

community and meaning with them—with them and with God. And it's this exact driving force that results in some of the most beautiful tender moments of the book—his creation of Wineskin, a community coffeeshop/free-spirit church, for example—as well as some of the story's most unfortunate, heartbreaking turns. Through (nearly) it all, Hicks remains the eternal optimist, and seeing the way he manages to resurface and reclaim his place in the community of his making is a testament to his strength and fortitude. This book is his way, I suspect, of drawing yet more of us into his nurturing, freakin' Jesus-inspired community. It sure seems enough to inspire and nurture nearly anyone.

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The Memoir and the Shelf

Heather Gay. *Bad Mormon: A Memoir*. New York: Gallery Books, 2023. 304 pp. Hardback: \$28.99. ISBN: 9781982199531.

Jennette McCurdy. *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022. 320 pp. Hardback: \$27.99. ISBN: 9781982185824.

Reviewed by Adam McLain

The metaphor of the shelf is one of the balms provided to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who are struggling with their faith. Instead of doubting and questioning faith because of the actions of others, the discoveries of history, or the consternation of

doctrine, place those doubts and questions on an imagined shelf. The doubts and questions still exist, but the answers to them can wait. By placing them on the shelf, you are in essence stalling their effect on your faith and prizing your faith over your doubts and questions. After all, all things will be known eventually, so the remedy goes. Why question now and potentially destroy your faith?

The shelf, though, is not always super strong. It's rather flimsy in many cases. The wall supports begin to cave in; the shelf starts to buckle. When someone disassociates or leaves the Church, the shelf breaks. The shelf can only take so much doubt; eventually, its hooks pull out of the imagined wall and all the doubts, fears, and questions spill out. This could happen with a featherweight of doubt or an elephant-sized question. It's personal to each person, but the ex-Mormon narrative centralizes on that moment of shelf collapse.

"When did your shelf collapse?" is a common question on r/exmormon (the Reddit collective for processing a Mormon faith transition). "How did your shelf break?" "What finally did it?" "Was it [insert historical fact, logical inconsistency, policy decision, or personal interaction]?" The shelf serves as a remedy for the faithful Latter-day Saint and as a community builder for the transitional Mormon. But it also highlights one of the core facets of post-Mormon narratives: there must be a reason or a catalyst for the move out of Mormonism.

I mention the metaphor of the shelf at the outset of this review since 2022 and 2023 brought us two post-Mormon narratives: Heather Gay's *Bad Mormon* and Jennette McCurdy's *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. In both memoirs, the authors discuss their Latter-day Saint faith of their youth and then, inevitably it seems, move on from that faith. Both books are written by celebrities and published by large presses, which means they are bringing publicity to the Church—whether for good or ill—but whereas Gay's memoir centers her exodus from Mormonism, McCurdy's Mormonism is peripheral to other events in her life.

The usual post-Mormon narrative techniques are at play in *Bad Mormon*. There are shelves. There are wrestles for the soul of her

personal religion. There is an Enos-like or a Joseph-like struggle to determine her personal relationship with God. There is some mistreatment by Latter-day Saints because of her divorce and choice to leave the Church, along with some comparison between her life in and out of the Church. But, in McCurdy's case, the common post-Mormon narrative tropes aren't part of the narrative. Instead, Mormonism is a veneer or an aesthetic rather than the central facet of existence.

Even though both of these memoirs are written by people inundated with Hollywood light throughout their lives, they reveal new approaches to the post-Mormon narrative. As such, my review highlights the contribution they potentially hold to Mormon culture and literature.



Heather Gay is a conundrum: she's a Mormon, but she's bad at it. She lives and works in Utah, too, surrounded by what she would term good Mormons—people who claim the cultural heritage of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and live its current code of conduct. Gay, on the other hand, claims the cultural heritage but rejects the code of conduct. As seen on *Real Housewives of Salt Lake City* (2020–present), she parties, drinks, and commits any level of what her neighbors might consider debauchery. For her, it's fun. It's her.

Bad Mormon is Gay's manifesto and reckoning. It's a memoir that depicts her childhood and youth in the Church, her departure from the Church, and her final culmination into the bad Mormon she is today. Its manifesto is a narrative of realization and reclamation. Within her marriage and the Church, she found herself stifled and stilted; without her marriage and the Church, she discovers a new vision of herself, one she controls and enacts through her own grit and authority. In essence, her book is about her coming into herself—someone who is not ruled by cultural norms but instead does what she wants to do.

Bad Mormon isn't simply a tale of sordid sin and personal proclivities; it's also a book that reckons with the treatment of women within

the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Gay shows how unfulfilled she was in the Church and how it didn't provide for her as she aged and developed as a human being. Her disassociation from the Church is also a recognition of the labor, pain, and dissonance that occurs in the lives of many women. Gay does not ideate on the specific reasons for this, favoring a general wave toward the entire faith as the reason, but in bringing up this important issue, her book provides a glimpse into how, perhaps, the Church could improve its treatment of women.

Of these two memoirs, *Bad Mormon* is the more traditional post-Mormon narrative. Early in her life, Gay begins to disassociate her fun self and her Church self, experimenting with life during the week but going to Young Women activities in the evening and church on Sunday. Her departure comes as her marriage dissolves; she begins to wonder if staying at home and mothering is the only thing she is good for. She wants to do more: be an entrepreneur, have a social life, engage in the world around her.

