

BOOK REVIEW

WILL THE REAL COKE
PLEASE STAND UP?

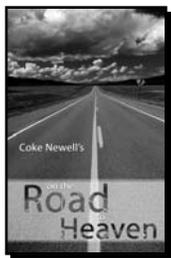
ON THE ROAD TO HEAVEN

by Coke Newell

Zarahemla Books, 2007

333 pages, \$16.95

Reviewed by Jonathan Langford



In our insistence on the literally true, we may give up some of the reality and power such narratives might contain if we cared a little more about truthfulness and a little less about accuracy in the details.

EACH NEW STORY is a chance to meet a potential friend. That's particularly true of first-person narrative, which tends to stand or fall on the quality of the narrative voice—how vividly we experience the “I” of the story and how we feel about the time we've spent with that character once the story ends. This is the case whether the narrative is an autobiography, a first-person novel, or—like Coke Newell's *On the Road to Heaven*—some strange hybrid of the two.

This book combines two classic Mormon genres: the conversion story and the mission story. The result is an engaging, well-written narrative that Newell and his publisher chose to call an autobiographical novel.

The book is an account of the spiritual journey of a boy named Everon “Kit” West who grows up with a love and reverence for nature, influenced by Native American perspectives (at least in some of their better-known popularized versions), who hitchhikes, uses marijuana with his friends,

and experiments with hippie culture, only to find it ultimately unsatisfying. Along the way, he acquires a Mormon girlfriend who's rebelling against her own convert family background, and the two fall in love. He encounters the missionaries and joins the Church, and she independently becomes active again. Then they sort of break up and each serves a mission before they come home and marry each other.

It's a well-crafted story arc, showing the passion of Kit's first yearnings for spirituality and how the path that introduces him to Carlos Castaneda (the author of popular books on Mesoamerican shamanism) is the same path that leads him to Mormonism and eventually to preaching the gospel to poverty-stricken Colombians. For Kit, white shirts and ties may have replaced tie-dye, but not as a repudiation—rather, as a destination, a fulfillment of sorts.

On the Road to Heaven is a most enjoyable read. Satisfying and hatred-inducing, in an envious-writer sort of way.

There's just one problem with Kit's story:

the way it's presented. I don't know how much of it is true.

THE autobiographical novel is a respectable literary form, with examples ranging from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* to Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Legitimate or not, though, it turns out to be a form that rouses my suspicions—and in this, I suspect I'm a lot like many Mormon readers.

After first reading *On the Road to Heaven*, I posted a review to AML-List in which I made a stab at articulating why the autobiographical novel rubs me the wrong way. I argued that narrative in part

invites us to get to know the person behind the “I,” holding out the promise of a potential connection with someone. I'm perfectly fine with that “someone” being a fictional character; some of my best friends have names like Frodo Baggins. Still, it's important to me to know just whose acquaintance I'm being asked to make. Frankly, the autobiographical novel seems a bit like a copout: claiming the moral and narrative authority of “I-was-there,” without making any commitment to live up to the accompanying responsibility to tell the truth as best you can. That makes me uneasy.

And so I like the “Everon ‘Kit’ West” of the story, and I can't help but think I'd like Coke Newell too, but I can't really be sure. All I really know for sure that's true about the protagonist-as-Coke-Newell (from the About the Author page at the back of the book) is that he was indeed “a former tree-hugging, Zen-spouting, vegetarian Colorado mountain hippie” who joined the LDS Church, as described in the book. All I know for sure that's not true is that his name wasn't Everon West. Everything in between is, presumably, negotiable. Just how negotiable is unclear.

I'm sure some people will want to call me to task for imposing an unacceptable limitation on the creative choices of the artist. My point, though, isn't that Newell shouldn't have done whatever he did in this book. Rather, I'm simply saying that the choices he



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made got in the way of my connection with the story.

Following my initial post to AML-List about *On the Road to Heaven*, the redoubtable Levi Peterson asked: “What do you mean by ‘telling the truth?’” Writing in response, I clarified:

Telling the truth,” in an autobiography, means telling what actually happened—to the best of your ability, and vagaries of memory and perception aside. Yes, we all know that all experience is filtered through the lens of our own minds. But in an autobiography, still we do the best to (at least) reflect that mental perception of the past accurately . . .

In a novel, on the other hand, I would say that “telling the truth” means something entirely different. It means making things work the way they work in the real world. Cause and effect. Most of all, it means doing our best to make sure that the characters act in ways that real-life people would act, in the circumstances we’ve created . . .

