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Chris Heimerdinger, *Tennis Shoes among the Nephites: A Novel*

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Title

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Abstract *Tennis Shoes among the Nephites: A Novel* (1989), by Chris Heimerdinger.

Chris Heimerdinger, *Tennis Shoes among the Nephites: A Novel*. Salt Lake City: Covenant, 1989. 228 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Elouise Bell

Historical fiction, whether in print or on film, generally suffers from a common disorder. In a word, rheumatism. Stiffness. Creaky joints. And scripturally based stories are particularly susceptible to the malady. Historical and scriptural characters rarely come alive in print, burdened down as they are with all our knowledge of their ultimate destiny, with the heavy background theme song, "Little Do They Know That—," and especially with our idealization of them.

All the more reason why Chris Heimerdinger's *Tennis Shoes among the Nephites* comes as a happy surprise.

This is not only historical and scripturally based fiction, it is—what else?—a time-travel narrative. Jim, Garth, and Jennifer are contemporary kids from Cody, Wyoming, who beam their flashlights down one dark cave too many, and wind up smack in the middle of the Book of Mormon era, during one of the Nephites' bloodier stretches. The book unfolds their adventures among the strangers whose names and intrigues are so well known to them, or at least to Garth, who seems to have the Book of Mormon memorized. *Tennis Shoes*, designed for teen and young adult readers, may have its flaws, but its characters are definitely not stiff. The author seems to understand that people are people, whatever their era. Except in the case of a prophet or two, his characters speak believable dialogue and behave like members of the human race we all know and love.

The book is, as one would expect, action-centered. It barrels along like a tropical version of *Star Wars*. (If you read closely, you'll even find the equivalent of a Jedi sword.) Adult readers may feel as though they had accompanied some young friends on an extended roller coaster ride; after a while, you're reluctant to scream and throw your hands in the air, even to preserve the name of good sportsmanship. But for the right audience, the book's rapid-fire pace is just the ticket.

Heimerdinger has done his homework, to the extent possible, and the setting is convincing, whatever technical flaws may be visible to a squinting eye. He handles detail and description well; in terms of the old creative writing maxim, he *shows*, rather than merely tells.

But the author's greatest achievement is his commitment to the two central characters. From first to last, Heimerdinger stands by them, and to the extent possible in an adventure book of this sort, refuses to use them, to accord them less than the fullest humanity possible. Garth is a nerdish scripture-freak, and it would be easy to let him drift into caricature. But his personal passion for the world he has come to know through studying the Book of Mormon is never compromised; indeed, it deepens and rings truer as the novel progresses. Jim, the narrator, seems a mighty precocious thirteen-year-old, but he also is true to himself throughout—ironic, skeptical, teaching, and loyal—not at all a bad combination for a time-traveler, or anybody else.

This is a book written with imagination, care, a surprising amount of skill, and the right kind of conviction. Its shortcomings don't really matter. I plan to give it to my favorite teenager as soon as he gets home from seeing *Back to the Future, Part III*.