

BAD MORMON

A MEMOIR



HEATHER GAY

**Thank you for downloading
this Simon & Schuster ebook.**

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

BAD MORMON



A MEMOIR

HEATHER GAY



GALLERY BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To Ashley, Georgia, and Annabelle

When I think of the three degrees of glory now, I think of my
heaven, my eternity, my legacy... My three daughters.

you are my sun,
my moon,
and all of my stars
e. e. cummings

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The official name of the Mormon church is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The full name was given by revelation from God to the prophet Joseph Smith in 1838. For almost two hundred years, we called ourselves Mormons; it was the name of our book, our lessons, our songs, our marketing campaigns, our website, and a church-produced movie titled *Meet the Mormons*.

In 1990, one of the church's apostles, Russell M. Nelson, spoke out against using the term "Mormon" and instead encouraged members to use the official name, "the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." He was publicly reprimanded by the prophet Gordon B. Hinckley, who encouraged that the nickname "Mormon" be embraced. In 2018, when Nelson advanced to the office of prophet himself, getting rid of the nickname became one of his first orders of business. He proclaimed that the Lord had impressed upon his mind that using the proper name of the church was not negotiable and commanded that members stop referring to themselves as Mormons and instead only as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

He then asked the rest of the world to respect this new commandment and refrain from using "Mormon" and "Mormonism" when referring to church members, doctrine, culture, and lifestyles unique to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Originally, I tried to follow the prophet and the church's style guide and use the full and proper name. But when I realized that I had used the word "Mormon" nearly two hundred times, it became clear that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was perhaps a bit belabored.

I have chosen to use "Mormon" and "Mormonism" as they are words with which I have found resonance since birth. Both monikers are used throughout the story in order to speak to my lived experience and my

identity. This is not meant to offend or dismiss the identities of those who feel otherwise.

You'll soon find that this choice is only one of the many ways that I am a Bad Mormon.

PROLOGUE

I was thirty thousand feet above Death Valley contemplating my life.

It was sinking in. *We were making a TV show!* I pressed down hard on my lower lip to keep from smiling. I needed to stay serious and acknowledge the gravity of the situation; this was a life-altering moment! If I went on television and exposed everything I'd been hiding from my friends, family, and church, there would be devastating consequences. But inside, the girl who grew up on MTV's *Real World* and Lauren Conrad's *The Hills* was euphoric. Maybe this was my golden ticket.

As I flew back to Salt Lake City from Los Angeles, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the cloudy airplane window. With my polyester cap-sleeved blouse and quickly deflating three-barrel curls, I looked like a tried-and-true frugal Mormon, not a starlet of the stage or screen. I asked myself, *Is this really happening? Does reality television seriously want me?*

This didn't happen for sensible, church-bred, landlocked single moms like me. In my small, insular world, there were few things I knew like the back of my hand, the Book of Mormon being one and the book of reality television being the other.

Years of reality television consumption had taught me that *nothing* hides from the cameras. You can't expect to go on television pretending to be something you aren't. The viewers will see right through you.

From the time I was born, I'd been indoctrinated to think in terms of binaries. Black or white, right or wrong, everything could be traced back to good or evil, God or Satan. There was no gray area, no in between. You could choose Hollywood, but you'd have to give up heaven. You can't have both. With cameras in my face, my hand would be forced in one direction or the other.

Which route would I take? Would I pretend to be naive about the absurdities of my faith and hide behind my Mormon upbringing? Or would I use this opportunity as a chance to escape and finally come out of the closet I'd been hiding in? Would I risk my eternity, my church, my community, my family, for a *sizzle reel*?

I thought about my life, what I had imagined it would be and what it had become. I thought about my daughters and the life I desperately wanted to give them. How the fairy tale had all imploded. How the impact had revealed all the cracks in my faith. There was no putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. There was no moral dilemma to wrestle with. No real decision to be made. This was my way out.

It's all happening.

When an opportunity like this comes along, you grab it with both hands, kid. You grab it with both hands.

the whole truth is like the story of a wave unfurled

—DAR WILLIAMS

PART ONE

BAD DAUGHTER

CHAPTER 1

FEELS LIKE HOME

Nestled in a suburban Colorado cul-de-sac in an unassuming cottage rambler on quiet Ivy Way, I sat peering out my bedroom window. I imagined myself as queen of the castle observing my kingdom below. My room was on the second floor and high enough to observe both the static familiarity of my own backyard and the unexplored wilderness just beyond my neighborhood. Leafy aspen trees shaded our playhouse and trampoline, the spindly branches growing low enough to display my mom's hand-painted wooden birdhouses. There were potted geraniums on the patio and a weathered soccer ball long forgotten in the basement window well. Adjacent to the swing set was a custom-built wooden sandbox filled with half-buried plastic shovels, pails, and tiny trucks, their wheel axles forever frozen by grains of sand.

