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The Death of a Disco Dancer; A Sense of Order and Other Stories; The Scholar of Moab

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David M. Clark

Jack Harrell

Steven L. Peck

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David Clark. *The Death of a Disco Dancer*.

Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2011.

Jack Harrell. *A Sense of Order and Other Stories*.

Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2010.

Steven L. Peck. *The Scholar of Moab*.

Torrey, Utah: Torrey House Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Shelah Mastny Miner

As an enthusiastic reader of literary fiction and as someone who is fascinated by Mormon culture, I am always on the lookout for works of literary fiction that contain Mormon themes or Mormon characters. While there are always plenty of new romances on the shelves at Deseret Book, and Mormon authors frequently find commercial and critical success writing science fiction and books for young adults, it is rare to come across works of contemporary fiction written for adults in which the characters are nuanced and well developed and the authors take risks with form and plot. Over the last two years, three books—Jack Harrell’s *A Sense of Order and Other Stories*, Steven L. Peck’s *The Scholar of Moab*, and David Clark’s *Death of a Disco Dancer*—use Mormon themes and characters in their writing while pushing against some of the boundaries of traditional fiction conventions.

A Sense of Order and Other Stories is the first collection of short stories published by Jack Harrell, a fiction writer and essayist who teaches at BYU–Idaho. The collection won the 2010 Association for Mormon Letters Short Fiction Award. Harrell is currently the coeditor of *Irreantum*, a literary journal published by the Association for Mormon Letters. His novel, *Vernal Promises*, won the Marilyn Brown Novel Award in 2000 and was published by Signature Books. The collection *A Sense of Order and Other Stories* contains sixteen stories, including “Calling and Election,” which won first place in the *Irreantum* fiction contest and was later anthologized in *Dispensation: Latter-Day Fiction*.

The stories in *A Sense of Order and Other Stories* take place in settings as varied as rural Illinois; Rexburg, Idaho; the office of the prophet; and the lone and dreary world. Not all of Harrell’s characters are Latter-day Saints, but many are. Some of the stories contain supernatural elements, including characters from other realms of life. But all of the stories, regardless of setting or worldview, feel realistic and grounded. They also contain an element of hope and faith, without being cheesy or overly sentimental. Jack

Harrell's writing shows promise that the LDS tradition does have room for excellent writing and that there is an audience for that writing, even if it is a small one.

One of the most delightful aspects about *A Sense of Order and Other Stories* is the sheer unexpectedness of where the narrative takes the reader. In "A Prophet's Story," Harrell begins with the LDS prophet sitting in his office, dreaming about how nice it would be to get in a truck, drive to Walmart, look at garden hoses, and buy a candy bar without the entourage and adoring crowds that would turn such an excursion into a chore. What readers do not expect is the level of planning that the prophet and his secretary undertake to carry out his wish or the parallel narrative of an apparently unstable motorcyclist who is making a stop in Salt Lake City. Harrell somehow brings the two narratives together, revealing that the motorcycle guy is not altogether crazy and that the prophet's jaunt might be not just a joyride but an inspired journey.

The Scholar of Moab by Steven L. Peck, a biology professor at Brigham Young University, is a recent work that won the 2011 Association for Mormon Letters Novel Award and is published by Torrey House Press, an independent book publisher of literary fiction and creative nonfiction focusing on the environment and culture of the American West. Peck's previous works include the novel *The Gift of the King's Jeweler*, published by Covenant Communications in 2003; he has also published several short stories and poems, including a chapbook of poetry published by the American Tolkien Society called *Fly Fishing in Middle-Earth*. His essays have appeared in *Newsweek* and *Dialogue*.

The ambition of *The Scholar of Moab* is impressive; even though its length, at just under three hundred pages, is not necessarily epic, it feels epic in scope. One reason is that the book encompasses so many different voices. The book centers on the story of Hyrum Thyne, a high school dropout turned "scholar." Readers not only get Hyrum's private journal—misspellings, malapropisms, and all—but they also hear poems from his wife, Sandra; letters and poems from his gal-on-the-side, Dora; letters from an erudite, despairing, conjoined twin who works as a cowboy in the LaSal Mountains outside of Moab; notes from an unnamed redactor; and letters, transcripts, and additional written work from other voices. As a reader, I found myself marveling at Peck's ability to differentiate between so many different voices, although at times I felt a bit too conscious of the effort Peck exerted to create them.

