

STUDYGUIDE

MARGUERITE O'HARA



**THE
LOST
TRIBE**

A film written, directed and produced by
Rachel Landers

Synopsis

Ex-Mormon, atheist, lesbian, and stand-up comic, Sue-Ann Post, undertakes a confronting pilgrimage to Mormon Zion as a guest of the gay and lesbian Mormon organization Affirmation, to attend their annual Gay and Lesbian Convention in Salt Lake City, the heart of Mormonism, in Utah, USA. Unlike Sue-Ann, many of Affirmation's members remain deeply religious despite having been excommunicated for their sexuality.

Sue-Ann Post has molded a career as an award-winning stand-up comic from the lurid and toxic brew of tales from her childhood and adolescence ... tales of a lesbian Mormon. In Australia she is one of a kind.

When Sue-Ann ran screaming from the Mormon Church, she was shunned by her family. She has been an outsider ever since, and when she demanded to be excommunicated on the national talk show, *Denton*, she finished the job. Sue-Ann's comic career reinforced a wall that buries the past she has never confronted: a raw nerve of unresolved trauma and loss that haunts her always. She misses her mother, her siblings and, in some ways, her church.

One night after her sell-out one woman show, *G-strings and Jock straps*, she is approached by a representative of *Affirmation*, an organi-



HANGING OUT WITH GAY MORMONS IN SALT LAKE CITY

In making this film ... I found it fascinating to explore why it is so important to many Gay and Lesbian Church members to remain devout and to be accepted as such by the Church hierarchy. On the one hand one may say 'why not?' – surely anyone regardless of race, gender sexuality and so on should be allowed to practice freely whatever religion they choose without persecution – on the other hand as Sue-Ann Post, the atheist ex-Mormon put it, 'why?'

RACHEL LANDERS, FILMMAKER

zation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Mormons and invited to attend their annual conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. Sue-Ann accepts. But, as the trip looms ever nearer on the horizon she begins having night sweats as the terror of confronting all she has turned her back on builds. Now Sue-Ann is headed to Salt Lake City to perform to a conference teeming with (predominantly, devout, excommunicated) gay Mormons. In Salt Lake she falls into a peculiar and confronting mix of people leading to a series of extraordinary and unexpected events.

The Lost Tribe is an observational documentary following Sue-Ann's funny, bizarre, and confronting journey to this Mormon heartland and an intimate portrait of one of the world's least understood religions.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This film will be of interest to upper level secondary students as well as to tertiary students, particularly students of:

- Religion and Society
- Gender Studies
- Ethical, Moral and Religious Studies
- Philosophy
- Media Studies
- Political Studies
- Studies of Culture and Society
- Psychology
- Studies of Society and Environment (HSIE)

Using *The Lost Tribe* in the classroom

The film deals with values, especially those involving family, religion and gender issues and the distress caused when these conflict.

While Sue-Ann Post is principally known in Australia as a comedian, and there are some funny moments and scenes in this documentary, there are as many tears as laughter. The film deals with her attempts to reconcile the religious faith she was born into (Mormonism) with the rejection

of fundamental aspects of herself, principally her sexuality, by the Mormon Church (and incidentally by many other religions).

It is as much a film about losing and finding 'family' and what this can mean in the twenty-first century as it is about the Mormon religion and its beliefs and practices.

If students are to fully appreciate this documentary they will need to have some basic understanding of:

- the history of Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints)
- Religious terms and acronyms used in the film.

