



1-1-2015

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## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Austin, Michael (2015) "The Brief History and Perpetually Exciting Future of Mormon Literary Studies," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol2/iss1/8>

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## Essay

# The Brief History and Perpetually Exciting Future of Mormon Literary Studies

*Michael Austin*

IN THE MIDDLE YEARS OF THE 1970S, Mormon literary studies seemed on the verge of becoming a big deal. Since 1966, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* had been publishing poetry, literary fiction, and literary criticism by and about Latter-day Saints. And in 1974, a bold new magazine called *Sunstone* began publishing similar fare for a less academic audience. The same year, Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert published the first edition of *A Believing People*, the first anthology of Mormon literature ever, to be used as the textbook in their Mormon literature course at Brigham Young University. And in 1976, the Association for Mormon Letters (AML) held its first annual symposium in the Empire Room of the Hotel Utah, featuring papers on Mormonism and literature by such luminaries as Cracroft, Leonard Arrington, Bruce Jorgensen, and Arthur Henry King.<sup>1</sup> For the next thirty-five years, the AML served as a nursemaid, shepherd, and cheerleader for the study of Mormon literature, hosting an annual symposium and giving awards for achievement in literary endeavors. In 1995 the AML board created AML-list, an e-mail forum for discussions of Mormon letters. In 2009

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1. AML conferences and proceedings are archived on the Mormon Literature Database at BYU and are accessible online at <http://mldb.byu.edu/amlproceedings/amlproce.htm>.

the association added the popular blog site “Dawning of a Brighter Day” to bring the study of Mormon literature into the age of the Internet.

Despite its prominent start and considerable activity, the critical study of Mormon literature has not kept pace with its cousins, Mormon history and Mormon folklore, in either the quality or the quantity of its scholarly production. Unlike these other two disciplines, Mormon literary studies has had a difficult time breaking free from the largely internal audience for Mormon intellectual discourse, as represented by journals such as *Dialogue* and *BYU Studies* and by specialist and academic presses along the Wasatch Front. And even this scholarly activity is in decline. In 2014 the Association for Mormon Letters announced that it was transferring operations from its longtime home in Utah Valley to Brigham Young University–Hawaii, where it will be led by Dr. Joe Plicka of the Department of English. According to former AML president Margaret Young, the move is an attempt to revitalize an organization that has been plagued for several years by shrinking resources and declining interest in its approach to the study of Mormon literature.<sup>2</sup>

But interest in Mormon literature remains strong in other areas. *Dawning of a Brighter Day* is a high-traffic website with hundreds of participants, as is another popular site, *A Motley Vision*—a group blog devoted to Mormon literature and culture started by William Morris in 2004.<sup>3</sup> Past AML president Gideon Burton, a professor of English at BYU, established a comprehensive, web-based Mormon literature database with bibliographic information for thousands of books and articles about Mormon literature.<sup>4</sup> And the Mormon writers guild LDStory-

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2. Personal communication with Margaret Young, May 13, 2014.

3. *A Motley Vision*, located at <http://www.motleyvision.org>, received the 2005 Association for Mormon Letters award for criticism. The award citation praised the bloggers for making “serious efforts to give sustained discussion to important issues, rather than simply aggregating fragments and chatter. The organization and coherence of the site, with its archives and references, has made possible the very sort of communal discussion of art and literature that AML encourages at its conferences, but does so asynchronously and electronically, allowing a greater breadth of participation across space and time.”

4. In 2007 the Mormon Literature Database (MLDb), maintained by Gideon Burton, incorporated the Mormon film database maintained by Randy Astle to become the

makers hosts a popular conference each year and awards the Whitney Awards in a variety of categories of adult and young adult fiction.<sup>5</sup>

These projects, and many others, were made possible by a critical tradition in Mormon letters stretching back to the early 1960s, when a group of academically trained literary critics at Brigham Young University and elsewhere began to turn the tools of their trade towards the literature of their culture. The work of this first generation of Mormon literary scholars—including Eugene England, Richard Cracroft, Mary Lythgoe Bradford, Karl Keller, Marden Clark, Marilyn Arnold, Robert Rees, Edward Geary, and Neal Lambert—provided a solid base for future studies in Mormon literature. Because of their work, and that of the two generations of scholars that they taught and inspired, we can speak coherently of a “Mormon literary studies” today. What follows is a brief survey of their initial effort, and of the scholarship that followed it, divided into three ongoing critical projects: (1) the creation of a canon of Mormon literature, (2) the exploration of the role of Mormons and Mormonism in American literary history, and (3) the application of the tools of literary criticism to the sacred writings of the Latter-day Saints, especially the Book of Mormon.

## Defining Mormon literature

To have Mormon literary studies, we must first have Mormon literature to study, and one of the most important projects of every generation of Mormon literary critics has been to argue that such a thing exists. A significant portion of what we might consider Mormon literary studies, therefore, consists of scholars trying to define precisely what they study.

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Mormon Literature & Creative Arts (MLCA) database (or Mormon Arts Database), which is currently hosted at BYU’s Harold B. Lee Library at <http://mormonarts.lib.byu.edu>.

5. The Whitney Awards are named for the early Mormon apostle Orson F. Whitney (1855–1931), whose declaration that Mormons “will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own” has inspired generations of LDS scholars, critics, and readers. Information on the conferences and awards sponsored by LDStorymakers can be found at <http://ldstorymakers.com>.

A representative (and by no means exhaustive) sample of this work would include Dale Morgan's "Mormon Story Tellers" (1942), William Muldar's "Mormonism and Literature" (1954), Bruce W. Jorgensen's "Digging the Foundation: Making and Reading Mormon Literature" (1974), Eugene England's "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years" (1983), and, alas, my own early effort, "The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time" (1995).<sup>6</sup> It also includes a fair amount of debate over boundaries, perhaps best exemplified by the dueling AML presidential addresses of 1991 and 1992. In the first, Bruce Jorgensen argued for an inclusive definition of Mormon literature—holding up Richard Cracroft's review of Eugene England and Dennis Clark's poetry anthology *Harvest* (1989) as an example of an uncharitable (and therefore un-Mormon) exclusion. Cracroft himself responded the next year with an address calling on Mormon literary critics "to promote a truly Mormon literature, to read and critique LDS writing with eyes of faith, with feet firm-set in Mormon metaphors."<sup>7</sup>

This definitional hand-wringing aside, two generations of critical attention have produced the outlines of a fairly coherent canon of Mormon literature.<sup>8</sup> Like any literary canon—Caribbean literature, say, or women's literature—Mormon literature is imprecise, flexible, and subjective. No

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6. Dale Morgan, "Mormon Story Tellers," *Rocky Mountain Review* 7 (Fall 1942): 1, 3–4, 7; William Muldar, "Mormonism and Literature," *Western Humanities Review* 9 (Winter 1954–55): 85–89; Bruce W. Jorgensen, "Digging the Foundation: Making and Reading Mormon Literature," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9/4 (Winter 1974): 50–61; Eugene England, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years," *BYU Studies* 22/2 (Spring 1982): 131–60; and Michael Austin, "The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time," *Dialogue* 28/4 (Winter 1995): 131–44.

