

FROM THE EDITOR

INTRICATE
FRAY

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The day before my sister married, my father sat the family down and told us that she was heading into the most important day of her life. For some reason, this idea rubbed me wrong, but I didn't know why at the time.

I figured it out a few years later when my wife and I were lying in bed staring at the ceiling. We had just started jobs as schoolteachers in a small Wyoming town, and the initial adrenaline of moving ourselves and two sons 3000 miles, starting new jobs, and buying a house had worn off.

For five years before that night, we had been attending graduate school. We had been excited; we had worked hard; we had looked forward to receiving our degrees. We had felt that we were setting up an interesting and rewarding life for ourselves by investing all this time, money, and energy. But now, with these new jobs, we suddenly felt like our lifeworld had derailed onto a track destined for a town called "And then they taught school for thirty years, retired, and died."

"Is this it?" we asked each other as we stared into the darkness. "Is *this* what we spent so many years working for?" Would the rest of our lives be falling action? My wife and I were suffering from what we now call narrative poverty—a state where one suddenly finds oneself without a meaningful story for one's life.

I believe that the same thing can happen with marriage. If the act of marrying in the temple is the single most important event in a Mormon's life, then what is the rest of life about? Who wants two-thirds of their lives to be an epilogue?

This is probably one of the reasons so many of us invest so heavily in landing that job promotion or buying that larger house. We're looking for some kind of

rising action to define our married lives; some kind of progress indicator. It's probably one of the reasons my wife and I went to graduate school. We were looking for a solid narrative.

I wonder if the reason for the high divorce rate nationally is partly that our marriages suffer from a lack of narrative. After all, the story of marriage doesn't get much help from the mass media. I'm trying to think of the last blockbuster movie or novel with a substantive story taking place within a marriage, and I'm not coming up with anything. This lack is probably because stories are built around change, and the easiest changes to see are the big ones. Why else do so many stories start with people not in love and end with them in love, or vice versa? Because those are pretty big changes.

Providing the world with compelling marriage narratives is where I believe Mormon authors should be uniquely qualified to make a significant contribution.

Our doctrine of eternal progression provides a high-octane fuel for the marriage narrative that few other traditions have. We believe that this life is only the preface to an eternity of progression—that the story should only get more interesting as it goes along. The plot has only just begun when vows have been exchanged.

Most Mormons marry in their early 20s, about one-third of their way through life. Interestingly, in most stories, the inciting event (the event that really gets the plot going) hits about the one-third mark too. So, narratively, marriage is positioned at the most dramatically weighty turning point of a Mormon's life.

We are also steeped in the culture of family. Our families are often larger than the national average. We tend to keep close ties with extended family. We cast our ancestors in integral roles when we tell our family narratives. In fact, we consider the entire population of the planet—past,

present, and future—to be part of a great big family. Family is pretty much our central metaphor.

So falling in love may be fun, but Mormonism avers that marriage and family is where substantive soul work is done.

However, if building up a strong tradition of marriage literature is something we want to do, we have our work cut out for us. As I said earlier, we aren't going to get any help from the mass media—they're interested only when someone is falling in love or breaking up. (Or did I miss the headlines reading "Pitt and Jolie Spend Day in Matrimonial Bliss"?) Even one of the great novelists of the 20th century fails us: "It is a sound instinct of the common people which persuades them that with [marriage], all that needs to be said is said," writes W. Somerset Maugham on the first page of *The Razor's Edge*. "When male and female, after whatever vicissitudes you like, are at last brought together, they have fulfilled their biological function and interest passes to the generation that is to come." And I am unaware of a strong current of marriage literature in Mormonism. Plenty of sermons, yes, but few narratives. The main story I hear is the pulpit joke about the husband who takes lots of walks.

Also, sadly, in practice, Mormon culture isn't so hot at creating marriage narratives. We're so obsessed with getting our children to that temple ceremony that we forget to set the stage for the rest of their play. We'd have to start thinking about marriage not as a story's background, but as its main character, complete with goals and dramatic needs.

Perhaps with the development of a robust marriage literature, we could have a hand in creating a world where people talk about the stories of great marriages the same way they talk about the stories of great leaders or great fictional characters. People might start to get into marriage because they see it as an adventure, because they're excited about the things they can do there, because they want to add their unique story to the larger body of marriage literature. Marriage will be like the Amazon river, or Mount Kilimanjaro; and the married will be their explorers.

We'll have to give up a few things, though. First, we'll have to redefine the perfect marriage. A good step would be to take down the façade we currently present of our marriages being the paragon of unflappable domesticity and let the rest of the world know that we're struggling just like they are. But we should also let them know that we're

trying to savor the struggle; we're trying to see it as productive. We're trying to make something here, not just endure to the end.

We'll have to give up the safe, simple stories of marriage maintenance and forge into the stakes-laden, complex stories of marriage *making*. We'll have to develop fecund new metaphors. "Marriage is a partnership"? "Marriage is a tender flower"? Nice sentiments, and helpful in their way, but boring. If we want to create compelling marriage narratives, we need to leave our well-intentioned advice behind. Marriage literature is not marriage therapy. It's the creation of possibilities.

