

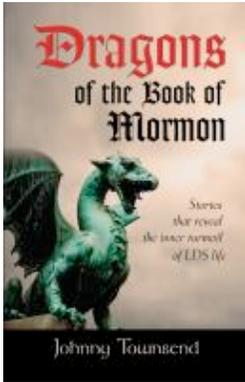
# Dragons

of the Book of  
Mormon



*Stories  
that reveal  
the inner turmoil  
of LDS life*

Johnny Townsend



*In this collection of Mormon short stories, we see a supporter of Prop 8 forced to attend his boss's gay wedding. A reporter seeks the identity of Salt Lake's new superhero--a masked man wearing temple clothes who mysteriously shows up at crime scenes. One of the Three Nephites is missing in Pasadena. Mormons survive the zombie apocalypse because of their two-year supply of food storage.*

## **Dragons of the Book of Mormon**

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## Praise for Johnny Townsend

In *Zombies for Jesus*, “Townsend isn’t writing satire, but deeply emotional and revealing portraits of people who are, with a few exceptions, quite lovable.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

Townsend’s stories are “a gay *Portnoy’s Complaint* of Mormonism. Salacious, sweet, sad, insightful, insulting, religiously ethnic, quirky-faithful, and funny.”

D. Michael Quinn, author of *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*

Johnny Townsend is “an important voice in the Mormon community.”  
Stephen Carter, editor of *Sunstone* magazine

“Told from a believably conversational first-person perspective, [*The Abominable Gayman*’s] novelistic focus on Anderson’s journey to thoughtful self-acceptance allows for greater character development than often seen in short stories, which makes this well-paced work rich and satisfying, and one of Townsend’s strongest. An extremely important contribution to the field of Mormon fiction.” Named to Kirkus Review’s Best of 2011.

Kirkus Reviews

“The thirteen stories in *Mormon Underwear* capture this struggle [between Mormonism and homosexuality] with humor, sadness, insight, and sometimes shocking details....*Mormon Underwear* provides compelling stories, literally from the inside-out.”

Niki D’Andrea, *Phoenix New Times*

*The Circumcision of God* “asks questions that are not often asked out loud in Mormonism, and certainly not answered.”

Jeff Laver, author of *Elder Petersen’s Mission Memories*

“Townsend’s lively writing style and engaging characters [in *Zombies for Jesus*] make for stories which force us to wake up, smell the (prohibited) coffee, and review our attitudes with regard to reading dogma so doggedly. These are tales which revel in the individual tics and quirks which make us human, Mormon or not, gay or not...”

A.J. Kirby, The Short Review

In *Sex among the Saints*, “Townsend writes with a deadpan wit and a supple, realistic prose that’s full of psychological empathy....he takes his protagonists’ moral struggles seriously and invests them with real emotional resonance.”

Kirkus Reviews

“The Rift” [from *The Abominable Gayman*] is a “fascinating tale of an untenable situation...a *tour de force*.”

David Lenson, editor, *The Massachusetts Review*

“Pronouncing the Apostrophe” [from *The Golem of Rabbi Loew*] is “quiet and revealing, an intriguing tale...”

Sima Rabinowitz, Literary Magazine Review, NewPages.com

“Johnny Townsend’s short stories cannot be pigeon-holed. His keen observations on the human condition come in many shapes and sizes...reflecting on both his Jewish and Mormon backgrounds as well as life in the vast and varied American gay community. He dares to think and write about people and incidents that frighten away more timid artists. His perspective is sometimes startling, sometimes hilarious, sometimes poignant, but always compassionate.”

Gerald S. Argetsinger, Artistic Director of the Hill Cumorah Pageant (1990-96)

*The Circumcision of God* is “a collection of short stories that consider the imperfect, silenced majority of Mormons, who may in fact be [the Church’s] best hope....[The book leaves] readers regretting the church’s willingness to marginalize those who best exemplify its ideals: those who love fiercely despite all obstacles, who brave challenges at great personal risk and who always choose the hard, higher road.”

Kirkus Reviews

In *Mormon Fairy Tales*, Johnny Townsend displays “both a wicked sense of irony and a deep well of compassion.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

“In *Marginal Mormons*, Johnny Townsend portrays nuanced, colorful LDS characters who struggle with the constraints of their rigid, black and white world. A fascinating read.”

Donna Banta, author of *False Prophet*

*The Golem of Rabbi Loew* will prompt “gasps of outrage from conservative readers...a strong collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

“That’s one of the reasons why I found Johnny Townsend’s new book *Mormon Fairy Tales* SO MUCH FUN!! Without fretting about what the theology is supposed to be if it were pinned down, Townsend takes you on a voyage to explore the rich-but-undertapped imagination of Mormonism. I loved his portrait of spirit prison! He really nailed it—not in an official doctrine sort of way, but in a sort of ‘if you know Mormonism, you know this is what it must be like’ way—and what a prison it is!

Johnny Townsend has written at least ten books of Mormon stories. So far, I’ve read only two (*Mormon Fairy Tales* and *The Circumcision of God*), but I’m planning to read the rest—and you should too, if you’d like a fun and interesting new perspective on Mormons in life and imagination!”

C. L. Hanson, *Main Street Plaza*

*Zombies for Jesus* is “eerie, erotic, and magical.”

