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Mormon Characters in Young Adult Novels

Toni E. Pilcher

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Mormon Characters in Young Adult Novels

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This study presents the analysis of Mormon characters in seven young adult novels: Emily Wing Smith's *The Way He Lived* and *Back When You Were Easier to Love*, Louise Plummer's *A Dance for Three*, A.E. Cannon's *Charlotte's Rose*, Kimberly Heuston's *The Shakeress*, Susan Campbell Bartoletti's *The Boy Who Dared*, and Angela Morrison's *Taken by Storm*. The characters in these novels are negatively stereotyped as typical Mormons. In four of the novels, the characters are stereotyped by other Mormon characters. In two of the novels, the characters are stereotyped by non-Mormon characters. The Mormon narrators in six of the novels prove the stereotypes incorrect, but the last novel, *Taken by Storm*, portrays a Mormon character fitting the stereotype. In all of the novels, the faith of the characters influences how they act, think, and speak.

Keywords: Mormon, faith, young adult, stereotype

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MORMON CHARACTERS IN YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

Introduction

In a recent episode of *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert commented on the rumors flying around President Barack Obama's supposed campaign to make potential opponent Mitt Romney, and therefore all Mormons, look weird. Colbert showed several of the new "I'm a Mormon" videos from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that portray members of the Church as normal people (Colbert). This sketch was inspired by the current cultural misconception and stereotypes of Mormons. While the Church has a widespread Internet presence, it is not often portrayed in other popular media, with a few notable exceptions, like this year's Broadway sensation, *The Book of Mormon Musical*.

However, as noted in a 2009 *Boston Globe* article, some Mormons heavily influence many areas of literature, especially the realm of children's and young adult (YA) books (Paulson). Mormons have a successful niche market with publishers like Deseret Book and Cedar Fort, and both companies are opening up new avenues to the wider national market. Mormons are not just writing to themselves; they are also writing to audiences outside their own religion. However, only a few Mormon authors published in the national market are writing about their religion. In general in the national market, religion rarely factors into a YA story and is hardly ever mentioned even casually. In fact, some 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 (Campbell).

But 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 written for the young people of the Church was Nephi Anderson's 1898 novel *Added Upon*. As it follows the main characters through the stages of immortal and mortal existence, this novel presents the Plan of Salvation. A product of the Home Literature movement as defined by Mormon scholar Eugene England, *Added Upon* was first published in 1898, but it remained in continuous publication until as recently as 2005 (England). 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, notably Jack Weyland and Bruce Yorgason, have succeeded with didactic novels that follow in the *Added Upon* tradition.

In the mid-twentieth century, a group of Mormon writers came to believe that religion and spirituality should not be topics for niche markets alone. They believed that the strictures of didacticism were limiting the art of the story. These writers, referred to as the Lost Generation by scholar Edward L. Geary, aimed for a broader national appeal (Geary). 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 Sorensen, 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. Sorensen showed what Mormons could offer to the children's and YA publishing world: high-quality literature.

Today, many bestselling YA genres are populated by books from Mormon novelists, notably science fiction and fantasy. Books like Shannon Hale's *Goose Girl* and Jessica Day

George's *Princess of the Midnight Ball* retell familiar fairy tales. Other books, like Brandon Mull's middle-grade *Fablehaven* series, have found success by borrowing fantastic creatures and tropes from existing tales and crafting them into new stories. In fact, *Fablehaven* rocketed Mull into the world of YA fantasy writing: the first book in his new YA series, *Beyonders*, came out in 2011 to critical acclaim. Additionally, the recent trend of dystopian fiction involves Mormons prominently. James Dashner's exciting *Maze Runner* series tells the story of a futuristic world where young people imprisoned in a giant maze go through a series of trials. Another dystopian series, Ally Condie's *Matched* trilogy, has a government that arranges marriages and deaths according to what would benefit the society as a whole. With fast-paced novels like these, science fiction and fantasy are still selling well in the national market, and Mormon writers are earning their share.

No one can ignore the enthusiastic fan base of Stephenie Meyer's paranormal *Twilight* books and their accompanying movies that have helped redefine paranormal romance. The genre, though not originating with *Twilight*, probably owes its current popularity to Meyer's books. Her novels sparked an interest in this genre among other writers, including Mormons Bree Despain and Kiersten White with their respective paranormal romance series, *The Dark Divine* and *Paranormalcy*.

In addition to Meyer's publishing success, books written by Mormons have won national awards and honors, like Sorenson's *Miracles on Maple Hill*; graced the *New York Times*' Best Sellers List, like White's recent *Paranormalcy* series; and shaped entire genres, like Meyer's *Twilight*. Still, with this presence in YA literature, few authors have actually written about Mormonism to the national audience, and only a few scholars have looked specifically at the portrayal of Mormonism, Mormon characters, or Mormon values in YA novels. A few

exceptions exist, including Jana Riess's essay in *BYU Studies* on Mormon values in *Twilight* (Riess). Some scholars have written about textual connections to mainstream religions like Catholicism, Judaism, and even Islam, but Mormonism is rarely discussed in the scholarship. One possible reason for this exclusion could be the lack of Mormon references and characters in novels published for a national audience. As a relatively young and controversial religion, Mormonism has long been a subject that few YA publishers cared about. Additionally, Mormons are well-known for their missionary program and their emphasis on spreading the good news of the Gospel, and, as such, Mormon authors have to be careful to not lapse into preaching in their novels lest they lose their audience's interest.

However, YA literature has the potential to influence the way readers think about Mormons. Instead of stereotyping Mormons, as Colbert pointed out that many people do, YA readers have an opportunity to look beyond misconceptions and understand individuals. Since 2000, several books featuring Mormon characters have been published in the national YA market. With the exception of Michael Tunnell's *Brothers in Valor*, these books are the only YA novels to present characters that are explicitly Mormon, so it is important to examine the ways they portray Mormon characters. In each book, the main characters are influenced by their Mormon faith, especially as they react to being negatively stereotyped as a typical Mormon. By presenting faith alongside negative stereotypes, do the books present a consistent image of Mormon characters for YA readers?

