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WAY BELOW THE ANGELS

the pretty clearly troubled but
not even close to tragic confessions
of a real live Mormon missionary



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When Craig Harline set off on his two-year Mormon mission to Belgium in the 1970s, he had big dreams of doing miracles, converting the masses, and coming home a hero. What he found instead was a lot of rain and cold, one-sentence conversations with irritated people, and silly squabbles with fellow missionaries.

From being kicked -- literally -- out of someone's home to getting into arguments about what God *really* wanted from Donny Osmond, Harline faced a range of experiences that nothing, including his own missionary training, had prepared him for. He also found a wealth of friendships with fellow Mormons as well as unconverted locals and, along the way, gained insights that would shape the rest of his life.

Part religious history, part coming-of-age story, part witty spiritual memoir, this book takes readers beyond the stereotypical white shirts and name tags to reveal just how unpredictable, funny, and poignant the missionary life can be.

Way Below the Angels: The Pretty Clearly Troubled But Not Even Close to Tragic Confessions of a Real Live Mormon Missionary Details

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Chad says

Harline is able to capture the essence of an LDS mission-- and not the collection of whitewashed stories constructed into a glorious narrative of success that is often told at homecoming talks. This book is faith-promoting, but it also isn't the typical stories you would expect in a missionary memoir. I liked how the author of "Flunking Sainthood" summarized it on the back of the book:

"How could a memoir that primarily deals with religion and rejection be so flippin' hilarious? Craig Harline's experiences as a Mormon missionary in Belgium in the mid-1970s are ingeniously funny, but they also point to important issues — how religious people deal with apparent failure and navigate grown-up faith after childish certainties have proven inadequate."

The author, Harline, tells the story from getting his mission call, all the way to re-visiting his beloved Belgium after he's been home for many years. I served my mission in Germany in 2009, and I found myself nodding over and over again at many of his narratives-- I too had a clash with the mission expectation to skip dinner to be more effective. I too saw missionaries who even thought of walking fast as a sign of moral superiority.

Harline uses some repeated vocabulary throughout his book that to me helps reveal some of the folly we engaged with in this culture within a culture. He calls missionaries "local businessman" because of how they must appear to outsiders, and the way that the Church wants missionaries to appear professional. He uses the phrase Success! to point out how the sales techniques and key indicators aspects all are geared toward this idea of accomplishment that never seems to work out, and can make you depressed if you don't work out some compromise with yourself. He uses the phrase bold-type to refer to missionaries who are willing to go the extra mile-- but not necessarily for noble causes, and that kind of make you chuckle (I'll have the spirit with me more and get more baptisms if I only read my letters on P-day!). He uses the acronym GMIW (Greatest Missionary in the World) to refer to the entire successful missionary narrative that is embedded within Mormon culture.

In particular, I loved to learn with the author as he came to many important spiritual realizations along the way. There are several epiphanies in the book that are just beautiful. I have learned some of the same lessons, but for me, I came to many of the realizations after my mission. Here's one (sorry for the spoilers):

"It was a total shock to me, realizing that -- a shock on the level of Peter's when God told him that Gentiles weren't unclean after all, or of people when they saw Jesus touching beggars and unwanted children and sinners and lepers. I not only was shocked to feel goodness that big, but I especially was shocked to feel it in a place so far away among a bunch of strangers speaking a strange language and almost all belonging to the great and abominable church of the devil. I'd have bet-my-life supposed instead that I was there enlightening and saving them, but now it looked like they were enlightening and saving me, and maybe even causing me to go a little native."

Thank you! Thank you so much for capturing this!

This book is filled with wisdom. It makes Mormon missionaries seem a little more human. It reminds you that success isn't about numbers-- or even about success. It's about people. Harline is able to capture something holy here, and I felt closer to God and my fellow man by reading his book. I want to be able to love more deeply and fully.

William says

Rarely has so much been badly written about so little.

Susan Emmet says

First I was bothered by style. Then, early on, by substance. Then I began laughing and linking up with Harline's memoir.