Publishers Weekly

“While [Townsend’s] many touching vignettes draw deeply from Mormon mythology, history, spirituality and culture, [*Mormon Fairy Tales*] is neither a gaudy act of proselytism nor angry protest literature from an ex-believer. Like all good fiction, his stories are simply about the joys, the hopes and the sorrows of people.”

Kirkus Reviews

“In *Let the Faggots Burn* author Johnny Townsend restores this tragic event [the UpStairs Lounge fire] to its proper place in LGBT history and reminds us that the victims of the blaze were not just ‘statistics,’ but real people with real lives, families, and friends.”

Jesse Monteagudo, The Bilerico Project

*Marginal Mormons* [named to Kirkus Review’s Best of 2012] is “an irreverent, honest look at life outside the mainstream Mormon Church....Throughout his musings on sin and forgiveness, Townsend beautifully demonstrates his characters’ internal, perhaps irreconcilable struggles....Rather than anger and disdain, he offers an honest portrayal of people searching for meaning and community in their lives, regardless of their life choices or secrets.”

Kirkus Reviews

“The Sneakover Prince” from *God’s Gargoyles* is “one of the most sweet and romantic stor[ies] I have ever read.”

Elisa Rolle, Reviews and Ramblings, founder of The Rainbow Awards

“*Let the Faggots Burn* is a one-of-a-kind piece of history. Without Townsend’s diligence and devotion, many details would’ve been lost forever. With his tremendous foresight and tenacious research, Townsend put a face on this tragedy at a time when few people would talk about it....Through Townsend’s vivid writing, you will sense what it must’ve been like in those final moments as the fire ripped through the UpStairs Lounge. *Let the Faggots Burn* is a chilling and insightful glimpse into a largely forgotten and ignored chapter of LGBT history.”

Robert Camina, writer and producer of the documentary *Raid of the Rainbow Lounge*

The stories in *The Mormon Victorian Society* “register the new openness and confidence of gay life in the age of same-sex marriage....What hasn’t changed is Townsend’s wry, conversational prose, his subtle evocations of character and social dynamics, and his deadpan humor. His warm empathy still glows in this intimate yet clear-eyed engagement with Mormon theology and folkways. Funny, shrewd and finely wrought dissections of the awkward contradictions—and surprising harmonies—between conscience and desire.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Johnny Townsend’s ‘Partying with St. Roch’ [in the anthology *Latter-Gay Saints*] tells a beautiful, haunting tale.”

Kent Brintnall, *Out in Print*: Queer Book Reviews

“The struggles and solutions of the individuals [in *Latter-Gay Saints*] will resonate across faith traditions and help readers better understand the cost of excluding gay members from full religious participation.”

Publishers Weekly



Dragons of the  
Book of  
Mormon

Johnny Townsend

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## Foreword:

### A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

Being a writer is never easy. But being an ex-Mormon writer of Mormon fiction must be one of the more thankless callings in the Church. As non-Mormons, we're not even eligible for the sole literary award given for Mormon literature, the Whitney Award presented by the Association for Mormon Letters. As excommunicated or disenfranchised Mormons, we no longer matter to Mormons, and therefore even as writers of Mormon literature, we don't matter to the Latter-day literati.

Perhaps I should give some background here, for evaluation purposes. I've earned four degrees, one of them an MFA in fiction writing from Louisiana State University. I've published stories and essays in many traditional publications, such as *Newsday*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Humanist*, *The Progressive*, *The Army Times*, *Medical Reform*, *Religion Dispatches*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Christopher Street*, *Harrington Gay Men's Literary Quarterly*, *Drash*, *Sunstone*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and in the anthologies *Queer Fish*, *Off the Rocks*, and *In Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions*. I helped edit a collection of gay Mormon fiction, *Latter-Gay Saints*. One of my essays was included in the textbook *Critical Thinking and Critical Reading*. I've been interviewed on KUOW, Seattle's NPR station, and there are two articles about my work in *DNA*, Australia's leading gay magazine. And last, and quite probably least, since public

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speaking is not my strongest point, I've spoken at eight different conferences across the country. I may not have published in *The New Yorker* or had a best-seller by Knopf, and it's clear the Pulitzer will never be within my grasp, but I do have enough credentials to warrant some very small degree of notice.

One of the main reasons I'm ignored, of course, is because all sixteen of my books are self-published. To many people, self-publishing is a pathetic attempt at validation by those no respectable editor would ever bother with. Having read a few other self-published books myself, I can understand the knee-jerk disdain. And I'll be the first to acknowledge that my own books would clearly have benefited from professional editing.

That said, I have to ask the question: how can those who dismiss me be so sure my books are being turned down by traditional publishers because of the quality of my writing, and not because of the Mormon content?

If I can't get Mormons to read my Mormon books because Mormons are so disinterested, why should a mainstream publisher believe he could get any respectable reading audience for my work if he invested in it? To disqualify my books, or those by other independently published authors who have left the fold, solely because of our small audience isn't the same as saying these books aren't actually good.

But how will anyone know, if they discount them before reading them?

My book, *The Abominable Gayman*, about a gay Mormon missionary in Italy, was named to Kirkus Reviews' Best of 2011. The reviewer concluded that "this well-paced work" was

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“rich and satisfying,” “an extremely important contribution to the field of Mormon fiction.” And yet I’ve given complimentary copies of the book to several Mormon reviewers, and not one of them will even open it. I’ve read anti-gay articles by some of the most prominent LDS reviewers, and this naturally disturbs me. How can I hope to get an objective review from someone whose agenda is to eliminate me?

