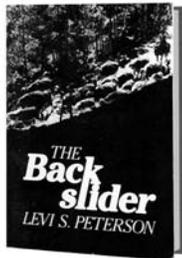


CELEBRATING *THE BACKSLIDER*CRIMINY! *THE BACKSLIDER'S*
WILD AND GODLY LANDSCAPE

By Jeremy Ravi Mumford



The essays by Jeremy Mumford and Neal Chandler are the third and fourth reflections we've published in our twentieth-anniversary celebration of Levi Peterson's novel *The Backslider*. We've also published a terrific letter by Ann Johnson in this issue. Please send your own responses, ruminations, and personal essays about your experience reading *The Backslider* to Cherie Woodworth at:

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FOR ME, *The Backslider* is associated with Seville, Spain, where I first read it. I lived there for most of a year, doing archival research for my Ph.D. dissertation on the Spaniards and Incas of colonial Peru. Setting out before sunrise, I would stop for black coffee and toast with olive oil, then walk to the General Archive of the Indies, a Renaissance palace next to the cathedral. When the archive closed at 3 p.m., I would walk in spectacular heat to an outdoor restaurant, eat an enormous meal, then sleep for the rest of the afternoon in my stifling, one-room apartment. Late at night, I would sit at the counter in an empty bar, nibbling on dry cheese, reading about Frank Windham's torments and the very different way he spent his days.

My life in Seville, with its peculiar indulgences and austerities, excitement and isolation, had resulted from my decision to try to make myself a college professor. So it interested me that in *The Backslider*, a cowboy novel, professors twice enter the story to effect crucial turns in the plot. First, a University of Utah paleontologist leads the Earle family to see dinosaur fossils in the desert. The excitement and anxiety of his visit prompt a series of quarrels which end with Frank and Marianne making love in a desert rainstorm. The other professor is a Book of Mormon expert at BYU. Frank sits

down to hear him lecture on scriptural clues to God's native language: the professor gamely urges his students to "work out the predication and subordination patterns" in Mormon holy books. Unlike the desert fossils, linguistic theology does not move Frank, who reflects drily:

Knowing what God thought about "I ain't" and "I done" and "I seen" and how he crossed his t's and dotted his i's would be next best to being in the presence of the burning bush, that was for sure. (124)

But though Frank is able to laugh off academic mumbo-jumbo, his brother Jeremy is not. Jeremy's attendance at university triggers the young intellectual's descent into madness, which, along with Marianne and Frank's affair, is the other key turning point in the novel.

I THOUGHT of these two professors recently when I read *From the Hand of Mormon*, Terryl Givens's marvelous study of scholarly responses to the Latter-day Saints' golden book. He describes two separate eras of Book of Mormon scholarship in the twentieth century. Scholars in the first era, of which B. H. Roberts was the greatest representative, looked for Nephites and Jaredites in New World archaeology.

Stunning discoveries of Mesoamerican cities seemed to promise great things but proved a mirage: they did not match either the Book of Mormon timeline or its ethnographic descriptions, nor could archaeologists find any traces of the horses and other animals described in scripture. Roberts, in fact, seems to have painfully lost his belief in the story's literal truth.¹

The next generation of scholars, led by Hugh Nibley, shifted their attention to the ancient Near East and to literary analysis, which proved more fruitful. Placing the Book of Mormon in a context of ancient Levantine literature seemed to yield remarkable parallels in names and literary forms, supporting believers' faith in the narrative. Where Roberts had faltered, Nibley held firm. As the title of one of Nibley's studies attested, there were Jaredites.

This shift in Mormon scholarship that Givens describes, from New World rocks to Old World texts, helps me understand the relationship between *The Backslider's* two professors. The atheist paleontologist dominates the question of what one can learn from the landscape; his report on 250-million-year-old dinosaurs forces assent from everyone except crusty old Nathan (who stalks off disgusted). Faith-promoting scholarship has retreated to textual study in the person of Jeremy's Book of Mormon teacher. Although this enthusiast for divine syntax "holds the line" against evolution, he does not seem able to challenge the paleontologist from a position of strength.

