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Way Below the Angels: The Pretty Clearly Troubled but Not Even Close to Tragic Confessions of a Real Live Mormon Missionary

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Craig Harline. *Way Below the Angels: The Pretty Clearly Troubled but Not Even Close to Tragic Confessions of a Real Live Mormon Missionary.*

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Reviewed by Lisa Torcasso Downing

On the surface, *Way Below the Angels: The Pretty Clearly Troubled but Not Even Close to Tragic Confessions of a Real Live Mormon Missionary* is just another missionary memoir, but with an exceptionally long title. We've read it before; many of us have lived it, this archetypal Mormon hero's journey. Harline's version of what he terms the "One True Missionary Story" goes like this: a young Californian intercepts his mission call somewhere between the mail truck and the mailbox, rips open the envelope and then looks up Belgium on a world map. He shows up at the MTC in the traditional superhero suit of iron, ready to save souls. After a few weeks of language lessons, off he flies to Belgium—land of waffles and Brussels sprouts—where both bicycles and converts fail and where Mother Nature weeps. A lot. But in spite of all that typical missionary stuff, *Way Below the Angels* stands way above most missionary memoirs. Its plot may be typical, and it does trade a little in some romantic didacticism, but under Harline's care the typical missionary tale turns platitudes into perspective and demonstrates with humor that the most vital soul God wants us to save is our own.

Harline's memoir succeeds because it helps its reader encounter painful realities with a smile. As expected, we go with Elder Harline through the streets of Belgium. Doors slam, dogs bite, and old men garner the strength to throw young male missionaries across their thresholds. We see Elder Harline study, fast, and pray as he devotes himself to the destruction of what he calls "the great and abominable church." But we also see him discover that the desire to love and the desire to spoil are like oil and water; they cannot mix.

For instance, near the conclusion of the memoir, Harline recounts his deep affection for Raymond, a Holocaust survivor, and his wife, Yvonne. Through these two people, whom he dubs the "most magical" of all Belgianlanders, Harline experiences both resistance to the

restored gospel and an intensity of goodness he can hardly comprehend. In tribute to them, Harline writes:

[M]y understanding of what goodness was didn't any longer come from studying any list of 113 or however many rules my particular culture said really and truly constituted goodness. . . . It was a total shock to me, realizing that—a shock on the level of Peter's when God told him that Gentiles weren't unclean after all, or of people when they saw Jesus touching beggars and unwanted children and sinners and lepers. I not only was shocked to feel goodness that big, but I especially was shocked to feel it in a place so far away among a bunch of strangers speaking a strange language and almost all belonging to the great and abominable church of the devil. . . . I'd have bet . . . I was there enlightening and saving them, but now it looked like they were enlightening and saving me. (234–35)

Harline's experiences remind us how easy it can be to misunderstand the kind of service, devotion, and respect our God seeks from us.

Although this memoir can be touching and even funny, it is not a feel-good tale of triumph. Triumph isn't in the cards for Elder Harline. He may know the final missionary discussion by heart, but he never gets to deliver it. He blazed into Belgium, determined to baptize a very specific and inspired number of converts (eighty-four to be exact), but leaves the country as Catholic as it was when he arrived. However, over and over, in large things and small, Harline reminds us that failure is not a disaster, but a redirection, one we can choose to fret over or embrace with a self-deprecating grin.

Way Below the Angels isn't for every Latter-day Saint. Some may be discomfited by its candid consideration of both the strengths and weaknesses in the organized missionary efforts of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Others may balk when they encounter the thematic corporate metaphor for the Church. Harline conspicuously and consistently refers to missionaries as "local businessmen" with a product to sell. Those of us who are familiar with critics of Mormonism are accustomed to accusations that the formal Church runs more like a business than a charity. But Harline uses the salesman metaphor to denote the zeal, good faith, and perseverance that propels young Latter-day Saint men and women to embark on lengthy missions, and, more impressively, to stay when the going gets rough. Harline does not speak of young missionaries as "local businessmen" in a pejorative manner. Rather, the term is both affectionate and self-conscious, as if the Harline of today is remembering with compassion the strange mixture of ego and naïveté that defined young Elder Harline and made him get up in the early morning hours, day after day, to "sell" religion on doorsteps in much the same way that school children sell magazine subscriptions.

Elder Harline's missionary work was, at times, soul-crushing in its rejection, and as he prepares to leave Belgium for home, the main thing he seems to pack is guilt: guilt that he hadn't done enough, that he hadn't been effective, that sometimes he felt sorry for himself, or frustrated and angry because the locals didn't appreciate him or his message. In spite of this, Harline leaves Belgium the same way he came—as a faithful, devoted, believing member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. What changes in him is not his degree of belief, but his understanding of the deep divinity of that belief and how the cultural façade some have built to enshrine Mormon theology struggles to measure up to the message within.

One of the last things Elder Harline does in Belgium is follow through on promises made to two non-LDS contacts to visit, respectively, the Sunday worship services of their churches—one Catholic, one Protestant. The beauty of each experience throttles young Harline by surprise. He writes:

It always bugged the heck out of me when people would say to us, *Oh, religions are all the same*, because the whole point of me and every other missionary being there in Belgium was to show that no they weren't. But then when I went inside these two other churches to check them out for myself, I had to at least admit that by focusing so much on all the differences I sure had missed all the sameness. (246)

It is conceivable that some Latter-day Saints may interpret a sentiment like that as minimizing the unique power of the restored gospel. However, Harline's intention doesn't appear to be one of reduction, but rather a celebration of the common, divine elements that tie us together as children of the same God, regardless of our individual faith practices.

Way Below the Angels: The Pretty Clearly Troubled but Not Even Close to Tragic Confessions of a Real Live Mormon Missionary is worth reading—twice. The first read is charming, humorous, and, at times, laserlike in its ability to dissect the foibles of evangelical Mormonism. Certainly, Harline's witticism defies our expectation of serious, contemplative literature, but this is not a memoir constructed on the fly by an amateur writer. When read closely, it reveals itself as a well-crafted, well-timed revelation about how one man's failure becomes victory in the eyes of God.

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