The Book of Mormon as a Collectible

John L. Sorenson
This article discusses the evolution of book collecting, particularly by Latter-day Saints. Although the circle of book collectors used to be small, it has since expanded, probably because of the spread of the Internet. Latter-day Saints throughout the world are now able to locate and purchase old and rare books within minutes. While this innovation can be productive and beneficial, the easy access can be risky. Because people are so anxious to buy these types of books, they have the potential to be deceived by those who create fraudulent products, and unlike the older, more experienced buyers, newcomers often do not inspect books closely for authenticity and condition before purchasing them. Because of these potential mistakes, it is essential that book collectors be more aware of the risks and take the necessary precautions to avoid them.
THE BOOK OF ALMA
THE SON OF ALMA
CHAPTER I

Now it came to pass that in the first part of the reign of the
king, as he had changed, from time to time, from his councils,

photography by Mark Philbrick
Not long ago a first-edition copy of the Book of Mormon that had Brigham Young’s signature in it was rumored to have sold for $200,000. Whether the transaction took place is uncertain, but the report reflects expectations some people now have about the market for rare copies of the Book of Mormon. Why would anyone pay such a sum for this book? Was it “worth” that much? Why do people collect old LDS books at all? And what is the place of the Book of Mormon in this pattern of commerce?  

Of all the things acquisitive humans collect, old books seem particularly desirable. They store easily—even handsomely—and most owners act as if their volumes do not require any special care to keep them from deteriorating. Moreover, a special aura attends a book collection, suggesting social status and literacy on the part of the owner.  

Several basic motivations lead people to acquire and keep books. One is simply the desire to possess a set of distinctive objects for aesthetic enjoyment, just as a child might collect pretty rocks or trading cards. Many people acquire books so they can possess in tangible form the information those books contain. Rare books are often purchased in anticipation that their monetary value will rise, whereupon they may be sold for profit like any other investment. Sentiment leads people to keep books from their childhood and books received as gifts or purchased as mementos. Gerald Jones (see preceding article) treasures his first-edition copy of the Book of Mormon largely for sentimental reasons. The rare book serves him as a mental and emotional bridge to past events and characters with which he desires the concreteness of a material connection. For a teacher, an important book in hand can vitalize lessons based on that book.  

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have always been book people. The Book of Mormon was, of course, the first literary icon to mark a person’s membership in the church. Printing presses marked the route westward from Palmyra as much as graves and buffalo skulls. In the 20th century the number of titles available to the Saints increased greatly, and the criteria marking important volumes underwent notable changes. Particularly in the last 20 years, church leaders’ renewed emphasis on the Book of Mormon has contributed to greater interest among the general membership in the publication history of the translated Nephite scripture.  

In the mid-20th century, collections of valuable, rare LDS books were kept by individuals or institutions numbering only in the scores or low hundreds. Most serious collectors knew, or at least knew of, each other as part of a tiny set of cognoscenti. Today this collecting enterprise has attracted many newcomers, causing a dramatic change in the collecting scene. The rules of the game are now different: the onetime gentleman’s hobby has been transformed into more of a business. Some observers credit the new situation
to the rise of the Internet as a medium for auctioning books. Those most knowledgeable of the market point instead to the considerable buying power of a few LDS nouveaux riches as the stronger factor in modifying the conditions of collecting.

At least on the surface, the practice of auctioning books over the Internet has proved important in bringing about crucial change. Online activity has provided a method to establish the dollar value of volumes that once were theoretically, but not practically, of discernible value. At the same time, the owners of rare works are now of a different type. No longer is knowledge of a book’s historical, literary, or doctrinal background and significance much involved in considerations. Even less significant is knowledge of a book’s intellectual content. New owners may be uninterested in, and even quite ignorant of, such intrinsic considerations. They are more likely to be simply participants in the marketplace, on the model of the naive though avid collectors of art who have driven up the prices of famous paintings in the last generation.

For a long time the primary target for collectors in the Intermountain West’s “Deseret” territory has been copies of the first edition (1830) of the Book of Mormon. Actually, these are not exceedingly rare. The first edition ran to 5,000 copies, and a knowledgeable guess is that perhaps over 500 still exist. Scores of copies change hands annually, yet the price has risen from perhaps $5,000 for a copy 20 years ago to more than 10 times that today. (It is well to keep perspective, however, by noting that during the same interval the price of many stocks on the stock market has increased at an even greater rate.) “Only very wealthy people can buy the more rare items,” observes a Salt Lake City book dealer. At the same time, there is a rising awareness that plenty of interesting collectible books are available for those with special interests and a slimmer purse.

