

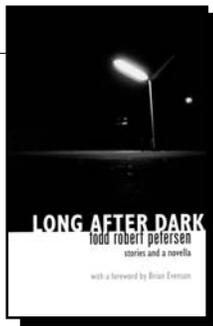
## BOOK REVIEW

## “REAL” STORIES

## LONG AFTER DARK

By Todd Robert Petersen  
Zarahemla Books, 2007  
165 pages, \$14.95

Reviewed by Ann M. Johnson



*Petersen's characters struggle with sin and don't always when. His short story characters remind me of people I've seen in Church—and have often ignored.*

TODD ROBERT PETERSEN'S *Long After Dark*, a collection of short stories and his novella, “Family History,” is an intriguing read. His characters struggle with real problems that evade the stock answers offered in church. David, the character in the last segment of the novella, discusses the problems of the 2020s when he comes of age. The world economy has collapsed, World War III is impending, LDS members are leaving the Church because they can't afford the financial burdens of all the temple building, and the prophet's main advice is for the Saints to write their family histories before the Second Coming. The situation is just enough exaggerated from today's current climate to be humorous. David's dying father wants to know what will happen to him after death. He laments that the Church doesn't provide any information about what is now the most pressing matter of his life. “They just tell us to make sure we've got our food storage and to give away the Book of Mormon. I want to know what's going to happen. I don't want to be so goddamn afraid of what's next,” he rages.

David's parents struggle with the family histories they have written. Too much honesty may ruin their reputations. Worse still, the histories will not be uplifting. David's mother asks that he not destroy the original stories. She knows that real stories, those about “opposition in all things,” will help people survive difficult times. She laments that Mormons “want stories of success without having to hear about the struggles of sin.”

PETERSEN'S characters struggle with sin and don't always win. His short story characters remind me of people I've seen in Church—and have often ignored. Active member parents struggle with the embarrassment of an unwed, pregnant daughter. Chad, a drug-using, pony-tailed guy, shows up at Church on Sunday during a life crisis and is ignored until he steals a picture of Jesus from the wall. Carol, a recently released stake Relief Society president, needs to feel useful again. The collage of characters and their heart-rending problems in Petersen's story, “Sunday School,” remind me that the real lessons of life reside within the

class members instead of within the lesson manuals. Members of this class feel each others' pain but do not overtly acknowledge it because, “Church is not a place for burdens like these.”

My favorite story is “Parables from the New World.” When he stops by to check the lock on the back door, a small-town sheriff accidentally sees his deputy's naked wife getting into the hot tub in her backyard. Praying doesn't help the sheriff overcome his lustful thoughts. Later that night, he encounters a Native-American Latter-day Saint (possibly one of the three Nephites) who tells him a story about an adulterous wager made between a badger and a coyote. The Indian thinks it's funny that the Book of Mormon doesn't have stories like that. “Scripture can get you feeling like nobody's ever too horny for their own good,” he tells the sheriff.

Petersen's stories deal with real situations without being overly dark. His darkest story, “Saved,” involves two car thieves, one a less-active Mormon who pays the ultimate price because his partner believes the childhood religion will ultimately pull him back. In “Now and at the Hour of Our Death,” an Argentine bishop shoots and kills an intruder in his home, then longs for the penance and forgiveness a confession to a priest in his former religion would give him. “We have no priests to absolve us. We do not gain our repentance so quickly,” his stake president counsels him

PETERSEN is a convert to the Church as are many of the characters in his stories. Lifelong Church members can benefit from learning vicariously about the painful backgrounds and situations which impact converts long after their baptisms. In “When the Brightness Seems Most Distant,” a couple struggles with the news that the wife's previous husband is HIV positive. In “Redeeming the Dead,” a convert has to deal with the death of his father who never forgave him for leaving his Catholic faith. “Quietly” is set in Rwanda where John, an African priesthood holder, has been sent by his white American branch president to dedicate the grave of a member killed in a violent attack. John recognizes that it is safer for an African to make the journey to the remote village than for the white American but reflects that twenty years ago, the American would have had to go himself.

Petersen's stories offer a compelling argument that joining the Church and having a testimony does not necessarily make life easier for us. ☺

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## COMMENTARY

## THE DEPARTED

By Stephen Carter

THE SUMMER OF 2000 I was out chasing some stories for the *Orem Daily Journal* when my editor called.

"There's this play or something premiering this afternoon at the Scera Theater, would you go cover it?" he asked.

A play premiering at the Scera at 2 o'clock in the afternoon? Weird.

