

with various literary forms and contemporary approaches, it creates a type of meta-scripture, in which literary truth is exalted over doctrinal correctness.

*The Fob Bible* reminds us of the literary heritage and strangeness that the Bible contains. It is compelling reading, making one reexamine assumptions about familiar ideas, stories, and characters, discovering that they are neither plain nor precious. *The Fob Bible* may drive you back into the scriptures, to experience again why the Good Book not only holds religious sway but literary prowess as well.

### Notes

1. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 97.

2. Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 222.

3. John Milton, "Paradise Lost," Book IX, lls. 161–62, in *Complete Poems and Major Plays*, edited with notes and introduction by Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 382.

## Characters to Care About

Jonathan Langford. *No Going Back*. Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2009. 302 pp. Author's note, epilogue. Paper: \$16.95. ISBN: 978-0-9787971-9-5

*Reviewed by Christian Harrison*

Google "gay" and "Mormon" these days, and you'll be flung—head first—into a veritable deluge of vitriol and sanctimony. Of course, it didn't start with California's Proposition 8. No, that river's path pushes back, through the '90s and the Church's involvement with the matter of gay marriage in Hawaii, to the experiences of gay men at BYU in the '70s and '80s, and then deeper, into the mists of Castro District folklore and out into the broad plains of popular culture—the play *Angels in America*, the film *Latter Days*, and the recent calendars featuring smarmy, shirtless, returned missionaries. It's a cultural crossroads that feeds the

American media juggernaut and promises years of eye-catching, gut-wrenching headlines to come.

As an out, gay man who is also a faithful and active Latter-day Saint, I have a front-row seat to a show I never asked to see. I'm fortunate, though. The *Sturm und Drang* on stage only occasionally breaks through its own din to touch me personally, as I do what I can to lead a life filled with self-respect and charity.

In that respect, I'm a lot like Paul Ficklin—the protagonist in Jonathan Langford's *No Going Back*—a young Latter-day Saint, furtively feeling out what it means to be both Mormon and gay. Yet the book sat on my bedside table for a couple of weeks before I picked it up. The awkward cover art, melodramatic title, and sensitive subject matter—it was all just a little daunting. Was I in for a tongue lashing? Perhaps a passive aggressive religious tract? Or maybe something else entirely . . . Would it inspire hope? Despair? Or would it just make me vaguely uneasy—like watching a comedian or musician bomb on stage?

There was only one way to know.

So early one morning, I reached for the book before slipping out of bed. Five hours later, I was still there, wrapped up in a story both familiar and foreign—each character flawed yet sympathetic, and the whole story infused with a gentle warmth. I could tell Langford loves his characters.

The story opens in a suburb of Portland, Oregon. It's 2003, and Paul's a sophomore in high school. He and his best friend, Chad, are working their way through the briar patch of Mormon male adolescence—homework, school politics, merit badges, first crushes, and priesthood advancement. Paul's a handsome kid, wholesome—but a bit nerdy. Chad's that kid we remember from seminary. You know, the one with the rough edges—who wanted to be good, but for whom “good” didn't come easy. Langford doesn't just put his cast in a real place and time but surrounds them with actual events and everyday brands—gracing the story with a certain authenticity. And it doesn't end with references to video games and rainy weather. It's in the sometimes-awkward teenage dialogue—and the different, yet somehow still imperfect dialogue of the grown-ups. It's this candor, I suspect, that will give the story a solid shelf life.

*No Going Back* could easily be a story about teen pregnancy, a

crisis of faith, or any number of other, equally delicate, subjects. But Langford wastes no time in outing Paul—placing him squarely on the inexorable path out of the closet.

Along that path, Paul encounters the usual cast of characters in a teen's life, each on his or her own path. Langford drapes them in flesh and sympathy, giving us peeks into their individual lives and motivations. It's not a common approach. Most authors take exactly what's needed from the cast of second-string characters, pouring their lives through a fine-meshed sieve. When it's over, all we really remember is the main character sitting on the plate framed by a colorful coulee of tasty background. But Langford uses a chef's knife, instead—giving us more of a composed salad. Each of the characters, distinct and sacred, plays his or her part in the story without compromising their true selves or the lives they live beyond the pages of the book.

While describing these characters in a brief review would do them and the book violence, I think one passage illustrates the delicate interplay Langford has achieved. It happens early in the book, soon after Paul tells Chad, his best friend, he's gay:

Down in the family room, the smile melted off of Richard's face as he settled onto the couch and closed his eyes.

