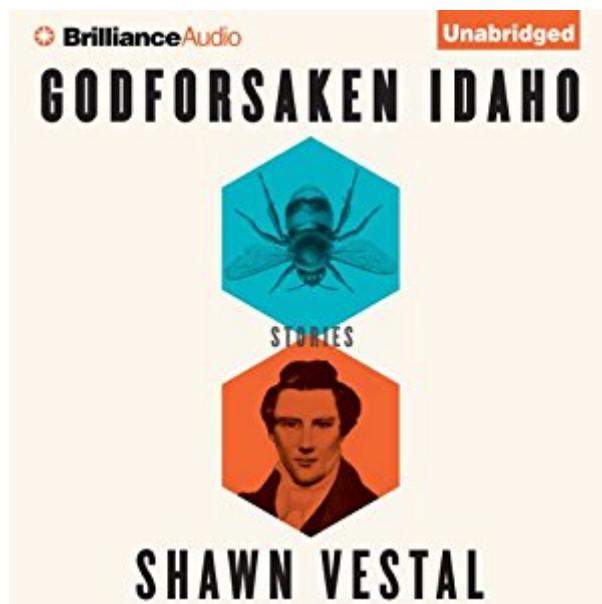


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# Godforsaken Idaho: Stories



## Synopsis

In this stunning debut, Shawn Vestal transports us to the afterlife, the rugged Northwest, and the early days of Mormonism. From "The First Several Hundred Years Following My Death", an absurd, profound vision of a hellish heaven, to "Winter Elders", in which missionaries calmly and relentlessly pursue a man who has left the fold, these nine stories illuminate the articles of faith that make us human. The concluding triptych tackles the legends and legacy of Mormonism head-on, culminating in "Diviner", a seriocomic portrait of the young Joseph Smith, back when he was not yet the founder of a religion but a man hired to find buried treasure. *Godforsaken Idaho* is an indelible collection by the writer you need to explore next.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

God may have forsaken Idaho, but Shawn Vestal has not. Born in Gooding, on the Snake River plain, Vestal now writes for the *SPOKESMAN-REVIEW* in Spokane WA, a scant twenty miles from the Idaho border. Five of the nine short stories in this collection take place in Idaho and two more in neighboring states of Utah and Montana. The remaining two, one set in heaven and the other in Harmony Township PA have important connections to Idaho. The stories are arranged in reverse chronological order. The initial story "THE FIRST SEVERAL HUNDRED YEARS FOLLOWING MY DEATH" is set in 2613 and the final one, "DIVINER" begins in 1825. "DIVINER" is narrated by Isaac Hale and tells about his daughter Emma meeting and marrying Joseph Smith Jr, founder of the

Mormon religion. "THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS FOLLOWING MY DEATH" describes a heaven where people remain forever the exact age at which they died. This produces some delicious ironies in Vestal's hands. The narrator was killed in a car wreck at 46, but his son, when he eventually arrives is a dementia-tinged 93. Heaven-dwellers can relive favorite moments in their lives on earth and most spend vast amounts of eternity doing so. A number of characters from the stories that follow play cameo roles in "THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS..." Genealogy and religion are other strands, besides geography, that bind the stories together. Vestal was raised a Mormon and that faith is entwined in his stories -- as it is with Idaho. An intricate genealogy runs through the collection, relating a character in one story to those in others. Sometimes the relationship is explicit, but sometimes is only implied through the use of common surnames. Since the stories were published in a variety of periodicals over at least eight years, one wonders what Vestal is up to with his fictional family trees and odd order to the stories. The title story, strangely enough, shares no religious or genealogical links to the rest of the collection. The narrator, whose name we never learn, recently moved from Chicago to northern Idaho to get away from his stroke-afflicted mother. His most treasured possession is his collection of PENTHOUSE MAGAZINE, which becomes an issue between him and his nosy landlord. Vestal's male narrators are a generally disreputable lot: unbelievers, hard drinkers, womanizers, ne'er-do-wells, and, occasionally, criminals. The women around them are better only by comparison. Sarah Warren, the narrator of "THE GULLS", and ancestress to many of Vestal's other characters, is the exception. Readers with no connection to and little interest in Idaho, genealogy, or the Mormon faith may still find pleasure in these stories. They offer few glimpses of leaping trout, scenic lakes, or snow-capped mountains, but are beautifully crafted. "WINTER ELDERS" (about Mormon missionaries) begins, "They materialized with the first snow." These stories are about people -- and what an odd bunch they are!

A collection of nine stories, mostly set in remote, rural Idaho, tales about troubled and difficult people. Men and women who struggle with questions of faith and doubt, righteousness and wickedness, reality and fantasy. Most of the characters are Mormons, walking a fine, shaky line between doubt and fanaticism. Their lives don't go well, they don't find the answers they yearn for, and they rarely find release from their private hells. The first story is a fanciful exploration of life after death. Another deals with a young man who goes quietly crazy while working in a tiny rural post office. Yet another recounts a plague of locusts, yet another, set in 1825, portrays the early days of Mormonism. The stories are dark, haunting, deeply troubling, and beautifully written. Author Shawn Vestal writes in a lucid, accessible manner, without a single wasted word. The tales draw you in and

leave you wanting more. You want to like these characters, you want them to find some redemption, and you care about them even when they don't. These are exquisite stories. I wish I'd written them myself. I recommend this collection most highly. Reviewed by Louis N. Gruber.

This is an excellent collection of really great stories. I'd like to say I'm confused by the bad reviews, but sadly I'm not. I think we all know these folks either haven't read the book or have serious issues with the title alone. Also, it seems at least one of the reviewers is around 6 years old. It seems pretty obvious, but does everyone understand that this is NOT a non-fiction account of Mormonism in Idaho? This is fiction. This is a book of short stories. One reviewer said the first story (my favorite) was "Apparently Vestal's idea of Heaven," well...um...maybe, or could it possibly be just a really interesting STORY?! Sure, most good writers draw from their experiences in life, and part of Vestal's life includes being raised Mormon in Idaho, but there is nothing in this book that should offend you if you are a reader of good literature. Some of the stories make you think, some make you cringe or laugh, all of the things I look for in a great book. Truly interesting reading and hard to put down. Just buy the book. You won't be sorry. I do have to admit some of the "bad" reviews made me chuckle. "the author has no talent and has done no research" and my favorite: "it is retarded" Classic.

Readers of the reviews may be puzzled by the wildly diverse reviews. I have to admit, I was at first. But maybe that's the charm of it. The stories may be short, (nine in all) but they are memorable and fully drawn. The characters are interesting and stick with you. The stories range the gamut from happy to sad, and while based on Mormonism, they are in fact fiction, and meant to be read and digested that way. I really liked it.

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