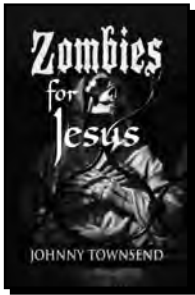


INTERVIEW

MAKING OURSELVES VISIBLE

A Conversation with Author

JOHNNY TOWNSEND



Mormon literature can never be a mature art form til LDS writers focus on the humanity of our position instead of on our “chosen” status. If our literature is going to resonate on a larger scale, the truthfulness of the Church, or lack thereof, can’t be a relevant topic.

If you’ve been reading *SUNSTONE* and *Dialogue* for the past five years, you’ve run across multiple examples of Johnny Townsend’s work. One of Mormonism’s most prolific short story writers, he is constantly putting out fiction that is, as D. Michael Quinn puts it, simultaneously “insightful, insulting, quirky-faithful, and funny.” Townsend grew up in New Orleans and served a mission in Rome before coming home, earning four degrees, and starting to publish in magazines such as *Glimmer Train* and *The Massachusetts Review*. A Hurricane Katrina refugee, he now lives in Seattle with his partner, Gary Tolman, who also served a mission in Italy. His most recent collection is titled *Zombies for Jesus*.

SUNSTONE: How do you approach writing about Mormons?

JOHNNY TOWNSEND: I once heard a prominent LDS writer say that only mainstream Mormons are worth writing about. I find that attitude thoroughly appalling. My father is a high priest and was on the stake high council for years. He is also now married to his fourth wife—not mainstream of him. My aunt was Relief Society president for her ward, all the while married to a gay man. My cousin, married to a returned missionary in the temple, had to adopt children because she couldn’t physiologically bear any. We are all non-mainstream,

and all of us have stories worth telling—and, just as important, worth hearing.

People have read some of my stories and have said, “Mormons wouldn’t do that.” I’m not writing about *Mormons* as a whole. I’m writing about this individual Mormon, or that one. Individual people might do anything, and those possibilities should be explored. We can’t write only about generic public-relations-friendly Mormons. We have to write about the complex characters who really exist.

SUNSTONE: What do you think needs to happen before Mormon literature can come into its own?

JOHNNY: The problem with a lot of Mormon writing is that the writers are trying to prove some doctrinal point. The stories are vehicles for proselytizing in one form or another. In that sense, they are very much like “art” from the former Soviet Union that is really just propaganda. Mormon literature can never be a mature art form until LDS writers focus on the humanity of our position instead of on our “chosen” status. If our literature is going to resonate on a larger scale, the truthfulness of the Church, or lack thereof, can’t be a relevant topic.

Isaac Bashevis Singer is a good model for Mormon writers. He writes tales that, rather than proclaim Judaism the true reli-

gion, simply tell human stories from a Jewish perspective—well enough to win a Nobel Prize for literature. There are Jewish books and magazines with stories critical of Israeli policies or Jewish practices. There are gay magazines with writing critical of gay attitudes and behaviors. Until we as Mormons can handle opposition in our own discussions amongst ourselves, we will be relegated to articles and stories that are nothing more meaningful than the pastor preaching to the choir.

At the same time, my goal as a gay Mormon writer can’t be to go out and convince Mormon readers that gays are really all right and that the Church should change its policies and doctrines to accommodate us. That would be proselytizing, too. I certainly try to move my readers, and if moving them means the readers feel favorably toward gays, I think that is a good thing. But I have gay characters make unwise choices and do things that aren’t necessarily praiseworthy. Some of my characters are admirable, and some make big mistakes. But with all of the stories, I try to bring some small illumination to the human condition, as trite as that sounds.

SUNSTONE: How did you get into writing gay Mormon fiction?

JOHNNY: My first missionary story was “Bus Surfing,” about a missionary being separated from the only companion he’s really liked. It received moderate acclaim in my writing workshop, but even when I was on the staff of the university literary magazine, I couldn’t get it published. After I came out, though, I revised it into a story about a missionary being separated from his first love. He can never reveal his true feelings to his companion, who will never know what he means to this elder, and who the protagonist will likely never see again in his life. At that point, it was published in *Christopher Street*, a prominent gay magazine.

Other stories underwent a similar transformation. “Washing Dishes” went from being about a missionary who can’t get along with a zone leader to being about a choice between eternal damnation and forgiveness. If this elder can’t forgive his mean zone leader, will God deign to forgive the missionary for his homosexuality? All of eternity rests on the answer. “Pissing in Peace” went from being about a guy with a shy kidney to being about the invasiveness of the Church, choosing our very underwear and even who we can allow ourselves to



"You really need to get some more pea-shooters out, Bishop."

love. The stories took on added dimensions, and weightier ones, once I decided to deal with those issues on a personal level and risk including them in my stories.

SUNSTONE: "Gay Mormon writer" is a charged role to play in our culture. How do you find yourself affected by it?

JOHNNY: It's true that the rest of gay literature has actually moved into a "post-gay" phase, where it is simply a given that the character is gay, making the character's orientation not at all the focus of the story. We need more of that in Mormon literature, too. As gays and lesbians with some understanding of the craft of storytelling, we need to make ourselves seen and heard and understood. Mainstream Mormons wish we didn't exist. They wish we would just go

away and leave them alone. We need to write gay stories so that we make ourselves visible, make ourselves noticed, so that no one can forget we are here and that we must be acknowledged.

Every writing teacher says, "Write what you know." What we know is the Mormon experience—and more specifically, the gay Mormon experience. We can move beyond our individual histories, of course, but we are most likely to write something truly worth reading if we focus on what we know best. So, I write stories such as, "Splitting with Elder Tanner," where a gay returned missionary decides to serve a second full-time mission because having a missionary companion is the closest he can morally get to marrying another man.

I would say, though, that I write more non-gay Mormon stories than gay ones,

and some of these are among my strongest stories, I think. In all of my stories, however, my main goal has to be simply to tell a good story, to create something that makes the reader feel more alive, more human, more compassionate for having read it. I think there are millions of Mormon stories of all kinds to tell. There will always be gay Mormons, of course, so there will always be worthwhile gay Mormon stories to tell.

SUNSTONE: Many people would wonder, considering the Church's recent political action, why you are so willing to continue interacting with Mormonism.

JOHNNY: I have an atheist friend who is mystified that I insist on writing Mormon fiction.

"I don't feel any need to write Baptist fiction just because I was brought up Baptist," he once told me.

"Then you probably shouldn't write any," I said. "But I *do* feel connected to the Mormon community, even if most Mormons don't want to have anything to do with me. It's a little like an Italian man leaving Italy at age 26 to make a new life in America. No matter how much he might love his new country, he can't erase 26 years of his life. And what if he still has friends and family back in Rome? Can he not care what happens to them, to the Italian government? Can he not care what happens when there's an earthquake in Naples? Does he never want to see a Sophia Loren movie or watch old classics like *La Dolce Vita* and *The Bicycle Thief*? He has a continuing connection to that country no matter how 'naturalized' he becomes."

My friend didn't buy it, feeling I should shun everything Mormon. But I pointed out that Mormons also have a lot of power politically and that to ignore that fact was foolish and short-sighted. Whether I *like* Mormons or not, or whether I feel particu-

larly Mormon myself after two decades of excommunicated life, Mormons and Mormonism are a part of my life every day. And the fact is, despite everything, I do still feel Mormon. I'm not a "log cabin" Mormon, supporting Mormon political agendas against my own best interests. I simply believe what I believe, and part of that includes some of the things I learned at church.

Pontius' Puddle



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