

BOOK REVIEW

WILDERNESS WITHIN

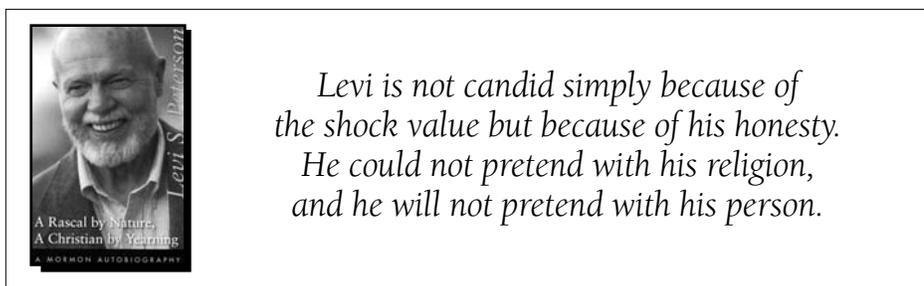
A RASCAL BY NATURE, A CHRISTIAN BY YEARNING:
A MORMON AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Levi S. Peterson

University of Utah Press, 2006

465 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by Tracie A. Lamb



Levi is not candid simply because of the shock value but because of his honesty. He could not pretend with his religion, and he will not pretend with his person.

IN *A Rascal by Nature, A Christian by Yearning*, biographer, novelist, and short fiction writer Levi Peterson delivers another well-written, candid portrayal of a life: this time, his own. Above all else, Levi is a good storyteller, and he approaches the writing of his own story with the craftsmanship he displays in his other writing.

In his opening paragraph, Levi explains the dominant themes of his life: “wilderness, my vexed and vexing relationship with Mormonism, my moral and emotional qualities, and my family” (1). In addition, there is one overriding theme that he does not mention but that permeates his life, a theme aptly shown in the title. Levi’s life is one of dichotomy—a tension between conflicting parts and pieces, which he attempts to reconcile through his writing and his life.

THE first and perhaps strongest tension is Levi’s need for family on one hand and separation and distinction on the other. He says, “Family is at my emotional core” (366) and explains how he internalized his mother’s impulse for “keeping

strong the ties of extended family” (435). And much of Levi’s book is about his family—detailing the lives of his father and mother, his own childhood, and his effort to remain close to his grown siblings and their families. He discusses his need for other people and admits he is “no solitary animal,” explaining, “I was happiest when others were happy” (86).

Despite this need for closeness and connection to his family, he also insists on being different from them and suggests that even his marriage to Althea, a non-Mormon, is a statement of his independence. Regarding his marriage and its effect on his family, he says, “I need this distinction between us. A telling sign that I don’t believe as they do has been essential to my continuing affection for them” (436). Surrender to familial conformity, it seems, would obliterate his personal identity. He says, “I have had a central core of personality to which nonconformity, resistance, rebellion have seemed absolutely vital and indispensable” (283).

Clearly, remaining close to his family is a priority for Levi even though he does not

share their beliefs. Less understandable is his need to remain in the Church while deliberately separating himself from its general membership. One of the more poignant sections of the book is where he describes the moment during his mission when he finally acknowledges his lack of belief in Mormon doctrine. He explains how he feels desperate to go home and yet, in the end, remains because “I lacked the stamina for restructuring my life outside the expectations of Mormonism” (142). Despite his anguish over this decision, when he severs his religious ties with the Church, he determines to keep the cultural connection.

He remains active in the Church to this day, often attending sacrament and priesthood meeting and serving as a home teacher. Yet, in this as well, he intentionally creates a division between himself and his religious community. He drinks coffee because it’s “a convenient sin. It is a very handy, inexpensive way to stay out of harmony with your church” (223). Although he goes to church, holds a calling, and has even performed the baptism of his grandson, he is not a believer in its doctrines and states, “My identity require[s] disbelief” (415). Despite the “depths of [his] disbelief” (323), he claims a place within the Church and, reflecting on his habit of admonishing doubting Latter-day Saints to stay Mormon if they feel they can, states: “If I met a wavering person whose identity was deeply Mormon, I had an impulse to help that person remain in the fellowship of the Church” (304).

ANOTHER tension of opposites in Levi’s life has been between the child and the adult within himself. Levi admits to an ongoing emotional struggle, what he calls his “pathology,” which has repeatedly threatened his ability to function. He says, “My pathology was roused by situations that forced me to recognize myself as an independent adult” (216), and explains, “I function today on the assumption that as a little child I internalized some terribly dysfunctional attitude that forbade me ever to grow up” (217).

Levi explains his long struggle to maintain equilibrium and function in society. To his credit, he is unafraid to admit he went through extensive counseling. Finally, though he was initially overwhelmed by the thought of being a parent, the birth of Karrin, his daughter, helped relieve his anxiety. He says he still has a “pathological need to be within a parent-child circle” (413). Although his place within the circle has now shifted, the connection serves to soothe his



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anxieties. Currently, he and Althea expend a great deal of time and effort serving Karrin and her family. Maintaining a close connection to his progeny benefits his own well-being but is, no doubt, an immense help to them as well.

THE element of Levi's autobiography most likely to cause some readers discomfort, as it did me, is his extreme candor. While most people go to great lengths to hide their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, Levi is willing, even eager, to reveal his deepest fears and shameful acts. Nothing seems too personal or sacred to divulge. He is not candid simply because of the shock value but because of his honesty. He could not pretend with his religion, and he will not pretend with his person.

