



10-1-2013

Monsters and Mormons: Thirty Tales of Adventure and Terror

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Recommended Citation

Parkin, Scott R.; Morris, Wm; and Jepson, Theric (2013) "Monsters and Mormons: Thirty Tales of Adventure and Terror," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 52 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol52/iss3/13>

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Wm Morris and Theric Jepson, eds. *Monsters and Mormons: Thirty Tales of Adventure and Terror.*

El Cerrito, Calif.: Peculiar Pages, 2011.

Reviewed by Scott R. Parkin

Mormonism has had a difficult history with pulp fiction, from lurid magazine tales of Danite murders and kidnappings to Arthur Conan Doyle's casual depictions of forced polygamous marriage and international revenge in *A Study in Scarlet*. Sensationalism about poorly understood details of Mormon culture, doctrine, and practice has long been a mainstay of thrilling stories focused on exotic locales and adventurism more than factual accuracy.

Though Mormonism has generally fared poorly in popular genres, individual Mormons have quietly become a powerful force in those same genres. Authors like Zenna Henderson and Raymond F. Jones embraced the new genres of science fiction and fantasy in the 1940s and 1950s at about the same time Samuel W. Taylor introduced the world to "A Situation of Gravity," which became Disney's *The Absent-Minded Professor*. While not household names themselves, their stories were known around the world. Since then, authors like Orson Scott Card, Dave Wolverton, Brandon Sanderson, and Stephenie Meyer have become international bestsellers in science fiction, fantasy, and horror, with a veritable mob of next-gen authors such as Dan Wells, Shannon Hale, James Dashner, and others joining the fray.

Still, though Mormons are well represented in genre fiction, there has tended to be an essential disconnect between Mormonism as subject matter and Mormons as authors. While there is much room for imagination informed by Mormon thought, the specific trappings of Mormonism have largely been left behind in the broader popular market (though that is starting to change).

So it was with a mix of horror and fascination that I approached *Monsters and Mormons*, a hefty new anthology of pulp-style stories

explicitly based on the peculiar trappings of Mormon life, history, culture, and folklore.

Digression: Anthology as State of the Literary Art

Short story anthologies are oddly rare in Mormon literature. We publish plenty of single-author collections, but multi-author anthologies tend to be fewer and further between. As such, they tend to be viewed as manifestos of sorts, snapshots of the current state of the Mormon literary art—at least over the past two decades. From Eugene England’s *Bright Angels and Familiars* through M. Shayne Bell’s *Washed by a Wave of Wind* to Angela Hallstrom’s *Dispensation*, we look to these anthologies as signposts of our collective literary maturity and use them as introductions to notable names that we might not hear of otherwise.

That is not precisely what editors Wm Morris and Theric Jepson were trying to accomplish with *Monsters and Mormons*—or at least it was not their sole goal. In many ways, this anthology is an act of aggression, an almost antagonistic response to the abuses heaped on Mormonism by the pulps and other popular genres over the years. The editors stated it best in the original call for submissions: “We propose to recast, reclaim and simply mess with that tradition by making Mormon characters, settings and ideas the protagonists of genre-oriented stories . . . a project of cultural re-appropriation. But even more than that, we just want us all to have fun with the concept.”¹

In attempting to explicitly reappropriate Mormon things from the pulp genres, this anthology actually does function as a statement of both maturity and the state of the literary art, though not in traditional ways. Rather than focusing *stories* on the Mormon experience, the editors have focused the *authors’* own imaginative extrapolation of the Mormon experience as a seed for creating stories.

In other words, overwrought and exaggerated stories in the pulp tradition told *by* us rather than *about* us; sensational stories with Mormons cast as heroes as well as villains; latent Mormon mysticism animating the phantasms of unique existential horror; and direct permission to mine Mormonism with the same reckless abandon that others have used to create exotic and unusual stories.

1. Wm Morris, “Monsters & Mormons: Call for Submissions,” April 15, 2010, *A Motley Vision*, <http://www.motleyvision.org/2010/monsters-mormons-submissions/>.

That level of comfort with creative reimagination of our institutions and practices speaks to a real kind of cultural maturity. These tales exist to explore and entertain, not to explain or proselyte. While many of these stories are somewhat less than literary masterpieces of theme, language, and allusion, they are all comfortable within their very Mormon skin. That is a (generally) good thing.

Cultural Reappropriation

By reappropriating the base materials of Mormon history, culture, and practice, this anthology attempts to actively expand the bounds of Mormon literature. As such, these stories aggressively push against not only the external abuse of our culture by outsiders, but the internal stasis of the literary assumptions and demands of our insiders. It invites us not to take ourselves too seriously and in the process opens up a whole new array of narrative possibilities.