To help with these understandings this guide includes:

- A glossary of key terms and acronyms.
- Brief biographical notes on key people appearing in the film
- A history of the Mormon Church

Glossary

OF KEY WORDS AND ACRONYMS

- **Affirmation** – Name of the group of Gay and Lesbian Mormons whose congress Sue-Ann attends. The word means positive declaration
- **Agnosticism** – Belief that nothing can be known with certainty of the existence or otherwise of God
- **Atheism** – Disbelief in the existence of God or gods
- **Excommunication** – official expulsion from church membership
- **Golden Plates** – found by Joseph Smith in 1823. Their content is said to contain the history of the tribe of Mormons
- **Heterosexual** – male and female coupling
- **Homophobic** – fear and sometimes hatred of same-sex relationships
- **Lamanites** – tribe whom Mormons believe almost wiped out the Nephites in 400AD; they believe Lamanites were the ancestors of the American Indians
- **LDS** – acronym for Latter Day Saints, from the complete name of the Mormon religion
- **Lesbian** – female homosexual
- **Misogynistic** – hating women
- **Mormonism** – Christian religion originating in America, also known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. In Australia there are approximately 45 thousand people claiming to be church members, or 0.25% of the population, compared with 27% claiming to be members of the Catholic Church. Salt Lake City in Utah, USA, is where Mormons created a city and settled in the late 1800s.
- **Nephites** – tribe from whom Mormons believe they are descended
- **Patriarchal** – social and religious systems where males are pre-eminent as leaders and rulers
- **Polygamy** – practice of allowing men to take more than one wife; now no longer practiced by Mormons
- **Temple** – building where important ceremonies are held, but not necessarily a place of worship like a church
- **Zion** – holy city; to Mormons this is Salt Lake City, while for Jews it is Jerusalem

Learning Outcomes

The themes and activities developed in this guide relate to the following learning outcomes:

- Analysing the core values of groups, societies and individuals
- Developing an understanding of why individuals and groups reject each other
- Understanding the key characteristics, values and attitudes of some Fundamentalist religious groups
- Empathizing with the effects family breakdown can have on an individual
- Exploring the many different things that ‘family’ can mean
- Developing an awareness of the positive aspects of religions like Mormonism for members of these communities who feel accepted and valued
- Drawing conclusions about the connections between religious beliefs and significant life experiences

Who’s Who?

SUE-ANN POST – a Melbourne standup comedian and author born into the Mormon faith who goes on a journey to Salt Lake City, the headquarters of the Mormon Church in Utah, USA, to take part in a Gay and Lesbian conference of fellow Mormons, mostly ex-members of the Church, others lapsed members.

ANTHEA SKINNER – Sue-Ann’s partner, who accompanies and supports her on the trip.

RACHEL LANDERS – writer, director and producer of the film, mostly behind the camera as she films the journey. Her films have won several awards, including nominations for two AFI Awards and a United Nations Media award for *Whiteys Like Us*. Recently she completed the documentary *A Girl, A Horse, A Dream* and the documentary series *Missing* for SBS.

GARY HORLACHER – a Mormon genealogist seen frequently in the film as a guide and friend. He farewells the women at the airport (amongst other things), and also leads the prayers at the final reconciliation session.

JOSEPH SMITH – first prophet and founder of the Mormons. Guided to ‘the golden plates’ in 1823 and murdered in 1844, partly because he advocated polygamy. Sue-Ann refers to him as ‘a right jolly prophet’.

BRIGHAM YOUNG – second prophet, leader of the Mormons and founder of Salt Lake City.



Student Activity **one**

Before watching the film

What do I think?

Read the following statements about religious beliefs and indicate whether you agree, disagree or are undecided about each one (A, D or U)

- Churches should not exclude individuals on the basis of their race or gender choices and sexual practices.
- You need to shop around for a Church that best suits your temperament and personal values.
- God is neither male nor female, neither black, white nor any other colour.
- Many religions are still too patriarchal and unsympathetic to women.
- Joy, companionship and acceptance are important in Church groups.
- Literal interpretations of the Bible are no longer appropriate.
- Poetic interpretations of Biblical stories are appropriate.
- Churches are too old fashioned and not 'with it'.
- Churches should be honest with people.
- God has no interest in people's sexual orientation.
- You can't pick and choose which bits of a church's beliefs you will adhere to.

- Religious beliefs have resulted in more harm than good over the centuries.
- There is a difference between church beliefs and practices such as a ban on drinking alcohol.