The Way He Lived

The Way He Lived by Emily Wing Smith revolves around six Mormon teens who are coping with the death of a boy who may have been gay. This boy, Joel, was on a Scouting trip when he collapsed from dehydration. As his sisters and friends remember "the way he lived,"

they realize how much others judged Joel, pushing him toward suicide. In the small town of Haven, where “the Mormon population sits at around 94 percent,” same-sex attraction is a sin and all gays are considered evil (122). But the narrators of the story do not believe that God could “love his straight children more than his gay ones” (88). For Tabs and Adlen and Miles and Claire and Norah and Lissa, it doesn’t matter that Joel was gay or that he committed suicide by not drinking enough water on that trip; it is “the way he lived” that mattered most.

In this novel, Mormonism is depicted in simple but accurate details. The Mormon characters do not drink alcohol or abuse drugs, as evidenced by this line from the novel, where Joel is enjoying a Friday night: “Something about the combination of sugar and nothing to do made him the Mormon equivalent of drunk” (95). Since Mormon doctrine prohibits the drinking of alcohol, these characters have identified a “Mormon equivalent of drunk.” Additionally, the Mormon practices of storing food and otherwise preparing for physical or economic disaster are also presented in *The Way He Lived* when these boys search through the year’s supply of materials in their friend’s basement (99). Other Mormon rules play into important plot events, like when Claire feels nervous about turning sixteen years old because “sixteen is something extra. Sixteen is dating age” (122). Teen relationships are highly regulated by Church principles, as Norah explains that she can’t be alone with a boy or kiss him for more than three seconds at a time (187). Mormon values, like family time, are shown as intricately connected with Mormon traditions. For example, Claire, one of Joel’s sisters, describes the practice of family home evening: “on Monday nights, nobody was allowed to go out or have other people over.... We spent the evening together as a family.... It was lame but it also wasn’t” (138-39). Overall, *The Way He Lived* portrays many aspects of Mormon rules and traditions.

But Smith takes readers even deeper into the Mormonism of Haven by depicting the Mormons as a diverse group of people who have varying commitments. For example, Adlen explains the differences in the practice of holding seminary: “In other parts of the world, Mormon high schoolers meet at someone’s home before school to learn about scriptures and get some spiritual perspective on their day. At Haven it’s part of the school day” (56-57). Adlen points out that Mormon practices in Haven are integrated into everyday routines, where they often lose their sacred significance. For Adlen, seminary has lost its original purpose to teach about the divine (57). In a seminary discussion about sin and repentance, Adlen realizes that the other Mormon high school students are too stubborn to accept new ideas (74). They have already condemned Joel to Hell because they “believe people only kill themselves if they feel guilty, burdened by wrong choices” (61). Adlen passionately disagrees. Other examples of varying beliefs within Mormonism include Tabs’ “I hate going to church *here*” (13, emphasis added) and Miles’ sarcastic comment about Joel, “He hated it when people used ‘bad language.’ Joel considered half of regular people’s vocabulary ‘bad language’” (96). Clearly, the Mormon characters in this novel have individual interpretations of such things as “going to church” and “bad language.”

While Smith emphasizes the variations among Mormon characters in a negative light, she respectfully presents the narrators’ beliefs. Tabs believes in withholding judgment of others: “Who’s gay? Who’s crazy? Who knows? Who cares?” (47). Adlen believes in connecting with the Holy Ghost because “it’s how she finds strength” (57). Lissa values the combination of faith and works: “Everybody took it [Joel’s death] hard—but they all did something about it. That’s how Mormons grieve—they do things” (199). And, in the end, Joel receives a plaque on the church wall, where all the Mormon missionaries have pictures and maps of where they are

serving. Instead of a map, Joel's plaque reads, "Called to his heavenly home" (223). This plaque acts as closure to the debate on whether or not Joel is a sinner.

Through these Mormon voices, Smith crafts a story in which Mormonism is critiqued and respected. She presents things that are considered normal to the Mormon characters, like family home evening and teen dating rules, but she also presents a diverse group of Mormon narrators. While these narrators have differing personal beliefs, none of them participates in their religion blindly. They ask questions—hard questions—and they are not afraid to express their doubts. Such characters allow Smith to present a respectful discussion on Mormon beliefs and values as she encourages her readers to ask their own questions. In the end, she does not answer the question brought up through the narrators' stories: Was Joel gay? By not answering, Smith suggests that such a question is ultimately unimportant, even to the Mormon narrators whose very religion defines same-sex attraction as sin. She thus challenges the stereotype of Mormons as strict conservatives.

Back When You Were Easier to Love

Smith's second novel, *Back When You Were Easier to Love*, also takes place in Haven. Again, because of the concentration of Mormon people and those high school students who were so set in their Mormon ways, conflict appears not between Mormons and people of other faiths, but among the Mormons themselves. At the outset, Joy is mourning a break-up with her boyfriend, Zan. He ran away from Haven and enrolled in a college in California, but Joy suffers from denial, believing that Zan wants her to follow him. With Noah, Zan's best friend, Joy finally finds Zan at a poetry meeting in California, but she is disappointed that he no longer abides by the standards of the Mormon Church or believes in its doctrine.

Like *The Way He Lived*, this novel provides details into Mormon doctrine and practices.

Joy explains how she feels about her religion:

I do believe. I believe in God, and I believe in Jesus Christ, and I believe in my religion. I go to church every week, pray every day, read the Book of Mormon and the Bible. I don't drink alcohol, tea, coffee—even caffeinated soda. I believe in waiting, so I'm okay with the rules—nothing even resembling sex until I'm married....I believe in repentance, forgiveness, integrity. (106)

This list presents a handful of key Mormon standards that shape the conflict between Joy and Zan. Where Zan drinks coffee, Joy does not. She doesn't judge him for this small offense, but she refuses to believe that he might disagree with her in more important areas, like “waiting...until I'm married” or “integrity.” One Sunday when Zan attends church with Joy, he passes her the sacrament tray without taking any for himself. Joy immediately worries, “he hadn't taken it, and why? The only reason you don't take the sacrament is if you're unworthy” (109). Worthiness to partake of Church ordinances is obviously something that Joy values. She is willing to overlook Zan's rejection of the rule about coffee, but she cannot overlook his rejection of the sacrament.

