NEAL CHANDLER. *Benediction: A Book of Stories.* Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989. 194 pp. $14.95.

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An old joke asserts that you can't satirize BYU because BYU is its own satire. The gag presumes a reality already so incredible that deliberate caricature would be mistaken for factual report. But of course the joke exaggerates the truth. A wonderful piece of cartoon satire appeared in the *Daily Universe* less than two years ago: a beautiful young woman stands at the pulpit in a BYU ward, her yards of blonde tresses cascading out around her. The caption reads, "My hair is so full today that I just had to stand . . ."

Nevertheless, there is enough truth in the joke to merit thought. Satire does not flourish in the Mormon culture, and with good reason—it is dangerous. The only thing more dangerous than satire is its absence. The appearance of Neal Chandler's book *Benediction,* therefore, is cause for celebration, a healthy vital sign, an indication that the patient may recover.

Three of Chandler's fifteen stories are pure classic satires, their very names caricatures of the contemporary LDS culture: "The Only Divinely Authorized Plan for Financial Success in This Life or the Next," "The Righteousness Hall of Fame," and "The Last Nephite" (which manages to combine the spirit of the Three Nephite folktales with that of "The Last Gunfighter" movie myths). The title story, "Benediction," is not true satire but instead a marvelously humorous story in which our anti-hero, Damon Boulder (the central figure in four of the pieces) triumphs with a satiric prayer, of all things. A satiric prayer may sound blasphemous, but it is in fact Damon's shatteringly effective way of silencing the blasphemy of a gospel doctrine teacher who has just spent forty minutes reincarnating the Apostle Peter as Rocky Balboa.

If you've sat through a few too many Sunday School classes that smacked of Og Mandino or Successful Salesmanship Sells the Scriptures, you may find yourself cheering for this particular flinty Boulder. (Chandler's fun with names is clever without being trite. While the Boulder-Petros-Rocky connection is a straightforward one, the name "Damon" gives us much more to think about, including the concept of "daemon" and of "demon" as well as Damon and Pythias.)

The book contains more than satire, however. We can begin to understand the scope of Chandler's work if we step back and remind ourselves of how we mortals handle the thorny paradox of the ideal vs. the actual. The ideal is what we want, what we hope for,

what we believe *should* be, what we *ought* to do or be. The actual is what *is*, what we and the world are like, here and now. How do we deal with the gap between the two? If we tell ourselves that what we are and what we'd like to be are one and the same, we are deluded or self-righteous. (If we know the difference, but profess to *others* that they're the same, we're hypocrites.) If we say that the ideal is unimportant (when in fact we believe it is important), or if we say it is unattainable and therefore not worth attempting, or if we try to lower the ideal, we are rationalizing. When we acknowledge the disparity, yet continue to try to match our actions to our ideals, that's called repentance. Sometimes, however, in addition to whichever course we take, the inevitable disparity between what is expected in life and what actually comes down the pike makes us laugh, or smile wryly, or chortle even as we wince. And that response is ironic.

In Chandler's "Living Oracle," for example, a young Damon (not named in the story itself) visits a Berlin cabaret hours after his release from his mission. This is an initiation account, in the tradition of James Joyce's "Araby" or John Updike's "A & P." It's all about disillusionment, as Damon and a fellow RM have one expectation after another thwarted. Just as the best line in a poem is often the title, here the insight of the story comes in a headnote, a gloss on the word "Release": "(l) to liberate, to set free from bondage or obligation. (2) to give up, surrender or relinquish, to let go or drop. (3) [law] to lease again" (62). This is one of the weaker stories in the collection, because although Chandler takes us carefully to the explosion of the illusion, he fails to evoke the impact of what that event can mean to a young person. ("Ever wonder if maybe it means something?" (66) is not exactly an exit line calculated to keep us up nights.) But as an overture for the whole book, a quick preview of the life Damon (or any of us) will live as dreams collide with nightmares and ideals bump against actualities, it is an effective initial sounding of motifs.

