

The Mormon Review

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Of Prophets and Jugglers: Will Self's *The Book of Dave*

Will Self, *The Book of Dave: A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future* (Bloomsbury USA, 2006)

By Rosalynde Welch

London, 1593, was the seedy, smoky seat of a nascent state. It was in May that a shadowy informant recorded for the benefit of the Privy Council the impious opinions of one Christopher Marlowe. The Baines Note, named for its author Richard Baines, alleged eighteen articles of blasphemy to Marlowe, *l'enfant terrible* of the Elizabethan literary scene. Among them:

He affirmeth that Moyses was but a jugler... That it was an easy matter for Moyses being brought up in all the artes of the Egyprians to abuse the Jewes being a rude & grosse people.

... That Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest. ... That if he were put to write a new Religion, he would undertake both a more Excellent and Admirable methode and that all the new testament is filthily written.

... That all the apostles were fishermen and base fellowes neyther of wit nor worth, that Paull only had wit but he was a timorous fellow in bidding men to be subject to magistrates against his Conscience.

... That if Christ would have instituted the sacrament with more Ceremoniall Reverence it would have bin had in more admiration, that it would have bin much better being administred in a Tobacco pipe.¹

Six hundred words radically refinish six thousand years of biblical narrative, stripping away providence and mystery from the raw materials of history and power. The note is of interest not so much for what it tells us of Christopher Marlowe's private judgments (probably not much) but instead for what it reveals about the limits of myth in the context of early modern state formation. Elizabeth plundered the Church's symbols and stories just as her father had plundered its monasteries, but even as she wrote herself into the Bible her subjects were questioning its authority. Prophets are but jugglers, the note tells us, and the holy book

is a pageant of bugbears and hobgoblins.

"Moyes was but a jugler"

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Such is the message of Will Self's 2006 novel *The Book of Dave: A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future*. Self, another *enfant terrible* of a much-later London literary scene, populates his novel with juggling prophets, credulous believers and ersatz holy books. Like the Baines note, a precursor in the long tradition of English skepticism, *The Book of Dave* casts a cynical eye on testaments old and new, men and ceremony religious, and the matrix of myth in which religious meaning resides. But whereas the Baines note beguiles with its brevity and naive style, Self's big novel writhes beneath a two-headed plot delivered in maximalist prose.

One head, the "revelation of the recent past," follows an alienated London cabbie named Dave Rudman as he divorces, loses custody of his son, and descends into depression and prescription-drug-induced psychosis. He loses everything except "the Knowledge" – the encyclopedic memory of London street geography that cabdrivers master during training – and in his madness he makes of the Knowledge a kind of esoteric mystery, the *gnosis* of his anti-gospel of misogyny, racism and misanthropy of all varieties. He mingles the Knowledge with fevered personal rantings he calls "Doctrines and Covenants", prints the

jeremiad on metal plates, and buries it in the garden of his ex-wife as a legacy to his estranged son. Later, his head cleared and his life coalescing around a new family, Dave writes a second book, a repudiation of the first and a (rather humdrum) bromide on tolerance and other virtues of the recent past. But it is too late; the bell cannot be unrung, the Book of Dave cannot be disinterred, and so the novel carries the reader toward the distant future.

In the second plot, rising seas have inundated London, and surviving humans form a benighted society on the remaining highlands. This new London of 500 years "after Dave" resembles nothing so much as the old London of 1500 "ano domini": a filthy, teeming conurbation, the cradle of a nascent monarchy, and the center of a monotheistic, patriarchal religion eminently useful in the making of states. Just the place for jugglers, bugbears and hobgoblins. The religion in question, however, is not Christianity but "Dävinanity," and the state not England but Ingland, for the Book of Dave has been retrieved from an ante-diluvian stratum and made the substrate of a brutal religious regime.

From a rural backwater of this sodden dystopia emerges a prophet, Symun Devush. The young boy unearths another testament of Dave, a new holy book that repudiates the priests

and precepts of the first and proclaims a new dispensation of liberal tolerance. The thread of this second plot follows the prophet and his son through the brief rise of the new sect and toward a tragic martyrdom.

The bones of the book are Mormon, even if its profane and violent flesh is not; situated at the intersection of religion and archaeology, the novel draws freely from the local Mormon mythos.

"It would have bin much better being administred in a Tobacco pipe"

The detritus of a madman's imagination accidentally becomes the basis of a complex religious society, and the rest of the novel is the elaboration of this joke. By its comic algorithm, the homely particularities of Dave's cab become the holy articles of Dävinanity. Human souls are called "fares," fares pray to Dave by means of a sacred intercom; priests are Drivers, Drivers bless fares through a ceremonial rearview mirror bearing the sacred sign of the Wheel.