You will be reviewing your responses to this exercise after you have watched *The Lost Tribe*.

There are three key questions to keep in mind as you watch this film. They are:

- 1 Why does Sue-Ann Post go to Salt Lake City?
- 2 What does she find out about herself and her Mormon heritage?
- 3 What do we learn from the film about people and religion?

All these questions are difficult to answer, for both Sue-Ann and viewers. If you follow what happened in Salt Lake City through carefully following Sue-Ann's journey and what she tells us about her life, it should be easier to make suggestions to answer question three.

Consider whether it is possible to remain a Mormon when your personal sexual identity is rejected by the Church as sinful, or can people like Sue-Ann achieve some sense of comfort through making this often painful journey?

Brief History of the Mormon Religion

Historical and Theological background information on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormonism)

According to the book of Mormon, a companion volume to the Bible, an ancient Hebrew tribe – one of the lost tribes of Israel – journeyed to America in 600 BC. After arrival the tribe divided into two warring factions – the virtuous fair skinned Nephites and the darker, idle and mischievous Lamanites.

In 33 AD, soon after his resurrection, Jesus Christ appeared in America to share his new gospel with the entire tribe. Despite a temporary peace, the Lamanites wiped out the Nephites in 400AD and went on to become the ancestors of the American Indians.

Mormon, one of the last Nephites to survive, recounted the history of the tribe to his son Moroni who inscribed it on a series of golden plates.

These golden plates remained buried until Moroni, now an angelic personage, guided a young man, Joseph Smith, to them in 1823.

Joseph Smith translated the golden plates (which formed the text of the Book of Mormon) and in 1830 became the first contemporary Mormon prophet and founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Twenty years after being guided to the golden plates, Joseph Smith had another revelation from God. The sanctity of celestial marriage had been revealed to Joseph – in effect that a man in the Latter-day Saint faith could take multiple wives.

The practice of polygamy led to widespread persecution of the Mormons (including the murder of Joseph) and they were hounded from one state to another. Finally Brigham Young, the second Latter Day Saint prophet, led the Mormons on a great trek across North America, eventually settling in an utterly remote desert valley – founding Salt Lake City – known also as Zion.

In early 1890, Mormons are threatened by Congress with expulsion from the United States. God sends a revelation to the fourth Mormon prophet to abandon the practice of polygamy.

At present there are approximately eleven million Mormons worldwide. It is regarded as one of the fastest growing religions in the West. In the USA there are more Mormons than Presbyterians or Episcopalians. On the planet as a whole there are now more Mormons than Jews ... if the growth of Mormonism continues at its current pace it is on its way to being considered a major world religion.

The Church of The Latter Day Saints is deeply patriarchal in structure; only (and indeed all) male Mormons can hold the office of priesthood and thus can enter the highest levels of heaven and become Gods themselves. Women get to serve men in their calling, marry and breed. To enter Heaven one must enter a heterosexual marriage. Being single or even celibate are not options. The tenets of the Church appear deeply misogynistic, homophobic, right wing, frequently racist and often downright strange. It's a religion that asserts that Mormons are the descendants of a tribe of Israel who voyaged to America in 600BC; a religion in which polygamy bound all cosmology and theology, defining and setting them apart – 'a peculiar people'.

The Church of Latter Day Saints of Jesus Christ is a religion that endorsed polygamy and slavery until threatened with expulsion from the Union in the 1890s. Up until the late 1970s male black Mormons could not join the priesthood and homosexuals were 'treated' with Electro shock therapy to turn them straight. A Mormon can still be excommunicated for any number of sins including adultery, homosexuality and masturbation. Even today the LDS adhere to the belief that its Gay and Lesbian members can be 'cured' of homosexuality if they attend reparative/conversion therapy conducted by the Church (such as that conducted by the LDS Evergreen Foundation).





