Mormon Civilization and Its Schizophrenic Discontents "The Open Curtain" Brian Evenson

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Words on Words
By Scott Abbott

Mormon Civilization and Its Schizophrenic Discontents

The Open Curtain
Brian Evenson
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What if you had suddenly experienced a break between what you took to be true and what you now perceived to be true – letters to and from your dead father, for instance, that revealed, perhaps, an illegitimate half-brother? What if your mother tightened her lips and claimed the opposite: “It’s simple truth. . . . We know the truth. There’s no reason to speak of this again”?

What if you started to “have an odd relation to words”?

What if you read a story in the 1903 New York Times about William Hooper Young, a grandson of Brigham Young and the author of an article about blood atonement, who was on trial for a ritual murder?

What if you began “to feel isolated, insulated, buried deeper inside” your body?

What if there were murders, ritual murders, and your throat were cut?

What if you received a new name in a secret ceremony and then swore never to reveal it except to God at the veil between life and death? And what if your throat were to be cut again if you did reveal it?

What if it were difficult for you to tell the difference between the person who had your original name and the newly named person, or between yourself and Brigham Young’s grandson?

What if you lived in Provo, Utah?

What if you were a character in Brian Evenson’s novel?

Even worse: What if most of these things were true and you were not a character in The Open Curtain – but rather a resident of Happy Valley reading the book and recognizing damning parallels between the landscape of the troubled character’s mind and the map you used to navigate your own culture?

Evenson’s new book (following Altmann’s Tongue, The Din of Celestial Birds, Father of Lies, Contagion, Dark Property, and The Wavering Knife) is a rigorously realistic novel about a young man who comes to manifest many of the symptoms of classical schizophrenia. It is harrowing to be inside the mind of Rudd Theurer in the first part of the novel, “Rudd,Parsed,” as he develops what must be hallucinations (neither he nor the reader is able definitively to distinguish between what is real and what he sees.
as real). It is doubly harrowing in the second part, “Lyndi, Adrift,” to witness Rudd from the perspective of the young woman who takes him in, marries him in the LDS temple, and then experiences his ritual-stoked delusions on her own body. And it is triply harrowing in “Hooper Amuck” to be again inside Rudd/Hooper’s mind as he tries repeatedly to make sense of his surroundings: “It took him a long moment to understand where he was. . . . It took him a moment to understand where he was. . . . For a moment he was not certain where he was” (sections 1 and 1 and 1 of part three).

The language of the novel is spare, exact, and almost affectless as it portrays characters themselves without affect. Readers of earlier work by Evenson will recognize this language that blankly states horrors that can scarcely be spoken. The terror evoked by this novel grew exponentially for me as the disturbed young man walked the actual streets of Provo, sat on Sunday-School chairs stenciled “Edgemont 3rd Ward,” did research in the BYU library, traversed the Provo-Springville highway, rode his scooter up local canyons, and participated in a sacred temple ritual – the pre-1990 one still replete with Freemasonic tokens and violent penalties. This novel is David Lynch’s _Blue Velvet_ staged behind Provo’s white picket fences. Rudd Theurer is Dennis Hopper grown up in Utah Valley, sucking on his gasmask while pawing through intimate cultural lingerie.

And that’s when the novel turned for me, came alive like dormant maggots in a bucket. A reader who indeed “parses Rudd” finds a character (like him or herself) who has taken on a personality based on various texts: his father’s letters, his Sunday School lessons, the _New York Times_ articles about the trial of Brigham Young’s grandson, the section from _Mormon Doctrine_ on blood atonement, the symbols and words of the temple ceremony, newspaper accounts of local murders Rudd may or may not have committed. Given his own mental state, these texts work in him corrosively, structure and destructure his identity, leave him at the end waiting “for someone to tell him who to be next.”

Freud argued in _Civilization and Its Discontents_ that humans are instinctually aggressive toward one another and that civilization or culture is created to restrict aggression. But restrictions, commands, or prohibitions that are too strong lead to unhappiness and neurosis. This works, he argues, for individual development as well as for civilizations: “If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some of mankind – have become ‘neurotic’?”

In the context of this novel, a Mormon culture that enforces secrecy on penalty of death, a Mormon culture that sets aside polygamy, blood atonement, racism, and violent Freemasonic symbolism without admission of error or productive discussion of the changes, a Mormon culture that thus tells its adherents a schizophrenic story and requires that that story alone structure their lives, a Mormon culture that tightens its lips and asserts that “We know the truth. There’s no reason to speak of this again,” is neurotic.
“I was Mormon when I started writing *The Open Curtain,*” Evenson writes in the Afterword. “By the time I finished it, years later, I had left the Mormon Church of my own volition.”

No wonder.

Both photos from the author’s website: www.brianevenson.com