Occasionally Self achieves truly funny satire: among the varieties of religious experience parodied in the novel is a sect called the Plateists, adherents of which wear clanking robes of automobile license plates recovered from the ancient ruins of the motorway. In their

enclave they toil at arcane numerological reckonings based on the alphanumeric inscriptions of their plates, like so many vehicular Kabbalists.

But the joke too often descends into the merely didactic. Dave and his ex-wife, Michelle, for example, are the primal figures of the Book, its Adam and Eve, and their bitter divorce and custody settlement become the foundation for domestic life in England. Under the dysfunctional conventions of the "breakup," as the family unit is called, men and women live in strict separation, and the ceremonial transfer of children from "mummytime" to "daddytime" each week drives a cruel liturgical calendar. The social costs of this rigid – and, as the text emphasizes, entirely arbitrary – arrangement is a major theme of the book, and long before a Driver proclaims that "the breakup is ordained of Dave" the reader has fully apprehended the barely-concealed critique of the LDS doctrine of eternal families. There's nothing sacred about the traditional family, Self suggests. Conjure enough Ceremonial Reverence, and religion can be made out of any old thing. The sacrament could be administered out of a tobacco pipe.

"All the new testament is filthily written"

Self satirizes virtually every aspect of revealed religion in the course of the long novel, but it is the Book of Dave itself that attracts his loudest guffaws. As a textual artifact, the Book of Dave is close kin to the Book of Mormon: a sacred history is recorded on metal plates, buried and then unearthed, and eventually placed at the center of a new religious tradition. The author offers no direct excerpt from this book-within-the-book, but the Book of Dave is described as a mélange of geographical landmarks from the Knowledge and Dave's own deranged views on family life and society, all rendered in an ersatz scriptural idiom:

It came to him in solid chunks – wrote itself, really. ... Yet this was not all. In transcribing his Knowledge Dave Rudman embroidered it. This was no plain cloth word-map, but a rich brocade of parable, chiasmus and homily. *Where to, guv?* he began each run, and when it intersected with a suitable tale he grasped it, then set it down. He kept driving, for out on the night-time streets the map, the territory and prophecy became as one. (347)

Self's point, again, is that even the effluvium of a lunatic mind can be cloaked with solemnity sufficient to inspire reverence; any found object, any cultural artifact, can be

wrapped in myth and infused with spiritual meaning. The cultural power of myth then ramifies the symbols and suggestions inherent in the object. A holy city, a New London, is raised from the fragmentary template of the Old London contained in the Book of Dave, thus creating the illusion of prophecy fulfilled and reinforcing the hegemony of the myth.

It's not a bad analysis of the way religious meaning is made, actually, but it's unlikely to persuade anyone acquainted with the Book of Mormon. No matter how outlandish its origin, the Book of Mormon is a sophisticated and coherent text, and its content bears scant resemblance to the unhinged innards of the Book of Dave. Self underestimates the Book of Mormon, overshoots his satire, and thus fails to land his critique. And it's too bad, because his trenchant analysis is relevant to Mormonism, given the ways in which Joseph found and folded cultural objects – symbols of Masonry, for example, or Egyptian funerary scrolls – into a rich mythos of the sacred. But because Self does not grasp the form or meaning of the Book of Mormon, his novel fails to exploit the full potential of Mormonism as a cultural intertext.

"the Jewes being a rude & grosse people"

If *The Book of Dave* offers meager insight on the Book of Mormon as a religious text, it copes with Mormonism as a sociological phenomenon with a little more success. Mormonism, like its central text, remains largely buried in the novel, a source of underlying narrative motif rather than overt plot dressing. But it floats to the surface occasionally. The protagonist's aunt is a Mormon, and Dave attends a sacrament meeting with her at a key plot point. Self must have attended services at the LDS chapel in Hyde Park---one can only chuckle at the thought---because his description of the space and the proceedings is quite plausible. After the passing of the sacrament, a speaker addresses the congregation:

From a blond wood lectern, under the exposed engine of organ pipes, a big-framed man with a blond crewcut and the solid, leisurely hands of an engineer was preaching a sermon on marriage and family values. 'As a man and a woman's spirit are ee-tur-nal,' he nasalled, 'so may the family's spirit become ee-tur-naal through obedience to the laws and principles.' ... 'Observe family prayer,' said the devout mountaineer, 'observe a family home evening and family scripture study and

our links will remain sealed.' (231-2)

