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Title A General Reader's Library of Book of Mormon Studies: The (Literary) Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: Three Recent Milestones

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Abstract Cracroft reviews the following books that can deepen one's understanding of the Book of Mormon: Richard Dilworth Rust's *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*; Marilyn Arnold's *Sweet Is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon: Its Narrative, Teachings and People*; and Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon*.

The (Literary) Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: Three Recent Milestones

Richard H. Cracroft

In this regular column in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, guest columnists will offer advice about what books they think should be part of a personal library of studies on the Book of Mormon. The purpose here is the same as for the *Journal* generally—to shed light on and deepen understanding of the scriptures through applied scholarship.

Join me as we explore three recent books, among many, that consider the Book of Mormon from a personal and literary viewpoint and that should be in the library of every serious, devoted student of the Book of Mormon. (All the publications discussed may be ordered through LDS book dealers or FARMS.)

Richard Dilworth Rust has made a notable contribution to Book of Mormon studies in his well-wrought *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997). He is a well-respected professor of American literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Examining the Book of Mormon as sacred literature, Rust becomes the first to open up the entire Book of Mormon as a literary text. He uncovers the form and structure of the book, traces the personal and stylistic impact of its various narrators on their accounts, and points up the book's epic qualities as well as its frequent and vivid imagery, types, and chiasmus sections. He points out that this stylistic variety enhances the message of the book as it unfolds through the various literary genres—poetry, sermons, letters, and autobiography. Demonstrating that the book is “a work of beauty and purity, with its words *to be feasted upon*,” Rust makes clear how the literary qualities of this scripture awaken and stir souls to feel joy in “coming to Christ,” whether in

ancient times or in the twentieth century.

Marilyn Arnold's *Sweet Is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon: Its Narrative, Teachings and People* (Salt Lake City: Covenant Communications, 1996) is a book-length personal commentary on the Book of Mormon. Arnold is a BYU emeritus professor of American literature, a renowned scholar on the work of author Willa Cather, former assistant to the president of BYU, dean of the Graduate School, and founding director of the Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature. She clearly has the professional credentials to write a fine book, but it is her powerful authority as a witness to the book's divinity that informs and permeates this moving “personal response to the book.” Arnold offers in twenty-seven well-crafted chapters, a close chapter-by-chapter explication of the entire Book of Mormon. She writes as a Christ-centered Latter-day Saint who brings to the task not only a well-trained and perceptive literary mind and imagination, but a faithful life of devotion. Because of the richness of ideas, insights, and possibilities she finds in the Book of Mormon, Arnold calls *Sweet Is the Word* “an essay in process.” She confesses that this scripture “is, quite frankly, the most challenging and compelling text I have ever tried to explicate, the most densely rich and rewarding text I have ever read.” Arnold herself has been “swept away by the miracle of the book.” I recommend that readers give themselves a quantum spiritual leap forward by reading *Sweet Is the Word* and the Book of Mormon in tandem. Such study changed Arnold's life; it has enriched mine; it will bless yours.

As will Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).

Elder Holland's focus is clear: “The principal and commanding figure in the Book of Mormon...is the Lord Jesus Christ.” He offers us what he terms “a meditation upon a scripture,” a “study of the Book of Mormon's contribution to our understanding of Christ,” rather than “a review of the other Standard Works of the Church on that subject.” The book is in seven sections, including his introductory “Affirmation.” Elder Holland discusses, in the section called “Antecedent,” the personal witness of the Brother of Jared about the Christ who is to come. In “Anticipation” he examines (in seven chapters) how Book of Mormon peoples looked forward to the coming Lord. In “Atonement” he makes clear the heart of the book's message of the Lord's mission of redemption as taught in the New World. In three chapters constituting an “Appearance” section, he describes the risen Lord's appearance to a group of surviving Nephites and Lamanites and his three-day ministry among them. “Afterward” recalls in three chapters the unique golden age of Nephite-Lamanite civilization, followed by the *Götterdämmerung* of the Nephite extinction, as well as the laments by Mormon and Moroni, who plead with future readers to heed, in time, their timeless call to “come unto Christ.” Elder Holland concludes the book in “Affirmation,” with his stirring personal witness of Jesus Christ as revealed to him through the testament of the Book of Mormon. Elder Holland displays extraordinary ability to articulate spiritual matters in lively, moving prose that has been shaped by informed, literate study. His skill and spirit are so moving that I feel secure in prophesying that his work will be one of our leading and enduring commentaries on the Book of Mormon. □