

Mormons Are Also People

by Thomas F. Rogers

Phil and Brenda are archetypes: the good, active, intelligent Latter-day Saint couple who were raised in the mold and stay in it all their lives, content—and yet straining sometimes at the contradictions in themselves, at the restraints, usually so comforting by sometimes far too tight.

These excerpts from the book—vignettes from a collection of vignettes—are more than a mere sampling of a fine, simple writer's work. They are also samples of the lives of fine, simple people, who, though fictional, are as real as the people who

glanced back at us so casually from the next row in sacrament meeting last week; from the mirror this morning; from their schoolbooks as we made them study for another hour before the television went on.

Perhaps, though, the best title for Tom Rogers's as-yet-unpublished book is People Are Sometimes Mormons; for though Mormonness runs through almost all these short tales, humanness runs deeper, more thoroughly.

That is, if we can draw a distinction between being Mormon and being human.

Recognition

Though they seldom had a conversation, Brenda often thought that Mrs. Richards was the best part of her education. Perhaps Brenda appreciated her so because her own mother had been so set on keeping her at home. Brenda's father, who had been their town's bishop for as long as Brenda could remember, had passed away in her junior year. It was her older brother Steven who had urged her to break away. She had her own life to live, he argued. And since their mother refused to move with her to Salt Lake while she attended the university, their mother would have to do for herself. She had always been self-reliant anyway, and would adjust better to widowhood if she had to stand on her own two feet.

Salt Lake's urbanity still overwhelmed Brenda—until she thought of Mrs. Richards, whose cosmopolitan taste and background made even this city seem somehow terribly provincial. Mrs. Richards had come here with her husband from Pennsylvania. He'd been a railroad official, then passed on before his retirement.

Mrs. Richards had remained in their pleasant home near the university, pursuing cards, charities, and a variety of gatherings with fellow clubwomen—by all appearances a superficial existence. Except that Mrs. Richards was also an author. Ear-

lier—ten or twenty years before—she had published a number of books for children. It was no secret: her friends knew it, too, but were not particularly impressed, while Brenda never ceased being fascinated. For Brenda, the fact that Mrs. Richards was an author gave her every move, her every gesture an omniscience and a credibility the others lacked.

Mrs. Richards was a decent employer. Brenda only had to fix their breakfast and make the beds before hurrying off to her morning classes, then return by four to pick up groceries and prepare supper—or somewhat earlier if the ladies were coming for cards. Mrs. Richards showed her how to make canapes and a number of delicacies that had never been served in the simple home of Brenda's parents. Never had she seen, let alone tasted, such elegant dishes or enjoyed such well-appointed surroundings. The living room was furnished with scratch-free Queen Anne. The china, its motif a delicate blue forget-me-not, was Rosenthal from Germany. And on the dining room wall, again in blue tones, hung an amateur but not unattractive water color with a view through a doorway onto a boat-bedecked harbor. Mrs. Richards, whose signature it bore, called it "The Blue Lagoon."

Religious differences slightly disturbed the otherwise gracious ambience. Brenda was not immune to the occasional slurs that the Mormons received in Mrs. Richards' living

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room, particularly from certain guests. One of these, the husband of Mrs. Richards's dearest crony, directed the university's school of medicine. They had been in the West only a year or two. Their name was Goldman.

One evening, as they dined with Mrs. Richards, Brenda, who was asked to serve, couldn't help overhearing Dr. Goldman's resonant opinion: "It's true that they're shrewd business people, those Mormons. You'll notice that Brigham Young's statue at the intersection of Main and South Temple faces away from the temple with its hand extended toward, that's right, Zion's Savings Bank." The laughter which followed, mostly his own, was even more resonant.

Brenda, who had just then entered with the dessert, couldn't help herself: "Trust a Jew to notice something like that!" she said.