I’m fine with both varieties of truth-telling. But when both are invoked simultaneously, I find it confusing and hard to accept. It’s a matter both of categories, and of framing the way that I read a particular work.

Thinking it over, I can’t help but think that this difference between fictionalized narrative and history is a particularly sensitive point for Mormon readers. In recent times, one General Authority’s imaginatively retouched personal narratives got him into what seemed to some people like an awful lot of hot water for something that’s frankly been standard practice for stories told around the campfire pretty much as long as we’ve had campfires and stories told around them. But a religion that bids for attention based largely on a claim of strict historical accuracy for a story about angels, prophecies, and translation of ancient records pretty much has to take seriously questions about truth in narrative.

Our fierce emphasis on the literal doesn’t always serve us well in our responses to literature, including literature that forms part of the scriptural canon. I’ve seen the argument made that Job had to have been a historical figure, because otherwise God’s comparison of Joseph Smith’s sufferings to those of Job would have been

a deep insult to Joseph. Such a response seems to me to miss the entire point of literature: that one reason it exists is precisely to help us deal with the challenges of life by presenting them in purer, clearer, simpler, fictive versions of reality. I’m reminded of Jesus’ rebuke to Nicodemus for his failure to recognize a metaphor when he heard one.

Those who work in Mormon literature, either as creators or critics, have long complained about the literal turn of Mormon readers’ minds, of our struggle as a people with accepting a role for fiction—and more so when that fiction strikes close to home in works by Mormon writers or about Mormon themes and characters. All the more so, I suspect, in genres such as the autobiographical novel where it’s unclear where historical truth ends and fictional truth begins. Our cultural genetics more or less destine us to be uptight in this area.

Which is, in some ways, a shame. If our notions of truth in narrative demand that our accounts of ourselves must be utterly, literally true in every particular, what hope do we have to see personal narratives that lay bare the deepest struggles of the spirit? Clearly—based on the large numbers of biographies and autobiographies among Mormons, and even the multitude of stories in Church magazines about the lives of members in many countries and circumstances—there’s a hunger for stories not just about Mormons, but about real tangible Mormons with historically verifiable lives.

Too often, though, one senses that the real challenges in those lives are only hinted at or presented in code. Even Newell’s narrative glosses over some matters, such as just how far the physical relationship between the two main characters went. As someone who has no intention to publish a narrative about my own life, I certainly can’t blame Newell for his reticence. But it seems sad that in our insistence on the literally true, we—and I include myself—may give up some of the reality and power such narratives might contain if we cared a little more about truthfulness and a little less about accuracy in the details.

A few days after I posted my initial review on AML-List, Chris Bigelow (Newell’s publisher) responded with Newell’s response to my thoughts. According to Newell, all the events in the book had in fact happened as described, to the best of his recollection. “Ultimately,” he wrote,

On the Road to Heaven is missing a

very significant piece of chronology—the episode of “the other girl” and what impact that had on the relationship between Annie and I [sic] . . . Its separation—done primarily because my former agent felt it broke the flow of the Kit–Annie story (in other words, Truth got in the way of good story)—is the primary reason *OTR2H* is billed as autobiographical fiction.

Newell has written “the other girl” segment as a short story, “Toaster Road,” which won the 2003 AML short fiction award.

Newell clarified further that *On the Road to Heaven*

was not initially written as fiction . . . I worked the first draft directly from my journals, which in an earlier, easier era were very extensive and detailed. Conversations, of course, were not specifically recorded in my journals, and I was forced to create from the memory of circumstance and relationship. I am confident that most of them are very close to accurate.

Another reason Newell changed the genre from nonfiction autobiography to autobiographical novel was to appease his wife, who “was less comfortable with the story of conversion and change than I was.” I see her ambivalence as the flipside of my own curiosity as a reader. I wanted to see and know whether the author of the story and the character I was reading about were one and the same; she wanted to keep that particular door closed. Both impulses are understandable. In retrospect—and knowing now which parts of the narrative are true and which aren’t—I see why Newell chose the autobiographical novel form as a kind of compromise between these two imperatives.

WHICH brings us to the classic question most readers of book reviews ask: “Will I like this book? Is it worth shelling out \$16.95 to buy it and ten hours of my life to read it?” Here, we tread on shaky ground, because despite my enjoyment of the book and my sense that it’s well-written and likely to appeal broadly to many readers, I also have to admit that much of the book’s attraction lies in its resonance with my own experience.

