

of the self as a privileged observer, separate and in some sense detached from culture's never-ending, always-changing spectacle. It *is* useful, perhaps even crucially important, to be able to occasionally step back and observe one's culture with critical distance—not only as an historian but as a member of any community. But then, with the wisdom and perspective you've gained, put your stainless-steel missionary suit back on and step back into the parade. Shake hands, lock arms, throw candy, eat the street food. Come on, what's the worst thing you could catch?



## Peck's Peak

Steven L. Peck. *Wandering Realities: The Mormonish Short Fiction of Steven L. Peck*. Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2015. 220 pp. Paperback: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-0988323346.

Steven L. Peck. *Evolving Faith: Wanderings of a Mormon Biologist*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2015. 211 pp. Paperback: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-0842529440.

*Reviewed by Michael Austin*

If someone ever asks me what kinds of things Steven Peck writes, the best answer I can give goes like this: the BYU biology professor and raconteur writes primarily in the fields of evolutionary biology, speculative theology, literary fiction, computer modeling, poetry, existential horror, satire, personal essay, tsetse fly reproduction, young-adult literature, human ecology, science fiction, religious allegory, environmentalism, and devotional narrative. You know, that kind of thing.

Given the volume and the scope of Peck's recent writing, we should not be surprised that he published two retrospective volumes in 2015. He is not the sort of writer for whom a single collection would make sense,

and even with two volumes we only get a rough sampling of his work. A complete retrospective will have to wait for the sort of multi-volume collected works projects that usually don't happen until somebody dies or wins a Nobel Prize. Until such a thing happens (and my money is on the Nobel), we will likely have to do with the outstanding-if-not-quite-representative volumes that we have. The two volumes divide imperfectly into two categories: *Wandering Realities: the Mormonish Short Fiction of Steven L. Peck* is made up of fiction that relates to Mormonism and *Evolving Faith: Wanderings of a Mormon Biologist* consists primarily of non-fiction that merges science and theology.

*Wandering Realities* will be the more accessible volume for most readers. It contains both previously published and as-yet-unpublished fiction—mainly short stories, but also two novellas that appeared separately. Just about anybody who has a favorite Peck story will find it here, and those who have yet to encounter Peck's work will find much that is new and surprising. And so much of what Peck writes is surprising. He is a writer who knows how to use all of his tools—boundary-pushing narrative technique, big ideas, ingenious plot twists, and engaging characters—to expand what we mean by both “fiction” and “Mormonism.” Mormon to their core, these stories constantly ask what it means to be a Latter-day Saint in America today or on Mars a thousand years into the future. Peck asks us to consider the many ways that different contexts and environments shape the way Latter-day Saints understand their common religion.

The first part of the book, “Other Worlds,” sets Mormonism in science-fiction contexts, always asking, “what would the Church be like in a different kind of world?”; “how will we baptize non-corporeal machine converts?” (in “Avek, Who Is Distributed”); or “what will the Church do about genetically engineered bodies that make people look like sharks?” (in “Recreated in His Image”). On a deeper level, Peck uses science fiction tropes to try to understand Mormonism's essential nature. By imagining profound changes in Mormonism, he also imagines what

might remain of today's Latter-day Saint identity. For example, though the far-future Mormons in "Rennect" have a radically different biology from today's American Mormons—they live for centuries and their men have the babies—they still weep when they see re-enactments of the handcart pioneers.

These futuristic Mormonisms are anchored by the wonderful, novella-length story, "Let the Mountains Tremble, for Adoniha Has Fallen," set on a future Martian colony where the people have reverted to a feudal society, with Mormonism functioning as the dominant church. In this setting, Peck explores some of the most important issues that face all religious communities during periods of transition and change—issues like obedience, dissent, authority, and loyalty. It is also an engaging adventure story centered around a profound moral dilemma.

The second part of *Wandering Realities*, "This World," features stories set mainly in contemporary Mormon communities. This does not quite make them "contemporary realism," though, as Peck's Mormons do the sorts of things that test the boundaries of what "realism" means. His Mormon bishops, for example, kill barking dogs ("When the Bishop Started Killing Dogs") and lock stake presidents in closets ("The Best Pinewood Derby Ever")—actions within the realm of possible behavior that should probably be considered more allegorical than aspirational. This section also includes Peck's recent AML Award-winning story, "Two-Dog Dose," one of the most touching and shocking pieces of Mormon literature I have ever read.

