



Letters to a Young Mormon

Adam S. Miller

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"This book is composed as a series of letters. The letters are meant for a young Mormon who is familiar with Mormon life but green in their faith....Here, my work is personal. I mean only to address the real beauty and real costs of trying to live a Mormon life. And I hope only to Show something of what it means to live in a way that refuses to abandon either life or Mormonism."

Letters to a Young Mormon Details

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From Reader Review Letters to a Young Mormon for online ebook

Loyd says

If Nietzsche were a Mormon (and less bombastic), he would be Adam Miller. In this book, Miller departs from the norm of books for LDS youth that typically outlines every step, every act, and every way of doing that a good Mormon teen ought to follow. Instead, Miller encourages the reader to figure this out for themselves, recognizing that the Gospel is not a set of rules (a road map, as he puts it) but is instead a way of being that one must discover and draw out for themselves.

Eleanor says

So much wisdom in such a little book. For me it seemed to take gospel sayings and principles I've heard my whole life and pump them with actual truth. I had to keep rewinding as not to gloss over ideas the same way I've glossed over them at church over the years. Read slowly. I wish every Mormon (especially myself) actually knew these things all of the time, or knew they knew them.

Brad Masters says

It seems like a cop out to say that my favorite book on Mormonism took me two hours to read. These things should take weeks of hard labor, burning midnight oil, right?

Not this one. And everyone should read it, young or old, Mormon or not.

Adam Miller's most recent book, published with the newly revamped Neal A. Maxwell Institute, is a series of short letters addressed to "S," whom he tells us is "a young Mormon who is familiar with Mormon life but green in their faith." These letters cover topics including Agency, Work, Sin, Faith, Scripture, Prayer, History, Science, Hunger, Sex, Temples, and Eternal Life.

While the book is addressed to Young Mormons, I am convinced that it is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in how Mormons approach life and living. For example, to those who believe faith is about wishful thinking or willful blindness to reality, Miller responds: "Faith doesn't wish difficult things away. It invites them in, breaks bread with them, and washes their feet. . . . Faith isn't a way of going to sleep. It's the work of waking up." Or to critics who find ardently (and myopically) claim that science and religion are incompatible, Miller outlines a helpful paradigm for viewing science as just another form of God's revelation:

"As we watch from our sofas, the world's secrets are getting shouted from the rooftops, its fossils are being turned out of their graves, its cored icebergs are testifying to God's long-suffering care . . . God is prying open our eyes and ears. Who has ears to hear? God speaks both scripture and science. Listen for his voice." These treasures and more fill the pages of this book.

But it would be a grave mistake to assume that this book is just a Jon-Bytheway-only-for-teens type of read. The prose is highly readable, if deceptively deep. And to be frank, some of the profoundest insights seem

almost beyond the reach of young people. Consider, for example, Miller's discussion of history. Anyone who engages Mormonism knows that sometimes digging through Church history can be difficult: after all, most know that Mormons used to practice polygamy. Miller offers brilliant, sage advice for all questioners, Mormon and not, as they approach historical difficulties:

"While it is scary to think that God works through weak, partial, and limited mortals like us, the only thing scarier would be thinking that he doesn't. . . . Our prophets and leaders will not turn out to be who you want them to be. They are not, in fact, even what God might want them to be. But they are real and God really can, nonetheless, work through their imperfections to extend his perfect love."

Now, this passage will surely resonate with anyone who has had enough life experience to know how imperfect humans can be. After all, Thomas Jefferson, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr. all had serious flaws, despite their huge accomplishments. My only concern is that some young readers may not see the value in this right away. I just hope they re-read it in a couple years.

I can't remember the last time I was this spiritually enriched after reading a book. Perhaps it was the Givens' *The God Who Weeps*. Perhaps it was the Book of Mormon in the last few months of my mission. All I know is that, Mormon or not, everyone with some interest in Mormonism should read this book.

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Here are a few quotes that I underlined:

"Work, chained to its outcome, is misery. Do what you can, do it better than you're able, and let things happen as they may. The action, not its fruit, is your business. The outcome is not your concern. If God is going to show himself to you in the work that you shoulder, he will only do so if you've stopped craving an approving audience and, instead, work out your own salvation."

"Faith is more like being faithful to your husband or wife than it is like believing in magic. Fidelity is key. You may fall in love with someone because of how well they complement your story, but you'll prove yourself faithful to them only when you care more for the flawed, difficult, and unplotted life you end up sharing with them. Faith isn't the opposite of knowledge. Rather, like love, faith perfects knowledge by practicing fidelity to it."