7. Expanded versions of both presidential addresses were published in *Sunstone* 16/5 (July 1993): Jorgensen, "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," 40–50; Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," 51–57. Gideon Burton addresses, and attempts to synthesize, both positions in his essay "Toward a Mormon Criticism: Should We Ask 'Is This Mormon Literature?'" *Dialogue* 32/3 (Fall 1999): 33–43.

8. For one recent discussion of the problems and possibilities of a Mormon literary canon, see Michael Austin, "Are There Any Mormon Classics? Notes towards a Latter-day Saint Literary Canon," in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Philip Barlow and Terry Givens (2014).

two people would come up with quite the same list of works if given the opportunity to do so. But most of those working in the field acknowledge the four general period distinctions articulated by Eugene England in his 1995 essay “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects”:

1. **Foundations, 1830–1880.** An initial outpouring in the first fifty years of largely unsophisticated writing, expressive of the new converts’ dramatic symbolic as well as literal journeys to Zion and their fierce rejection of Babylon, and often intended to meet the immediate and practical needs of the church for hymns, sermons, and tracts.
2. **Home Literature, 1880–1930.** The creation, in the next fifty years, of a “home literature” in Utah, highly didactic fiction and poetry designed to defend and improve the Saints but of little lasting worth.
3. **The Lost Generation, 1930–1970.** A period of reaction, by third- and fourth-generation Mormons, usually well educated for their time, to what they saw as the loss of the heroic pioneer vision and a decline into provincial materialism, which impelled an outpouring of excellent but generally critical works, published and praised nationally but largely rejected by or unknown to Mormons.
4. **Faithful Realism, 1960–present** (overlapping somewhat with the previous period). A slow growth and then flowering from the 1960s to the present of good work in all genres, combining the best qualities and avoiding the limitations of most past work, so that it is both faithful and critical, appreciated by a growing Mormon audience and also increasingly published and honored nationally.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Eugene England, “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects,” in *Mormon Americana: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the United States*, ed. David J. Whitaker (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1995), 455–505. This review essay includes an extensive bibliography of literary scholarship through 1995 (pp. 483–93). A shortened version of

The first two of these periods, covering the literature of the Saints until about 1930, dominates Cracroft and Lambert's *A Believing People* (1974).<sup>10</sup> All but a handful of the selections in this anthology come from the pioneer and early Utah periods of Mormon history. Cracroft and Lambert represent the Foundations period largely through excerpts from early autobiographies, journals, letters, hymns, and sermons. From the Home Literature period, the book anthologizes Orson F. Whitney's essay that gives the period its name, along with an excerpt from Whitney's 1904 epic poem *Elias: An Epic of the Ages*. It also includes a generous selection of poetry and hymns and two prose selections by Nephi Anderson, the perennially popular author of the novel *Added Upon* (1898).

Outside of *A Believing People*, however, literary critics have paid very little attention to these early periods of Mormon literature beyond simply acknowledging that such literature exists. Most of the texts in the first period consist of journals, letters, pamphlets, and other primary documents of the sort normally studied by historians rather than literary critics. And most of the novels and poems of the second period, as Eugene England bluntly acknowledges, aren't very good. But the next period, the so-called Lost Generation, has generated a substantial body of critical discussion dating back to the 1960s.

The term "Lost Generation" was originally applied to the expatriate writers living in Europe between the world wars—most famously Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. It was first applied to Mormon letters in Edward Geary's influential 1977 article "Mormondom's Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s,"<sup>11</sup> which presents and briefly analyzes works by Vardis Fisher, Virginia Sorensen, Maurine Whipple, Samuel Taylor, Paul Bailey, Richard Scowcroft, and Blanche Cannon—all nationally prominent writers with Mormon backgrounds whose

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this essay introduces England and Lavina Fielding Anderson's anthology of criticism, *Tending the Garden* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), xiii–xxxiv.

10. Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, eds., *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1974; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979).

11. Edward A. Geary, "Mormondom's Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s," *BYU Studies* 18/1 (1978): 89–98.

fiction, to some extent, dealt with Mormon themes and characters. In what might plausibly be considered a companion piece entitled “Fictional Sisters” (1997), historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich examines a dozen Mormon-themed novels by women writers of the same period (but extending into the 1950s), including Sorensen, Whipple, and Cannon, but also introducing such lesser-known works as Jean Woodman’s *Glory Spent* (1940), Elinor Pryor’s *And Never Yield* (1942), Ardyth Kennelly’s *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1949), and Amelia Bean’s *The Fancher Train* (1958).<sup>12</sup> Precisely because the writers in the Lost Generation group all achieved success and acclaim outside the Mormon cultural region, Mormon literary critics have often made them the starting point in a serious canon of Mormon literature.<sup>13</sup>

Vardis Fisher is by far the best known of the Lost Generation writers. During the early phases of his writing career (1928–1940), Fisher was seen as a promising writer of serious fiction and spoken of in the same sentences as the likes of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Thomas Wolfe. But Fisher’s connection to Mormonism is highly problematic. Though raised in Idaho by Mormon parents, Fisher had very little contact with the church until he was in his late teens. He was baptized as an adult but left the church soon after and never again self-identified as a Latter-day Saint. His early autobiographical fiction often refers to Mormon characters, and his most famous novel, *Children of God* (1939), deals primarily with the founding of the church and the Mormon migration to Utah.<sup>14</sup> But most of his more than two dozen novels have little to do with Mormons or Mormonism. To date, most Mormon scholarship on Fisher has confined itself to examining *Children of God* and debating whether or not Fisher should be considered a Mormon writer. Several recent articles, though, have begun

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12. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Fictional Sisters,” in *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*, ed. Claudia L. Bushman (Cambridge, MA: Emmeline Press, 1976), 241–66.