This corner of heaven was my domain, and its perimeter was clearly defined by a six-foot-tall teakwood fence my dad had built and stained with help from family and friends. It created an impressive and imposing boundary complete with a private gate. The gate not only allowed us direct access to the undeveloped land preserve bordering our property but also kept our home private from the passing traffic and the vast landscape. We were safe and set apart, with access to the outside world when and if we needed it.

I had been told on more than one occasion not to go through the gate without my parents, but their warnings never stopped me from dreaming. *What good is a queen if she's not striving to expand her kingdom?* The longer I gazed at the mounds of dirt and prairie grass bordering our neighborhood, the more I felt them calling to me.

My mom and I had been reading aloud the book *Incident at Hawk's Hill* and I had become fixated on the story of young Ben, a six-year-old boy on the frontier who wandered away from his home and is nurtured, cared for, and

fed from the teat of a wounded badger separated from her cubs. This story spoke to me and my maternal instincts. I was convinced a lost child could be living in the field outside my suburban Denver neighborhood, but I'd never know if I didn't leave the safety of my bedroom. If I was going to find a badger den and an actual feral child to rescue and raise as my very own, I would have to venture through the forbidden gate, not just dream about it. And so it was, after weeks of gazing out my window imagining my destiny, I finally dared to try.

The lock had been positioned just high enough to allow a taller, more responsible person to go through the gate, close it, and then return to the backyard by reaching over the top of the fence to unlatch the lock from the other side. The secret to the gate was twofold: you had to be tall enough, and you had to know exactly where on the fence the lock was located. Once shut, the gate was virtually undetectable from the surrounding fence and out of reach to any adventurous six-year-old.

Opening the gate had been easy. I was small but resourceful enough to boost myself up and unhinge the simple latch, but once I stepped through to uncharted territory, the gate slammed shut, and the lock clicked back into place. I panicked. I couldn't tell where the normal fence ended and the gate to my backyard began. The distant, intermittent cars that I had once watched passively from my bedroom window immediately became unbearably loud and fast. I doubted my ability to *ever* cross the street alive, and certainly not while holding anything feral. My ambition had exceeded my ability, and I understood why my parents had built the fence and been explicit about the rules.

Because they loved me.

Because they wanted to protect me.

Because they knew it was dangerous; they knew there was no way back.

On the other side of the gate, it was all so clear. I was locked out of my life, locked away from my family, abandoned in the lone and dreary world. The adventures I had planned forsaken, the good intentions I had nurtured long forgotten. Outside the gate was bad. Inside the gate was good. And I needed to get back home.

Screaming for help was an option, but it would (1) reveal my disobedience, and (2) most likely go unnoticed. I couldn't control my heaving

sobs, but I kept my head down, my long mane of wavy hair hanging around my face just enough to conceal my shame. I wanted to disappear. I kept my eyes glued to the sidewalk and tried to walk with purpose to avoid being kidnapped or, worse, being asked by a Good Samaritan if I needed any help.

Once I reached my street and saw our house crest around the corner, I broke into a run. I didn't bother to gather myself or wipe my tears or even come up with a cover story. I ran right through the front door, headed straight up the stairs to my room, and dove face-first into the pillows on my bed. I vowed never to tell a soul and never to leave the sanctity of my kingdom again.

I told myself that from then on, I would only look for badgers and feral children within the confines of the backyard. I didn't need or want to go beyond the blasted gate. The lesson I learned left an imprint. The rules were there to keep me safe, not to stifle my ambitions. If no badgers or orphans appeared in my backyard, it was probably for the best.

The small voice inside my heart continued to whisper, *You can make all your dreams come true*, and I really believed it. The world was mine for the taking, and there was nothing I couldn't do if I set my mind to it. What could possibly go wrong? Who could possibly be against me?

I don't know the exact time I realized that the world was created for more than just me, but I like to think I had a good nine or ten years of absolute, egocentric, ignorant bliss.

Everything in my life confirmed my identity, my faith, and my future. Until it didn't.



I was planned for, prayed for, and prepared for long before I even knew it was my turn on earth. Perfectly spaced and perpetually pampered, I was the third child and the second daughter born into what I believed was one of God's chosen families. But to anyone else, we appeared to be typical suburban Americans.

I was one of six children, three girls and three boys. The births of my older and younger siblings were stacked within eighteen months of each other, but I was born with years of cushion in the blessed middle. My sister Jenny and brother Tyler had birthdays a mere fifteen months apart and were five and

four, respectively, when I arrived. I was the only child at home when they went to school, so I had my mom all to myself. My little sister, Nancy, was born four years later, and this sacred gap between siblings gave me just enough undivided attention to confirm my birthright.