"When God knocks, don't creep up to the door and look through the peephole to see if he looks like you thought he would. Rush to the door and throw it open."

"We can't afford to play games whitewashing Brigham Young or Homo erectus."

"Let God grow in you. Hear his voice in your need. Let Jesus resurrect you right now, in this life, even before you're done dying. Let him put your spirit back in your hungry body."

"Chastity is not something you are born with and then break or lose, it is something that is made. It is something that must, with years of patient and compassionate effort, be cultivated and grown and gathered and sealed."

"Even when you feel you've done wrong, your job is still the same: practice caring for your life as it's actually given rather than fretting guiltily over how you imagine it should be. Shame and fear will not help you here. Satan, not Jesus, is the accuser."

“The temple is strange. It does not belong to this world. The temple is a door and, if you pass through it, you will arrive someplace you’ve never been. The aim of the temple is to initiate you into the mysteries of the kingdom and before you can solve those mysteries you must encounter them as just that: unsolved mysteries.”

Ramona says

5 stars and more. This little wisp of a book is one of the most beautiful expressions of the gospel I have read. It is simple, but surprisingly mysterious and deep. It is full of truths, but explains them in ways that coat your thoughts and leave you pondering..... "do I live what I believe?"

Please note, there are two editions, and you want the second edition, it contains more letters and ideas that can't be missed. It is hard to explain why this book moved me so deeply. It was as if what I wanted to express about what I believe in this sometimes chaotic world and why I continually choose religion (yes, it is a conscious choice, not a blind follow) was understood by a beautiful writer, recorded in words and handed to me tied up in a bow. This book was a gift.

Take note;

"Working, you will find that you are not your own and that God is at work in you. You will find that God, in both rough and subtle ways, is working in and through you to do things you can't do and create things you don't entirely understand...." (Yes. This. Letting God live in you and accomplish His cause.)

On chastity- a hard subject to approach with beauty;

"Chastity is not a kind of perfection.....Chastity is a habit built over time by way of good choices. It is a power that gathers strength from consistently practicing care and discipline."

On sin;

"Jesus doesn't want you to feel ashamed, he wants you to be responsible. Your stories aren't the truth, life is. And only the truth can set you free." I need to wake every day remembering that.

I literally just finished this book, and I am already hungry to read it again. I want to buy hundreds of copies and give them to friends who believe as I do, I want us all to hide away in a still space and think about these words. Think about the process that being a believer in God is and the sanctifying that happens when you give what you can of your life to Him. Really, this book is a type of philosophical celebration of the gospel. Perhaps not the type of book that everyone will love, as it requires a lot of reflection and isn't just something you flip through, but for me, for the kind of person I want to be and for the explanation of why religion is part of my life, it was completely on point. I would give it 10 stars if I could. Well done, Adam Miller.

Rachel says

There were some profoundly beautiful sentiments that I appreciated, but it may have been a bit overhyped for me.

Breck says

This is one of the best books I've read in a while and highly recommend. It's only 80 or so pages. Each "letter" is a Gospel topic address to his children about his experiences and what he's come to learn over the years. The topics are all familiar but presented in an fresh, original way. Miller's perspective is unlike anything I've ever read before; but not a lot unlike a Terry L Givens, Bruce C. Hafen, or C.S. Lewis. While devout, Miller isn't afraid to take on the challenges of suffering, faith, science, church history, and other such topics in his letters. But his message is one of inspiration and belief.

The best I can do to convey the power of his ideas and writing is with a favorite quote:

"You must bare wholeheartedly the fact that the work of living your life can't be done by anyone else. This is basic Mormonism. You are an agent loose in the world, and as Paul puts it, you must 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling". You'll be surprised how true this is. From the near side of trying, it may look like things have been pretty well mapped out for you. Just stick to the plan. Memorize your Articles of Faith, get your merit badges signed off, complete your Personal Progress, get good grades, go on a mission, go to the temple, get married, etc. There may be a few details here and there to handle, but nothing major. You've got a map, you just have to follow it.

But once you get to work you'll be unnerved by the distance between the neat map in your hand and the rough terrain at your feet. Fighting to coordinate the two, you'll be tempted to throw the whole thing over...but even sound maps are just maps. They are no substitute for real roads.

The gap between theory and practice is often biggest with the simplest things. You've promised to pray but you'll spend a lifetime learning how to pray. You've promised to study the scriptures, but you'll spend a lifetime learning how to read them. And you've promised to give God everything...but you'll spend a lifetime learning how to consecrate even a part. You cannot forfeit responsibility for this how. You cannot wait for someone else to do them for you. If you do not work things out for yourself, they will not be done. You must learn how to body your religion out into the world with your own fingers and toes, eyes and ears, flesh and bones. This can only be done from the inside out.

