Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen

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Reviewed by Eric Samuelsen

With *Peculiar Portrayals*, Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin have assembled a fine collection of scholarly essays analyzing recent novels, plays, television programs, and films depicting Mormons and Mormon culture. It is an outstanding group of original papers, and I recommend it very highly.

The collection begins with Cristine Hutchison-Jones’s “Center and Periphery: Mormons and American Culture in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America.*” Hutchison-Jones situates the play as an exploration of minority experience in America, describing how Kushner delights in showing Mormons in creative interaction with African-Americans, women, Jews, and homosexuals. Hutchison-Jones points out that Kushner’s Mormons function as examples of a reactionary American conservatism against which the play’s more sympathetic characters contend. She argues that it is not Mormonism per se that is the play’s target; it is conservatism. As Hutchison-Jones concludes, “For Kushner, Mormons and Mormonism represent both the positive good of American creative energy and the dangerous stagnation of such creativity into conservative institutions” (26). I found the essay insightful in its dissection of the play’s political worldview, while wishing it focused with equal perception on the more transcendent, spiritual aspects of the play’s essentially optimistic conclusion.

Michael Austin’s essay, “Four Consenting Adults in the Privacy of Their Own Suburb: *Big Love* and the Cultural Significance of Mormon Polygamy,” brings together such disparate elements as Jon Krakauer’s book *Under the Banner of Heaven*, the HBO series *Big Love*, the Elizabeth Smart kidnapping, and the Mitt Romney presidential campaign to describe what might be called the current state of American perceptions of Mormonism. He uses specific *Big Love* episodes as springboards for remarkable short studies of various cultural tropes relating...
to contemporary polygamy. He concludes, “The weirdly normal polyga-
mists at the center of Big Love are not . . . affiliated with the Church of
Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—but they aren’t quite not Mormon.
Standing at the fringes of Mormondom generally, they help to clarify
some of the conflicting ways that the story of Mormonism . . . weaves
into the much larger narrative of America” (56–57).

Kevin Kolkmeyer’s essay, “Teaching Under the Banner of Heaven:
Testing the Limits of Tolerance in America,” takes perhaps the most
unusual approach of any in the book. It is a first-person account of
Kolkmeyer’s experience teaching Jon Krakauer’s book to multinational
students at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. The essen-
tially anecdotal nature of the article forces readers to accept at face value
Kolkmeyer’s conclusions about the experiences of his students with
Krakauer’s text. Still, I found the article engaging and the student com-
ments about Krakauer insightful and surprising.

J. Aaron Sanders’s “Avenging Angels: The Nephi Archetype and Blood
Atonement in Neil Labute, Brian Evenson, and Levi Peterson, and the
Making of the Mormon American Writer” is a highly ambitious reading
of three works in particular, Labute’s bash: latter-day plays, Evenson’s
The Open Curtain, and Peterson’s The Backslider. Though passionate and
erudite, I was a bit troubled by what struck me as deliberate misreadings
of the three main works he discusses. I found the study reductive. Blood
atonement is at most a vestigial and peripheral concern of the works
Sanders primarily explores. A more modest use of evidence might have
led to more persuasive conclusions.

On the other hand, John-Charles Duffy’s “Elders on the Big Screen:
Film and the Globalized Circulation of Mormon Missionary Images”
looks at seven films of varying degrees of obscurity as an examination of
the materiality and the ubiquity of certain images and impressions and
tropes in our increasingly global Church culture. The Church goes to
great lengths to present our missionary force in certain ways, and Duffy
finds echoes of those images in all sorts of obscure and shadowy corners
of popular culture worldwide.

I was similarly impressed with Mark T. Decker’s “‘I Constructed in
My Mind a Vast, Panoramic Picture’: The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint and
Postmodern, Postdenominational Mormonism.” Decker situates his
study outside what he calls “the stark polarity” (144) of either secular
caricature or faithful hagiography. Of course, “postmodern” is, as Decker
acknowledges, a contested term (147). But Decker’s solution is decep-
tively straightforward—the postmodern, following Lyotard, expresses an
“incredulity to metanarrative” (147). Simply stated: Edgar Mint, in Brady
Udall’s celebrated novel, remains skeptical of the Mormon metanarrative but embraces Mormon religious ritual—he loves his baptism—because of how it makes him feel. And as such, Decker urges us to consider the novel as pointing to a post-denominational Mormonism. This is a worthy and fascinating study of a great novel.

Juliette Wells’s “Jane Austen in Mollywood: Mainstreaming Mormonism in Andrew Black’s Pride and Prejudice” sets itself the task of examining how a Mormonized film based on a Jane Austen novel was received by the larger, mostly non-Mormon Jane Austen fan culture. Wells is particularly interested in showing how the film’s most stereotypic Mormon characters resonated with audiences unfamiliar with Mormons but very familiar with the film’s source material. Surprisingly well, it turns out, in this appealing study of a very minor film.

Finally, only the title could persuade me to read Karen D. Austin’s “Reality Corrupts; Reality Television Corrupts Absolutely,” such is my disdain for reality TV, the genre the article discusses. I had not considered, however, that Mormons are not only ubiquitous on certain kinds of reality TV, but ubiquitous as Mormons. And Austin goes on to explore the implications of this insight with great facility and thoughtful analysis.

If you are interested in how Mormons have been portrayed in popular culture, Peculiar Portrayals may not be the first book to consult, but it should make a nice supplement to your library. The editors acknowledge the limitations of their approach, saying their book “creates a map that is more suggestive than definitive” (3). It might be most useful if read in conjunction with Terryl Givens’s People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), Callie Oppedisano’s “Worthy of Imitation”: Contemporary Mormon Drama on the Latter Day Stage (Boston: Tufts University, 2009), and J. Michael Hunter’s Mormons and Popular Culture: The Global Influence of an American Phenomenon (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2013). I am grateful to Austin, Decker, and all these fine scholars for a book that was always as provocative as it was engaging.

Eric Samuelsen is a Mormon playwright and former BYU professor. He received a BA in theater from BYU in 1983 and a PhD in dramatic history, theory, and criticism from Indiana University in 1991. He has written more than two dozen plays, including Gadianton and A Love Affair with Electrons, and has been called a Mormon Henrik Ibsen or Charles Dickens. He has won several awards from the Association for Mormon Letters for his works and has served as president of that organization.