

Douglas Thayer. *The Conversion of Jeff Williams*.

Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003

Reviewed by Daniel Kay Muhlestein

The *Conversion of Jeff Williams*, winner of an Association for Mormon Letters Best Novel Award, is an intriguing book written by Douglas Thayer, the author of the novel *Summer Fire* and two collections of short stories, *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone* and *Under the Cottonwoods and Other Mormon Stories*. Thayer's recent book is a coming-of-age novel narrated by Jeff Williams, a seventeen-year-old San Diego native who spends the summer in Provo with his seriously ill cousin, Christopher.

Three related plot lines run through the novel. The first explores Jeff's relationship with Christopher and Christopher's well-heeled parents. Jeff is initially reluctant to spend the summer with his Provo relatives. He admires their wealth, but he misses the beach, his erstwhile girlfriend, and his parents' more relaxed approach to religion. As the summer progresses, however, Jeff becomes less infatuated with money, learns to love Christopher, and begins—for the first time in half a decade—to pray with real intent. When a massive pulmonary embolism strikes Christopher, Jeff struggles valiantly to save his cousin's life. And after Christopher dies, Jeff experiences shock, grief, and a deeper appreciation of the gospel promises of rebirth and resurrection.

The second plot line in the novel revolves around Jeff's relationship with his hard-working, soft-spoken father, Frank. Because of a chance encounter with one of Frank's high school acquaintances, Jeff meets a number of people who are able to tell him many of the particulars of his father's life before he moved from Provo to San Diego, including his boyhood activities, his military service, and the successive tragedies that claimed the lives of his father, his best friend, his mother, and his two younger brothers. Chastened and inspired, Jeff begins to view his father

in a new light, and he looks forward to sharing his discoveries with his dad—a meeting of minds and hearts that is temporarily interrupted by Christopher’s death.

The third plot line is less a series of linked actions than a cluster of related memories, as Jeff reflects back over his childhood and adolescence, analyzing who he is and why he has made the choices he has made. Many of Jeff’s ruminations concern girls, dating, and teenage desire, and he thinks long and hard about why he has been able to keep his hands to himself when so many of his friends have strayed into sin, concluding that his relationship with his mother is probably the determining factor. *The Conversion of Jeff Williams* thus describes a triple epiphany in the life of its narrator—religious, familial, and moral—with the last of the three being remembered rather than enacted.

For a Utah reader, one of the most tactile joys of *The Conversion of Jeff Williams* is Thayer’s sense of place. He knows Utah County intimately, and he recreates Provo and its vicinity with precision and care. Utah Lake, Mount Timpanogos, and Provo Canyon are all described, as is the beauty of the setting sun: “The sunsets in Utah Valley were sometimes incredible. The clouds turned purple, gold, yellow, orange, and became great walls of light that reflected off Timpanogos and the high east mountains until the sky seemed to be full of fire” (29). Almost every major landmark in Utah County is described, including BYU, the MTC, the temple, the cemetery, and of course Provo itself.

Often, however, the enjoyment that comes from reading Thayer’s descriptions of the Wilkinson Center, the CougarEat, and University Mall is the simple pleasure of recognition rather than the complex pleasure of symbolic significance. Only when Thayer juxtaposes the oldest parts of Provo to Jeff’s aunt’s upscale neighborhood does the landscape itself begin to reverberate with meaning, small lively neighborhoods standing in stark contrast to “the vast enclosed space, the unused and unnecessary, the pastels and whites, and so much silence” of the Lowery mansion (175). Even then, as Jeff nears his religious epiphany, he thinks of the “Promised Land” less in terms of the Twelfth North bridge of his father’s childhood than of his own comfortable, unassuming home in San Diego. And at the end of the novel, it is to San Diego that Jeff returns. The Utah setting that initially looms so large is thus ultimately reduced to the status of an aching, absent presence, a father’s house that has long since burnt to ashes. And the most important symbolic landscape in the novel becomes an endless stretch of freeway under a distant Nevada sky.

Of course, characterization, not setting, is the real heart of a coming-of-age novel. Although Thayer uses several minor characters to forward

his plot, *The Conversion of Jeff Williams* revolves around the lives of two related families: the Williams family of San Diego and the Lowerys of Provo. For most of the novel, Jeff lives in Provo with Christopher, and during that time Thayer uses the Lowery family principally as a foil against which to display the characteristics of both Jeff and Jeff's parents. The Williams family is working class; the Lowerys are rich. Jeff's father works with the Boy Scouts; his uncle Richard is a stake president. Jeff's mother is a nurse who helps pay the bills; his aunt Helen spends her days snipping roses and doing genealogy. Jeff is a faithful but unenthusiastic latter-day warrior; Christopher appears to be the very *crème de la crème* of a chosen generation—handsome, athletic, smart, personable, righteous.

