



The Friday Gospels

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It's Friday in the Leake household, but this is no ordinary Friday: the Leakes are Lancastrian Mormons and tonight they will be welcoming back their son Gary from his two-year mission in Utah. His mother, Pauline, wants his homecoming to be perfect. Unfortunately, no one else seems to be following the script.

In turn, the members of the family let us into their private thoughts and plans. There's teenage Jeannie, wrestling with a disastrous secret; her peculiar elder brother, Julian, who's plotting an exit according to his own warped logic; their father, Martin, dreaming of escape; and 'golden boy' Gary, who dreads his return. Then there's Pauline, who needs a doctor's help but won't ask for it.

As the day progresses, a meltdown looms. Except that nothing goes according to anyone's plan, and the outcome is as unexpected as it is shocking. Laced with black humour and giving an unusual insight into the Mormon way of life, this is a superbly orchestrated and arresting tale of human folly and foibles and what counts in times of crisis.

The Friday Gospels Details

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From Reader Review The Friday Gospels for online ebook

Timothy Urban says

Loved this book and, as an ex Mormon, I can vouch for the authenticity and sharply observed idiosyncrasies of the characters, and their confused motivations.

British Mormons have been part of the scene, especially around the UK's Bible Belt (Yorkshire and Lancashire), for nearly 200 years. And while we might be tempted to think of blue-skied Utah, the Osmonds, even Mitt Romney, the Mormons have been part of the fabric of British life just as long as many other lesser-known orders, protestant movements, groups and sects.

And as subject matter they're just as odd and interesting as anyone else. After all, there's nowt as queer as folk.

While this book spends some time carefully describing British Mormon culture, their beliefs never actually feel all that unfamiliar. In many ways this book is in the same tradition as *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, and, going back from there, *Spring and Port Wine*, *A Kind of Loving*, *Joby*.

It's a story of ordinary people trying to make sense of their messy lives by clinging to a tradition that doesn't quite have the answers.

Margaret says

A brilliant depiction of an "ordinary" family in Chorley, Lancashire who belong to the Church of the Latter Day Saints. For those of us who live in or near Chorley and have wondered what goes on in the enormous Mormon temple in Chorley, it's fascinating. The characters are portrayed in a sympathetic way and as you read you realise that whatever you think of their religion, these individuals are as lovable and fallible as everyone else. There are some very ugly and unsettling events which are treated head-on and you make your own judgement. Great ending!

Sarah Broadley says

I read this book while sitting on a deckchair in the rain at the Edinburgh Book Festival. Over a couple of days I sat in the same deckchair, which seemed to wait on my appearance every morning and I carried on where I left off. After a while the rain dripping off my nose didn't even register, which is the great thing about reading an intriguing book. You are hooked and all is quiet as you devour the words and chapters.

The Friday Gospels by Jenn Ashworth is a riveting read from the start. It starts off by introducing you to all the main characters through their own chapters and filling you with knowledge of daily life within the Mormon Community. You gather all the different traits and mishaps of each family member as you continue to read and it doesn't take long to fit all the family-tree pieces together. However, saying that, I did not see the end coming at all. Reading this book, I was convinced this was Jenn Ashworth's real-life story, but there is nothing to say that it is. The detail and research that has gone into the completion of this tale as accurately

as possible is astounding.

I was prepared for Gary to throw the towel in, I wanted his mum to go and see about her ailments before she was no longer with us and Jenny needed her Mr Darcy to appear and whisk her off to live happily ever after somewhere else. I began to care what their future held and it wasn't looking good for some of them.

This book does not have a 'big-bow' ending, it's a story of an unconventional family and the blood bond that holds them together but also drives them apart. I'm sure every reader will relate to each and every one of the slightly odd family members as they find their way in their somewhat restricted world.

I have a fascination with religion, especially the ones I know nothing about and this book fed my desire for information. The Friday Gospels is a refreshing look into another way of life, it may not be the way everyone would choose to live but life would be boring if we were all the same, wouldn't it?

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Sibyl says

About nine-tenths of the way through this book I thought, 'She's lost me.' And 'This would never happen.' And 'What on earth is she doing, trying to make this happen?'

Because Jenn Ashworth has the appearance of being a realist writer. Small town life in Lancashire is minutely rendered. There's a loving, absorbing accumulation of detail. Garages, supermarkets, corner shops are faithfully rendered.

But then I realised that in this book I she is ultimately concerned with the supernatural, the miraculous. The novel contains Old Testament levels of violence, and parables that may be seen as modern Gospels. Although all of the main protagonists were raised in the Church of the Latter Day Saints, the miracles (not to mention the sacrifice) which lie at the heart of this novel, turn out to be rooted in ordinary humanity.