I was what they called a BIC in my church, which meant I was “born in the covenant.” A daughter of the Most High God sealed for time and all eternity to devout, temple-married parents. BIC is only on your church membership record if your parents are married in the temple before you are born. “Children of the covenant” are natural heirs to the blessings of the priesthood and, according to the prophet Russell M. Nelson, part of a strain of sin-resistant souls with special promises and responsibilities. If you are born to parents married outside of the temple, you aren’t a BIC. You can still be admitted into the highest level of heaven, but it requires a work-around. You are grafted onto the family tree as a branch, but you will never be of the covenant line.

Born in the covenant: Mormon flex.

I may have had “BIC” on my church membership record, but growing up, I didn’t know what “covenant” meant. I didn’t even know that we were religious. I just thought that we were better than everyone else. I had no idea the sacrifices or oaths my parents had taken in order to assure that their children were part of “the prosperity of promise.” I just thought they were following the recipe for a typical family, with the secret ingredient of the gospel making us deliriously happy. We were Mormons, and Mormons had it figured out. We were doing something right. We were thriving. We had the world on a string.

Mormonism was our way of life, the only way of life, because we loved it. And we believed it.

Our faith came with perspective, balance, and humor. It was all-American. We were service oriented. We had fun. We had refreshments at every get together. We loved pinewood derbys, road shows, and girls’ camp. Our youth leaders indulged us with water balloon fights and ice cream socials. We would meet for activities at the vacant church buildings in the middle of the week and hang out afterwards to run through the darkened hallways feeling safe and silly and sneaky all at the same time.

We didn't hang crucifixes or focus heavily on sin, we knew the rules and we assumed no one would ever break them. We didn't forgo birthday parties and Halloween. We didn't cover our hair with veils or wear prairie dresses with tennis shoes. We seemed normal. We seemed practical. Our priests weren't cloistered away in monasteries, they were married volunteers who wore sport coats and Christmas ties.

I had never heard anyone at church say anything garish like "Praise Jesus!" or raise their arms uncontrollably and speak in tongues. Of course, we believed in the speaking in tongues and in the praising of Jesus, but we would never actually do it out loud. I had been taught that people who loved God like *that* were fanatics. We were the one and only true church on the face of the earth; we had the restored gospel, the priesthood, the Book of Mormon, and a living prophet that spoke to God. We had everything. We didn't need to shout it from the rooftops, all we needed to do was show up and share.

When other people spoke of their religions, I would think, *Forget religion, what we have is so much better. We have a way of life. A plan of happiness, a proven system. It works if you work it.* I wanted to share the gospel! I wanted to help the world! I was blessed to be born into the covenant, born into the faith, and I knew I had a duty to share it with those who were less fortunate.

We had the answers to all the tests. And "man's search for meaning" would undoubtedly lead everyone right to our front porch, where we would be waiting like *Dateline NBC's* Chris Hansen on *To Catch a Predator* with a pitcher of sweet tea and a smile.

"Hello! Come on in! Pull up a chair. Let's get started."

Where did we come from? What is our purpose here on earth? Where will we go when we die? I could answer these questions with confidence from the time I could speak. Everyone else was floating through life without a purpose, without a plan, and without the perfect love that we had as a family. I believed in my family and our religion like I believed in America, and from my window at the center of the universe, I couldn't tell the difference between the two.



My parents both grew up in Utah surrounded by members of the church and Mormon culture, but they eventually moved away. I was born in Carmel,

California, where my dad was studying Russian at the Language Defense Institute on the Monterey Peninsula. My parents were Mormon, but they weren't weird. I wasn't one of those run-of-the-mill Utah girls, I was a Carmel-by-the-Sea California girl, and I planned on living a life worthy of the distinction.

My father started his career in the FBI investigating bank robberies and eventually found his way into Russian counterintelligence, which forced him to relocate frequently. My mom, his wingman and wife, happily followed, creating homes without complaint in multiple states around the nation. By the time I was five, she finally said, "Eight is enough." After seven states, she wanted to take root. My dad left the FBI and accepted an assignment with the Bureau of Land Management, hunting thieves of historical indigenous sites in Denver, and my mom settled in to make the Mile High State her home sweet home for good.

My mom's early years of marriage always seemed like a grand adventure to me. I imagined how she learned to adapt and represent from sea to shining sea, living in a new state almost every two years, stopping only long enough to make a few friends and have another baby: Utah (Jenny), Minnesota (Tyler), Washington State, California (me), Virginia, Texas (Nancy), Colorado (Logan and Casey). Eventually, each state she made a home in would be immortalized in a series of framed batiks along our staircase and mantle in Denver. I would study each landmark etched out in ink and wax and imagine my parents all across America, making friends, making memories, making homes.