Years ago most transactions involving first-edition copies of the Book of Mormon were between a dealer and an individual or institutional collector, but now the Internet auction phenomenon is nearer the norm. These auctions drive both asking and selling prices upward. Another book dealer observes that “bidding is a contact sport in some cases. It gets the adrenaline going, with a definite effect on price.” Another dealer uses a more vigorous metaphor: “Auctions can be like a feeding frenzy between at least two collectors or dealers.” Because the Internet has also made it possible for buyers and sellers to discern just how rare any book is in relation to demand, truly rare items are now more easily recognized as such. Prices for them rise as a result. First-edition copies of the Book of Mormon now average on the order of $50,000 to $60,000.

The opposite effect is seen with another class of collectible LDS books. The Internet sometimes reveals that the more common collectible books, even though they may be old, are in relatively large supply.
In the 1990s the rise in price for first-edition copies of the Book of Mormon was apparently spurred by the new wealth created by the software and information technology industries in Utah. A class of rich and super-rich entrepreneurs found themselves able to pay previously unheard-of prices to build personal collections. Owning books of historical, religious, or sentimental value became a mark of status in their circles. Once the social pace-makers set the pattern, wanna-bes kept it moving and the dynamic of collecting in the Mormon market quickly altered because of the amounts of money thrown into the pursuit of those trophies. Of course, the infusion of new wealth in this market did not all stem from Utahns. For example, a man representing the historical tradition of Mormon dissident James Strang has used a personal fortune to acquire upwards of 30 first-edition copies of the Book of Mormon, and he continues to acquire more. He has been quoted as acknowledging that a primary motivation for the activity is financial; he expects the rise in prices to make him still wealthier down the road.

One consequence of the rising market for collectible LDS books is that buyers and sellers are now less likely to be knowledgeable about the books they handle. In the old days, before collectors made a purchase they were likely to take time to examine a book offered for sale and to learn something about its history. Now it is common for rare books posted for sale on the Internet to be sold within a day, a practice that precludes direct, detailed examination for quality. One consequence is that fraud is more common. A naive buyer is far less likely to detect, for example, that some pages in a purchased copy have been photocopied (on old paper removed from any old book) and inserted to fill in a gap, thus making an expensive “complete” copy out of what had been a volume with pages missing. In other cases historical signatures have been cut out of commonly available books and pasted into rarer books to construct a “signed copy.” Buying on the Internet
also increases the possibility of accepting false information offered about a book (such as a claim that it is in “fine” or “mint” condition). Experienced dealers are more likely, of course, to detect and assess items offered for sale that are of lower quality. One of the rules of the book dealer’s trade has always been “know whom you are dealing with.” Haste in pursuing Internet (or any other) purchases can mean that the inexperienced individual buyer errs in this regard, sometimes being blinded by greed, sometimes from sheer ignorance of the possible pitfalls. A dealer in Salt Lake City comments that “with Mormon material specifically, we have recently seen more collectors who are not informed. They are like big game hunters doing trophy hunting. Some of them have 10 to 20 copies of the same thing.”

While a touted advantage of e-commerce in rare LDS books is that buyers have access to far more information than before, a key question is how a person can winnow reliable facts from trivialities or lies encountered along the “information superhighway.” For instance, books may be listed for sale that in fact may not be currently available, the “seller” hoping to acquire the item once he has a prospective buyer. Moreover, reasonable prudence would lead buyers to suspect that the best copies and bargains around have already been sold to those who have paid closest attention to the market—dealers or prime collectors—leaving overpriced or defective books on a given listing for the less wary.