Student Activity

two

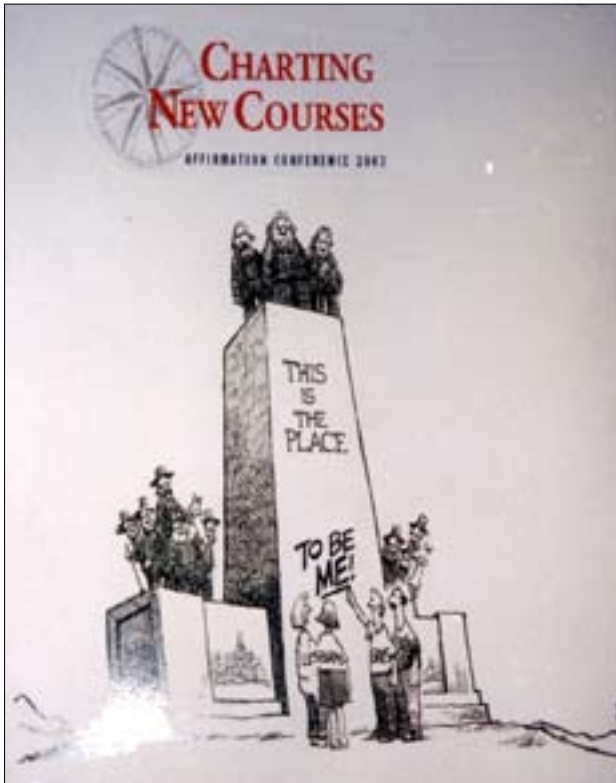
Running sheet for viewing the program

Take brief notes on as many of these questions as possible while watching the film. It will help if you read through the questions first.

The Journey Begins

1 What does the opening sequence of the film tell us

- about Sue-Ann's life in Melbourne and how she feels about the trip to Salt Lake City?
- 2 Sue-Ann says, 'I loved my church and didn't want to leave it'. When did she leave the Mormon Church and why?
 - 3 What happened when Sue-Ann was interviewed on *The Denton Show* on television in 1994? What did she say on national television and how did she feel about this afterwards.
 - 4 What did she expect to happen after her appearance and statements?



- 5 Why didn't she hear anything about it for six years?
- 6 What did the letter she finally received from the Mormon Church headquarters say?
- 7 What has been the subject matter of many of her comedy routines?
- 8 As she and Anthea leave for the convention in Salt Lake City (Mormon headquarters) what is her predominant emotion?

Arriving in Salt Lake City and meeting the people and the city

- 1 What is Sue-Ann anxious about as she arrives at Salt Lake City airport?
- 2 What does one of the members of *Affirmation* say to her when they meet at the airport?
- 3 In the motel room, Sue-Ann and the guys from *Affirmation* sing a song 'Popcorn Popping ...' How does this establish a bond?
- 4 What does Gary, the fair-haired Mormon genealogist, find out about Sue-Ann's ancestors?
- 5 What percentage of citizens of Salt Lake City is believed to be Mormon?
- 6 List some of the social practices of Mormons, which may set them apart from other groups.
- 7 During the tour of some of the sites of Salt Lake City, Sue-Ann becomes emotional. What do you think prompts these tearful moments, which recur throughout the conference?

Conventioning

- 1 At the conference registration Sue-Ann learns that the letter she received from the official Church saying she'd been taken 'off the books' did mean she'd been ex-communicated. What does this mean to her at this point?
- 2 After Steven, the smiling guy, has sung his song about ex-communication, Sue-Ann says of Mormons in Australia, 'We are few and far between', implying a subconscious identification with a religion she has previously publicly rejected. Does this suggest ambivalence about her feelings towards the church or is it just a 'slip of the tongue'?
- 3 At the Workshop where the speaker talks about 'reconciling gayness with Mormonism', Sue-Ann leaves and becomes very emotional. How does this man's views about the importance of celibacy conflict with her own beliefs?
- 4 When Sue-Ann presents her talk (gig) to the delegates, she says, 'I've mellowed and softened towards the church'. Would you?
- 5 She tells a story about speaking at The World Council of Churches Convention in Australia about The Mormon Church, which is not a member of this group, despite their Christian beliefs. When these people loved her material and laughed loudly at her stories of what she sees as silly aspects of church practices and beliefs, how did she respond? (You need to keep in mind that she is a standup comic by trade)

