

Stories of trans and gay Mormons balancing their spiritual and temporal lives. Essays on gun reform, universal healthcare, and climate change. Concluding with a handful—and mouthful—of erotic tales based on the author's experiences in a French Quarter gay bookstore and as a young missionary in Italy.

**Who Invited You to the Orgy?:**  
An Ex-Mormon's Life without God  
by Johnny Townsend

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# Who Invited You to the Orgy?

AN EX-MORMON'S LIFE  
WITHOUT GOD

Johnny Townsend

## 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

*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*

“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 Reviews’ 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*

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 Buzzard Tree,” from *The Circumcision of God*, was a finalist for the 2007 Whitney Award for Best Short LDS Fiction.

“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*

“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](http://NewPages.com)

*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

*Johnny Townsend*

“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)

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*

“*Selling the City of Enoch* exists at that awkward intersection where the LDS ideal meets the real world, and Townsend navigates his terrain with humor, insight, and pathos.”

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

Johnny Townsend

“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

*Let the Faggots Burn: The UpStairs Lounge Fire* is “a gripping account of all the horrors that transpired that night, as well as a respectful remembrance of the victims.”

Terry Firma, Patheos

In *Let the Faggots Burn*, “Townsend’s heart-rending descriptions of the victims...seem to [make them] come alive once more.”

Kit Van Cleave, *OutSmart Magazine*

*Marginal Mormons* 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.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2012.

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*

“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

*Gayrabian Nights* is “an allegorical tour de force...a hard-core emotional punch.”

Gay. Guy. Reading and Friends

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.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2013.

Kirkus Reviews

“This collection of short stories [*The Mormon Victorian Society*] featuring gay Mormon characters slammed [me] in the face from the first page, wrestled my heart and mind to the floor, and left me panting and wanting more by the end. Johnny Townsend has created so many memorable characters in such few pages. I went weeks thinking about this book. It truly touched me.”

Tom Webb, judge for The Rainbow Awards (A Bear on Books)

“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* is an “entertaining collection....Townsend’s prose is sharp, clear, and easy to read, and his characters are well rendered...”

Publishers Weekly

“The pre-eminent documenter of alternative Mormon lifestyles...Townsend has a deep understanding of his characters, and his limpid prose, dry humor and well-grounded (occasionally magical) realism make their spiritual conundrums both compelling and entertaining. [*Dragons of the Book of Mormon* is] [a]nother of Townsend’s critical but affectionate and absorbing tours of Mormon discontent.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2014.

Kirkus Reviews

“Mormon Movie Marathon,” from *Selling the City of Enoch*, “is funny, constructively critical, but also sad because the desire...for belonging is so palpable.”

Levi S. Peterson, author of *The Backslider* and *The Canyons of Grace*

In *Gayrabian Nights*, “Townsend’s prose is always limpid and evocative, and...he finds real drama and emotional depth in the most ordinary of lives.”

Kirkus Reviews

*Selling the City of Enoch* is “sharply intelligent...pleasingly complex...The stories are full of...doubters, but there’s no vindictiveness in these pages; the characters continuously poke holes in Mormonism’s more extravagant absurdities, but they take very little pleasure in doing so....Many of Townsend’s stories...have a provocative edge to them, but this [book] displays a great deal of insight as well...a playful, biting and surprisingly warm collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Among the most captivating of the prose [in *Off the Rocks*, in a piece reprinted from the collection *A Day at the Temple*] was a story by Johnny Townsend illustrating two Mormon missionaries who break the rules of their teachings to spend more time with one another.”

Lauren Childers, *Windy City Times*

*Gayrabian Nights* is a “complex revelation of how seriously soul damaging the denial of the true self can be.”

Ryan Rhodes, author of *Free Electricity*

*Gayrabian Nights* “was easily the most original book I’ve read all year. Funny, touching, topical, and thoroughly enjoyable.”

Rainbow Awards

*Lying for the Lord* is “one of the most gripping books that I've picked up for quite a while. I love the author's writing style, alternately cynical, humorous, biting, scathing, poignant, and touching.... This is the third book of his that I've read, and all are equally engaging. These are stories that need to be told, and the author does it in just the right way.”

Heidi Alsop, Ex-Mormon Foundation Board Member

“If you like short stories and you're interested in the lives of Mormons, you should be following the work of Johnny Townsend. Since he writes from an ex-Mormon perspective, believers often dismiss Townsend's work as biased—or as *a priori* ‘an attack on the church’—but I think that's a mistake. Johnny Townsend writes his characters with a great deal of compassion and empathy, whether they're in the church or not...or somewhere in between.”