Mom was a BIC, born in the covenant, like me and like the generations before her. Her ancestors were oxcart pioneers that had traveled across the plains and settled in Ogden, Utah. When I imagine my mom in her prime, she resembles a young Katherine Heigl: perpetually youthful, deep brown eyes, and a big, brilliant smile. The oldest of six children, her youngest brother was barely born when she began having babies herself. In high school, she was a member of the 4-H Club and a white-gloved song leader, cheering in her green and white Hillcrest Huskies uniform. She was self-reliant and resourceful, working after school every day and saving up to buy her own braces and contact lenses. She wasn't afraid to spend a pretty penny to look pretty.

When she first met my dad, she was a Chi Omega at Utah State. He was a smooth-talking Sigma Chi who wore white jeans and penny loafers with no socks. She said she fell for him because he was a sharp dresser and drove a convertible VW Bug.

“What can I say?” she’d muse. “He looked like he came from money.” *Eye roll.*

My dad had not come from money; he had been raised by a cruel father and a well-meaning Mormon mother of meager means. The Scouting program and church youth groups had been his saving grace, and he worked hard for everything he had. He was influenced by bishops who later became apostles to the prophet. But his home life didn’t compare to the love and stability my mom had grown up with. And that did not go unnoticed. “We are who we come from” was a recurring theme in our church culture. My mom’s attempts to explain the rationale in marrying my dad served both as a cautionary tale for first impressions and as an explanation for how a prize like her fell for someone with a less-than-perfect pedigree.

“I was tricked,” she would joke. “He charmed me!”

Her destiny from that fateful moment on was to be on a fast track from sorority girl to stay-at-home mom. She was engaged, married, and pregnant within the year. The families decorated the wedding breakfast tables with black-eyed Susans in her honor. At the reception, her bridesmaids wore custom-sewn dotted-swiss gowns in a rainbow of pastel colors with puffed sleeves and empire waists.

My mom was an enigma, a sarcastic tour de force who was supremely competent in all the creative arts. If you wanted to turn in a winning essay or art-fair project, you wanted my mom as your consultant. She knew how to sprinkle salt on my watercolor painting of an ocean wave to make it foamy, how to add a topless mermaid on a rock outcropping to a drawing of an island to create intrigue, how to use words like “ermine” and “gilded” to describe something regal.

She always smelled of Paco Rabanne and could wear red lipstick without it smearing or getting on her teeth. The kind of mom who added a dollop of Cool Whip and a bendy straw to your glass of milk just because she knew it would thrill you. I’d follow her around the house like a groupie and watch her sit on the end of her bed with a compact mirror, applying her makeup slowly

and methodically, the mascara wand hovering in midair if she was distracted by the soap operas on the television in her bedroom.

“Oh, Heather, don’t watch this. It’s not for kids,” she would say, her eyes glued to the screen.

Those words filled me with illicit joy. She would say the same thing to me when I got to stay up late to have her comb my hair and set it in pink rollers or twist it into braids. I learned to hand her the comb or curler as slowly as possible to extend the task and prolong our time together. All my other siblings were in bed, and I considered these moments alone sacred. I’d sit quietly while her hands worked their way through my hair.

When she was finished, I’d creep onto my stomach and push my body back until it was level with the couch and out of her line of vision. The stakes were high. Any sudden movement or sound would remind her of my presence and get me unceremoniously sent to bed before the first note of the *Hill Street Blues* theme song played on the twenty-four-inch screen in the dimly lit living room.

I could tell which shows were for kids and which shows were not for kids based on the main characters. If they seemed like they could be Mormon—a father with a briefcase and a mother with an apron—then the show was safe to watch. If they did not seem Mormon—a mother with a briefcase and a father nowhere to be found—it was best to turn the channel. Because of my community, I had been surrounded by a specific type of faith, a specific type of success, that was easy for me to recognize. I would see a mom and a dad with kids on television or in a movie and it was obvious to me that if they seemed happy and well-adjusted, then they were most assuredly Mormon.

The Partridge Family? Mormon.

Tom Hanks? So Mormon I could taste it. Even as a bachelor disguising himself as a woman on *Bosom Buddies*, he still seemed Mormon. Peter Scolari, too. To me, they were just well-meaning Mormon guys working the system until they found wives.

Dick Van Patten? A good-time guy driving a minivan with eight highly independent children? Now, that is a *Mormon* man. And not just a Mormon man but a *bishop*. He’d never make it to the Big 12 apostle status—he was too easygoing for that—but he would definitely be a bishop. And not just any bishop, a *fun* bishop. The kind who would keep your secrets and not make

you break up with your boyfriend. The kind who would encourage his son to marry a soap star and a Real Housewife of Beverly Hills. With a Dick Van Patten by my side, anything was possible.