A few months ago I had some free time and wandered into my old haunt, Deseret Industries. In my early 20s, I would bring home a bag of used books almost weekly, but on this particular visit, only one book caught my eye: Nick Hornby's novel *How To Be Good*—a topic no Mormon can help but be interested in.

The story is about Katie, a general practitioner married with two children. Her husband, David has an ill-paying job writing a column called "The Angriest Man in Holloway." Their marriage is falling apart and on the verge of ending when David meets a spiritual healer named DJ GoodNews. The encounter turns David completely around, and he becomes the most ineptly philanthropic man in Holloway.

GoodNews moves into their home and, with David, concocts one grandiose humanitarian scheme after another. David gives away the family's computers, makes the kids donate the toys they *like*, and convinces his neighbors to take in homeless kids.

Being a family practice doctor, Katie has always considered herself a good person, but she has a hard time dealing with these changes. David and GoodNews throw the household and Katie's life and beliefs into chaos.

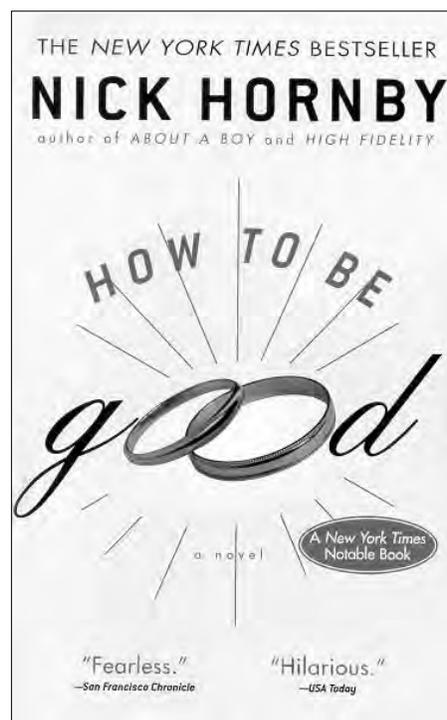
About halfway into this book, I realized that it would make a great model for Mormon marriage fiction.

The difficulty with Mormon fiction (and anti- or critical-of-Mormon literature) is that someone is always right, and the purpose of the story is to show why that someone is right. Often, the author makes no bones about who that enlightened person is from the very beginning.

I realize that a lot of people enjoy this kind of fiction. Reading it is like riding a roller coaster where you know that, as wild

as it may get, numerous engineers have tested this thing countless times, ensuring that you will come out the other end as whole as you went in. I assume the same principle is at work in romance novels, where the reader automatically knows who needs to get together with whom; or sci-fi, where the reader knows that the alien lord will be overcome; or literary fiction, where the protagonist will inevitably end up alone, in the rain.

How To Be Good, however, is different. Though the reader is meant to side with Katie—the normal, sane, rational person



—and look askance at David and GoodNews—the two who are trying to do good in the world—real goodness seems up for grabs.

For example, the reader completely agrees with Katie that housing a faith healer and a homeless boy named Monkey are terrible ideas. And, indeed, some neighbors get burned during the course of the project. But, by golly, as a result, three homeless kids find their way into a better life.

However, while saving homeless kids, Katie and David's family is going to pot. Their son starts stealing from fellow students, their daughter slowly loses her humanity to sanctimony, and Katie's brother shows warning signs of suicide.

A battle is certainly raging here, but the book is not about who wins and who loses, or who's right and who's wrong. Instead, it

tracks the intricacies of the fray. It shows how the people caught in this tension grow.

One of my favorite parts of the book is when Katie and her daughter Molly go to an Anglican church. There they listen to a slightly cracked pastor who sings pop and Broadway songs in her sermon. At one point, she quotes St. Paul's thoughts, "Charity is not puffed up and does not vaunt itself." Katie grabs the quote as ammunition to shoot down her husband's inflated righteousness.

She takes her shot during a particularly tense moment, but David points out that the same scripture was quoted at their wedding ceremony, except that charity was replaced with love. Then he drags out a box of memorabilia he had assembled a few days after their honeymoon. "It was a fantastic day. I was so happy. I just didn't want to forget it," he says.

And, for just a moment, despite their battling worldviews, a tiny bit of warmth sparks between them.

Her own warmth, Katie reflects later, "is sick, dying, or dead . . . there is just enough for Molly and Tom [her son], but it doesn't really count, because it's a reflex, and my occasional flashes of warmth are like my occasional desire to wee."

In the end, David becomes less reliant on utopian visions, and Katie, a little less reliant on rationality. They both become more fluid. In other words, in this novel, we don't have the triumph of an idea or principle. Neither David nor Katie is right. Instead, we get some character development.

It seems to me that eternal progression is exactly what *How To Be Good* is all about. People don't progress because they get righter and righter. They progress because in all its idiosyncrasy, their humanity becomes larger, more robust, and more diverse in response to their circumstances.

At the end of the book, Katie compares her transformation to a house, which she wants to "keep extending . . . until it becomes a mansion, full of rooms."

Happily, we have a few excellent works from Mormon writers to start with. Eric Samuelsen's play *Family* (available on Sunstone's website), Margaret Young's novel *Heresies of Nature*, and Angela Hallstrom's *Bound on Earth* all do a bang-up job of delving into the intricacies of marriage and family. I hope they are paving the way for more to come.