The Lowerys are not static characters, however. Christopher undergoes a series of important transformations. Mr. and Mrs. Lowery are humanized by tragedy—the novel is bracketed by the deaths of their three sons. And by the end of the book, the most obnoxious examples of Lowery pretentiousness have been safely eliminated. To his credit, Thayer has as much charity for the Lowery family as he does for the Williams family, and he tries hard not to hold the Lowerys' wealth against them.

In spite of his charity for them, Thayer's discussion of the Lowery family contains a surprisingly effective critique of Mormon materialism. Richard Lowery is, after all, an ex-seminary teacher who strikes it rich by hawking church tapes, family planners, and motivational programs through multilevel marketing. He is also an absent father who speaks and prays in clichés and views the priesthood as yet another path to power. Like her husband, Helen Lowery is obsessed with appearances. She always wears dresses, white or pastel, never pants. She jumps from house to house, each more extravagant than the last. She seems determined to recreate the oeuvre of *The Great Gatsby* but lacks the panache needed to do so, producing a kind of recycled materialism that is too pathetic even to be crass—as though buying expensive suits at University Mall were somehow the epitome of urban chic. In spite of (or perhaps because of) her wealth, Helen's life is often an exercise in trivia, endless hours spent picking flowers and bullying the gardeners. In short, the Lowerys are *nouveau riche*, Mormon style, the kind of people who would own a Porsche without knowing quite how to pronounce its name. And to insure that readers do not somehow miss the point, Thayer highlights the most tasteless aspects of their extravagance—art that is unabashedly Latter-day Saint kitsch, a stable of unused cars, a mansion that is a clumsy imitation of temple splendor.

Of course Thayer's critique of Mormon materialism is Horatian rather than Juvenalian, and it is initially counterbalanced by the narrator's lack of maturity. Further, Thayer seems a little uneasy about exploring one of

the most important implications of Richard's call to become a General Authority: the tangled connections among wealth, power, family pedigree, and Church callings. Thayer's hesitation is not surprising. The apparent links among money, family, and authority in Mormon culture are a sensitive and complicated topic that can presently be raised only obliquely in Mormon literature and art. And though Thayer does not fully explore the issue, he at least acknowledges it.

Jeff's father is depicted as a genuinely positive character, an earthy alternative to the showy materialism of the Lowery family. Frank Williams is hardworking, close-lipped, and just eccentric enough to be likeable. He loves his family and serves others—all without flash or drama. The more Jeff learns about his father, the more he admires him. And at the end of the novel, Jeff begins the same journey from Provo to San Diego that his father had traveled a generation earlier. Father and son are thus united in a hero's quest of mythic proportions, the son becoming his father's double across space and time.

Nevertheless, for much of the novel Frank Williams remains a strangely elusive figure. Although he is the ultimate subject of the novel, the final object—that is to say—of his son's search for understanding, the particulars of Frank's life are described only indirectly, filtering down through multiple hazy narrators. His missionary experience, his military service in Korea, his loss of family and friend, and his archetypal journey West are all obscured by time, space, happenstance, and indirect discourse—a silent movie forever wrapped in fog. Just as Jeff must struggle to understand his father, so also must the reader.

Jeff's mother, on the other hand, is a vivid, engaging character from beginning to end. An ex-army nurse, she is smart, sassy, and surprisingly sexy. She has what Zora Neale Hurston once called the "big voice" of subjective authority. She is also frequently a hoot, whether she is discussing skinny-dipping, household chores, or sleeping in the nude. As Jeff recalls,

When I was fourteen, I told Mom that I'd read in a magazine named *Body* that the healthiest way to sleep was without anything on and that was the way I was going to sleep from now on.

"Oh? Very interesting, Jeff. From what I've heard, most boys ought to sleep in a suit of body armor."

"Very funny, Mom."

"Yes, well, forget about sleeping raw. You'd probably take a chill and catch a bad cold."

"Sleeping raw?"

