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Pilcher, Toni, "Mormon Contributions to Young Adult Literature" (2011). Student Works. 79. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub/79

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Mormon Contributions to Young Adult Literature

Toni Elise Pilcher

Mormon authors are making big splashes in the world of young adult (YA) literature, a relatively young genre that is targeted at readers from age 12 to age 18. Since 1967, when the American Library Association officially recognized YA literature as separate from children’s books, writers and publishers have been trying to define the genre. It is, in a sense, coming of age. Generally, to be considered YA, a book has to have a teenage protagonist in situations with which a teenage reader can identify. Like literature for adults, there are few limitations to subject and theme, but unlike literature for adults, most YA novels either have a happy ending or end with a hint of hope.

Perhaps this hope is what attracts so many Mormons to the genre. In a *Boston Globe* article in 2009, Michael Paulson noted that Mormon writers “are surging into the genre of young adult literature, finding a happy marriage between the expectations of their religion and the desires of a burgeoning publishing niche” (“Faith and good works”)¹. Paulson noticed that Mormons are setting trends in this popular genre. Several publishing houses in the Mormon market have imprints specifically for YA books, and there have been best-sellers and award-winners in both the Mormon market and the national market. Indeed, in the last decade, the number of Mormon writers in the national book market has grown into a notable presence that demands recognition. However, members of the Church have been involved in literature for adolescents since the early twentieth century. In the 1950s, Brigham Young University was even teaching courses in the Education department on YA books, a decade before the American Library Association officially recognized YA literature as its own genre². The English
department followed suit in 1962 with its YA literature course, still a few years ahead of the trend\(^3\). From this early foundation, Mormons have contributed to the development of the genre through several essential venues, including writing and teaching.

**History**

In the national market religion rarely factors into a YA story, and is hardly ever mentioned even casually. YA critics have recently voiced concerns over the lack of religion in so-called diverse books, pointing out that adolescence is usually the stage of life in which most religious questions arise\(^4\)\(^5\).

However, historically, religion has played an important role in the YA literature of the Mormon market. In the early days of the LDS Church, members recognized the instructive and religious power of stories. Whether they had a specific agenda or not, stories could convey doctrines and principles of the gospel in an interesting and engaging format. The first novel-length story that was written for the young people of the Church was Nephi Anderson’s *Added Upon*. This novel presents the Plan of Salvation by following the main characters through the stages of immortal existence. A product of the Home Literature movement as defined by Mormon scholar Eugene England\(^6\), *Added Upon* was first published in 1898, but it remained in continuous publication until as recently as 2005. Anderson’s story had staying power: though it was created for educational purposes, the book was obviously interesting enough to keep people reading for over a century. Throughout the history of Mormon YA literature, many authors, including Jack Weyland and Bruce Yorgason, have also succeeded with didactic novels.

However, other writers thought that the strictures of didacticism were limiting the art of the story. These writers, referred to as the Lost Generation by England\(^7\), aimed for a broader audience and national appeal. While they did not address Mormon-only topics—some even
embraced taboo subjects—many of these writers acknowledged the inextricable influence of
their Mormon worldview. One particular writer, Virginia Sorenson, was widely accepted and
acclaimed when she published her 1956 novel for young readers, *Miracles on Maple Hill*. This
novel, about a young girl who discovers the beauty of everyday miracles, won the most
prestigious award in children’s literature, the John Newbery Medal from the American Library
Association. Sorenson and her peers showed what Mormons could offer to the children’s and YA
publishing world: high-quality literature.

At the same time, Mormon writers were also developing a stronger critical community,
responding to the assertion that good literature requires good criticism. Mormon writers were
devoted to improving and sharing stories, within both the Mormon market and the national
market. This dance of ideas has contributed to and shaped the now-burgeoning young adult book
culture. Mormons have left their mark through writing, editing, teaching, and analyzing YA
literature.

**Writing**

Mormon novelists basically find two kinds of audiences for their work: the Mormon
market and the national market. Mormon fiction usually has Mormon characters, situations,
and/or doctrine, while national fiction typically does not have explicitly Mormon material. Most
Mormon writers have found it difficult to divorce themselves from their religious background,
imbuing their characters with a set of Christian morals and an eternal perspective. This is not a
distinctly Mormon practice, since the Church shares many beliefs with other religions. Still,
signs of didactic or obvious religious influence have turned publishers away from Mormon
manuscripts. However, YA literature in general calls for moral themes more than adult literature
does. Fantasy, a foundational trend that has always been popular with young readers, inherently
involves morals and lessons, though the readers are often left to interpret these lessons on their own.

