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Reviewed by Anne Blue Wills

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Craig Harline. *Way Below the Angels: The Pretty Clearly Troubled but Not Even Close to Tragic Confessions of a Real Live Mormon Missionary*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014.

Reviewed by Anne Blue Wills

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THE PLOT OF CRAIG HARLINE’S UNEVEN MEMOIR follows his adventures as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Belgium in the mid-1970s. Predictably, the experience is much harder than he expects—full of what he calls “rough stuff” (p. 265)—in part because of the myths and expectations that flavor Mormon culture. This heroic model demands a missionary who knows scripture perfectly and can answer every non-Mormon’s questions convincingly, bonds seamlessly with his mission companion, and brings in a convert at least once a month. All of this missionary effectiveness arises from the missionary’s unshakeable faith and complete reliance on the Holy Ghost’s blessing of his work.

As his title indicates, Harline’s experience did not match this “One True Story” of the Mormon missionary (p. 259). The considerable effort he and his mission companions expend tracting, “proselyting,” and meeting with inquirers does not lead so automatically to conversions. The work frustrates and exhausts, pitching the young Harline into a crisis of faith. He pokes considerable fun at himself and everyone else—senior and junior mission companions, potential converts, mission zone leaders, his bishop, the predominantly Catholic population of Belgium, elderly people, overweight people. He documents his many foibles as a missionary but, in some of the book’s more poignant sections, also tells how those experiences prompted his groping toward a less orthodox, more humanistic faith.

His title also signals one of the major weaknesses of the book: Harline’s tale is “pretty clearly troubled but not even close to tragic.” Is that enough to make us want to read the book? What sets Harline’s account

apart as remarkable? If potential readers are in search of a memoir recounting an unusual yet somehow typically human story, Harline's account will disappoint. One can see or read versions of this narrative in classic LDS cinema such as the drama *God's Army* (2000) or the comedy *The R.M.* (2003). Ryan McIlvain's semiautobiographical novel *Elders* (2013) more artfully tells a very similar story.

The book falls short, too, as an engaging story. The narrative reaches some powerful plateaus. Much of the book, however, focuses on the considerable tedium of LDS missionary life and on the callow reflections of an American teenager trying to live in an unfamiliar culture. Moreover, in his telling, Harline relies heavily on typographical tricks whose overuse may wear on the reader's patience. He particularly favors long, inexplicably hyphenated phrases: In praise of the missionary endeavor, he writes that there is indeed "something to be said for compulsory living-with-people-you-wouldn't-ordinarily-choose-to-live-with" (p. 75). Similar examples are too numerous to list and distracting in the extreme. Harline also builds lists of sentence fragments whose organizing theme fades after the third or fourth paragraph of partial thoughts. Other habits—overuse of italics and irony punctuation, for instance—signal that Harline may not trust his readers to pick up the tensions between official myth and individual experience. The literary quality of this story, therefore, falls short of the standard set by other contemporary LDS memoirs such as Joanna Brooks's *Book of Mormon Girl* (2012) or similar seeker memoirs such as Carlos Eire's *Learning to Die in Miami* (2011) and Gary Shteyngart's *Little Failure* (2013).

As noted, Harline does mine some powerful moments from his experience. "The whole mission business," he writes, "was more about suffering a little with people and feeling connected to them than it was about baptizing them" (p. 219). The young Harline, faced with arduous and apparently unproductive missionizing, eventually stumbles into deep awareness of the Belgian landscape, whose ancient quiet speaks to him in ways that cannot be reduced to bullet points in a pocket-size missionary handbook. He also forms connections with ordinary Belgians that solidify into enduring friendships. These friends tend to be

the ones who take a liking to Elder Harline but tell him they just are not interested in listening to the church's gospel discussions—the lessons that, in the One True Story of LDS missionaries, lead smoothly to conversion and baptism. His “understanding of what goodness was” began to be less rooted in rules and regulations and more “from just seeing it personified in two ordinary- and even stereotypical-looking Belgianlanders named Yvonne and Raymond” (pp. 234–35). Harline realizes, too, that he loves to study and indeed loves church and meetings and gathering with other missionaries. His vocation as a prolific Reformation historian who teaches at Brigham Young University clearly grew from his mission experience. All of these insights clarify for the young Harline a “totally silent thought/feeling that calmly but overwhelmingly entered the emptiness [he felt] inside . . . *Just be yourself*” (p. 120).

