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Woman of Destiny Orson Scott Card; Zinnie Stokes, Zinnie Stokes Donald R. Marshall; Summer Fire Douglas H. Thayer

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Reviewed by Edward A. Geary, professor of English at Brigham Young University and editor of *BYU Studies*.

After thirty years in the doldrums, the novel on Mormon themes has found new life recently, with several titles published each year. Many of the new Mormon novels, however, are only superficially Mormon, being merely adaptations for LDS audiences of mass market fiction formulas. Serious Mormon fiction writers have tended to concentrate on the short story, which has lent itself to some significant experimentation, and for which *Dialogue, Sunstone, BYU Studies*, and even, on occasion, the Church magazines have provided an outlet. Two of the writers under review, Donald Marshall and Douglas Thayer, have established reputations primarily as writers of Mormon regional short stories. *Zinnie Stokes, Zinnie Stokes* and *Summer Fire* are their first published novels. Orson Scott Card has achieved his most notable success in the field of science fiction. Though he has written plays on Mormon themes, *A Woman of Destiny* is his first Mormon novel and probably his most ambitious work to date.

The three novels are quite different from one another and could, indeed, be said to represent divergent trends. One is an “inside” novel for “outsiders,” written from a Mormon perspective but aimed at a mass market audience. Another is in some respects an outside novel for insiders, only incidentally Mormon in its themes but published by the major LDS publisher for LDS readers. The third is an inside novel for insiders.
Orson Scott Card's *A Woman of Destiny* may well be the most sympathetic fictional treatment of Mormon history ever issued by a national publisher. But that claim, once made, requires some qualification. The novel, published in paperback by Berkley Books, has reportedly had a very good sale, but one wonders what the purchasers thought they were buying. The title, the cover design (on the front an aristocratic-looking woman against a backdrop of sailing ship and covered wagon; on the back the same woman, distrobed, in a passionate embrace), and the blurbs ("The epic saga of a woman who dared to search the world for love") all suggest the formula historical romance. How many readers picked up the book at the supermarket bookrack only to be disappointed when they discovered that the novel does not conform to the expected stereotype? And on the other hand, how many people who might have enjoyed the book were deterred by the garish come-on, thinking that it was cheap sensational fiction?

*A Woman of Destiny* is not cheap fiction, though it serves up more generous portions of sex and violence than some readers will care for and though Card has a tendency to slip into the language of formula fiction when he describes passion: "her achingly sweet body that was always eager for him, that never could be satisfied." In addition, his characters, especially the women, discuss sexual matters with a frankness that is more characteristic of the late twentieth century than the mid-nineteenth. But this is a big book, vividly imagined and rich in incident, and the sensational scenes are balanced by more sensitive and moving passages.

The "woman of destiny" of the title is Dinah Kirkham, born to a middle-class Lancashire family that has come down in the world. Abandoned by their ne'er-do-well father, Dinah and her two brothers and their mother struggle for survival in the Manchester slums through scenes that could have been lifted out of Victorian "Blue Book" reports on poverty in the Midlands, complete with open sewers, sweatshops, child labor, even the obligatory chimneysweep episode. Through determination, hard work, natural gifts, and considerable luck, they pick themselves up by their bootstraps and achieve success and respectability. (There is more than a little Horatio Alger in this book.) But for Dinah, the transition from mill girl to middle-class housewife is unsatisfying since it ties her to a crude and fumbling husband (whom she married under pressure from her family to save her reputation after an attempted rape by her employer). Thus when Heber C. Kimball arrives in Manchester, he finds a responsive ear in Dinah, who sees in the Restoration message a confirmation of the
sense of special destiny she has cultivated since childhood. Though it costs her a great deal, she joins the Church and emigrates to Nauvoo, where she becomes a spiritual leader among the women and a secret plural wife to Joseph Smith. After the Martyrdom, she joins the westward trek of the Saints, eventually becoming the grand old lady of Mormondom, “the prophetess,” so formidable that even Brigham Young must treat her with care.