In recent years, more Mormon writers have been able to publish stories with Mormon characters and situations. Among them are Louise Plummer, A.E. Cannon, Ann Dee Ellis, and Emily Wing Smith. Smith’s novels are the most explicit when it comes to religion. She published *Back When You Were Easier to Love* in 2011 with Dutton Children’s Books, an imprint with Penguin. Her first novel, *The Way He Lived* (2008), was published with Flux, a new imprint dedicated to YA literature. Both imprints are directed toward national audiences, but both novels have explicitly Mormon elements, be it setting or character. Of course, it is not a new thing to have Mormon characters in the national market. Even Ender in Orson Scott Card’s iconic *Ender’s Game* (1985) has a Mormon mother who prays over him at night. But national publishers, with a few imprints as exceptions, do not publish religious YA fiction.

Still, the markets and the writers are not static. Many writers published their first YA novel in the Mormon market before moving into the national market. Recently, Ally Condie broke into the national market with a seven-figure contract for a trilogy that began with *Matched* (2010), but only after publishing several YA novels for Deseret Book. In addition, some writers simultaneously publish in both markets. Years before the recent wave of Mormon YA writers, Dean Hughes and Lael Littke were writing full-time for several publishing houses, both in and outside of the Mormon market. Hughes now has over 80 publications published by Atheneum and Pocket Books in the national market and Bookcraft and Deseret Book in the Mormon market. Littke has over 20 novels and countless short stories under her belt. She has published extensively with Deseret Book, but she has also published with Scholastic, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and Harcourt Books, all national market publishers.
Whether they write for a Mormon audience or a national audience, Mormon YA writers have participated in literary movements outlined by England. The first books written for youth in the Church were part of the aforementioned Home Literature and Lost Generation movements. However, the most successful wave of YA books has been late in the Faithful Realism movement, as defined by England.

While Faithful Realism is usually associated with the literary genre of contemporary realism, there are many other genres participating in this movement, including historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction, and paranormal romance. Regardless of genre or the age of the audience, those stories which are most believable, most realistic, are the ones that shine. Traditionally, Mormon writers have flourished in historical fiction. Mormon culture emphasizes honoring those who have gone before: Scripture stories and pioneer stories have always been highly respected in the literature. The tradition of historical fiction is no different among books for younger readers, though authors have recently expanded the range of history that is being explored. Dean Hughes is one of the most famous Mormon authors of historical fiction, particularly for his *Children of the Promise* series, which is set in World War II. Chris Crowe, an instructor and scholar of young adult literature as well as a writer, has also received critical acclaim for his historical fiction. His novels are set at the middle of the 20th century in the South, depicting the good and the bad of past times. At the other end of the historical spectrum, Rebecca Tingle’s novels are set on the British Isles prior to the Norman invasion of 1066. Tingle, one of the few Mormon Canadian authors along with Martine Leavitt, tells little-known stories from a time long before the LDS Church was organized.

Mormon YA literature has certainly contributed the new subgenre of Book of Mormon historical fiction, or historical fiction that involves figures and situations from this particular
book of scripture. This subgenre was made popular by Chris Heimerdinger’s *Tennis Shoes Among the Nephites* series, which could also be considered science fiction because it involves time travel and the meeting of new and old worlds. Heimerdinger and Deseret Book are still publishing new additions to *Tennis Shoes*, and many other authors continue to write in the subgenre. In 2011, Bonneville published debut author Misty Moncur’s *Daughter of Helaman*, a novel that takes a twist on one of the central Book of Mormon stories: in a battle between rival tribes, the Nephites and the Lamanites, an army of 2000 young warriors fight to save their families, and all 2000 miraculously survive. In Moncur’s novel, a teenage girl tries to find a way to fight alongside the young men, a classic example of YA historical fiction.

Most adult readers have also noticed the recent explosion of Mormon writers in fantasy and science fiction. The trend spills over into YA literature. Of course, the range within each genre covers everything from fairy tales to intergalactic warfare. Traditional high fantasy writers in Mormon communities often look to Tracy Hickman and his epic *Dragonlance* novels, which he co-authored with non-Mormon Margaret Weis in the 1980s and 1990s, but there are many other trends among Mormon YA writers. Books like Jessica Day George’s *Princess of the Midnight Ball* (2008) and Shannon Hale’s *Goose Girl* (2003) retell familiar fairy tales along the same vein as Gail Carson Levine’s *Ella Enchanted*. Other books, like Brandon Mull’s middle-grade *Fablehaven* series, have found success by borrowing elements from known tales and crafting them into new stories. In fact, *Fablehaven* rocketed Mull into the world of young adult fantasy writing: the first book in his new YA series, *Beyonders*, came out in 2011 to critical acclaim. However, these national publishing ventures are not the only successful fantasy stories coming from Mormon writers. For example, Obert Skye is still publishing new books with
Shadow Mountain about the fantastical world of Foo, and debut novelist Tyler Whitesides launched a Shadow Mountain series beginning with *Janitors* in late 2011.