Reviewers are certainly not obligated to like me, of course. I freely admit I’ve gotten some negative reviews over the years for my writing as well. Some reviewers will like my work, and some won’t. That’s life. What irritates me is hearing constantly that I’m not even worth evaluating in the first place. I can’t help but feel that Mormons are thinking, “If we just ignore him, maybe he’ll go away.”

I’ve received some good reviews from *Sacramento News and Review*, *Phoenix New Times*, *The Short Review*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Main Street Plaza*, but it’s hard to find reviewers for self-published books anywhere. I simply believe that Mormon audiences are missing out on valuable additions to their libraries if we don’t acknowledge that self-publishing is a real, viable source of literature.

An LDS reviewer on Amazon gave one of my books a negative review because the book was filled with characters who wouldn’t pass a temple recommend interview. It’s one thing not to like the content and therefore choose not to read a book, but it’s another to say the book is poorly written just because you disagree with the morals of some of the characters.

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I know, I know. I'm beginning to sound like a petulant child complaining that no one has chosen me to play on their softball team. It's always a sign of weakness to be on the defense rather than taking aggressive offensive action. But I have a few other questions to ask those who would automatically disqualify me from consideration.

How would Church members treat a schizophrenic woman in their ward who has a terribly annoying personality? Would we be Christ-like, or something less?

What would electroshock therapy for a gay BYU student do to him?

What kind of life would a dedicated polygamous Mormon in 1855 Utah have, ordered to take a fourth wife, when all he really wants is to be with another man?

If all gods are married eternally, and some gods have more than one wife, is it a sin for a Mormon woman to fantasize sexually about being married to Jesus?

If children under the age of eight go automatically to the Celestial Kingdom, what would happen if someone set out to deliberately murder young children in order to "save" them?

These may be outrageous questions, but I don't think they're insignificant ones. A reviewer can claim I don't do these ideas justice, but they can only claim that if they actually read my work to find out. One LDS publisher refused to consider my book, *The Circumcision of God*, because he said the title alone made him uneasy. He never got as far as reading the actual book. You can imagine reactions to my next titles, *Mormon Underwear*, *Sex among the Saints*, and *Zombies for Jesus*.

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I would suggest that fear is not an adequate measure of literary quality.

I received an email from a Latter-day Saint who said he'd seen my books online and understood that I was anti-Mormon. He was willing to discuss Mormonism, he said, and see if I could persuade him to become anti-Mormon as well. I wrote back that he was mistaken, that I was not anti-Mormon, and that I had no desire to participate in such a discussion. On our mission Facebook page, one of my former missionary colleagues admitted to never having read any of my books, but feeling, in his opinion, that "when you exploit [the Church] for your own sinister means...that's wrong." Far too many Mormons perceive me in this manner, which I find distressing. It is not my desire in any way to attack the Church. I write about real problems that exist for real Mormons. I want people to *think* rather than to follow blindly. This does not make me an enemy.

Someone else asked how I would feel on Judgment Day if I found out that my writing had led people away from the Church. I find the question puzzling. If something I say makes a person doubt and ponder, I do not think that is a bad thing. Jews don't feel that doubting is a sin. Many famous rabbis unashamedly proclaimed their doubt. I daresay that any truly thoughtful person can't help but doubt once in a while. Doubting is not the end of the world. What is important is how one lives one's life, despite the doubt that is a necessary part of a mature faith. Too many Mormons, though, are downright afraid to pick up books such as my own for fear that doing so will somehow cause their testimonies to self-destruct.

I wonder about the strength of a testimony that can be shattered so easily.

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“It’s not that I’m scared,” one faithful Latter-day Saint protested stoutly when I brought up this point. “It’s just that I don’t care to read about such people.”

You don’t care? Well, I’m afraid I completely believe you on that point. But you *should* care. To be worthy of the name “saint,” we can’t simply turn our backs on the people who “bother” us, people we find “distasteful,” people who are “beneath” us. Yet that is what happens consistently time after time.

But it’s not only my own work I see tossed aside so casually. *By a Thread*, by Marty Beaudet, is quite a good novel, yet it has been ignored by Mormon academics as well. Could it be simply because the main character is a gay Mormon? Likewise, Donna Banta’s novel, *The Girls from Fourth Ward*, doesn’t get noticed, because her plot has four Laurels murdering their tyrannical bishop. Is it faith-promoting? No. So apparently it isn’t worth reading. Her follow-up novel, *False Prophet*, details another murder in a Mormon congregation. Jews have no trouble accepting the Harry Kemelman series where the rabbi solves murders in his community. But Mormons are astonished and thoroughly disgusted at the very idea of a similar Mormon series. Is it any wonder that Jewish literature is superior to ours? I’m sure there are plenty of other good Mormon books I’m neglecting to mention, but how can I mention them if I don’t know they exist? And how can I know they exist if the gatekeepers keep them away from me?

And it isn’t even just ex-Mormon writers who are suppressed in the Mormon literary world. When Tom Rogers wrote his play *Huebener*, about a faithful LDS teen in Germany who opposed the Nazis and was killed for it, his play

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was censored by Church authorities immediately after it was performed at Brigham Young University. Why? Because they were worried about the reception the Church might receive in Iron Curtain countries if the Church was seen opposing tyranny. Well, the Church *should* have been perceived as an institution that wouldn't put up with tyranny, in Iron Curtain countries or anywhere else. That would have been a *good* thing. But instead the Church felt that censorship was better. Ironic.