13. See Terry Givens’s overview of the Lost Generation in *People of Paradox* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 287–98.

14. Vardis Fisher, *Children of God* (New York: Harpers, 1939).



to look at how the Mormon tradition might have informed his other major works.<sup>15</sup>

Two other Mormon writers from this period have inspired significant critical discussion. Both of them—Virginia Sorensen and Maurine Whipple—self-identified as Mormons throughout their lives.<sup>16</sup> Sorensen, most famous as the author of the best-selling, Newbery Award-winning children’s book *Miracles on Maple Hill* (1957), also wrote nine novels for adults, eight of them involving primarily Mormon characters, including *A Little Lower than the Angels* (1942), which is set in Nauvoo and features Joseph Smith as a prominent character. Sorensen’s Mormon characters, while challenging, are generally sympathetic, and her novels have occasioned a respectable amount of critical attention from the 1970s on.<sup>17</sup> Maurine Whipple’s only novel, *The Giant Joshua* (1941), is nearly always ranked at or near the top of lists of important works of Mormon

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15. At the first conference of the Association for Mormon Letters in 1976, the distinguished historian Leonard Arrington delivered a paper, cowritten with his graduate student John Haupt, entitled “Vardis Fisher’s Mormon Heritage,” which argued that Fisher’s ties to Mormonism were stronger than previously believed. The paper was later published in *BYU Studies* 18/1 (Fall 1977): 27–47. Fisher’s widow responded with an angry press release entitled “Vardis Fisher Was Not a Mormon,” which she had bound with all of Fisher’s works for which she still held the copyrights. Years later, a more balanced appraisal of Fisher’s Mormonism was given by BYU professor Stephen Tanner in “Vardis Fisher and the Mormons,” in *Rediscovering Vardis Fisher: Centennial Essays*, ed. Joseph M. Flora (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 2000), 97–113. See also Michael Austin, “Vardis Fisher’s Mormon Scars: Mapping the Diaspora in *Testament of Man*,” *Dialogue* 47/3 (Fall 2014): 1–22.

16. We must footnote Sorensen’s Mormonism just a little bit because, towards the end of her life, she received baptism into the Anglican Church of her second husband, novelist Alex Waugh. However, she always acknowledged her cultural identity as a Mormon, even when it was no longer her religious identity.

17. Important critical essays about Sorensen include Mary Lythgoe Bradford, “Virginia Sorensen: A Saving Remnant,” *Dialogue* 4/3 (Autumn 1969): 56–64; Mary Lythgoe Bradford, “‘If You Are a Writer You Write!’ An Interview with Virginia Sorensen,” *Dialogue* 13/3 (Fall 1980): 17–36; Sylvia B. Lee, “The Mormon Novel: Virginia Sorensen’s *The Evening and the Morning*,” in *Women, Women Writers, and the West*, ed. L. L. Lee and Merrill Lewis (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1979), 209–18; Bruce W. Jorgensen, “‘Herself Moving Beside Herself, Out There Alone’: The Shape of Mormon Belief in Virginia Sorensen’s *The Evening and the Morning*,” *Dialogue* 13/3 (Fall 1980): 43–61;

literature. In addition to a handful of critical analyses, Whipple is the subject of the 2011 biography “*Swell Suffering*,” by Veda Tebbs Hale.<sup>18</sup>

In the years since Eugene England’s initial attempt at periodization, it has become clear that his fourth period, of Faithful Realism, can only describe that small portion of contemporary Mormon literature represented by writers who maintain a connection to the church while writing challenging Mormon-themed fiction to a largely LDS audience. The most prominent of them, Levi Peterson<sup>19</sup> and Phyllis Barber,<sup>20</sup> continue to attract critical attention from literary critics working with Mormon texts. Most of the other writers in this category—John Bennion, Tom Rogers, Michael Fillerup, Donald Marshall, Todd Robert Peterson, Linda Sillitoe, Margaret Blair Young, and, most recently, BYU biology professor Steven Peck—have produced, and continue to produce, well-regarded novels, plays, and short fiction with scholarly commentary on their work largely limited to reviews. Stories by many of these writers (and a number of others) have been included in three important anthologies of Mormon fiction: Eugene England’s *Bright Angels and Familiars* (1992), Angela Hallstrom’s *Dispensation* (2010),

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and Sue Saffle, “Eggersen Men: Male Family Influences in Virginia Sorensen’s *Kingdom Come* and *The Evening and the Morning*,” *Dialogue* 35/1 (Spring 2002): 42–46.

18. Veda Tebbs Hale, “*Swell Suffering*: A Biography of Maurine Whipple (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2011). See also Edward A. Geary, “Women Regionalists of Mormon Country,” *Kate Chopin Newsletter* 2 (1976): 20–26; William A. Wilson, “Folklore in *The Giant Joshua*,” *Mormon Letters Annual* (1978–79): 57–63; Jessie Embry, “Overworked Stereotypes or Accurate Historical Images: The Images of Polygamy in *The Giant Joshua*,” *Sunstone* 14 (April 1990): 42–46.

19. See Steven P. Sondrup, “Levi Peterson’s ‘Road to Damascus’ and the Language of Grace,” *Literature and Belief* 5 (1985): 79–93; Michael Austin, “Are Mormons Really Christians? Levi Peterson and the Paradox of Mormon Identity,” *Sunstone* 117 (May 2000): 64–66; and Bruce Jorgensen, “Still Laughing with the Best Comic Mormon Novel So Far,” *Sunstone* 141 (April 2006): 71–73.

