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Finding Jane

Melissa Leilani Larson

The first time I tried to find Jane Manning James's grave was in November 2016. It was a brisk autumn afternoon, and traffic was horrible. My apartment at the time was pretty far east in Salt Lake City, not too far off Foothill Drive, and I had been downtown for a play reading. I couldn't get home because of University of Utah football traffic, so I took a detour and stopped by the city cemetery to pass the time. When I had the idea to look for Jane, the sun was already low in the sky. I parked the car and wandered. I had messaged a friend for directions to the site, but I couldn't get my bearings. The sun, oblivious to my frustration, dropped lower and lower. The air had a bite to it, and my ears began to ache. It was time to leave. As the sun set, I tripped and nearly fell in an open grave. I guess there is good reason for cemeteries to close at sunset.

The traffic had finally let up, and I drove home, disappointed. I had spent the better part of 2016 steeping myself in Jane's history and was excited to visit her resting place—as if seeing it would somehow cement her realness in my mind. I had at that point written several drafts of the screenplay that would eventually become the film *Jane and Emma*, and I was discouraged at the progress I was making. I didn't feel that I had found Jane as a character yet, and I was worried I wouldn't ever find her.

There has always been a lot riding on this film. Coming on board, I felt a tremendous sense of expectation. *Jane and Emma* adds up to a lot of firsts: a Latter-day Saint history centered on a Black female protagonist. A female-driven production team. A film that would acknowledge and even attack thorny issues in Latter-day Saint culture: race, gender, polygamy, and personal revelation. All of this, plus the simple fact that

the two women of the title, Jane Manning and Emma Smith, are icons in the Church's history. And if that wasn't enough, Joseph Smith himself would probably need to make an appearance.

I don't remember learning about Jane in Primary or seminary growing up. I don't think I can put a finger on when I first heard her story, but I'm fairly certain I was already in college. I knew she was Black; I knew she had joined the Church in 1844 in Connecticut; I knew she came west to Salt Lake with the Saints. I didn't know that she had lived and worked in Emma and Joseph's house or held the Urim and Thummim or discussed religion with several of Joseph's plural wives. All that came with studying the brief but jam-packed life sketch Jane had dictated shortly before her death. Can a whole life really be contained in nine typed pages? Can a two-hour movie do the same?

The best biographical films, I've come to realize, don't try to tell a whole life story. It's too daunting a task. The best biopics focus on a particular period in the protagonist's life—a time when the dramatic stakes were high and that person's life changed irreversibly. At the same time that you are telling a true story, you are telling a story, and drama has to drive it forward. A narrative film isn't about presenting information; it's about giving the audience an emotional experience.

Jane's life is a fascinating one, but the events highlighted in her history are scattered. I would need to create a narrative thread to connect one event to the next. Without a narrative tying the plot points together, the film would just be a series of vignettes: moments in Jane's life that, in a feature film, would feel episodic and isolated instead of cohesive. If I did find the right connecting thread, I would need a miniseries to properly tell Jane's life story.

But some say necessity is the mother of invention. The film, as a small, independent project, already had a number of parameters in place. It was a low-budget feature, intended to be small and intimate because, well, that's what we could afford. As a self-producing playwright, I was very familiar with the limitations of budget. I needed to find a story that could be easily confined. That confinement would limit production costs—of cast, crew, costumes, and so on—and allow us as filmmakers to really focus on telling a good story.

When the project was pitched to me, the title was already in place: *Jane and Emma*. The intent was to introduce Jane as a significant character in the Latter-day Saint pioneer tapestry through presenting her friendship with Emma Hale Smith. From Jane's autobiography, I learned that Emma had welcomed Jane and her family into her home on first sight, though they had been walking in the same clothes and shoes for weeks. She offered Jane a home and a job when Jane feared having

neither. And, ultimately, Emma invited Jane to be sealed to Emma and Joseph as a member of their eternal family.

Already the scope of the story was narrowed down to Jane's time in Nauvoo, from the fall of 1843 until the summer of 1846. Jane spent roughly the first six months of that time living in the Mansion House hotel, working in the employ of Joseph and Emma. I had found what I hoped was the window of time in which our story would take place.

But what was the right narrative thread? I needed to give Jane a problem to solve. Her friendship with Emma needed to be put through a crucible. Both would need to be changed at the end of the film.

I went back to Jane's life sketch in search of inspiration. I noticed a major event I hadn't considered before: Jane left Nauvoo briefly in the early summer of 1844 looking for a new job, possibly because Joseph had decided to lease the Mansion House to another owner. When Jane returned to Nauvoo just a few weeks later, Joseph was dead.

