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The Tree House

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Douglas Thayer. *The Tree House: A Novel*.

Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2009.

Reviewed by Phillip A. Snyder

Douglas Thayer has always been a wonderful writer of male initiation stories, beginning notably with “The Red Tail Hawk,” originally published in *Dialogue*¹ and included as the first story in his 1989 collection *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone*² as “The Red-Tailed Hawk.” In this story, Thayer explores the grim and beautiful process by which his unnamed teenaged protagonist comes to apprehend his own mortality in connection with a disastrous solo goose hunt he undertakes one December just before Christmas. The first-person narrative accounts well for both the external and internal struggles of a young man intent on becoming one with nature—literally as well as philosophically—particularly as he tries to turn killing and taxidermy into effective modes of life preservation. He yearns to touch the living birds with which he identifies so strongly for their solitary freedom in the sky and for their aloofness from the earth-bound world of humans, a world he has come to despise. He immerses himself in their natural world and risks his life to approximate their existence: “I lived my real life in the [river] bottoms, fished, swam, climbed the high trees, embraced limbs, sometimes ran naked and alone through the green willows, lay spread-eagle under the sun, soared on the great rope swing, hunted the birds, killed them.”³ However, he remains blind to the hypocrisy of his own hunting ethic and, seriously misjudging his dominance over nature, takes himself to the very brink of death in a freezing snow storm:

All summer the cows had been vanishing, the wire-hung birds too, the carp, the little buck. And I had no name for it, only vanishing, knew only that it was not swimming, not running naked in the moonlight, not embracing trees, not soaring. It was not feeling. I grew whiter, saw myself vanishing into the snow. I watched, and then slowly, like beginning pain, the terror seeped into me, the knowing. I struggled up, fled.⁴

This climactic epiphany in “Red Tail Hawk” precipitates in the protagonist an immediate reconsideration of his desire to merge into nature,

illustrating also the well-worn truism that young people possess a naïve notion of their own immortality, one from which they must be disabused. It thus also reaffirms the thematic heart of this initiation story, which ends with the main character's reconciliation to living in the warmth of the human world. As all successful initiates do, he learns he must carry the traces of his initiation experience—in this case, a left hand mutilated by the amputation of three frost-bitten fingers—into the future with him, much like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Wedding-Guest*, "a sadder and a wiser man."⁵ In narrative retrospect and with newly-earned maturity, Thayer's protagonist sees his encounter with death as a gift and also sees his stuffed and mounted specimens for what they are: dead, dusty, and wholly inadequate representations of the ineffable presence of life.

Thayer's newest novel, *The Tree House*, takes up similar initiation themes according to the traditional pattern of the *bildungsroman*, a novel of apprenticeship and development, but with even more profound ethical implications. Like most *bildungsroman* examples from the Anglo-American canon, *The Tree House* follows a male pattern of development as its protagonist, Harris Thatcher, grows toward adulthood in the wake of his father's and his steady girlfriend's premature deaths. Harris then leaves his Provo home to serve an LDS mission to a recovering post-World War II Germany, and soon after his return home leaves Provo again as a draftee in the Korean War. Accordingly, Thayer divides his novel into three main sections—"Provo," "Germany," and "Korea"—finishing with a short epilogue-like return to Provo that brings his initiation story full circle.

This archetypal return, however, is hardly triumphant for Harris, who has seen too much indiscriminate destruction, war, and death to view his survival as anything more than blind luck or indifferent fortune. His dearly bought maturity brings Harris little personal satisfaction or sense of accomplishment because, of course, true maturity understands its own limits and greets itself with humility rather than with self-congratulation.

As his German landlady, the astute, well-educated Mrs. Meyer, tells him, Harris is fundamentally good. She provides the novel's most insightful assessment of Harris's essential character:

"Manfred [Harris's first companion] is passionate about his Mormon faith, but you are not. You are religious, but you are not passionate in that sense. You are not that kind of person. You should not let this bother you. For you being religious is enough because your goodness does not come from your faith. You are good by your very nature. . . . You are not willing to lose yourself, to live only by faith, I do not think, at least not yet. It is difficult to be reasonable. It is often painful, but it is a way to learn. Perhaps someday you will become passionate, a man of faith, but it will be difficult for you." (165)

It is debatable whether Harris achieves this passionate faith by the end of the novel, but it is certain that his essential goodness (along with his strict adherence to LDS standards in his personal comportment) remains intact throughout everything he experiences. In that sense, he always remains true to the faith, although he temporarily abandons his prayers, scripture study, and church attendance at certain points in the narrative, notably during his time as a soldier and immediately thereafter, as he adapts himself physically and emotionally to his environment.

