



## Saint Unshamed: A Gay Mormon's Life

**Kerry Ashton**

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*Saint Unshamed is a triumphant memoir about how one man managed to find a way out of a culture that would silence him.*

In his memoir, *Saint Unshamed*, actor and writer Kerry Ashton likens shame to an insidious disease that threads through the body and the psyche, slowly destroying and devaluing everything it touches. Ashton caught it early—from his parents, from his Mormon faith, from his burgeoning understanding of his own sexuality. Brutal, graphic, and historical, this memoir tells not only Ashton's harrowing story, but also that of the many gay men who struggled with their sexual identity and health during the latter quarter of the twentieth century.

Now capable of understanding much of what he has endured, Ashton begins with his own lack of shame, a state he spent decades trying to achieve. Shamed by his family for being effeminate and policed and punished by Brigham Young University, Ashton nevertheless emerged the victor, but he also endured electroshock therapy that forever damaged his nervous system and a disturbing and violent rape.

In the midst of his own story, Ashton also discusses friends who lost their lives, including gay men who killed themselves, who contracted HIV, or who buried themselves in heterosexual marriages. He gives life to rest stops and gay cruising grounds, relating both their necessity and the danger they represented for men who could not speak about their sexual needs.

Ashton also tries to make sense of his religious and family life. Strict Mormon laws regarding sex, from masturbation to intercourse to anything in between, informed much of Ashton's suffering, but to deny Mormonism would have been to lose his family, his faith, and, in many ways, his identity as a young man. Ashton's electric scenes speak to that quandary and make real the many parts of life that are barred to men who come out.

Though the memoir progresses almost to the present, with a quick screed against Donald Trump near its end, Ashton's young adulthood and childhood produce the best-wrought scenes with the most at stake. The pacing and the tension there is literary; scenes are full and include actions and reactions. Reminiscences from Ashton's middle age read more like reportage, without the fevered intensity of the early parts of the book.

The text's moves through time are frequent and sometimes disruptive. Barbra Streisand movies are referenced to help keep years straight in the story, which also pays homage to Judy Garland; *The Wizard of Oz* becomes an extended metaphor with clear parallels in Ashton's story. Ashton's encounters with famous people are charming and interesting in and of themselves.

Devastating but ultimately hopeful, *Saint Unshamed* is insightful as it reveals a generation of Mormon men who were hurt and sometimes destroyed by the church's positions on their sexuality. It is a triumphant memoir about how one man managed to find a way out.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (December 21, 2018)

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