In that play, we see stalwart Mormon Solomon Schwartz, seventy-six years old, a member for sixty years, whose parents were converted to the gospel by John Taylor before he became the third president of the Church, being barred from entry by the branch president, who fears the Nazis will come after the Mormons if the Mormons aren't as awful to the Jews as the Nazis are. The real Solomon, of course, ended up dying in one of the camps, completely abandoned by his fellow Mormons who gave him up to protect themselves. It was a terrible betrayal and is depicted by the Church today as the result of the actions of the sinful, misguided branch president acting alone. But the rationalization the branch president used (we mustn't upset the Nazis) was the same that Church leaders in Utah used decades later to censor the play (we mustn't upset the Communists). That branch president wasn't "going rogue." He was following established thought patterns set up by the Church that are still in effect today.

Margaret Blair Young, longtime member of the Association for Mormon Letters, published through Deseret a trilogy of books detailing the lives of Black Mormons in the early Church. The problem with these faithful accounts of faithful members is that they made current members uneasy. So

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the books went out of print. They've been reprinted now with another publisher and are being marketed instead to African-Americans, who care more about these people than their fellow Mormons do.

While it is a sin in Mormonism to commit adultery or murder, it sometimes seems as if the biggest sin is daring to make someone "uncomfortable."

Reviewers of my stories have commented more than once that they can't tell if I'm pro-Mormon or anti-Mormon. It's because I'm really neither. I am merely trying to tell the truth, even when it might be "awkward." I am deeply saddened that Mormons view me the same way Huebener's branch president viewed him when he decided to excommunicate the young man. That "misguided" official was far from the only Church leader to behave very poorly toward the "undesirable."

Yet if the Church is going to censor even faithful members writing about other faithful members, what chance do *I* have to be treated fairly in the LDS literary community?

My book *Marginal Mormons* received a starred review from Kirkus and was then named to Kirkus Reviews' Best of 2012, and also put on the list of Top 25 Indie Books of 2012. At the same time I learned about this, I read a venomous letter to the editor in *DNA* accusing me of "outright hatred" for the Mormon Church and of spouting "flat out lies." And all this from another gay Mormon! A homophobic one, of course, who confessed that he hadn't actually read any of my books. (I'm sensing a theme.) It's as if Mormons have to say, "Shh! The Gestapo might find out we've been reading your work!" They can't read people like me, publish people like me, because they might get in trouble with "the authorities."

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Are the members of the Mormon Church so weak in our faith that we can't even *read* about people who make choices we wouldn't make ourselves? My sister-in-law in Salt Lake told me of a "terrible" incident that happened with her LDS book club: "We had selected the book and all of us had bought it and started reading it, and *then* we discovered it had profanity, so we had to rush out really quick and look for something else." If we are so delicate that we can't even read a four-letter word without swooning, I don't know that we're strong enough to write literature that will be enduring. It's like asking Steven Spielberg to tell the story of *Schindler's List* without putting anything "upsetting" in it.

We need to create an atmosphere where Mormons feel comfortable reading about and discussing all the different ways Mormonism affects people's lives. We need to accept the verifiable fact that some of these experiences are negative, and not be so unsure of ourselves that facing that truth destroys our faith. Hearing a different perspective only threatens someone who can't defend his own position. And to call learning about our valid life experiences a "waste of time" suggests a callousness that is not indicative of true Christian living.

It's clear that mainstream Mormon scholars are ignoring the works of many marginalized Mormons not only because we're self-published, but also because we don't write the testimony-building stories they believe Mormon literature should be. They see us as wolves, evil apostates out to corrupt the good sheep of the fold. But we're still Mormons, too, still part of the flock, whether those academics want to accept it or not. Ignoring us won't make us go away, and neither will a few deliberately spiteful reviews specifically created to hurt our feelings. We write what we do because it *matters* to us.

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I would suggest that moral disapproval is not an adequate measure of literary quality, either.

At least twenty libraries around the country, and three outside the U.S., house some of my books, but I find it interesting that the Salt Lake City Public Library system is the only one that won't even respond to my requests to accept any of my titles.

Writers like us should be acknowledged for the hard work we do to develop and promote Mormon literature. To exclude us from the club because we didn't go to the temple last week to do endowments is short-sighted, and it diminishes those defining the canon as much as it does us. The censorship that occurs in the Mormon literary world is led by the same impulse which led Catholic priests to hack off the penises on Roman statues. It's the same impulse that led those priests to burn all Mayan books so that the knowledge and literature of an entire civilization was lost forever. That impulse leads solely to the destruction of valuable art, and it does nothing at all to build faith.

When I wrote my story, "Edited Out," a fictionalized account of the true story of a Mormon actor carefully excised from the temple film when it was discovered he was gay, I was writing the story of all Mormon artists who are excluded from inclusion in the LDS artistic community.