You are a pioneer. Life has never before been lived in your body. Everything must be done again, as if for the first time. You are an aboriginal Adam, a primal Eve. You are a Mormon."

Jacob says

Wow. My rating may be more a reflection of my high expectations than the quality of what's in the book, but I'll just state up front there is a HUGE difference between what I was looking for and what I read. I made a note to purchase this book as soon as I became aware of it, because it seemed like *exactly* the kind of thing I've been working on myself: letters (in my case, wiki / blog entries) to my children to explain to them some of the most important spiritual lessons I've learned in my life, in an attempt to help them arrive at that point faster and move beyond it in their own lives.

The Chapters are all topics I would write to my kids as well: Agency, Work, Sin, Faith, Scripture, Prayer, History, Science, Hunger, Sex, Temples, and Eternal Life. Okay, maybe I wasn't really going to write about hunger. But these all seem to me like topics that would be excellent to address to someone who is still very much learning the nuts and bolts of religion. Most of the content, however, is not at all what I would write. That itself is not a problem; the problem is that I feel most of the content is also not at all helpful for educating or guiding a young Mormon, unless they happen to be natural budding philosophy majors. (By the way, if you are not particularly interested in this review and somehow still reading, feel free to stop now and move on.)

Unfortunately the first third is the worst. I found myself thinking, "I'll probably give this 2 stars", but wondering how I would justify going that high. The letter on Agency is more of an introduction to the author and the book. It's certainly no more about agency than any of the other letters, and perhaps should have been titled "Ambiguity". The letter about Work is more about love.

The Sin letter kicks off an obsession of the author's in maintaining that the definition of sin is trying to make sense of one's life in terms of making it some kind of story. This idea threads through later letters, and although it does make a point, I've got to say I think it's ultimately wrong. There's nothing wrong with trying to make stories out of what God does with your life, and if one were to follow Miller's advice about not having any of your own stories I suspect it would lead to avoiding having goals or making plans for your life, which is also clearly not what God wants. It's also how most people learn and prophets teach. Furthermore, it's probably not a real useful perspective for helping a youth understand the nature of sin.

The middle letters about Scriptures, Prayer, and History are much better. The Scripture letter focuses on the importance of spending lots of time interpreting them for meaning applied to one's own life, and the Prayer letter starts with teaching about the two-way communication nature of prayer and preventing the biggest problems: letting your mind wander and falling asleep. And the History letter addresses a very common fallacy that wastes time and clouds people's perspective, that times were so much better way back when. But the Prayer letter ends with a discussion of sitting with the Lord in silence as a different kind of prayer? The author clearly had a beautiful experience behind this, but he's unable to communicate it, especially to a young person. And the History letter veers inexplicably into Miller's story obsession, urging you to not only give up your story, but God's as well. There may be good advice in here, but the only clarification we get is "When God knocks, don't creep up to the door and look through the peephole to see if he looks like you thought he would. Rush to the door and throw it open".

The Science letter surprised me. The author seems to feel that every apparent incompatibility between science and religion should be resolved in science's favor, and I would have thought a philosopher would be more aware of the limitations and weaknesses of science. I'm not arguing the other side of that, but I am claiming that our understanding of both are faulty and riddled with errors, and that apparent disagreements are as likely to be problems with one as the other. Perhaps the author is overreacting to the anti-science crowd.

The letters about Hunger and Sex are okay, but suffer the weakness of keeping themselves ambiguous and metaphorical. I don't think they'll end up being nearly as helpful as they should, especially for youth. It's too bad because there are good nuggets to be found in there, such as a reference in each to act as if you would like to take that action again. Maybe my feeling that most people (especially youth) who read this won't get the meaning of acting in a sustainable manner is pessimistic, but if you're trying to write for youth you really need to be clear and specific.

The Temples letter is interesting, but as an introduction to the temple and why temples are important it's a lot

like existing lessons that aren't really clear and don't address what a youth needs to understand beyond the single hand wave that "the temple is strange". And the Eternal Lives letter turns an important truth ("eternal life" doesn't mean what you think it means) into an odd claim that God's life is just like our current mortal one: "like being born and getting old". Um, I'm pretty sure one of the biggest ways in which our current mortal life is NOT like God's is the mortal part. Maybe Miller got a little carried away in his metaphor (again).

