

Book Reviews

TAYLOR, SAMUEL W. *Heaven Knows Why*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Millennial Productions, 1979. 213 pp. \$3.95; paper.

Reviewed by Richard H. Cracroft, professor of English and chairman of the Department of English at Brigham Young University.

While it continues a sober truth that it takes a great deal of sifting through Mormon letters to uncover even a page or two of intentional Mormon humor, the reprinting of Samuel W. Taylor's *Heaven Knows Why* sparks new hope for Latter-day Saints with unregenerate funny bones. Indeed, *Heaven Knows Why* is good news for all LDS readers who, weary of the "my daddy is a bishop and . . ." brand of Mormon humor, long for writers who delight in smiling at instead of weeping about the human plight, about the ever-present gap between our Latter-day Saint ideals and our less-than-celestial realities.

Sam Taylor is back, not the Sam Taylor who writes history like a novelist, but the Sam Taylor of *Family Kingdom*—vintage Sam Taylor, Sam Taylor at his best. *Heaven Knows Why*, first serialized in *Colliers* in 1946 as "The Mysterious Way," and published by A. A. Wyn, Inc., in 1948, is now reissued in paperback by Scott S. Smith's Millennial Productions, complete with a sober and undistinguished cover that makes the novel look like a tract, and thus safe for anyone's Postum table.

But within the plain cover is the funniest Mormon novel to date. Professor Kenneth Hunsaker, in his survey of twentieth century Mormon fiction, was only slightly hyperbolic in calling the book "the most delightful of all Mormon novels," but he is right in insisting that the book is an "outstanding comic novel." The praise is only slightly diminished by the fact that the book is, so far as I know, the *only* full-length comic novel in Mormon letters.

While the book was, on first appearance, either deeply loved or hated, it is difficult, in 1979, to understand why the book was ever controversial. Innocently funny, *Heaven Knows Why* moves the Mormon or gentile reader from chuckles to belly laughs (discreet, of course)—not at the expense of the Mormon faith or its leaders, but in joyous response to the refreshing combination of things at once familiarly Mormon and erringly human.

The book opens in Heaven, where Moroni Skinner is distracted in his job in the Compiling Office of the Accounting Section of the Current History Division of the Records Department by the way-

wardness, on earth, of his grandson, Jackson Skinner Whitetop. Jack, recently discharged as a veteran of World War II, is now living a gently dissolute existence on the remnants of the once-proud Skinner ranch in a western Utah valley.

Moroni Skinner receives permission to make one appearance to Jack. A clumsy messenger at best, Skinner makes a practice visitation to an old friend, a back-sliding, skeptical prospective elder, looks over the valley, is impressed by Katie Jensen, the bishop's lovely daughter, and finally makes his hilarious appearance to a stunned Jack, to whom he gives the laconic message: "straighten up, fix up your place, and marry Katie Jensen."

The complications begin. Katie is engaged to be married the next day to the bishop's first counselor, who turns out to be a sly hypocrite. And then there is "The Trouble," a long-standing feud between the opposite ends of the valley as to where the chapel is to be built. And then there is the fact that the bishop's wife is a closet doubter who is not only determined that Katie will marry the prosperous first counselor, but is dubious about revelation, especially the appearance of Moroni Skinner to the no-good Jack Whitetop. And then there is the bishop's passion for Coffee-Near, which Jack, caught by the bishop while enjoying a cup of freshly perked coffee, has foisted off as an innocent, healthful, noncaffeinated barley beverage made from an old family recipe. The bishop, of course, must have the recipe. And then there is the question as to the father of Anita Smith's child. And the question as to the owner of the \$25,000 which Jackson finds in his kitchen cupboard. And . . . and so it goes.

Startled into action by Grandpa Skinner's visit, and by the Herculean tasks which his would-be mother-in-law sets for him to accomplish, Jack Whitetop dashes out to resolve these—and other—problems. The rush through the maze of problems is hilarious, but the resolution warms the Mormon heart as the repentant Jack wins Katie's hand, becomes an elder, effects the reform of the first counselor, solves "The Trouble," moves the bishop's wife to faith and testimony—and finds a recipe for Coffee-Near. At the novel's end, Taylor takes us back to Heaven where we are allowed to rejoice with a revitalized Moroni Skinner, who has now received promotion to Chief Checker of the Compiling Office, much to the joy of his angelic but nagging wife Lucy.

Heaven Knows Why, free from symbolic undergirdings and allegorical profundities, is pure entertainment—light, tasteful, and funny. Only slightly dated—the novel reflects rural Mormon values which

seem more at home in 1920 than 1946—*Heaven Knows Why* demonstrates how an author can deal with the Matter of Utah humorously yet without painfully barbing beloved institutions. If there is any satire in the novel, it is on rigidity, pomposity, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness—and Mormons, thank heaven, have never enjoyed the corner on those commodities. With few exceptions, most of the scenes could be played by Baptists, Lutherans, Catholics, or Mohammedans. The delightfully notable exception is Taylor's fun with the Word of Wisdom, the innocent violations of which by Bishop Jensen provide some of the funniest scenes in this funny book.

Heaven Knows Why works on two fronts: It communicates familiarly with Mormons, puts them at ease, and teaches them another perspective on themselves. At the same time, it communicates with non-Mormons by underscoring Mormon humanity through portraying charmingly those foibles common to all men, not just Mormons. The result is a warm and friendly treatment of the Latter-day Saints, not as peculiar people, but as affable neighbors in a fallen world—and not one mention of polygamy!

Sam Taylor is back, with the funniest Mormon novel ever. Taylor should be encouraged in this republishing venture, which he undertook, he notes in his introduction, to determine whether "Mormons have matured to the point where we can now chuckle rather than bristle at some of the foibles and conceits of our culture." I think we're ready.