Mrs. Richards was obviously displeased, but Goldman, perhaps to prove his superiority, laughed all the louder—the laugh seemed slightly forced to Brenda—and insisted that Mrs. Richards was extremely lucky to have such quick-witted help.

When her guests had bid good-night, Mrs. Richards instructed Brenda that on future occasions she and her guests would provide the scenario, while Brenda remained in the wings.

Feeling that she had scored well enough, Brenda complied; and thereafter, either in deference to her or in fear of another rejoinder, Mrs. Richards tried to steer the conversation away from Mormons whenever Brenda was within earshot.

They spent seven months together. Then, one afternoon, Mrs. Richards began to have chest pains and shortness of breath. Brenda, who had just completed a health course, correctly recognized the symptoms of a coronary. Because Mrs. Richards's physician was too busy to bother with a house call, Mrs. Richards was dispatched to the hospital in an ambulance. Before they would take her, however, the attendants required an advance payment of \$15.00. By then Mrs. Richards was unconscious, and, rather than touch her employer's money, Brenda, by some good fortune, found the amount in her own purse. The local grocer must have learned about Mrs. Richards's condition the same day because, when Brenda dropped by that afternoon to pick up several routine items, she was told that the old lady's credit had been temporarily discontinued.

Mrs. Richards lasted another week. Brenda dutifully attended her each day during visiting hours, although it was uncertain if Mrs. Rich-

ards ever knew it. Meanwhile, Brenda had notified Mrs. Richards's two married daughters, who lived in the East and had not seen their mother for several years. She also phoned them on the day when, arriving at the hospital, she was told that Mrs. Richards had finally expired. Each day during the vigil Brenda had expected them to appear, but Brenda was Mrs. Richards's only visitor. Even the Goldmans appeared to have better things to do. Because Mrs. Richards was rarely conscious, perhaps visits struck them as superfluous.

As her vigil persisted, Brenda often wept—not so much over Mrs. Richards's condition as because no one, besides Brenda, seemed to care.

The daughters flew in after their mother's death and arranged for the burial. There was the barest semblance of a service, attended by the three of them and lasting only fifteen minutes. The daughters had decided not to invite any of Mrs. Richards's local friends.

As they sorted through her effects, they discarded a variety of keepsakes. Others they sold to a secondhand dealer, keeping little or nothing for themselves. They had no room for and little interest in the needlepoint furnishings, now slightly

old fashioned, which years before they had grown up with. They were mostly interested in liquidating Mrs. Richards's property as quickly as possible, then returning to the East.

Dismantling the dining room, they came to her "Blue Lagoon." When they told Brenda to put "that thing" out with the week's trash, Brenda, growing spunky, risked their displeasure, as she had Mr. Goldman's, by suggesting that she would like "that thing," and they gave it to her.

They also offered to pay her for an expenses incurred the week before their arrival, but, as a point of pride—or principle—Brenda declined to tell them of the \$15 she had given for the ambulance. Just as it was somehow important that "The Blue Lagoon" remain with someone who had known and admired Mrs. Richards in her old age, it was also important, she told herself, that something be done for her without compensation. Mrs. Richards would at least retain her dignity in the memory of an impressionable freshman from a place Mrs. Richards and her daughters had never been or even heard of. It was a pristine recognition—one their money could never purchase.

To Each His Own

Brenda had majored in literature. Her professors' sensitivity and keen articulation had led her to conclude that the non-literate were victims of their own subliminal urges and, therefore, suspect.

That may have been why Morris Linford had stopped coming to Sunday School. For this brawny mesomorph, the life of tackle and scrimmage had totally supplanted and compensated for the life of the mind. But Brenda had failed to notice in time. During her very first lesson she had asked him to read a passage from the Doctrine and Covenants. He'd immediately blanched, but made the effort:

"Seeek ... not ... to ... de-declare my ... word but first ... seeek to oob-obtain my ... word and then ... shashall your ton ..."

"Tongue."

"Tongue be loo ..."

"Loosed."