Zan appears to overlook everything. Unlike the characters in *The Way He Lived*, Zan can't distinguish between the conservative Haven community and the Mormon Church. Even Joy recognizes this distinction when she says, “Leaving Haven isn't the same as leaving the Church, you know. They aren't one and the same” (52). Zan, however, takes everything that the Mormons of Haven do as official Church policy. Joy comments that “Zan wouldn't have left if the girls here didn't wear *Modest is Hottest* T-shirts” (7). This T-shirt blatantly promotes the Mormon value of wearing clothes that cover and respect the body, and Zan assumes that the

person behind the shirt condemns anyone who does not dress modestly. Zan's narrow point of view is that "people had a disbelief that places could exist where it was normal to see grocery stores selling wine and copies of *Cosmo* that weren't hidden behind thick plastic 'modesty screens'" (18). He believes that only conservative Mormons are socially accepted in Haven.

Before Zan leaves for California, Joy tries to help him see the difference between Haven Mormons and other Mormons. At one point, Joy joins in with a gay-rights rally in Salt Lake City. Zan is surprised: "Not a lot of Mormons think about things like that" (36). Joy corrects him by clarifying that "not a lot of Mormons *in Haven* think about things like that" (36, emphasis added). When he asks what she means, she points out that "at least for California Mormons gay marriage is actually an issue. Here, gay marriage is wrong, sinful, never-gonna-happen, period. There's no real debate" (36). She hints at a greater variety of Mormons not seen in their tight-knit community. Later, Joy reflects on the disparity growing between her and Zan: "Even now that I live in a town where it's hard to tell where belief ends and culture begins—I don't like the culture, but I do like the belief. That was never an issue with me. It was too late before I realized it was an issue with Zan" (107). Even though Joy acknowledges the difficulty of distinguishing belief from culture, she also acknowledges that individual Mormons should not be conflated into a single Mormon identity. For Joy, Mormonism is just a religion, Haven is just a location, and individuals are individuals, especially when she is considering Noah: "Noah Talbot is not the kind of guy to let girls in his room. I'm not sure if that counts as a Haven thing or a Mormon thing, but it's definitely a Noah thing" (155). Joy refuses to define others simply as "Mormon" or "from Haven" because she values people's individuality.

In addition to portraying a difference between culture and belief, this novel also discusses some of the stereotypes of Mormons. Joy sets herself apart when she calls herself "one of the

rare Mormon girls without any siblings” (28). Mormons love families, and some Mormons interpret that love as pressure to have a large family. Joy also remarks that one of her friends is a cliché Mormon girl: “smart but not too smart, peppy but not too peppy, pretty but not too pretty. She’ll go to Brigham Young University like forty percent of our class...and she’ll meet the perfect recently returned missionary” (51). Joy describes what some people consider the ideal Mormon experience, but as the story progresses, she begins to look beyond the mold and into the inner motivations and turmoil of the people. The change is manifest in the way she views Noah: in the beginning, he perfectly fits the stereotype, but in the end, he is a unique individual.

Back When You Were Easier to Love reveals diversity and dissent among a fictional Mormon population. Joy and Zan have individual priorities when it comes to religion and spirituality, and these differences eventually drive them apart. However, when it becomes clear that Zan’s negativity is aimed toward Mormonism and not just Haven (168), his attitude does not stir up doubts in Joy. Instead, she responds with an affirmation of faith in saying, “this I believe” (253).

As with *The Way He Lived*, Smith continues to challenge the stereotypes that trap Mormon and other evangelical characters. Right from the start, Joy boldly defies Zan’s expectations of her as a Mormon girl when she participates in the gay rights rally and allows him to drink coffee. Even so, Joy expresses a deep connection to her religious beliefs that Zan never understands. He thinks more about the fact that stereotypes exist than he does about whether or not God exists. The differences between Joy and Zan highlight contrasting reactions to stereotypes. Where Zan abandons his Mormonism in an effort to avoid being stereotyped, Joy embraces hers despite being stereotyped.

A Dance for Three

Louise Plummer's 2000 novel, *A Dance for Three*, also explores diversity among Mormon characters. In this novel, when fifteen-year-old Mormon Hannah Ziebarth tells her boyfriend that she is pregnant, he punches her in the face. His brutal rejection is the last straw for Hannah, whose father had died years ago and whose mother is emotionally unstable. Hannah ends up in the psychiatric ward, faced with a long recovery from her mental breakdown and the decision of what to do with her baby. Her best friend, Trilby, and her boyfriend's younger brother, Roman, along with a cast of adult mentors, help Hannah make a healthy decision. Though Plummer does not preach a Gospel message, she shows how Mormonism informs her characters' priorities and motivation.

Hannah first reveals she is Mormon when she relates an encounter with Bishop Kelsey. She explains, "We're Mormons, and he's the bishop of our ward, our congregation" (38). When Hannah explains that she was trying to avoid Bishop Kelsey because she has not attended church since her father died, she places the bishop in opposition to herself. She expresses her guilt in knowing "I'm not a good Christian" (100). Her shame at missing Church meetings and at being pregnant outside of marriage ("Can he tell I'm pregnant?" [39]) stem from her understanding of Mormon values. She knows that having sex outside of marriage is forbidden by the Church and that it requires a lengthy repentance process; she even jokes about answering "fornication" when the bishop asks what she has been doing lately. She also knows that Mormons value service, which suggests to her that it makes Bishop Kelsey "feel good to look after her" (39).

