

anything, it is that the line between one's life and one's culture is thin, if it exists at all. And a writer's best hope for authenticity is to not only embrace one's literary tradition but one's cultural tradition as well.



## Quiet Stories, Complex Emotion

Darin Cozzens. *The Last Blessing of J. Guyman LeGrand and Other Stories*. Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2016. 202 pp. Paper: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-0-9883233-9-1.

*Reviewed by Braden Hepner*

Darin Cozzens's second collection, *The Last Blessing of J. Guyman LeGrand and Other Stories*, contains Emus and Mormon spinsters, ill-fated wedding ceremonies and wheelchair races in the dementia ward, washtub nostalgia and the ambiguous values of patriarchal blessings. Beneath these elements of the quietly bizarre run themes of desire, fate, and, most prominently, forgiveness.

From the wind-swept lands of Wyoming and the Intermountain West, these stories feature lives of struggle and need. Cozzens plumbs the human experience for meaning and dredges it up in double handfuls. This is our world, an existence within which "it is a rare case that doesn't involve one human wronging another" (128), where chastity is a cakewalk compared to "loving your enemy" (133), where "excitement is half fear" (22), "love is a fearful thing" (22), and the ubiquity of injustice is poignant and heartbreaking. In the face of this travail, Cozzens's characters trudge on because, as one of them observes, the only "human antidote" is love (160).

In "The Washtub," a bidding war erupts at a farm liquidation sale over a washtub, with human intrigue driving the paddles rather than

common acquisitiveness. The emotions of the characters—among them a man whose running suit matches his alma mater’s team colors, and whose chewing gum matches his running suit—are nuanced and layered, their meaning half-buried and often as unfathomable as that in our own lives. The washtub—a relic from days before modern plumbing, early site of children’s baths, late holder of warble repellent—means something different to all interested parties, each of whom see it as an aid to personal agenda, be it to assuage the hunger of nostalgia, to cover a flagrant professional error, or to spark a potential romance.

Cozzens’s focus is on the intricacies of life—often Mormon life—in the contemporary West. Lives of single-wide trailers and mule dung, of the unrelenting forces of modern commerce and ordinary people working to subsist and find some measure of contentedness among hardship and unjust fate. His fiction is technically sound, and despite being compromised occasionally by didacticism and moralizing, it gets at the heartbeat of human existence, giving quotidian sweat and grit their deserved purposes. The conflict at its core is subtle and deep. Common lives hold profound meaning.

Cozzens opts for substance over sensation, for quiet subtly and depth over familiar mythologizing. Throughout many of his stories he chooses to limit his audience to those familiar with Mormon culture and theology—a world of patriarchal blessings and Elders Quorums. Readers unfamiliar with these elements will, nevertheless, find the characters and their plights moving. The Mormon experience is, after all, a human experience.

In that regard, Cozzens is tuned-in to the complexities of orthodox belief, the beauty of faith, and the perils of Mormon culture. He presents Mormon life as it is for so many—a life of contented, if not perfect, worship through behavior. Yet he is perspicacious enough not to hold all punches, and currents of light chiding flow throughout. Ever, the protagonist of the title story, “The Last Blessing of J. Guyman LeGrand,” gets the willies when he is dragged to a recruitment meeting

led by “four or five overgroomed ex-missionaries in three-piece suits and tasseled dress shoes, bearing testimony of attic insulation in front of a hotel conference room full of penniless college guys” (179). Ordinary life for these characters is full of “contradictions and absurdities over which [they had] no control” (133).

In “Chariot Race in D-Wing,” a story about “*how to forgive*” that draws parallel wisdom from the film *Ben-Hur*, Ed Beverly is a Mormon English professor at a Presbyterian school. Wrongfully fired and haunted by decades of animosity toward Chairman Grubgeld, he fancies he hears the old man’s ghostly crutch tap coming from the dementia wing of a hospital he is visiting. He hasn’t heard it, but he is drawn anyway through the doors, where he finds his old nemesis pushing chess pieces around a Monopoly board. In the process of reckoning with his grudge, he realizes that his “pity was more dodge than compassion” (134) and that he has fallen short of his own beliefs. “[He] lost his job not because [he] was Mormon, but because [he] wasn’t Mormon enough” (134). It is sentiments like this one that keep these stories from mere faith-promotion, or a pandering to any approved sentiment, pushing them instead toward deep human drama.

Even so, Cozzens is at his best in stories like “Spinsters and Their Dreams,” where Ivy Teague draws a succinct and eloquent summation of her life as her brother lies on his deathbed. Ivy holds an aged grudge of her own, and in her worldview curiosity is often confused with “cruelty” and “destructiveness” (70). In “Liquidating Earl Haws,” banker Frett Maxwell Jr. is given the distasteful task of informing Earl and Ruby Haws that their livelihood of farming is over, that the bank is seizing their meager assets. “To plant anything was to hazard the harvest, and no one was exempt,” Frett Jr. muses twice (151, 166). It is snowing and cold as he approaches the Haws farm, and there is no answer at the door. He finds the old couple in the barn coaxing a heifer through her first birth. “For one last sweet moment, Frett Maxwell Jr. delay[s] announcing himself” and watches as Ruby kisses her husband on the cheek (166). In a moment of metaphorical

beauty amid a grievous context, the former heifer noses her newborn calf, and the calf “[flaps] its ears and [makes] a start” (166). The best story of the bunch, “Liquidating Earl Haws” deftly avoids moralizing and ends on an affecting note of poetry and non-resolution.

Readers looking for quiet stories of complex emotion and human struggle will enjoy this carefully-wrought collection. Cozzens deserves to be read, and this collection is a welcome addition to contemporary Mormon fiction.



## Past Second Base

Joey Franklin. *My Wife Wants You to Know I'm Happily Married*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.  
194 pp. Paper: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-0-8032-7844-8.

*Reviewed by Eric Freeze*

At the last Association of Writers & Writing Programs conference, a famed historical literary figure stood for pictures and selfies next to booths piled high with books. He was bald except for a tuft of hair in the middle of his head and a dark goatee and handlebar mustache. In a more mainstream context, people would probably think he was Shakespeare with his brocade doublet and puffy sleeves. But most images of Shakespeare emphasize his shoulder-length bob. And Shakespeare wore a stiff collar, not a pleated ruff. Maybe the actor just didn't have the hair? And why the goatee? But anyone who has studied the history of the essay knew immediately when they saw him: it was Michel de Montaigne.

Conference-goers would soon find that the actor who so closely resembles the French essayist (minus the stick-on facial hair and Renaissance garb) was actually Joey Franklin, a professor of creative writing at