



1-1-2016

Understanding the Book of Mormon

Elizabeth Fenton

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Fenton, Elizabeth (2016) "Understanding the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 25 : No. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol25/iss1/5>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu.

Understanding the Book of Mormon

Elizabeth Fenton

I RECEIVED MY FIRST COPY OF THE BOOK OF MORMON on Halloween in 1999. I don't usually remember acquiring books, but the circumstances surrounding this particular acquisition were embarrassing enough to leave an impression. It was my senior year of college, and I was hanging out in my apartment, half-watching a horror movie while completing some minor class assignment (I realize that this speaks volumes about my social life at the time). When the doorbell rang, I responded as I had been all evening—by greeting guests with a bowl of fun-sized Snickers. Across the threshold stood two well-dressed women sporting name tags. I thrust the candy at them and asked, “Are you guys dressed as Mormons?” As soon as the words passed my lips, the air between us shifted. We all froze, the question and the bowl hovering in the doorway between us. The answer, I realized with a certain, dawning mortification, was both yes and no. I fumbled to apologize: “Uhm . . . I mean . . . I'm sorry . . . I thought . . . I mean, it *is* Halloween . . . Would you like some candy?” I was making it worse. They knew it; I knew it. Salvaging the interaction could not be left to me. All of this transpired in about ten seconds, but I experienced it, and it remains in my memory, in cinematic slow motion, the moment stretching out and up as our smiles grew wider and more awkward. I felt like I was failing a politeness pop quiz, because, in fact, I was. But then those women gave me a gift: they laughed. “I guess we aren't what you were expecting,” one said. Time

resumed its normal pace, and now I could laugh, too. We spoke for a few minutes, and despite my assertion that I was not interested in adopting a new religion, they left me with the book. They also declined my renewed and even more enthusiastic offers of candy, which I thought was unfortunate. I put the book away and didn't think about it much for the next decade.

This essay is about crossing a threshold to meet the Book of Mormon. It's a threshold I could not even approach as a harried undergraduate. And though I have read the book several times in the past few years, I still am feeling my way along that threshold's edge. This is partly because the Book of Mormon is like any other complex text: its sprawling narrative, deep intertextuality, and at times dizzying rhetorical flourishes make it the sort of book one can read again and again, always seeing something new. Add to this its compelling history, and it becomes an artifact that a lifetime of study might never fully explain. But it would be disingenuous to pretend that the sole source of my readerly unease is the Book of Mormon itself. It is, simply and frankly, a challenge to write about someone else's sacred text. I was raised Catholic in an interfaith household in rural Vermont, a state with a Congregational church on every corner that doesn't have a Baptist church. When I received my copy of the Book of Mormon, my frame of reference for it was the series of LDS public service announcements that ran on television in the 1980s. After watching one—"Share a little bit of yourself, without even knowing!"—I asked my mother who the Latter-day Saints were. She told me that they were family-oriented people who lived "Out West" and believed that Jesus had visited America. This was pretty much the extent of my education about Mormonism until I was a tenured professor. Thus when I decided to study the Book of Mormon, I hardly knew where to begin. There is a vast body of scholarship on the text, but it mainly assumes an audience that has grown up with the book and believes it to be a holy scripture. I wanted to enter this conversation as a scholar of early US literature and as someone who loved the book immediately upon reading it but did not believe it to be a sacred text. Unlike many of its commenters, then, I needed an introduction to the

Book of Mormon. That need took me to a variety of places, including the Hill Cumorah Pageant (best research trip ever). It will perhaps come as no surprise that Grant Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon* was an essential part of my earliest engagements with the text and is still a work to which I turn for insight and information. In my reading, Hardy's book stands as both a brilliant effort to reach across a variety of thresholds—of method, of interpretation, of perspective—and a reminder that some divides, despite our best efforts but perhaps for good reason, always will remain.