I remember back when Chad was this easy kid to listen to and understand. Now he's like a stone. An angry, sullen stone. Half the time we talk, it seems like it turns into another argument. And then he comes out with this gay question—

. . . Someday maybe he'd find out what had been behind Chad's question tonight. He just hoped it wouldn't be one of those conversations parent have nightmares about. "Dad, I'm gay." "Dad, I got a girl pregnant." "Dad, I blew up the school." He shook his head. . . . At least his son had good friends. (13)

Richard—Paul's bishop and Chad's father—could have been a convenient literary device. Instead, he's a father worrying about his son. Soon, though, Richard isn't just worrying about work and home, but the very weighty issues Paul sets at his feet:

Richard remembered that the last couple of Sundays, Paul had assigned other boys to prepare the sacrament but hadn't helped himself. Now he knew why. . . . Richard contemplated the young man who sat before him. Paul's hands were shaking slightly, he realized. He hadn't noticed it before.

And suddenly, in his mind's eye, he saw a different scene. Paul,

head still down, shaking the bishop's hand and walking out of his office. Paul going into the house where he and his mother lived. Paul opening the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, pouring pills from a bottle into his open hand, swallowing again and again—

. . . “Paul.” [Richard] stood and held out his arms. “Come here.” Paul stood, but hesitated. Richard took a step toward him. With a gasp, Paul flung himself forward and clung to Richard as if he were a much younger boy. “Paul,” Richard said again, his arms wrapped around the boy's shoulders, which were shaking now with sobs. “Heavenly Father loves you. And so do I.” (127–28)

In the Author's Note (unpaginated), Langford says he didn't try to “depict any (mythical) typical experience” but instead attempted to create characters who were “mostly well-meaning.” He hoped, in the end, that we'd “come to like and feel for those characters.” And on both fronts, Langford was successful. I certainly didn't agree with the choices of all the characters or even some of the doctrine discussed; but I cared about each of them and cared deeply for a few.

All of this isn't to say the book is perfect. The dialogue could use a final, gentle polishing, and the cover is a mess. But like some literary *wabi sabi*, the book's imperfection only reinforces its authenticity. The book is neither a missionary tract nor a political broadside. It's a window—and a smudged one at that. Every reader will likely take something different away from the book. But each, I suspect, will leave feeling a little more hopeful. And if they're anything like me, they'll also have wept a little more than they're willing to admit.

So. Back to that deluge . . .

In the tumult of he-said-she-said and they-did-we-did, it's easy to forget that behind, beneath, and beyond it all are real people with real needs—living lives that are rich and meaningful, and sometimes fraught with pain and anguish. If we can remember that, then we can move past the shouting and into real dialogue. This book, I think, is part of that dialogue. As are efforts like Equality Utah's Common Ground Initiative and the LDS Church's recent—and ringing—endorsement of Salt Lake City's ordinance protecting gays from discrimination in housing and employment. Each, in its own way, reminds us of our own humanity and the imperative of treading carefully. Each, I pray, is a sign of calmer seas ahead.

I guess you could say Jonathan Langford's book isn't so much about going back as it is about going forward. And that's a good thing.

## Too Long Ignored

Ronald G. Watt. *The Mormon Passage of George D. Watt: First British Convert, Scribe for Zion*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009. 293 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, index. Cloth: \$39.95; ISBN: 978-0-87421-756-8

*Reviewed by Polly Aird*

Although George Darling Watt (1812–81) is perhaps best known in the LDS Church as the first convert in the British Isles, he also recorded Brigham Young's sermons in shorthand for more than sixteen years, preserving them as key historical and theological resources. And yet, after feeling bullied by Young, Watt left the church he had loved, associated with the Godbeites, and became a spiritualist. Ronald G. Watt, George's descendent, has made it his life's work to bring his ancestor back into the light of day. The result is a flawed but significant biography.

George Watt had a childhood and youth of almost Dickensian poverty and illiteracy. When he was fourteen, his stepfather ejected him from the family home and onto the streets of Manchester. Some months later, a woman, perhaps his mother, found him and took him to a government workhouse where he was essentially imprisoned. There a fellow inmate finally taught him to read and write. The contrast between these beginnings and his later life are dramatic, but Ronald Watt moves through these years quickly, pausing to develop a more rounded picture only with Watt's conversion to Mormonism in 1837 at age twenty-five.

From then on, though still poor, he had something to live for—not only religious belief but a significant social position, for he was quickly ordained a priest and then an elder and missionary. When assigned to the mission in Scotland, he studied shorthand in Edinburgh. In September 1842, he sailed for New Orleans with his wife, Molly (whom he had married in 1835), and