20. See Eric A. Eliason, “The ‘Mormon Magical Realism’ of Phyllis Barber: Parting the Veil with Folkloric Literature,” *Annual of the Association for Mormon Letters* 14 (2001): 127–32; and Laura L. Bush, “Training to Be a Good Mormon Girl While Longing for Fame,” in *Faithful Transgressions in the American West: Six Twentieth-Century Mormon Women’s Autobiographical Acts* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004), 171–93.

and Robert Raleigh's overlapping but somewhat less orthodox collection *In Our Lovely Deseret* (1998).<sup>21</sup>

Often, as England suggests, the literature in this category tries to negotiate a tenuous path between critical and faithful approaches to the LDS Church. Such literature is often set in Mormon communities among Latter-day Saints struggling to live their religion. When these writers criticize elements of LDS culture or practice, they usually situate their criticisms from within the Mormon community—with the expectation that their characters will remain Latter-day Saints after all of the conflicts in the story have been resolved. Take, for example, the dramatic final scene of Levi Peterson's *The Backslider*, in which a cowboy version of Jesus appears to the novel's protagonist, Frank Windham, in a urinal. Swearing occasionally and smoking a cigarette, the Cowboy Jesus rebukes Frank for his legalistic attempts to earn his salvation through ritual obedience to things like sexual continence and obedience to the Word of Wisdom. In the process, Peterson criticizes Mormon culture for its checklist approach to holiness, and Mormon theology for its unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of divine grace. But it is clear at the end of the novel that Frank Windham, like Levi Peterson himself, will remain some kind of Mormon.<sup>22</sup>

The category of Faithful Realism, however, fails to account for the two dominant strands of Mormon literature today.<sup>23</sup> The first of these, the modern home-literature movement, consists primarily of uplifting novels, stories, and plays by faithful Latter-day Saints published by

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21. Eugene England, ed., *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); Angela Hallstrom, ed., *Dispensation: Latter-day Fiction* (Provo, UT: Zarahemla Books, 2010); and Robert Raleigh, ed., *In Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1998).

22. Levi S. Peterson, *The Backslider* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 353–61.

23. Christopher Kimball Bigelow surveys a variety of different kinds of fiction by Mormon writers published for primarily Mormon audiences in “Orthodox vs. Literary: An Overview of Mormon Fiction,” in *Mormons and Popular Culture: The Global Influence of an American Phenomenon*, ed. J. Michael Hunter (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 2:51–63.

Deseret Book<sup>24</sup> and marketed exclusively to Mormon audiences. This movement began in the 1970s with plays such as *Saturday's Warrior* (1973) and *My Turn on Earth* (1977) and continued in the 1980s with the novels of Jack Weyland and a handful of others. Since then, Mormon home literature has become a multimillion-dollar-a-year industry with some novels—such as those in Gerald Lund's historical *The Work and the Glory* series (1990–1998)—posting sales figures comparable to those of major national best sellers.<sup>25</sup>

Despite its considerable commercial success, the modern home literature movement has attracted very little, if any, analysis by scholars of Mormon literature—just as most best-selling secular novels rarely attract the attention of mainstream literary critics. However, a second strand of contemporary Mormon literature—works by identifiably Mormon authors who write for general audiences—has fared much better. Terry Tempest Williams's memoir *Refuge*, for example, has been widely anthologized and taught in college courses since its initial publication in 1992,<sup>26</sup> and LDS literary critics have been naturally drawn to the parts of this work that deal with Williams's Mormon faith. Other writers with some connection to Mormonism—such as Brady Udall,

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24. The LDS-owned Deseret Book purchased its two largest competitors in the LDS book market, Bookcraft and Covenant, in 1999 and 2006, respectively, giving it a virtual monopoly on the home-literature market, though small independent presses and self-published books have made some inroads, as indicated by the presence of such books each year among the finalists for the Whitney Awards (see note 5).

25. In 2004 *LDS Living Magazine* reported that the nine volumes in *The Work and the Glory* series had sold a total of more than two million copies, "making it likely the most popular historical fiction work any religious publisher has ever released." See "Bestselling *Work and the Glory* Series Hits the Big Screen," *LDS Living*, September 24, 2004, archived at <http://www.ldsliving.com/story/5951-best-selling-work-and-the-glory-series-hits-the-big-screen>.

26. See, for example, Cecilia Konchar Farr and Phillip A. Snyder, "From Walden Pond to the Great Salt Lake: Ecobiography and Engendered Species Acts in *Walden and Refuge*," in *Tending the Garden*, ed. Eugene England and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 197–211; and Katherine R. Chandler, "Potsherds and Petroglyphs: Unearthing Latter-day Saint Sources for Williams's Environmental Vision," in *Surveying the Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams: New Critical Essays*, ed. Katherine R. Chandler and Melissa A. Goldthwaite (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003), 195–210.

Walter Kirn, and Judith Freeman—have dealt with Mormon issues in ways that encourage critical studies of Mormonism as part of larger conversations about their work.<sup>27</sup>

Though there will never be anything like a fixed or agreed-upon canon of Mormon literature (or any other kind of literature for that matter), the combination of works by identifiably (if not always orthodox) Mormon writers is comparable to other regional and subcultural literatures in the United States. There is, in other words, a strong-enough body of texts to justify a critical culture with centers, symposia, endowed professorships, book series at university presses, and the occasional Festschrift in honor of its major practitioners. This is exactly where Mormon literary studies seemed to be headed when the Association for Mormon Letters held its first conference in 1976, but the going has been slow, and the publication of scholarly work on Mormon literature has declined since its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. Fortunately, though, Mormons keep publishing literature, some of it very good, that can be profitably studied from multiple perspectives. Mormon literary critics have work enough to do ere the sun goes down.

## Mormonism and American literary history

Since its earliest days, Mormonism has exerted a pull on the American imagination far beyond its actual representation in the population. There has, therefore, been much more consequential literature about Mormons than by them.<sup>28</sup> A second important project of Mormon lit-

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27. Mark T. Decker, “‘I Constructed in My Mind a Vast, Panoramic Picture’: *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint* and Postmodern, Postdenominational Mormonism,” in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*, ed. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010), 144–62; and Michael Austin, “Finding God in the Desert: Landscape and Belief in Three Modern Mormon Classics,” *Literature and Belief* 21/2 (2003): 39–53 (this study deals with Terry Tempest Williams, Phyllis Barber, and Judith Freeman).

28. For a bibliographical review of Mormons in popular fiction, see Michael Austin, “‘As Much as Any Novelist Could Ask’: Mormons in American Popular Fiction,” in Hunter, *Mormons and Popular Culture*, 2:1–22.

erary studies has been to evaluate and critique the way that works about Mormons and Mormonism have shaped the literary history of America and, to a lesser extent, England. In the nineteenth century, both countries provided a lot of grist for this mill. The first major writer to treat Mormonism was the British adventure writer Frederick Marryat, whose travel adventure *Monsieur Violet* was published in both England and America in 1843. Marryat lifted whole chapters word for word from anti-Mormon exposés such as Eber D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* [sic] (1834) and John C. Bennett's *History of the Saints* (1842) as he mixed the story of Mormonism's early years with the wanderings of his hero, Monsieur Violet, throughout the wild American West.

