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The Edge of the Reservoir Larry E. Morris

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LARRY E. MORRIS. *The Edge of the Reservoir*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988. 233 pp. \$7.95.

Reviewed by Randall L. Hall, manager of seminary curriculum, LDS Church Educational System.

Larry Morris's novel *The Edge of the Reservoir* ambitiously weaves together such weighty topics as life, death, religion, love, marriage, and friendship, without being heavy-handed. The novel reads well. The language is simple, lucid, and flowing, carrying the reader along, deftly shifting between the difficulties of the present and the bittersweet recollection of the past. And there are some moments of genuine humor.

The book's focal point is Ryan Masterson, who, in his late thirties, is already drifting in the doldrums of mid-life crisis. Frustrated with his job, his marriage, and unfulfilled dreams, Ryan retreats to junk food, late night TV, self-absorption, and reminiscence. Ryan's transformation from a young, artistically sensitive, outdoor loving, hardworking distance runner to a frustrated father of two, somewhat perplexed dreamer of dreams, late night snacker, whose boss and wife are chief sources of his misery, is nicely done. Carefully selected, well-drawn scenes in the past and present, along with realistic dialogue, give a very believable sense of the pain and frustration in someone we may casually notice on the bus or in the mall, wrapped in the cloak of everydayness, about whose inner

life we can only guess. Morris manages to walk the line describing mid-life crisis without falling off into cliché. Much of this can be attributed to the accessible, everyday reality that makes the book live. However, in some instances the everyday detail may eventually surface as a weakness. Mention of episodes of *M.A.S.H.*, particular items in 7-Eleven stores, and specific Utah Jazz basketball games and players (several of whom are no longer with the team) already date the book and may soon become a distraction.

Of particular interest and insight are the varied family and friendship relationships portrayed in the novel. These relationships, treated with immediacy and poignancy, form, stretch, tighten, and teeter with believable balance. One of the pivotal relationships involves Rosemary Richards, a good-looking, athletic Mormon girl with a weakness for Gene Pitney (a crooner of sad love songs from the 1950s and early 1960s). Ryan's frequent reminiscence of his courting days takes us through the bewilderment, delight, and frustration of a non-Mormon/Mormon romance, with the unresolved emotions, implications, and questions strung along his memories of almost twenty years.

The look at the Mormon church through Ryan's nonmember eyes is fair and often insightful, giving both Mormons and non-Mormons some things to consider in reaching a mutual understanding. But while religion, or at least the difficulty of interfaith dating or marriage relationships, forms a significant part of the book, any real concern with God and his reality, or his relationship to individuals, is relegated to the reader's imagination.

There are some fine moments of complexity and humanity in Ryan's relationship with his Uncle Neal and Aunt Norma, who, especially after the death of Ryan's mother, become his surrogate parents. Ryan's close identification and bond with his uncle is given an added dimension in that, like Ryan, Uncle Neal had courted a Mormon girl. In his case it led to marriage. Uncle Neal's death and funeral serve as the backdrop to scenes of compassion, emotional richness, and depth.

Perhaps fittingly, it is Uncle Neal who accurately puts his finger on Ryan's problem, a problem that drains promise and energy from the last third of the novel. Shortly after the death of Ryan's mother, his uncle tells him to "stop blaming other people for your problems." "You're feeling sorry for yourself" (163), he tells Ryan. Unfortunately, Ryan never seems to grow beyond those feelings, and they tend to paralyze him. For the most part, Ryan doesn't act but is acted upon, hoping some current will carry him to happiness and success. This leaves the last third of the book less satisfying than the first two thirds. The chronicling of Ryan's

frustration is done so convincingly that we anticipate a stronger resolution than the unconvincing drift to Ryan's halfhearted realization of how important it is to have someone love you. There seems to be little significant grappling with values, with understanding, with resolve.

One telling episode in which Ryan, upset over having broken up with his Mormon girlfriend Rose, goes to Rexburg, Idaho, to see her, and then decides not to, is illustrative of his paralysis: "He wandered into the store, sat down at the fountain, and ordered a large Coke, hoping something would happen—that someone would sit next to him and announce a change in the rules: he and Rose could get married without him joining the church and without her compromising her belief" (164).

It is generally what Ryan *doesn't* do that shapes the direction of his life. When a lonely businesswoman suggests he come to her hotel room, he freezes, and his silence is taken by the woman to be a tacit refusal of her invitation: "She walked into the mall without looking back, and was gone. All it would have taken was a simple yes. She had mistaken his paralysis for virtue. He hadn't been able to say yes at the crucial moment, and now the opportunity had vanished" (150). His virtue will remain intact as long as doing nothing will preserve it. But if a woman made a stronger move, Ryan admits to himself in another instance, "He knew what would happen if a woman like that fell into his arms" (126).

Ryan's lack of responsibility may stem from what he perceives as a lack of meaning or purpose in life. His philosophy seems best summed up in his own words: "You lived out a life full of events that had nothing to do with each other. And none of it had anything to do with fairness. But you played along and pretended things were just how they were supposed to be" (183). This same sense of bewilderment and drift is echoed in the final scene where, after almost twenty years, Ryan visits with Mrs. Richards, the mother of his Mormon girlfriend. After staring for a while at the picture of Rose with her husband and family and sorting through his own life, past and present, Ryan admits to himself that "he couldn't understand anything" (232). And we're afraid he's right.

As they say goodbye, Rose's mother tells him, "And I'm glad [things are] going well for you. I always knew you'd be successful" (232). True, there have been some successes here and there, but her statement is much more ironic than truthful. The echo of "you played along and pretended things were just how they were supposed to be," rings rather forlornly. Ryan will continue to play along. Sometimes things will be as they were supposed to be. Often they will not.