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### Marilyn Arnold. *Sweet is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon-Its Narrative, Teachings, and People.*

Karen Lynn Davidson

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *Sweet Is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon—Its Narrative, Teachings, and People* (1996), by Marilyn Arnold.

**Marilyn Arnold. *Sweet Is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon—Its Narrative, Teachings, and People*. American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 1996. xv + 366 pp., with index. \$15.95.**

Reviewed by Karen Lynn Davidson

When President Benson called on Latter-day Saints to study the Book of Mormon, Marilyn Arnold knew that for her, reading and thinking were just the beginning. She notes, "I have often needed to write about a book in order to collect my thoughts about it" (p. vii). Arnold's thoughts are now published as *Sweet Is the Word*, a distinctive and engaging commentary for anyone, scholar or beginner, who wants a better understanding of the Book of Mormon.

Many faithful members of the church have written on Book of Mormon topics. Marilyn Arnold adds to her faith a significant qualification: she is a reader and teacher of literature, known especially as a scholar of American literature. She is sensitive to language as it reveals character and motive, and gifted in gauging the meaning and suggestions of a phrase, sometimes of a single word. Against a solid backdrop of personal faith and a belief in the truth of her scriptural text, she has written a passage-by-passage study of the Book of Mormon—a "close reading," in literary terms.

"I am not a scriptural scholar," Arnold claims, "and I have not called on the scholars to assist my reading" (p. vii). Her task is to read, reflect, and write. She is also not afraid to speculate: Why was Nephi so fond of Isaiah's teachings? What clues do we have as to Corianton's (unrecorded) part in his dialogue with his father? What could have made Jacob so prone to discouragement? What might have gone through Mormon's mind as he decided what to keep and what to cut in preparing his abridgment? Why do Book of Mormon prophets not speak about the end of the world? This is how an active reader reads, and it is a wonderful lesson in pondering, not just reading, the scriptures.

Arnold organizes her book in reader's-companion fashion, moving through the Book of Mormon chapter by chapter. She summarizes so clearly the events, teachings, family relationships, and time sequences of the Book of Mormon that a first-time reader could benefit immensely from having *Sweet Is the Word* for parallel study.

But would this book be useful to a Book of Mormon scholar? After all, we usually assume that the Book of Mormon doesn't need a Cliffs Notes, however well written those notes may be! My guess is that for even the most conscientious reader, Arnold will point out new issues. Sometimes she merely brings up an interesting question: What is the worth of sacred texts "to the body," for example (1 Nephi 19:7)? Sometimes she raises questions and answers them as well: What is the significance of Nephi's changing word choices in showing his spiritual growth over the years (p. 26)? How do the Savior's carefully chosen references to the word *Father* indicate his "scrupulous definition of his role as the divine Son" (p. 274)? There will be some new insights here for anyone, I would think.

In addition, for an experienced reader of the Book of Mormon, years of familiarity may have tended to flatten the events and people, so that what was dramatic and surprising on first reading has by now become (sadly) just a series of familiar examples for our moral benefit. Arnold awakens our emotional response. She calls the Book of Mormon "theater," "electric," "the stuff of a national epic," and tells us why it is so. She marvels at the unique and often very human personalities of the individual prophets, the triumph of out-and-out physical courage, the blackening influence of cynical indifference, and, above all, the powerful poetry of the Book of Mormon—poetry of praise, aspiration, and sometimes even of depression. She brings this drama back into high relief once again, thus helping us respond with our heart as well as our conscience.

Anyone who teaches a class in any gospel subject will find this book useful. An instructor who wants to bring some new light to familiar lesson material can use this book's index to correlate Book of Mormon insights with many topics. Arnold thoughtfully suggests present-day applications that would make fine discussion topics: the role of "remembrance," what it means to prepare our

minds for instruction, what the Book of Mormon teaches about the link between generosity and redemption, and so forth.

Although Arnold refers to few outside sources, she does allow herself now and then a brief reference to such writers as Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Mark Twain. When she draws these parallels, I feel teased; I want more. If I were to name something I missed in this book, it would be a more frequent taste of the ways in which thoughtful poets, fiction writers, and essayists can broaden our understanding of scriptural truth. Those of us who love literature delight in learning about such parallels—and again, what a bonus this would be for a teacher who wants to approach old topics in a new way! I hope Marilyn Arnold's next book will lead us down some of these paths.