

## BOOK REVIEW

## OK, MORMON

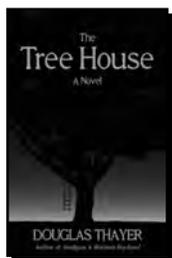
## THE TREE HOUSE

By Douglas Thayer

2009

384 Pages, \$16.95

Zarahemla Books

*Reviewed by E. George Goold*

*Job emerges from calamity without the certainty that his death will make everything okay, but with the power to create his own meaning from his suffering*

EVERYONE FAMILIAR WITH Mormon letters knows Douglas Thayer. The veteran Brigham Young University English professor established himself with the landmark short story collection *Under the Cottonwoods*, built a long, distinguished career with novels including *Summer Fire* and *The Conversion of Jeff Williams*, and delighted audiences with his memoir, *Hooligan: A Mormon Boyhood*. He is referred to by many critics as “the Mormon Hemingway” because of his straightforward, embellishment-free style. Thayer’s latest novel is *The Tree House*, from Zarahemla Books.

Thayer’s hero, his autobiographical avatar, is Harris Thatcher, your typical Mormon young man growing up in World War II-era Provo.

Life is pretty simple for young Harris. He ponders questions of religion now and again but doesn’t stress about finding answers. “Harris had begun to wonder why some families were more religious than

others, what God was really like, and what he wanted you to do. But he didn’t worry about it. He was just curious.”

Then dad dies. Harris is struck a blow, but he eventually gets over it and steps into his new role as man of the family. He takes a job at the local diner and learns to make pies. He is befriended by kindly diner owner, Mrs. Hardy, and the disgruntled, beer-guzzling cook, Jack. He finds an outlet for love in Abby, his high school sweetheart.

But then she dies. Harris doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to love again, but he goes on a mission to Germany where he learns about a different kind of love. He builds a strong testimony and isn’t ashamed of outward displays of religiosity such as kneeling in prayer and wearing his garments. He returns home to Provo a changed man. “After two-and-a-half years in Germany hearing all the stories about the war and seeing the destruction, he didn’t feel protected in Provo anymore. He knew it was possible that bombs could drop on Provo someday, tanks

roll through the streets. His house could burn, Luke’s house, the whole block, a vast pall of smoke rising thousands of feet into the air. This understanding surprised Harris and made him somewhat apprehensive.”

His apprehension grows when both he and stalwart Luke, who just got back from a remarkably successful mission in Mexico, are drafted to fight in Korea. As he excelled at being a missionary, Harris excels at being a soldier. He knows how to follow orders; he kills with precision and without doubt. But along the way, things like praying and wearing garments don’t seem as important as they had on his mission. Harris has time to prove his heroism and fulfill his duty well beyond expectation before he is shot twice and drastically wounded.

In his hospital ward, he finds a soldier from Luke’s outfit, who informs him that his saintly friend Luke had died in a horribly tragic yet heroic and virtuous way. Harris’s experiences in Korea shake the foundations of his belief, and he finds absolutely no solace in the promise of the atonement. “How could Christ do that? Harris didn’t have the faintest notion and understood finally that he had no faith, perhaps never had, that he’d been fooling himself.”

Harris is honorably discharged and returns to Provo. He misses his dead friend, his dead dad, his dead girlfriend. He resumes work at the diner and returns to his old lifestyle. Then a house fire kills his mother and his two brothers. So now he misses them too. He goes into a state of walking shock, speaking only when spoken to, thinking about becoming like his old buddy Jack, drinking beer and staring at the wall. Instead he gets acute appendicitis that nearly kills him.

He wakes up in the hospital and meets Jennifer, who not only went to high school with Harris but even knew his first love. Jennifer nurses him back to health and restores his hope. They start dating. Over malted milks, he tells her the part he played in killing Chinese soldiers. The indomitable Jennifer responds, “Oh, Harris, that’s terrible. But, Harris, that’s what the atonement is for. Don’t you know that?”

