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Dispensation: Latter-day Fiction

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Angela Hallstrom, editor. *Dispensation: Latter-day Fiction*.

Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2010.

Reviewed by Scott Hales

Frequently, fiction provides readers with an opportunity to encounter difference. When I began taking literature seriously as a teenager, these encounters with characters so different from me and my surroundings were at once exciting and, for an awkward Mormon kid, somewhat perilous. In those days, my favorite novels were Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Both works, with their settings in places far distant from the bland Ohio suburb I called home, made me long for some regional or international tragedy—some event that would narrow the distance between my life and that of Frederic Henry or Tom Joad. No such luck. My teenage years passed uneventfully. No Great War or Depression altered my life's direction.

Of course, as a Mormon teenager—as a young priest who had to bless the sacrament every week—I also recognized that my identification with Hemingway's or Steinbeck's characters could only go so far. I couldn't, for example, revel in drink the way the standard Hemingway protagonist did (not if I wanted to keep blessing the sacrament, that is), nor could I align my religious views comfortably with those of Preacher Casy—no matter how much I admired his courage. I was different: I was a Mormon kid from Ohio with a big family, average grades, a set of scriptures, a dozen hideous ties, and a jar in the cupboard that was supposed to be collecting coins for my mission. In a moment of frustration and despair—a concoction of emotion typical of a high schooler—I complained to my English teacher that nowhere in literature were characters like me. Where were the Mormons?

She had no idea.

Sorry, kid. You're stuck with Tom Joad.

So, deprived of a literature of familiars, I learned, as have many Mormon readers, to appreciate differences and the pleasures of reading texts that challenged me to weigh the merits of my own life's choices against those of others. At the same time, I still wanted to read about characters

like me, Mormon characters who looked at the world through Mormon spectacles. Little did I know that kind of literature did exist, that four years earlier Eugene England had edited a book called *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories*, a collection of twenty-two short stories about characters I could directly relate to—at least more directly than Fred-eric Henry or Tom Joad.

England's anthology, of course, was not the first compilation of Mormon literature. In the mid-1970s, Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert had edited two anthologies of Mormon literature, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (1974, 1979) and *22 Young Mormon Writers* (1975). Less than a decade later, in 1983, Levi S. Peterson produced a collection of creative Mormon writing, *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon Short Stories*, which remained the only anthology of its kind until England's *Bright Angels* appeared on the market a decade later, in 1993, to become the standard work of contemporary Mormon fiction. Of course, much has happened in Mormon fiction and the Church since the early 1990s. Not only has Mormonism enjoyed a significant increase in membership and global visibility, but it has also produced a handful of new creative writing talent with new insights and approaches to Mormon experiences.

Enter *Dispensation: Latter-day Fiction*, a new anthology of Mormon short stories recently published by Zarahemla Books (2010), the independent press responsible for some of the most innovative and important works of Mormon fiction from the last decade: Todd Robert Petersen's *Long After Dark* and *Rift*, Douglas Thayer's *The Tree House*, and Coke Newell's *On the Road to Heaven*. A kind of continuation of the project *Bright Angels and Familiars*, *Dispensation* gathers together Mormon short stories from the late 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium. Among the authors anthologized in the book are veterans of Mormon fiction like Douglas Thayer and Margaret Blair Young (who also penned the introduction to the collection), as well as newcomers like Laura McCune-Poplin and Arianne Cope.

Dispensation's editor, Angela Hallstrom, is another rising star in the field of Mormon letters and an enormously talented writer in her own right. Indeed, aside from *Dispensation*, Hallstrom is best known for her novel *Bound on Earth*, a moving narrative of a Mormon family, the Palmers, who struggle to come to terms with the daily realities of mental illness, marriage, family, and faith in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Utah. In 2008, the novel won both the Association of Mormon Letters' Award for the Novel and the Whitney Award for Best Novel by a New Author. More importantly, though, *Bound on Earth* demonstrates Hallstrom's remarkable skill in capturing authentic Mormon voices. Like the best works of Mormon fiction, it

chipped away at the Sunday morning façade of its characters and gave its readers meaningful insight into Mormon life. The novel more than qualified Hallstrom to take the helm on *Dispensation*.