The irony of those words from that mouth was not lost on Morris's otherwise obtuse classmates. To counter their snickers Brenda quickly changed the subject, suggesting that someone relate an appropriate faith-promoting experience.

The boy who complied so readily was Alfred.

If anyone had heeded the exhortation to "obtain" the "word" (much less the words), it was Alfred Washburn. Having nearly memorized, it seemed, the contents of his gold-embossed scriptures, Alfred had been Brenda's one certain hope and, of all the boys, her only consolation.

That was the year before. From a distance Brenda still followed the progress of her former charges. They were running true to form. Alfred was already a student officer at the local LDS institute. He gave inspiring talks in church and was an outstanding debater. By contrast, Morris had flunked out in his first semester, and there were unsavory rumors about the direction his life had taken since. His absence in the last year from all church activity tended to confirm them. Meanwhile Brenda still reproached herself for her initial blunder. She might have done more, but, during that same time, school and thoughts of Phil had taken up most of her attention. You can only spread yourself so thin.

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Then one Sunday while she gathered her manual and visual aids after another routine lesson, Alfred entered her classroom.

"How's Sister Matthews?"

"Well, Alfred! How nice to see you!"

"It's great seeing you too, Sister Matthews," he said, extending his hand. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Why, no. Of course not."

"I just wanted to let you know how grateful I am for the tremendous influence you've had on my life."

"Well, I . . ." Brenda demurred.

"I'll be leaving for the mission home in three weeks—"

"How wonderful, Alfred!"

"Yes, it's a great privilege. Anyway, I just . . . felt inspired to come by and tell you how sincerely thankful I am for all your efforts." His voice grew mellow: "Unfortunately, Sister Matthews, most of us take our leaders' sacrifices for granted. That has distressed me and, well, I just wanted you to know that in my eyes you are a *very special spirit* and that I will always remember and appreciate your dedication."

"Why . . . thank you, Alfred. I . . . you're very special yourself."

"Thank you, Sister Matthews. That's a great compliment. It makes my new responsibility all the more momentous to think about. It's so humbling to contemplate the impact I'll have when I get on that mission."

Opening his attache case and handing her one of a large stack of invitations, he added: "I also want to personally invite you to attend my farewell. It took a lot of arranging, but Grandfather will be there. It's so hard to tie down an Apostle on a Sunday night. The institute director will also say a few words, and the chamber choir is working up a special number. We'll have a buffet afterward at the house for our very special friends. I hope you can come and shake Grandfather's hand."

She promised she would. He thanked her and, with another firm handshake, sped off to intercept other very special guests.

Brenda wanted to run away, too, and hide. Glancing at the invitation, she imagined in place of Alfred's slick profile the unpretentious features that belonged to Morris Linford, and her panic gave way to compassion. She yearned for one more chance.

A: "What a lovely home!"
B: "Yes, we've finally made it to a pleasant neighborhood."

A: "Where did you get that mirror and such an ornate frame? It actually curves in and out, doesn't it—the glass, too. It reminds me of Linderhof."

B: "Linderhof?"
A: "In Bavaria."
B: "Oh, yes, it's a baroque design. We special-ordered it."

A: "And what are you doing these days to improve yourself?"

B: "I mostly just try to keep up with the kids."

A: "You really should have been kinder to yourself."

B: "Oh, we *enjoy* them. . . . Are you still a compulsive reader?"

A: "At the moment I'm not reading so much because I'm into writing. I'm doing a book."

B: "You are?"
A: "I got into it while Max was away guest-teaching at Stanford."

B: "A novel?"
A: "Heavens, no. It's historical. On early New England pewter."

B: "I didn't know."
A: "Yes. With illustrations by Boston's finest photographer."

B: "How exciting. But when did you . . .?"

A: "It's all in the museums. Just there to be studied. Besides, in Boston we have such fine museums. What marvelous rolls. Homemade?"