Some elements of Dinah Kirkham’s character, as well as several key incidents in the novel, are obviously borrowed from the career of Eliza R. Snow, a fact that has provoked criticism from some readers who feel that this represents both a distortion of history and a sort of preemption of authentic biography. But this is simply one of the risks the historical novelist takes, particularly when he deals with a history so passionately cherished and so heavily mythologized as Mormon history of the Nauvoo period. Not that Card’s history is bad. He has had the benefit of advice from a distinguished Mormon historian (thinly disguised in the Acknowledgments as “Jared B. Ames”), and I find his treatment of Nauvoo people and events much more satisfying than those of Samuel W. Taylor, or Virginia Sorenson, or Vardis Fisher, if for no other reason than that I can imagine Card’s Joseph Smith attracting the loyalty of thousands of followers. But still it is Card’s Joseph, and his Emma, and Brigham Young, and Heber and Vilate Kimball. And to my mind the author runs greater risks in his treatment of these characters than he does in borrowing from Eliza R. Snow. Historical fiction, when it treats actual historical figures, requires the novelist to attribute motives and to speculate on the inner lives of people whose inner lives we cannot know. As a fictional character, Card’s Joseph is sympathetic and well realized, but I suspect that it is difficult for most LDS readers to accept any fictionalized treatment of Joseph Smith—except, of course, their own.

A word remains to be said about Card’s technical achievement. A book jacket blurb proclaims A Woman of Destiny as an “epic saga.” I am not sure what an epic saga is, but it is to the novel’s credit that it is neither an epic nor a saga. The tradition of the novel is quite distinct from the tradition of the epic, and a novelist who aims at an epic treatment usually ends up, not with an epic, but with a diffuse and incoherent novel. Card’s focus on Dinah and her family provides his novel with its “indispensable center,” and the credibility is further enhanced by the pretense that the novel is a sort of family history. Each of the ten books begins with an essay by “O. Kirkham, Salt Lake City, 1981,” a descendant of Dinah’s brother Charlie,
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who has discovered Dinah’s journal in the Church archives and is attempting to reconstruct her life from the limited documentary evidence. This is a simple and by no means original device, but Card uses it to good effect to give a sense of controlled distance and authenticity.

Donald R. Marshall’s Zinnie Stokes, Zinnie Stokes is the shortest of these three novels, and the slightest. It is essentially a wish-fulfillment fantasy built on the themes of the Ugly Duckling and the Quest for the Golden Girl, with just enough realistic detail to make you think that this sort of thing might possibly happen. The book has been a local bestseller, and it makes a pleasant evening’s reading, but it falls short of Marshall’s earlier volumes, The Rummage Sale and Frost in the Orchard, in both thematic significance and the vividness of the writing.

Gavin Terry, Marshall’s protagonist, had spent his adolescence as a non-Mormon in Cedar City, Utah, and then joined the LDS church after he moved away from the state. This situation suggests interesting possibilities for development, but they are possibilities the novel does not develop. As far as we can tell, nobody that he grew up with in Cedar City cared much whether he was a Mormon or not, and there is no indication that his conversion has had a very profound effect on his life. Gavin returns to Cedar City from his home in Ohio after the death of his wife in order to square accounts, to make right the errors and omissions of his youth. In fact, the list of his youthful peccadilloes is remarkably short. He once kept excessive change from a transaction at the corner grocery; he let a widow pay him for more hours than he actually worked; and he left Cedar City at the end of his junior year in high school with hard feelings toward two of his classmates. His most serious offense, having rejected a poor, plain little farm girl from Enoch when she invited him to a dance, is one that he had entirely forgotten until he meets her again, now “a hauntingly lovely woman” (in the language of the book jacket blurb) with a mystery. The novel unravels the mystery, which is actually rather predictable, and ends with Gavin’s life pointed in a new direction.

The most convincing writing in Zinnie Stokes, Zinnie Stokes occurs in the opening pages with the account of Gavin’s reaction to his wife’s death after a protracted ordeal with cancer. But the intense emotions of the beginning do not last long, and for a young father who has lost a loved companion Gavin is remarkably unburdened. It is as though the author lacked the energy to continue the kind of
novel he began. Indeed, the whole book seems a little tired. The satiric insights of Marshall's earlier work, the comic Utah names, the vivid evocation of small town life, all are muted or nonexistent in this novel, and with them has gone most of the poignancy that characterizes the author's best work.

Douglas H. Thayer's *Summer Fire*, like his earlier volume, *Under the Cottonwoods*, represents an experiment to determine whether Mormon values can be subjected to the scrutiny of serious fiction, not from a standpoint of partial or complete alienation (as has been the case with much serious Mormon fiction in the past) but from a moral position firmly within the LDS framework. For this reason, even though his work is formally quite conventional, Thayer may be the most innovative writer in Mormon letters today.

*Summer Fire* is the story of a sensitive and sheltered adolescent's first encounter with evil. Sixteen-year-old Owen Nelson, who, like most of Thayer's protagonists, has grown up in Provo, goes with his cousin Randy to work on a ranch in Nevada, where the foreman, a powerful but war-scarred man named Staver, makes a point of corrupting the summer hands with drink, gambling, and sex. Randy succumbs to temptation. Owen does not, but he does come to see that the moral universe is a much more complex and difficult place than he had imagined.

