In the Image of God: Theme, Characterization, and Landscape in the Fiction of Orson Scott Card Michael R. Collings

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Orson Scott Card is arguably the most successful, and certainly one of the most talented, writers of fiction the LDS community has yet produced. For a Mormon audience, he has produced several short stories; a number of plays; a historical novel, *Saints* (originally published as *A Woman of Destiny*, winner of the 1985 award for best novel from the Association for Mormon Letters); and an assortment of miscellaneous items, including *Saintspeak*, a humorous dictionary of LDS terms, and scripts for many of the popular video and audio tapes on LDS Church history and scripture. Card is perhaps best known, however, for his science fiction and fantasy: over sixty short stories, many of which have been collected into his recent omnibus volume, *Maps in a Mirror*, and over a dozen novels, including the award-winning *Ender’s Game* and *Speaker for the Dead*, the yet-to-be-completed *Tales of Alvin Maker* series (based on the life of Joseph Smith), the new *Homecoming* series (*The Memory of Earth* and *The Call of Earth* published so far), and *Lost Boys*, a recent excursion into mainstream horror. A several-times winner of the prestigious Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards, Card is clearly an important figure within the science-fiction-and-fantasy landscape, notable not only for his popularity, but also for the high standards of quality in his work.

*In the Image of God: Theme, Characterization, and Landscape in the Fiction of Orson Scott Card* by Michael Collings represents the first book-length study of Card’s fiction, though numerous shorter articles have appeared. As such, it deserves particular attention, not only for its own sake, but also because it sets an agenda of sorts for future Card studies. Each of the seven chapters stands almost as a separate essay on some aspect of the broad triple focus of the title (theme, characterization, landscape), but together they create a suggestive, carefully drawn picture of Card’s writing as a whole, as well as provide...
interesting observations on a number of individual works. Throughout, Collings focuses attention on elements that are clearly central to a proper understanding of Card's work, yet not so obvious as to preclude the possibility of fruitful and intriguing commentary. For someone who is interested in exploring the manifold implications and ideas in Card's work, this volume is a good place to start.

It is often considered unsophisticated, or at least unfashionable, to look too closely at authors' ideas about their own work; and certainly it is important not to mistake an author's views for authoritative pronouncements. However, critics cannot properly ignore information about the conceptual context within which such writing projects are shaped, particularly when that information sheds light on important ideas in the works themselves. Thus, one of the most important services Collings provides is to make the reader aware of the large body of writing Card has produced on his own writing, on the practice of writing in general (Card is author of a book on characterization in science fiction and fantasy), and on other writers' works. By quoting Card's words and relating them to the practice of Card's fiction, Collings creates a context for understanding precisely what Card is attempting to accomplish in his work and for judging his success in that project. Particularly interesting are Card's observations on the role of storytelling in the life of the community (discussed in chap. 2, "To See the World the Poet's Way"), which are highlighted by his three critical terms critick, epick, and mythick. Each of these represents a different level of belief in reading stories: the critickal mode is that of the detached reader; the epick, that of readers who find a story true for their own group (for example, fiction that embodies a particularly "Mormon" experience of the world); and the mythick, that of readers who believe a story is true for all human beings. Card's own fiction is focused on creating belief on the latter two levels; hence the central importance of storytelling to Card, as opposed to the stylistic concerns that drive many other writers. This emphasis on storytelling is also—at least, according to Collings—one of the keys to understanding the effectiveness of Card's fiction, which is powerful because it allows readers to "see the world as the poet sees it and live by the changes that will then irrevocably taking place in them" (41).
One of the most significant elements in Card's worldview is his strong commitment to LDS ideals and beliefs, a commitment that finds its way into his science fiction and fantasy as well as his overtly Mormon fiction. Collings, who is himself LDS, spends much of the book arguing the importance of these elements in Card's fiction and tracing their appearance in specific works. Chapter 3, "Farther in and Farther Up": Mormonism, Science Fiction, and Orson Scott Card," discusses Card's "Book of Mormon" style, the Messianic focus of such works as Ender's Game and Speaker for the Dead, the description of America as the promised land in Card's Folk of the Fringe stories, and the use of Joseph Smith's life story and early events from American history in the Tales of Alvin Maker series. Throughout Card's fiction, Collings argues, both in his more and in his less explicitly LDS-influenced work, the focus is not on preaching but on inviting readers into "an essentially Mormon world" (74). One of Card's tools in constructing such Mormon worlds are landscapes (described in chap. 7) which, according to Collings, can be interpreted literally, allegorically, analogically, and anagogically (the traditional four levels of medieval exegesis) in terms of LDS elements: the explicitly LDS historical setting of Saints; the science fiction marvels of the Worthing and Ender stories, which can be seen as standing for spiritual counterparts; and the worlds of Treason, Folk of the Fringe, and the Alvin Maker stories, in which the landscape itself blends with the human characters in the fulfillment of their individual and collective destinies. Card thus represents, in his attempts to blend science fiction and fantasy with his own Christian beliefs, a kind of Latter-day Saint C. S. Lewis—though the comparison is perhaps unfortunate in light of Lewis's tendency at times to sacrifice story on the altar of theology, a temptation Card generally resists.

