



Falling from Disgrace | A Reader's Guide

by Tammy Dietz

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Questions and Topics for Discussion

About the Book

Tammy Dietz grew up committed to her family's Mormon faith, a profoundly patriarchal hierarchy that declares men superior and women subordinate, that demands devotion, purity, and chastity. But when the dogma of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints clashes with the forces of a changing world, Tammy's destiny transforms.

Patriarchy provides order but also chaos in a family with a depressed mother and a hoarding father. Set in the affluent Bay Area, Tammy's coming-of-age story is one of poverty amid wealth and a desire for status, recognition, and inclusion, both inside the Church and out. But when Tammy breaks the most serious of rules, her once certain path falters, her once protective community turns intrusive, and she finds herself on an unexpected journey.

Thoughts from the Author

Looking back at this crossroads of my life, I recognize now that I didn't completely want to leave the Mormon community. But I didn't know how to remain. Rejecting my church and rejecting my lover were equally incomprehensible, and yet I felt enormous pressure to choose. The voice in my head repeated, you cannot have both. Rigid, black or white, in or out, no in-between. By the time I'd witnessed behavior suggesting I could ignore the contradictions and reside in between, I'd already wrestled myself out.

I had lost touch with all of my Mormon friends, except one. Shelly, a longtime childhood friend, cut hair at a fashionable salon close to where I lived and worked. Permanent waves, all the rage in the 1980s, were expensive, and during one appointment, Shelly agreed to provide the service at her house for half the price.

Right there I should have anticipated that Shelly was a person at ease in the space between "right" and "wrong." Of course, I was as well. I had been a thief most of my young life and lived comfortably with that dichotomy. But stealing was different than rules of abstinence to my mind. Stealing changed my state of grace only for the moment that I slipped goods into my pockets, and the outcome of stealing improved my social status. Premarital sex left a permanent stigma. The mutilated rose would never recover its original form.

Shelly received the same lessons. We sat next to each other for a few of them, stood next to one another singing in the ward choir about being wholesome and pure before our Lord. All Mormon girls were pure. Shelly and all of them. Of course they were, I'd assumed.

So I was surprised at a conversation we shared one day while she gave me a perm in her kitchen sink.

Shelly was married by then to a black man. It had caused a ruckus on both sides of the family, hers and his, but they fell in love and got married regardless. Mormonism involved confusing messages about race and favor from God, and interracial marriage was also taboo, which was why the families had prickled at their union. Knowing she may have experienced something similar to what I experienced as a breaker of rules set the stage for an unusually candid, albeit cautious, discussion about church.

"That's just it, Shel, that's why I'll never go back to Mormonism. They've only recently changed their minds about black people being equal to the white and delightful." I rolled my eyes. How could she buy that shit now?

She sighed.

"And some of the rules and regulations," I added as she squeezed cool neutralizer from a plastic bottle with a cone-shaped spout snipped open at the tip, carefully coating each curl wrapped so tightly that my head ached. I went on. "The rules are . . . well . . . I think they're kind of ridiculous. You know?"

She stayed calm, her eyes bright with recognition.

"How did you do it?" I asked her as our eyes met. "I mean, really? How did you manage to make it to the Mormon temple? You're gorgeous, you had boyfriends, lots of them, I remember. And the Book of Mormon silliness. It's all so silly. Where did the Golden Plates go anyway?"

Shelly's eyes returned to her work as she adjusted the cotton headband to absorb the fluid dripping to my ears and neck.

"I don't know where the Golden Plates went, that's a good question," she said as easily as if I'd asked her whatever happened to the Bee Gees.

"Sam?" she called out while beginning to unwrap each curler, tossing the plastic rollers in the nearby sink. "Sam?" she called again.

"Yeah?" I heard the voice of her visiting younger brother from a room down the hall. Sam was ten years younger than Shelly, a surprise baby, and I always remembered him as elementary age. Since I'd left church and stopped attending our ward by the time he'd reached puberty, I hadn't really seen Sam grow up, but that was clearly the voice of a mature male headed toward a mission soon.

"Whatever happened to the Golden Plates, do you know?" Again with that Where's Waldo tone.

"I don't know," Sam replied, equally lighthearted. "I think they went back up to heaven."

I raised a brow, but she didn't meet my stare.

"I guess it's not about that for me," she said without slowing down her work on my hair. "These curls turned out great, Tammy, really good."