However, even as many might use Gay's narrative to attest that most people leave Mormonism because they just "can't handle" the various rules, her reckoning with the treatment of women within the walls of the Church cannot be dismissed. She shows that her exit was a desire to live in a different way, *but it was also because she found no space for herself in the Church except as a mother*. And motherhood was not as fulfilling as she had been taught. A tale of warning, then, echoes from *Bad Mormon*: underneath the partying, underneath the outward strength a businesswoman needs to exude, underneath the reality television character, Gay's life story resonates with the lack of opportunity and fulfillment some women feel in the Church.



Jennette McCurdy has what other people might consider a problem: she's glad her mom's dead. And she has good reason to be glad

about it. Her mom forced her into a Hollywood life (McCurdy starred in the mid-2000s *iCarly*, a hit show on Nickelodeon), which has affected her entire life. She gets called Sam (her *iCarly* character) on the streets, where people mimic her character's obsession with food (Sam is remembered for always carrying around a chicken leg that she would eat on screen). Unknown to many of these fans who call McCurdy out, McCurdy would act out the chicken leg scene and then that night vomit up a meal or purge her body after a binge. McCurdy's memoir is about her life growing up with a controlling mom (throughout her childhood, her mom would shower her and wipe her butt after she pooped), her mistreatment at the hands of Hollywood executives (she was forced into drinking when she was underage), and her fight with mental illness and eating disorders (she fought with bulimia for much of her life).

McCurdy was also raised Mormon, which is where this review will focus.

What's most interesting to me is that McCurdy doesn't blame Mormonism or even factor it into her history as a cause of much of her childhood trauma. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is more aesthetic than emblematic, a church among many rather than the traumatizing centerpiece. Many may read this as not being a part of Mormon literature then, but I would say it becomes even more a part of Mormon literature as we learn from someone who has a history with the Church that did not affect the rest of their life. This is not a trauma-related, leaving-the-Church narrative; McCurdy's Mormonism is simply a part of her past.

This isn't to say that Mormonism didn't affect her life. As a child, McCurdy found refuge within the walls of the Church. It's her reprieve from the troubles that beset her home life. She even goes so far as conflating her obsessive-compulsive disorder with the Holy Ghost, believing that God is prompting her to perform various rituals in order to receive various blessings. When she begins to date, even, the same culture mores around the law of chastity bind her actions; she doesn't

want to have sex with her intimate partners if they are just dating. Even as Mormonism has an effect on her life, though, it isn't traumatic or negative when she stops attending; in fact, McCurdy doesn't really mention it. Mormonism fades into her background, a part of her childhood, never the reason for the problems she works through.

I find importance in McCurdy's text when it comes to Mormon culture and literature because it offers an alternative to the binary narrative of proactively in or antagonistically out, which so much determination of Mormonism swirls around. So many autobiographies of Mormonism are about the trials of staying in or the harrowing experience of leaving, but for McCurdy, there isn't a great narrative arc about her relationship to Mormonism. It was a part of her childhood and then, when things were going well, her family slowly slid away from it, making it a part of the past without an immediate effect on her present or future.

McCurdy defies the usual post-Mormon narrative, whether told by active Latter-day Saints or ex-Mormons, and provides an alternative story to those who leave the Church: they just leave, and leaving doesn't have a large effect on the rest of their life.¹ This is what makes McCurdy's memoir an important addition to Mormon literature, especially literature concerning the post-Mormon experience: the Church is not, nor should it always be, at the center of all post-Mormon narratives.



Bad Mormon and *I'm Glad My Mom Died* are not paramount Mormon culture. Indeed, even though *Bad Mormon* is written about Gay's transformation into a bad Mormon, neither book is written *to* or *for* Latter-day Saints. In fact, *Bad Mormon* goes so far as to even depict the Latter-day Saint temple ordinances in detail, something many

1. Jana Riess comes to a similar conclusion in her own review of McCurdy's work: "What 'I'm Glad My Mom Died' Teaches Us About Ex-Mormons," *Flunking Sainthood*, Religious News Service, May 30, 2023.

Latter-day Saint readers might find repulsive. The authors of these books aim to share their lives with a wider audience. As such, their narrative choices stray toward general audience—but in those choices we can learn about the relationship between Mormonism and broader culture. After all, Mormonism was important enough to a child actress and a reality television star that both wrote extensively in their books about it.

With these two memoirs, published by large publishing houses and receiving national publicity, we can see that the arguments around shelves are insular to Mormonism. Someone's faith journey into or out of Mormonism is not always a dramatic interplay of dark nights of the soul or broken shelves. And it isn't always about being in or being out, being fully present or being fully inactive. For McCurdy, the Church is aesthetic, a childhood memory of a place that once provided refuge for a struggling child; for Gay, the Church is just another patriarchal institution, one in which she found herself growing out of and needing to conquer and escape to realize her potential. These memoirs—especially McCurdy's—enlarge the narratives of post-Mormon literature in a way that decenters the Church and recenters individual, complex experiences.

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