Back in the early 1970s, when I was in fourth grade or so, one of my favorite books

was *My Side of the Mountain*, by Jean George, a book about a teenage boy who goes to live on his own in the mountains of upstate New York. Granted, living off the land wasn't something I ever had the skills to do—I never even made Tenderfoot in Boy Scouts. But growing up loving the woods and mountains of western Oregon, I used to fantasize about it, even though I knew that between mission and college and all those other things faithful Mormon boys are supposed to do, it was never going to happen to me. So a book about a boy who grew up in (and largely on) the mountains of Colorado in the 1960s and then made the transition from eco-hippie to Mormon and who managed to balance Mormonism and environmentalist counter-culturalism touched on something very familiar and personal to me.

Ironically, when it comes down to actual events, there's not much of Kit West's life that resembles mine. I never actually tried drugs—was never even approached with an offer. Didn't have a girlfriend (well, not before my mission). Heck, I was the kid in my fifth grade class who campaigned for Nixon in 1972. And I don't have many dramatic stories to tell about my own mission (to Italy, not Colombia), although it was an important experience on a personal level. So why does Newell's narrative speak to and for the person I was during those years—and to some degree the person I still am?

Describing the origins of his lifelong love for fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien wrote:

Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened desire, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded. . . I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighborhood, intruding into my relatively safe world. . . . But the world that contained even the imagination of [the Norse dragons] was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril. The dweller in the quiet and fertile plains may hear of the tormented hills and the unharvested sea and long for them in his heart. For the heart is hard though the body be soft.¹

I don't think I ever really wanted to live Kit West's life. I can't deny, though, that many of the concerns and desires that were central to my growing up are played out al-

most archetypically in Newell's narrative. Things that were important to me were also important to him. That affords a sense of kinship and recognition.

Which raises the inevitable question: Will Newell's book appeal to Mormons (and non-Mormons) who don't share his background, experience, and perspective?

This is one of those questions we don't talk about that much in literature classes: just how much do our judgments about any work of literature rest on our interest in its subject matter? In the ideal world of literary critics, we should love stories for the quality of their crafting, irrespective of their setting or themes.

But in the real world, this isn't really so—and, judging by the evidence, no more for literary critics than the rest of us. Yes, the appeal of literature arises partially from the archetypes and larger narrative patterns—but also from the details: the joy of seeing in fiction those same beloved (or even hated) details that we remember from our own lives: the books we read, the arguments we had, the music we listened to.

Of course, it doesn't have to play out this way. Sometimes the writer's craft can provide a bridge to otherwise alien experiences. A good example in my case is Ed Geary's *Goodbye to Poplarhaven*, a set of personal essays about growing up in rural Utah during the 1940s and 1950s. It's a glimpse into a foreign landscape and mindscape I didn't share but that become familiar to me through his telling. For me, the attraction of Geary's narrative lies not in its evocation of the familiar but its exploration of the unfamiliar. I think that Newell's narrative has the potential to work in this same way for readers whose experience is far removed from the world he describes.

A criticism sometimes made of Mormon literature is that its scope is narrow. In particular, some say that most of what's available is set firmly in the old Mormon Corridor, that arid area of pioneer settlement in the western United States more or less corresponding to the boundaries of the old State of Deseret.

I haven't read widely enough in Mormon literature to know how just that criticism is. What I can say is that Newell's autobiographical novel is the first Mormon narrative I've read that directly reflects important elements of my own growing up. I suppose that's the reason I feel such a strong desire to plop this book in front of my non-Mormon friends (or even my stake president, for that matter) and say, "Here. Read

this. Kit's story isn't mine, but this will give you some idea of what being a Mormon felt like during my adolescence, and part of why I'm a Mormon still."

NOTES

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 63–64.



BUTTER CHURN

There's a flip flop sound
in the farmhouse:
wooden paddles beating sweet
cream,
wide glass jar bulging
at the bottom,
metal gear spinning at the top.
The handle protrudes
like a prayer flag.
Every child gets his chance
to hoist the rhythm,

the butter like a child
being born of its mother,
an alchemy
of myth and legend
churning the Milky Way
for its butter,
spinning immortality—
the essence of anything
deep down liquid gold.

It's a movement
we all long to join.
We are children lining up,
holding hands,
the paddle clapping,
our minds, hearts, feet
finding the rhythm
of our late liquid birthing
in the dance.

—ANITA TANNER