



1-1-2015

Steven L. Peck, *The Scholar of Moab and A Short Stay in Hell*

Reviewed by Scott Hales

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2>

 Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Hales, Reviewed by Scott (2015) "Steven L. Peck, *The Scholar of Moab and A Short Stay in Hell*," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol2/iss1/23>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mormon Studies Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Steven L. Peck. *The Scholar of Moab*. Torrey, UT: Torrey House, 2011;
A Short Stay in Hell. Washington, DC: Strange Violin Editions, 2012.

Reviewed by Scott Hales

OVER THE PAST FORTY YEARS, writers of literary Mormon fiction have focused on telling realistic stories that provide unconventional views of Mormon life to contrast with the cheery images provided by the LDS Church Correlation Committee. Rife with depictions of Mormon cultural foibles and moral failures, these stories seek not to embarrass Mormons or condemn them unfairly, but to emphasize humanity's desperate need for Christ's atonement and grace. For instance, in Levi S. Peterson's *The Backslider*, the most critically and aesthetically successful Mormon novel from this era, protagonist Frank Windham overcomes his self-destructive drive to purge himself of sin when Jesus appears to him in the form of a cigarette-smoking cowboy, chastises him for not accepting His redeeming blood, and encourages him to enjoy a good Christian life. Atypical and—for many—blasphemous, Peterson's Cowboy Jesus preaches a gospel that offers an alternative standard of righteousness from the one Frank gleaned from the more dogmatic members of his southern Utah community—particularly his mother, whose narrow views on keeping the commandments would make even the most orthodox Mormon squirm. This alternative standard, however, while jarring to many Mormon readers, is crucial to the cultural work of the novel. Rather than mocking that which is sacred to demean it, it seeks actually to improve it by redefining our understanding of what it means to be a faithful Mormon.

Works like *The Backslider* continue to appear on bookshelves to offer Mormon readers similar alternatives, often with the subtly didactic intent of encouraging readers to replace hard-line, dogmatic approaches to Mormon living with greater attention to faith instead of works, compassion instead of judgment, and grace instead of condemnation. Lately, however, several works of Mormon fiction have stepped away from this approach, distancing themselves from drawing pat conclusions on

questions of ethics and morality to explore other avenues of meaning—and meaning-making—in the Mormon world. Indeed, rather than reconfiguring the way Mormons understand devotion to God, church, and community, these works have embraced an approach that perceives the whole of the Mormon cosmology as a kind of playground where one can tell offbeat and fanciful stories that revel in the chaotic now of an information-age Mormonism. While these novels do not wholly forgo the Mormon literary tradition of “artistic preaching,” they do so in a manner that often raises more questions than they answer.

Among recent contributions to this new direction in Mormon literature have been Steven L. Peck’s *The Scholar of Moab* (2011), a novel, and *A Short Stay in Hell* (2012), a novella. Both works are set in landscapes on the fringes of orthodox American Mormon life and belief. In *The Scholar of Moab*, set in the 1970s, protagonist Hyrum Thayne wrestles with his listless life as a “miserly laborer” for the US Geological Survey in Moab, Utah, desiring instead to “stroll among the high & mighty” as a scientist-scholar (pp. 6–7). He also lives a kind of double life as a Mormon “in outward experience” and so, “like many scientists,” remains an “unbeliever” in his heart (p. 9). On the other hand, Soren Johansson, the protagonist of *A Short Stay in Hell*, is an active, believing Latter-day Saint who dies and finds himself not in the spirit world but in an afterlife where Zoroastrianism is the true religion and hell is modeled after the setting of Jorge Luis Borges’s 1941 short story “The Library of Babel.” Interestingly, though, despite Soren’s devotion to his faith, Mormonism plays a much smaller role in *A Short Stay in Hell* than it does in *The Scholar of Moab*, functioning more as a starting point for Soren’s existential journey than as an elemental part of the work’s setting and themes. Still, as Soren’s stay in hell progresses, perceptive readers will identify ways Mormonism flavors the entirety of the text, even after Soren abandons his old beliefs in the face of his new Zoroastrian reality. The novella’s attention to themes of free will, accountability, and eternal relationships, for instance, give *A Short Stay in Hell* the feel of a Mormon meditation on the logic of the plan of salvation.