One very thoughtful reviewer of *Marginal Mormons* said what I think the few LDS readers who pick up my books honestly feel. "I don't know if I want to peel back the stereotypes and dwell with the darkness, the conflicts, the misery and the mayhem that the natural man exhibits. Can I focus instead [on] Hawthorne's world by day in the town

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square and turn a blind eye to the antics that occur by night in the woods? I think I prefer my fiction to show a version of humanity that's a little higher than the angels, even if it's a window dressing version of our species." Then she says quite explicitly that she would rather surround herself with "pretty lies" than read my stories which she admits "ring true." She politely declines to read any more of my work.

My response would simply be: Until your faith can adequately deal with real life, it is of little use to anyone. And if learning about life makes you uncomfortable, then you probably shouldn't be reading books in the first place.

What I am afraid of is that the Church will wither away and become less and less significant over time if leaders insist on always offering pretty lies in place of truth, or as they euphemistically put it, "milk before meat." This program *promises* meat but never delivers on it. If the members can't at some point begin eating meat, they will forever remain immature, both literary and spiritual infants. Catholics need Jesuits, Jews need Kabbalah scholars, and Mormons need more than authors who write "faith-affirming" versions of *Pollyanna*. I want a Church that is a healthy, vibrant adult, and I believe that reading mature Mormon fiction can help bring that about. This is my "sinister" agenda.

Elder Orson F. Whitney, later to become one of the Twelve Apostles under President Joseph F. Smith, said in his talk on "Home Literature" in 1888: "We will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own." I certainly don't claim to be the answer to that prophecy, and yet I fear there will *never* be an answer to it if Mormons remain so terribly afraid of the content those great writers addressed. Shakespeare, for those who have bothered to actually read him, has characters who commit

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adultery, lie, betray others, and even murder. It's no Disney version of *The Little Mermaid*. But then, I've heard some Mormons complain about that work, too, because Ariel is wearing a bikini top, not a one-piece bathing suit. "It's so hard to find family-friendly movies these days," one LDS woman lamented.

Milton and Shakespeare, huh?

I'm not saying we need to write pornography, but we do need to grow up, unless we want the emulation of Peter Pan to be our highest aspiration. Once during a Single Adult movie night at church, our group of twenty-somethings was watching *Ladyhawke*. At one point, one of the young women jumped up and blocked the television screen, her arms spread wide. "There's a scene here where we almost see Michelle Pfeifer's breasts!" she warned.

Almost.

The Mormon fiction audience is by definition small, and authors dealing with unorthodox interpretations or uncomfortable questions, or who may even use a four-letter word or two, have an even smaller audience. But that does not make us unimportant. In its first 36 years of publication, *Moby Dick* sold only 3000 copies. Even today, if it wasn't assigned reading for students, it would hardly be a best-seller. Yet it is still one of the most important novels produced in America. Likewise, those of us on the edge of Mormonism deserve at least to be seen and evaluated. We are part of Mormonism, too. Much of our work may in fact prove to be unimpressive. But there may also be a few gems just waiting to be discovered.

We will never know unless someone looks.

## Temple Man

“Hey, Scoop,” said my boss, Mr. Andrews, “get over to Parleys Way in Sugar House right away.”

“What’s up?” I asked, ignoring Andrews’s insult. I was new at the *Salt Lake Tribune*, eager to make my mark, and Andrews couldn’t help making fun of me. He was heavy and bald, like Lou Grant, only taller.

“Some guy just tossed a brick through a car window to rescue a dog.” He slapped down a slip of paper with the address. “Go get the story.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Andrews raised an eyebrow in reply. I grabbed my iPad and took off, grumbling to myself most of the way over to this older part of the city. It was the middle of summer, and we’d been having a heat wave, with temps almost to a hundred every day this past week. It would be cruel to leave a dog inside a car in this weather for even five minutes, but it hardly seemed like front page news, either. I wanted a real scoop.

When I reached the address on East Parleys Way, it was obvious at a glance what had happened. A dark blue Toyota Camry was parked on the street, with a police officer talking to an older woman on the sidewalk next to it. The rear window on the passenger side was bashed in. I pulled to the curb just ahead of them and got out of my car. I hung back a few feet, listening to the officer and the woman, typing what they were

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saying as quickly as I could. I wasn't sure how long they'd been talking, but the officer seemed to be finishing up.

"You're sure you've never seen this guy before?" the officer asked, a well-built man around forty, perhaps just a few pounds overweight. "He must be from the neighborhood."

"I told you, I couldn't identify him even if he was my next-door neighbor. He had on a mask."

"All right, ma'am. Thanks for your help." The man closed his notebook and walked back to his cruiser. Normally, I'd have wanted to interview him as well, but I was afraid the woman would leave if I didn't approach her first, so I sacrificed the officer. I could always call the station later.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," I said, stepping in quickly. "I'm Mark Sanderson with the *Salt Lake Tribune*. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" I smiled the friendly smile that had won over my wife. "Could you tell me what happened here today?"

The woman sighed. She was probably sixty, short, with gray hair, wearing a simple green house dress not much more elegant than a muumuu. "I was walking home from the grocery," she began, and I now noticed her personal handcart filled with bags a few feet away, "when I heard faint barking coming from this car." She pointed. "There was a little terrier inside. I tried to open the doors, but they were all locked. I stood on the sidewalk and called for help, and just sixty seconds later, this man comes up."

"And you didn't see where he came from?" I asked, agreeing mentally with the officer. "He must be a neighbor."

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“I tell you, I didn’t.”

I nodded, not wanting to irritate her. “Okay. And next?”