"What do you mean, it's not about that for you?"

"I mean I don't really care about what's true or what's not true, what is sensible and what is ridiculous. I like church. Our church. I always have."

I was stunned, even more so when she said what came next. And for this, she did meet my eye as she whispered, “I mean who really cares if I had sex with my husband before I married him?”

Frozen, I could not reply. There were no words for the shock before it settled into recognition. Mormon girls weren't as pure as I'd assumed. Why, then, had I taken it all so seriously, when others could simply decide not to?

I drove home that night with my beautiful half-price curls in a fit of what can only be described as anger, though I wasn't sure at or about what. How could she be so casual and comfortable with hypocrisy? It wasn't fair.

I know now that cognitive dissonance and selective adherence to the systems we support are realities of the human experience. Hypocrisy is more of a norm than a crime, and we all do it, related to various topics, myself included. I love animals. But I also eat them. And elitism is surely a total fantasy, sustained by all who pander to it—both the “superior” and the “inferior.” I wasn't any worse than any of my Mormon girlfriends for my taboo behavior, and I wasn't any better than any of them for attempting to own my choices authentically and avoid hypocrisy.

Looking back on this now, after fully transitioning to a non-Mormon life and writing a book about the journey, I realize that Shelly lit a small torch of understanding for me that day. It would take decades, but eventually I have come to see her comfort with hypocrisy as synonymous with what it means to be tolerant of differences. Tolerance isn't agreement, and perhaps more importantly, tolerance doesn't need to be agreement. But it also isn't judgment. It's a choice to reside in between.

I find it both surprising and redeeming that while I certainly didn't learn about tolerance from Mormonism, I did learn a little about it from a devoted Mormon. I can also see that if I'd had that wisdom earlier, I might have chosen a different life course. My post-Mormon life has been charmed and wonderful. But I do sometimes wonder how it might have been different if I'd stayed, fibbed my way through, and remained steady in the in-between.

Discussion Questions

1. What might your life have been like had you made a different choice when at a critical crossroads—if new information had arrived earlier, or if you'd had the maturity you have now?
2. Is there anything in your life you've pursued with blind faith regardless of the opposition? What, and how has it impacted you?
3. To what extent do you discuss religion with friends and family? Why?
4. What are the pros and cons of chastity before marriage, regardless of religion? In what ways does teaching young adults one or the other benefit or harm them or society?
5. How are the struggles Tammy and her mother face within the framework of their religion the same or different? What did you notice in the story about the impacts of Mormon patriarchal beliefs on men?
6. How do you interpret Tammy's response to learning about Church history? Have you experienced anything similar, when you discovered something

- impactful that was also intentionally hidden from you? What did you do, and how did you feel about it?
7. This story takes place decades ago, in the 1970s and 1980s. How did the time period influence the story? How might it be different if it took place today?
 8. What was Tammy's motivation to shoplift, in your opinion, and how did she justify it? How does this relate to justifications you've made or seen others make for behavior considered wrong?
 9. In what ways do you think Tammy was "lucky" or "unlucky" in life? What character traits do you most admire in her, and which do you least admire?
 10. What were your first impressions of Tammy, her family members, and the dynamics between them? How did those impressions change over the course of the story? Do any of the story characters remind you of people you know? How so?
 11. How did the location and condition of Tammy's home influence the outcome of this story? What is the connection between the home condition and church, if any?
 12. Why did Tammy become a target for Mr. Bittle? How did Tammy escape deeper trouble with him?
 13. What are the main themes in this book? Which themes resonated with you the least or the most?
 14. What questions would you ask the author, if you could?
 15. Do you know anyone you think would benefit from reading this story? Why?
 16. If there was one thing you could change about the outcome of Tammy's story, what would it be, and why?

About the Author



Tammy Dietz is a learning experience design leader, facilitator, instructional designer, writer, and editor. Her creative work has appeared in various anthologies and literary journals. From 2009 to 2018, she served as nonfiction editor of *Silk Road*, a literary magazine published by Pacific University, where she earned an MFA in creative nonfiction in 2009. She has also worked in the field of learning and development for twenty years and is currently a learning experience design manager at a Fortune 500 company. She lives near Seattle with her spouse of thirty years.

Get in Touch

Tammy would love to hear from readers! She encourages you to contact her with questions or thoughts at tammydietz@hotmail.com.