Rachel Connor says

Jenn Ashworth's novel is one of those rare things: it entertains, while diving beneath the surface of serious questions – about the meaning of faith, fundamentalism, family and community. For those who have already read her previous novels – *A Kind of Intimacy* and *Cold Light* – there's the same characteristic mixture of dark and funny. But *The Friday Gospels* has a greater narrative pull. The subject matter is original and engaging (Mormons in Lancashire – a fascinating insight into a little seen world); the alternate voices draw you through the story, leaving you, at the end of each section, positively breathless.

Without, I hope, giving too much away, the premise is this: the Leeke family's youngest son is on his way home from the United States, after two years of missionary work in Utah. As they prepare for his arrival, each family member is grappling with their own private issues. Pauline, the mother, is struggling with health issues which render her immobile. Martin, the father, contemplates an extra marital affair but his affection is unrequited. Gary's sister, Jeannie, is caught up in the concerns of her teenage world. Julian, (Gary's brother)

is also locked into a world of his own, with a driving need to escape. Each narrative voice stands alone – perfectly formed - yet woven together they are a stunning exploration of the fabric of family life, in all its imperfections.

It's a challenge to pull off a successful multi-voice narrative, but Ashworth does it with authenticity and insight. Each character is held up for examination, for all his or her flaws. In the end, this is a hugely compassionate book.

At times *The Friday Gospels* reminded me of Ali Smith's *The Accidental* – only more accessible, miles funnier and with more heart. The redemptive ending strikes just the right chord. This is a novel which – without question - will cement Jenn Ashworth's success as one of the most talented young novelists in the UK today.

Jen Madsen says

As a post-Mormon, I was hesitant to pick this book up, but it came recommended and is this month's read for book group. I had read the reviews and the synopsis on Amazon, but I was unprepared for the candor, compassion, and blessed confusion Jenn Ashworth was able to convey in this very human story whose characters happen to be members of the LDS church. Most LDS fiction I've read, and I'll be honest, it's been awhile, shies away from the mess and ambiguity of being alive. This book goes for the jugular but at no point does it take condescending jabs at the religion even while exposing some of its flaws. Ashworth reminds me of Flannery O'Conner in the way she focuses her lens in on the grotesque all while revealing something more sublime.

Francesca says

I absolutely adored this book. The quiet, steady craftfulness of the writing as it details a family in everyday chaos, the collision of self-delusion and lies alongside religious faith (or lack of) and the way that the multiple perspectives weaved the story and the characters closer together rather than casting them apart and interrupting the narrative. The people and the details feel so real and you can sense the weight of their issues on each of their shoulders. The voices differ clearly, but almost unnoticeably, linking them together as family members, part of the same household and religious movement, willingly or otherwise.

I read *The Accidental* by Ali Smith last year and it reminded me strongly of that, but more personal and interconnected, grittier and more relatable and realistic, with each character's perspective corroborating or contradicting another's self-image.

A four star rating doesn't feel enough for this book, but it didn't quite have the awe factor of my five-star rated books. A solid 4.5, one of the most original novels I've ever read and something I'll definitely come back to.

Emmkay says

I enjoyed this novel about a working-class Mormon family in Lancashire tremendously. It takes place during a single day (a Friday, per the title), during which the younger son, Gary, is returning home after two years as a missionary in Utah. The day's events and backstory are narrated by the various family members (their gospels?) - Gary himself; mum Pauline, who has a mysterious illness and had been hugely invested in the honour of having a son who's a missionary; dad Martin, anxious about finances and seeking solace in his dog and a fellow dog-lover; older son Julian, who seems a bit creepy; and teenage daughter Jeannie, grappling with a secret of her own and the weight of her religious upbringing.

The events as they unfold are perhaps not all that realistic, but it's wonderfully and compassionately told, properly funny-sad and kind to its protagonists. Interesting as well to learn some more about the LDS church, of which I knew little: not an uncritical view at all, but again a compassionate one.

Laura Wilkinson says

Brilliant. Just brilliant. Took me a little time to get into it, but SO worth it.

Ellie M says

I'm probably slightly biased as I live in the town portrayed in this novel, but I thought this book was a very good read. I have previously read *A Kind of Intimacy* and I liked her style then. This novel is the fictional account of a day in the life of an LDS family who reside in my home town (we are home to Preston Temple, England, as it's called...). She has some brilliantly accurate descriptions of my town which I loved, but the story itself is very good, covering everyone from the son who is due home from his 2 year mission to convert non-LDS, to the daughter who has made a mistake, and the other son who is about as far removed from his younger brother than can be imagined. The Mother has health issues and the Father, possibly worn down by the Mother, is seeking female "friendship" via dog walks in the local park. The stories converge, individuals connect, and I don't think it was in too far fetched a way. The conclusion is heartwarming.