When I got there I wasn't impressed. I saw three other people milling around the lobby looking kind of lost. Two of them were reporters, who are often lost anyway. That's why they're always asking questions.

Someone opened the doors and ushered us into the theater. When the projector turned on, I realized I wasn't here to see a play. But I was in no way prepared for what I did see.

Now, *God's Army* was Richard Dutcher's second film, so he was still learning plenty about his craft at the time. But none of that mattered to me as I watched this amazing look into a missionary's life. The only thing that mattered was that, for the first time in my life, I saw the potential of Mormon stories. I saw it was possible to create a morally complex world using the Mormon worldview as a foundation, to make fascinating characters that didn't convert at the drop of a testimony. I saw that faithful Mormon characters could actually propel a story, something I had never supposed. In other words, I saw a real storyteller at work.

By the end of the movie, I was converted. Mormonism wasn't just Sunday anymore. It was a seedbed for compelling, fully realized stories. It was a place where an artistic renaissance could find root. And I, a humble news reporter, wanted more than anything to be a part of it.

I had the chance to sit down and interview Richard after the movie, but I'm afraid I wasn't very professional. I was too overcome by what I had just experienced. But the question kept nagging at me: What was it about

Richard's work that made it so much more powerful than anything I had seen before in Mormon art? As a Utah County-raised Mormon boy, I had seen pretty much everything the Church had to offer filmwise. *Mr. Krueger's Christmas* bored me; *Legacy* was big; *On The Way Home* was definitely entertaining and had that guy from *CHiPS* in it. But none of them gave me the vision *God's Army* had.

A few months after *God's Army* had come into theaters, I attended some speeches Richard and his wife Gwen gave at Utah Valley State College. One person asked Richard if it had been difficult to get the approval of Church authorities to make *God's Army*.

"What kind of approval did I need?" Richard asked. "That was my story. You don't need Church approval to tell your own story."

Suddenly it clicked. That was what made Richard's work so different from every other story I had seen come out of the Mormon community. It was his own.

mountainside. And every time fresh actors tread the path of the story, the groove runs deeper. [...] A million unknowing actors have moved, unknowing, through the pathways of story.

Stories don't care who takes part in them. All that matters is that the story gets told, that the story repeats. Or, if you prefer to think of it like this: stories are a parasitical life form, warping lives in the service only of the story itself.<sup>1</sup>

I was an unknowing actor, moving, unknowing, through the Mormon story. A story influenced by thousands of general conference speeches and Church magazine articles, and millions of subsidiary sacrament meeting talks and Sunday School lessons. In other words, a very deeply carved story. Practically a canyon.

So, when I tried to write, the boundaries of the Mormon story made themselves felt mightily, like walls of stone. It seemed that there were only two things to be done: follow that same path, making it a little deeper, or climb the wall. But as we all know, climbing the wall means getting out of the story. But where does that lead? According to the Mormon story, it means falling into the anti-Mormon story. Deep into its suffocating waters and violent currents. It was either one or the other.

**THE VERY DEFINITE POSSIBILITY THAT RICHARD will never make another Mormon-themed film breaks my heart, as does the idea that Mormonism can't serve as a community to the person who helped me learn to tell my own story.**

AT first, such a realization may look silly, but as I thought back on my own attempts at writing, I began to understand that I was hog-tied by the storytelling expectations of my culture and my church. I didn't have the ability to write my own story.

In his book *Witches Abroad*, author Terry Pratchett portrays stories as etching grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a

But with Richard's initial push, I slowly began to conceive of the idea that there could be a third way to go. What if I could give myself enough authority to start my own story? I mean really delve into my life, really probe my thoughts, really lay out what my experience seemed to present to me instead of letting the Mormon story take over the interpretation of my life? What if I became a branch of the story, as small and uninfluential as it might be, rather than running with the mainstream?

This is what I spent five years doing as I earned my M.F.A. and Ph.D. in writing (I realized early on that I had no natural facility for storytelling; therefore I had to go to school longer to learn it). I was trying to find my way out of the huge story that insisted on telling me. I was also trying to find a way to not slip



STEPHEN CARTER is finally finished with *Alaska* and now lives in tropical Wyoming, where he makes animations with middle school students. His wife, Noelle, has an award-winning poem in the current issue of *Segullah*. Stephen and Noelle have two sons: one is a dragon expert; the other just had a tooth removed.

into the opposite path, the anti-Mormon story, since they are merely two sides of the same coin—both interested in me only as fodder for their own consumption.

