

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES GOLDBERG

Tell us about your unique master's thesis. I started at BYU's MFA program as a creative nonfiction student, and got interested in blogging as a form halfway through the program. When I proposed blogging as my thesis project, though, I caused a minor controversy. Could online writing be literary? Could a blog have the same depth as a print essay? Some faculty members had quite strong feelings about such subjects.

In the end, I found a committee of professors who were willing to count my three interconnected blogs as the bulk of my thesis. Since we had to have some sort of document to submit to the university at the end of the project, I also wrote a PDF piece called *Drink Me, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Blog*, which talks about various aspects of blog writing with the aid of John Tenniel illustrations, blog excerpts, and possibly the most tongue-in-cheek writing ever to be concentrated in a single BYU Master's thesis. It's quite a ride.

Is there a difference between traditional creative nonfiction and blogging? Do you see the blog as a new literary form? There are many important differences, including:

1) People voluntarily read blogs.

So yes, I see blogs as a new literary form. For one thing, the literary technology is different: bloggers can hyperlink, invite comments, include video and easily intergrate images, publish instantly, etc. For another thing, readers' behavior is different: for example, they tend to respond to the relationship between a blog's overall concept and its individual posts. They also seem more likely to read additional posts from a blogger they like

than to track down additional essays from a print writer they like. It's just a difference experience.

Which is not to say that I'm against printed creative nonfiction. I just think there are lots of cool possibilities to blogging and I'd like to see them taken seriously by students of literature.

How has the internet changed the face of creative writing?

We're so close it's still hard to tell. Certainly, it's easier to reach a niche audience--I think web comics are a great case in point for that. I also run semi-annual contests for short Mormon works. That would have been difficult without the internet.

It's obviously harder to make ends meet if you're running a bookstore than it once was, and that's too bad. And it's probably easier as a reader to surf aimlessly, since there's no end to the internet like there is to a novel.

The question that interests me most, though, is not "what has happened" but "what can happen." I think there's a lot more we can do to make art that makes the most of the internet.

Your blogs often discuss your diverse cultural background, including your family's roots in Mormonism, Judaism and Sikhism. How have these traditions affected you as a writer?

Those are three communities bound by shared stories as much as anything else, and I've wondered whether my roots in story explain my commitment to creative writing over the years.

I also have a deep sense of owing something to past and future generations. And

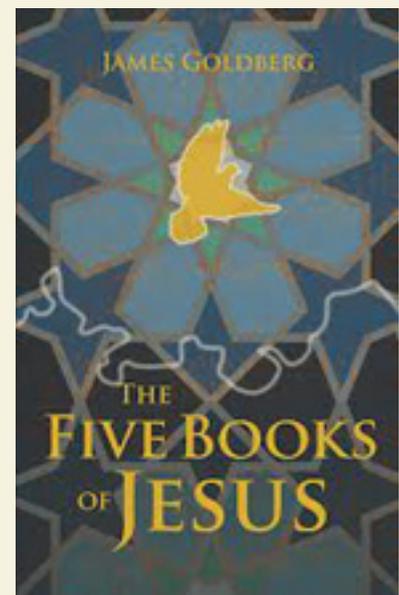
that's helped me ask the sorts of intense questions that drive writing. I feel an obligation to think deeply about the world so I can decide how to link vastly different pasts and futures in my family lines.

Tell us about your new novel, *The Five Books of Jesus*.

It's a retelling of the gospels that takes their world seriously: both in terms of the physical realities of rural life in first century Galilee and in terms of the Jewish story-world the gospels grew out of. The "five books" in the title is a reference to the five books of Moses. I've structured the synoptic gospels' story around Hebrew Bible shapes.

The story of Jesus is arguably the best known story in the world. What made you select this story as the subject of your first novel?

When things become too familiar to us, we often stop really seeing them. That's wonderful when it means not having



OREM PUBLIC LIBRARY AUTHOR INTERVIEW

to focus during my commute. It's less wonderful when I drift while being told something important.

Whether you're religious or not, certain aspects of Jesus' story have likely been ingrained in you as a member of a society deeply influenced by Christianity. And whether you're religious or not, other aspects of his story are probably hidden under layers of familiarity. It's hard to see them because we've looked past them for so long.

In a way, it's easy to make Jesus' story surprising precisely because we all think we know it.

What challenges did you face as you wrote a novelization of the lives of New Testament figures??

There were lots of everyday gaps in my knowledge: how long of a walk is it from town A to town B? how far can you see when you look out from point x? what does an ordinary person think about in his or her free time?

There was also the terrible self-doubt of wanting to tell an important story well and fearing that I was a total hack. That fear has only been cured by talking to people with whom the book resonated deeply. Ultimately, my measure of success is the thoughtfulness and thirst I see in readers.

Another big challenge, of course, is how to create detailed characters working from source texts that aren't particularly interested in character detail. I wanted to build characters around whatever scrap of knowledge the gospels gave me: it was a pleasant challenge to look for the core of a character when I sometimes only had a few verses to go from.



James Goldberg holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Brigham Young University, where he is now a professor. His works have appeared in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, *Drash Magazine*, and *Irreantum*, and his play, *Prodigal Son*, was honored by the Association for Mormon Letters in 2008 with their Drama Award. He recently published his first novel, *The Five Books of Jesus*.