I hadn't realised the author was previously a member of the LDS community. This book is therefore not a religious tract, but instead questions perhaps some of the structures of the LDS belief system. It is lighthearted, amusing in parts, and very well written. I see the many young (American) LDS around town and this novel, along with Carys Bray's *A Song for Issy Bradley: A Novel* I have perhaps a better understanding of things like the "dresscode" for women, so it's been educational in that sense.

For Books' Sake says

"Jenn Ashworth, raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has finally written her Mormon novel. Continuing in the same brooding, uneasy vein as her first two books, *A Kind of Intimacy* and *Cold Light, The Friday Gospels* does not disappoint.

Ashworth has produced a darkly comic tale of northern suburbia, one that boasts a unique cast of characters

and the kind of knuckle-chewing pathos that compels you to devour it in one sitting." (Excerpt from full review at For Books' Sake.)

Antonomasia says

[4.5]

Like a Mike Leigh film in book form.

The Friday Gospels, told by five first-person narrators, is about a family of British Mormons, a group most people don't think about unless some come to their door. Several blogs said Jenn Ashworth should have been one of Granta's Best Young British Novelists, though she was on the BBC Culture Show's similar list a couple of years ago. She was also brought up as a Mormon in Lancashire. Wisely, this story about LDS in Lancs is her third novel, an accomplished piece of semi-comic fiction inspired by other sources as well as her own story - not another confessional debut.

If there's anything wrong with this book it's that it has so much happen in one day, such a lot of *plot*, in a soapy sort of way. Though perhaps farce would be a better comparison if you're willing to include some serious topics in farce as well. That one day involves the homecoming of golden-boy second son Gary who's been away on his missionary training in Utah for two years. Problems in the lives of the four other Leeke family members: mum, dad, older brother & younger sister, all come to a head over the course of the day. Some quite naturally because Gary's return is a watershed, others more absurdly.

I may have been generous to give this novel five rather than four stars but that's because not only did I love its working class provincial setting, but I really liked what it was saying about religion - the first time I've encountered a novel which has an atheist or at least anti-certain-types-of-organised-religion agenda. (But it doesn't have to be read that way.)

Ashworth has a wonderful phrase here about religion: you "feel it clanking like a chain around your ankles even when you did not believe in it any more." Absolutely spot on. I have a feeling that people with that experience will find more meaning in this book.

I went to a Catholic school but had confusing messages at home from a parent who professed atheism at times yet also went to church fairly regularly. I had a curious intermittently-devout phase between the ages of about 6-9, largely self-imposed as a sort of comfort and defence. Its principal instrument was obsessive re-reading of *Sixty Saints for Girls*, a gift from my late godmother, (which book I now consider to be a largely pernicious - and continuing - influence, though I don't blame the godmother in the least as she was a great person and it was a case of book + environment + personality, not just book).

Aside from actual R.E. lessons, the school was not terribly severe in its religious proselytising - mitigated I think by a couple of teachers who'd experienced the horrors of Irish convent schools in the 50's and who later became politicised in the sixties. I never felt affected by fear of hell (an old-fashioned myth no-one really believed in any more, I was told more often than not) or rantings about sexual morality (religious people just didn't mention sex as anything which might affect me until long after I'd already got a plethora of info from Usborne books, novels and teenage magazines). And no-one really bothered me when I decided I didn't to be confirmed aged 12 - though it made me feel left-out and immature - but there are certain things that always stick. So it wasn't a terribly religious childhood, but enough to give me some affinity with those who were more affected. An ex, whom I lived with for a couple of years, grew up partly in a Jehovah's Witness commune (and became an atheist as eloquent as Hitchens and probably better informed about the other side).

The tone of many of the Mormon morals & strictures in *The Friday Gospels* is familiar from his stories.

In *The Friday Gospels* the idea of whether there is any higher power is subtly left open: one could choose to see certain events as coincidental, as precipitated by people, or as part of a divine plan. However there is certainly indictment of aspects of religious teaching and of the stricter and more priggish members of the LDS community, and of the shame they try to impose on those who don't meet their standards. The best critique of all is contained in the events surrounding the daughter, Jeannie: of a culture which implicitly or explicitly encourages kids to act according to fables they hear, which rewards silence and a lack of questioning, and which tells girls to "defend" themselves against male sexuality whilst actually leaving them less able to deal with it than most of their non-religious peers. And perhaps worst of all (view spoiler)

The people in *The Friday Gospels* are very much people, characters rather than symbols for delivering a message. Ashworth isn't criticising human beings, rather teachings and beliefs. Her preparedness to find some good even in distinctly dodgy characters is what I'd associate with someone who's done social welfare work (she used to be a prison librarian) and confounds what it's usual to expect from a certain type of narrator. I felt that her prognosis for Pauline, the mother was potentially over-optimistic (view spoiler) but I could quite understand what Ashworth was trying to show. And I can't remember when I last read a book including more than one non-elderly character with a disability.