Homecoming Dance, Family Fellowship and Reconciliation

- 1 The *Saliva Sisters* sing at the dance (and in other places in the film), parodying the words of popular songs to suit the group they are performing to. How do they subvert the words of the pop song *Day Tripper*? (You can check out more about this group by going to the website listed at the end of this guide)
- 2 At the Family Fellowship service, the parents of some gay and lesbians join with them at a prayer meeting. Sue-Ann finds this especially emotional. Why?
- 3 At the final Reconciliation meeting, Gary leads the prayers with, 'We work to reconcile who we are as gays and lesbians with our faith'. Do you believe this is possible?

Saying Goodbye

As Sue-Ann and Anthea leave Salt Lake City, Sue-Ann says, 'I think I've made my peace ... a little burning coal of anger has dissipated'.

What do you think has been the most important aspect of attending the Affirmation conference for Sue-Ann Post?



Student Activity **three**

Discussion

Talking the talk, but is it 'walking the walk'?

Choose 3 of the statements below from the film and discuss them in small groups. Try to broaden your discussion about their significance and implications to beyond the Mormon Church.

- 1 'I loved my Church.' (Sue-Ann)
- 2 'Will I feel alien in Utah?' (Sue-Ann)
- 3 'I still lock the cat out of the bedroom because of what my mother told me.' (Sue-Ann)
- 4 'I'm a lesbian not because I hate men, but because I love women.' (Sue-Ann)
- 5 'Why would you bother to stay in what is quite a homophobic church?' (Sue-Ann)
- 6 'We're family.' (Duane)
- 7 'You can't completely turn your back on the Church you were raised in or on your family.' (Sue-Ann)
- 8 'The persecuted have become the persecutors.' (Conference delegate)
- 9 'There's still a lot of good in this religion.' (Gary)
- 10 'We work to reconcile who we are as gays and lesbians with our faith.' (Gary)

What do Mormons believe to be right?

Use missionaries to recruit converts; active proselytizing throughout the world.

That the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is the one true Church

That God and Jesus are separate, physical beings who live on a planet called Kolob.

That the American continent is the new 'Promised Land' and that's where God's faithful will gather His Faithful shortly before the Second Coming.

No tea, coffee, alcohol or other drug use

No pants, sleeveless tops or skirts above the knee for women

Active concern with genealogy and ancestry

Only married men can become Gods in Heaven

No pre-marital sex

No masturbation

No homosexuality



four

Student Activity

Style and content

The way in which a film is made is important in shaping responses to the themes and issues raised. In *The Lost Tribe* the construction of the narrative, visual and sound editing will all elicit a particular response from viewers.

How does the filmmaker, Rachel Landers tell the story of Sue-Ann Post's trip to Salt Lake City?

I wanted to get beyond all the surface [of Mormonism] and explore in depth why this religion (and their religious identity) was so important to these gay and lesbian Mormons (all of whom had been excommunicated) and how they supported each other while fighting for acceptance and change. (Rachel Landers-Director)

Sue-Ann's description of Rachel's instructions to her and Anthea before they left for Salt Lake City on how to react and not react while they are being filmed:

Rachel gave us a crash course in doco. basics, including when to ignore the camera and when to look straight in the lens. See, Anthea and I knew nothing about the nuts

and bolts of how a documentary is made. We understood that she'd be following us around with a camera recording much of what we said and did but we didn't understand all the ramifications. No acknowledging of the camera, no introducing people to Rachel while the camera was running and no referring to the film process either. The world of documentary making has its own rules and customs and we were totally ignorant of them.¹

- 1 Did you feel the camera was unnecessarily intrusive at any time during the making of this documentary?
- 2 Are there aspects of Sue-Ann's life that you would like to have known more about?
- 3 What good visual material was available to the filmmakers?
- 4 What does the opening shot suggest about the film's major themes?
- 5 How do the music and songs used as background enhance and reinforce both images and narration?
- 6 What would be some of the difficulties in making a film about a convention of Gay Mormons in Salt Lake City?
- 7 What would be your focus in making a film about such a gathering of people?

