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Waiting for the Flash Paris Anderson

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PARIS ANDERSON. *Waiting for the Flash*. [Orem, Utah]: Scotlin, 1988. 133 pp. \$7.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Gladys C. Farmer, an English instructor at Brigham Young University.

Waiting for the Flash, a novella by Paris Anderson, is a mature, engaging look at the LDS mission experience. The story is told through the eyes of Elder Ron Say, a twenty-year-old “tough guy” called to serve in the Mexico Torreon Mission.

The format of the book — daily journal entries — is an approach that wouldn’t work for most missionary stories. The ordinary mission primarily contains dull, routine days punctuated only occasionally by memorable highs and lows. The journal format works well here, though, for three reasons. First, Elder Say

is *not* a typical missionary. He abounds in paradoxes: tough, yet gentle; sweet, yet crude; insightful, yet confused; a repentant sinner, yet one who can't forgive himself; a genuinely Christian person, yet one who can't become the idealized straight Mormon missionary. Second, the settings cover three distinct areas, each containing vivid, astute observations and social commentary: the Missionary Training Center in Provo, the California Los Angeles Mission (where the missionaries wait for their visas), and the Mexico Torreon Mission. Finally, Elder Say's mission gets shortened by eight months because of medical problems. One doesn't have to read 730 journal entries! In fact, the least absorbing parts of the book are those few weeks when Elder Say is at peace with himself and his companions and when several investigators are responding well to their message. Although many investigators are mentioned, the reader never gets to know these people well enough to become emotionally involved with them because the focus of this book is Elder Say.

Despite this one-dimensional approach, *Waiting for the Flash* is remarkably compelling. In fact, I enjoyed it as much as any literary piece I have read describing the Mormon missionary experience. I enjoyed its frequent, sometimes raucous humor and appreciated its insights and honesty. The hurt, the pain, the introspection, the hope, the faith, the growth, and the implied judgments of the system are real — and important to understand.

In his prefatory note, Anderson comments that he “wrote this book with the hope of helping readers understand themselves and the foe missionaries face” (iii). I had to ask myself, “What is that foe?” I'm not sure, but as delineated in the book, it could be either external or internal forces. It could be the missionary system itself. The seriousness of the charge to preach the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people has created a mind-set and a regimentation that causes incredible pressure, frustration, and guilt for any “free spirits” who come to devote two years of their lives to the cause. This predicament is vividly characterized in the difficulties of Elder Say and his friends, who struggle through the MTC unwittingly “break[ing] rules I never even knew existed” and who long to “go somewhere where I couldn't get in trouble for everything I do” (20). Once Elder Say leaves the MTC, he is genuinely surprised to find that his first, “nonconformist” companion is still one of the top baptizers in the mission and marvels that one can have fun and still have success. But such moments of feeling that “it's OK to be human” are quickly negated by the comments and actions of later, more rigid senior companions and mission leaders who make him feel “incompetent and weak” (43).

A second foe could be the self-righteousness and lack of compassion of those involved in the system. At the time of his mental breakdown, Elder Say is fortunate to be with a kind, older companion who is also an experienced social worker. But even this elder doesn't see and appreciate Elder Say's valor until he takes the liberty to read Elder Say's journal.

After his healing and the arrival of his visa, Elder Say finally has the opportunity to proselyte where he had received his call. One day, in Gomez, Mexico, Elder Say and a native companion have a vivid experience of feeling the presence of Satan in one of their tracting areas. With great soberness, Elder Say reflects on the significance of missionary work and begins to understand the intensity of his teachers at the MTC and the driving dedication of a few of the missionaries. He cannot though — and rightfully so — equate this passion with the power hunger and unkindness he sees in many of the missionaries. This book gives a penetrating commentary on missionaries “giddy with their authority” (13) who treat fellow missionaries and contacts alike with a sense of superiority.

Another foe might be the insecurity or impotence in the missionary himself — whether caused by sin, unresolved conflicts, lack of faith, or simply social and emotional deficiencies common to youth. Many missionaries, feeling the heavy weight of their responsibility, try earnestly to get in touch with themselves and the Spirit. Such intense introspection sometimes leaves them, as it does Elder Say, feeling unworthy of God's grace.

An overwhelming message of Mormonism is “by their works ye shall know them,” and success in the mission field is usually measured by numbers. It is thus difficult for struggling missionaries like Elder Say to understand that our Savior's love is unconditional, that we are sufficient just as we are, that our love and faith are more important to God than what we have achieved. This truth is one of the important messages of *Waiting for the Flash* and one that applies to more than missionaries. I fear, though, that this book may not reach the audience it merits. In fact, it has the potential of offending many: those who have never served a mission or heard one described in such honest terms, those too far from the experience to remember the pain involved, and those who are too caught up in “looking good” to see the genuineness and value in those who are struggling.

The mission ranks (and the Church) are full of the likes of Elder Say: “human” people trying to mature, repentant sinners trying to stay straight, guilt-laden people trying to accept the message they are teaching. Their actions often belie a genuine love of God and an intense personal struggle to find and serve him. Anderson skillfully and touchingly reminds us of that truth. For this reason alone, *Waiting for the Flash* ought to be read and pondered.