Rachael Holbein has expectations in "Mormon Tabernacle Blues." (Oh, what a title! Can you imagine such an *album*? Wouldn't our culture be enriched by such a wonder?) Rachael expects her son, Roy, Jr., to be "her last, best hope of unblemished maternal victory" (79) after he comes home from his mission. Instead, she must watch him "slide slowly, steadily down into the sin of bachelorhood" (79). But if the son is a disappointment and her husband living evidence "that heaven had defaulted its end of the bargain" (77), it is her father who causes her most pain. The clash between ideal and real has produced, in her father's case, a skeptic and a doubter, who reads *Scientific American* and makes out a last will and testament instructing Rachael to cremate his remains. Rachael, in a flash of

inspiration, invites the local science teacher (a fellow ward member) to straighten her father out. At a dinner made in the Cholesterol Kingdom, faith and doubt tangle (with faith getting tangled in the broccoli for good measure). This well-written little piece has surprises for the reader as well as for Rachael. The irony darkens after what we assume is the climax and moves into a deeper insight than we had expected, perhaps deeper than we had wanted. Such are the perils of irony, and of literature.

Other stories with sharp (and rather somber) ironic themes include "The Onlooker," "Whole Life Premiums," and "Roger across the Looking Glass." "Roger" is clearly the most complex and fully developed story in the collection, a troubling portrait of a marriage seen through a veil darkly by a husband who cannot understand his wife's pain, or his own. Though not long, this story has something of the richness of a short novel, with many strands implied, and an entire episode—his wife's care of her dying mother—tantalizingly abbreviated into a couple of pages. "Roger" lays open the pain that results when ideals tyrannize actualities, when a person sacrifices what she is for what she is expected to be, and ends up being neither, but some tragic netherworld zombie. A later story, "Borrowing Light," fails in trying to make the epistolary form carry the weight of how her mother's tragedy affects Roger's daughter. Despite its problems, "Borrowing" further confirms the notion that Roger and Ellen's story has more potential than it has been given here.

Although "Roger" could have been a much longer story, trimming would have benefited several of the others, especially the satiric pieces. Timing is everything in comedy, and once readers have taken delight in the initial shock of the caricature, prolonging the effect is counterproductive. (Comics are told to "Get on and get off.") Here, especially, less is more. Yet despite a touch of overkill, surely the stories that will find the readiest audience are these satires. In both "The Righteousness Hall of Fame" and "The Only Divinely Authorized Plan for Financial Success," Chandler has great sport with our current Mormon equation of financial and spiritual well-being. When a friend suggests that the enterprise Carmen Snavely wants to goad husband Walter into joining might be a pyramid scheme, Carmen slaps down a dollar bill, points to the engraving on the back, and says, "Of course it's a pyramid. . . . It's God's own plan, Thelm, put here in a free country with a free market and free enterprise. That's what a pyramid is, it's capitalism. . . . Honorable men . . . put it in the Constitution and on the back of that dollar bill so that every eye might see and every tongue confess the truth of what I'm telling you right now" (19). Carmen's Walter has

a different perception of actuality, however. When fast-talking Brother Houston makes his pitch, Walter simply points out, "Young man, your fly is open" (20).

Of course, that's what satire is about—pointing out open flies. Someone once said to Rudyard Kipling that truth was "a naked lady." To which Kipling replied, "Yes, and a gentleman looks the other way!" To the satirist, however, looking the other way is the real sin. Seeing, and saying what one sees, are crucial steps in salvation. In Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea,* the hero Sparrowhawk tracks down the destroying demon and realizes that the way to gain power over him is to speak the demon's real name, which is his *own* name. He acknowledges the demon as a part of himself, he unites the two parts (the brightest and the darkest), and the threat is no more. As Le Guin writes, "A man who [knows] his whole true self cannot be used or possessed by any power other than himself, and [his] life therefore is lived for life's sake and never in the service of ruin, or pain, or hatred, or the dark."[1] Neal Chandler's book is worth reading for the laughs. It's worth *rereading* for the insights that unite the bright and dark sides of Mormon culture.

NOTE

[1]Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 180–81.