C. L. Hanson, *Main Street Plaza*

“Townsend is a wonderful writer with a wry but sympathetic eye for humans' frailties, and the ways in which religious belief both exacerbate and console them. [*Despots of Deseret* contains] more vibrant parables about doubts and blasphemies that hide beneath a veneer of piety.” Named to Kirkus Reviews' Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Lying for the Lord*, Townsend “gets under the skin of his characters to reveal their complexity and conflicts....shrewd, evocative [and] wryly humorous.”

Kirkus Reviews

In *Missionaries Make the Best Companions*, “the author treats the clash between religious dogma and liberal humanism with vivid realism, sly humor, and subtle feeling as his characters try to figure out their true missions in life. Another of Townsend’s rich dissections of Mormon failures and uncertainties...” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Invasion of the Spirit Snatchers*, “Townsend, a confident and practiced storyteller, skewers the hypocrisies and eccentricities of his characters with precision and affection. The outlandish framing narrative is the most consistent source of shock and humor, but the stories do much to ground the reader in the world—or former world—of the characters....A funny, charming tale about a group of Mormons facing the end of the world.”

Kirkus Reviews

Townsend’s “works are on a cutting edge of history.”

Walter Jones, Assistant Head of  
Special Collections, Marriott Library

*The Washing of Brains* has “A lovely writing style, and each story was full of unique, engaging characters....immensely entertaining.”

Rainbow Awards

“Townsend’s collection [*The Washing of Brains*] once again displays his limpid, naturalistic prose, skillful narrative chops, and his subtle insights into psychology...Well-crafted dispatches on the clash between religion and self-fulfillment...”

Kirkus Reviews

*The Last Days Linger* was awarded Second Place for Best Gay Contemporary General Fiction in the 2017 Rainbow Awards

“While the author is generally at his best when working as a satirist, there are some fine, understated touches in these tales [*The Last Days Linger*] that will likely affect readers in subtle ways....readers should come away impressed by the deep empathy he shows for all his characters—even the homophobic ones.”

Kirkus Reviews





# Who Invited You to the Orgy?

An Ex-Mormon's Life without God

Johnny Townsend

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# Contents

<b>Introduction: Who Invited You to the Orgy? .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Part I: Short Stories.....</b>	<b>25</b>
The Italian .....	26
The Golden Plunger.....	38
Chewing on Mormon Crickets .....	42
<b>Part II: Essays.....</b>	<b>57</b>
Bullet Points .....	58
One Million Elephants in Miami.....	63
Democrats Must Change Their Mascot from the Donkey to the Ostrich.....	66
Freedom to Fire Mormons.....	69
I'm Two Days Older Than You, So I'm Always Right.....	72
Pledging Allegiance to the DNC .....	76
Superstition Is Leading Us Toward Extinction .....	80
Can We Stop the Asteroid Heading for Earth?.....	83
Fearmongering on the Left .....	87
Don't Take It Lying Down...Bleeding to Death .....	90
Drawing a Line in the Tar Sands.....	93
Culling the Herd .....	96
Progressive Reform vs. Socialist Revolution .....	102
A Treatment Plan for Stage 3 Climate Cancer .....	106
A Good Time to Be Old .....	110
Have I Been Wrong All This Time?.....	114
Bracing Ourselves for Climate Combat.....	118
Those Who Can, Teach .....	121
Opioid Receptors.....	130

<b>Part III: Erotica .....</b>	<b>147</b>
Getting Inside .....	148
A Gaggle of Gays .....	167
Electricity .....	183
Porn Store Sleepover .....	194
Holy, Holy, Holey .....	228
About the Author .....	243
Books by Johnny Townsend .....	246

## Bullet Points

- 52% of Americans feel that more guns make us less safe
- 60% of Americans favor stricter gun laws
- 73% of Americans think that the U.S. isn't doing enough to address gun violence
- 93% of Americans support background checks for all gun buyers

When I asked a coworker once what some of her hobbies were, she said, "I like to watch videos online of people dying. You know, videos taken at the scene of car accidents, people jumping off bridges, things like that."

I was appalled. What kind of person would actively seek out such images? But after the massacre at two mosques in New Zealand, I realized it might be more psychologically damaging *not* to watch people dying. On the one hand, I appreciate that limiting the "fame" of murderers and terrorists is a good thing. And I can't begin to imagine how awful it would be for relatives and friends of those killed in the attack to see even a moment of the footage that monster filmed as he slaughtered their loved ones.

But at a certain point, protecting viewers lets lawmakers, gun manufacturers, the NRA, and even ourselves off the hook. Those deaths remain theoretical and abstract. We hear the numbers of people killed, but they remain numbers for most of us, not people. We can't understand the full horror we support because the "sensibilities" we're "protecting" are our own.