Twenty-eight stories are anthologized in *Dispensation*, and, as Hallstrom notes in her preface to the collection, each story is “Mormon in some way” (xi). Most often, this means that the main characters are Mormons themselves. In Levi Peterson’s story “Brothers,” for example, the two main characters are aging half-brothers—one an excommunicated Mormon, the other still very active—who reconnect after years of estrangement as they climb to the summit of Wyoming’s tallest mountain. During their journey, the brothers reflect on their lives and surroundings with a decidedly Mormon lens. Peterson’s device is to juxtapose two seemingly opposite characters in order to challenge his readers’ assumptions about Mormon identity. For instance, Bernie, the active brother, looks across the “stark, unadorned landscape” of Wyoming’s Gannett Peak and thinks “that this must be a foretaste of the telestial kingdom, that unhappy place where the unvaliant among the Mormons and the wicked among the gentiles will dwell throughout all eternity” (45). The excommunicated brother, Mitch, on the other hand, finds himself questioning the theology Bernie so easily takes for granted:

Could God be so mean, so punctilious and worried about protocol, that he wouldn’t let people associate with each other in eternity even if they wanted to unless they had knuckled under to the church and gone through all the ceremonies and made all the vows and kept all the commandments, all four or five thousand of them? (46)

Bernie and Mitch are Mormons to the core, even though their relationship to the Church could not seem more different. And their Mormonness is not an unspoken, ethereal aspect of the story: it is the story.

Such is not the case, however, with Lisa Madsen Rubilar’s “Obbligato,” the story that precedes Peterson’s in the anthology. Nowhere is it mentioned, for instance, that its characters are Mormons, although its rural Idaho setting, themes of motherhood and sacrifice, and references to “Primary” and “Heavenly Father” make Mormonism its obvious framework. While it begins in a setting familiar to rural American Mormonism, with images and ideas that have been recycled through countless other Mormon short stories, it eventually goes into exile as its narrator, a young French horn player, breaks tradition and moves to Chicago to pursue a career in music. In many ways, her determination to live a life different from that of her parents—particularly in the reluctance that seems to accompany it—is characteristic of a new generation of Mormons that have grown up

in a world of new secular opportunities and expectations. While there's no indication that the narrator has abandoned her faith, something of loss is apparent in her voice as she weighs the consequences of her choices:

Such questions present themselves at unexpected moments. Like when it's January in Chicago, and you're starting up the stoop to your dreary third-floor apartment when you spy a discarded poinsettia in a garbage can next to the curb, and for a moment the spidery, leafless thing cries out to you like a child; so you lug the plant upstairs where it sheds the last of its green and red leaves into the sink before you lug it back down again. And you say to yourself Mother would have done better. (23)

Peterson and Rubilar tell very different Mormon stories, and new attention to the broader physical and experiential geographies of Mormonism is one of the strengths of *Dispensation*. In fact, one of the aspects of the anthology that is most compelling for a reader like me is its inclusion of stories like Stephen Tuttle's "The Weather Here," Jack Harrell's "Calling and Election," Matthew James Babcock's "The Walker," and Lee Allred's "Hymnal," which engage with Mormonism in stories reminiscent of the early episodes of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*.

In "The Weather Here," for example, Tuttle introduces us to a group of men, plagued by rainstorms and flea infestations, who live in a house without a roof. Omnipresent in the story is the enigmatic Mandelbaum, a former friend of the men, "who was most likely to disagree on any given subject" (95). Mandelbaum's recent departure, along with his endless speculations on their bizarre and barren existence, occupies the thoughts and conversations of the men, each of whom suffers from unreliable memories and a "lack of historical context" (100). Like "Obbligato," "The Weather Here" makes no reference to Mormonism or its culture. It isn't until the end of the story, when the men recall one of Mandelbaum's speculations, that we begin to see why this story is in the anthology:

He [Mandelbaum] said that we were being punished for misdeeds and that our pasts were catching up to us. He said that this place was the opposite of a resting place, that it was a restless place where we would never know peace again, because we had hurt people, and done them wrong, and presented as truth things which we knew were not. (102)

"The Weather Here" is a complex story, and readers can interpret this passage in any number of ways—although its placement in a book like *Dispensation* would seem to lead the reader to ask where in the Mormon cosmology these men are. Are they stuck in spirit prison? Has Mandelbaum left because his temple work has been done? Or have these men been consigned to the telestial kingdom or outer darkness? Ultimately, Tuttle leaves

these questions, like his characters, in limbo. This uncertainty and ambiguity work so effectively, however, that it makes “The Weather Here” all the more worth reading and pondering.