In many ways, this is not a problem with the quality of the writing as it is a problem of being aimed at entirely the wrong target audience and not being my style. A quoted endorsement from Robert L. Millet mentions he wishes it had been available for him to read as a teenager, so I suspect there are some actual young Mormons for whom this would be a good experience. However, most young people don't think nearly as abstractly or philosophically as they would need to appreciate what this book is trying to say. A book focused on helping young people also needs to be a lot more explicit about "how" to do things and comfortable leaving metaphor for plain speaking (for example: "give up your story", or "[faith] invites [difficult things] in, breaks bread with them, and washes their feet", and the quote from the History letter above). This would probably have been much better labeled something like "Letters From a Mormon Struggling to Live and Understand His Religion". If it wasn't mistargeted and pitched more as ideas the author is currently working through, I may have given it three stars.

Bradley Ferguson says

I heard about this book through the Neil A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU. They have a series of podcasts (I'd highly recommend them) and in one of them they reviewed this book and only had good things to say about it. I guess there are a numerous books out there that have the title "Letters to a Young . . .," and the author, Adam Miller, wrote this one for his daughter, and titled it "Letters to a Young Mormon." It is a very short book containing a series of essays written from the a father to his daughter and anyone picking up the book will quickly realize that it is not actually a book for kids. This is not because it has questionable content but it is because Adam Miller is an LDS philosophy professor (not at BYU) and his writing has a poetic, thoughtful, (deep?), tone to it that often had me re-reading passages to better understand what he was trying to say.

The essays cover topics such as Agency, Sin, Faith, Scripture, History, etc. I loved pretty much all of them. I was a little afraid of his sometimes-flowery writing style, as I have never been one for poetry – this is not because I really dislike poetry but more because I just so often feel like I miss the point. Luckily, I ended up actually really liking his writing style. It challenged me and I have already read the book a couple times through and shared parts of it with friends and family. The following passages are some of my favorites

From the essay on Sin: "Sin is endemic to the story you're always telling yourself about yourself. This story shows up in that spool of judgmental chitchat—sometimes fair, sometimes foul—that, like an off-stage voice-over, endlessly loops in your head. This narration follows you around like a shadow. It mimes you, measures you, sometimes mocks you, and pretends, in its flat, black simplicity, to be the truth about you. This story is seductive. It seems so weightless and bulletproof and ideal. But as a shadow it hides as much as it reveals. You are not your shadow. No matter how carefully you line up the light, your body will never fit the profile. Sin is what happens when we choose our shadows over the lives that cast them. Life is full of stories, but life is not a story. God doesn't love your story, he loves you. Jesus is not asking you to tell a better story or live your story more successfully, he's asking you to lose that story."

From the essay on Scripture: "Joseph produced, as God required, the first public translations of the scriptures we now share. But that work, open-ended all along, is unfinished. Now, the task is ours. When you read the scriptures, don't just lay your eyes like stones on the pages. Roll up your sleeves and translate them again. Every morning and every night, we are each commanded to sit down at our kitchen tables, spread out our books and notes and papers and pens, and, with a prayer in hand, finish what Joseph started. It is not enough for Nephi to have translated Isaiah into reformed Egyptian or for Joseph to have translated Nephi into King James English. You and I must translate these books again. Word by word, line by line, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, God wants the whole thing translated once more, and this time he wants it translated into your native tongue, inflected by your native concerns, and written in your native flesh. To be a Mormon is to do once more, on your own small scale, the same kind of work that Joseph did."

And finally, two of my favorite quotes from the essay on History: "It's a false dilemma to claim that either God works through practically flawless people or God doesn't work at all. The gospel isn't a celebration of God's power to work with flawless people. The gospel is a celebration of God's willingness to work today, in our world, in our lives, with people who clearly aren't. To demand that church leaders, past and present, show us only a mask of angelic pseudo-perfection is to deny the gospel's most basic claim: that God's grace works through our weakness. We need prophets, not idols. Our prophets and leaders will not turn out to be who you want them to be. They are not, in fact, even what God might want them to be. But they are real and God really can, nonetheless, work through their imperfections to extend his perfect love."

"At some point, God will ask you to sacrifice on his alter not only your stories about your own life but your versions of his stories as well. Your softly lit watercolor felt-board versions of scripture stories and church history must, like all your stories, be abandoned at his feet, and the messy, vibrant, and inconvenient truths that characterize God's real work with real people will have to take center stage. If they don't, then how will God's work in your hungry, messy, and inconvenient life ever do the same? When God knocks, don't creep up to the door and look through the peephole to see if he looks like you thought he would. Rush to the door and throw it open."