Like the Book of Mormon scholars, I felt that I had retreated from American spaces to Old World texts. What drew me to my work was the landscape of the Andes, both natural and human-made: winding roads and steep plunges in the mountains, colonial cities built on Inca foundations, green parrots in stone plazas. But the best archive for colonial Latin American history is in Seville. I found myself in Spain—a country less strange to me than the Andes but more alien—puzzling over impenetrable handwriting in sixteenth-century lawsuits.

IN *The Backslider*, the reticent hero makes it clear that his loyalties lie with the land, not with words. While he acquits himself well on his visits to Provo, Las Vegas, and Salt Lake City, he is never tempted by city life, let alone the university. He loves horses, cattle, and the open southwestern landscape.

That landscape, however, carries a threat—not from the rationalism of the paleontologist, but from a kind of dark magic in the land. Marianne points it out:



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It's this country that drives people crazy . . . It's so pretty; it's wild and clean and godly. But sometimes it makes me feel so lonesome I can't stand it. It isn't just the polygamists who go crazy down here. Everybody has more or less gone crazy. (303)

Marianne's comment carries a sting for Frank, since the prime examples of crazy are his own kin—and perhaps himself.

The holy madness that runs in Frank's family stems from the wild and godly landscape, but it paradoxically rejects the values of the earth itself. His mother, who teaches her sons that holiness means asceticism, expands the prohibitions of the Word of Wisdom to include all sensory pleasure, from sex to meat-eating—and flavorful food in general. Frank's "natural man" loves the things that a being God made from soil might be expected to enjoy: good food, a hard day's work on horseback, going to a dance in a Stetson hat, bringing home the first steer for his future ranch, and lying down next to a wife who has some flesh on her bones. Marianne loves the same pleasures, which is the strongest bond between them. But Frank's idea of what God demands puts them on a regimen of unsalted beans and separate beds, leaving them both profoundly depressed. This Mormon version of an *Opus Dei* lifestyle leads, in time, to Frank taking a cheese-grater to his own flesh. As Marianne notes, he's pulling her and himself down the path poor Jeremy has already walked, which ends in madness.

Frank's rescuer—a literal *deus ex machina*, who appears among the plumbing fixtures when Frank faces despair in a wash-room—is the "Cowboy Jesus" who closes the novel. Jesus (who, startlingly, is a smoker) is more clearly a fellow Westerner than a fellow Mormon. He reconciles Frank to the innocent pleasures of the earth: work, play, and the love of a good woman. I found this ending a bit disappointing. I can't really weigh in on theological questions. I am no Mormon but an outsider drawn to the strange loveliness of Mormonism and therefore open to the charge of fetishizing the exotic. But what interests me is "how God [is] feeling this morning up on the royal star of Kolob" (253), not the cowboy Jesus' ecumenical, country-western reassurance. That message seems a retreat from the Mormon landscape's magical threats and promises. The cowboy Jesus seems to forget that the land is not just clean and godly, but also wild.

THAT'S how I thought about it, anyway, when I brought this beloved novel with me to the Andes after finishing my research in Spain. The Andean *altiplano* is an even larger version of the landscape that pushed Jamisons and polygamists into madness. A high plateau between mountain ranges covers southern Peru and Bolivia, with Lake Titicaca at the center, the Andes' answer to the Great Salt Lake. One afternoon I sat near a mine entrance at Potosí, an old silver-mining mountain from colonial times. I watched the miners cut the neck of a llama and splash the blood over the mine door to protect those who would enter the dangerous earth that year. I ate a little bit of that llama, half-cooked on an open fire. It reminded me of the polygamists of Johnson Valley who climb up the mountain to sacrifice a lamb at dawn, according to "the true Aaronic law" (306). "Criminy!"—as Marianne would have said. ☞

NOTE

1. This statement is controversial, but the support for it seems convincing. For an overview of the controversy, see Brigham D. Madsen, "B.H. Roberts' Studies of the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 77–86.



GHOST STORIES

None were true so far
as we knew: falling through
ice or canoes capsized
in rapids no one survives

thirteen kids out of inner city
huddled shoulder to shoulder
while we two counselors
boys ourselves voices

still changing told not who
vanished but how
gathering firewood
say the fire quietly alive

these stories made up of
nothing but other stories
maybe ghosts mistold
it could be any one of us

—CHRISTIAN KNOELLER



JEANNETTE ATWOOD