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

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Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin, eds. *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*.

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010.

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 polygamists 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 Kolkmeier’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 Kolkmeier’s experience teaching Jon Krakauer’s book to multinational students at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. The essentially anecdotal nature of the article forces readers to accept at face value Kolkmeier’s conclusions about the experiences of his students with Krakauer’s text. Still, I found the article engaging and the student comments 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 deceptively 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 stereotypical 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 Samuelson 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.