Nevertheless, Harris's goodness becomes even more enhanced by virtue of its having endured so many trials and so much personal grief. As Mrs. Meyer correctly predicts, Harris's life *is* difficult—made so mostly by external factors he cannot control, but also by his stoic adaptation to every situation that comes his way. Harris knows how to take a punch and keep fighting. Unfortunately, his self-contained stoicism creates some collateral damage by requiring him to suppress his emotions, which suppression, as Mrs. Meyer observes, keeps him from losing himself and cuts him off from spiritual feelings. In this suppression, Harris is unlike Luke, his best friend from childhood, and Elder Sturmer, his missionary role model, both of whom open themselves up to religious feeling and lose themselves in their passion for their faith, whatever the circumstances. Neither Luke nor Elder Sturmer is a stock stereotype of Mormon male perfection, but Harris, ignoring or underestimating his own gifts, sometimes views them as exemplars beyond his capacity to emulate.

The “Provo” section of *The Tree House* covers the same time period as *Hooligan: A Mormon Boyhood*, Thayer's fine 2007 memoir,⁶ and paints a similarly accurate portrait of Provo during a transformative historical time. In *Hooligan* Thayer shows us distant national and world events through the first-person consciousness of a naïve, Huckleberry-like Mormon boy trying his best to reflect his community's notion of responsible manhood. Thayer translates these events within local contexts: the Movietone News in the local theater, the family radio, the local paper, the stars displayed in the front windows of houses along familiar streets. This translation renders catastrophic world events as evocative images within the intimate confines of a boy's protected world. In *The Tree House*, this world is represented by the tree house that Harris's father, Frank, has built for him. It functions very early on as a refuge for Harris and later as a touchstone for his innocent youth as well as his father's relatively carefree life of teaching, Scouting, hunting, fishing, swimming, and puttering around in his shop. Unlike his son Harris, Frank never serves as a missionary or a soldier but spends his life in the pursuit of pastimes and resists any intrusions on his pursuits. He is a wonderful

father and a good high school biology teacher and Scoutmaster, but, as Harris understands later in the novel, Frank lives a relatively selfish and largely unchallenged life. Harris, however, does not have the same luxury because his father dies of diabetes complications at the beginning of the novel's second chapter, forcing Harris to come down from the tree house permanently and take up the responsibilities of adulthood.

In this respect, *The Tree House* title does not reflect very well the central developmental themes of the novel or serve as a very productive motif; something like *The Education of Harris Thatcher*—to parallel Thayer's earlier novel *The Conversion of Jeff Williams*⁷—might work better, especially because *The Tree House* is a prequel to *Jeff Williams*. Although Thayer references the tree house intermittently throughout the first "Provo" section to illustrate Harris's having turned away from childish things, it does not figure much in "Germany" or "Korea" and reappears at the end of the second "Provo" section to tie up the novel by reinforcing the permanence of Harris's family memories and relationships despite every loss he has endured.

Thayer's authentic and compelling depictions of Harris's Provo life, his mission in Germany, and his military service in Korea depend on a sparse, realistic, almost transparent prose style that suits the narrative focus beautifully as it reflects Harris's thoughts and sensibilities. Thayer restrains his third-person, limited omniscient point of view, revealing just enough of Harris's immediate consciousness to keep us tuned in to the moment, and resists the temptation to indulge in heavy-handed, deterministic foreshadowing. Even the central motif of the novel—fire—weaves itself consistently but subtly throughout the narrative, representing at once destruction and death, refining experience, and spiritual enlightenment. Evidence of World War II firebombing destruction, for example, pervades the "Germany" section, and Harris sees Germans working to rise out of the ashes of war both literally and figuratively. In his missionary contacts, he meets people who have responded very differently to the destruction they have experienced. Mrs. Meyer and Elder Sturmer have been refined by the fires of war and have emerged stronger and more humane, she as a philosophical humanist with enduring faith in humanity's ability to share responsibility for evil, and he as a stalwart Latter-day Saint with enduring faith in the power of Christ's Atonement to transform lives. Others have emerged bitter toward both mankind and God or arrogant in their stubborn nationalism. One unnamed woman, crippled in the war, her husband and children and mother killed by American soldiers and bombs, tells the elders before quietly closing her door, "Keep your Christ. I have no need for him or his wonderful love" (125). Heinrich Steuerman, a former fighter pilot Harris and Sturmer tract out, speaks of the early days of the

war as “splendid times,” bragging to them of the Allied planes he shot down and the men he killed, as well as the money he plans to make as a Volkswagen dealer (152).