Aside from their innovative uses of Mormon elements, both works benefit from strong main characters. *The Scholar of Moab* introduces readers to Hyrum Thyne first as a vandalized statue, a broken tribute “reverently erected” to honor Hyrum as “The Lord’s Chosen Servant and Defender of Moab.” The reason for this monument, at least initially, remains a mystery for the novel to unfold; however, the image of a “once grand idol” obscured by “verdant fescue ringing the red-rock base out of which two hollow, broken brass shins protrude boldly” immediately associates Hyrum not only with “some perverted twist on an Arthurian legend,” as the text suggests, but also with the “vast and trunkless legs of stone” of the broken and forgotten statue of Ozymandias, which once memorialized, according to Shelley’s famous poem, a powerful pharaoh and the city he built. Like these legends, Hyrum is a forgotten hero whose glory days have become nothing more than a half-remembered curiosity, a scattered narrative for amateur historians to puzzle over and piece together. Indeed, Hyrum is more antihero than hero. Naive, poorly educated, and morally inconsistent, Hyrum deceives his way through the novel, conjuring ludicrous stories about Communist plots and Gadianton robbers in order to obscure his failings as a husband and Mormon. Yet there is something heroic about Hyrum Thyne’s desire to transcend his “Dickensian life” and become a scholar. If he is a hero, he is a tragic hero—a man whose longing to transcend his environment is hampered by his penchant for “get[ting] caught up in things in ways that make no sense” (p. 204). As Hyrum’s fabrications snowball and increasingly excite Moab’s superstitious Mormon community, his awareness of this tragic flaw becomes more pronounced, causing occasional, poignant moments of reflection in his personal journal:

I would have been much happier talking about bumblebees & their Faith. Or talking about Evolution. . . . But even though that is what I wanted to do that is not what I did do. Instead I dig a deeper & deeper Hole about these Gadianton Robbers. The very thing I want to be done with. The very thing I want to fix I Break even more. Why I do this I do not know. I seem my worst Enemy mostly. A real Enemy could not do worse I think. (p. 204)

Hyrum is right about his character. *The Scholar of Moab* has no obvious villain to oppose its protagonist except that within him that keeps redemption at bay. Mormon literary critic Marden Clark once opined that “Mormonism has a high potential for tragedy,”¹ and *The Scholar of Moab* might be that claim’s best evidence. In Hyrum the aspiring scholar we see great heroic potential, particularly in his capacity to dream and inspire others, yet his inability to apply that potential in positively transformative ways—either for himself or for others—causes unnecessary suffering in those who love and trust him. In this respect, he is a kind of fallen prophet or false savior, a sad example of a Mormon whose inability to “[put] off the natural man,” as King Benjamin terms it, stymies efforts toward meaningful goodness (see Mosiah 3:19).

If Hyrum Thyne is a tragic antihero, then Soren Johansson is a Mormon everyman whose stay in hell evokes the experiences of Mormons who, upon finding their foundation of faith shaky, begin new searches for truth. Indeed, Soren’s journey through hell involves a process of reconciling his mortal certainty about the truthfulness of Mormonism with the disillusionment he feels when the reality of his afterlife undermines that certainty. In hell, for instance, Soren discovers that “all contracts, bonds, commitments, covenants, pledges, and promises entered into prior to . . . entering Hell are null and void,” thus rendering his deeply held beliefs about the eternal nature of his relationships to his wife and children suddenly inconsequential. Similarly, when Soren is offered coffee, the once-simple choice of whether or not to refuse it becomes an existential crisis:

Being a Mormon, I had never even tasted coffee, let alone drunk a whole cupful. How could that matter now? Zoroastrianism had been shown true, and I was in a Hell that had no prohibitions against it. Still, it was hard. Lifelong habits are not easily broken. Keeping the Word of Wisdom, as we Mormons called our health code, had always been taken as a sign of my righteousness, my

1. Marden J. Clark, “Paradox and Tragedy in Mormonism,” in *Liberating Form: Mormon Essays on Religion and Literature* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992), 131.

worthiness to attend the holy temple, and to participate fully in the church. Even here in Hell, after a lifetime of keeping the Word of Wisdom, I was having an ugly time deciding whether to try a cup. (pp. 39–40)