Being a person of mixed religious heritage, but certainly one prone to evangelical frenzy as a teenager, I sure can relate to "being told" how to believe - and rejecting that belief, but not totally. During my religious quest, I got a copy of The Book of Mormon at the NY World's Fair and spoke at some length with those who offered it to me. I don't remember whether it was Discussion C, D ...or J. I tried to read it, but didn't make it through. Since that time (several decades ago), I have come to view Mormon beliefs as sketchy and bridling. And yet I know Mormon folk here in Maine who are pretty openminded.

So I thought I should read Harline.

Impressive how well he remembers and sees his youthful self, full of himself and his wish to be the Ultimate Missionary. And so wonderful to follow him in and out of bike paths, and homes, and crappy apartments and food, and to see, by the end of his two-year mission, how he's grown and found people throughout Belgium who became friends, not converts.

This memoir offers so much hope for idealism tempered by growth and knowledge and of living a life dominated by the clock and charts - and discovering that timeless openings to possibility can grow in many different kinds of rabbit holes.

To learn humility and openmindedness. To learn to make waves, even wee ones. To learn that the world is full of all different kinds of people and beliefs and cultivating that garden is the finest idea. To learn that being way below the angels is an okay place to be.

Exponent II says

While it isn't a woman's story, I still feel that it is worth reviewing here, in this women's story space for two reasons. 1) The author, Craig Harline, does a fairly good job pointing out when women's stories, voices, and presence are forgotten.

One example of this is when his Salt Lake Mission Home President tells a mixed group of Elders and Sisters that they are to dress like "local businessmen." Another is when his going-Belgium group was moved to the Rexburg, Idaho LTM, and they held a nightly devotional with the older going-Belgium missionaries, that fully excluded the Sisters because it was in an Elder's dorm room. The saddest examples took place in Belgium. The first question they asked women who answered the door was if they could speak to their husband. Not because they weren't allowed to speak to women, but because they were taught that they

should focus on the man. A woman named Lieve demanded focus, because she had a dream and a wish to be baptized. She also had a husband who did not share that dream or wish. He was required to sign a permission slip, which he did. But then he took it back. Lieve learned that if her husband had the dream and wish, her signature would not be needed...

To read this entire review, please visit the Exponent blog at <http://www.the-exponent.com/a-book-re...>

David Harris says

I appreciate this author's efforts to avoid the temptation to treat the experience of a mission euphemistically. It's understandable that people in the business of preaching for the purpose of gathering converts would want to cast that work in as positive a light as possible. But Mr. Harline sees honesty and objective truth as a higher good, and that makes for a very useful contribution.

I was a bit put off by the author's writing style at first. I don't really go in for clever turns of phrase and silly acronyms like VOM for vintage old man or POL for precious old ladies. Also, the never ending repetition of the phrase "local businessmen" to refer to missionaries got old really fast. Yes, it's odd that teenagers called to preach the gospel are required to dress up in suits and ties to present themselves to the world. And, yes, it's kind of jarring when you encounter Wall Street-styled executives on the street for the first time and are tempted to think they are Mormon missionaries. But that phrase got old really fast.

Another thing that put me off was the author's emphasis on the desire to be a leader, ie. aspiring to the position of district leader, zone leader or the even loftier position of assistant to the president. But I liked that he evolved away from that crass way of thinking as he progressed through his mission. And, again, I appreciated the honesty in his portrayal of his thought processes at various points in his mission.

The last few chapters of the book are the most satisfying. Harline finally comes to terms with the fact that he will not only not reach his goal of 84 baptisms but may not end up making even one real convert before he finishes his mission and goes home. His perspective about what he is doing in Belgium begins to change. He talks about "going native" and actually admits that, in many real ways, the people of Belgium ultimately influenced his intellectual development much more than he did theirs. He befriends pastors and priests and talks of the inspirational meetings he attends in Catholic and Protestant churches. He makes lifelong friends during these latter months of his mission as he learns to value the art of conversation for its own sake and the give and take of true friendships. And many of these friendships extend for years beyond his return from the mission.