The one exception to the "Mormons-in-the-Present Time" organizing principle of Part II is "The Gift of the King's Jeweler," which is set in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. This bit of "early Peck" was published as a separate book by Covenant Communications in 2003. It tells the fable-like story of a Babylonian craftsman who becomes convinced that the God of Israel is real and who, guided by his dreams, manufactures a strange-looking instrument that Latter-day Saints will recognize as the Liahona of the Book of Mormon. It is the most devotional piece in

the collection and one that rounds out the perspective of the author—highlighting the devotional core of everything in the volume.

Like *Wandering Realities, Evolving Faith* is divided into two sections—an organizational logic that does not quite capture the real diversity of the volume. The first section consists of peer-reviewed articles in places like *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. These are deeply learned writings situated within a long tradition of scholarly attempts to reconcile the claims of religion with those of science. Part II of this volume consists of shorter pieces—magazine articles, personal essays, and blog posts that treat many of the same issues in somewhat more accessible ways.

As the title promises, there is a lot of wandering in these essays. Peck's puckish meandering takes us in fascinating directions, exploring things like the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the pseudo-scientific pursuits of Alfred Russel Wallace, and the scientific imagination of Joseph Smith. But the wandering is not aimless. Peck has some very concrete points that he wants to make in his essays on science and religion, and the bulk of the essays in Part I shape up nicely into a coherent line of reasoning that, by the end of the book, we can recognize as something like "the big picture."

The big picture (stripped of all of its nuance and complexity) looks something like this: Religion and science are not mutually exclusive ways of knowing, nor are they completely separate magisteria that must be rigidly confined to their own spheres of influence. Science provides very powerful tools for answering certain kinds of questions, some of which have religious dimensions, and scientific methodologies are "not a threat to spirituality or belief in the existence of God" (13). Because all knowledge incorporates subjective assumptions, both religion and science require an element of faith.

While scientific and religious ways of knowing are compatible, they are not identical, and we misuse both when we try to make scientific treatises out of religious texts designed "to connect us subjectively,

consciously, and spiritually to richer truths and meaning” (18). The book of Genesis, for example, was never designed to answer questions about dinosaurs or the age of the earth. When we insist on reading it this way, we end up cheating both religion, by ignoring what the author of the text was really trying to tell us, and science, by setting up unnecessary oppositions between important religious principles and easily testable facts. Latter-day Saints especially have no reason to fear well-established scientific principles like organic evolution—with all its attendant randomness and contingency. Our doctrines both support and are supported by these principles when they are viewed through the lens of our distinctive beliefs about things like embodied deity, exaltation, and universal laws that constrain even God. With dizzying intellectual force, Peck explains how these theological assumptions support an understanding of a universe in which profound complexity—including life, consciousness, and God Himself—can emerge from designs writ deep within the structure of reality.

And that’s just for starters. Along the way, *Evolving Faith* treats us to thoughts and observations that defy easy categorization. The essays in Part II are more personal and confessional than the peer-reviewed articles in Part I, and they tend to treat a wider variety of topics. Several essays discuss Mormon responses to the environment. Another gives a series of personal experiences to illustrate the deep connections among violence, grace, and the atonement. And still another examines the boundaries between sacred and secular space. But the most engaging and personal essay in Part II—and I would argue the most remarkable essay in the entire volume—is “My Madness,” which gives first-hand account of the temporary insanity that Peck experienced after being infected with a parasite during a research trip to Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> This is quite simply the most engaging and enlightening account of the logic of madness that I have ever read.

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2. This essay was first published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 57–69.

Steven L. Peck is one of Mormonism's best living writers, but he is also one of our most formidable and comprehensive intellects. His interests are as wide-ranging as his experiences, which lead to great satisfaction for his readers and, I suspect, great frustration for his publishers and booksellers. In an age when we expect books (and their authors) to conform to genres and categories, Peck gives us fluid intellectual borders and a genre-busting literary style. It is no accident that both collections contain the word "wandering" in the title; no word better describes Peck as a writer or as a thinker. In both his fiction and his non-fiction, he moves through ideas, topics, and styles at a dizzying pace. By their very nature, retrospective collections like *Wandering Realities* and *Evolving Faith* must try to capture the movements of a peripatetic mind. Both do so admirably, and I recommend them enthusiastically and without qualification.



## [A Conversation Begins](#)

Stephen H. Webb and Alonzo L. Gaskill. *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 218 pp. Hardcover: \$27.95. ISBN: 978-0190265922.

*Reviewed by Joseph Gile*

There has never been any official theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic and LDS Churches, but Stephen H. Webb and Alonzo L. Gaskill have opened an unofficial one in *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation*. The key to appreciating their efforts is located in the subtitle—and what a conversation it is! Stephen Webb is the Catholic here and Alonzo Gaskill the Mormon, with the two authors discussing such theological issues as authority, grace, Mary, revelation, ritual,