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In a publishing market that demands very specific genres such as science fiction or self-help, finding authors who strive for literary excellence with little regard for marketability can present a small challenge—but they are out there. In this review essay, Jack Harrell introduces readers to a few such examples within Mormon literature.

The Search for Mormon Literary Quality

Bound on Earth, Rift, Long After Dark, and The Best of Mormonism 2009

Jack Harrell

I know a secret. For a hundred years or more, Latter-day Saints have been writing works of literary quality. We have had among us fine poets and novelists, playwrights and essayists, and, more recently, a few serious filmmakers. I'm not the only one who knows this secret. For three decades, students have taken Mormon literature courses at BYU, reading novels, poems, and plays virtually unknown to their parents and peers. I was one of those students in the early 1990s. It is difficult to see the effects this educational movement has had on LDS culture when visiting a Mormon bookstore today. But for me and thousands of others, reading works of literary quality by and about Latter-day Saints brought to our lives a treasured richness of literary appreciation and religious understanding. Still, the secret of Mormon literary writing remains untold to many Latter-day Saints all over the world.

What do I mean by works of literary quality? That is a very big question, one too complex to answer sufficiently here. The pop-culture standard is based on units sold: the more copies a particular book sells, the better it is. Literary qualities are harder to measure, but they include characteristics like a striking use of language, complex themes, and philosophical depth. Literary works lend themselves to multiple interpretations. While certain works merely reinforce what readers already feel and believe, literary works tend to challenge, expand, and refine the reader's values and assumptions. Ideally, a work of literature causes the reader to say, "I'll never be the same after reading that book."

Another quality of literature is important to mention here because, sadly, it is so absent in the fiction sections of LDS bookstores: the standard

of universality. Readers do not have to be Jewish, for example, to appreciate a book by Chaim Potok. One need not live in seventeenth-century England to understand Shakespeare. Literary works transcend boundaries and speak to people across cultures and years. Many books in LDS bookstores fail this standard, alienating readers who are not LDS or who do not fit a particular demographic. Just as an inside joke told between two people tends to alienate a third party, much LDS writing has the same effect on those outside American Mormon culture.

The works reviewed here might alienate certain readers on other grounds, however. Readers expecting Mormon characters with no inner doubts or personal conflicts may be disappointed. Readers expecting Mormon characters who always live as we all know we *ought* to live (and don't) might deem these works to be not uplifting enough. For these readers, there are many options available at LDS bookstores. The rest of you will likely need to order the following books on the Internet.

Angella Hallstrom's *Bound on Earth* opens with a conflict that assures us this book will offer no easy answers. In the novel, Beth is a young wife and mother married in the temple to a returned missionary, Kyle, a good man in his mid-twenties who has become mentally ill. Kyle will not take his medicine. In his paranoia, he is convinced that Beth and her entire family, the Palmers, are against him. After waiting down the street for hours, Kyle crashes the family's Thanksgiving gathering at Beth's parents' house, putting everyone on edge. The drama works well because Kyle is not necessarily dangerous; the author's subtle touches in characterization intensify the conflict even more. Like the members of the Palmer family, we feel as bad for Kyle as we do for Beth. Kyle asks to hold their baby, Stella. He takes Stella to sit in the backyard, on the swing. As a gentle snow falls, Kyle sings to her while Beth watches tensely from the patio door. When Beth goes out to get her baby, Kyle says, "I would give you anything, you know." Then, as narrator, Beth says, "I leave him out on the swing. I walk with my daughter toward the house, and it's lit up and warm, a deep yellow glow against the night."

Bound on Earth goes on to chronicle other stories about the Palmer family through time. Most stories are contemporary, but one reaches back to a pioneer ancestor whose dying infant daughter is healed by a miraculous visitor. This book is real family drama, where the characters are not "good guys" or "bad guys." Instead, the characters feel like friends who do not always get it right, but we care about them nonetheless. The novel poignantly shows how families are in fact united by the painful and peculiar stories of each individual member.