If Self doesn't get the Mormon argot precisely right, he comes close, and LDS readers will perhaps forgive an occasional lapse in return for his comic phonetic transliteration of 2 Nephi 9:10 into the dulcet east-end tones of Aunt Gladys:

'O 'ow grate the goodness of our God, oo prepareff a way fer our escape from this awful monster; yea, that monster, deff an' 'ell, which I call the deff of the body, an' also the deff of the spirit.' (229)

Should the Correlation Committee ever decide to produce a cockney translation of the Book of Mormon, Self is their man. The episode reveals a deeper observation about Mormon culture, as well. As Dave waits in the foyer of the chapel, he studies a visual panorama of Mormon life.

A Nordic baby was born and raised. He studied, married, was gifted with his own baby. The family grew as the Mormon did construction work, then more work – now white collar. In old age the snowy-haired Saint, fulfilled, instructed a granddaughter, before dying a peaceful death on white pillows. The soft hands of a sky god reached down to gather him

up. The Mormon go-round was lived out in a city of wide boulevards and spacious, modern dwellings. The Mormon Knowledge was a simple grid pattern, while beyond the 'burbs green hills rose to bluey mountains. Heaven was a ski resort in the Rockies. (231)

The facile Mormon lifescipt laid out in the mural flattens and straightens the countours of ultimate reality. Whereas the Knowledge of London, the deep mysteries of the city revealed only to worthy initiates, is multiform, shadowy, layered, the Mormon Knowledge is a well-lit grid, its neat rectangles too shallow to accommodate recessed tragedies of human drama. The point is driven home moments later: "An apple-cheeked Mormon youth came over to where Dave and Gladys stood and offered them each a plate of white bread chunks and a tiny beaker of water. If this was the Saints' sacrament, their Saviour's body was bland, his blood tasteless" (231). Self's criticism of Mormonism is bare on the page, here disinterred from the satirical overlay of the second plot. And yet it is to the Mormon mythos that Self turns for the vital symbols and stories that enliven the novel. Herein lies the author's subtler point: the implicit contrast between the bland mores of Mormon life and the force of its myth

suggests that contemporary Mormon culture does not live up to the privileges of its rich cosmology. It's not an original complaint, to be sure, but it is well dramatized on this stage.

"to write a new Religion"

In the end, *The Book of Dave* uses Mormonism chiefly as a cache of narrative treasure. Prophets and angels, golden plates and seerstones, migrations and martyrdoms: this is the stuff of metaphor and symbol and anything else a novelist might want, all glimmering with a tempting patina of weirdness. And if the novel borrows freely from the wealth of Joseph's religious imagination, Joseph himself borrowed resonant objects and ideas from the cultural texts around him as he created his masterwork, the Restoration. In the same way – if made cynical and ridiculous – Dävinanity seizes on the Book of Dave as it builds a new Holy Empire. Religion plunders literature, literature plunders

religion: *The Book of Dave* observes the former as it enacts the latter.

The special power of the novel as a textual form is its heteroglossia, and thus heteroglossia is the special craft of the novelist. The scope and conventions of the novel bring together different kinds of discourse, and the welter of voice and view opens the world for interpretation. If *The Book of Dave* brings an original approach to bear on Mormonism, it does so finally through its heteroglot portrait of the prophet. The book's high-concept, double-threaded plot structure is unwieldy, but it has the advantage of bringing together two views of a prophet – Dave Rudman in the primary plot and Symun Devush in the secondary – and allowing them to play out side by side. Self accomplishes this double vision by radically distinguishing the discourse, the worldview, in which the two men are situated: Dave Rudman inhabits a modern world entirely stripped of myth; Symun Devush strides across a mythic geography

suffused with macrocosmic significance. Both men bring forth new books: one is a grotesque rant, the other a sacred harbinger of a new religious order. Both men are murdered: one is the victim of a desultory and meaningless accident, the other perishes nobly in a symbolic martyrdom. It is the same diffracted image that followed Joseph Smith through his life: Joe Smith or Brother Joseph, shiftless rascal or chosen seer. The two men roamed one world. In *The Book of Dave*, one man roams two worlds, and this is the novel's gift. To bring together two views of the man and his book, to chafe them until sparks are thrown, to observe the world in the fiery glow.

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¹ <http://www2.prestel.co.uk/re/baines1.htm>. Accessed 9/22/09.