The Scholar of Moab is also a book that manages to walk the fine line between satirizing the people of Moab and embracing them. On the back jacket, Scott Abbott writes that the novel is "satire of the best sort: biting

what it loves, snuggling up to what it hates,” an assessment with which I heartily agree. Sandra and her ward members are both ignorant and tender, and my reaction to Hyrum vacillated from hate to love and back again several times over the course of the narrative.

The Scholar of Moab can be read as realistic fiction where an astounding number of coincidences come together to create delightfully weird and tragic situations; it is also possible to read it as magical realism. I am not sure that Peck comes down decisively on either side of the genre issue. *The Scholar of Moab* is rich, nuanced, and complicated. It expects a lot from its readers, and I appreciate the growing body of books out there by and for (but not exclusively for) Mormons who embrace these complexities.

David Clark wrote *Death of a Disco Dancer* while taking a sabbatical from his job as a corporate attorney. He has published short stories in *Sunstone* and *Irreantum* and has been an award winner in the Brookie and D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest. While an undergraduate at BYU, he served as editor of the *American Studies Forum*. He also served as articles editor of the *George Washington Journal of International Law and Economics*.

Death of a Disco Dancer tells the story of Todd Whitman, an eleven-year-old Mormon living in Mesa, Arizona. Todd’s grandmother, who is suffering from dementia, recently moved in with his family. In the daytime, Todd’s life is like most eleven-year-old boys on the cusp of graduating from Primary and going to junior high—he’s consumed by his first crush, as well as by the social pressure of keeping up with two older siblings. At night, when everyone else is asleep, Granny visits Todd’s bedroom, where she proclaims her love for the Dancer (John Travolta from Saturday Night Fever), teaches Todd how to dance, and relives her past.

The secondary narrative takes place in the present time and shows Todd, now an adult, working through the waning days of his own mother’s life, which provides a subtle reinforcement of how certain patterns cycle through families. This narrative also places the events of Todd’s childhood into relief as he looks back at them from a distance of thirty years. The fact that the narrator is in his forties looking back on his childhood experiences might account for why the “young” Todd in the main narrative feels older than eleven. His thoughts and concerns seem more believable as a teenager than as a rising seventh grader. Perhaps Clark sees Todd as an unusually precocious eleven-year-old.

Quibbles aside, in *Death of a Disco Dancer* Clark is able to do something that few LDS authors have achieved so far—like Harrell’s and Peck’s books, Clark’s book is about Mormons but not necessarily for a Mormon audience alone. He talks about Mormon elements in a familiar way, but while the

book is about subjects that are central to the Mormon experience (eternal families, repentance, progression through the ranks of the priesthood), they are presented in a universal way. The book is tight and well edited, rich and complex, and totally compelling. I read the 300-plus page book in less than a day, not because I had to, but because I wanted more. I hope Clark gives us more.

While all three books are worth reading on their own merits, it is also interesting to look at the three in conjunction with each other as possible predictors of trends in Mormon literary fiction. All three books take risks in terms of form and plot. Harrell's stories (notably "Calling and Election") start out in a world Latter-day Saints are familiar with—a church parking lot in Eastern Idaho, for example—but then take them out of the realm of realistic fiction and into something approaching magical realism. Peck's book challenges readers by playing with form (interweaving journals, letters, poems, and traditional narrative), introducing potentially unreliable narrators, and injecting possible elements of magical realism as well. *Death of a Disco Dancer's* alternating chapters require readers to make connections between the worlds of eleven-year-old Todd and forty-year-old Todd. All three books are funny and are not afraid to be strange. These stories might not appeal to all mainstream readers, but they definitely appeal to me, and I think they would appeal to many readers of literary fiction, Mormon or otherwise.

Shelah Mastny Miner (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) graduated from BYU with a BA in English Teaching, then went on to receive an MA in American Culture Studies from Washington University in St. Louis and an MFA in Creative Writing from BYU. She works as the features editor for *Segullah*, writes for the *Mormon Women Project* and *Feminist Mormon Housewives*, and keeps a book review blog at *Shelah Books It* (shelahbooksit.blogspot.com). She and her husband live in Salt Lake City with their five children.