“Well, as I told the policeman, I was shocked to see his outfit. He was wearing a white, pleated robe, white slippers, and a white hat. And he had on this odd green apron in the shape of fig leaves. Plus he had on a black mask like the Lone Ranger. I didn’t know what to think, so I backed off.”

Whoa, I thought. Some guy wearing Mormon temple clothes in public? That was a major no-no in the Church. This woman clearly wasn’t LDS or she’d have recognized the outfit. Of course, the mask was a new addition. I didn’t know what to make of that.

“The man came over to the car, saw the dog inside, and went up to that house right there...” She pointed again. “...and then grabbed a brick from the front porch. He came over, told me to go in the street and call the dog over to that side of the car, and then he bashed the window in. The man didn’t even have to unlock the door. That dog just jumped out right into his arms, and the man walked off down the street with him.”

“So he stole the dog?”

“He saved that dog’s life!” The woman was wagging a finger at me. “The criminal here is the owner of that car. I want him arrested for endangering that poor creature!” She looked off in the direction of the officer’s car. He’d driven away while we were talking.

I stepped behind the Camry and wrote down the license plate. We could look up the owner in the newsroom as well. I thanked the woman, typed in her name and contact info, and

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snapped a photo of the damaged car. Then I climbed back into my own vehicle and thought for a moment.

Within seconds, sweat was forming on my forehead. The dog's owner really had been a bastard. It was worth covering the story just as a reminder to the community. But I wanted something more. I turned on the engine and switched the air conditioner to high. On my way back to the office, I thought and thought about how to approach Andrews. It was the mask that intrigued me more than the temple clothes. That guy had been up to something.

Back at my desk, I typed and retyped. I called the police station and spoke briefly with the officer who had responded. I got the name of the car owner. When I finished my story, I handed it to Andrews. He read the headline and the first paragraph and his mouth fell open.

“‘Temple Man, Salt Lake’s Newest Superhero, Saves Dog’s Life’? Are you crazy?”

“I’m telling you, we’re going to see this guy again. KSL or KUTV or KSTU or, God forbid, *Deseret News*, is going to catch on eventually. We want to be first with the story, don’t we?”

“*Deseret* would never print something like this.”

“So we distinguish ourselves from them once more. Even if this guy never shows up again, we’ve got a fun piece.”

“We’ll get letters.” Andrews frowned.

“It’s always good to be noticed, sir.”

“I’ll think about it.”

The article appeared the next day, and that was that. I kept my ears alert for any more cases of a guy wearing temple clothes, but nothing showed up. So much for my intuition, I thought. Still, it had been an entertaining story to write.

Then exactly a week later, it happened.

“Hey, Scoop,” said Andrews, slapping an address on my desk. “Seems some guy wearing temple clothes is on his cell phone at a local market over in Sandy calling for a tow truck to take away a car from a handicapped parking space. Looks like the car owner doesn’t have a handicapped tag. Go see what you can come up with.”

I smiled and jumped out of my chair. Of course, the man was gone by the time I arrived, and I could see the tow truck heading off down the street with a Chevy Equinox trailing behind. Temple Man had just made an enemy, I thought. A small group of spectators was still milling about, so I approached and asked the entire group, “What happened?”

A teenage girl, maybe sixteen, with stringy blond hair, was laughing. An older man around seventy, with a stern face and glowing white hair, pointed at a sign in the empty parking area. “Some jerk was parked in the handicapped space. People don’t realize we need those spaces ourselves. Not me personally, of course, but people like me. I was driving around, looking for parking, and I saw this guy in temple clothes and a mask calling on his cell phone, reading off the license plate. I just thought, ‘Good for him.’”

Well, *this* witness was a Mormon.

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“Just how was the man dressed?” I asked. “You said—”

“What the hell is going on?” said a thirty-something man coming out of the grocery with a grocery cart. “Where the fuck is my car?”

Hopefully not a Mormon.

The girl kept laughing. The older man said, “Got towed, you son of a bitch. You’re not handicapped.”

“Goddamn shit!” the man said. “I was only in there a few minutes. There was nowhere else to park. Such a goddamn small parking lot!”

Two or three of the others among the onlookers started backing off.

“Stop laughing, you stupid bitch!”

The girl kept laughing but walked away. There was no more I was going to get here, but I drove back to the newsroom and called the towing company to get the car owner’s name. Public humiliation sounded like a good idea. Then I tried to track down the mysterious caller with the cell phone companies. It turned out the call had been placed on an unregistered phone using minutes from a prepaid card. This guy planned to show up again, I realized. I wrote my story.

Andrews strode over to my desk, slapping it with his palm. “‘Temple Man Tows Faker.’ It’s great work, Mark.” Shelly, two cubicles over, stuck her head out and stared. Apparently, Temple Man was doing heroic work here in the newsroom, too, getting Andrews to be more human. I smiled and called Cathy.

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Over the next month, Temple Man made five more appearances. He showed up at a public park, stopping a bully from tormenting a kid. Two mothers reported on that, one of them getting a shot of the guy with her cell phone. That made page three. One day, a man dressed in temple clothes and a mask handed out sandwiches and bottles of water to the homeless. Page five. Late one evening, a guy dressed in temple clothes helped a young mother change a flat tire on the highway. Page six. Another incident involved a man simply identifying himself as Temple Man calling the police and reporting a drunk driver. Sure enough, the police found a drunk driver, and just like before, the call had been placed from an unregistered cell phone. Page seven. Then one afternoon, Temple Man showed up at Trolley Square to give a man who'd had an apparent heart attack CPR until the paramedics arrived. That finally made the front page, complete with a photo by an onlooker. I wondered then how Temple Man always seemed to be at the right place at the right time. Was he inspired? Was he for real? Was it just a coincidence? Did he keep his temple clothes in his car so he could jump into them at a moment's notice? The back seat of a car couldn't be any less comfortable as a changing room than a phone booth used to be.