Student Activity

five

The big issues

Discuss these questions either in small groups or as a class, before selecting one to explore in more detail.

- 1 Is it possible to practice a religious faith if you can't accept some of the church's basic beliefs?
- 2 What do you think was the most important aspect of this journey for Sue-Ann Post?
- 3 Many religions, including many Christian religions, do not accept Gay people as full practicing members of their faith. On what basis might such discrimination occur? Research the official church attitudes to Gay people in a religion you are familiar with.
- 4 How do you think practicing members of the mainstream Mormon Church might respond to this film?
- 5 Revisit your responses to the What Do I Think? activity you completed before watching the program. Would you change any of your opinions?
- 6 How likely do you think it is that those religions currently unwelcoming to, or rejecting of, gay and lesbian people, are likely to change their practices in the future?
7. Although the Mormon church now discourages it – historically, Mormons have been subject to persecution for their practice of polygamy because it is viewed by many as a perverse sexuality. The members of Affirmation are now being persecuted by the Mormon church for practicing what the church has deemed to be a perverse sexuality. How do these two situations compare with one another?
8. Unlike most other religions, Mormons believe in direct revelation, that God speaks directly and routinely to the current prophet to reveal new information. Thus, many would say that Mormon doctrine is

more fluid than that of most world religions. In the 1970's, for example, a revelation was handed down to allow black men to join the priesthood. How does this affect gays and lesbians who hope, one day, to be welcomed back into the church as practising homosexuals? How is their position different to homosexual members of other faiths?

References

Books

Sue-Ann Post, *The Confession of an Unrepentant Lesbian Ex-Mormon (or Hanging Out With Gay Mormons in Salt Lake City)*, ABC Books, 2005. A detailed account of Sue-Ann's thoughts about religion and her Mormon background and about the trip to Utah on which the film is based

Sue-Ann Post, *A Bit of a Postscript*, Penguin Books, 1997. An autobiographical account of her life

Web Sites

<http://www.ausport.gov.au/fulltext/1999/sportsf/sf990402.htm>
Transcript of an ABC radio interview with Sue-Ann Post about her hammer-throwing activity (accessed 3/10/05)

<http://www.ssonet.com.au/display.asp?ArticleID=4182>
Transcript of interview with Sue-Ann Post in a Sydney newspaper about her trip to Salt Lake City (accessed 3/10/05)

http://www.affirmation.org/learning/a_bit_of_a_postscript.asp
Website of the Affirmation Gay and Lesbian group with links to a number of sites dealing with this group of Mormons (accessed 3/10/05)

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/Arts/PostMormon/2005/03/21/1111253945423.html>
Age newspaper interview with Sue-Ann Post on her return from her trip to the convention in Salt Lake City (accessed 3/10/05)

<http://www.affirmation.org/conference/default.asp>

Site details the 2005 Affirmation Conference to be held in Denver, Colorado, part of which includes a screening of *The Lost Tribe* (accessed 3/10/05)

<http://www.salivasisters.com/>
Website of group who sing in the film (accessed 3/10/05)

<http://www.lds.org/>
Official website of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (accessed 3/10/05)

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/ark/stories/s1375956.htm>

An interesting interview transcript from ABC radio about the history of The Mormon Church, and Joseph Smith, made to coincide with the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth (accessed 3/10/05)

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Endnotes

- 1 Sue-Ann Post, *The Confession of an Unrepentant Lesbian Ex-Mormon*, p95, ABC Books, 2005.

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