Young adult science fiction has also provided success for some Mormon writers. Orson Scott Card, one of the earliest and most pioneering Mormon science fiction writers, wrote *Ender’s Game* (1985) with a young adult protagonist, though he had an adult audience in mind. Science fiction is traditionally geared toward adult readers, but certain subgenres are rising in popularity among young adult readers. One such subgenre is dystopian fiction, where the story usually presents a setting that counters the concept of a utopian society. James Dashner’s exciting *Maze Runner* series can be considered dystopian, for example, because it tells the story of a futuristic world where young people are imprisoned in a giant maze to go through a series of trials. Another example is Ally Condie’s aforementioned *Matched* (2010), the first book in a dystopian trilogy, where the government arranges marriages and deaths according to what would benefit the whole. Dystopians like these are picking up speed in the national market, but Mormon writers have also participated in more standard types of science fiction that young readers can enjoy. For example, Glenn Anderson, author of *The Millennium File* (1986) and *The Doomsday Factor* (1988), writes speculative fiction and space adventure with young adult characters.

With the success of traditional fantasy and science fiction aside, one of the most recent trends among Mormon YA writers is paranormal romance. Though not originating with Stephenie Meyer’s best-selling *Twilight* series, the genre probably owes its current popularity to Meyer’s books. It would be remiss to discuss the contributions that Mormons have made to young adult literature without mentioning Meyer. While her books are not highly literary, they inspired an entire demographic to get interested in reading. In a time when the future of
publishing is unstable and libraries and bookstores are shutting down, getting people to read is no small accomplishment. Book sales skyrocket when Meyer publishes and even when she provides the approving blurb on the cover of a new book. With *Twilight* (2005), she also revived the genre of paranormal romance. Her concepts were not new, but they sparked an interest in this tradition among other writers and publishers. Bree Despain and Kiersten White, among other fellow Mormon writers, followed suit with their respective paranormal romances, *The Dark Divine* (2009) and *Paranormalcy* (2010).

**Editing**

In addition to writers, Mormon publishers have made a noticeable impact on the YA publishing world. In 1998, Deseret Book established Shadow Mountain, an imprint for books with national appeal. The publishing director of Shadow Mountain is Chris Schoebinger, who has had more than 20 years of experience with Deseret Book, including work with YA authors like Ally Condie. With the Shadow Mountain imprint, Schoebinger was able to take books like the *Fablehaven* series and Obert Skye’s *Leven Thumps* series to the national market, earning himself the Marvin J. Ashton Award for Excellence along the way.

In fact, Shadow Mountain has launched many successful YA series, including Lisa Mangum’s *The Hourglass Door* trilogy and M.L. Forman’s *Adventurers Wanted* series. Mangum herself has contributed through her writing talents and also through her editing skills. She is the acquisitions editor for Shadow Mountain, where she has helped to craft the image of Mormon YA literature for several years.

Another notable Mormon editor is Stacy Whitman, a graduate of BYU’s editing program. Though Whitman does not work with Mormon manuscripts specifically, she has edited for Mirrorstone, a young adult imprint, where she helped to craft the *Hallowmere* series. She is now
the editorial director of Tu Books, an imprint which specializes in young adult fantasy and science fiction\textsuperscript{12}.

**Teaching**

In a different way, Mormons have also contributed to the way in which YA literature is used in the classroom. Church-sponsored universities teach courses specific to YA literature. Besides creative writing classes, Brigham Young University offers an annual course on children’s and young adult publishing. In this course, students learn the ins and outs of this niche publishing world through lectures, local conferences, and guest speakers who represent agents, editors, authors, and illustrators\textsuperscript{13}. The course is part of the English Language and Linguistics department’s editing program, a series of courses that few universities have. In conjunction with this BYU program, Church magazines offer editing internships, where many young Mormon editors have developed their skills\textsuperscript{14}. Church organizations are proving to be innovative and cutting-edge in preparing students to participate in the publishing world.

In addition to courses on the creation of books for young readers, Church schools also teach specific courses on the scholarly study of YA literature. Both the English department and the Teacher Education department at Brigham Young University offer courses on literature for young people\textsuperscript{15}. BYU-Hawaii\textsuperscript{16} and BYU-Idaho\textsuperscript{17} English departments also offer courses on young adult literature. These courses focus on preparing elementary and secondary school teachers for critical reading instruction, but they also allow students to become familiar with the broad range of books directed to young readers. Such courses are not unique to Mormon schools; however, several Mormons are prominent teachers and scholars in young adult literature. Among them are Elizabeth Wahlquist, who taught classes including young adult literature at BYU for 47 years\textsuperscript{18}; Michael Tunnell, a leading Lloyd Alexander scholar and author of *Children’s Literature,*
Briefly, a popular textbook for education courses now in its fifth edition; Alleen Pace Nilsen, co-author of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, another prominent textbook; Jesse Crisler, editor of *Essays on Children’s Literature*; and Chris Crowe, former president of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) and author of *More than a Game: Sports Literature for Young Adults*.