The task Hardy undertakes is ambitious. Responding to Richard Bushman's dismay that the book "has never been examined in its full complexity by outside scholars" and Nathan Hatch's assertion that Mormonism has received far more attention than its central text, Hardy explores the Book of Mormon as a whole and as a work of literature. This approach might seem sensible enough, but it is fraught with difficulty. On the one hand, the text is large and unwieldy; attempting a study of it is akin to writing about, say, *Moby Dick* or *Paradise Lost*—not impossible, of course, but not exactly easy. Then there is a more pressing question of audience. As Hardy notes, his assertion that the Book of Mormon can be read as a coherent work of literature has the potential to rankle believers and nonbelievers alike. Mormon readers often have overlooked the text's organizing literary principles, he contends, because they "have been so overwhelmed by the needs of practical theology and the desire to defend the book's historicity" (p. xiv).¹ Given the history of anti-Mormonism in the United States, this is understandable. Non-Mormons have tended to dismiss the book entirely, preferring to critique the religion that emerged from it rather than deal with the text itself. (Indeed, when I first tried to publish my article on the Book of Mormon's depictions of history writing, a rejection letter I received from one journal was accompanied by reader reports stating that the text held no value for nonbelievers and was an inappropriate object of critical study.) *Understanding the Book of Mormon* attempts to cut across these different limits in thinking by

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

engaging directly with the text using a framework offered by narrative theory. To this end, Hardy asserts that

reading the Book of Mormon well—that is, comprehensively, following the contours and structure of the text, perceiving how the parts fit into the whole, and evaluating fairly the emphases and tensions within the book—requires a recognition of the central role played by its three major narrators: Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. (p. xiv)

Treating the book's voices as narrative functions, Hardy hopes, will allow believers and nonbelievers alike to at least temporarily bracket the questions of historicity that have framed so many discussions of the Book of Mormon and examine the text on its own terms. What Hardy finds through this approach is that the Book of Mormon's literary and theological concerns are deeply entwined and cannot be understood properly apart from each other.

In assessing the Book of Mormon as a composite of three narrative voices, Hardy offers a macro view of the text that I think will be of use to any reader. The Book of Mormon's account of its own composition—combined with the story of its nineteenth-century translation—is one of its most daunting features. Plates within plates (brass, gold, large, small), translations of abridged copies, missing pages, buried originals, biblical resonances, and narratives out of sequence combine to make the book a marvelous but at times frustrating reading experience. Readers looking for a starting point to understand or rethink the text will find Hardy's initial, explanatory chapters and introductions to the narrators to be of great value. Hardy begins with ten "quick, relatively uncontroversial observations about the text," noting that believers and nonbelievers may "account for these features differently" but asserting that all readers should be able to agree about some basic characteristics of the book (p. 4). I did chuckle at Hardy's qualification of his statement, "relatively," because my own experience working on the Book of Mormon has left me with the impression that there might be nothing about it that is entirely free of controversy. Still, Hardy's statement that the book is long

(and that its “mission could have been accomplished more concisely”) seems reasonable enough (p. 5). Some of his other assertions—that, for example, the text imitates the style of the King James Bible and is a “human artifact”—might be more or less relatively uncontroversial. As a whole, though, this list of basic properties clears a space for readers to consider the work not as a collection of verses but instead as a constructed whole. Hardy admits that this outline of basic features might not make a strong case for careful reading, but his subsequent focus on the narrators does provide a scaffold for more detailed analysis. In dividing his study into assessments of each narrator, Hardy gives shape not only to his own argument but also to that long book itself. Readers accustomed to encountering the Book of Mormon as decontextualized verses or individual stories might be surprised to read about a Nephi who at times subordinates story details to his didactic aims, a Mormon who views history as theology, and a Moroni who struggles with the very demands of authorship. Refracted through these lenses, the Book of Mormon’s different sections take a clearer shape, and some of their more literary properties come to light.

In the spirit of narrative theory, Hardy catalogs a variety of textual features in the Book of Mormon. This is a particularly useful approach for readers interested in drawing formal or thematic connections among the book’s different sections. Hardy’s assessment of Nephi, for example, includes an analysis of 2 Nephi’s iterative phrasing, showing how its promise of an interpretation of Isaiah in chapter 25 incorporates words from its own earlier story of Joseph’s prophecy regarding the brass plates. Hardy illustrates these echoes of 2 Nephi 3 in 2 Nephi 25–33 with an easy-to-follow table showing the overlapping phrases. The repetitions, Hardy argues, allow Nephi to turn an exegesis of Isaiah into “a deliberate, creative synthesis of his own revelations, the writings of Isaiah, and the prophecy of Joseph” (p. 81). One of the best things about Hardy’s book, I think, is the attention it pays to the Book of Mormon’s internal intertextuality. In this particular case, a reader easily could miss the reappearance of 2 Nephi 3 in simply trying to follow the action, but once Hardy points it out, many interpretive possibilities

follow. The great care Hardy has taken with the text is evident throughout *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, as he time and again offers shrewd observations about how the book is constructed. His valuable insights include (but are not limited to) a comprehensive inventory of every kind of narrative intervention deployed by Mormon (p. 97); a rereading of the chiasmatic structure of Alma 36 (p. 140); an account of Mormon's reworking of the Gospel of Matthew in 3 Nephi (p. 196); a list of phrases connecting the story of the Nephites to that of the Jaredites (p. 232); and a table showing Moroni's narrative interventions linked with his references to Christ (p. 236). Throughout *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Hardy deploys the closest of close reading, highlighting the formal properties of the text and thereby discovering patterns that other readers might miss. His readings of these features are often quite prescient, but even readers who disagree with Hardy's conclusions will find that he has laid significant groundwork for further inquiry into the text.