Although clergymen and religious zealots are often portrayed negatively in young adult literature (Sharp and Schleicher), Hannah's conversation with Bishop Kelsey reveals that "he's a pretty nice guy, really" (39). He asks about her mother, who is clearly still suffering from the

father's death. He even remembers that Hannah plays the flute and invites her to play in a church meeting. The bishop is beginning to break away from the negative stereotype, but he still makes Hannah feel uncomfortable. Despite his efforts to befriend Hannah, she is too ashamed at this point to talk to him about her pregnancy or her family's needs. Because Bishop Kelsey is a clergyman, Hannah believes "he probably wouldn't like me if he knew I was pregnant. Probably wouldn't invite me to church even to play the flute. Probably would excommunicate me" (39-40). However, in a defining moment in the text, Hannah acknowledges that her worries could result from the way Bishop Kelsey reminds her of her father rather than from his position as her bishop. She expresses her negative feelings toward him, and then she admits to the reader that these feelings are inaccurate. Rather than placing the bishop in opposition to her, she places him in apposition to her father, someone she loved and trusted. It is not Bishop Kelsey's religious role but other aspects of his character (e.g., he "was Daddy's good friend" [40]) that generate a negative impression on Hannah.

Subsequent encounters with Bishop Kelsey reinforce the bishop's genuine gestures. Hannah wants to resist his offers of assistance, but she respects his faith in the Church. When he visits Hannah and her mother after the first interview, Hannah comments that "some might say he's inspired, that he can see that I'm in trouble and has come by to help" (43). Hannah's mother reveals the pregnancy, and Bishop Kelsey, reserving judgment, talks with them about Hannah's options. He neither condemns Hannah nor makes the decision for her; instead, he gives her the opportunity to think things through and make a decision on her own. This kind of freedom is not typically expected from a religious leader.

Bishop Kelsey remains a constant source of help throughout the novel. During Hannah's hospital stay, he visits several times and reassures her that "the Relief Society women [have been]

bringing your mother breakfast, lunch, and dinner” since Hannah was the one doing the cooking and cleaning at home (113). It is even made clear that “the church can continue helping with your mother’s care forever if need be” (113). The bishop is being particularly thorough in his service. At one point, he offers to be Hannah’s lawyer free of charge. Together, he and Hannah come up with a plan to make sure her ex-boyfriend Milo does not get away with beating her. In this way, the bishop’s assistance outside of his religious duties suggests that his desire to help is genuine. Plummer presents Bishop Kelsey as a smart, caring bishop who respects Hannah despite her mistakes

Through *A Dance for Three*, Plummer departs from the traditionally portrayed religious leader figure. While she initially sets Bishop Kelsey up negatively through Hannah’s eyes, she proceeds to challenge that image through the bishop’s kindness. Instead of forcing Hannah to repent and sin no more, he gives her time and the chance to think for herself. He frees her rather than torturing her. His behavior forces Hannah to let go of her negative stereotype as she realizes it is false. She prioritizes her belief that Bishop Kelsey is a genuine servant of God over her belief in the stereotype of overbearing religious leaders. Surely, Plummer’s portrayal of Mormon characters supports Smith’s portrayal: flaws are recognized but undermined by the positive qualities of individuals.

Charlotte’s Rose

In a much different story, A.E. Cannon’s *Charlotte’s Rose* takes readers to the historical roots of the Mormon Church through a portrayal of the pioneer trek to Utah. In this novel, 12-year-old Charlotte and her father leave their beloved Wales to join the other Mormons in the United States. They travel with 700 other Welsh converts across the Atlantic Ocean and the sprawling plains of the Midwest. Along the way, Charlotte volunteers to take care of a newborn

baby whose mother has died. The trip is long and dangerous, and taking care of a baby is even harder. Charlotte must decide if her new faith is worth the rough journey, and her experiences with the baby help her see the hand of God in her life. *Charlotte's Rose* explores the strength of the Mormon pioneers in body and in faith.

Several significant patterns arise in the story as it portrays Mormon characters and Mormonism. First, Cannon establishes a religious vocabulary to introduce readers to the pioneers' mindset. All the characters in the novel are relatively new to the religion, so the reader learns these terms alongside them. As these Welsh converts begin their journey, they turn their faces toward their destination: "Zion!" (4) This name is not unique to Mormons, but members of the early Church referred to the Rocky Mountain region as Zion, the divinely appointed place to establish God's people. In fact, at the end of the novel, one pioneer draws a comparison to the Biblical people of God: "Like the Children of Israel preparing to enter the Promised Land, we will reach the valley of the Great Salt Lake in a few days' time" (203). Because they see similarities between their lives and the ancient Israelites, characters in Cannon's novel also use the term "gentiles" to describe those who are not members of the Mormon faith (8). This extended analogy is important for the Mormon pioneers because it provides the motivation to hold to their faith. They believe that if God protected his chosen people the first time, it follows that he will protect his chosen people now.

Explanations of Mormonism are not limited to terminology, however. Charlotte herself is able to explain some of the basic religious doctrine that sets Mormons apart: "Mormons do not believe in hell. Or at least not in the way other religious people do" (117). In addition, Charlotte explains that Mormons don't baptize their babies because they believe that "when a baby dies, . . . that little spirit is welcomed straight back into the outstretched arms of a loving God" (72).

She also discusses the *Book of Mormon*, which is canonized as scripture alongside the Bible. With some humor, Charlotte shares her favorite *Book of Mormon* story: “I like the story of King Noah and how he burns God’s prophet Abinadi at the stake, because, quite frankly, it is more exciting than some of the other stories in the Book of Mormon” (154). Indeed, Charlotte’s simple explanations and commentary provide the reader with a growing sense of Mormonism that parallels Charlotte’s.