Price and demand for old copies of the Book of Mormon and other LDS works have changed, however, for reasons other than the Internet auction. “The church has grown dramatically,” notes a librarian who handles LDS materials, “and so has the number of collectors.” But of course the number of old books does not increase, so prices inevitably rise in accordance with the increased demand. Now some copies of the Book of Mormon of later date, like those of the early 20th century, are being sought by collectors who missed getting in on the first-edition wave. Copies of the scripture in languages other than English have also begun to increase in marketability. We might well imagine that a collection of every foreign language translation of the Book of Mormon would rise in value as the internationalization of the church proceeds. Furthermore, “valuable” does not necessarily mean “old.” There is, for example, considerable demand for first printings of all four editions of Bruce R. McConkie’s book *Mormon Doctrine*. 

**In the Old Days, Before Collectors Made a Purchase They Were Likely to Take Time to Examine a Book Offered For Sale and to Learn Something About Its History. Now It Is Common For Rare Books Posted for Sale on the Internet to Be Sold Within a Day, A Practice That Precludes Direct, Detailed Examination for Quality.**
The collecting of LDS books is now a subcategory of the public’s interest in anything antique. The popularity of public television’s *Antiques Roadshow* program is symptomatic of this rising concern with the past—both commercial and emotional. The looting of archaeological and natural history sites worldwide has been equally spurred by this seeming desire of individuals to “get my piece of the past,” even if the collectible object exists without context that might maximize its meaning.

Another result of rising prices is that the relatively few institutions, mainly libraries, that have long collected rare books are being priced out of the market when they try to acquire more of them. Rarely do they have funds to compete in the current competitive bidder’s market. There is an irony here because the book treasures that libraries already own are worth more in today’s market, yet the only way for them to benefit from this nominal increase in wealth would be to disperse their collections by selling them.

There are certainly bibliophiles of the old school who lament the changes. A nostalgic dealer observes, “It takes many years to become a serious, informed collector. It takes a long time to develop the drive, to develop areas of interest, and to know what one wants. A focused collector also has to learn details of availability, prices, and sources.” But such sophisticated collectors are increasingly rare. “We have seen the passing of a golden era,” says one participant. “The collecting game has deteriorated in a way. Now there are a lot more people that are interested in making money through trading books. They treat the books themselves like a mere commodity, not something to own and treasure. The number of top-notch, informed collectors is small, and the proportion who are in that category is getting smaller.”

One is reminded of the Japanese businessman who paid $53 million at auction a few years ago for a particularly famous canvas by Van Gogh. His interest reportedly was in holding it for a time and selling it at an even higher price. Meanwhile, the masterpiece probably sits in a bank vault, unseen by anyone. Such speculative ventures can be quite risky, especially for novice collectors. An avaricious hunter of “good deals” who lacks knowledge of market realities may be trapped into thinking that a jackpot situation he has heard about—like the purported $200,000 copy of the Book of Mormon—can be duplicated by sheer luck operating through the Internet auction mechanism. The reality is, of course, quite different.

For some reason LDS collectors want the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon above all, when in terms of actual value—both intrinsic and monetary—other works are more interesting. “The 1837 Kirtland printing of the Book of Mormon and the 1842 Nauvoo
For some reason LDS collectors want the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon above all, when in terms of actual value—both intrinsic and monetary—other works are more interesting.

“The 1837 Kirtland printing of the Book of Mormon and the 1842 Nauvoo printing are both more rare than the original 1830 printing,” cautions one dealer. Yet it is not essential that casual collectors set out to become supremely informed about early Book of Mormon editions or any other special area of concern. It is possible for those who have not identified a particular aesthetic or intellectual focus to enjoy collecting as an old-fashioned hobby merely on the philosophy “I don’t know much about books, but I know what I like.” Such people may love all kinds of old books and scarce items, but especially those close to their own traditions or localities. Pursuing self-defined interests or a personal penchant in an open-ended manner may be worth more in emotional satisfaction than fussing about prices and worth of books in terms of “the market.”

Given human tendencies and current disposable wealth, the Book of Mormon collecting phenomenon will no doubt continue and even accelerate. But the sheer size and impersonality of the market that now exists holds the possibility of increased fraud and painful disappointment for the naive.

Collector beware!
nished a product similar in appearance (see Lechtmann, “Pre-Columbian Sur-
faced Metalwork”); John Henry Holder and Gay Stresser-Planz, “The Haustee:
Region: A Second Locus for the Pro-
duction of Bronze Alloys in Ancient
Mesoamerica,” Science 257, 28 August
1992, 1215). Moreover, Nephi’s original
plates might have been of different
composition than Moroni’s plates.