One of the most productive aspects of Hardy's focus on narrators is the attention it allows him to pay to the various workings of chronology in the text. Hardy is adept at tracing the often-convoluted timelines at play in the Book of Mormon and highlighting some of the ways in which the book marshals temporality in order to achieve its literary aims. This is perhaps most true in his explication of Mormon's lengthy narrative. As Hardy notes, Mormon, despite his ostensible commitment to historical linearity, moves simultaneously forward and backward in time. While on the one hand, "Mormon employs an explicit, strict chronology" (p. 103) when it comes to events in Nephite history, his narration also defers an account of his own history, operates through flashback, and incorporates embedded documents narrated by other voices. I was particularly taken with Hardy's explanation of Mormon's rendering of the Nephite reformation, which, he points out, includes both a flashback detailing Alma's life and a "subsidiary flashback" telling the story of Aaron's imprisonment. Through these tangentially connected story lines, the text reminds readers that events are transpiring synchronically. This is just one example of many in which Hardy

unravels a perplexing scene, and because he pinpoints the verses where such shifts in time occur, it is easy for a reader to turn to the Book of Mormon and see how it creates temporal complexity. Hardy's work suggests that simultaneity is an ever-present concern in the Book of Mormon, a book that not only presents many stories at once but also is itself a simultaneous story, a history running parallel to the Bible on the other side of the world. I think Hardy could do even more with the tension generated by Mormon's presentation of the relentless march of history on the one hand, and the at-times-jarring departures from chronology on the other. He notes, for example, that Mormon offers a scant account of his personal history only after he has provided about three hundred pages of Nephite history. This approach to biography is quite different from that of Nephi, whose family history is the reader's entry point into the Book of Mormon. Hardy interprets these different approaches to history as functions of the personalities and aims of the narrators in question, but it might also be fruitful to consider the implications of the appearance of such diverse approaches to history within a single text. Do Nephi's and Mormon's varying presentations of chronology, for example, allow the text to comment on the relationship between familial histories and national histories? Beyond assigning motives to its narrators, how might we make sense of the text's numerous and shifting timeline(s)? This is perhaps an unfair criticism to level at a book that is doing the heavy lifting of laying out as many of the text's narrative features as possible, but I often found myself wishing Hardy would move even further beyond identifying these moments of temporal confusion in the text and assess them apart from the narrators who give them voice. That said, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* provides important analysis and, perhaps more importantly, opens up the possibility of even more extensive study of the text's varied uses of time.

Although he mainly assesses the Book of Mormon's superstructure, Hardy deftly pinpoints significant moments throughout the text and shows readers how instances of disruption and dissimulation point to some of the work's most pressing concerns. One of the best of his many fine close readings appears early in his study, when he analyzes the scene

in which Nephi brings the brass plates to Lehi after killing Laban. “And it came to pass that after we had come down into the wilderness unto our father,” Nephi writes,

Behold, he was filled with joy, and also my mother, Sariah, was exceedingly glad, for she truly had mourned because of us. For she had supposed that we had perished in the wilderness; and she also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man; saying: Behold thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness. And after this manner of language had my mother complained against my father. (1 Nephi 5:1–3)

As Hardy explains, this passage bears several remarkable features: it disrupts the telling of the main story with a flashback detailing a domestic dispute, shows a woman taking issue with her husband’s decisions, and interrupts its own flow to quote that woman directly. This last is perhaps the most intriguing, because, in Hardy’s words, “Nephi *never* quotes women” (p. 18). Sariah’s voice, which appears just once more in the text, is the only female one Nephi ventriloquizes. Hardy performs a smart reading of this passage, showing how Sariah’s maternal anxiety combines with Lehi’s assertion that he knew the Lord would “deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban” to portray Nephi and his brothers “as vulnerable, potential victims rather than perpetrators of a deed [the killing of the sleeping Laban] that, without a considerable amount of explanation, would look a lot like murder and robbery” (p. 19). Through the mother’s voice, the sons become children again, delivered by providence rather than through violence. This strikes me as a useful way of understanding Nephi’s narration, which Hardy argues is carefully designed to achieve didactic effects, even if that sometimes entails the omission or flattening of particularities. Read in this light, the scene also suggests the complex interplay of familial and national histories in Nephi’s narrative. The Book of Mormon will eventually tell the stories of thousands of people over hundreds of years, but it begins with the story of one family in turmoil. The momentary intrusion and

immediate silencing of Sariah, then, might be read also as signal that the text ultimately will abandon its domestic narrative in favor of a national one spoken almost exclusively by men.