Dispensation, of course, is exciting for other reasons as well. One welcome aspect is its global vision. For too long, Mormon literature has put its shoulder to the wheel or its hand to plow, turning over stories rooted in the rural landscape of Utah and the American West. While these stories should continue to have place in collections of Mormon fiction—and *Dispensation*, to be sure, has no lack of rural American settings—they are becoming increasingly less characteristic of the worldwide Church as a whole. On the other hand, stories like Paul Rawlins’s “The Garden” and Todd Robert Petersen’s “Quietly” (arguably two of the best stories in the collection) foreshadow the possibilities of a Mormon fiction more aware of the Church’s transnational experiences. Indeed, I think it is significant that the anthology opens with “The Garden,” the story of Simon Bob, a black South African, who reluctantly hides a white Mormon missionary from a mob that is trying to kill him. Although Rawlins gives readers a small sense of who the missionary is, “The Garden” really isn’t about him. Its emotional center, rather, is Simon Bob and his internal conflict. He’s not the hero the missionary needs him to be; in fact, having already experienced enough of tragedy and injustice in his life, Simon Bob mostly wants to fade away and disappear:

He could be killed for hitting a white man. He could be killed by others for letting him go. He could be killed for many other things as well—or for nothing at all. It was best here to live without being seen. The police didn’t see you and harass you about your papers. The *tsotsis* didn’t see you and knife you in the street. (9)

Clearly, Simon Bob and the frightened missionary he harbors are a long way from the red rock and irrigated fields of rural Utah. So too is John, the main character in “Quietly,” who is a recent African convert given the assignment to dedicate the grave of a Church member recently killed by the Hutus in Rwanda. Like Simon Bob, John brings a new perspective to Mormon fiction. At one point in the story, for example, he finds himself recalling a member who

had taken his family into Tanzania, working in Dar es Salaam until he had enough money to take them all to Salt Lake City. He wanted his children to grow up in the American Zion. *He should have known that since blacks finally have the priesthood, it needs to stay here in Africa*, John thought. But he knew that he couldn’t hold the desire to escape against anyone. (386)

Here, readers get not only John's story, but also the story of the man who fled Africa for the Mormon Zion. Their stories, in some ways, are no different from other Mormon stories that likewise touch on themes of priesthood duty and the yearning to gather with the Saints. At the same time, however, their international settings, as well as their unflinching exploration of such issues as race, immigration, and genocide, testify that these are not your father's Mormon stories.

In her preface to *Dispensation*, Angela Hallstrom writes that "immersing oneself in a completely foreign place or time is one of the fundamental pleasures of reading good literature" (ix), which is certainly the lesson I learned from reading Hemingway, Steinbeck, and countless other writers in my teenage years. Even today, I make a habit of reading books by authors of various backgrounds so that my scope does not become too narrow, my worldview too restricted. But, like Hallstrom, I agree that "recognizing oneself in a work of fiction is an exhilarating experience, too" (ix). The good news is that I no longer need to ask where the Mormons are. Latter-day Saint readers from all walks of life have a book that showcases the diversity and complexity of their experience.

Perhaps because of this, *Dispensation: Latter-day Fiction* also has the potential to act as an intermediary text, a window through which readers of other faiths can look and better understand their Mormon neighbors. It's the kind of book that belongs on every Mormon bookshelf, although its striking portrayal of certain aspects of Mormon life may be off-putting for some readers. That said, those who are looking for challenging fiction that offers an unblinking view of Mormonism will not be disappointed by it. As its title suggests, it's a collection of Mormon stories that seeks to herald in a new dispensation of Mormon literature.

Scott Hales is a PhD candidate in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati. His critical essays and book reviews have been published in *War, Literature, and the Arts*; *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*; *Ireantum*; and on his Mormon literature blog, *The Low-Tech World: Exploring Mormon Literature* (www.low-techworld.org).