Although worried that his new “Hell was really all a ruse concocted by God” to try his faith, Soren drinks the coffee, but not without feeling as if he “had betrayed something deep within [him]” (p. 40). Like that of Hyrum Thayne, Soren’s character is shaped by his increasingly complicated relationship to Mormonism. As his ties to the community lessen, so do his moral certainties about the laws and rules that are supposed to order the universe:

All my life I had lived with a strong sense of morality. How do you give it up? How do you do things you thought you’d never do? Where do all the things you believed go, when all the supporting structure is found to be a myth? How do you know how or on what to take a mortal stand, how do you behave when it turns out there are no cosmic rules, no categorical imperatives? It was difficult. So tricky to untangle. I still remember the deep sense of loss. The pain almost killed me. (pp. 51–52)

In a sense, then, *A Short Stay in Hell* functions as a kind of thought experiment that asks readers to imagine how they would react, if placed in a similar situation, to the collapse of the assumptions that govern their lives and worldviews. For this reason, *A Short Stay in Hell* has relevance for readers beyond Mormon circles, especially if they read Soren’s Mormonism as a type for any system or ideology—religious or otherwise—that shapes human experiences in significant ways. For readers, that is, Soren is a vehicle through which they can better reflect upon and assess how they choose to order their lives.

Of the two works, *A Short Stay in Hell* is the most conventional in form and style. Written from a first-person perspective, the novella provides an essentially chronological account of Soren’s stay, with a weary, hell-worn Soren relating his journey from the vantage point of several billions of years in the future. Indeed, as if to make up for its rather conventional

narrative approach, the novella expands (and boggles!) its readers' minds with the way it stretches and collapses their sense of time, condensing eons into barely one hundred pages in a way that seems neither gimmicky nor awkward. Soren's narrative voice is such that glossing over the events of a million years as if they were the events of a minute seems natural and believable. It is a voice that is intimately acquainted with the concept of eternity in ways known perhaps only to the gods.

The Scholar of Moab, on the other hand, is a fragmented narrative that disorients readers with nonlinear chronology, multiple (and often unreliable) narrators, and blurry generic lines. Set largely in the 1970s and comprised of documentary fragments recovered from the cluttered trailer of "a bitter old man," the novel is a cacophony of voices, formats, and styles loosely bound together by their interest in Hyrum Thyne's rise and fall. Aside from Hyrum's pathetic journal, readers become acquainted with the horrid doggerel of Sandra Thyne, Hyrum's devout Mormon wife; the whimsical, overwrought prose of New Age poet Dora Tanner, Hyrum's mistress; and the philosophical reflections of Oxford-educated Edward and William (Eddy and Billy) Babcock, conjoined twins who befriend Hyrum and work as cowboys in Moab. Each of these texts contributes something to our understanding of Hyrum's story, yet what ties them all together is the welcome voice of "The Redactor," the modern-day compiler and sometime interpreter of the found documentary record. He is to *The Scholar of Moab* what Mormon is to the Book of Mormon, although he lacks a Moroni to tie up the loose ends of the story's chaos. Indeed, like *A Short Stay in Hell*, the novel ends without the convenience and satisfaction of a traditional ending, thus forcing readers to draw their own conclusions from The Redactor's work.

Of course, neither *The Scholar of Moab* nor *A Short Stay in Hell* is interested in delivering traditional endings. Both works have much to say about Mormons and to Mormons, but like a number of other new works of Mormon fiction, they are not interested in concluding their narratives with the tidiness of a rote Sunday School lesson—or even the relatively tidy heresies of something like *The Backslider*. Rather, they are focused on—or at least moderately preoccupied with—foregrounding

and exploring important issues and themes that touch at the core of human experience. In other words, Hyrum Thayne and Soren Johansson allow readers to negotiate their own grapplings with the everyday chaos of uncertainty and doubt that make finding a place in the world—and enduring to the end—so difficult. If these works seem inconclusive, it is only because Peck wants to give us practice in needling out the meanings that can be so elusive in reality.

Scott Hales received his PhD in English from the University of Cincinnati. His critical essays on American and Mormon literature have been published in *Religion and the Arts*; *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*; *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*; and *War, Literature, and the Arts*. He has also published book reviews in *Irreantum* and *Religion and Popular Culture*.