For an alternate view of missionary life in Belgium in the mid- to late 20th century, I highly recommend Levi Peterson's short story "The Gift", which can be found in the short-story collection *Greening Wheat*. (That book is long out of print but can still be found in used editions.) The story is a mix of faith, ecumenical explorations, illicit love and interdenominational tolerance, and I believe it represents the pinnacle of Mormon literature... So far.

Rachel says

I didn't get to read as closely as I would have liked when it was assigned for my History 390 class, and it was

a very fun, thoughtful read filled with lots of historical jokes, which I appreciated. I recommend it to anyone who has served a mission, as I imagine it would take on a new level of meaning.

Dorothy says

I am not Mormon, but have had a lot of contact with Mormons living in Arizona and Utah. I am always taken aback by the belief that if you are not Mormon, you will not be allowed in heaven. So begins the drama of becoming a missionary at the age of 19 to try to convert as many people as you can during your 2 year assignment. First, of all it is pretty much established that the adolescent's brain does not mature until 25-26 years old. The areas last to develop are the judgment and decision-making centers. Coming from very sheltered family backgrounds, which prevent the young men and women from experiencing the world, particularly puts them into a one down position. I felt a lot of resentment towards the Catholic Church being expressed throughout this book. Their egocentrism and thought of grandiosity as well as an unhealthy competitiveness. There was a lot of pettiness. The missionaries were not treated as individuals, but as worker bees, sent out to get the job done on a very long daily schedule. It appeared that the food supplies were inadequate for feeding the numbers housed and meals were not necessarily healthy. There are several instances where the author believes he has received a message from God, such as, "just be yourself", but then he ignores the message and returns to his previous ways. He speaks of mystical experiences in the fields of Belgium, that I would simply attribute to making a deep connection with nature, which happens frequently if you are where you can see the world's natural beauty. I also found the some of repetition of letters to refer to precious old lady, etc to be annoying. I found some redemption in the final chapters where he drops is memorized discussion passes in order to just go out and talk to the people and try to find common grounds without the religious preaching to be much kinder and it wasn't immediately rejected. I know many Mormon young men who weren't able to complete the LMT Training or returned home early or during their missions who came home with terrible shame and guilt, which severely impacted the rest of their lives. When returning missionaries are encouraged to marry at 21, when they haven't completed their career studies and begin producing children it places an even heavier burden on these young men and women. I am giving it a low rating, not because the book was badly written, but because I think the subject matter is appalling.

Kate says

Anybody who has ever struggled through fundie teenager faith angst, will TOTALLY relate to the hilariously over-devout, egoistic struggles of young Mormon missionary Craig as he wends his way through his two-year mission adventure to evilly Catholic Belgium, where the locals are, um, somewhat less than enthusiastic about the LDS message.

I'm not a Mormon, but I remember the days of ridiculous do-or-die teen evangelicalism when I was a kid. This book is SoOOoooOOo Funny for anyone who's been there. The sweet thing about "Way Below the Angels" is that the author grows up in his faith--he puts away truly childish things, and becomes an honest practitioner of his faith, rather than an earnest, though misguided, teen parrot.

I was laughing out loud through many pages of this book. He is an excellent comedic writer, especially as he gently mocks "deep" theological conversations of 19-to-25 year olds, and the missionaries' desperate attempts at relevance as they attempt to "proselyte." And he is probably at his best when he writes out Flemish syntax in English. Just hilarious. I really enjoyed it.

Samuel Brown says

My favorite Mormon mission memoir by far, this book was a lovely, nourishing way to spend a Sunday afternoon. Captured many elements of missionary experience from the perspective of a believing future academic. I agree with Harline that honest and soul-searching description of religious experience of this type is most likely to further religious understanding across confessional or denominational boundaries. I would recommend this book for an interested outsider with a reasonable amount of time who is curious about how Mormon missions work. For insiders, I think this wonderful book would be most useful for someone hoping to process her own mission experience in retrospect.