**Critical Discussion**

Mormon young adult literature also has a growing critical community. Like Jessica Day George’s “Bookshop Talk,” several websites regularly review Mormon works. In particular, “Shelah Books It,” “LDS Women’s Book Review,” and “Gamila’s Review” are recognized blogs providing critical commentary, both for and against books. Such criticism is useful: in blog format, it is easily accessed by readers, writers, and commentators. Blog format also allows criticism to be debated and discussed through comments and on other websites, where bloggers can link directly to reviews and other related pages. Professional critics also chime in on Mormon YA literature. Though this niche genre does not have its own critical publication, journals like *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*, which service Mormon art in general, often publish articles on the subject. The Association for Mormon Letters also has a regular blog post regarding Mormon YA. Undoubtedly, there is ample information online that allows for an ongoing conversation to progress towards a refinement of the literature.

In a 2007 publication, BYU professors Chris Crowe and Jesse Crisler collected short essays from over 60 Mormon YA authors. These writers humbly described what they were attempting to contribute to the book world. Many, like Cheri J. Crane and Gerald N. Lund, felt strongly that they were contributing specifically to the development of Mormon literature. Others looked more closely at the broader spectrum of Mormon literature. Regardless, all the
writers are keenly aware of the vulnerability of their craft. They expressed a desire to participate with care in the art of storytelling.

These and other Mormon writers are especially dedicated to the development and improvement of YA literature. They have set up extensive online communities through blogs and websites, where they host writing contests, encourage discussions on style and form, and provide reviews of provocative books, among other things. The aforementioned Jessica Day George, a YA writer who found recent success with her middle-grade Dragon Slippers series and her Princess novels, runs the website “Bookshop Talk.” Through this venue, George organizes and posts book reviews that have been written by a vast community of blog readers. She aims to explore not only newly released books but forgotten classics in order to “remind the world” of the elements that make a story timeless. For example, in a post on Harry Potter, George posits that the best themes in YA literature are “both heartbreaking and yet necessary.” She is interested in the continuation of such important themes.

While George’s book reviews and author interviews are not Mormon-specific, she represents perhaps one of the greatest contributions that Mormons have provided for young adult literature: the space for a Mormon writing community. Long before online social networks, groups of Mormons would gather in living rooms to create and refine stories for teenagers. They held writing groups, like the one that included Elizabeth Wahlquist, Ann Cannon, and Louise Plummer. Though much of the networking is now done through the internet, the same conversation continues. In the last few years, Carol Lynch Williams and Ann Dee Ellis put together a blog (throwingupwords.wordpress.com) that acts as a sort of online forum for readers, writers, and fans alike. They post nearly every day with writing prompts, advice, and support. A common topic on their blog is what to do when writing stops being fun, or, in Williams’
words, how to get past the icky middles of novels. As is the trend in publishing, most other Mormon authors also have interactive blogs and websites. In addition, the Association for Mormon Letters runs a blog where scholars and artists can discuss, among other things, the age-old debates and new questions of Mormon YA literature. Such discussion refines both reader and writer as the genre moves into the future.

Though there are many factors that motivate Mormons to contribute to this genre, it is easy to see from the care they use that Mormons respect their youth and have hope in a bright future. In an interview with Boston NPR host Robin Young, Professor Chris Crowe compared the coming-of-age young adult experience to the coming-of-age of the LDS Church, which is a young institution compared to organizations like the Catholic Church. Even the scriptures, especially the Bible and the Book of Mormon, and Church history are replete with adolescent figures: young David, Daniel, Nephi, Moroni, and Joseph Smith, to name a few. The teenage years are a time of self-discovery, which members of the Church believe is one of the purposes of mortality. All the same, very few adults want to return to that period of their lives. They remember how hard it was to be a teenager with all the tugs and pulls of young society. Thus, there is a certain admiration for the zeal and faith of young people among the Mormons which allows Mormon writers to create clever, thought-provoking stories for a young audience. They find it a noble cause: a service and a joy. After all, who can truly measure the extent of the influence that a single story can have in the eternities?

Notes

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32 Gerald N. Lund, “How I Came to Write”: LDS Authors for Young Adults, eds. Jesse S. Crisler and Chris Crowe (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2007), 135-141.
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