For his part, Harris grows and matures as a missionary dedicated to his work and immersed in the German culture—his fellow missionaries nickname him “The German”—initially under the tutelage of Elder Sturmer and Mrs. Meyer. Their mutual influence on Harris is evident in a profound response he makes to a woman he and his new companion meet while tracting, who asks them to explain to her why her village, of no strategic importance, was bombed by the Allies: “Does God know why? Tell me.” Harris replies simply, “We are all guilty. We must forgive each other.” The woman responds: “Yes, that is true. I am guilty, too. One can only hope for mercy. There must be mercy somewhere. Thank you. Excuse me. I am cooking my food” (186).

Thayer’s portrayal of Harris’s development into a fine missionary partakes of the archetypal without losing its individuality in setting and personality. Harris’s personal assessment of his quest for a deep and abiding testimony, for example, reflects a solid doctrinal understanding of how revelation comes differently to different people—almost as if it had come from a bishop or a seminary teacher or an Apostle at general conference—to underscore the individuality inherent in self-development even within the *bildungsroman* pattern:

Sometimes Harris tried to imagine what experiencing the Holy Ghost would be like so that he would know the Church was true. He could hear a voice, see an angel, or be filled with a great burning feeling, as if his whole body were being consumed. Or it would be an absolute understanding, an incredible clarity, like pure knowledge. Or he would be filled with light. Or maybe his testimony would come just a little bit at a time. Maybe out tracting or at a cottage meeting, he would be surprised that he knew the Church was true. That sure knowledge would just be there in him and he would just know. This wouldn’t be startling or amazing in any particular way, but just something ordinary that happened.

Harris didn’t know how it would happen, but he kept waiting for it to happen. He understood now that testimonies came in different ways. He already believed in the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the Word of Wisdom. He believed in love, kindness, being morally clean, and people being resurrected. He taught those things. Harris believed the gospel helped people to be good and also happy. Rewards in the eternities didn’t interest him a lot, except being resurrected. He just didn’t quite know these things were true. Knowing had to be a different feeling than believing. He wanted to know. He prayed to know. (141–42)

In addition to articulating Harris’s personal perspective on testimony reception, this passage represents well Thayer’s deep understanding of

LDS doctrine and Mormon culture that informs *The Tree House* and his other LDS novels. It also demonstrates why reading Thayer can be such a rewarding experience: he grounds gospel principles in people who live in a world that is often full of accidents, illness, and evil to illustrate how grace and faith and fortitude can see them through even the most painful experiences. His fiction provides a serious, nuanced response to the simplistic and shallow philosophical question of why bad things happen to good people.

Thayer develops themes of grace, faith, and fortitude most profoundly in the “Korea” section of the novel in which Harris finds himself trained for and then immersed in war where decidedly bad things happen to this good young man. The descriptions of basic training and front-line fighting, much like the descriptions of Provo and Germany, are detailed and realistic as they are filtered through Harris’s consciousness. His perception of himself and the world about him has matured markedly as evidenced by the elegiac tone that tinges his leave time in Provo between basic training and transport to Korea. He takes the train home from North Carolina, partly because the Army would pay for it but mostly because it would give him time to think:

Sitting up watching out the window or lying in his berth, his hands under his head, staring up at the ceiling, Harris thought about the people he loved. More than anything he wished that his father, Abby, and his grandmother would be in Provo to greet him when he got home.

Harris thought about growing up, about high school, life in the Sixth Ward, his family, the Starlite Café, college, the Church, his mission, and being in the army. He didn’t have any big questions to ask. It just seemed important to remember things and feel the happiness and the sadness the memories brought and just know it was all part of his life.

Harris thought about what it would be like to have Abby waiting for him to put his arms around her and kiss her, hold her tight, tell her he loved her. They might even have been engaged and then gotten married when he was home. But bringing back all that feeling didn’t work as well as it used to. Abby was fading in his memory, just like his father and his grandmother. . . . He tried to imagine seeing them all again in the next life. It was hard to do. (259)

These nostalgic memories of dead loved ones and of past experiences underscore Thayer’s development theme, reminding us that they mark significant events in Harris’s maturation that have prepared him for future events. One of the most important memories Harris ponders during his leave, for example, is his recollection of the war stories narrated by Jack, cook and pie-maker at the Starlite Café where Harris had worked since his father’s death:

Jack had told him a lot of horror stories about World War I—men being blown to bits by artillery, going insane under the week-long barrages, dying from the chlorine and mustard gas attacks. . . . Harris understood how all of Jack's stories had helped prepare him for being in the army. Basic would have been a lot harder if he hadn't had Jack's stories. Harris was grateful. A boy needed a man's stories to help prepare him for his own life. (266–67)

