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Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories
Eugene England

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EUGENE ENGLAND, ed. *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992. xx; 348 pp. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Patricia Mann Alto, a high school English teacher in Ukiah, California.

Academics have recently been inundated with demands to include in what has been called a Eurocentric canon more literature from other cultures. Such inclusion would necessitate exclusion of some standard material to make room in crowded curriculums, yet the multiculturalists contend that students derive great satisfaction in literature written by or relating to their own cultures. After reading *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories*, I better understand the deep satiety that comes from seeing one's culture explained, explored, and enhanced in what would be in anyone's book good literature. Fortunately—or not—this book's inclusion in the Mormon canon of literature would not precipitate bumping much material off the short list of what one should read. Mormons are just now coming into their own in the realm of good literature.

England explores this coming of age in his introductory essay, "The New Mormon Fiction," which stands as one of the best parts of the book. He has peeled back the academic verbiage and scholarly pretension that often accompany such an undertaking and offers a lucid and concise history and explanation of Mormon fiction. After tracing Mormon literature from early apology and satire through "home literature" and the "lost generation," he introduces the crop of well-schooled writers who now are defining a Mormon voice both in the Church and in the larger world. England, a professor of English at Brigham Young University, has a broad view of literature from the perch he has taken, straddling—or perhaps bridging—the realms of a convinced Mormon and of a liberally educated man of letters. For example, he writes of the home literature movement without attacking or apologizing for its "didactic and sentimental" stories (xii). He explains that Orson F. Whitney, concerned about the influences of the world on the early Utah Saints, promoted homegrown poetry and fiction for Church members by such writers as Susa Young Gates and

Nephi Anderson. England notes that this writing, aimed at combating evil from without, was “based more in dogma than experience” (xii). And he discusses what such literature meant to Mormon readers after its inception in the 1880s.

By the 1940s, according to England, the lost generation of Mormondom—writers such as Vardis Fisher, Maurine Whipple, Virginia Sorensen, and Samuel Taylor—created a new body of literature, written by and about Mormons, but acclaimed by non-Mormons nationally far more than by the Mormon milieu. England compares these writers with America’s “lost generation,” noting “their impatience with their culture and expatriation from their people” (xii), but nonetheless dedicates the collection to Sorensen and Whipple with the note “they taught us how.” Both writers are represented in the collection, as are two of those “taught how,” Douglas Thayer and Donald R. Marshall, whom England dubs “pioneers of a second generation” (xiii). Thayer and Marshall benefited from having studied both the lost generation’s approaches to Mormon culture and the works of modern British and American authors. When the 1960s brought *Brigham Young University Studies* and *Dialogue*, the spate of new writers England describes found vehicles to publish their contemporary literature.

England explains that he selected the stories because they were Mormon and contemporary, offering insights into Mormons’ own kind of ethnicity and “mythic vision,” which he claims are the stuff of “good and characteristic literature” (xviii). Whether the stories are actually about Mormons or not, the authors have been influenced, England maintains, by the way Mormonism has impacted their beliefs. He contends, rightly I think, that the stories he has selected are good partly because they are expressions of minds which “reveal, develop, and challenge the shape of Mormon beliefs” (xviii) and partly because they provide insights into both the physical and the spiritual worlds: “Thus the title reminds us that the best Mormon fiction concerns both bright angels of spiritual reality and the familiar, beautiful world in which we live and create our being” (xix).

I agree that the stories are good. They have the advantage of all short fiction: they are accessible to the busiest of us since they

can be consumed and considered in one sitting. They are well-formulated, well-peopled, well-told tales. They are certainly not hampered by the old mediocrity Mormons have sometimes wallowed in, willing to forego excellence and connection through real experiences for that which is uplifting only according to the standard set by home literature.