"Yes, that's what it's called, or at least used to be. Now how about going out and getting the lawn cut before your father gets home—unless of course you plan on stripping down and taking a nap first." (163–64)

The most important character in *The Conversion of Jeff Williams* is of course the narrator himself. Indeed, the success of the novel turns on how well Thayer depicts the mind and heart of his seventeen-year-old protagonist. Thayer skillfully records Jeff's teenage interest in women, sports, and automobiles. He describes Jeff's jaded response to countless lectures on moral purity with particular wit: "I wanted to say that maybe there should be a chastity merit badge just for Mormon Eagle Scouts, but I didn't" (134). He also describes Jeff's religious epiphany with both tenderness and candor, acknowledging the uncomfortable but essential fact that Jeff's conversion is as much an expression of wish-fulfillment as faith: "I felt no sudden surge of joy. It was a simple understanding. It would do for me, I knew. I didn't think about Jesus at that moment. . . . Thinking of him wasn't necessary. I'd approached him by wanting to live forever" (226). Such a combination of authorial honesty and charity is both rare and worthy of praise.

From an aesthetic standpoint, however, Jeff is not an entirely satisfactory character. Although he tells his story in first person, Jeff's language is not the language of a seventeen-year-old boy—Eagle Scout or not. The rhythm of his thoughts is too regular to reproduce the chaotic process of a mind in action; his sentences, too perfectly ordered and balanced:

I curled up; I closed my eyes. All I wanted to do was sleep, fall into sleep. . . . Perhaps my crying was also because of what I knew in my flesh, blood, and bones about death now, that I was not excused from death, and that this understanding must change my life. Yet, laying there in the dark room, I wasn't sad or frightened. I was young and loved. (217–18)

Recreating consciousness is tricky business, of course, and not every text can be expected to match the brilliance of John Updike's "A & P," Sherwood Anderson's "I Want to Know Why," or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. But at a strategic point in the novel, Thayer comes close. Midway through the book, he momentarily introduces a second, more mature narrator, an older version of Jeff Williams, who can look back on his former consciousness with both insight and generosity:

I didn't connect that discovery about myself to anything in particular—to my parents, the way I'd been brought up, or to my Mormonism because it valued work, practicality, and usefulness. I simply understood that there was something fulfilling about the hard work. . . . I understood that there are things you have to pay for if you want them. (106)

It is unfortunate that Thayer does not develop this narrator more fully. He has much to offer the novel, and he would have served as a useful counterpoint to his younger self.

Just as Jeff's diction is polished and balanced, so also is his consciousness filtered and strained. He sees, he feels, he desires, he fears; but he does

so through a thick layer of Victorian gentility that obscures rather than highlights the essentials of his experience. Even when Jeff is ogling sun-bathers, he only skates obliquely across the surface of desire, transforming passion into voyeurism, ardor into prudent fun: “I went to the beach to surf but also to watch girls. . . . I liked to see their tanned, lotioned bodies glistening in the sun. . . . I could talk to them and sit by them on their blankets eating their food but not touching them, girls I’d never known or even seen before” (96). It is not that Jeff does not acknowledge his adolescent lust. It is, rather, that his acknowledgment is so thoroughly censured that it seems barely worth readers’ attention. He describes not how he truly thinks and feels but rather how he *thinks* he should think and feel, libidinal drives dressed up—so to speak—in their Sunday best. And though discretion may be the better part of valor, the ease with which Jeff translates his emotions into acceptable language and imagery takes much of the bite out of the novel. This is not to say that Thayer should have written the Mormon equivalent of D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*—or even Levi Peterson’s *The Backslider*—but it is to suggest that his subject matter could have benefited from a little less fastidiousness.

In that respect, *The Conversion of Jeff Williams* is symptomatic of the genre of Mormon fiction within which Thayer writes. Among those writers who—in the words of Richard Cracroft—attempt “to write honestly and well . . . and to probe the lives of faithful men and women confronting a Sophic society,”¹ there is a natural tendency to undersell the allure of sin, just as there is a countervailing tendency among Sophic writers to soft-shoe its consequences. Re-creating temptation without leading the reader astray is an arduous task, and most writers of faithful Mormon realism prefer to risk too little rather than too much. In the process they produce small triumphs rather than large ones. In the final analysis, such is the case with *The Conversion of Jeff Williams*: it is a muted triumph, among the best of its kind.

Daniel Kay Muhlestein (daniel_muhlestein@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor of English at Brigham Young University. He received his PhD from Rice University and is currently serving as the associate editor of *Literature and Belief* published by the Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, Brigham Young University.

1. Richard H. Cracroft, “Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature,” *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 56.