Jack's stories fortify Harris as he is required to conduct the dirty and deadly business of a soldier—all against a surreal backdrop of foul stench, unsanitary quarters, insufficient personal hygiene, flies, rats, snipers, artillery, mortars, and more, accompanied by a soundtrack from a North Korean disk jockey piping propaganda and playing hits like "Some Enchanted Evening." Harris comes to understand that he is enacting war according to historical and even universal patterns and finds himself disconnected from his faith:

Harris's testimony, what he believed or didn't believe about God, or anything else, really seemed to make little difference. The ridge did not seem like a place for religion, for asking God or Jesus for protection, or discussing the atonement or the redemption of mankind, not a place for Luke. Men on both sides shot prisoners, mutilated the dead, tortured the living, all of it a part of war, of bloody hate-filled war and always had been. (296–97)

Nevertheless, however honest and powerful and valid these personal observations seem to be, Harris turns out to be very wrong about Luke, who serves in Korea as a medic but who does find a place for himself and for God in the midst of the carnage.

The Tree House can function in much the same way that Jack's stories do in the novel: it can help prepare its readers for life, which, as Thayer shows us, can be full of accidents, illness, and evil, but he also shows us that these can be mediated by grace, faith, and fortitude. Harris is almost destroyed by Korea, spiritually as well as physically. As he walks through the hospital wards during his recovery, he feels himself on the very edge of his considerable self-control, struggling to reconcile his religious beliefs with the physical and psychological wounds that surround him. As always, Harris ponders the meaning of everything:

You touched a woman's hair, you baked a couple of pies, and you thought you were going to be okay. . . . It wasn't possible. Not all the faith, pity, and compassion in the world could make it okay. And the idea that Christ somehow took upon himself all the suffering, pain, and sorrow of mankind down through all the ages, all of those billions and billions of people, was bewildering to Harris. How could Christ do that? Harris didn't have the faintest notion and understood finally that he had no faith, perhaps never had, that he'd been fooling himself. (345)

It takes a supremely confident LDS writer to put those lines into Harris's mind, to articulate so starkly the thoughts that would almost certainly be swirling around any wounded LDS soldier's head in circumstances similar to Harris's. Thayer's confidence comes from the ethical foundation of his life and art, as well as from the experience of teaching college students at BYU for fifty years and of writing many initiation stories. Like the young protagonist of "The Red-Tailed Hawk," Harris ends up being saved by someone who brings him back to the warmth of human relations and also reminds him of who he is, what he knows, and how he needs to change despite his literal and figurative scars. Harris has never had any problem with fortitude, but faith and especially grace have been harder for him to embrace, so it is fitting that he comes back to them with an open heart at the end of this *bildungsroman* to accept the proverbial "peace of God, which passeth all understanding . . . through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). Thayer tempers this happy ending by embedding the novel with stories of people like Jack who never choose to recover themselves and their faith fully after war, reminding us that not all initiation stories, or real lives for that matter, are fulfilled according to the traditional pattern of achieved wholeness. Coming to full spiritual and social maturity is fraught with difficulty and cannot be undertaken or described using simplistic clichés. Writing about it requires a serious degree of good old-fashioned verisimilitude, which is one of Thayer's great strengths as a writer.

Despite his being awarded the 2008 Smith-Petit Foundation Award for Outstanding Contribution to Mormon Letters by the Association for Mormon Letters, Douglas Thayer has long been an underappreciated voice in the world of Mormon literature. With the recent publications of *Hooligan* and *The Tree House*, he has enjoyed a sort of renaissance, and, with a new collection of short stories due out in late 2010 or early 2011, also from Zarahemla Books, that renaissance is sure to continue. However, because so many of his books are out of print, it will be difficult for new readers to access his earlier texts. With Thayer in his eightieth year and contemplating retirement from BYU, now would be a perfect time to reissue his work so general readers, as well as scholars, could review the very fine career of a pioneering writer of Mormon and other western fiction. Thayer and his writing deserve no less than that.

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The Cormac McCarthy Journal 6 (Autumn 2008): 69–86, and *Post-Manifesto Polygamy: The 1899–1904 Correspondence of Helen, Owen, and Avery Woodruff* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009).

1. Douglas Thayer, “The Red Tail Hawk,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Autumn 1969): 83.
2. Douglas H. Thayer, *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1989).
3. Douglas H. Thayer, “The Red-Tailed Hawk,” in Thayer, *Mr. Wahlquist*, 5.
4. Thayer, “Red-Tailed Hawk,” 16.
5. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume D: The Romantic Period*, 8th ed., ed. Jack Stillinger and Deidre Shauna Lynch (New York: Norton, 2006), 446.
6. Douglas H. Thayer, *Hooligan: A Mormon Boyhood* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2007).
7. Douglas H. Thayer, *The Conversion of Jeff Williams* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003).