The reader is also introduced to the famous story of Joseph Smith, the first president and prophet of the Mormon Church. When Charlotte recalls the first time she heard the story of a 14-year-old boy praying about religion and seeing God and Jesus Christ, she remarks, “it’s sweet to think that God would look down from heaven and bother with a boy who was only a little older than John, kneeling among the trees” (16-17). Charlotte’s reaction to the story suggests at least one reason why the Mormon characters in this novel are attracted to and believe in the seemingly impossible story: it shows that God cares about the weak and humble. Having grown up in a mining town in nineteenth-century Wales, Charlotte knows the pains of poverty and hunger. She feels weak and humble throughout the journey, and she yearns to know that God is watching and that He cares about her and the baby. This yearning leads her to prayer.

Prayer is Charlotte’s lifeline. She talks to God many times throughout the novel, and her prayers cover a variety of topics. Occasionally, she uses prayer to simply share something with a divine friend, like when she says, “I know I asked you to make Sister Roberts slip and fall on the deck. But a rat is a much better idea. Thank you” (21). Or when she comments on the fashion of Americans: “Dear God, I wouldn’t mind having a hat like *that* upon my head when I walk across the prairie. Thank you” (41, original emphasis). Other times, Charlotte takes prayer more seriously as she asks for safety and protection. When approached by Indians, Charlotte makes a

silent bargain: “Please, God. I will repent of all my sins soon—tonight!—if you will make them leave me and Papa and Rose and all our things alone” (135). In fact, as Charlotte matures, her prayers become less about herself and her frivolous desires and more about Rose: “Dear God, please protect Rose from coughing and all manners of sickness” (147). Finally, Charlotte’s prayers turn into prayers of gratitude, as when she says, “Thank you, God, for giving me this friend” (229). The development of Charlotte’s use of prayers reflects the development of her relationship with God. At first, Charlotte sees God as a tool to make life convenient. Then, she sees God as a protector and intervener. In the end, she sees God as a loving provider. Because Charlotte endures through hardship, she is able to see God in a new light.

Another unique aspect of this novel is that it portrays some of the historical resistance to the Mormon Church. In relating the story of Joseph Smith, Charlotte also shares how his story ended: “So Joseph is finally killed under the cover of night by a mob of men who hate him and the other Mormons, too. His church does not die with him, though” (16). The Mormon characters in *Charlotte’s Rose* are accustomed to hatred and violence, and not even the death of their leader destroys their faith. Many of the characters face this kind of hatred from their own relatives, as pointed out by one of the women Charlotte meets on the ship: “I will say one last goodbye now, Charlotte. To my mother. Who turned her back on me when I joined with the Mormons” (30). Charlotte does not experience this rejection herself, but upon arriving in America, a stranger shoves anti-Mormon pamphlets into her hands. Though she cannot read the English, she notes that a picture that makes Mormons look like animals (43). She asks her father why they would be hated so much, and he answers, “People object to the way some Mormon men have more than one wife. They don’t understand it” (44). When Charlotte pushes him further, asking why Mormons would continue to do things that make others hate them, he explains, “All I really

know is that Joseph Smith preached we should try to live like the prophets of old in every way” (43). He, like many of the other characters, recognizes that some Mormon practices are unusual, as he does later when someone mentions the Extermination Order issued by Governor Boggs. He concedes that “maybe our Mormon brothers and sisters were not completely blameless in their dealings with gentile neighbors” (121). As Charlotte would put it, “I believe that God allows for differences in his children....Even in Zion” (45).

Cannon’s Mormon characters are presented as a varied group of individuals who share beliefs. The pioneers in her story acknowledge their weaknesses and the arguments placed against them, but they also have the strength to keep going down the path they believe to be correct. Though these pioneer characters face more physical challenges than the characters in the previously mentioned novels, there is a definite thread that binds them together: negative stereotypes. The stereotypes presented in *Charlotte’s Rose* are more fanciful (e.g., animals, enemies), but they still represent an unfair categorizing of individuals. As Charlotte matures in her faith, she discovers that the real Mormon experience entails a relationship between God and herself.

The Shakeress

Kimberly Heuston’s *The Shakeress* is another example of historical fiction representing the early days of the Mormon Church. In this novel, twelve-year-old Naomi joins a Shaker community in 1828 to save herself and her orphaned siblings. She grows up familiar with the Bible and basic Christianity, but she has to change some of her ideas when she joins the Shakers. At first, she finds Shaker culture and customs strange, but she fully embraces their love of spirituality. Alongside the many rules that Naomi happily accepts is one rule that does not sit well with her: in their attempt to cast off worldly things, Shakers do not marry or have families.

In Naomi's mind, families are one of the most important gifts from God. In fact, staying with her family was the reason she sought out the Shakers in the first place. After she leaves the Shaker community, she learns about the new Mormon Church. As she did with the Shakers, Naomi worries about the newness of Mormon doctrine and scripture. However, she listens to what they have to say and she watches the Mormons as they serve the people around them. Certain aspects of their teachings mirror her own beliefs. Eventually, Naomi welcomes the doctrines of this new religion because their teachings about marriage and family align more with her own ideas than did the teachings of the Shakers.

Naomi's story presents the experience of an outsider character learning about Mormonism. Neither she nor her friends are immediately enamored with the things they hear about Mormons. When Naomi hears Joseph Smith's story for the first time, she feels only "mildly interested" (137). Later, one friend tells her, "We got plenty of religion as it is without that new Golden Bible" (136). Another friend teases the Mormons, saying, "So you believe Joseph Smith because his story is so unbelievable? Makes perfect sense to me" (162). Naomi's conversion to the Mormon Church is not a spectacular miracle; Heuston presents it as a slow, thoughtful process that takes many years.