Perhaps more objectively this isn't quite a five-star book but I still think it's doing something unusual and important in containing what's usually the stuff of non-fiction rants into a very approachable work of literary or domestic fiction.

Blair says

If, before I started reading this book, you had told me a story about a Mormon family in Lancashire awaiting the return of their missionary son from Utah would be something I'd find it hard to tear myself away from, I would probably have laughed. Indeed, if *The Friday Gospels* hadn't had the name Jenn Ashworth on the cover, there is no way I would ever have bothered picking it up. Thank god it did, then, because this was an excellent, engrossing read and possibly the author's best yet.

The book focuses on five members of the Leeke family: mother Pauline, struggling with a hazily defined illness and unwilling to see a doctor; father Martin, misguidedly obsessed with a female friend; disturbed eldest son Julian, plotting an escape; devout Gary, fearing himself a failure; and teenage Jeannie, trying to hide a secret she feels will rip her life apart. The whole story unfolds in just one day, hence the 'Friday': and each member of the family gives their own account of the day, hence the 'Gospels'. Through the characters' incredibly different viewpoints, we come to understand the secrets they are keeping and how they are deluding themselves and those around them.

Things I liked:

- The detailed and painfully realistic depiction of English working-class life, something Ashworth is so good at. That mixture of bleakness, pathos, humour and warmth. Probably more effective here than in her previous novels, even if thematically it wasn't the most appealing to me personally.
- Speaking of which, I also enjoyed the parallels with the author's other books: Martin is reminiscent of Annie in *A Kind of Intimacy*, with his delusional interest in a woman he bumps into at the park, and Jeannie is like a cousin of the younger Laura in *Cold Light*, except her character type is much more palatable as part of an ensemble cast than the main focus.

- The successful creation of five very different, intersecting, overlapping, voices. They are completely distinguished from one another, there's little similarity in style, so they are very real and it's easy to believe in them as individuals.
- Religion is (obviously) a major theme here, and in several ways it affects everything that happens, but the book avoids getting bogged down in any examination or critique of it. There's a sense that Ashworth (who apparently grew up in a Mormon family) is gently mocking the faith, and at times subtly criticising it, but always with an affectionate edge. Ultimately, the focus is on what is ordinary and extraordinary about these characters despite, not because of, their religion.
- A strong and effective plot, not afraid to tackle disturbing themes: some of Julian's chapters were very hard to read and made me feel quite unwell, but they were powerfully written.
- The book is longer and denser than I thought it would be, but incredibly readable.

Reservations I had:

- While the different voices are convincing, they sometimes make it difficult to adjust from one to the next. When I got to the first chapter of Pauline's narrative, which is written in a stream-of-consciousness style with no paragraphs at all, I found it tough going compared to the others. Also, we didn't hear enough from a couple of the characters: I really liked Martin's narrative and would have liked more chapters focused on him.
- My major problem was with the ending. It's not that the ending is bad, at all. It's satisfying, it wraps everything up and it brings all the strands of the plot (and the family) together. And indeed, had the book ended any other way, it would have been almost unbearably bleak. However: (view spoiler). Basically, this is a very good book, but it could have been a great, powerful one had it tackled certain issues head-on rather than skimming over them.

Jayne Charles says

This was a great read. Following a Mormon family through a single traumatic day (with the help of lots of flashbacks) it's entertaining, happy, sad, instructive, funny and tragic. Each of the main characters get their time in the spotlight and have their own individual voices. I liked the way the author brings her own knowledge of the Mormon way of life to bear but stops short of either mocking or advocating it. I like books that teach me things and this did. The second book I have read by Jenn Ashworth - both of them brilliant.

Hannah Wingfield says

An excellent book. It's quite similar to *A Song for Issy Bradley* which I also loved - it's about a family of Mormons in Northern England and told in the first person with each main character taking it in turns to narrate. It's funny, and dramatic, and creepy at times. It tackles serious topics - sexual consent, birth injury, religion, family dysfunction - with humour and offers a glimpse into Mormon life. The best book I've read this year so far.
