Latter-day Screens

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This book is not about Mormon people and history so much as it is about Mormonism as an idea, an image, and a way of thinking. While I have my own experiences with Mormonism that I detail in the epilogue, this book isn’t really about me. Yet, it isn’t not about me, in that growing up non-Mormon in the highly Mormon city of Mesa, Arizona, cultivated in me a certain point of view that, no doubt, led me to a career in gender studies and a commitment to social justice. Even so, this book is not meant as a critique of a religion or its adherents but as an examination of the way Mormonism as a meme functions as a symbolic stand-in, particularly with respect to gender and sexuality. I believe Mormonism serves as a lens through which to see a set of cultural operations and investments otherwise difficult to discern.

I recognize that religion is not, and never can be, only abstraction. And so I offer my thanks to the actual LDS folks who have been my friends over the past forty years, in real life and on social media. While some of those people have already unfriended me for being radically liberal, many others have remained. I hope those Mormon friends who become aware of this book might see it as a tribute to a way of seeing they fostered.

The LDS Church believes in a living doctrine, meaning some of the policies I discuss in this book have changed since 2019. Here’s hoping for yet more advances!

I have two non-Mormon friends who have been with me since childhood. I first met Stacey when I was three and she was four, and our mothers were convinced we’d enjoy playing together. Were they ever right! Although we always liked each other, it wasn’t until our families moved closer to one another that Stacey and I became inseparable. I loved and continue to love her ready
laugh, her quick wit, her overall good-naturedness, and her capacities to go deep, all qualities that serve her well now as a physician. Stacey, I still owe you a nickel for believing my dog’s hernia was a penis but tough crunchies.

Michael and I met in seventh grade, at Kino Junior High School in Mesa. I will never forget my first glimpse of him dashing down the hall in a furtive run-walk as he delivered messages for the nurse. Never was there a more conscientious or fast-moving aide than he—or a more talented scene partner in acting class or a smarter competitor in AP English. I loved and continue to love his intensity, his intelligence, and his loyalty. He is now a highly successful attorney and ever-ready flash mob participant in Los Angeles. Michael, I’m sorry for crushing your cookies.

When I first began to consider writing a book about Mormons, both Stacey and Michael thought I was, to put it mildly, making a big mistake. Why go back and think about those things? Why be immersed in the very culture that we had all worked so hard to flee physically and emotionally? Yet, both told me stories of such intimacy and pain that I was deeply moved and doubly convinced that I wanted to write this book. I won’t repeat those stories here, except to say that both Michael and Stacey have been part of a lifelong conversation that has tried to make tangible something ephemeral that had enormous influence over us. Together we have the makings for a classically unfunny joke: A lawyer, a doctor, and a professor walk into a bar and ruminate on the cognitive dissonances of their childhood. We all learned to negotiate a series of invisible codes that we were never taught yet learned so well that we often internalized. Together we cut our teeth on the hegemonic structures of Mormonism, and we all have moments, even now, when feelings of discomfort or confusion emerge mysteriously in our lives—reminding us of those tender days of childhood. For these reasons, I dedicate this book to my two lifelong friends, Stacey Davis and Michael Graham. I’m not sure you even know one another, but together you’re fused as the North Star that has guided my writing in this book. While I regret that neither Stacey nor Michael live nearby, I am so grateful that both offer me an immediate intimacy and a lifelong connection.

I also want to thank all of the media producers whose creative and often courageous work fueled this project. While I appreciate and am fully fascinated by big-budget productions like *The Book of Mormon* and *Big Love*, it is the voices of individuals trying to navigate their way to a new truth that affected me most strongly and offered the clearest clarion call for putting my own truth on the page. In particular, I want to thank Terry Tempest Williams, Judith Freeman, Emily Pearson, Cindi Jones, Tara Westover, and Mar-
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I especially wish to thank Courtney Berger at Duke University Press, who from the very first inkling of this project understood its vision. Courtney, thank you for your insights, your editorial magic, and your always spot-on point of view. Thanks, too, to the excellent editorial team at Duke, particularly Sandra Korn, Liz Smith, and Karen Fisher.

I thank my best guys and my closest family, Jake Waller and Greg Waller. Thanks for making the stars shine and the coffee strong and for so much special time.

Finally, no book on Mormonism would be complete without some attention to Mormon foodways. I do not have recipes for Jell-O molds, homemade root beer, or funeral potatoes, but I do have something better . . . our neighbor Mrs. Osbourne’s fudge cake. It is not for the weak of heart or the calorie conscious, but it does deliver an almost foolproof dessert for even the most challenged of chefs. My favorite part is that the frosting goes on right when
the cake is out of the oven. I’m sure this is a time- and labor-saving device for busy mothers with lots of children, but it’s also a flavor-enhancing breakthrough, since the frosting caramelizes as it cools. I hadn’t really planned to include a recipe in this book. But this morning as I prepared to finish the copyedits on the book and to make my son’s annual birthday cake—nine years old!—it seemed fitting to include this much-loved recipe that I begged off Mrs. Osbourne when I myself was nine. I offer it to the book and to you, my reader, as a sweet token of thanks and appreciation.

Josie Osbourne’s Fudge Cake

Sift together in a large bowl:

- 2 cups sugar
- 2 cups flour

Mix in a saucepan:

- 2 sticks butter
- 4 T cocoa
- 1 cup water

Bring to a boil and pour over flour and sugar. Stir well and then add:

- ½ cup buttermilk
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 2 beaten eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla

Mix well and pour into a greased and powdered-sugared 11” × 16” pan.

Bake at 400 degrees for 20 minutes.

While cake bakes, boil:

- 1 stick butter
- 4–6 T buttermilk
- 3–4 T cocoa

Remove from heat and add:

- 1 box powdered sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 1 cup chopped nuts (optional)

Beat with a spoon and spread over cake while it is still hot.

Mrs. Osbourne’s hints: this cake is better just a bit warmed up, and it will feed a family of 12!
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