In the days following Naomi's first discussion with the Mormon missionaries, she can't stop thinking about the doctrine that God can still speak to man. Weeks later, she finds herself awake in the middle of the night, wondering about the things that the Mormons taught her: "What did God look like?" (147) "What if God suddenly appeared to her?" (149) "Was anyone watching her from heaven?" (150) Though she recognizes that Joseph Smith's experience talking to God is an improbable one, she ponders the possibility: "What if God appeared on the earth and spoke to someone again? Who would he choose? How would he come? And how would she

know if He had?” (150) Naomi’s questions are formed not as doubts but as wonders. She asks if it could happen rather than if it should happen. As her wonder grows, she invests more into her research. Finally, she decides to read that “Golden Bible,” the *Book of Mormon*, “just to see what she could find” (166). Naomi’s conversion begins with questions and a search for answers, suggesting, as *The Way He Lived* does, that religious questions do not signal a lack of faith for Mormon characters.

As Naomi delves deeper into her search, readers also learn many essential Mormon beliefs. One controversial doctrine is related early on in her search: “The Mormons believe that, if you want to, you can keep growing and changing after you die until you become a god or a goddess yourself” (162). This doctrine is a guiding force for many other Mormon beliefs and practices; the end goal is to become like God. Naomi understands lofty goals like this from her years as a Shaker. Thus, she also agrees with concepts like “the Lord blesses His children in ways and at times that you never imagined possible” (166). She plows forward in her research and discovers the one doctrine that truly appeals to her: “We love and serve each other. We marry and establish families” (165). Because of fond memories of her parents and siblings, Naomi wants to get married and raise her own family. She wants to feel that special love again, the kind that only comes from family. The Shakers forbid family units, but the Mormons believe that God wants people to have families. Therefore, Naomi’s background as a Shaker influences the way she approaches Mormonism. It is the reason why she latches onto the freedom of the Mormons and their emphasis on family.

Naomi also experiences Mormon prayer. In one instance, a small child with appendicitis receives a healing blessing from Mormon elders, in which the prayer says “your Heavenly Father loves you” (186). When Naomi hears these words, she feels the Holy Ghost intensely: “It seemed

to Naomi that every nerve and cell of her body and her mind understood then that the Lord did love Bertie, and that He loved her too, all the way through to the center of her bones, and that He could and would heal this little boy” (187). This answer to the prayer of healing changes Naomi’s perspective on God. She believes that God loves people and answers their prayers, so she decides to turn this belief into action. After praying to know if she should be baptized, Naomi receives a tingly feeling and realizes that, though the future is unknown, “God remembered her, and that was enough” (199).

As a Mormon character, Naomi is unique in that her story begins before she converts to Mormonism. *The Shakeress* thus slightly departs from the previous novels: instead of reassuring herself that she wants to be a Mormon, Naomi has to make the initial decision to become a Mormon. Despite this difference, Naomi encounters obstacles similar to those presented in the other books. She identifies stereotypes in the form of the teasing questions asked by her friends, but she focuses on the doctrine and not on the people. As with Charlotte, Hannah, Joy, and the narrators of *The Way He Lived*, Naomi prioritizes her belief in the Church over her concern about being stereotyped.

The Boy Who Dared

The Boy Who Dared, another historical novel, is set in Germany in World War II and focuses on the true story of a Mormon boy, Helmuth Hubener. When Hitler first becomes chancellor, Helmuth thinks that Hitler will help repair Germany; however, he also senses that Hitler’s hatred and accusations against the Jews are unjustified. Like many of his friends and neighbors, Helmuth hopes that this particular aspect of Hitler’s platform will fade during the rebuilding of the country. Of course, that does not happen, and Helmuth finds himself distrusting anyone in the Nazi party. When his older brother brings home a contraband radio, Helmuth tunes

in to a British broadcast that reveals the truth about the war: Hitler is oppressing and lying to the German people. Thinking that he can start an underground rebellion, Helmuth distributes fliers to warn people of the truth. He and his friends are caught and interrogated by the Nazis, and at the conclusion of the novel, Helmuth is executed.

This book shows how Helmuth uses his Mormon faith—especially his belief in the Bible and the Articles of Faith, a document written by Joseph Smith to briefly explain Mormon beliefs—to make his decisions. In thinking about Hitler’s persecution of the Jews, Helmuth recognizes that this hatred is not condoned by his religion: “Mormons believe that people have a right to worship how, or where, or what they want. It’s written right in the Thirteen Articles of Faith. Article Eleven, to be exact” (15). However, the very same religious document teaches Mormons to “respect their country and its leaders, even if one disagrees with them” (26). Helmuth thus finds himself in a conundrum because of his beliefs: if he aids Hitler in eliminating the Jews, he breaks one law, but if he disrespects Hitler’s decrees against the Jews, he breaks the other law. In the midst of this paradox, Helmuth asks his older brother, Gerhard, what to do. Citing another Mormon belief, Gerhard wisely responds, “Breaking the law is serious. But God gave us free agency.... That means we have the right to choose our own actions. If you choose to break the law to help someone else or keep someone from harm, then it’s justified” (36). In this novel, Mormon doctrine places Helmuth in a problematic situation, but the doctrine also helps him solve it.

As Helmuth makes his decision, he relies again and again on his faith to stay motivated. He repeats the words “that’s what the Bible says” throughout, so it is clear that he continually thinks about his situation from a religious perspective. He also uses his faith to prioritize the things he is willing to fight for: “Nation. Christianity. Morality. Family. Helmuth knows these

things are very important” (22). When Helmuth and his friends get deeper into their scheme, they begin to justify their actions through a sense of responsibility to nation and family: “Breaking the law goes against their church teachings, but the boys feel sure that they have a responsibility to learn the truth” (122). But after Helmuth gets caught, the other boys lose their zeal. Alone in his cell, Helmuth must once again find his inner strength. His beliefs now are stated simply as “believes in prayer, believes in God, has always believed in God, even now doesn’t believe that God has abandoned him but has grown closer” (38). He reaffirms his trust in God, saying in his prayers, “As thou wilt” (38). From the beginning to the end, Helmuth’s story is framed by his Mormon faith.

