

• *Book Reviews* •

Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin, eds. Logan Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010. Pp 1-203.

Peculiar Portrayals is a collection of essays intended to spur further research into media portrayals of Mormons, a religious group that strives for mainstream acceptance in the face of current popular opinions that are focused on present intolerance (mainly relating to California's Prop 8 debates) and past involvement in polygamy and violence. Indeed, the most prevalent issues brought up in these essays are polygamy, violence, and homosexuality, while the most prevalent themes are integration versus alienation and past versus present. Sanders writes that "the past is always present" (89) with Mormons and depictions of missionaries exemplify Mormons' "peculiar" marginality coequal with their "ability to blend into the social mainstream" (127).

While the editors seek to be "more suggestive than definitive" and admit to "tantalizing gaps" (3) with such tightly knit essays thematically, some of these gaps seem unnecessary. For instance, the minority experience in America is a prevalent theme. Cristine Hutchinson-Jones explores Tony Kushner's use of Mormons in his *Angels in America* not only as a meditation on 1980s homosexual communities, but also the minority experience in America. Kevin Kolkmeier is more explicit as he uses the controversial text of Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven* to help immigrant students grapple with the complexity of assimilation, the difficulty of "others" in shedding stereotypes, and the questioning of America's reputation as "the land of opportunity" (64). Kolkmeier's efforts are successful largely because of

the identity crises inherent in Mormonism's experience in America, as members seek to be both insiders and outsiders. Juliette Wells's article on Mormons using Jane Austen to appeal to "both insiders and outsiders" cements this dichotomy of the Mormon experience (163).

One issue pervading the insider/outsider tension is polygamy, which Kolkmeier touches on, but which Michael Austin develops more fully in his exploration of HBO's *Big Love*. Austin points out that while *Big Love* brings to the forefront Mormonism's most alienating feature—the historical practice of polygamy—it does it in a way that normalizes it to mainstream American values. When a certain character refuses to take an additional wife, he is expressing the primacy of subjective feelings, a stance which accords well with modern American notions of love and romance.

Karen Austin's article on Mormons in reality television continues the exploration of Mormons seeking to mainstream themselves but also points out how the Mormon stereotype as outsider and "other" is central to their use in the shows' narratives. As such, the Mormon stereotype becomes useful fodder for writers and producers interesting in creating conflict and country-bumpkin-learns-the-way-of-the-city-type story arcs which reinforce mainstream American values.

John-Charles Duffy continues this exploration of Mormonism's cultural image in his article about Mormon missionaries. Duffy argues that the missionary image has been expropriated and entered into the American marketplace of ideas, and has

consequently been reworked by various directors. Mormon missionaries have become “sources of moral grounding or agents of transformation” (131) as well as images of “peculiar, marginalized religious groups” with an ability to “blend into the mainstream” (127). This entrance of the missionary image into the cultural lexicon is problematic for a church that seeks to tightly control that image, the recognizable uniformity of which is a product of that very control.

While many of the articles rely on the dichotomies that are easily attached to Mormons, Mark T. Decker’s article fights against these reductive dualities as he analyzes Brady Udall’s picaresque tale of a biracial Apache boy, *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*. Set firmly in the postmodern world, Edgar Mint, like Mormonism’s image, seems obsessed with history to the point that it limits his ability to function in the present. Decker explores how Udall’s very American characters respond to the weight of history and their ancestors as they reconcile them with a postmodern and, in some cases, post-Mormon world filled with the “multiplicity of micronarratives” that is definitive of the “postmodern condition” (148).

Peculiar Portrayals contains provocative explorations of a Mormonism which is indelibly tied to its past and, indeed, to the entire American experience. It does suggest “tantalizing gaps” which crave further exploration, and, as a sourcebook, is definitely valuable as a starting point for debates and research into studies of Mormonism and Mormons and their peculiar position in America today.

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