Jennifer reminds Harris that the Book of Mormon is nothing but a history of war. The sons of Helaman were a bunch of kids, like Luke and Harris and all the other cannon fodder in Korea. “What do you think they felt like, seeing all the men they killed? They went on with their lives as far as we know. Don’t you think they went back home and got jobs, fell in love, married their girlfriends, and started families?



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Their moms must have taught them about the atonement.”

Jennifer's pep talk, along with a shot in the arm from Mrs. Hardy, restores Harris to action and eventually he and Jennifer marry. Harris decides to be a lawyer. He walks into his former ward with his wife on his arm, redeemed.

**S**TYLISTICALLY, Thayer follows Hemingway. Thematically, he must have gotten his material from the book in the Bible between Esther and Psalms. In other words, Harris Thatcher is Thayer's Job. He loses everything. Every single immediate family member, his best friend, and his high school sweetheart all die. The challenges and obstacles facing Harris form a litany of loss and pain that verges on the absurd. But, oddly, never once, not one single time, did I ever feel any sympathy for Harris. Why? Because again and again throughout the novel, I got the feeling that he's going to be okay. I just knew that things would work out for him.

Harris is still going to get his great reunion in the sky. He'll get to see his family again, and he and Luke will hunt deer in the Celestial Kingdom. As Luke's mother says at her son's funeral, "Oh, Harris, we'll see him again on resurrection morning! Our boy will be so beautiful, so beautiful. We'll all be here together once more, won't

we, Harris?" That idealized notion of the triumphant family reunion, the one that fuels the desire of all Mormons, is still a reality for Harris. As it is for all believing Mormons. Thus, in *The Tree House*, we witness what happens with 99 percent of so-called Mormon literature. Any dramatic tension, any suffering that Harris may endure, is undercut because of the lingering certainty among Mormon readers (and clearly, authors) that his belief in the atonement will save him.

Perhaps this is the distinguishing trait of Mormon literature: it is optimistic to a fault. The great hope the atonement offers will always prevail. No matter how many people die around the hero, no matter how many people the hero kills with his own two hands, some hot little nurse will always come along to save him and remind him that the atonement makes everything okay.

The comparison to Job goes further. The meat of Job is his suffering and his insistence on justice. Even though his dead children and riches are all replaced, Job gets no answers from God. The narrative imposes no meaning on his suffering. Job emerges from calamity without the certainty that his death will make everything okay, but with the power to create his own meaning from his suffering—God having abdicated that function. But Harris is merely a victim of fate, passively accepting life and death according

to the atonement. Whether he lives or dies doesn't matter; he's still saved. Job's struggle is far more compelling: going on with life in the face of an inscrutable God who provided no shining bedside nurse to remind him that he knew the answers all along.

Is there a Mormon literature dealing with what happens when Jennifer never comes? What is a man to do when no shining young woman reminds him that the atonement makes everything okay? What do we do when there's no Jennifer to tell us what the atonement even is? There is no such literature, because any book that doesn't express belief in the healing power of the atonement can't really be called Mormon.

While a good map for beginning writers to follow, *The Tree House* is ultimately unsatisfying and almost irrelevant compared to other much more compelling books specifically about war, if not death generally. If you want to read about what happens when soldiers see what war is, when they stack dead bodies, see friends get legs blown off, and experience a world where "right and wrong" mean absolutely nothing, read the recently released *Matterhorn* by Karl Marlantes. He's not Mormon (nor was Job, I believe) but his book deals with true suffering and its consequences in a way that provides comfort far beyond the empty rooms in *The Tree House*.

**Salacious, sweet, sad ...**

**insightful**

**insulting**

**quirky-faithful**

**and funny.**

D. Michael Quinn

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For years, Johnny Townsend has been publishing award-winning Mormon fiction in many national magazines including *Glimmer Train*, *Sunstone*, and *Dialogue*. Now his work is gathered into seven compelling collections. Find them at Amazon or:

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