I remember feeling disturbed during the second Bush administration when news organizations were no longer allowed to film caskets filled with dead soldiers from the Iraq war being carried off of planes. Whatever respect such censorship might show the families who'd lost a son or husband or father or mother or sister or daughter, the end result was that the majority of Americans never saw the consequences of entering that unjustified war.

In the first days after the attack on the World Trade Center, news programs repeatedly aired footage of people jumping out of the burning building to their deaths. The scenes were horrific. I can still see those people in my mind all these years later. Because people matter to our psyches more than buildings or airplanes ever will.

When I watched Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 11/9," I was shocked to see cell phone video taken by students as the Parkland shooter gunned down their classmates and teachers. There's a fine line between exploitation and honesty, and Moore stayed on the right side of that line. But that massacre hit me with much greater force when I *saw* it than it did when I *heard* about it, and it hit me pretty heavily even then.

Seeing is believing.

Hearing about children in cages is abstract. Seeing them in cages induces a visceral reaction. Reading about a school on

lockdown because of a fake bomb threat can be shrugged off in the cacophony of bad news we hear every day. But seeing photos of a 7-year-old's forearm where the girl had written "Love Mom and Dad" with a purple marker just in case she got killed is heartrending. Reading a book about the tsunami following the 1883 eruption of Krakatoa is interesting. Watching video of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami makes the horror of such an event real.

The story of the Andes plane crash survivors is fascinating on its own. But the fact that the survivors took photos during their 72-day ordeal makes it unforgettable. President John F. Kennedy's assassination would have made an impact under any circumstances, but because the murder was filmed, and because that film has been aired hundreds of times over the last fifty-five years, we will all remember how a promising life and career can end instantly at the pull of a trigger. Even now, because these words are attached to a visual memory in our brains, we can see Jackie leaping out of her seat and crawling across the trunk of the car to grab part of her husband's skull.

If a news organization reports that a police officer shot and killed a suspect in self-defense, many of us are willing to take the officer's word. But when we see with our own eyes a video of an officer shooting an unarmed Black man in the back, or shooting an unarmed Black man lying on the floor with his hands up, while we hear that man begging "Please don't kill me" as the officer aims and fires, we *know* in the deepest level of our souls that we've just witnessed the deplorable reality of structural racism.

Seeing the truth about gun violence, no matter who is committing it, is essential if we are to realize our right "to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Those opposed to showing these ghastly images claim that doing so will make survivors, and the loved ones of those killed, experience their grief again and again. That may be, but grieving people don't own our history and legislation and morality. The rest of us have a right to know what we're up against so we can act accordingly.

Seeing is understanding.

Critics claim that seeing this violence and blood and gore on a regular basis will desensitize viewers. That may be true as well, but what good has all our sensitivity gotten us? Some thoughts and prayers? The only chance we have to accomplish the difficult changes necessary is if we *cannot* avoid the abominations we're told we shouldn't politicize.

News anchors can announce "trigger warnings" right before going to commercial alerting viewers that these images will be aired immediately after the break. Or we can make the images available online only to those who deliberately click on a link. I'm not proposing, after all, that we reenact "A Clockwork Orange."

If I say Kent State 1970, what image comes to mind?

How about Tiananmen Square?

Or the Black woman in Baton Rouge standing calm and serene in a sundress as police in riot gear descend upon her?

Some historians say that the photo of the "napalm girl" in Vietnam helped change the course of the war.

Emmett Till's mother insisted on an open casket for her son who'd been tortured and murdered by a white mob. She wanted people to *see* what those savages did to him. Every one of us



who has seen that photo, even all these years later, is sickened by the sight—except those so filled with hatred and bigotry they can no longer experience empathy or compassion.

What happened in Sandy Hook was so nightmarish that even without seeing photos of six-year-olds on the floor with their brains splattered across the tiles, we still *almost* generated enough indignation to change gun laws. Would we have been able to cross that threshold if we'd actually seen those pictures?

Seeing motivates us.

Yes, it's possible terrorists or psychopaths will get a kick out of seeing the carnage, but haters and murderers and politicians whose pockets are lined with money from the NRA aren't going to be any more helpful if we respectfully sensor the atrocities they support. The killings simply continue unabated. The next Las Vegas concert massacre, the next Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, the next Aurora movie theater slaughter comes along anyway.

And is quickly forgotten. Because we have no haunting images seared into our minds.

We cannot reduce suffering if we can't even bear to see it. We don't need to show every single photo and every single video, but we must show *some* of them. For these gun deaths to matter, they must become more than bullet points in a rhetorical discussion. Words are essential, but it will take images as well to pierce us in the deeply primal way necessary to move us to action.