Maybe he had a van.

Of course, I also realized we could have a copycat on our hands, someone who'd read the stories and was trying to emulate him. We had an Op-ed in our paper about the need for the common man to step up and do the right thing by his neighbors as Temple Man was doing. There was an Op-ed in *Deseret* bemoaning the sacrilegious nature of the "self-righteous, self-proclaimed superhero." Letters to the editor in both papers were published asking whether or not this was for

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real or if the guy was poking fun at the Mormon Church. One letter writer said simply, “Finally, a Mormon who *does* good rather than just going around *saying* all the time that he does good.”

At least he wasn't picketing coffee shops or snatching cigarettes out of the mouths of smokers. Something a Mormon superhero might very well do. This guy seemed to be focusing on real problems, even if most of them were not overly remarkable.

While the news stories were great for my career, Temple Man was causing a bit of trouble in my personal life. Cathy told me one evening over dinner, “You better not ever publish this guy's name and ruin what he's doing.”

“It would be a great scoop,” I said.

“You'd ruin the mystery,” she replied. “He's more powerful as a mystery.”

My wife had a point, yet at the same time, the desire to have a *real* scoop burned inside me. There would be a few articles interviewing the guy and finding out what motivated him, and maybe good things could come from revealing his identity. Still, I'd read enough comic books as a kid to know that Cathy was probably right.

But it wasn't only my personal ethics that were thrown into disarray by the appearance of Temple Man. As a faithful Latter-day Saint, I attended the temple once a month, usually the Jordan River temple, closest to my home. When I started an endowment session after covering the story for several weeks, I simply couldn't see the temple ceremony in the same way. Here was a room full of men and women in their temple

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clothes, the men on one side of the room and the women separated by an aisle on the other side. Part of me had always felt silly wearing the clothes, the goofy little apron, and the baker's hat tied to the robe so the robe wouldn't slip off my shoulder. In some ways, Temple Man was making the outfit "sexy," yet at the same time, he was clearly no Spiderman. There'd never be a movie about him. His latest two appearances had been to fill in a notorious pothole by himself and to hang an Olde Brooklyn Lantern from a post where a streetlight had been out, apparently for weeks.

I looked about me in the endowment room as we were performing one of the secret handshakes. Was one of these guys *him*? Or were we all congratulating ourselves on our faithfulness, while the real hero was out there rescuing a cat from a tree?

Sheesh, a cat from a tree?

The following day at work, Andrews came running over to my desk. "Get out on Millcreek. There's a fender bender. Apparently, Temple Man is on the scene trying to calm frayed nerves."

I drove on over, but not as quickly as I might have. A fender bender, I thought? Why wasn't Temple Man out there preventing murders and rapes? Why wasn't he fouling bank robberies and muggings? Was stopping at the scene of a minor accident the most we could expect out of a real-life hero? His escapades suddenly stopped seeming so endearing and began to feel rather pathetic instead.

By the time I arrived, the police were talking to the drivers, and there was no sign of Temple Man. I interviewed

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the witnesses, got permission to use another cell phone picture, and soon had my story ready for the *Tribune*. I went home early, feeling depressed.

“You didn’t get fired, did you?” asked Cathy when I walked in the door at 3:00. We didn’t have any children yet, but as a good Mormon, we still felt it best if she didn’t work outside the home. She worked part-time as a real estate agent, which we figured was a good profession in case she ever did need to work after the kids came. It would offer flexibility.

“No, I’m just not feeling well.”

“You don’t look so good, either. You better get to bed.”

I heated up a can of Campbell’s chicken soup, ate about a third of it, and climbed under the covers. I slept fitfully, dreaming about Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone and even Halle Berry. I woke up at 2:00 in the morning, went to my computer, and thought about resigning. We could put off having kids a few more years while I went back to school and Cathy worked full-time. Maybe I could be a defense attorney. Or maybe a doctor.

I’d read about people who had big dreams, and when they finally fulfilled those dreams, they thought, “Is this all there is?” Writing about Temple Man may not have been my dream, but writing about something exciting was, and Temple Man had churned up a great deal of excitement, if not in the community at large, at least among the news writers. The national news hadn’t picked it up yet, probably out of a sense of delicacy, not wanting to be accused of mocking anyone’s religion, but every reporter in town—print, radio, and television—knew my name.

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I had a police scanner I sometimes listened to, always hoping for that “big moment,” and I half-heartedly turned it on now while I read my emails. I had three messages from the public, saying they thought they knew who Temple Man was. Three or four of those showed up in my inbox every day. I’d given up checking them out. One email was from my cousin in Denver saying she was jealous to hear how well I was doing. And one was from Andrews, saying he hoped I felt better because he was going to assign me to a drug case soon.

Just what I needed, to get shot by a drug dealer.

I’d never be a Woodward or a Bernstein, I thought. I’d certainly never be a Richard Engel.