But *The Boy Who Dared* also sheds insight onto a more general Mormon experience in 1930’s Germany, particularly in its representation of the hatred Mormons receive from the Nazis. Helmuth’s stepfather, Hugo Hubener, is a prominent member of the Nazi party, and of him, Helmuth says, ““Hugo isn’t a Mormon. How dare he criticize their church!” (47). While Mormons are not targeted, they are still mocked by the Nazis. Helmuth recognizes that Mormons are different from other groups of people, but he celebrates the differences rather than weaponizing them: “Mormons don’t drink coffee, though Helmuth likes its deep, rich smell” (62). In fact, the Mormons are presented here as a loving, obedient people. There is diversity among the congregation, but they are not judgmental. Still, the Mormons disagree with the Nazis and push back in their own way. When an Anti-Semitic sign is placed on the door of the building used for Church meetings, “church members protest and tear down the sign after one week” (55). Many Church practices are hindered by the war, including missionary work. Helmuth reports that “the boys miss the American missionaries, who were called home when war broke out” (84).

The book presents the struggle of German Mormon characters in balancing their Mormon faith and their German citizenship.

Again, this novel presents physical challenges and dangers to its Mormon characters. Unlike the other books, *The Boy Who Dared* does not deal directly with the stereotypes of Mormons. Rather, it examines the ways in which Helmuth and his friends use their faith in the presence of the Nazi party, who are decidedly anti-Mormon. As exemplified by his decisions, Helmuth relies on his Mormon beliefs and even uses them to justify a rebellion against the Nazis. In his own way, Helmuth breaks the stereotype of the rigidly obedient conservative youth, though the stereotype is not addressed in the text. It is clear that Helmuth faces the choice to be a normal Mormon, but he believes that his situation calls for him to step outside of that role. Therefore, this book aligns with the others in praising a Mormon character's rejection of the stereotype.

Taken By Storm

In Angela Morrison's *Taken by Storm*, main character Leesie's Mormonism sparks the central conflict between Leesie and Michael. Michael's parents recently died when a hurricane hit their cruise ship; Michael somehow survived, and at the opening of the story, he is living with his grandmother in a new town, where he meets Leesie, "the Mormon Ice Queen" (1). As Michael tries to come to terms with his grief, he develops an addictive attraction to Leesie. Unfortunately for him, Leesie adheres to her strict Mormon standards, which prohibit sexual activity until after marriage. Leesie attempts to share her religion with Michael to help him feel better, but Michael only wants physical attention. The two are at odds, but they slowly come to understand and respect each other's values.

Mormonism is the driving force for the action of this book. Like many of the other characters in this study, Leesie interprets everything around her through the lens of her faith. Right after her grandmother dies, she writes a poem: “I walk with His hand on my shoulder, His voice whispering in my soul, His love soaring in my heart, His suffering my salvation” (2). Similarly, when she learns that Michael’s parents are recently deceased, she turns again to her faith, suggesting that “my faith has a lot to offer someone who is grieving” (51). Despite this difference, Leesie is attracted to Michael and feels driven to help him. On the other hand, Michael wants to indulge his lust but is stopped every time by Leesie and her Mormon beliefs. She will say something along the lines of “you know I don’t go out with guys who aren’t Mormons” (22). Or later, when she *is* going out with a non-Mormon, she confides, “I am definitely in lust. You know how wrong that is?” (129) Leesie’s and Michael’s feelings about Mormonism do not match, and the book outlines their attempts to change each other’s standards.

Like *The Shakeress*, this novel shows the reactions of non-Mormon characters to Mormonism. Leesie is open with her friends about her religion, and her conversations provide insight into the outside world’s view of the Church. Her best friend Kim comments on Leesie’s chastity, “You can’t stay Virgin Mary forever” (22). She encourages Leesie to have sex with Michael, but Leesie ignores her advice. Later, in a discussion about helping Michael, Kim asks, “Aren’t you always doing good deeds?” (33). As an outsider to the Church, Kim still recognizes two important Mormon values: sexual abstinence until marriage and service for others. Kim’s understanding of Leesie’s Mormon beliefs is accurate, but she fails to realize the importance that Leesie has attached to these beliefs. In this way, Kim misunderstands the depth of Leesie’s faith, and she uses a stereotype to define Leesie.

Michael also reveals his thoughts and feelings toward Mormonism. When Leesie takes him to a Mormon dance, Michael sees a pair of girls misbehaving and dancing crudely. “Aren’t they Mormons, too?” he asks. Leesie responds, “They’re messing up everything” (165). She is frustrated by the inconsistent image of Mormons that Michael sees. He discovers that Mormons are varied, that not all Mormons are as strict as she is about their faith. Of course, he tries to widen this loophole. In his dive log, he writes, “she wants me to try her faith? Maybe I’ll just try her” (88). After the dance, he makes sexual advances and gets angry when she turns him down. He knows how Leesie’s Mormonism portrays him: “I’m the infidel. Forbidden” (112). At the same time, Leesie believes that Michael’s attention is a result of his misplaced grief, and she reaches out to him, but Michael resists her spiritual aid: “My soul’s fine as is...slaughtered...but I don’t think finding religion will fix it” (95). He feels antagonistic toward Mormonism throughout the novel, mostly because of his sexual frustrations.

One of the most interesting aspects of this novel is the extensive explanation of not only Mormon standards but Mormon doctrines. Leesie is the voice for all explanations. She tells one friend about God’s plan for the earth: “He [Heavenly Father] sent us here so we can learn and grow” (123). She also explains repentance and hell: “It boils down to this: no hell. Everyone goes to heaven. But some heavens are better than others” (52). Later, she talks to Michael about what would happen were she to break the Church rules about sexual abstinence: “Painful confession, eternal salvation put on hold, and it would break my dad’s heart” (105). Despite his resistance, Michael agrees to go with Leesie to church where she explains the sacrament meeting to him. She explains the speakers, the passing of the sacramental bread and water, and the prayers. Through Leesie, Morrison provides a sort of beginner’s guide to Mormonism.