Early on, Levi explains that this book started out to be a reflection on wilderness but became his autobiography instead. However, it remains a book about wilderness—the wilderness within. It also explains, to some extent, his struggle with growing up. He says that as a child,

Adults ordered me not to behave so wildly, so I knew the wild was something to be disapproved of and repressed like sin, vice and rudeness. (89)

His inherent attraction to wildness even affected his decision to major in English, of which choice he writes, "Among the values consistently associated with wilderness in [literature] . . . was . . . freedom from social restraints" (201). Later, when describing how his grandson Hans bolts during Levi's brother's funeral, Levi says, "There is something refreshing about the indifference of the very young to protocol and propriety" (432).

In his autobiography, Levi certainly shows his own indifference to protocol and propriety, at least on the written page. He explains his recognition and acceptance of the fact when he says,

Among the important issues I had to settle while writing the chapter [on my early college years] was candor. I knew in advance that many of my likely readers would feel uncomfortable with [my] revelation[s]. . . . Yet I decided to include these facts in my chapter, thereby licensing myself to include similar facts in my later chapters.

My impulse to make such facts known derives, in part, from a resentment I have felt since early childhood toward the mandatory

silence polite society imposes upon matters of sex and personal hygiene. (411)

By writing so freely about "matters of sex and personal hygiene," Levi affirms the wild within, so that his autobiography remains, as it was first intended to be, a treatise on wilderness.

Others have also been caught off guard by the level of candor in this book. As Levi shared at the 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, his brother Leon told him:

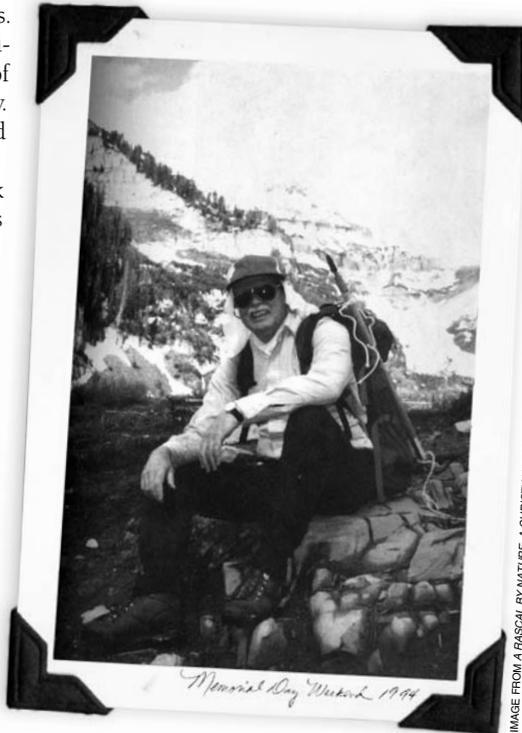


IMAGE FROM A FASCAL BY NATURE, A CHRISTIAN BY YEARNING

Well, Levi, it is a pretty candid book. On Judgment Day, the great and dreadful day of the Lord, when, we're told, all will stand forth revealed to the entire world, there will be no problem for you because the whole world already knows it.

Although I acknowledge that it may serve a purpose in his life and writing, Levi's bluntness is, for me, personally, the greatest contradiction his autobiography raises. I have known Levi for nearly thirty years now, since he was my advisor at what was then Weber State College. I have also been fortunate to be in a writers' group with him. What I have experienced of the man in person flies in the face of what I read in his writing. Although at times prone to irreverence, he has been unfailingly gracious, warm, and generous towards me. Whatever I have written is because of Levi's encouragement, and I know he has done the same for countless others.

The sometimes shocking and offensive revelations in the book do not jibe with the kind, gracious man I know.

Not all readers will agree with me concerning Levi's candor. Some may enjoy his frankness, and some may suggest that his autobiography portrays Levi just as he is. Perhaps he reveals the blunt side of himself to some more than to others. Certainly as my college professor, he was less graphic than he has been as a friend. And I suspect he can wax even more colorful with a bunch of male buddies on a hike.

Nevertheless, I feel a bit like Levi's niece Joan, who wrote him, "What I object to is the picture I think [your stories] may be painting of you . . . which seems in variance with the great and good man you are in my eyes" (272). Although Levi is self-revelatory beyond the norm, I think including these crude stories works against the book's ability to reveal the person of good will and service I know. The book may present his inner life but does not adequately portray the whole man in his giving relationship to others. Kathleen Petty, letters editor for *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, of which Levi is the current editor, says, "He has to reveal what people won't guess, but he's too modest to reveal the good and generous parts that people cannot guess."

DESPITE the book's scatological obsession and at times uncomfortable candor, Levi remains, overall, a fine writer. He frequently quotes from his journals, kept daily for years. Some of these unrevised excerpts show Levi at his best. In one, he writes:

If I am evanescent and brief in fact, I am not so in desire. In desire I am eternal. Eternity, I think, is time without its beginnings and endings. I would be without beginnings and endings. I would escape my fated march toward death, I would evade annihilation. I would see myself in the dawn forever. I would smell fresh air and see suns rise. I would hoe my garden and sit with my friends tomorrow as today, and the day after that, and then always the day after that. My will to be is endless. (242)

Life is more poignant for those who believe it will not go on. Levi achieves immortality through his writing and through his relationships. He leaves a trace of himself in this way—the only immortality he believes there is. ☺