

An Astonishing String of Stories

Steven L. Peck. *Tales from Pleasant Grove*. N.p.: Create Space, 2018. 428 pp. Paperback: \$11.66. ISBN: 9781986604239.

Reviewed by Charles Shiro Inouye

There is a kind of madness that comes from living in Utah. Its sources are many—tall mountains and vast deserts, the ability to see a hundred miles at a time, the imaginative force of a newly-coined religion that insists that people are gods and vice versa. Informality and a lack of history are other factors. But it is, above all, the silence of the landscape that encourages men and women to overreach the normal limits of sane (or at least civilized) behavior.

That silence is terrible. And so it quickly gets covered over with entertainment, a background track that gets sucked into homes by way of cable and cellular networks. For some, the dry, quiet wind is countered with disciplined religious life that brings hope and meaning. For others, it is easier to turn to drugs and alcohol, to romance and tempting sexuality. Who can endure such honesty on one's own? Who can bear such silence without some help?

Can we say it? What is true of America is doubly true of the West, and what is true of the West is doubly true of Utah. There the imagination runs free, when it is not suicidal. Everyone seems to have an opinion, whether supported by the facts or not. Everyone plants their own bushes and arranges their own stones. Jell-O with carrots is practice for a future of worlds without end.

Given this need to speak into the silent wind, we should not be surprised that Steven Peck, evolutionary biologist and poet, has produced the astonishing string of stories that we find in *Tales from Pleasant Grove*.

These are Utah stories at their best, about life that is as quixotic as fry sauce and chicken-fried steak.

As a hayseed, born in Richfield and raised in Sigurd and Gunnison, I appreciate Peck's fecund imagination. Some of his tales remind me of my own flights of imagination, brought on by too much time moving over the earth at one mile per hour in a grain combine. That said, the best stories of this collection are the ones firmly grounded in a reality that was never meant to be fantastic in any way.

Consider "Sister Carvalho's Excellent Sunday School Lesson." The protagonist is not Sister Carvalho but Yona Lindenstrauss, native of Tel Aviv and a newcomer to Zion (Pleasant Grove, Utah, that is). The daughter of highly educated parents, Yona went to the best schools and became a "programmer in a missile defense unit" (55). She leaves Israel after the Arab-Israeli conflict results in the deaths of two friends, Hanan and Rachel, and after an attack that results in the personal loss of one foot, four front teeth, and a piece of her jaw. Hardly ethnocentric in her Jewishness, she marries an African Arab, Mbaye, and ends up in Pleasant Grove, where she teaches philosophy at Utah Valley University.

Yona likes Utah. She and her husband "attended the Mormon Church not because they believed it, but because they loved their new community and found it the best way to be a part of it" (57). A clerical mix-up results in their being mistaken for another couple, Brother and Sister Carvalho, who also happen to end up in the Pleasant Grove 5th Ward for a much shorter stay. Embraced by a well-meaning (but maybe not so mentally sharp) Bishop Baxter, Yona and Mbaye become fully integrated in the ward as the Carvalhos, people who prove to be more than willing to lend their considerable experience and wisdom to the cause of a stone cut from the mountain without hands.

Unable to convince their neighbors that they are not Sister and Brother Carvalho, they come to accept their new identity as Latter-day

Saints, finding a place for themselves among a friendly, warm people. In her journal, Yona writes,

They seem militaristic and enjoy a kind of performance of military fervor, and yet despite such displays of nationalism, few have actually served a stint in the military themselves or can speak to its reality. It feels strange, especially when the threats they face are distant and indirect. They love to wave flags and shoot fireworks and highly value displays of patriotism yet despise their president and talk much of acts of insurrection—all the while creating mythic figures of their founders who are more like gods than humans. What they know of world affairs seems limited and often wrong—believing things that confirm what they already think and holding in suspicion things that don't, regardless of the evidence.

They often appear simplistic and naive. They are rarely actually threatened, yet seem to be filled with great fear despite living in the safest place I've ever known. There is constant talk of the great evil of the day, but I have trouble getting them to articulate what it is exactly that they are afraid of and they talk vaguely about the family being under threat and evil being abroad. . . .

Despite these strange peculiarities, they are mostly kind and willing to help each other. They care for those in their circle with tenderness and concern. And like all people, love TV and computer games. And I must say when all is said and done, I like them much and am comfortable here. (60–61)

For Yona, life in Utah is a kind of idyllic dream. So when Satan enters Pleasant Grove in the form of a fight between those who use (and sell) Young Living essential oils versus those who prefer Do-Terra, she takes it upon herself to tear this cancer from the body of PL5. What follows is a hilariously absurd Relief Society lesson in which Sister Carvalho (i.e., Yona) separates the sisters into two groups, according to which essential oils they prefer, and incites them to fight each other. She gives

the two opposing Relief Society counselors daggers and orders them to kill each other.

She berates one and all. “I came from a place where blood runs in the streets because hatred has created hatreds upon hatreds that have lasted centuries. I came from horror to a small pocket of peace and safety and you and she pointed to the sister on both sides of the room are trying to make it a place of blood and terror again. I will not have it. So you two fight it out to the death. The woman who survives gets to sell her oil to everyone. GO” (68).

In the end, the women realize they can’t do it. They don’t have it in them to kill. No one dies. Many tears are shed, and all are edified. Sins are eventually confessed and forgiven. Once again, all is well in Zion.

Equally wild and absurd, and also grounded in the reality of Utah life, is “Bishop Johansen Rescues a Lost Soul,” where yet another well-meaning bishop of Pleasant Grove confronts Lucifer Son of the Morning. We get the impression that the vivid materiality of this arresting story could only come from a writer steeped in, on the one hand, a theology of flesh and blood and, on the other, science fiction mixed with perhaps a few too many gothic video games.

Whether knowingly or not, Peck belongs to the Gnostic tradition, where evil is as real as virtue. He revels in the literalism that makes life as a Latter-day Saint something of a surprising advantage when living in a post-human, neo-animistic world with its renewed appreciation of materiality. A familiarity with monsters forms the very heart of the third best story in this collection, “Battle Creek no Kawa Doragon,” where Clara Shirakawa, a Nikkei newcomer to the imaginative kingdom of Utah, discovers an Asian dragon in a creek in the Wasatch range. The story is magical, in the way that much of contemporary Japanese

culture now challenges modern realism and its long reign of patriotic, paternalistic terror.

With these three stories, Peck establishes himself as a leading revelator of contemporary Latter-day Saint life. Especially when bringing his full range of imaginative powers to the task of social criticism, he excels. As for the rest of the volume, which is a whopping 415 pages long, I must say that Peck writes best when he writes long. Many of the shorter pieces are fragments in need of either completion or deletion. From an ecological point of view, a shorter book would have been more tree-friendly. From a literary point of view, it would have been more effective.



Mere Tears and Torrents, Signs and Seals: The Sweet Semantic Everything of *Troubled Love*

Matthew James Babcock. *Four Tales of Troubled Love*. New York: Harvard Square Editions, 2019. 245 pp. Paperback: \$22.95. ISBN: 978-1-941861-62-2.

Reviewed by Jonathon Penny

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But not of grief, for I have knocked down that
Before the agony; the spirit grows,
Forgets, and cries;
A little comes, is tasted and found good;
All could not disappoint;*