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Dead Wood and Rushing Water: Essays on Mormon Faith, Culture, and Family

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Boyd Jay Petersen. *Dead Wood and Rushing Water: Essays on Mormon Faith, Culture, and Family.*

Sandy, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2013.

Reviewed by Mark Brown

Boyd Jay Petersen's *Dead Wood and Rushing Water: Essays on Mormon Faith, Culture, and Family* collects a wide range of the author's work from the last fifteen years and includes everything from published essays and book reviews to the eulogies Petersen delivered at his own parents' funerals. Though the mode varies from essay to essay within the book, there is a remarkably consistent purpose throughout all his work. Petersen uses his writing to address and navigate ambiguity—specifically the problem of how to be faithful and believing when the people we love, the physical bodies we rely on, or the religious communities we embrace present trials of faith.

In his introduction, Petersen points out that the word “essay” comes from a French verb that means “to try or attempt,” and that the personal essay is a tentative effort at capturing and crystallizing ideas (7). He also draws on the metaphor from the book's title and explains his purpose in writing about his Mormonism: “In the same way dead wood nourished a river, writing has been a way for me to find redemption in defeat, hope in pain. The personal essay, in particular, gives me a way to make my life experiences meaningful. But it also helps me understand myself and what I believe. It's often in writing about a topic that I really come to understand my position” (3). While certainly not every Latter-day Saint will agree with some of the positions Petersen takes, all Mormons would benefit from thinking about their faith, their understanding of doctrine, and their political life as deeply and carefully as Petersen does here.

Many of Petersen's essays deal with the collisions between his upbringing in the LDS faith together with his desire to believe and his struggles with depression, along with his questioning nature. The essays also pay tribute to mentors who allowed Petersen to occupy the liminal state of a questioning apologist: his father-in-law, Hugh Nibley, and his former

professor and friend Eugene England. These two men figure prominently in how Petersen addresses questions regarding subjects such as women and the priesthood, politics and Mormonism, and believing when belief is hard.

His book is a collision of subjects: faith and hope, doubt and fear, the mundane and the cosmic. A particular pair of essays will suffice as an example of the kinds of collisions Petersen has encountered in his own thinking. “The Priesthood: Men’s Last, Best Hope” and “Fifteen Years Later: A Response to ‘The Priesthood: Men’s Last, Best Hope’” demonstrate Petersen’s ability to examine not just a question (Why does the Church allow the priesthood to be conferred on only men?) but also his own thinking about that question (Do I still believe what I once believed?). In the first essay, Petersen argues that priesthood is a key element enabling men to become complete. He writes:

I believe that conferring the priesthood on men is an essential and divinely inspired component of celestial marriage. It gently pushes men into acts of compassionate services and provides them with a feeling of connectedness with their families without ever “feminizing” them or insisting they are “less than men” for being more than “natural man.” Priesthood compensates for the biological and societal conditions that otherwise hold men back from attaining essential Christ-like qualities. (177)

In the second essay, Petersen shifts his focus from what the priesthood does for men to what more the Church can do for women. While Petersen affirms that he still believes in the efficacy of the priesthood in helping men to be more Christlike, he believes the Saints have had a failure of imagination “when it comes to women’s roles in the Church. We have not thought enough about creative ways to be more inclusive” (186). Latter-day Saint scripture describes the priesthood as “the right belonging to the fathers” from “the foundation of the earth” (Abr. 1:2–3), and that “this same Priesthood, which was in the beginning, shall be in the end of the world also” (Moses 6:7). While Petersen believes women will receive by revelation more priesthood authority someday, he advocates waiting until that revelation is received through orthodox priesthood channels, and his views are an opportunity for readers to grapple with orthodox priesthood texts (Mark 3:14–19; D&C 107:40–54; Abr. 1:4, 1:31; 2:10–11; and one might also add, the ordinances of the temple). Meanwhile, Petersen advocates using “imagination and direct inspiration” to find “creative and inspired solutions” to how women’s input can find more prominent, effective, and appreciable places within the Church (186).

Some argue that the Church is in a once-a-generation downswing, and it is losing more young people, women, and whole families as a global digital culture encourages questioning and dissenting voices to be heard and disseminated. Others affirm that the Church has never been stronger and note that the number of Latter-day Saint congregations continues to grow worldwide and the percentage of those seeking to remove their names from Church records remains stable. Whatever the institutional case may be, Petersen should be considered among the preeminent essayists of this moment in Mormon history. With clean, economical prose, an obviously sharp intellect, a healthy amount of self-deprecating humor, and the plaintive and very real sentiment of “Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief” driving his work, Petersen articulates many of the core concerns Latter-day Saints are working through in this age and models a way for those who have questions but are determined to choose faith.

Mark Brown holds an MFA in creative writing from Boise State University and a PhD in film studies from Wayne State University. He teaches composition, creative writing, and film at Delta College in Michigan. He and his wife, Suzanne, have three daughters.