I was in a meeting with several key voices in the film's production—executive producer Arthur VanWagenen, director Chantelle Squires, and producers and story collaborators Tamu Smith and Zandra Vranes—when I imagined what it must have been like for Jane, thirty miles away in Burlington, Iowa, to come home without knowing what had happened in Carthage, Illinois, and discover that the Prophet was dead. We didn't know exactly when Jane came home, only that she wasn't gone long, and that Joseph and Hyrum were killed in the meantime.

Pieces began to click into place. I imagined scenarios in which our characters would have to make choices. What if Jane said she was going to find a new job but really left Nauvoo because she was disappointed by racism among the Saints? What if Emma tried to be a good friend to Jane but simply didn't understand what it was to be a Black woman in America in the years before the Civil War?

We had our crucible. What if Jane returned to Nauvoo the same day that Joseph and Hyrum's bodies were delivered from Carthage? I would have to imagine it and hope that audiences would follow my lead. But the stakes on that night would be so high for both women, providing a situation that was ideal for drama. I saw Emma as fragile and anxious, terrified that the same mob that killed Joseph might return to desecrate his body. Jane, meanwhile, decides to keep watch over Emma through the long night. It was a simple story that fit all of our parameters: it focused on Jane and Emma's friendship; it was mostly confined to the interior of the Mansion House; the stakes were high; and both women would be changed by the end of the night.

Not everyone will believe that Jane and Emma were friends. Some will even argue that Jane fabricated Emma's offer for Jane to be sealed to



Jane Elizabeth Manning James is buried in the Salt Lake City Cemetery alongside her husband, Isaac James. His headstone is to the left of a large memorial marker, and Jane's headstone is on the right. Her headstone reads:

Jane E. James
Born
May 11, 1822
Died
Apr. 16, 1908
only sleeping

The large memorial marker to the left of Jane's headstone reads:

Jane Elizabeth Manning James
"I try in my feeble way to set a good example for all."
Born free in 1822. Fairfield County, Connecticut
Baptized LDS in 1841. She led a group of family members to
Nauvoo, Illinois in 1843
"Our feet cracked open and bled until you could see the whole prints
of our feet with blood on the ground"
Jane lived with Joseph, Emma and Mother Smith
"Brother Joseph sat down by me and said, 'God bless you.
You are among friends.'
Married Isaac James around 1845
Arrived in Salt Lake September 22, 1847
"Oh how I suffered of cold and hunger, but the Lord gave us faith
and grace to stand it all."
Shared half her flour with Eliza Partridge Lyman,
who was near starving.
Died April 16, 1908. Outliving all but two of her eight children
"But we went on our way rejoicing, singing hymns, and thanking god
for his infinite goodness and mercy to us."

the Smiths because Jane wanted so desperately to enter the temple. But I believe that they were friends and that Emma did make that offer, and I think that even just the possibility is worth exploring in a story.

My first adventure to search for Jane's grave happened on a Saturday evening. The next morning, after church, I went back to the cemetery. I figured out the directions I had misunderstood the night before and, after some determined wandering, found a pair of rounded stone markers separated by a bronze monument. I had found Jane and her first husband, Isaac.

I stayed there for nearly half an hour and talked to Jane. I apologized for not having the skill to tell her story. I confided that I didn't have the right experience, that I was feeling a lot of pressure. I told her that I knew her story was important, that her connection to Emma was real. I said I was embarrassed that she had been attached to Emma and Joseph as a servant rather than sealed as a daughter. I was upset that she had to wait nearly another lifetime after her death—seventy-one years—before her temple work was completed.

I don't know if Jane heard me that day, but it didn't matter. She let me talk, and she let me cry, and she let me write. I had found her—not just as a distant historical figure, but as a real, human woman. I left the cemetery that morning with renewed confidence, ready to work. I went back several times over the next two years to refocus when things got hazy and the job seemed impossible. I'd visit Jane and remind myself that she was, in fact, a real person and it was a privilege to tell her story. And I'd return home and try again. A new angle, a new scene, a new draft.

Of course, what I've written in that script is only a guess. I like to think of it as an educated guess, but at the end of the day it's just a guess because it has to be. Yes, I had to fill in holes that history left behind. But this story, this friendship, is important enough to guess about. We don't have enough of a record to know, but we can guess. We should guess. We should imagine. Through imagining, we can put ourselves in Jane's shoes and in Emma's, allowing them to be real women, like us. And that imagining, I hope, will open us up to be better people. To be better Saints.

Melissa Leilani Larson is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter whose work has been seen on four continents. Her plays include *Martyrs' Crossing*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Little Happy Secrets*, *Pilot Program*, *The Edible Complex*, *Sweetheart Come*, and *Mountain Law*. Her films include *Jane and Emma* and *Freetown*. Two of her plays are published in *Third Wheel*, available from BCC Press. Mel is a three-time winner of the Association for Mormon Letters drama award and was a 2016 O'Neill National Playwrights Conference semifinalist. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Playwrights Workshop.