# Superstition Is Leading Us Toward Extinction

(published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on 21 April 2019)

Humans are an intelligent, rational species. We build upon existing knowledge to understand ourselves and the world around us. This trait has allowed us to overcome almost every obstacle and reign as the dominant species on the planet. So why haven't we been able to incorporate the science around greenhouse gases into our collective consciousness and adjust our behavior accordingly?

In addition to being highly rational creatures, it seems, we're also highly irrational.

Smart, intelligent people will throw a pinch of salt over their shoulder. We'll avoid walking under a ladder, change direction if a black cat crosses our path. We worry that if we break a mirror, we'll have seven years bad luck. We believe in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy.

Sure, we grow out of many superstitious beliefs over time, but not all of them. Most of the adults in my life still say "Knock on wood" so as not to tempt Fate. I see adults cross their fingers, make the sign of the cross, don their lucky shirt. They play the lottery using their lucky numbers, repeat unique rituals before a game or a job interview.

We watch “Charmed” and “Touched by an Angel” and every Harry Potter movie because part of us not only *hopes* there is something greater out there but also *believes* on some level that magic and the supernatural are real forces, if we can only tap into them.

Many of my Mormon friends and family don’t feel the need to act on climate change because they believe Jesus will return any day now and take care of everything.

These are people who wear magic underwear every day of their adult lives.

I mean no disrespect. I used to wear them, too. I still keep a pair, thirty years after being excommunicated.

My previous partner taught at a religious university. An avowed atheist, Tom still maintained his fair share of superstitions. When he was diagnosed with liver cancer, I saw first-hand how humans cling to irrationality like a life preserver. Tom refused to write a will out of fear that doing so would jinx him.

Of course, superstition is not an effective treatment against biology, and he was dead three months later. His superstition had real-life consequences, however, if not for him, then for those around him. Since gay marriage wasn’t legal at the time, Tom’s estranged sister was legally his next of kin and inherited the house, his pension, his CDs in the bank, and everything else.

Perhaps our refusal to act on climate change won’t affect us personally very much, but it will certainly affect the billions of others left here after we die. Are our grandchildren spoiled brats, selfish for wanting to inherit a habitable world?

As a Mormon missionary in Rome, I was instructed not to dust my feet off on anyone, no matter how provoked I might be. Dusting our feet was a ritual so powerful even God couldn't refuse to act on it and would be bound to afflict whoever we'd cursed.

As elders in the LDS Church, we held the priesthood, a mystical power that would allow us to heal the sick. My missionary companion and I blessed a member of our congregation in Sardinia, promising him a full recovery.

He was dead the next day.

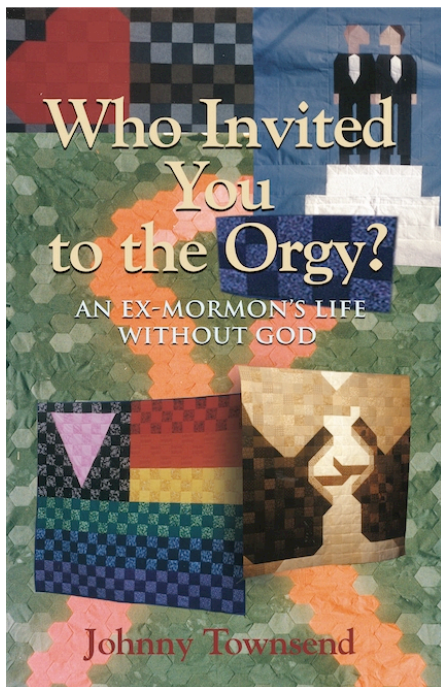
My companion and I “knew” that if we had only been more righteous, the man would have lived.

If faith or priesthood or other magical powers can only function on occasion, in a few isolated cases, when we're exceptionally devoted, then relying on those as our primary tools to solve an existential crisis is not a very solid plan.

Mormons are told to pray as if everything depends on God but act as if everything depends on us.

Maybe the Messiah is coming back...and maybe he isn't. What's clear, though, is that it's up to us, through real, concrete, scientific measures, to take drastic action and transform our civilization to something sustainable.

Giving climate scientists and activists the Evil Eye is not good policy. So let's use the brains evolution gave us, put aside our superstitions, and act as if the world is real, with the belief—no, the knowledge—that reality matters.



Stories of trans and gay Mormons balancing their spiritual and temporal lives. Essays on gun reform, universal healthcare, and climate change. Concluding with a handful—and mouthful—of erotic tales based on the author's experiences in a French Quarter gay bookstore and as a young missionary in Italy.

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