My only problem with the book comes with the double bind created by its diversity. While almost anyone will find something intriguing and satisfying here, any ordinary reader will also find some stories to disregard. The very variety of the selections thus becomes a drawback for casual readers, few of whom would find all the stories to their tastes. For example, I am no fan of science fiction, and I would ordinarily have skimmed over Orson Scott Card's "The Fringe." (Being forced to read it for my review, I must admit, has caused me to consider re-evaluating that stance.) Not a lover of fantasy, I was caught up in the skillful crafting of Maurine Whipple's "They Did Go Forth" but found the element of myth did not suit my tastes since it was so unrealistic in the face of Mormon folk myth and legend. Somehow, the folk tales ring more true than the literary ones. Likewise, some stories, such as Darrell Spencer's "I Am Buzz Gaulter, Left-Hander," John Bennion's "Dust," and M. Shayne Bell's "Dry Niger," are not stories my taste would have led me to. In fairness to the excellence of the writing of these tales, there are many other readers who would find these stories more fascinating than the stories I personally liked best.

For example, I sympathize completely with the women in some of the stories. In Eileen Gibbons Kump's "Sayso or Sense," we see that men have the sayso, while women have the sense. Karen Rosenbaum's "Hit the Frolicking, Rippling Brooks" gives us a glimpse of the educated female intellectual coming face-to-face with the clichés of cultural Mormonism, while in Pauline Mortensen's "Woman Talking to a Cow" a woman in a difficult family situation unburdens herself to perhaps the only one who will hear her—the family cow. These tales might whiz over the heads of many beloved men because the stories are out of these men's frames of reference. But my experiences made the tales as meaningful as my lack of experiences made other stories obscure.

Anyone who has ever lived in an LDS ward will enjoy my personal favorites: the stories—some funny, some not so funny—that tell *about* Mormon life without erasing the warts or hiding the human frailties that we've gossiped about among ourselves but would deny if made public. I felt a palpable joy in seeing familiar scenes—even some of the family's dirty laundry—common to the Mormon experience described via excellent writing. Phyllis Barber's "At the Talent Show" and Virginia Sorensen's "Where Nothing Is Long Ago" confront the child's struggle with the adult view of the world. Levi S. Peterson writes of the conflict between love for and self-preservation from the difficult member in "The Christianizing of Coburn Heights." And then we read of the covert—and sometimes not so covert—warfare that brews in some Gospel Doctrine classes. Neal Chandler draws this situation so well in "Benediction" that I wonder, after having read this story, when I will be able to go to a Sunday School class without having to stifle a giggle as the closing prayer commences.

Then there are the stories that make us look inside our individual hearts and lives. "Lost and Found" by Michael Fillerup is one. A tale of a man lost to everyone but the little Navajo LDS branch he serves as the only priesthood bearer shows the implications of being lost and of being found. The story begs for rereading. I commanded a friend to read this story because it left me with an urgent need to discuss it with someone else.

The stories contain compelling characters to add to our list of intimates, real or imagined, with whom we share the world. One agonizes with the newly returned missionary taken out to kill in Douglas Thayer's "Opening Day" and rejoices with Thalia Beale's escape from Ephraim to Carmel in "The Week-end" by Donald R. Marshall.

Space limitation precludes just exploration of the individual tales in the book. They are so well concocted that anyone with an appetite for fine literature will find a banquet here. Those who are interested in reading good stories will find plenty to feed their tastes as well. The stories do not apologize for our faithfulness, our faithlessness, or even our faith, as some pieces by the lost generation seemed to. They do not preach from the desperate and

emotional call to didactic perfectionism that was portrayed as real life in the home literature movement. England's selections bubble from the day-to-day experiences of living—not idealized—Saints in the latter days, and they ring true because the connections are so real.

To top the volume off, England gives an extensive bibliography of other notable Mormon stories and collections and describes the work of those represented in the anthology, providing a place to launch—or continue—the quest for works by Mormon writers or about Mormon culture.

Recently, a friend and I were discussing the Church as a huge tent covering a variety of people. Some cling tightly to the center pole. Others wander very close to the edges but are still covered by the same tent. While no one would likely consider *Bright Angels and Familiars* ground-breaking in contemporary fiction, it conjures magic for those interested in the Mormon culture; it reaches to all ends of the tent, thereby telling us more about ourselves and allowing us to become more intimately acquainted with a range of bright angels, fainter angels, familiars, and not-so-familiars.