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A Storyteller in Zion: Essays and Speeches by Orson Scott Card

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Reviewed by Thomas C. Clark, an attorney and Gospel Doctrine instructor in Northern California.

Orson Scott Card is possibly the most versatile, the most prolific, the most read, and the most highly compensated Mormon author to date. His credits include poetry, essays, a dozen plays (that have been produced in regional theater), a revision of the Hill Cumorah Pageant, hundreds of audio plays based on scripture, a dozen scripts for animated videos, more than two dozen *Ensign* articles, a volume of humor (*Saintspeak: The Mormon Dictionary*), an award-winning historical novel (*Saints*, previously published as *A Woman of Destiny*), and a novelization of a motion picture (*The Abyss*)—in addition to the science fiction novels and short stories for which he is best known. Card was the first author to win both the prestigious Hugo and Nebula awards for best novel two years in a row. Card is a true man of letters, if not a literary man for all seasons. He is the Latter-day Saint answer to Frank Herbert and C. S. Lewis.

*A Storyteller in Zion* is a collection of speeches and previously published articles, essays, and reviews by Card. Three of the speeches were presented at BYU, two articles come from the *Ensign*, six essays and reviews come from *Sunstone*, and a comment comes from *Dialogue*.

*A Storyteller in Zion* is an impressive literary smorgasbord with something for everyone. Most of the menu (particularly parts two, three, and four) is the intellectual equivalent of prime rib or trout amandine. However, as with all smorgasbords, *Storyteller* has its inevitable green Jell-O salad (see the first chapter, "The Coming of the Nonmembers").

Like any book, *A Storyteller in Zion* has its flaws. Some of them are trivial: we would like to know when and where the review of John Gardner’s *On Moral Fiction* was published, and we wonder why mention is not made that "Consecration: A Law We Can Live With" and "Eugene England and the Lighted Lamp" were originally published in *Sunstone*. 
A more serious deficit for such a personal work is its lack of a biographical introduction. Except for sycophants, most readers will judge Card’s essays by the essays’ own merits and not on the basis of his fame. Nevertheless, readers would benefit from a better sense of who the “storyteller” is and where he is coming from. Of particular interest would be knowing more about the apparent tension, alluded to in the dedication and in the acknowledgments, between Card and Sunstone and Signature Books. (The acknowledgments are placed, curiously, at the conclusion of the book and not at the beginning.)

Some could perceive the advertisement of Card’s business enterprises as promotional and problematic: Hatrack River Publications, specializing in “Mormon fiction that, while absolutely loyal to the Church and the gospel, nevertheless points out our foibles and weaknesses” (7); and Vigor; a newsletter not about “doctrinal or historical issues,” but about “practical issues that matter in the day-to-day life of active Latter-day Saints.” (The latter advertisement appears on a tear-off following page 215.)

Aside from such basic critiques, Card can be difficult to survey. In his review of Eugene England’s Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel (“Eugene England and the Lighted Lamp”), Card remarks that he “cannot read England’s essays as a critic”: “I am too much a part of the natural audience for his words. I can’t step outside and dispassionately watch his transaction with his readers. I am caught up, captured, possessed, and for a time I see the world through his eyes” (175). One of the reasons anyone may have trouble reviewing England’s book is that such a book presents the author’s testimony. Faithful Mormons can find it difficult to evaluate or critique testimonies of fellow Saints. We can scrutinize nonfiction easily enough; we measure the theories and arguments against the evidence. We can test fiction by how convincingly the writer transports the reader into the realm of imagination. However, testimony, as Card puts it, “def[ies] criticism by any detached standard” (175). Testimony is best examined by searching within ourselves to see if our hearts and spirits resonate on the same chord as the testimony. Reviewing Card’s book presents the same challenges.

Orson Scott Card bears testimony principally through his discussions of art, morality, and several gospel topics. Much of his
comment on the arts is a technical and protracted defense of the depiction of evil in his novels. Although readers may grow weary of this subject, Card is, as a moral (and Mormon) storyteller, obviously sensitive to the problem of evil. Those who are not artists or writers may find these chapters less appealing.

On the other hand, Card’s insights, as a science fiction writer, into the authorship of the Book of Mormon are fascinating. If the Book of Mormon is what Joseph Smith claimed, then the Prophet’s influence would be minimally evident. If Joseph manufactured the book, his influence as the work’s author would be pervasive: “All of the ideas and events in the book [would come out of the mind of an 1820s American]” (16). Joseph’s fraud would be unconsciously betrayed by conventions of language, preoccupations with contemporary issues, and cultural assumptions. Card demonstrates in detail how daunting such a task of deceit would be: “Writing something that purports to be an artifact of another culture is the most complicated, difficult kind of science fiction, because not only is it about strange things, it must also in itself be a strange thing” (18).

Perhaps the most compelling chapters are those that focus more on Zion than on the “storyteller.” Card’s consecration parable, “Consecration: A Law We Can Live With,” is trenchant and persuasive. “Living in Zion” raises a cry similar to those that have usually been heard only from the lips of Hugh Nibley or Avraham Gileadi. Card urges us not to wait for Zion to be established by decree, but to create it on a grass roots level by examining ourselves and repenting of our oppression of the poor. Such action requires that we radically change our values and teach our children “to honor most those who contribute the most to the community, not those who withdraw the most and use it for themselves. . . . We should pity the wealthy and teach our children the worthlessness of their amassing of possessions” (204). We must acknowledge that we are merely stewards and that we are not necessarily “the proper ones to decide where to bestow the possessions and goods that the Lord has blessed us with” (205). Card’s speculation as to where Zion will first reappear is intriguing. (Hint: It will not likely be in Utah or California.)
The most striking and controversial article is “The Hypocrites of Homosexuality.” This brave essay (Card’s last to ever appear in Sunstone) is one of the reasons his books have been boycotted (at least by one San Francisco bookstore) and his speaking appointments have been picketed by gay activists.

Orson Scott Card presents himself as a conservative intellectual. In several of his essays, Card appears to serve as an apologist for the Brethren. While General Authorities have no need of self-appointed defenders, Card’s advocacy of the Brethren was a rare counterpoint in Sunstone—the forum in which “Walking the Tightrope” and “Prophets and Assimilationists” first appeared.

But whether apologist or not, Orson Scott Card proves by this anthology of fifteen essays to be more than a gifted storyteller. He is also a critic, a soothsayer, a gadfly, and an inspired defender of the faith. Card’s final assessment of England’s book is a fitting summation of his own:

[The] book cannot be read safely. You cannot receive even a portion of the value of this book if you do not put yourself at risk in the reading of it, if you are not willing to be changed. But if you place yourself in his hands and receive his words with an open, undefended heart, he will bring you closer to the Spirit of God and closer to the community of Saints. That, and that alone, is the work worth doing. (181)