The Book of Mormon Plates
Jennie M. Sjodahl

Like the article itself, the following notes are
as they appeared in the original article
from the April 1923 Improvement Era,
with the exception that publication
data has been added in brackets.
1. This is quoted from (Gregg Thomas, “The
Prophet of Palmyra” [New York: J.
B. Alden, 1890]) and may or may not
be authentic.
2. An excellent little book by George
Reynolds [Salt Lake City: Juvenile
Instructor Office, 1883].
3. The American edition, published at
Nauvoo, 1842, has 566 pages, 5 1/2 by 3
inches, including the margins.
4. See History of the Prophet Joseph,
by his mother, Lucy Smith, pp. 85 and 10.
The account related must have been
given by the Prophet himself to his
mother. [The pages cited correspond
to the 1902 edition of this book, revised
by George A. Smith and Elias Smith
and published by the Improvement Era.]

Epigraphic Considerations on Jane
Sjodahl’s Experiment with Nephi Writing
John Gee
1. Robert Deutsch, Messages from the Past
Hebrew Bibles from the Time of Isaiah
Through the Destruction of the First
Temple,illon Art Collection and an
Up-to-Date Corpus (Tel Aviv:
Archaeological Center Publications,
1999).
2. “A New Weight from Hamath and
Trade Relations with the South in the
Ninth–Eighteenth Centuries B.C.” in The
World of the Ancient Israelites, ed. P. M.
Michaël Daviau, John W. Wevers, and
Michael Weigl [Sheffield: Sheffield
Academic Press, 2001], 133–35.

The Book of Mormon Art of Arnold Friberg,
“Painter of Scripture”
Vern Swanson
1. Vern Swanson, “A Master’s Hand:
Arnold Friberg, Illustrator,” Southwest
Art 11 (December 1981): 75.
2. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001),
Springville Museum of Art (SMA)
Library.
3. John L. Sorenson correspondence with
the author (21 May 1999), in the au-
thor’s possession. Two generations
later, Sorenson would issue a book,
Images of Ancient America: Visualizing
Book of Mormon Life (Provo, Utah:
Research Press/FARMS, 1998), that pro-
vided some of the information Friberg
had hoped for in 1951.
4. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001),
SMA Library.
5. Ted Schwarz, Arnold Friberg: The
Passion of a Modern Master (Flagstaff,
Ariz.: Northland, 1983), 34. Schwarz
has a background in general historical
studio photography and magazine and
book illustration.
6. Margot J. Butler, Special Education Co-
ordinator, Church Education System,
Salt Lake Valley North Area, transcript
of an interview with Friberg (3 June
1986) and other quotes from the
transcript were modified by Friberg
himself upon reviewing this article in
manuscript form in February 2001.
7. Ibid.
9. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001),
SMA Library.
10. Ibid.
12. Quoted in Grady Johnson, “Moses and
the Mormon Artist,” Instruct, Septem-
ber 1954. The final nine words in the
quotation were added by Friberg in
an interview with the author in February
13. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001),
SMA Library.
14. All the comments are from Butler’s
1986 interview, modified by Friberg in
15. Friberg statement to Vern Swanson,
December 2000.
16. See Noel A. Carmack, “Images of Christ
40–41, 73.
17. It was exhibited in December 2000 at
Williams Fine Art in Salt Lake City on
the occasion of a show of Friberg’s work.

The Journey of an 1830 Book of Mormon
Gerald E. Jones
1. Journal of Samuel Smith, Historical
Department Archives, Church of Jesus
Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake
City.
2. I have obtained three other 1830 books
that closely match my 1830 Book of
Mormon and translated by
Bruce R. McConkie [Salt Lake
City: Bookcraft, 1990], 207. Nephi speaks
of how “in that day shall the Lord of
hosts be but a crown of glory, and a for
adium of beauty, and the terror of his
people” (Isaiah 28:5). The context of
that chapter is Ebalism, or northern
Israel, in the day of its wickedness;
prior to being taken into captivity by
Assyria in 721 B.C., the Babylonians,
walking in the practices of their fore-
past, were a crown of glory. Nephi writes
that the Lord shall have a crown of glory
to maintain his position as the
“remnant of the house of Israel,”
whose church and priesthood shall
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state of the Israelite tribes. The Lord’s
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