On a personal level, I enjoyed remembering my own complex mission experience in the early 1990s and recognizing Harline's archetypal nightmare of being called back on a mission as one I've dreamed many times. I particularly loved the image of an intrepid band of missionaries trudging through snowy fields in rural Belgium delivering a Christmas pastry to the tiny house of a stranger. I've been haunted too by the divine presence in a failing light spreading over untrammeled snow far from the frantic lights and noises of urban life.

Steven Peck says

This was absolutely one of my favorite books this year. I think that Harline captures better than any writer I've come across the universal experience (or at least that of MY experience) of heading into life full of expectations that we will be the hero of a grand and glorious adventure who through hardship and battle will in the end triumph, only to find that as we move through life things are a little different. A lot different! There is a series of paintings by Thomas Cole hanging in the National Gallery in Washington called 'The Voyage of Life' the one called 'Youth' shows a young man in a boat heading for a magnificent palace hanging in the air, he is tall and proud and his face is lit by firm resolve--one hand is on the rudder and the other raised in a kind of triumph. In the next panel, he is in the rapids, out of control, and on his knees praying just to survive. Harline's book follows this transition in the life of a Mormon missionary with humor (abundant), and insight into the human condition. I cannot stop thinking about it. His story pulled me into my youth and my own expectations of how life would turn out and how those expectations have changed since having moved fairly far down life's path.

This is not just a book for Mormons. While that provides the context, the story is really about growing up. His experiences in Belgium as a naïve young man from California are hilarious and frankly several times I could not help but laugh out loud. Harline's writing style is, well . . . I can't think of another work for it, fun. It is fun to read.

The book also gives a chance to get a deep picture of it is like to be a Mormon missionary. Harline pulls no punches and presents a Mormon mission in depth and sympathetically, but without trying to gloss over its strange peculiarities and absurdities. This is not a polished projection of a Mormonism without flaws, but nuanced depictions of missionary life as it is lived.

Simply put this a book is delightful, humorous, insightful, well written, and informative. And it's fun—or did

I say that already?

Carson says

"This! This!" Absolutely fabulous. It spoke to my soul.

I swear the author and I lived in the same body for two years with the same thoughts, experiences, challenges, epiphanies, visions of grandeur, and subsequent dreams of being back on a mission.

Chapter 8, "Five-Sense Gray," may be one of the most...most awful things I've ever read. Not awful because it was bad, but awful because of how it made me feel. It took me back to those cold days in the lowlands (I served in Netherlands and Belgium in 95 to 97) that were filled with rejection. I think I had buried those feelings for about 20 years. You brought them back, but it was good to sit with them again (probably because I know I'll never have to do them again).

Thank you for writing my memoir of those two years. You've saved me a lot of time. Now I just need to know when to give this book to my sons and daughter to read. Just before a mission? During? After? I want them to go :-)

But I want my kids to know, especially if they serve in a hard mission, like in Western Europe, that they can't beat themselves up about how little "Success!" they are seeing.

I love the use of the Dutch sentence structure. Seeing that you used that makes me think that you wrote this book more for you than for anyone else. If your target audience is missionaries that served in Dutch speaking missions, your publisher wouldn't have been very excited about the dozens of books you might sell.

Anyway, thank you Craig Harline deeply for this book. I keep telling my wife how amazing it is to read it and re-live those remarkable two years --remarkably hard, yet something one can only live "om" to know.

The author's prescriptions at the end for better missionary work are excellent.

Sharon says

Absolutely FANTASTIC.

Reading this book felt like reading a story about my own life. From the very first scene in De Brouckere Square to the very last page. I can't even begin to explain how much healing and validation and understanding this book gave me. I'm not good enough with words to express my gratitude to this man for re-living his mission like this, and sharing it, so that the rest of us with a similar experience could finally find some peace.

