

ROBERT F. SMITH. *Baptists at Our Barbecue*. Murray, Utah: Aspen Books, 1996. 262 pp. Paperback, \$9.95.

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In Smith's debut novel, his pretty-boy, park ranger protagonist, Tartan Jones, flees the double trouble of pressure to wed and rumors that his unattached state reflects an interest in an "alternate lifestyle." To escape his lifelong Utah home, Tartan accepts an obscure assignment elsewhere in the Southwest. With wry humor and empathetic condescension toward the local yokels, our hero chronicles his struggles in love and culture shock in the twisted little town of Longfellow. This community's most volatile problem is sectarian strife between Mormons and Baptists, who vie for demographic dominance while rejoicing in each scale-tipping arrival or departure that benefits their camp. However, the novel's Mormons also spend plenty of time squabbling among themselves. The Baptists presumably do as well, but we see little of them, despite the book's title.

This novel is very funny. This reader sustained a smirk throughout most of the book, chuckled about every three pages, and out-and-out busted up every twenty pages or so. Smith's style is engaging and clear. A sample of his prose explains why two of the book's characters do not get along:

It all stemmed from the time Orvil had appeared on *Wheel of Fortune*. Orvil got on the show but didn't win a single dollar. He kept spinning bankrupt, and when he finally got a chance to win some money he mistakenly guessed. . . .

"Funger sandwich . . ." instead of Finger sandwich. It was a dumb mistake, especially considering that every letter had been up on the board except the two I's. But Orvil had never heard of a finger sandwich and thought the concept to be quite disgusting when the puzzle was finally solved by the next contestant. Bruce made a big deal about Orvil's stupid guess.

"Funger sandwich? What the heck is a funger sandwich?"

Orvil made up some lie about the Native Americans having a ceremonial treat called the funger, but admitted the truth after Bruce began searching through books at the library. Orvil did end up with

a box of Tyson potpies and a really nice hairbrush as consolation prizes, but it just wasn't the same as, say—ten thousand dollars.

Ever since then, however, Orvil and Bruce had been bitter enemies. (78-79)

This story is typical of hundreds in the book. *BBBQ* does have a sustained plot, but it is often, if only momentarily, lost behind a plethora of unrelated anecdotal sequins. Smith fashions character personalities and plot lines to service this wonderful anecdotal humor. This strategy makes the humorous asides the level on which the novel is most successful. One way to read this book is as a collection of short short stories.

While this book's primary objective is light humor, Smith tackles some fairly high literary fare. Toward the end of the book, he unravels a disturbingly dark, ironic situation in which a pretty despicable antagonist performs a grizzly and unwittingly atoning work that brings about a *Bells of Saint Mary's*-style faux-miraculous community healing event. (Sorry to be so cryptic, but I don't want to be a plot spoiler.)

This probing of the deep, dark places of the human condition seems joltingly incongruous with the lightness of the book's earlier untroubled comedic depiction of violence and dysfunctional relationships. In fact, some readers may be disturbed by the surprising amount of death and violence in this work of faithful Mormon fiction, especially since it is depicted, and then laughed off, in such a cartoonish manner. Other readers, because it is cartoonish, might not even notice it.

BBBQ also buzzes with amorous energy as Tartan and his new girlfriend, Charity, fall in love. With a brilliance unprecedented in Mormon fiction and without even alluding to a single anatomical feature below the chin, Smith captures the body-wrenching, God-given attraction—from a male point of view anyway—that draws couples into eternal-family-producing temple marriages. In the LDS world view, this power is distinguishable from the sinful lasciviousness which leads people to sexual relationships without commitment and offspring without supportive two-parent families.

This distinction, difficult for outsiders to see and thus good grist for the mill of LDS fictive treatments, has yet to be fully explored, though Smith makes some good first steps. Blurring this distinction is common in work such as that of Levi S. Peterson, whose wigged-out rural Mormons seem to have influenced some characterizations in *BBBQ*. One of Peterson's characters, the monumentally ill-tempered, socially inept, and physically misshapen Rendella Kranpitz from the short story "The Christianizing of Coburn Heights,"¹ is reincarnated in *BBBQ* as the troublesome Mary Longfellow. Smith is no Levi Peterson clone, however. While Peterson explores deep sexual and theological dysfunction among people on the fringes of Mormon religion and culture, Smith examines dysfunction mostly in interpersonal skills among committed Latter-day Saints.

A major deficiency in *BBBQ* is the lightness with which the book treats the kind of nuts-and-bolts contextualization required to make a story read like it is taking place in believable people's lives. For example, the main character is a forest ranger, yet his creator does not make the world of this occupation particularly relevant to the story or compelling to the reader. Perhaps Smith can be allowed this liberty, since the book is not about rangering. However, while the title clearly promises meaningful treatment of the very important issue of LDS/Evangelical relations, this book offers no theological or cultural information about Baptists other than the fact they have pastors instead of bishops.

Smith's evasion of theological and cultural content detracts from his book's power to be the cautionary tale about the evils of prejudice that it strives to be. Despite these criticisms, Smith's debut novel succeeds on the strength of its humor. As Joseph Fielding McConkie says on the dust jacket, "The kid has talent." With *BBBQ*, Smith has established himself among the best Mormon humorists writing today.

NOTE

¹Levi S. Peterson, "The Christianizing of Coburn Heights," in *The Canyons of Grace: Stories* (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1992), 79-101.