When the Saints migrated to Utah and practiced polygamy openly, they became something like an international literary sensation—the subject of works by Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, and hundreds of lesser-known writers. Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) would become the most well-known nineteenth-century work about the Mormons because, in the process of telling the story of a vengeful Mormon avenger (a story largely plagiarized from Stevenson's book *The Dynamiter*, published two years earlier), Doyle introduced the character of Sherlock Holmes and invented the modern detective novel. Stevenson and Doyle created cohorts of vengeful, violent, sexually deviant Mormons who practiced blood atonement on their own people and sent Danite avenging angels out to kill anyone who escaped. These were the images of Mormonism that Doyle absorbed from the popular press and from the British “penny dreadful” novels that he was familiar with. When the Saints abandoned polygamy and settled into relative anonymity at the end of the nineteenth century, the sensational novels and stories continued, uninterrupted, in the form of historical fiction. Many of these novels formed part of the emerging Western genre, whose most important founding text, Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), is set almost entirely among the Mormons.<sup>29</sup>

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29. For an excellent analysis of the way that Mormonism functions in *Riders of the Purple Sage*, see William R. Handley, “Distinctions without Differences: Zane Grey and the Mormon Question,” *Arizona Quarterly* 57/1 (Spring 2001): 1–33.

The nineteenth century's literary portrayals of Mormons had a comic side too. The well-known humorist Charles Farrar Browne, who used the stage and pen name Artemus Ward, traveled to Utah in 1864 and made the trip the subject of a wildly popular comic monologue that he performed all over the United States and England. Ward's Mormons are largely good-natured, but naïve, bumbling, and provincial.<sup>30</sup> Much the same image comes through in Mark Twain's much better known travel narrative *Roughing It*, which contains several chapters about the author's visit to the Mormons of Salt Lake City. Twain gave the world such *bons mots* as "If Joseph Smith composed [the Book of Mormon], the act was a miracle—keeping awake as he did it" and (speaking of Mormon women) "The man that marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind . . . and the man that marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that the nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence."<sup>31</sup>

Many early contributions to Mormon literary studies combined the archival work of locating and the analytical work of explaining the role of Mormons in literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of this work was done by historians, such as Leonard J. Arrington, who began in the late 1960s to publish articles with his graduate students exploring these nineteenth-century works. Their research unearthed dozens of little-known novels, stories, and exposés about violent Mormons, blood atonement, Danite avengers, and polygamous patriarchs.<sup>32</sup> At about the same time, Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft began exploring the nineteenth-century comic portrayals of

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30. "Artemus Ward's Lecture [on the Mormons] as Delivered at the Egyptian Hall, London" (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1869).

31. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Co., 1872), 127, 118.

32. Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature," *Western Humanities Review* 22/3 (Summer 1968): 243–60; Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "The Missouri and Illinois Mormons in Ante-Bellum Fiction," *Dialogue* 5/1 (1970): 37–50; Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "Community and Isolation: Some Aspects of 'Mormon Westerns,'" *Western American Literature* 8/1–2 (Spring/Summer, 1973): 15–31; and

Twain and Ward in a series of articles published mainly in regional journals such as the *Utah Historical Quarterly* and the *Western Humanities Review*.<sup>33</sup> Their careful work has allowed subsequent generations of Mormon literary historians to situate the better-known works of Doyle, Grey, and Twain within a literary context that abounded in similar representations of Mormons and Mormonism.

Two of the most important books on Mormon literature in the past two decades pick up and significantly expand on these early articles about nineteenth-century Mormonism in American literature. Terryl Givens's *Viper on the Hearth* (1997) explores anti-Mormon portrayals in both popular journalism and sensational fiction, advancing the argument that nineteenth-century American society attempted to constrain Mormonism's truly radical theological ideas by constructing Mormons as Other and as the objects of fear and ridicule. In *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* (2009), BYU theatre professor Megan Sanborn Jones applies Givens's argument to a dozen or so previously unstudied plays about Mormonism that were written or performed between 1850 and 1890.<sup>34</sup>

A commonplace of contemporary Mormon literary studies is the assertion that the nineteenth-century Mormon stereotypes have significantly influenced popular fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first

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Rebecca Foster Cornwall and Leonard J. Arrington, "Perpetuation of a Myth: Mormon Danites in Five Western Novels, 1840–90," *BYU Studies* 23/2 (Spring 1983): 147–65.

33. Neal E. Lambert, "Saints, Sinners, and Scribes: A Look at Mormons in Fiction," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 36 (Winter 1968): 63–76; Richard H. Cracroft, "The Gentle Blasphemer: Mark Twain, Holy Scripture, and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 11/2 (1971): 119–40; Richard H. Cracroft, "Distorting Polygamy for Fun and Profit: Artemus Ward and Mark Twain among the Mormons," *BYU Studies* 14/2 (Winter 1974): 272–88; Richard H. Cracroft, "'Ten Wives Is All You Need': Artemus, Twain and the Mormons—Again," *Western Humanities Review* 38/3 (Autumn 1984): 197–211; Richard H. Cracroft, "'The Assault of Laughter': The Comic Attack on Mormon Polygamy in Popular Literature," *Journal of Mormon History* 34/1 (Winter 2008): 233–62.

34. Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press 1997; rev. ed., 2013); and Megan Sanborn Jones, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* (New York: Routledge, 2009).



centuries. Givens traces the persistent influence of these older stereotypes in the concluding chapter of *The Viper on the Hearth*, which he updated for the 2013 edition to include recent works such as *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003) and the hit Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. Literary critics have examined contemporary Danite and blood-atonement plots in dozens of mystery novels and science fiction works and in the more serious fiction of Neil LaBute, Brian Evenson, and Levi Peterson.<sup>35</sup> Even in contemporary works that seem far removed from the dime-novel tradition—such as Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (1979) and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1991–92), which both won Pulitzer Prizes—Mormon characters and Mormonism itself are portrayed with a distinctly nineteenth-century flavor.<sup>36</sup> “It has been more than a hundred years since mainstream Mormonism officially encouraged the scandalous behaviors . . . that generated the river of lurid tales that flowed from nineteenth-century presses,” writes literary critic Mark Decker. Yet “contemporary authors and auteurs tend to portray the religion in ways that invite comparisons with their pulpy forebearers.”<sup>37</sup>

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35. Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*, 165–87. For twentieth-century portrayals in other genres, see Michael Austin, “Troped by the Mormons: The Persistence of 19th-Century Mormon Stereotypes in Contemporary Detective Fiction,” *Sunstone* 21/3 (August 1998): 51–71; Michael Collings, “Refracted Visions and Future Worlds: Mormonism and Science Fiction,” *Dialogue* 17/3 (Autumn 1984): 107–16; and Aaron J. Sanders, “Avenging Angels: The Nephi Archetype and Blood Atonement in Neil LaBute, Brian Evenson, and Levi Peterson, and the Making of the Mormon American Writer,” in Decker and Austin, *Peculiar Portrayals*, 87–112.