Beyond the narrative arc of Harline's transformation, the book raises issues worth pondering within and beyond LDS circles. Religious communities in the United States tend to engage in scrupulous examination of sexual behavior to the exclusion of real conversation about the holiness of human sexuality, and the LDS community (at least in Harline's 1970s) was no exception. In preparation for his mission, and once while he is in the field, the young Harline voluntarily goes before his bishop to confess sexual sins that amount to little more than accidentally brushing a girl's arm. He writes to another girl to ask her forgiveness for another gaffe, which she had not remembered or sought an apology for. These trivia in a context of such scrupulosity signal a need that Amy Frykholm has explored masterfully in her book *See Me Naked: Stories of Sexual Exile in American Christianity* (2012). The scruples distract from knowing self and others as sexual beings whose desire could teach us something about God's own desiring for relationship. Harline's befuddled teenage self serves as a caution not only to the LDS community but also to other communities: religious authorities that shame young women and men into avoiding each other as sexual beings until the moment they are ready to marry and start a family want it both ways.

The book raises theological questions for any Christian who ponders grace and works, the power of the Holy Ghost, divine Providence, and the reality of evil. Young Elder Harline pushes himself to “get . . . worthy” (p. 14) and bemoans the moment when he and his companion “lost” a potential convert (p. 110). He struggles, as do many Christians, to find exactly where human effort makes its contribution to the spreading of God’s kingdom. Harline’s experiences also illustrate perennial tensions at work between individual responsibility and institutional claims to religious authority. Moreover, his story evinces the ethical, cultural, and theological tangles intrinsic to conversionary missions.

Some of the book’s strangeness of tone and plot may relate to some mixed signals about Harline’s intended audience. He teaches at Brigham Young University. Yale University Press publishes his historical writings. Eerdmans published this book and all but dominates the field when it comes to books about and for American evangelicals. So is *Way Below the Angels* a Mormon apologia, addressed to them? Harline’s continuing affiliation with BYU suggests that he remains an LDS Church member in good standing. His spiritual awakening in Belgium did not apparently propel him out of the church into an embrace of traditional evangelical Christianity. His own children, he notes, have completed their own missions. So why would his story appeal to evangelical Christian readers? It certainly confirms some of the worst Mormon stereotypes—that Saints are brainwashed, that those converted by missionaries are only responding to coercion and therefore fall away rapidly. It does not build clear bridges to evangelical readers. Perhaps, then, he addresses his book to other Latter-day Saints. Yet Harline’s withering snark about lax preparation and naive missionaries and his powerful suspicion about the ethics of proselytizing would seem to disqualify his story as church-approved reading. Maybe, then, Eerdmans and Harline hope that this book will signal to other LDS authors that they have friends in Grand Rapids. Maybe we can look forward to more (and more diverse) Mormon voices coming from Eerdmans. And that would be a good thing.

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Donald S. Lopez Jr. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Greg Wilkinson

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THE *TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD* IS A *TERMA*, a Tibetan treasure text. Starting in the eighth century CE, texts were buried in the ground and, according to Buddhist predestinarian teachings, buried in the minds of future Tibetan lamas as well. Several hundred years later, the lamas who were prepared to understand and interpret the texts discovered them. (Tibetan Buddhist teachings suggest that those who found *terma* knew of their locations because they were the ones that buried them in a past life.) These texts were often represented as a restoration of original, authentic Buddhist teachings and were significant in developing perceptions of Tibetan Buddhism as a distinct tradition. Those with background in Mormonism and Tibetan Buddhism may not be surprised to find comparative analyses between *terma* and the Book of Mormon. These texts share some similarities in their narratives of provenance and discourse of legitimation. Donald Lopez, in his “biography” of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, notes these but goes well beyond identifying similarities in the textual traditions of Mormonism and Tibetan