B: "I finally learned to bake. Believe it or not, I even mix bread now."

A: "Then you *are* improving yourself."

B: "I do my best."
A: "And how about your children?"

B: "Our oldest is a very fine scholar."

A: "Surely you'll send him to the East."

B: "Her."
A: "Her then."

B: "We were thinking of sending our children to BYU."

A: ". . . I see. Well, with the really promising ones, you may want to reconsider. . . . Speaking of the East, have you run into any of our old friends?"

B: "Let's see . . . why, yes, the Jensens are now here on the faculty."

A: "Really? They ended up here? Tell me, is she as silly as ever?"

B: "She's still a bit flighty."

A: "What about her husband—does he still slip out during Sunday School?"

B: "I don't know. They're in another ward."

A: "You heard about the Maxwells?"

B: "Yes."
A: "I knew they wouldn't stay together. She was far too superficial. . . . But what are you doing in the Church these days?"

B: "Phil advises the teachers."

A: "Poor Phil!"
B: "And I teach the sixteen-year-olds in Sunday School."

A: "Aren't the manuals something else?"

B: "I quite like ours."

A: "All those gauzy lessons on relationships."

B: "I find ours quite inspiring. A little simplistic, I suppose."

When her friend finally left, promising to stop during the next vacation, Brenda removed the rolls, glanced wearily into her ornate gilt-framed mirror, and thought: "I think next time I'll serve her Oreos and Kool-Aid."

But she wouldn't.

Endurance

He'd cautioned the others to stay in the living room. Engulfing Carolyn's tiny hand in his palm, so small it was—Phil ushered her into his and . . . into his bedroom.

He'd never done anything so difficult. It hadn't been so hard telling the older ones. They were expecting it. All but Jamie, now on a mission. And Carolyn: Carolyn, their five-year-old, wouldn't have understood, and so until now she'd been spared, too. It was his duty to tell her. He wanted to

be the one, but how much more he didn't want to!

"Where's Mommy?"

That question again: He could no longer tell her Mommy was just visiting the doctors and nurses. His throat tightened as hard as last night when, her hand in his, Brenda had ceased to respond.

"Mommy's . . . Mommy's gone to live with Jesus." It hadn't occurred to him to put it that way till now. He'd thought it would require the verb

"died." Even "passed away" would have been a circumlocution. But what he'd said was true enough. At least it was how she—and all the rest of them—needed to view it.

He scanned her face. How was she taking it? Not anxiously, as he'd imagined. Curiously, wistfully, but not noticeably upset. As if about to formulate and pose another question, she suddenly turned and ran out the door. The realization just broke, he told himself. Her sisters would comfort her.

Now that he'd done his part, he was too relieved to stand. Still sitting on the bed, he stared before him through the open closet door: her dresses. When had she worn them last? Only a month ago, only a week beyond the day she'd found out and then told him. It was just after work, outside the doctor's office. She'd suspected for some time that something was wrong, then finally gone in for a checkup. They'd agreed to meet in the clinic's parking lot. A colleague had dropped him off, and he'd waited for her in her car, the Volkswagen. He'd intended to surprise her with plans for their summer cabin. He would start framing on weekends the following spring. They would have the use of it that very summer and all the summers that lay ahead of them. Or so he thought.

She seemed composed enough as she came from the building and joined him. She even asked him what it was he'd wanted to discuss and didn't try to stop him until he'd shown her the drawings, estimated the cost and explained how he intended to proceed with the construction. Then, gently, she touched his arm. Her look signalled concern for him, not her: "Phil, I must tell you something. I've . . . I've got a serious malignancy. I think it's terminal. It's quite advanced. The doctors don't dare operate."

"You've what? So suddenly? Impossible, they can't know for sure without more tests, can they?"

"No, not absolutely."

"Well, then. . . ." His voice trailed off.

She did not reassure him. "Of course, it could reverse itself. But chances are. . . ."

"Chances! Chances! We'll live by our own chances!"