So what happened after all this effort? What great reward came my way? Well, at the moment, I am an essayist of very small renown. I write stuff for *SUNSTONE* and *Dialogue* sometimes and get paid with contributors copies (strangely, there is absolutely no black market for these). From time to time, I win an award that, though few have ever heard of it, at least bolsters my bank account for a day or two. Only a very small handful of people even know that I write.

I guess I don't have a lot to show as far as accomplishment and popular acclaim are concerned. The only thing I have to say for myself is that I have bled over each of the essays I have published. I personally wrested each of them away from the two huge stories that wanted to take them over. They're my stories.

It was a lot of work to bleed these essays out, but that didn't bother me. I loved feeling like I was a part of the new Mormon artistic renaissance I had come to believe in during *God's Army*. I only wished I had more to contribute to it. Mainly because for so many

years, I have found little that nourishes me in the official church. I wanted the Church to be brought back to me through the art that arose from it. And I had hope, because things were progressing. I started to see a nook for myself; I started finding a community.

**I**N A RECENT essay, Molly Bennion wrote about a community of Mormon women she'd found when she joined the Church in 1967: "For about twenty years, I felt part of a community of seekers and finders. We who needed to know, who loved to learn, and who found new questions at the end of each new answer were not alone. It was a heady time."<sup>2</sup>

My heady period, when I felt as if I were not alone, lasted seven years: from the day I first saw *God's Army* to the day I read that Richard, for reasons that I'm sure are complex and deeply felt, has decided to graze in other spiritual pastures. (See story, page 79.)

When I first read about it, I immediately wrote to the Association for Mormon Letters email list defending Richard's decision. But I started to notice a significant alteration in my mood afterward. I felt like I was coming apart. I realized that I was grieving, and that the grief was attached to Richard's decision.

Now I can echo Molly as she writes, "The headiness is gone. Today church is the loneliest place I regularly go."

See, I'd be fine if Jared and Jerusha Hess decided they were done with Mormonism. I'd be fine if Ryan Little or Kieth Merrill decided to leave. It didn't bug me when Neil LaBute and Brian Evenson left. Why? Because their work doesn't enliven Mormon arts except indirectly. Hess's *Napoleon Dynamite* and *Nacho Libre* have pretty much zero Mormon references in them, much less ideology. The religious soldier in Little's *Saints and Soldiers* could have been of any religion. Merrill's artistic connection with Mormonism is strictly through institutional film. And I've watched people try to tease out Mormon ideology in LaBute's and Evenson's work, but I've never been convinced by their arguments.

The bottom line is, none of these people did what Richard did. He took Mormonism seriously in all its peculiarity, in all its promise, in all its paradox. He approached it unabashed. He was willing to stick his neck out and make real cinema for Mormons.

During the period between *Brigham City* (another slam dunk in my book) and *States of Grace*, Richard was on the Association for Mormon Letters list for a few months. During that time, he told us about a production of the musical *Chicago* he had seen in New York and how amazed he was at the dedication of the dancers, throwing their entire bodies into the dance every second, seeming to end the play on the brink of collapse.

You haven't seen me work like that yet, he wrote, but soon you will.

Then we got *States of Grace*. When I saw it, I could see exactly what he meant. Every bit of talent and energy Richard had was pushed to its breaking point. It was my first *God's Army* experience all over again.

But what was the larger picture? Essentially, *States of Grace* was a box office misfire. When I went to see it, there were two other people in the theater with me. What happened? The greatest accomplishment in Mormon cinema to date comes into our hands, and we ignore it? There is no doubt that *States of Grace* is gritty. My own brother couldn't handle it, so I can't claim that people who didn't like it are stupid. Maybe *States of Grace* just isn't the way most Mormons liked their gospel served up. I can appreciate that. I personally dislike the way the institutional church serves its cinematic gospel. So I guess we can all have our opinions.

But there is no doubt about one thing. Richard had put out a deeply personal story. He had bled it out the way one must in order

## HONEST JON by Jonathan David Clark



Chuck finds another way in. . .

to make a story true. But then he found himself playing to an empty house. In fact, if you were reading the blogs at the time *States of Grace* came out, you would have found a lot of Mormons attacking Richard for his story. What's worse, apathy or antagonism? Richard got both.

**M**OLLY'S essay, from which I quoted earlier, focuses on the disappearance of intellectual women from the Church. One of the main reasons she gives for this disappearance is that, as a general rule, the Church doesn't value the contributions intellectual women can make. "Inside the walls of our chapels and classrooms, most of the talents we have developed and yearn to share with our brothers and sisters seem not to be wanted."