The scanner soon crackled to life. A man was holding his wife hostage over in Magna. I breathed a sigh of relief. Something real for a change. I jumped into my clothes and ran out the door. I didn’t exactly live close to Magna, so I was surprised when I arrived at the address to discover the police still hadn’t shown up. The front door was open, though. I could see a man in his boxers and T-shirt holding a gun to a woman’s head. But someone else was at the door, too.

Oh, my god. It was him, Temple Man. He must have a police scanner, too. I wondered what had made him decide to finally use it, though. That could have explained a few of the other incidents, I supposed, like the fender bender, but the guy was clearly small-time. This was something new.

All of a sudden, I felt like a journalist again.

I had to get close enough to hear what was going on, without provoking the armed man or putting myself in any danger. The first thing I did was take a picture, but before I

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could do anything else, two police cars pulled up and four men filed out. One of the officers, a tall African-American, saw me and held up his arm. "You keep back." He stayed on his walkie talkie while his partner and two other officers slowly approached the house.

"I got a gun here!" the man at the door shouted, shoving it up against his wife's head. She squealed in terror, her flimsy nightgown offering little protection against the cool night. Temple Man stood by calmly. He seemed to be talking, but I couldn't hear him.

The officers stopped advancing, their guns at the ready. "It's okay," shouted one of them. "We're just here to talk."

"Get the fuck off my property!"

"Sir, we need you to put the gun down so that we can talk. We don't want anyone to get hurt."

"Get out of here or I'll blow her brains out!"

The woman whimpered again.

"Hey, you!" shouted one of the officers, pointing toward Temple Man. "Back off!"

Temple Man said something to the husband which I couldn't hear, and to everyone's amazement, the man threw the woman to the ground and grabbed Temple Man instead. The woman jumped up, her knee bleeding, and ran toward the officers. I was close enough to hear her. "That man asked Jerry to take him hostage instead of me! Said he was famous and Jerry would get what he wanted if he took him!"

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I was focused on the woman, and the next time I looked up, the front door of the house was closed. Two of the officers ran to the front door, standing just to the side, as if debating what to do next. A moment later, there was a shot. The two police officers still near the street ducked behind their cars, one officer dragging the woman with him. The officers near the house kicked in the front door.

When it was all said and done, the husband was found dead in the living room. There was no sign of Temple Man. No one knew if the husband had killed himself, if the two men had fought over the gun, or what. The wife said that the guy wearing the strange clothes had shown up shortly after the shouting started inside, and he tried to calm her husband down. She'd never seen the man before and had no idea who he was. The police didn't seem intent on finding the stranger, as the husband was the obvious criminal, but I wrote my longest story yet for Andrews, and he loved it. Another front page.

Three weeks later, Andrews came by my cubicle and slapped my desk. "What happened?" he demanded.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"You know damn well who. There's been no sign of Temple Man for almost a month!"

I shrugged. "Maybe seeing real danger scared him off. Made him realize he was taking too many chances."

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“I don’t want to hear that. That’s *Deseret* talk.” He had pulled a stick pin out of my cubicle wall, making one of my notes fall to my desk. He stuck the pin back in without the note.

“Maybe he was just some college kid looking for adventure and now he’s had his fill.”

“Hmmp.”

“Perhaps he was some terminally ill guy out to fulfill a fantasy.”

“Mark...”

I shrugged again. “Maybe he was one of the Three Nephites.”

Andrews slapped my desk. “Write it up,” he ordered.

“What?”

“All of it. Everything you just said. There’s still a chance we can get a Pulitzer out of this.”

I did write it up, editorializing a bit on how there might be a hero inside each of us, if we dared to put ourselves on the line. Saving a cat from a tree might not change the whole world, but it changed the world for that cat. Saving a dog meant the world to that dog. Saving a bullied kid meant the world to that bullied kid. Even saving an old man with a heart condition, so that he could live even six more months, was something.

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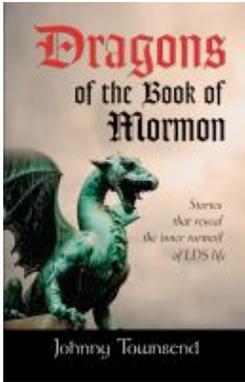
I began to see the potential for heroism everywhere again. If some guy wearing ridiculous clothes could make a difference, anyone could.

Being a good bus driver could be heroic, I thought, getting poor people to work and to the grocery so they could live their lives as best they could. Being a good elementary school teacher was heroic. Being a good parent was heroic.

Maybe there was more ahead for me, after all. Perhaps I'd report on the mayor or the police chief or the senior senator from Utah. Maybe I'd report on the state legislature. Or maybe I'd just continue to do human interest pieces and make people really think about what it meant to be human.

That night, after dinner, for the first time, Cathy and I didn't use a condom.

After she was asleep, I took the mask I sometimes used when Cathy and I had sex and stuffed it in my pocket. Then I pulled out the little suitcase in our closet with my temple clothes, put it in the trunk of my car, and went for a drive.



*In this collection of Mormon short stories, we see a supporter of Prop 8 forced to attend his boss's gay wedding. A reporter seeks the identity of Salt Lake's new superhero--a masked man wearing temple clothes who mysteriously shows up at crime scenes. One of the Three Nephites is missing in Pasadena. Mormons survive the zombie apocalypse because of their two-year supply of food storage.*

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