Y'all should read this. 10/5

Cynthia says

I read this book in just a couple days because it was that good. 80% of the time I was silently chuckling while my family looked at me like I had lost my marbles and the other 20% I was reading and re-reading his words because of his personal insights, trying to wipe away my tears so that again my kids wouldn't be like "what's wrong with mom?". The perfect combo of pathos and humor. There's something beautiful about realizing that people are really the same everywhere and simply loving them is always the answer, as the author learned at the age of 20.

What a great "coming of age" story. The author painted a very candid picture of Mormon missionary work. My husband read this book before I did so it was fun to ask him "Holy crud is this true?" as my husband served a mission in the Antwerp Belgium mission (1990-2) as well. I think I understand my husband's mission experience just a little more now. Empathy is always a good thing.

Holly says

Tedious to the point of being unreadable. Character development and narrative are sacrificed in order to spend pages and pages and pages on minute explanations--of Mormon beliefs, of missionary practices, even of the shorthand used by missionaries in Belgium in the 1970s. It's not just that the explanations are rendered in minute and excruciating detail, it's that the things being explained are trivial. Seriously: thirteen pages are devoted to explaining a missionary's schedule, which is printed in the missionary handbook in a form something like this:

6:30 a.m. Arise
7 a.m. Companionship Study Class
8:00 a.m. Breakfast
8:30 a.m. Personal Study
9:30 a.m. Proselyte
12 noon Lunch
1 p.m. Proselyte
5 p.m. Dinner
6 p.m. Proselyte
9:30 p.m. End proselyting—plan tomorrow's activities
10:30 p.m. Retire—this is a must

I also loathed the tone, which you can get a taste of from the title: smugly certain that its overblown attempts at cleverness are succeeding. The women who let the narrator visit are called POLs, for "precious old ladies." Their male counterparts are VOMs, or "vintage old men." It's not just the grasping for cuteness--it's the condescension, which the author seems to think isn't really condescension because it's all dressed up in cuteness.

Especially annoying is that almost everything anyone ever says is rendered in summarized Flemish syntax, not as dialogue spoken by a character. I get wanting to explain how different Flemish is, but dialogue isn't

just "flavor," it's also one of the primary ways of creating a vivid scene with some dramatic tension. There are probably no more than two dozen lines *at most* of actual dialogue. EVERYTHING IS SUMMARIZED. Even the huge "crisis" hinted at in the prologue is summarized, and told to the reader at a double distance: the narrator is summarizing how he explained a source of unhappiness to his zone leader, but he's not telling the reader: no, he's offering a long, self-conscious, juvenile prayer, and the reader is just allowed to eavesdrop on this conversation with an invisible someone. It has absolutely no dramatic tension, and therefore very little emotional force. To use a standard way of discussing a classic mistake and novice writers, it's *all telling* and *no showing*, and it's so *painful* and *boring*!

Plus the whole book is about nothing happening. It's about how when Elder Harline asks someone to be baptized, they chuckle and say they don't want to change churches, but he's welcome to come back for biscuits and seltzer. It's about how when he spends hours on trains and trudging through snow to take a pastry to someone, they're not home. It's about how he doesn't get along with his domineering companion but never musters the courage to talk it out.

But rather than deal with the devastating psychological consequences of being told that wasting two crucial years in your youth on impossible tasks is the most important thing you can do, Harline provides a steady stream of cloying, clueless cuteness.

Plus: more than one bus is regularly written as *busses*, even though it should be *buses*. *Busses* is the plural of *buss*, which is a colloquial term for kiss.

It's a testament to the crappiness of Mormon literature that this amateurish dreck is considered good.

Tracy says

This is a delightful book that I want everyone I know, especially the RM's and prospective missionary in my home to read and discuss with me.

I laughed out loud a lot, and enjoyed the poignant parts.

Upon telling his Bishop about his call to Belgium. The Bishop says "You just need to love the people." and he thinks "That's ridiculous. I'm not going there to love them, I'm going there to fight Catholics."

The way he writes about being an ego-centric teen and trying to cover it up with being spiritual is great throughout the book.

He can go on a little long in making a point, but just get through it and don't let that make you quit reading.