What do you do when a huge part of your community can't or won't hear the unique voice you've cultivated? What do you do when parts of your community condemn you for exercising your talents? What do you do when your community ignores or reviles the stories that nourish you?

During the 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, a session was held in which several people gave their own interpretations of *States of Grace*.<sup>3</sup> I listened to this session later on MP3, and the responses struck me as being too nice. It felt somewhat like a "Praise be to Dutcher" session. I was hoping for a little more rigor, a little more questioning. But then, at the end of the session, Richard got up and talked about the homeless preacher in the movie who says, "The only thing harder than being without a home is being without a church."

"I just realized that for the past few months, I've felt like I've been without a church," Richard said. Turns out this session was just what Richard had needed. It was the resonance he had hoped for. He had found a "church" among the motley crew who attend the Salt Lake symposium each year. People with ears to hear and eyes to see the beauty of his contribution. People who could hear the voice of his small stream of story over the roar of the mainstream Mormon story and find an unexpected, but wholly beautiful, harmony.

"**G**IVE," said the little stream. That's what so many of us try to do. But we have strange talents whose currency seems to have little value in the economy of Mormonism. So what do we do with our talents? Do we bury them? That would essentially be burying ourselves. I understand that we have started our own little streams; it's our own fault that we're harder to hear from

the main stream. But though we've departed from the primary current, our source is still in Mormonism.

According to psychiatrist Carl Rogers, the most valuable gift we can give to each other is understanding.<sup>4</sup> This is why the story of the atonement has so much resonance. The idea that someone has walked with us through our lives and understood us to the core is a stabilizing and empowering one. We live in a culture so steeped in judgment that understanding is at a premium.

In M. Scott Peck's definition of community, you can't get away from the fact that everyone has to stop trying to convert one another in order to become a true community. A community is a place where people hear each other.<sup>5</sup>

Parker J. Palmer defines a community as a space that should honor the "little" stories of those involved as well as the "big" stories of the disciplines and tradition.<sup>6</sup>

**J**ESUS said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). Perhaps he meant that while we're in the act of judging, we're not in the act of understanding.

All of us want to have a community where we are heard, where we can hear other people, where our individual stories can cross-fertilize, making something new and beautiful. There are a lot of us, and we're very different from each other. That's why there are so many different communities. So many different ways to make new stories.

What I hope is that Richard is moving into a community that can hear him. I hope that he can nourish his community as it nourishes him. In fact, I hope this is the path of all who have left Mormonism.

The very definite possibility that Richard will never make another Mormon-themed film breaks my heart, as does the idea that Mormonism can't serve as a community to the person who helped me learn to tell my own story. Equally sad is that the field of Mormon arts has been left to hard-working, but only semi-talented artists like me.

Maybe one of Mormonism's roles in the world, besides producing FBI agents, is to export artists to the world. The way the Soviet Union used to, fostering talent like the composer Dmitri Shostakovich and the dancer Rudolph Nureyev so they could defect to the West and carry on their art without the government constantly looking over their shoulder. Just because Russia had a hard time keeping its artists didn't stop it from producing them.

But still, didn't the continent get a little

colder, and its nights a little darker, every time one of these artists left?

Molly's lament for the departing of talented, intelligent women, and mine for Richard, makes me wonder if, as a church, we need to follow Alma's advice a little more: to "mourn with those that mourn; . . . and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:9). To me, that sounds like a good way to say, "Let's start listening to each other's stories." ☺

## NOTES

1. Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad* (New York: Corgi, 2005), 3.
2. Molly McLellan Bennion, "A Lament." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 115–22.
3. "Discussion of Richard Dutcher's *States of Grace*," 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, 10 August 2006, audio/CD/download SL06–171.
4. Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (New York: Mariner Books, 1995).
5. M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Touchstone, 1998).
6. Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known, Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).



## BREAKFAST WITH MY FATHER

*I'm going to Chillicothe  
for breakfast with my father,  
my neighbor harnesses  
her gray hair and climbs  
into a Chevy  
and one of the four of us is back  
in a kitchen smoky with bacon,  
another back to read  
of the paper boy's arrival  
with the barrier that for years  
separated two bowls.  
One of us hears a sob  
in the presence of an empty chair,  
and I am bathed in the Saturday  
his laughter dolloped each plate.  
My neighbor knew that at her age  
this occasion was a privilege.  
I knew in truth that at any age  
it was a luxury of good fortune  
for who among us ever gets  
breakfast with their father?*

—SHOSHAUNA SHY