The effect is that very little is out-of-bounds here—either in terms of subject matter or story structure and delivery—and more than a few familiar things were reimaged into very unfamiliar shapes (though considering their recent overuse, vampires were understandably discouraged). There are Mormons in space, Mormon zombie-killers, and Mormon demon-hunters. Porter Rockwell showed up as mythic/mystic figure in several stories, as did Gadianton robbers and a variety of ghosts. There were human, alien, supernatural, and superhuman antagonists. Polygamy shows up several times, and there is both noir detective fiction and an odd set of pioneer journal entries. There's even a Lovecraft pastiche.

Stories here caught me off guard more than once, and even when I struggled against my own suspension of disbelief to accept a core conceit, I found many of these stories powerful and affecting.

For example, the graphic story “Mormon Golem” by Steve Morrison offers a visually striking and emotionally powerful rendering of Joseph Smith creating a wooden golem to protect the Saints of Far West, Missouri. Though it flies in the face of everything I believe about Joseph Smith, prophetic calling, and priesthood power, the story is at once both utterly alien and deeply Mormon. It got all the details wrong, but it penetrated to an underlying defiance in the Mormon spirit that we will not always sit back and take the abuses heaped upon us by an angry mob. Such an odd juxtaposition is part of what makes the anthology work.

By daring to abuse the peculiarities of our culture as fodder for stories told with charity toward their Mormon characters, this anthology

successfully challenges both Mormons and non-Mormons to engage our experience at the level of theme, not just event. By recasting the familiar into fantastic settings, these stories ask us to imagine both the particulars and the potential consequences of some core beliefs.

The results are uneven at best. Some of these stories do little more than tell traditional tales with simple substitutions—consecrated oil for holy water, or missionaries preaching through the zombie apocalypse. On first approach, those stories frankly bored me; I wanted something new and uniquely Mormon added to the familiar tale. On further consideration, though, I appreciated the powerful desire of some authors to use specific people, places, or details from their explicitly Mormon experience in tales that are not in any way thematically Mormon.

As such, this anthology is neither Missionary School nor Deseret School fiction. It is Mormons cutting loose to tell stories however, for whomever, by whatever method they choose according to the dictates of their own conscience. It is an explicit and intentional effort to wake us up and challenge our static assumptions about Mormon fiction.

Pearls of Great Price

The best most of us can hope for in any anthology is to really like a few stories, to really hate a few, and to find the rest variably adequate. While I admit that I liked some of these much less than others, I didn't actually find any stinkers. Everything here was at least competently written and told, even when I just couldn't buy the core conceits or when I wanted to nitpick details.

But a few really stood out for me. Perhaps the most obvious is Eric James Stone's story, "That Leviathan, Whom Thou Has Made," which won the Nebula Award for short story in 2011—the sci-fi equivalent of an Academy Award voted on by fellow professional authors. It's cleanly written and looks unflinchingly at questions of individual faith and commitment and the nature of God.

Another story that stood out for me was Moriah Jovan's "Allow Me to Introduce Myself" that features some of the best pure storytelling, imagination, detail, and sense of wonder in the anthology. This is one of those stories whose core conceit (a Mormon monastic order) stuck deeply in my craw, but whose execution ranks among the better stories I've read in years.

Likewise, Dan Wells's "The Mountain of the Lord" and Steven L. Peck's "Let the Mountains Tremble for Adoniha Has Fallen" offered strong looks into Mormon communities facing existential threats from

both inside and outside. Both are longer stories that take the time to build interesting, complex worlds and equally compelling characters who struggle with basic hopes and desires.

Several stories featured strong writing and atmosphere, especially Erik Peterson's "Bichos" and Scott M. Robert's "Out of the Deep Have I Howled at Thee." These are vivid, well-crafted stories that penetrate deep into the minds of their characters and reveal both hidden hopes and fears. I have already mentioned the graphic story "Mormon Golem," by Steve Morrison.

All of the stories in this anthology met my expectations of quality and imagination, but for me these few were especially enjoyable.

Good Report and Praise

From the lurid cover art to the back cover blurbs, *Monsters and Mormons* makes its intentions abundantly clear. These are stories in the pulp tradition that will push some imaginative and aesthetic bounds. If you don't want to read science fiction, fantasy, horror, detective, alternate history, or ghost stories that take some liberties with orthodox assumptions about Mormon ideas and practices, then there will be little here to entertain you.

But if you want an anthology designed to explicitly expand the bounds of Mormon literature in an act of aggressive cultural reappropriation from both external and internal critics and to assert a deep identity with underlying Mormon culture, there is much to appreciate here. The book represents a dramatic shift in how we can choose to think about Mormon literature. *Monsters and Mormons* accepts our peculiarities as a given and seeks simply to use them to inform a creative work, where Mormon-ness requires no reason for being except as defined within the story.

Scott R. Parkin (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) is a writer, editor, publisher, essayist, and critic who has published stories in a wide variety of venues, including *Irreantum*, *LDS Entertainment*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *The Leading Edge*, *Galaxy*, and *BYU Studies* (where he won half the prizes in the magazine's only fiction contest). He has taught writing at BYU, is a regular contributor to AML's *Dawning of a Brighter Day* blog, and recently completed a young adult fantasy novel.