Because Hardy's work pays such close attention to narrative voice, it is well poised to assess what I think is one of the Book of Mormon's most interesting features: its frequent and often seamless incorporation of biblical passages. In his section on Nephi, for example, Hardy tackles the question of why (and how) so much Isaiah appears in the text more or less whole cloth. "For readers who see Smith as the author," Hardy writes,

The easiest explanation is that the eighteen chapters of Isaiah in First and Second Nephi are filler, employed when his creativity flagged or because he felt the need to pad the narrative. . . . Believers, on the other hand, often see the Isaiah portions as preserving a version of Isaiah older and more accurate than anything else available today. (p. 66)

Hardy attempts a more nuanced explanation than either of these and thus lines up the relevant verses from each text, assesses their individual contexts, and highlights their often-minute distinctions. As he notes, rather than simply parroting the Isaiah of the Authorized Version verbatim, the Book of Mormon contains an altered Isaiah, as roughly half of its verses differ at least slightly from the biblical text. These distinctions range from the probably innocuous—in one instance, "eye" simply becomes "eyes"—to the potentially profound—Isaiah 13:15 promises, "Every one that is found shall be thrust through," but 2 Nephi 23:15 insists that "every one that is *proud* shall be thrust through" (p. 67, emphasis mine). Since the Book of Mormon itself offers no explanation for these variations, Hardy writes that it is "difficult to know what to make of all this" (p. 67). Still, he contends that when viewed within the larger context of Nephi's narrative project, the not-quite-exact copying of Isaiah appears to situate the Book of Mormon's narrator himself within an unfolding biblical history. Hardy demonstrates this most clearly in his analysis of 1 Nephi's revision of Isaiah 48, which includes additions that change the probable subject of the text from Cyrus of

Persia to Nephi himself (p. 73). Rather than deeming this a product of mere narrative arrogance, Hardy reads Nephi's adjustment of Isaiah as a conscious shifting of the concern of the text from the Persian conquest of Babylon to "Nephi's own predictions about the much more distant gathering of other branches of the House of Israel, including the descendants of Lehi" (pp. 73–74). The Isaiah that appears in the Book of Mormon, then, broadens its prophetic reach both spatially and temporally, encompassing Nephi's America and allowing him to write to an audience in the distant future. I found this reading thought provoking. This is an avenue of inquiry that deserves more critical attention than Hardy's book can give it, but his meticulous cataloguing of both Isaiah texts is a model for future study and an important step in considering the biblical resonances in the Book of Mormon.

As Hardy shows, the Bible appears not only as citations in the Book of Mormon but also, more frequently, through allusion. Numerous stories in the text bear striking similarities to biblical narratives, and the language in which those stories are told often overlaps with the Bible in phrasing or rhythm. So in addition to assessing particular verses that appear in both works, Hardy interprets passages of the Book of Mormon that evoke the Bible less directly. My favorite instance of this appears in his section on Moroni, which offers a lovely reading of the book of Ether. Focusing on the passage in which the preexistent Christ appears to Jared's brother, Hardy shows that, through allusions, Moroni presents Genesis in reverse. As Hardy puts it, "several key incidents and phrases seem to indicate that Moroni arranged his abridgment up to this point as a reversal of the fall of man, tracing major events from the Garden of Eden to the Tower of Babel backward" (p. 241). And, indeed, the story of the Jaredites begins with a divine confounding of language, then progresses to the building of a great ship, the chastising of the Jaredites for their wickedness, their expulsion into the wilderness, and the Lord's assertion that Jared has been "created after mine own [divine] image" (p. 242). All of this, Hardy notes, culminates in Christ telling Jared's brother, "Ye are redeemed from the fall; therefore ye are brought back into my presence; therefore I show myself unto you" (p. 241). Backwards from Babel, through flood