In the end, Leesie does not succeed in converting Michael to her religion. However, Michael develops a respect for Leesie's religious standards. He doesn't understand her doctrines completely, but when he is given an opportunity to have sex with her in a moment of her weakness, he chooses not to. He says that "a vision of her standing in front of her white temple with snowflakes falling around her—pure, untouched, holy—fills my soul. I can't take that" (273). He knows that marriage in a Mormon temple is important to her, and he also knows that such a marriage would be basically impossible if she slept with him. The moment of his choice indicates another approach to Mormonism: Michael might not agree with it, but he ultimately admires and respects it. Throughout the novel, readers share Michael's experience, and the story allows them to learn about the varying aspects of Mormonism so that they can decide how they feel about it themselves.

In *Taken by Storm*, Leesie is stereotyped as a typical Mormon by her friends, Kim and Michael. Kim stereotypes her in online chats, but Michael stereotypes her through his antagonistic actions. He knows that she believes in common Mormon values like chastity, but he wants her not to. By holding to her standards, and eventually convincing Michael that her standards are important, Leesie actually reinforces the Mormon stereotypes. She is chaste, obedient, and kind. The only time Leesie gets close to breaking free from the stereotype is when she almost has sex with Michael, but Michael is the one to stop her, to keep her confined by the stereotype. In this way, this novel departs from the others in this study. Leesie is not much different from the other Mormon characters, but she fits within the stereotypes presented in her story.

Conclusions

Through these seven novels, several patterns emerge regarding stereotypes, antagonists, and the uses of Mormonism in YA fiction. Characters in four of the books are stereotyped by other Mormon characters. Characters in two of the remaining books are stereotyped by non-Mormon characters. The last book, *Taken by Storm*, portrays a Mormon character encountering stereotypes from both within and without the Church. Finally, all the books make it clear that religion cannot be extracted from the story without changing the plot, conflict, and especially the characters because their faith influences how they act, react, think, and speak.

Mormon characters in *The Way He Lived*, *Back When You Were Easier to Love*, *A Dance for Three*, and *The Boy Who Dared* are stereotyped both negatively and positively by other Mormon characters, including themselves. For the narrators of *The Way He Lived*, the stereotypes are restricting and negative. The characters respond by remembering Joel for the good things he did in life rather than falling into the trap of judging him. Similarly, Joy in *Back When You Were Easier to Love* continually defies Zan's expectations of her, even when he refuses to accept that his expectations are incorrect. Zan's reaction is quite different from Hannah's reaction in *A Dance for Three*. Hannah negatively stereotypes her bishop, but she quickly realizes that he does not belong in the villainous category.

Diverging from these negative stereotypes is *The Boy Who Dared*. In this book, Helmuth stereotypes Mormons positively, but he also disproves the stereotype by breaking some rules for what he considers to be the greater good. Unlike the characters in the previous novels, Helmuth gets punished for stepping outside the boundaries of obedience; however, it is notable that the Nazis execute him not for challenging the Mormon stereotype but for challenging the German

one. The characters in all these novels are stereotyped in different ways by Mormons, but these characters all prove those stereotypes wrong.

Stereotypes from non-Mormon characters are similarly proven wrong in *Charlotte's Rose* and *The Shakeress*. Charlotte is a new member to the Church when she sees the anti-Mormon pamphlets in Boston; up to this point, she has never really considered how other people view Mormons. The pamphlet suggests that Mormons are evil and animalistic, but on the plains, Charlotte finds that Mormons are kind-hearted and faithful people. She develops strong relationships with the Mormons around her and with God through prayer, and all her worries about stereotypes disappear. The experience is comparable for Naomi, who sees Mormons being negatively stereotyped even before she enters the Church. Her friends, even her fiancé, joke about the Mormons' golden bible and their silly practices. Naomi acts on pure faith as she continues to investigate Mormonism, and she learns that her friends' image of Mormons was false.

For Leesie in *Taken by Storm*, dealing with stereotypes is not so easy. She has stereotyped Mormons in one way, and her friends have stereotyped Mormons differently. Leesie wants to be a typical, obedient Mormon girl: she won't date non-Mormons, she wants to attend BYU, etc. Her friend, Kim, has a much narrower view of Mormons. She believes that Leesie is nothing more than a chaste do-gooder, disregarding all the other important values that Leesie embraces. Finally, Leesie's boyfriend, Michael, sees her as the Mormon ice queen who is trying to save his soul. Michael holds a different view of the typical Mormon than Kim does: he refuses to see past the rules on chastity and salvation. As a result, Kim and Michael press Leesie to get out of the stereotypical "good girl" role, and Leesie responds at first by breaking small rules, but

in the end, she chooses to reinforce the stereotype. *Taken by Storm* inhabits an exception to the image of Mormon characters otherwise created by YA literature.

Interestingly enough, in all instances of breaking stereotypes, Mormon characters set themselves apart from incorrect perceptions by adhering even closer to their Mormon beliefs. Even Leesie, who fights to maintain the stereotype, sticks to her beliefs in order to do so. The Mormon faith guides these characters in their thoughts and actions. For example, Charlotte and Naomi rely on prayer to connect them to deity. Helmuth navigates a paradox using his belief that God wants him to help the German people. Leesie follows strict standards in order to decide which actions are right and which are wrong. Joy, Hannah, and the narrators of *The Way He Lived* choose to love others rather than judge them. Mormonism thus plays an essential role in each of the novels presented here.

Overall, the portrayal of Mormon characters is relatively consistent in these novels. The stereotypes of Mormons in these books are inconsistent, coming from a variety of cultures, time periods, and characters, and this variety suggests that there can be no simple stereotype of Mormons. Still, whether disproving stereotypes or agreeing with them, each Mormon character in this study uses his or her faith to make important decisions. Through their decisions, the characters also represent a diverse group of Mormons. Some are challenged by same-sex attraction, others by anti-Mormon literature, still others by personal pride. The consistency exists not in the conflict of the stories, but in the ways the characters react to the conflict. These books consistently show Mormon characters making decisions based on their faith.

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