36. For a discussion of Mormon elements of *The Executioner’s Song*, which purports to give a journalistic account of the 1976 Gary Gilmore murders, see Steve Glassman’s “Bad Boys and Bad Girls in the Good Land: The Nonfiction Novel in the Southwest,” in *Crime Fiction and Film in the Southwest: Bad Boys and Bad Girls in the Badlands*, ed. Steve Glassman and Maurice J. O’Sullivan (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001), 197–209. For treatments of Mormonism in *Angels in America*, see Michael Evenden, “Angels in a Mormon Gaze,” *Sunstone* 17 (Sept. 1994): 55–64; Michael Austin, “Theology for the Approaching Millennium: Angels in America, Activism, and the American Religion,” *Dialogue* 30/1 (Spring 1997): 25–44; and Christine Hutchinson-Jones, “Center and Periphery: Mormons and American Culture in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*,” in Decker and Austin, *Peculiar Portrayals*, 5–36.

37. Decker, “Panoramic Picture,” 144.

Not all contemporary literary portrayals of Mormonism come from the nineteenth-century stereotypes. Some of them are considerably more complex, ranging from the satirical (but largely affectionate) image of Mormon missionaries in the hit Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* to the upstanding (if somewhat naïve) American patriots in the novels of Tom Clancy and W. E. B. Griffin.<sup>38</sup> And a handful of extremely successful writers known to be Mormon—such as Orson Scott Card, Ann Perry, and Stephenie Meyer—have injected a distinctive Mormon consciousness into popular culture that has provided a platform for critics to explore the connections between Mormons and literature. For example, the prolific LDS scholar and writer Michael Collings has written widely about the Mormon subtexts of Card's novels—including *In the Image of God: Theme, Characterization, and Landscape in the Fiction of Orson Scott Card*, the first book-length study of Card's works, which was published by Greenwood Press in 1990 and reissued in 2014 as part of a self-published omnibus volume entitled *Orson Scott Card: Penetrating to the Gentle Heart*.<sup>39</sup> And as the *Twilight* novels of Stephenie Meyer begin to attract the attention of serious critics, Meyer's Mormonism has become an important area of scholarly inquiry into the texts.<sup>40</sup>

Scholarly studies of the role of Mormonism in literary history have always been easier to place with mainstream academic publishers than studies of literature by and for Latter-day Saints. Such studies will continue to offer the best opportunities for Mormon literary critics to break

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38. See Chiung Hwang Chen and Ethan Yorgason, "'Those Amazing Mormons': The Media's Construction of Latter-day Saints as a Model Minority," *Dialogue* 32/2 (Summer 1999): 107–28.

39. Michael R. Collings, *In the Image of God: Theme, Characterization, and Landscape in the Fiction of Orson Scott Card* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990).

40. See, for example, Natalie Wilson's *Seduced by Twilight: The Allure and Contradictory Messages of the Popular Saga* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), which contains chapters entitled "The Soul of the Vampire: Sparkly Mormons, Female Eves, and Unconverted Wolves" (pp. 133–56) and "Got Vampire Privilege? Or, Why You Should Marry an Undead White, Wealthy, Heterosexual Mormon" (pp. 57–179). Also see Kristi A. Young's "Testifying: Mormonism and the Writings of Stephenie Meyer," in Hunter, *Mormons and Popular Culture*, 2:39–50.

out of the “Utah bubble” that has both nourished and confined them. Academic journals and university presses are simply more interested in manuscripts about Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, and *Angels in America* than about Nephi Anderson and *Saturday’s Warrior*. And there is plenty of work left to do in this area. Mormon themes and characters run through some of the most important American and British literature of the past two centuries in ways that we are just beginning to understand. And as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints becomes more prominent internationally, the role of Mormonism in the literatures of other cultures may expand significantly, providing still more avenues for critical analysis.<sup>41</sup>

### The literary study of sacred texts

In *What Hath God Wrought*, an expansive, Pulitzer Prize–winning history of America from 1815 to 1848, Daniel Walker Howe writes that the Book of Mormon is “a powerful epic written on a grand scale with a host of characters, a narrative of human struggle and conflict, of divine intervention, heroic good and atrocious evil, of prophecy, morality, and law.” After a brief presentation of its major ideas and motifs, Howe concludes that the Book of Mormon “should rank among the great achievements of American literature, but has never been accorded the status it deserves, since Mormons deny Joseph Smith’s authorship, and non-Mormons, dismissing the work as a fraud, have been more likely to ridicule than read it.”<sup>42</sup>

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41. By far the most prominent literary work about Mormonism written in a language other than English is the novel *Paradísarheimt* (1960), by the Icelandic Nobel Prize laureate Halldór Laxness, published in English translation as *Paradise Reclaimed* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1962). The novel, which tells of a nineteenth-century Icelandic farmer’s conversion to Mormonism and subsequent journey to Utah, has been the subject of several studies by LDS critics, most recently by Fred E. Woods in “Halldór Laxness and the Latter-day Saints: The Story behind the Novel *Paradísarheimt*,” *BYU Studies* 49/3 (2010): 47–74.

42. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 314.

For all of the reasons that Howe suggests, the Book of Mormon is a text that presents endless fascinations for literary critics: a complex narrative structure, multiple levels of authorship, passionate ideological conflicts, a wide diversity of genres, layers of intertextual connections to the Bible, Hebrew literary forms, nineteenth-century narrative patterns, and a vigorously contested narrative of authorship. These are precisely the sorts of questions that literary criticism was designed to address. But Howe is also correct in observing that nearly everybody with an interest in the Book of Mormon has too much of their own ideology at stake to analyze the text from the disinterested scholarly perspective that the best literary criticism requires. Thus, the vast majority of the critical books and articles written about the Book of Mormon are devoted either to proving it to be an authentic ancient record of ancient Israelites who migrated to the Western Hemisphere or dismissing it as a nineteenth-century fraud.