and fall, Jared's brother achieves the status of prelapsarian man. This is a wonderful moment in the Book of Mormon; it links the text to the Bible in a poignant and creative way while simultaneously presenting its alternative narrative order as the solution to the problem of the fall. It also links Moroni to Mormon and Nephi. Reading Hardy's book, it becomes possible to see that each of these narrative voices is concerned with how seemingly linear events necessarily appear out of sequence once they enter into narrative (at the very least, the past erupts into the present simply by being told). Nephi struggles with the problem of knowing how a story will end before it begins, and Mormon tries to make the past present in order to prophesy a coming future. Moroni's own reluctant narrative attempts to remedy one past with another, all while living in a destroyed present. By the end of Moroni's narrative, it has become clear that saving the Nephites was never the Book of Mormon's project. The rescue of Jared's brother from the fall did not protect the Jaredites from extinction, and Moroni's rendering of that rescue will not save the Nephites any more than Mormon's history did or Nephi's prophecies could. All of its narrators write of dead and dying civilizations, though, in the hopes of creating a redemptive future.

Thus far I have discussed what I view as some of the most productive aspects of *Understanding the Book of Mormon*. The text is true to its title; it certainly helped me to understand the Book of Mormon, and I consider it an invaluable source for the study of the text. But I'd like to return to where I began this essay and consider more carefully the book's effort to reorient critical conversation around the text and thereby cross the interpretive threshold between believing and nonbelieving readers. For Hardy, a focus on narrators seems one way to talk around the problem of historicity, because narrative strategies, at least in theory, can be discussed on their own, in terms of their structural properties, without recourse to authorial intent. Remove the author from the picture, by this logic, and you free the text from the burden of history. The Book of Mormon contains repetition, chiasm, intertextuality, and flashback—those facts are undeniable—but whether those features were crafted by divine order or no, in Mesoamerica or Palmyra, New York,

becomes irrelevant, at least from a literary perspective, once the narrative voice is unhinged from everything beyond what it speaks. This sounds like great middle ground, but by the end of *Understanding the Book of Mormon* I was dubious about Hardy's claim that a discussion of narrators could sidestep the text's controversial history. This is because it turns out (and maybe is no surprise) that talk about narrators can sound a lot like talk about real people. While Hardy's approach allows him to generate important observations about the structure of the text, it also creates rhetorical space in which, for all his disavowals, he can talk about Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni as if they are historical figures.

In the context of narrative theory, narrators are devices designed to achieve particular effects just like other narrative elements (perspective, narratee, author function, etc.). They are not conscious beings, because they are not beings at all (though, of course, well-designed narrators create the illusion of realness). The Book of Mormon's main voices often appear in Hardy's work, though, as thinking subjects driven by goals and motives rather than by the imperatives of the narrative. Thus when he asks, "When does Nephi come to realize that the book he is writing is actually the same book he saw in vision several decades earlier?" Hardy turns discussion of a narrator to speculation about an author (p. 77). Narrators do not have realizations, though narrative technique may produce the effect of realization in a text. Slippage between narrator and author appears throughout *Understanding the Book of Mormon*: Hardy assigns "historiographical inclination" and "literary ambitions" to Mormon (pp. 102, 110), and he notes that Moroni "appears to be a very reticent author" (p. 218). At one point, Hardy even says that he has been "speaking of Mormon as if he were a historical figure," but then moves forward with his analysis as if this is not a serious interpretive issue (p. 114). Thus although he has made the case that narrative theory can cut the Gordian knot of historicity, his conflation of narrator and author functions actually allows Hardy to treat the book as a Mesoamerican artifact but not say that he is doing so. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* thus does not extricate itself from the question of authenticity; its very mode of analysis, in the end, allows a degree of unspoken apologism.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing; I just found myself often wishing that Hardy would be more up front and transparent about it.