These sections are clearly of particular interest for LDS readers of Card's work, and may help create a broader understanding of the LDS implications of his work for non-LDS readers as well. Unfortunately, much of Collings's discussion is handicapped by the absence of any clear exposition of some basic LDS beliefs—including the doctrine of human divinity, which seems central to Card's Worthing stories and to many of his other stories as well. It is hard to perceive the particularly LDS twist to Card's use of Christic patterns without
an understanding that the path Christ took is one that other humans are expected to follow and that the hero in Card's works is thus a human on his or her path to godhood. Hence the particular suitability of science fiction as a vehicle for Card's fiction, since the attaining of godhood is one of the genre's most resonant themes. Collings's analysis here stops short of some of its most interesting possibilities—though whether out of reluctance to spend even more time on the LDS angle in a work of mainstream literary criticism or out of fear of oversimplifying and perhaps overstating the relationship between LDS theology and Card's fiction is unclear. On the whole, however, Collings's discussion is both clear and suggestive and provides a good starting-point for future criticism along these lines.

Another element of Card's fiction that more or less demands attention is his use (perhaps overuse) of the young boy (sometimes girl) with extraordinary gifts who is exposed to great suffering, including the need to inflict cruelty; loses his identity as a child; must be sacrificed or sacrifice himself in order to save the community; and at the end of the story either dies or (in more recent works) must struggle to reattach himself to humanity in order to live: "the child-god with life and death in his hands," as Collings describes him in his title to chapter 5. The pattern is that of the Christ-figure but has a broader application as well: it is the hero monomyth, the archetypal pattern described by Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, and others, or at least one variation on these patterns.

The use of this pattern in Card's fiction is the primary focus of chapters 4 and 5, in which Collings also responds to criticisms of Card's work as being too violent and lacking adequate characterization (although, as Collings points out, Card's characters are consistently praised by those who like his work). Collings's argument is that both the pain and the archetypal overtones of Card's characters are part of what gives them their power: Card's use of these elements is neither trivial nor simplistic, but valid and complex, justified not only in terms of literary convention, but also in terms of Card's own fictive worlds and their emphasis on individual and collective transcendence. This last point is the particular focus of chapter 7, "The King's House Is All the World": Building the Crystal City," in which Collings confronts the problems of the hero's
reintegration into the larger community at the end of the quest and the need for individual experience to serve the communal good. Such an emphasis runs directly counter to the practice of much "serious" literature over the past hundred years or so: the hero has commonly been the artist, whose alienation from the community is featured not only as a cause of suffering, but as the mark of his or her special calling. In Card's fiction, however—as in his criticism—the hero and the artist both are defined in terms of their function within the community and must find their identity there in order for their lives and their work to be complete.

There are suggestions here of a distinctly LDS poetics—one which sees the poet as one type of hero, even as a type of Christ-figure, but which, like LDS theology, thinks of that role less in terms of difference than in terms of continuity with other human beings. Thus, the work of the Maker—whether he or she is simply a shaper of stories and tales or, like Alvin Maker, a creator of genuinely new things in the real world—is to create a community by teaching other people how to be Makers. Perhaps such a way of looking at the poet/hero is better expressed through the particularly LDS image of the prophet—someone who, while remaining human, receives communication from God and is often called upon to sacrifice his life for the community. In light of Card's view that it is through the telling of stories that we create human communities, such a poetics might provide interesting insights into the larger question of the relationship of the individual and the community—a problem that is particularly vexing for a theology like ours which simultaneously insists both on community solidarity (the "City of Zion" imperative) and on irreducible individual responsibility. Such ideas might also help move us beyond a relatively narrow view of what constitutes a "Mormon" literature, both in terms of subject matter and stance.

The development of such an LDS poetics is clearly beyond the scope of Collings's work. What this study does, however—and does well—is to raise a number of such issues and make a convincing case for their importance without going too far afield from its primary focus, that is, to provide a clear and accessible interpretation of some of the most important features of Card's work. On this score, Collings's bibliography of Card's works and of writing about him deserves particular
mention for its carefulness and completeness (though I did notice two omissions: “Billy’s Box,” a short story published in The Friend under the name of Byron Walley,¹ and “Star Pioneers,” a star show written for the Hansen Planetarium in Salt Lake City²). It is to be hoped that Collings will continue to maintain and find publication outlets for updates to this bibliography, which constitutes a vital critical tool for anyone interested in writing on Card’s work.

Unfortunately, the editing and proofreading of this work do not equal its scholarship: there are several errors and inaccuracies (e.g., missing lines in the preface and a reference to Lewis’s seven-book series Chronicles of Narnia as a “five-volume treatise” (8)), and there is a general problem with repetition on the one hand and a lack of needed information on the other: for example, Card’s critical output and honors are described at the beginning of both chapters 1 and 2, while the term “critickal” is not defined until the chapter after it has been initially used. Overall, it appears that the various chapters were written as separate essays and only incompletely integrated into a single work. Given the fairly hefty cost of volumes in this series, one would expect that Greenwood Press could devote a little more editorial attention to their manuscripts.

Such problems, however, do little to decrease the overall usefulness of the volume, nor to detract from the interest of its carefully thought-out and persuasive discussions regarding specific aspects of Card’s works. As for the other point noted earlier—an unwillingness at some points to push critical arguments as far as they could, perhaps, profitably be taken—such criticisms may ultimately reflect little more than the inevitable difference in perspective between an author and any individual reviewer. What Collings has done, in any case, is to open up the field for future work. One can only hope that future contributions will maintain the same high level of scholarship and care that Collings’s work displays.

NOTES

² Script copyrighted in 1986.