Presented in outline form like this, the novel appears to be a rather typical initiation story, and so it is. What distinguishes it is its examination of Mormon values and the means by which they are inculcated into the young. Owen's situation is peculiar in that he has been the only male in a household dominated by his genteel grandmother. Since his father (who died when Owen was three years old and who, his grandmother assures him, is by this time well advanced toward godhood) is not around to provide a practical model of masculine frailty, Owen has grown up purely on the LDS ideal of manhood, an amalgam of the idealized models of all the Primary and Sunday School and Aaronic Priesthood and seminary lessons he has heard, plus the equally abstract and genteel ideals of the Boy Scout movement. So intense is his preoccupation with perfection that he cannot understand the necessity for the Atonement. The thematic keynote of the novel is expressed in Owen's remembered conversation with his seminary teacher:

Brother Anderson said that we all needed the atonement; he said that the Lord would suffer for our sins if we would let him and his blood wash us clean. I asked Brother Anderson after class if you needed the
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atoning if you kept all the commandments. He said, no, not if you kept them all, and he asked me if I kept them all.

"I think I have."

"That's good. Keep it up. But keep the Lord in mind. You may need him some day."

(P. 5)

The novel is essentially a working-out of Owen's discovery that perfection is a bigger order than he had thought. By the summer's end he has learned that he is not exempt from the fallible human condition, and he has gained at least an incipient appreciation of the necessity of atonement:

I looked at my hands, and then I looked at Randy and the other people in the bus whose faces I could see. I knew that I wasn't any different from them, and I knew that was part of what I'd learned. But there was something else, something even more important, that I didn't have a word for yet. But I would. It was a word like prayer, or faith, or love.

(P. 256)

The missing word is presumably grace, though the point is somewhat blurred by the fact that in addition to his new insights Owen also gets the expensive bicycle he wanted.

Summer Fire is an important Mormon novel, in spite of a badly chosen title. (I much prefer either of Thayer's two working titles for the book, Staver and Summer Hands.) However, the book does have some significant technical shortcomings. The narrative flow is not as strong as it could be, and there is too much repetition of similar incidents, especially in the middle portion of the novel. A summer of ranch work will of course involve a good deal of tedium, but a novel about such a summer ought not to become tedious. One of the great challenges of fiction in the realistic mode is to convey a sense of the banality of life without itself being banal. Summer Fire does not entirely succeed in this.

Despite these weaknesses, the book is well worth reading and shows the author's growing mastery of his themes and his craft. The major characters are solidly realized. Owen is not an appealing character, but he is convincing, and through him Thayer presents some powerful insights into the pitfalls of the Mormon genteel tradition. I was particularly struck by the idea that an intense drive for perfection goes hand in hand with a tendency toward narcissism. Probably the greatest obstacle to Owen's moral growth is his preoccupation with himself, with the rightness of his conduct, the weight of his body, the strength of his muscles, the pimples on his face. Though he often thinks he is thinking of others, he is almost always regarding himself
as though from outside himself—a tendency which James Joyce rightly associates (in "A Painful Case") with moral paralysis. Randy, the more fallible (yet somehow more likeable) Mormon boy, is rather sketchily drawn. But the portrait of Staver, though his motives remain somewhat mysterious, is very effective. Thayer suggests much more than he makes explicit in his treatment of Staver, a technique he could have profitably employed with other characters as well, especially the pious dying housekeeper, Mrs. Cummings.

One of the novel's real delights is the character of Stan, the hired man with the endless repertoire of tall tales, who is always pulling Owen's leg. It is rare to find such a good slice of the vernacular tradition in a contemporary novel, and the character reveals a gift for humor that is not apparent in Thayer's earlier work. Local detail has always been one of Thayer's strong points, and it is a strong point here, as scenes are rendered with a sharp concreteness that tempts the reader to go to Nevada in search of the Battle River Valley. This is true even though the accuracy of particular details might be called into question. For example, I seriously doubt whether any stream in the southern half of Nevada could supply the gunnysacks full of big trout that Staver takes out of the Battle River when he dynamites the holes for his weekly fish fries, and the old farmer in me is pained at the time lag between mowing and baling on the Johnson Ranch, with its attendant loss of nutritious hayleaves. But the very fact that one can quibble about specific details in this way is an indication of how completely realized the sensory world of this novel is. Whatever its shortcomings, Summer Fire has the solidity of a lived experience, and in fiction that is the essential quality.