There were numerous quotes like these that really moved me. I want to put them on cards and be reminded of them time and time again, like a good verse from the scriptures. That to me is a mark of a good lds book. Strongly recommended.

Hawkgrrrl says

A very quick read, this is a selection of thought provoking essays about faith. The approach is fresh and unique and far better than the discussion generally teed up in church. I particularly liked the chapters on Sin and Faith.

A few quick quotes.

On Sin: "Sin depends not just on your actions but on the story you use those actions to tell." This essay talks about how we sin to create a story about ourselves (even if that story is a self-righteous one), and instead we need to lose our need to believe that story and focus on the life that really is and on other people as people, not part of our story.

On Faith: "The fashionable line is that faith is like a poor man's substitute for knowledge." and "Faith is more like being faithful to your husband or wife than it is like believing in magic." and "A testimony is a promise to stay. . . it is a declaration that, in the face of uncertainty, you have made a decision."

BHodges says

Full disclosure: I work for the publisher. Take that into account, but regardless of whether I worked for the publisher or not I'd still say this book is, hands down, the best book written for Latter-day Saint youth I've ever read. The author isn't cheesy, he isn't over-enthusiastic, his book doesn't read like a big Pep Rally for faith. He doesn't rely on gimmicks, jokes, exclamation marks, or cliches. He isn't desperate to entertain, so he doesn't condescend to LDS youth--youth who are typically more savvy than we give them credit for. He manages to preach without sounding preachy. He manages to sound wise without sounding pretentious or ancient. He sounds more like a wise older friend than an imposing authority figure. He rephrases the gospel in a way that will rejuvenate faith, making it fresh and extremely relevant, speaking to many of the big issues we all face, not just youth. That's why this book will be extremely useful for older Latter-day Saints, too. This book grapples with life as we live it in the real world, in our complex physical bodies with our complex human urges and feelings and desires. Most importantly, the author recognizes he doesn't have all of the answers, but helped me understand that the plan of salvation is more about living life than answering questions in a big gospel quiz. This book is short and very easy to read, but you'll want to read it more than once. I can't recommend it strongly enough.

Christy says

So good. A thoughtful guide to the practice of Mormonism in life as it can only be lived, imperfectly, messily, and, hopefully, full of joy.

Jenny says

This wonderful book is just as it says: letters written from an older Mormon to a younger Mormon. The letters are carefully crafted and concise, addressing 12 religious themes with straightforward honesty devoid of gimmicks or flashy stories. And yet, brief as they are, the letters are simultaneously expansive: expansive in scope, and particularly expansive in terms of effect--I have rarely read a general-audience religious book so thoughtfully, and I am certain that I will return to read this book again with similarly fruitful results.

For example, in the chapter on Sin, Miller begins with "Being a good person doesn't mean you're not a sinner. Sin goes deeper. Being good will save you a lot of trouble, but it won't solve the problem of sin. Only God can do this." A simple introduction to the topic of sin, yet one that immediately reassures the reader that their inability to be perfect is not a sign of failure, but rather an invitation for God's grace to act in their life. The entire book exhibits this particular type of tenderness from author to reader; part of Miller's strength as an author lies in his ability to communicate a genuine love for his brothers and sisters without sounding at all patronizing or condescending.

Read this book. And read it again. You won't be able to help yourself. It truly provides some of the best that Mormonism has to offer.

Savannah says

These are lovely. I only wish there were more of them.

emilee says

a quick read that i couldn't put down until i finished. many times i just paused & thought about the sentence or paragraph i just read, every chapter is very thought-provoking. filled with religious concepts that were relatable & made me feel normal & human in my weaknesses, yet then inspired me to stretch & do more, after understanding these gospel concepts in a simpler way. love love loved it.

Quinn Rollins says

This is short, and it has the ugliest cover of any book published in 2014, but this is probably the best book of this nature I've ever read. Formatted as a series of letters from the author to a "young Mormon," it's author Adam S. Miller's thoughts on twelve topics. It reminds me of my best conversations about religion with friends and family members and colleagues. Some of the topics are more conventionally religious, like Faith, Prayer, and Scripture; others are more secular, but where religion and religious thought are often seen as intrusions or barriers -- Science, History, Sex. It's the kind of book I wish the LDS Church brochure "For the Strength of the Youth" was more like.

This was published by BYU's Neal A. Maxwell Institute, and although all things BYU make me shudder and arch a skeptical eyebrow, this book is all win. It manages to balance rational thought, observation, faith and our rich-but-complicated history as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I picked up this copy at my library, but I'll be purchasing it. Great read for Mormons of any age, or people who live with them and are trying to understand them.
