

YORGASON, BLAINE M. and BRENTON G. *The Bishop's Horse Race*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979. 160 pp. \$5.50.

YORGASON, BLAINE M. *The Windwalker*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979. 99 pp. \$4.95. Illus.

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For the past fifty years or so one of the main concerns at any intellectual gathering of Mormons has been the lack of a significant Mormon literature. However, LDS writers now seem to be springing out of the woodwork, and this effusion may at last bring to an end the debate about whether a Mormon literature exists or not.

By far the most popular writer to emerge recently is Blaine M. Yorgason, whose *Charlie's Monument*, after being turned down by twenty-one publishers, finally found a home at Bookcraft and has since sold about 150,000 copies. Although critics have been slightly less than lukewarm about that book, in any hard-cover league that's in the best-seller category.

THE BISHOP'S HORSE RACE

Now Blaine has teamed with his brother, Brenton G. Yorgason, to write a rollicking, good-humored tale dealing with a Mormon bishop in Sanpete Valley in 1888, when Utah was still a territory and polygamy persecution was the central problem facing the Church.

There are many strengths to *The Bishop's Horse Race*, principally the strong conflicts and fast pace that help make a good story. Bishop Jons Soderberg of Aspen Wells makes an ill-advised bet with some of the townspeople that he can ride his new Belgian stallion the 110 miles to Salt Lake City between sunup and sundown. Aside from the bishop and his son Hyrum, there is a not unlikeable villain named Hebron Clawson, who is a federal marshal dedicated to sending the polygamous bishop's hide off to the Sugar House Territorial Prison.

Of major interest here is the authentic settings that reflect small-town Utah in the last century. The authors are at their best in such digressions as when Hyrum, who narrates parts of the story in the first person, gives us the recipe for making lye soap, or explains the toil of cleaning and plucking the "tithing chickens."

In addition, one of the strong points of the book is the colorful language of the frontier, used without profanity—as unlikely as that seems. Although the authors occasionally reach too far for a

metaphor, most of their language falls naturally and accurately into place and adds to the enjoyment the piece offers. For instance, when a ward member insults one of the bishop's wives, Soderberg warns, "Mungus . . . if you have something to say about me, then drag up your stock and run it around the corral a few times so we can see how the brand lies. But don't you ever malign one of my family again!" (pp. 18-19). Also, in explaining where his new-found girl friend lives, Hyrum tells us, "she and Mungus and Curly lived on some two-by-twice rawhide outfit somewhere south of town." Or, as the villains tell themselves of their chances of stopping Bishop Soderberg, "Sure as sow bugs under a buffalo chip!" Such lively figures of speech, often earthy, lend an authentic reflection of the times and the people that is not often found.

Indeed, in the chapters narrated by the bishop's son there is occasionally almost a Tom Sawyer quality about his experiences:

This day Ma had pulled me out of bed right early so I could get over to Ammon Hanson's and get a big old wart charmed off my hand, and he took a hunk of raw bacon and rubbed the wart like crazy, wiped it all off with an old dishrag, and then took the dishrag and buried it somewhere out in his orchard. I don't know how it worked, but it did. I'd had two of them charmed off me before, so I didn't doubt for a minute that it would work. It took a week or two, of course, but the warts always went. [Pp. 14-15]

On the negative side, the book suffers overall from too-frequent lapses into didacticism, perhaps due to the authors' backgrounds as seminary teachers. It is particularly disconcerting to find the characters spouting unlikely homilies designed to show us the straight and narrow. As an all-too-common example, when a lady of stained reputation sets out to waylay the bishop through her wiles and is foiled, she becomes repentant and explains to Hyrum and his girl friend that a stain on a dress is what people notice most:

"Remember, the same is true of a reputation. One spot on it, one blemish, and that's all folks will see. No matter how many good things there are about a person, all people can see is the one spot of dirt in their character. And, saddest of all, sometimes that's sometimes all that a person can see about herself, too. In fact, mostly we judge ourselves more harshly than others do." [P. 143]

Too many of these "teaching moments" intrude on the story and detract from the believability of the characters, not to mention the dialogue.

The other element that takes away from the plausibility is the introduction of a supernatural character, obviously Jon Soderberg's

long-deceased grandfather, to pull the bishop over his major obstacles.

Yet, in all, *The Bishop's Horse Race* is an enjoyable tongue-in-cheek romp through Utah of 1888. Inasmuch as the Brothers Yorgason have left teaching to write full time, we can expect more of the Soderberg family and life in nineteenth-century Utah. We will be the richer for it.

THE WINDWALKER

Of a different nature is Blaine Yorgason's earlier work, *The Windwalker*. The characters are Plains Indians rather than Mormons, but the sentiments are compatible to both. This is an engaging and serious look at aging told in an ingenious plot and style. The Old Man, the Windwalker, awakes in a snowstorm blind and bound atop a scaffolding where he has been laid to rest in Plains Indian style.

It had been his day to die, the day that he had looked forward to and yet feared for so many long seasons. He had sung his song of farewell for those few who might have cared to listen, and then he had lain back to await his departure into the west, into the land of the Sky People where the black road of his troubles was to end. [P. 2]

Much of the force of the work—and the power is considerable—comes from the interior monologue of the Old Man as he speaks to himself and to the Great God he sometimes calls Grandfather.

“Hoka-hey, Grandfather!
This is a good joke you have
played.
A very good joke.
You have played many, but this
is the best, and
the old man who lies on this scaffold
salutes you.” [Pp. 3-4]

Loosing himself, stumbling blindly through the blizzard with his war lance clasped in arthritic hands, the Old Man undergoes a series of gripping adventures—wolves, a grizzly bear, and Crow warriors who are searching for the lodge of the Old Man's family.

The major thrust of the story lies in the effectiveness of the aged Cheyenne when he gropes his way back to his family and finds the only man there dying from wounds received at the hand of the Crows—who lurk nearby waiting to finish their destruction. In the end, it is the Old Man's wisdom that saves the day.

The idiom of *The Windwalker* has the ring of authenticity, so much that the author has received no few gifts from Indians who say that he has caught the original Americans' concept of God and Man and the world he lives in. The images, the figures of speech, and even the didactic moments fit naturally and seldom intrude on our sense of experiencing along with the Old Man. The half-dozen colored illustrations by Yorgason himself are breath-taking and accurate.

The Windwalker is a story of growing old and dying with dignity. It is engaging and well told. Whereas *The Bishop's Horse Race* is a sporting fling into the past, flawed but enjoyable, *The Windwalker* is art.

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