The stories in Todd Robert Petersen's *Long After Dark* resonate with the book's title and cover art—a nighttime shot of a paved lot and a lone light pole. This book reads like stories told late at night by a stranger you are only gradually learning to trust. The book contains sixteen stories, some as short as a couple of pages, and ends with the sixty-three-page novella "Family History." Many of Petersen's characters are Mormon, but not the kind of Mormon you might see on the cover of the *Ensign*. One character pays tithing on money won in a dog fight. Another, an Argentinean priesthood leader, is released from his calling after shooting a young intruder who broke into his home. In another story, a meth addict steals a picture of Christ from a nearby ward meetinghouse—not because he's a thief at heart, but because he vaguely recognizes a need for Christ in his life. Then Peterson takes us to another continent, where an African elder is called by his branch president to dedicate a grave in a dangerous and strange village nearby. Soon we're back to Mormondom, or Petersen's version of it, where a Utah sheriff's deputy runs over a coyote on the highway at night before having a mystical encounter with a Native American Latter-day Saint.

Petersen's characters and circumstances move toward the more familiar in his novel *Rift*, winner of the Marilyn Brown Novel Award. The main character of *Rift*, Jens Thorson (the character who opens *Long After Dark*), has maintained a years-long feud with his bishop. This feud escalates when the bishop's adult, pregnant, unwed daughter moves in with the widower Jens. Because her own father is trying to teach the girl a lesson, Jens is left to care for her as her father should. In *Rift*, Petersen generally portrays Mormons as judgmental of their neighbors, sticklers for small sins, and indifferent to the pain of those who "don't belong." Certainly many Latter-day Saints do not fit this description, but sadly, Petersen's view is accurate too often. The irony is that by taking this critical stance, *Rift* may be its own brand of preachment. But it helps that the work is lyrically written and presents the foibles of ordinary Latter-day Saints with humor and grace.

Stephen Carter's *Best of Mormonism 2009* lives up to its title. In the spirit of the well-known Best American Series, Carter has selected short works published by Mormons in LDS and other literary publications, including *Iowa Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Dialogue*, and *BYU Studies*. One advantage here is variety—essays, short stories, poetry, and a play. The second advantage is quality. Each of the works was previously published, and some in the finest literary journals today. The volume is solid writing, from its thoughtful introduction by Phyllis Barber, titled "Writing: An Act of Responsibility," to its last selection, a beautiful poem by Darlene Young called "Patriarchal Blessing." Joshua Foster's "Redemption in Three

Levitations,” first published in *South Loop Review*, presents us with three semi-miracles against a backdrop of Idaho farm life. Lisa Torcasso Downing’s “Clothing Esther” is a masterfully restrained short story about a woman who must clothe her mother-in-law for burial. In “We Who Owe Everything to a Name,” Lynda Mackey Wilson tells of her own mother, who found herself pregnant by a man who then fled the country. Wilson tells the story of how she was raised by the good man who married her mother, and how that experience informed her more mature understanding of our souls being adopted by Christ.

None of these volumes will sell like hotcakes, which is too bad. But despite a lack of commercial potential, I’m hopeful about the future of Mormon literary writing. Surely some Latter-day Saints—perhaps many—will recognize that commercial success is not the only, or even the best, measure of quality. Some things come at a higher price—a significant investment in time, patience, and thought. The books I’ve mentioned represent a small but meaningful movement, one that may never become widespread. Nonetheless, good literary writing by and about Latter-day Saints is out there. To you I recommend the search.

Jack Harrell (who can be reached via email at byu_studies@byu.edu) teaches English and creative writing at Brigham Young University–Idaho. His collection *A Sense of Order and Other Stories* was published by Signature Books in 2010.

The four books discussed here are Angela Hallstrom, *Bound on Earth* (Woodsboro, Md.: Parables, 2008); Todd Robert Petersen, *Rift* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla, 2009); Todd Robert Petersen, *Long After Dark: Stories and Novella* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla, 2007); and Stephen Carter, ed., *The Best of Mormonism 2009* (Salt Lake City: Curelom, 2009).