"Just the same, chances are you'll have to enjoy that cabin for both of us—this summer too."

He forbade her to say more. He refused to accept the doctor's prognosis or even consider it until that same evening when she told him what she had dreamed several days before: "We were on our way back to Jackson County with a band of the Saints.

There'd been some kind of holocaust—a world war maybe. It was vague. I only know that the country—and life itself—were more desolate than I had ever imagined. The crops had shriveled. The wind was fierce and bitter cold and never ceased blowing. Animal carcasses were everywhere. Only the snakes—deadly snakes that were always in our path—seemed to thrive."

"Did we make it—back to Jackson County?"

"I don't know. I woke up before we got that far. But what's important, Phil, what's most important, is that you and I, and the kids, too, were all so close and loving. We were all so happy. Those hardships—like the pioneers—had forced us to stand up for our faith. We were no longer soft and flabby, and we no longer doubted. We struggled, but we were sure of our purpose. We were happy. And I knew that we would make it, that we would endure to the end. . . . Phil!"

"I'm listening."

"Phil, I dreamed that dream for a purpose. Never forget it, will you? Because now it's you who will have to endure. For both of us."

Ever since that night, only a few weeks back, he'd thought about their marriage in a new way, about the

temple and the pledges they'd made there. He thought about the many times he had gone there for others, long passed on, and he thought he at last understood how by taking vows for the dead we fulfill the ordinances of life. Now he yearned to return to the temple, often. Brenda had urged him to consider remarrying. Should he? Shouldn't he? He wasn't anxious. He wasn't concerned. Time would tell.

He persisted in his reverie—how long he couldn't be sure, perhaps only minutes—when Carolyn reappeared in the doorway. She hadn't been crying, as he'd expected. She only seemed slightly perplexed, the way she'd looked before leaving the room.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, dear?"

"She hasn't either."

"Hasn't what?"

"Hasn't left us."

He stared again at the limp garments in Brenda's wardrobe. Maybe Carolyn was right. Maybe they could have it both ways.

"Hasn't . . . ? How do you know?"

"Her car's still in the driveway."

"I see." He looked once more at the clothes. He would remove them in the morning while the others were still sleeping.

Looking Back

Why are most men so attached to their youth? Is it that then there seems to be no limit to what they might be and do, so that each forthcoming day portends a memorable adventure? Is it that men later have difficulty being reconciled to the role life has assigned and for which nature has best suited them? Won't eternity some day open up a gentler retrospect and point to a more satisfying culmination, a true "season of . . . mellow fruitfulness?" Won't that time then also seem adventurous and "golden"?

It had been a long day. They'd insisted on taking him to Ogden for dinner, his sons and daughters and all 37 grandchildren. Then they'd brought him back to the local chapel for a reception with his cronies (those still above ground) and with family friends. It had been well attended, and he'd had a chance to reminisce and tell them what he really thought about whatever came to mind. Even the grandkids were attentive for once—mostly, he figured, because their folks had threatened them with a good paddling if, on this one day, they didn't give their grampaw his due. There was some satisfac-

tion in holding out for what would have been your golden anniversary if your wife had still been with you.

And what did he talk about? Why, what he recited to them every time they came to visit. About his days, after 1914, in the U.S. Army, where he proved himself as a lightweight boxer and, though he never went abroad, nursed many a buddy who later died of influenza. That led to his recollection of the hard times in his younger years—his father, who'd been a bishop under Brigham Young and the rivalry between his father's two wives, especially after his father had to part with the youngest in 1890.

