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Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone and Other Stories Douglas H. Thayer

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DOUGLAS H. THAYER. *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone and Other Stories*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1989. 154 pp. $7.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Mary L. Bradford, past editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought,* now an author living in Arlington, Virginia.

This well-designed book with cover art by Royden Card will be warmly welcomed by Douglas Thayer's many readers. The stories are vintage Thayer, well-honed, not recognizably Mormon, but definitively Western. The five stories present themes familiar to Thayer's readers: young men in search of themselves, testing their wits and their courage against a challenging landscape. Sometimes in a cowboy-Indian tradition, they test their manhood, but unlike the old heroes they are not always victorious, and they are not "macho." They doubt themselves, they are intrinsically gentle, and somewhere they have mothers who worry.

The title story speaks in the voice of a young man working at Yellowstone Lake as a summer ranger. He is befriended by an elderly couple who have been summer campers for more than forty years. Mrs. Wahlquist feeds him and shares worries about her husband. Since his retirement from Sears, Mr. Wahlquist has developed kidney ailments and a melancholy turn of mind. "My husband was born at least a hundred years too late," she says, and the young narrator understands. Their trailer is a "small museum" full of books, maps, Indian artifacts, and photographs of famous Indian chiefs. Wahlquist "had spent forty years visiting the places he'd read about in the accounts left by the trappers, mountain men, explorers, and Indians. He liked to stand at the place and read from what had been written" (82).

" 'The wilderness is gone now,' Mr. Wahlquist said. . . . 'You can still find little pieces of it, but it's mostly gone. . . . It's a land of spirits. That's all. All you can do is think about what it was like' " (83). When the unnamed narrator joins in the search for the missing man, the outcome is foregone, but the grief is real. Grief, not only for a life, but for the great disappearing spaces of the West.

The other four stories are also strong and moving. "The Red-Tailed Hawk," first published in *Dialogue,* is a classic. Its careful attention to detail, an almost detached dryness, renders this coming-of-age story fit competition for Hemingway. In fact, I like Thayer better than Hemingway. He wears better. Thayer not only grows on the reader, but he is obviously a growing writer. He has grown in his ability to depict characters other than young men

coming of age. He has developed the sensitivity to create women and children of different ages and stages. He has Hemingway's unflinching eye but with a deeper moral vision. His Mormonism influences him but without the sentimentality that sometimes mars the work of Mormon writers.

"The Gold Mine" is told entirely through the eyes of Mrs. Miller, a woman of uncertain age who has been attending the sick, the wounded, and the dead at the bottom of a canyon with an abandoned gold mine somewhere in the desert (Nevada?). To her, the quick and the dead have equal validity. She speaks about the processes of laying out a body with the same matter-of-factness she applies to baking a cake or tending her flowers. The reader knows women like her, women who have survived three husbands and severe attacks of diabetes, and who seemingly will go on until the Millennium. However, her energetic sanity covers a creeping decay, an unnamed dread.

We do not really know who Carl is—the young man who lives alone in a shack near the abandoned mine shaft. But we sense that he has been abandoned too. We meet him when he comes down the canyon to report the death of the boy, Richard, whose body is in the shaft. Richard has been living with Carl. Richard's father had brought Richard from Provo, Utah, in an attempt to reform him. He had explained to Mrs. Miller that he "wanted him to run loose. . . . He just wanted Richard to ride that dirt bike of his across this desert till he got some of the hell out of his system. He'd decided he couldn't keep Richard from breaking his neck if that's what he wanted to do." The father had owned stock in the worthless mine, so "he figured he would get something out of it" (25). We hear the scream of Richard's mother when Carl calls to break the news. We listen to Mrs. Miller's litany of regret as she dresses the body and speculates on the mother's grief for another abandoned son.

The terrifying feelings of the almost silent Carl somehow break through the quiet economy of the writing. The merciless qualities of the lonely desert are contrasted with the social cooperation of its ranchers, its lawmen, its nurturing women. Carl must build a box for the body, help Mrs. Miller dress it, and load it intc the back of his pickup on a bed of ice for the long ride to Utah. Mrs. Miller shows him how, feeds him, lectures him, and rides with him. The characters take shape through deft depiction of the telling detail, and small gestures assume symbolic power. An unforgettable story!

All the stories in this collection are unforgettable. I recommend them unequivocally.