It is quite possible, however, to bracket the question of the Book of Mormon's origins temporarily and examine it as a literary text. And trained literary critics, in and out of the LDS Church, have been doing so for many years. Robert K. Thomas—a BYU English professor and academic vice president who coauthored the popular *Out of the Best Books* anthologies in the 1960s<sup>43</sup>—wrote his senior thesis at Reed College on the literary properties of the Book of Mormon in 1947. After receiving a PhD in English from Columbia University, he followed up with the much-cited article “A Literary Critic Looks at the Book of Mormon.”<sup>44</sup> Dozens of other articles studying the Book of Mormon as

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43. The five-volume *Out of the Best Books* series, edited by Bruce B. Clark and Robert K. Thomas, was published by Deseret Book between 1964 and 1969 for use in the Relief Society's Cultural Refinement curriculum. Deseret Book also published a “best-of” collection, *Favorite Selections from Out of the Best Books*, for a more general audience in 1979.

44. Robert Kedzie Thomas, “A Literary Analysis of the Book of Mormon” (Portland: Division of Literature and Languages, Reed College, 1947); and Robert K. Thomas, “A Literary Critic Looks at the Book of Mormon,” in *To the Glory of God*, ed. Charles D. Tate Jr. and Truman G. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 149–61.

literature have been written by, among others, Douglas Wilson, Bruce Jorgensen, Stephen Sondrup, and Eugene England.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike most of the other critical projects of Mormon literary studies, the early articles bringing literary criticism to bear on the Book of Mormon have led to more detailed and sophisticated book-length publications that have now begun to penetrate into the larger world of academic literary studies. Between 1996 and 2002, literary scholars published four books on the Book of Mormon, bringing a wide spectrum of contemporary critical methodologies to the study of Mormonism's foundational text.

The first of these books, Marilyn Arnold's *Sweet Is the Word* (1996), approaches the Book of Mormon chronologically, functioning as a sort of study guide to encourage readers to go deeper into the text than they otherwise would. Arnold, who taught American literature at BYU and published widely on Willa Cather, makes it clear in the introduction that she will not use secondary sources or traditional scholarly methods in her analysis; rather, *Sweet Is the Word* is "very simply, my personal response to the book."<sup>46</sup> One year later, University of North Carolina literature professor Richard Dilworth Rust published *Feasting on the Word* (1997), which was awarded the Association for Mormon Letters

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45. Douglas Wilson, "Prospects for the Study of the Book of Mormon as a Work of American Literature," *Dialogue* 3 (Spring 1968): 29–41; Bruce W. Jorgensen, "The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1981), 217–31; Steven P. Sondrup, "The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading," *BYU Studies* 21/3 (1981): 357–72; Eugene England, "A Second Witness for the Logos: The Book of Mormon and Contemporary Literary Criticism," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:91–125. For a select bibliography of literary criticism about the Book of Mormon through 1995, see Edgar C. Snow Jr., "Narrative Criticism and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 93–106.

46. Marilyn Arnold, *Sweet Is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon—Its Narrative, Teachings, and People* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 1996), vii.

award for criticism that same year.<sup>47</sup> In *Feasting on the Word*, Rust combines chapters that explicate the various genres of the Book of Mormon (epic, poetry, sermon, autobiography) with chapters on its formal and rhetorical strategies (imagery, typology) to produce a volume that very effectively situates the Book of Mormon within the larger conversations of literary theory and criticism.

A third book, Mark D. Thomas's *Digging in Cumorah*, was published by Signature Books in 1999.<sup>48</sup> Unlike Arnold and Rust, Thomas examines the Book of Mormon primarily as a nineteenth-century text—bracketing the question of ancient origins but examining other religious texts from the period as rhetorically comparable documents. Thomas's critical methodology is profoundly influenced by the work of the Jewish biblical scholar Robert Alter and the Protestant literary critic Northrop Frye. Following Alter's influential *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Thomas examines the Book of Mormon's use of "type scenes," or structurally similar narratives that are repeated at different points in the text with slightly different emphases, such as the "dying heretic" narratives of Sherem, Nehor, and Korihor.<sup>49</sup> Following Frye's work in *The Great Code* and *Words with Power*, Thomas also looks for the large archetypal patterns that dominate and give structure to the text, such as the movement from captivity to deliverance.<sup>50</sup> *Digging in Cumorah* was widely praised by literary critics—including Wayne C. Booth, who worked with Thomas at the University of Chicago—but aggressively dismissed by many more traditional Mormon scholars, who felt that

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47. Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997).

48. Mark D. Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999).

49. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1982). The type scenes of the three Book of Mormon "dying heretics" occur in Jacob 7:1–21 (Sherem), Alma 1:2–16 (Nehor), and Alma 30:6–60 (Korihor). For Thomas's analysis of this type scene, see pp. 161–70.

50. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1983); and *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature"* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1992).

Thomas's emphasis on nineteenth-century literary techniques dismissed the Book of Mormon's claims of divine origin.<sup>51</sup>

Ultimately, Arnold, Rust, and Thomas are Mormon literary critics writing for Mormon audiences, and while their books have been much discussed and (in Thomas's case) debated in Mormon circles, they have had very little influence outside the Mormon community. This is not true of the fourth book, Terryl Givens's *By the Hand of Mormon*, which was published by Oxford University Press and reviewed in many of the most important academic publications in the country.<sup>52</sup> In his approach to the Book of Mormon, Givens employs a sophisticated reception theory. He begins with the argument that the Book of Mormon has been received and understood by its audiences in at least four distinct ways throughout its history: (1) as a divine signal of the opening of a new dispensation and of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling; (2) as an authentic history of ancient America; (3) as a nineteenth-century fiction; and (4) as a complement to or extension of the Bible. These four large reception categories become the foundation of his analysis of the Book of Mormon's meaning and significance.

Givens's work demonstrated both the scholarly and the commercial potential of a literary approach to the Book of Mormon, and it has been followed up by at least two more scholarly studies of the Book of Mormon published by highly selective and prestigious academic presses. Grant Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, also published by Oxford University Press, approaches the text through character studies and rhetorical analyses of its three major narrators: Nephi, Mormon,

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51. In a blurb for the back cover of *Digging in Cumorah*, Booth writes, "This astonishing book probes more deeply into the Book of Mormon's literary and spiritual qualities than any other work I know. . . . The most influential American narrative of the nineteenth century has at last found the scholarly reader it deserves." FARMS reviewer Alan Goff is much less complimentary in his review, "Scratching the Surface of Book of Mormon Narratives," *FARMS Review of Books* 12/2 (2000): 51–82.

52. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

and Moroni.<sup>53</sup> And Paul C. Gutjahr's *The Book of Mormon: A Biography*—part of Princeton University Press's new Lives of Great Religious Books series—describes the history of the book's reception as a book, focusing on the ways that its audiences understood it at different times and highlighting formatting changes, translations, illustrations, and derivative works.<sup>54</sup>

Over the past ten years or so, these scholars have constructed a scholarly apparatus for studying the Book of Mormon as a literary text. Their efforts are now starting to bear fruit, as younger scholars have recently begun the painstaking work of situating the Book of Mormon in different literary contexts. Bradley J. Kramer, for example, sets the Book of Mormon in the context of ancient rabbinic literature in his new book *Beholding the Tree of Life*.<sup>55</sup> Others, such as Jared Hickman of The Johns Hopkins University and Elizabeth Fenton of the University of Vermont, have proposed plausible and ingenious nineteenth-century American literary contexts for the Book of Mormon. This kind of contextualizing work—which has traditionally been carried out by either apologists or detractors seeking to prove that Joseph Smith was or was not a prophet—is well on its way to becoming an important concern of mainstream literary scholarship.<sup>56</sup>

By a wide margin, the Book of Mormon is the LDS scripture that has most engaged both Mormon and non-Mormon literary critics. There have been occasional literary studies of other Mormon scriptures, such as Lambert and Cracroft's analysis of the literary form in Joseph

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53. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

54. Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

55. Bradley J. Kramer, *Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2014).

56. See Jared Hickman, "The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse," *American Literature* 86/3 (2014): 429–61; and Elizabeth Fenton, "Open Canons: Sacred History and American History in *The Book of Mormon*," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1/2 (Fall 2013), 339–61. Hickman and Fenton are currently coediting a volume for Oxford University Press that will explore a variety of Americanist approaches to the Book of Mormon.



Smith's narration of the first vision<sup>57</sup> or Charles Swift's recent work on the literary elements of the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>58</sup> And LDS scholars trained in literary criticism have occasionally written about biblical figures in distinctively Mormon ways.<sup>59</sup> But these are largely part of internal conversations among Mormon scholars. The pioneering work of Givens, Hardy, and Gutjahr has demonstrated clearly that what Daniel Walker Howe described as one of the "great achievements of American literature" can indeed find a place at the scholarly table and that both Mormons and non-Mormons can study it productively using the tools of literary analysis.

### So what now?

Reading over the last fifty years or so of work in Mormon literature studies, one cannot help but be impressed by its optimism, perhaps best encapsulated in the Association for Mormon Letters blog site, *The Dawning of a Brighter Day*, named for a 1982 article by Eugene England. The brightness of the day, of course, depends entirely on the metric one uses to measure it. By some measures, the state of Mormon literature and literary studies is very bright indeed—Deseret Book has created a strong market for well-written LDS-themed fiction across most popular genres, supplemented by smaller presses, independently published books, and popular conferences such as LDStorytellers and Life, the Universe, and Everything.<sup>60</sup> Mormon writers like Stephenie Meyer are

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57. Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 31–42.

58. Charles Swift, "The Literary Power of the Doctrine and Covenants," *Religious Educator* 10/1 (2009): 21–31.

59. Steven C. Walker, *Seven Ways of Looking at Susanna* (Provo, UT: Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, 1984); John S. Tanner, "Why Latter-day Saints Should Read Job," *Sunstone* 14/4 (August 1990): 38–47; and Michael Austin, *Re-reading Job: Understanding the Ancient World's Greatest Poem* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2014).

60. Life, the Universe, and Everything is a long-running science fiction and fantasy symposium held in Provo, Utah, highlighting many LDS authors along with other

experiencing phenomenal success in the national market. And scholarly readings of the Book of Mormon as literature have recently been published by several of the most prestigious academic presses in the world.

Judged by other standards, however, the brightness fades. Mormonism still has not produced any Miltons or Shakespeares, but this should not surprise us at all. Very few cultures, and very few times, produce world-shaking writers like these. And even Milton and Shakespeare were not “Milton and Shakespeare” until long after their own deaths. But Mormons have not even been very good about producing, or recognizing, their own Flannery O’Connors and Cynthia Ozicks—challenging but deeply spiritual writers who draw on the power of their religious traditions (Catholic and Jewish, respectively) to produce works of significant literary merit. This is partly because of elements in Mormon culture that work against serious fiction—such as a strong tradition of using stories primarily to teach doctrine and a tendency to see literary narratives dichotomously, as either 100 percent supportive of the church or “anti-Mormon.”<sup>61</sup> But it is also a failure of critical discourse. Many Mormon scholars know that Maurine Whipple’s *The Giant Joshua* is a complex mid-twentieth-century narrative with strong elements of feminism, ecocriticism, and anticolonialism. Very few non-Mormon scholars have ever heard of Maurine Whipple or *The Giant Joshua*, however, because nearly everything ever written about them has been published to an almost entirely Mormon audience.

To get to the brighter day that Eugene England foresaw, Mormon literary scholars must follow more closely along the path that Mormon historians have taken. They must make their internal conversations external, in much the same way that LDS scholars like Terryl Givens and Grant Hardy have taken their critical analyses of the Book of Mormon public. The market exists. The scholarly study of literature has traditionally been very good at making room for the literatures of

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important figures in the science fiction and fantasy genres. For information on the LDStorymakers conference, see note 5.

61. See Bruce W. Jorgensen, “Heritage of Hostility: The Mormon Attack on Fiction in the 19th Century,” *Wasatch Review International* 4 (1996): 75–94.

small subcultures—many of them far smaller than Mormonism. And more than a dozen prestigious academic presses now publish Mormon studies books in areas such as history, sociology, anthropology, folklore, legal studies, gender studies, and theology. The golden age of Mormon literary studies may not be right around the corner, but it is out there somewhere. The future is as bright as it has always been.

**Michael Austin** is provost, vice president for academic affairs, and professor of English at Newman University in Wichita, Kansas. He is the author or editor of seven books, including *Reading the World: Ideas That Matter* (Norton, 2006), *Useful Fictions: Evolution, Anxiety, and the Origins of Literature* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), and *Re-reading Job: Understanding the Ancient World's Greatest Poem* (Greg Kofford, 2014). He is currently working on a book on Vardis Fisher, Virginia Sorensen, and the mid-twentieth-century Mormon literary diaspora.