There were also those proverbial incidents which become family legend, like the time Grampaw played a glorious prank on his reprobate half-brother Jeb. Jeb had gone after a deer; unbeknownst, Grampaw followed Jeb and, when Jeb stopped for a rest and fell momentarily asleep, Grampaw took Jeb's knife. Later—as, after feeling his deer, Jeb discovered he had no way to dress it and bellowed a terrible blasphemy (which could have been predicted—Grampaw, who was watching him from

behind a large boulder, tossed the knife so it fell at Jeb's feet, as if hurled from the sky. Then, in a disguised bass voice, he intoned: "I hear you, Jeb, my son. Here's your knife. Now *what* did you call me?" Leaving both the knife and the deer behind him, Jeb ran all the way home—some twelve wooded miles. In later years Grampaw enjoyed saying of stubborn Jeb that not even the voice of the Lord had quite converted him.

But more than anything he dwelt on his days as a missionary in the bayou country of Mississippi and Louisiana. That had been under President Callis, over a half century earlier: He'd always been feisty, and in those days he had a temper to match. So as he climbed somebody's flight of stairs with his first companion, the very first day, his companion, who was a city boy, made some comment about farmers' sons and in the next instant found himself on the downstairs landing with a broken jaw.

President Callis threatened to send him home for that, but he promised to repent and—after lengthy prayer and fasting—did so.

He told them about his first three months with that same companion, tracting the Louisiana backwoods without purse or scrip and living so close to the Lord that they only went one night (their first, when they still weren't hungry enough or sufficiently humble) without food and shelter. At the end of that time they brought in twenty-four souls, baptizing them at the Shreveport district conference.

He'd also had a tight moment or two. On one occasion he and his companion were only saved from a lynching because one of the mob had traveled to the West and been generously hosted in Salt Lake City. With his shotgun the man held his townsmen at bay while he escorted the two elders to the safety of his home. Another time Grampaw had started to cross a particular bridge but, in doing so, found himself and his Book of Mormons flung into the river. After retrieving one or two soggy volumes and reaching the original shore, he encountered the sullen stares of a half dozen strapping giants his own approximate age, shirtless, barefoot, and wearing tattered bibbed overalls.

"Didn't you see that there sign?" their leader jeered.

"What sign?"

"The one says 'Niggers an Mormons not welkim on this bridge!'"

"I didn't see a sign."

"Then, I giss, you jes cain't read."

"Whether I read or not, I need to

get to the other side of that river."

"Tell you what—since you seem so spunky—we'll ignore that sign and let you 'cross if you ken whip any one of us."

"You promise, if I do, the rest of you won't gang up on me?"

"Sure."

"What's your religion?"

"Catholic."

"Do you promise, on your Catholic honor?"

"Why, sure."

"Then I think I'll tackle *you*. It's been my experience that the one who talks the most usually has the least to

back it up with. . . ." And here his feistiness came to his aid, though he was a banty by comparison. He licked the man, and they let him across.

Those were his memories—all of them of times before he had really begun to be a man, married and settled down to work in a kiln for the cement company—providing for five fine children, serving for twenty-six years as the local bishop, and later on the stake high council, and in his retirement assuming the duties of a local justice of the peace and weather observer. Not mean accomplishments, but why did he never speak of them?

The Seer Bird By Susan Chock Hartman

People say that animals cannot see colors.
But perhaps somewhere there is a bird
who, whistling over the gray forest,
glimpses the world's surprise: leaves gone green,
variegated browns in bark and fawn,
moss and lily lightly sprung from monotony,
and multicolored brother birds
observing his shock
with mild, uncomprehending eyes.

Perhaps, for him, the mist clears;
he shrieks, he falters on seeing blue sky.
With his right eye he catches the upward thrust
of familiar feathers; the rapid vision snags;
and, studying his own mottled wings, he traces
a slender dispassionate gyre to the ground.

Maybe there are some who do not scoff.
A cow draws near and stares at the grass—
with all her dense will it remains gray.
A fish flickers near the reef—
from every angle it remains gray.
A chipmunk, climbing, focuses on the limb—
it looms and sharpens but remains gray.

Feckless, they watch the mad gray bird
thrashing through the tall gray grass
with green and blue and prodigy in his song,
and, closing their eyes,
believe.