I would level a similar criticism at moments when Hardy entertains interpretations of the text that fall outside the purview of LDS readings. Although I appreciate his attempts to consider diverse readings of the Book of Mormon, Hardy's voicing of nonbelievers' potential explanations for the text's various features often reads like parody. When introducing Moroni, for example, Hardy notes, "Perhaps the Book of Mormon could have ended [with Mormon's narrative], but it does not; . . . we find ourselves in the hands of yet another narrator" (p. 217). As explanation for the sudden appearance of Moroni, Hardy writes, "Apparently [Mormon] died before he could complete his book; either that or Joseph Smith's literary exuberance and delight in creating new characters led him to continue the story just a little longer" (pp. 217–18). Put this way, the notion that Moroni is not the text's author sounds preposterous. "Exuberance and delight" seem very silly reasons to create a new narrator. And why would anyone continue writing an already-too-long book? Rendered as a false binary—either Mormon died, or Joseph Smith got carried away—the possibility of interpreting Moroni's narration in a critically responsible but nonbelieving vein appears impossible. But, of course, there are plenty of different ways to account for the presence of Moroni in the text, and Hardy's own book offers several reasons why that final narrator is crucial to the book's larger project. His reading of the book of Ether's narrative repair of the fall is itself excellent evidence for the importance of the Moroni chapters. With Moroni's voice, as Hardy notes, the Book of Mormon simultaneously finishes the story of the Nephites and performs a kind of narrative resistance to conclusion. Through its series of false stops and restarts, allusion, and apparent anachronism, Moroni's narration speaks to the difficult project of concluding a sacred text. What, after all, should be the final word on a chosen people, a prophecy, a divine calling? How can a text that pries open a spiritual canon and asserts the prospect of more texts and more histories draw itself to a close? Part of the Book of Mormon's appeal for me—a nonbeliever who finds much of

value in the book—is its radical reimagining of what it means to write a scripture and its reassessment of the seemingly inviolable boundaries of revealed religion. Moroni’s narrative plays an integral role in what I would deem the book’s most significant challenge to orthodox notions of canonicity, and I would not reduce its importance to mere authorial delight. It is hard to blame Hardy for constructing an imagined reader who simply dismisses the Book of Mormon and explains all of its most interesting features away by evoking the specter of a wild-eyed Joseph Smith. Such readers exist; they have since 1830. But if, as Hardy asserts, the Book of Mormon is a more complex and interesting text than most people (LDS readers included) have realized, then perhaps unorthodox readings could move beyond tired arguments about Smith and offer fresh insights into the work itself. The divide between interpretations born of belief and unbelief might be blurrier than Hardy’s work allows.

When I first encountered *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, I was simply grateful a book of its kind existed. It is an indispensable work for anyone trying to gain a clearer sense of the Book of Mormon’s structural and thematic concerns, and it contains many beautiful readings of the text. I would recommend it to any student of the Book of Mormon, regardless of his or her particular beliefs, because it is both a fine analysis of the book and a great example of lucid scholarly writing. And as I noted at the beginning of this essay, Hardy’s work makes a worthy effort to reach across numerous interpretive divides, offering analyses that could be of use to a variety of readers for a range of purposes. There are, however, some thresholds that cannot be crossed, at least not fully. Much as I admire the Book of Mormon and think it an essential work in the canon of US literature, I do not believe its account of its own creation to be true. This view necessarily sets limits around what I can read into and out of the text. The same could be said for Hardy, though his position relative to the book is quite different from mine. In some ways, although we are talking about the same text, Hardy and I always will be talking about different books. His Book of Mormon is a Mesoamerican scripture; mine is a nineteenth-century epic. Try though it may, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* doesn’t really entertain the possibility

that the Book of Mormon might be a work of fiction; and though the mystery surrounding the text is part of what makes it appealing to me, my work resolutely situates the Book of Mormon within the context of the antebellum United States. There is no critical methodology capable of closing the gap between these perspectives without leaving a seam. As Hardy's work shows, even narrative theory, with its ostensibly neutral labels and descriptions of textual features, cannot square positions as irreconcilable as belief and unbelief. In reconsidering *Understanding the Book of Mormon* for this review, though, I have come to think that the Book of Mormon's most important feature might, in the end, be its utter resistance to uniform reading. If the book's predictions about itself are correct, the day will come when all readers will understand it perfectly. For now, though, it inhabits a universe in which disagreements about its most basic features—author, medium, language, time period—persist. Rather than viewing it as a problem to be solved or a truth to be told, though, literary critics could embrace the challenge the Book of Mormon poses to our most basic assumptions about what constitutes a literary text, what we need to know about a book in order to analyze it, and the ostensible neutrality of our approaches. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* cannot efface the distinctions among its readers or those of its primary text; no work of criticism can. In remaining faithful to the text and its formal properties, though, as well as to his own position, Hardy's book provides all readers with a clear vantage point from which to consider the Book of Mormon and assess it on their own terms. *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, if I may belabor the metaphor, might not cross every threshold, but it certainly opens many doors.

Elizabeth Fenton is associate professor of English at the University of Vermont, specializing in the study of early U.S. literature and religion. She is the author of *Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (2011) and is currently coediting, with Jared Hickman, a collection of essays on Americanist approaches to the Book of Mormon.