping and Utah focus that pervade the game.

The product is not particularly slick: your money buys you four miniature marker pens, score cards, and a question booklet that looks as if it could have been run off your own printer. In addition, the booklet contains some rather glaring typographical errors. For instance, in Round 17, *men* are asked, “What is the last movie you and your husband saw together?”

Oops! *Those* celestial companions must have gotten their marriage license in Massachusetts!





The Sugar Beet

“All the Mormon News That’s Fit to Print”

The Mormon Tabernacle Enquirer, a collection of The Sugar Beet’s best material, has sold out its first printing. Sorry to all you slowpokes who didn’t get one. Copies of the second printing are now on sale at ZARAHEMLABOOKS.COM. Your home teacher said he wants one for his birthday. All proceeds will go to a deserving group of “fasting” Mormon writers.

EXCESS MEAT SCANDAL ROCKS SEMINARY PRESIDENCY

NAPANEE, ID—A huge blow was delivered to the Napanee High School Seminary Thursday when Gary Cole, seminary president, was caught eating meat in excess behind the school.

Cole was allegedly in the middle of consuming huge quantities of beef in the form of hamburger, veal, and the highly addictive medium rare ribeye steak when Brother Anglemeyer, the 10th grade seminary teacher, confronted him.

According to eyewitness McKayla Anderson, Cole was caught “with an open bottle of A-1 in his hand and a piece of steak still hanging out of his mouth.”

“This is a huge smudge on what was once a clean record,” said Anglemeyer. “Not only did Gary flout the Word of Wisdom by eating too much meat, it wasn’t even at a time of winter, famine, or excess of hunger.”

Seminary second counselor Michael Thisbee said he isn’t surprised by this sudden revelation. “For the past few weeks, I’ve thought I’ve been smelling chocolate on Gary’s breath. And as we all know, chocolate is the gateway to harder foods. Satan tells you it’s all right, that it won’t hurt anything. But look at what happens.”

“My main worry is that this will spread like a virus through the student body,” Anglemeyer said, “Students furtively chewing on Slim Jims in the classroom, sneaking into fast food joints for their burger fix. And if things get really bad, we’ll lose precious souls to those nefarious all-night barbecues I’ve been hearing about.”

EVIL UNABLE TO ATTEND PARTY

MAPLETON, UT—Bobby Stanton regrets to inform those he invited to his party scheduled for Saturday night that Evil will not be able to attend.

“I tried to invite Evil early,” he said in an interview with the *Sugar Beet*, “I did everything I could to attract him. I was even planning on spiking the punch, renting a few *American Pie* movies, and maybe even having a few *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues out back. But I guess Evil was busy with other plans Saturday.”

Fortunately the Appearance of Evil isn’t doing much that night and will come to Stanton’s party in Evil’s place.

“Naturally we’ve had to tone things down since only the Appearance of Evil is coming. So I’ve got some O’Douls on hand and a couple of *Austin Powers* movies.” said Stanton. “There is also the distinct possibility of off-color conversation. Still, I’m pretty sure all the guys will be able to bless the sacrament the next morning. Sorry about that.”

Views from the Street

Deseret Book just purchased Seagull Book and its twenty-six stores. What do you think?



Does this mean the Church is finally going to talk about the birds as well as the bees?



If they expand their scrapbooking aisle, then I will know this was an inspired takeover.



Today Deseret Seagull, tomorrow Deseret Seagull Time Warner AOL MSNABC Lockheed Martin.



Is this the way the Church deals with splinter groups now? “Cause the “United Brethren of Exaltation unto the Throne of Kolob” is up for sale to the highest bidder.



It’s just as Daniel prophesied when he spoke of the “Bookstore cut from the Mall without hands.”



Mormons read?