lost, even though Mormons made up the majority of Utah's voters.[3] The Church had become a mainstream religious organization, and the spiritual convictions and political loyalties of its members were separate.

There is another ironic indication of the success of the Church's transformation during the last century. The Smoot controversy focused on Mormon marriage practices as being radically outside the mainstream of American social values. A century ago during the Smoot hearings, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt was a leading voice calling for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to give Congress authority to regulate marriage and define marriage as only the union between one man and one woman, in order to outlaw the Mormon practice of polygamy.[4] Today, a century later, an effort to amend the U.S. Constitution led by President George W. Bush seeks a Constitutional amendment similarly to define marriage as only the union of one man and one woman. In the Roosevelt era, the effort was directed against the LDS Church. Today the effort is directed against same-sex marriage, and the LDS Church is one of the staunchest allies in supporting the most conservative social values.

Good News for Fiction Readers

Jack Harrell, *Vernal Promises* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 342 pp.; and Douglas Thayer, *The Conversion of Jeff Williams* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 234 pp.

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3. Smoot, the Republican candidate, was defeated by Elbert D. Thomas, a Democrat and faithful member of the Church who was a political science professor at the University of Utah.

4. In his 1906 State of the Union Address to Congress, President Roosevelt expressed strong support for a Constitutional amendment on marriage: "I am well aware of how difficult it is to pass a constitutional amendment. Nevertheless in my judgment the whole question of marriage and divorce should be relegated to the authority of the National Congress. . . . In particular it would be good because it would confer on the Congress the power at once to deal radically and efficiently with polygamy. . . . It is neither safe nor proper to leave the question of polygamy to be dealt with by the several States. Power to deal with it should be conferred on the National Government." Theodore Roosevelt, "Sixth Annual Message to Congress," December 3, 1906. Retrieved in October 2004 from http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showdoc.php?id=749&type=1&president=26.

In 2003, Signature Books hit 100 percent from the free-throw line when both of the novels it published that year won manuscript awards from the Association for Mormon Letters. Jack Harrell's *Vernal Promises* and Douglas Thayer's *The Conversion of Jeff Williams* present the most serious stories about Mormon people that I've seen in a while. I'm glad to see new work that is both faithful and challenging, trying to do what good fiction always strives to do: work through the complexity of human experience.

Vernal Promises centers around a young man from Vernal, Utah, named Jacob Dennison. He is young, newly converted to the Church, and recently married to Pam, a girl he met at a kegger and then got pregnant. Within the first few pages, however, Pam miscarries. The news is particularly devastating to Jacob, who spends the rest of the novel getting knocked around like a loose can in the back of a pickup. His sadistic boss at the local grocery store wants to sack him, and his father thinks Mormonism is the last refuge of a pantywaist. The pressures mount, and Jacob starts jonesing for cigarettes and cold ones and other women. As his fingers slip from the iron rod, Jacob quits the grocery store and starts working for his father's "used" (read: stolen) oilfield equipment operation, which keeps Jacob on the road longer and longer, until the gravity of his marriage grows so weak that he turns from it altogether and proceeds through canto after canto of a hell that reads like one written by a reanimated corpse built from the bodies of Gus Van Sant, Hubert Selby Jr., and Cormac McCarthy. It is this aspect of the book that suggests its full measure as important in Mormon letters.

This book does have its inconsistencies. The narration oscillates from omniscience to a limited perspective so close to the characters as to be nearly first-person. Sudden shifts of narrative focus spring up unexpectedly. The narrator, who is transparent most of the time, will suddenly refer to the emergency room as the "E-room" or will strangely describe one of the characters as feeling "as sassy as a red rooster in a hen house." Harrell also frenetically changes point of view.

Nevertheless, *Vernal Promises* is a key Mormon novel of the last few years, mainly for its approach and subject matter. It is faithful but doesn't function as a general conference talk on the struggle with sin. Harrell is seriously engaged in trying to depict the difficulties of this world without worrying about providing moral guidance. His book is a stark testimony of life in the impoverished rural West, a world LDS people are no strangers to, except in our mainstream literature. One of the crucial things this book shows us is the fact that the general body of the Church is not entirely comprised of smiling, happy Utah County Prozac abusers or hyper-wealthy bench dwellers who, because of their bravado in the preexistence, are so rich that they no longer need good taste. Harrell reminds us that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in editorial meetings at Deseret Books.

To his credit in *Vernal Promises,* Harrell doesn't simply depict the pedestrian

vices of the weekend drinker who might smoke a little dope. Harrell's Wyoming Gentile underclass is made up of the kind of chilling, mulleted meth-addicts that most *non*-Mormons cross the street to avoid. More importantly, Harrell doesn't demonize these people. They are corrupt, but they are still people, self-destructive but also self-aware, shallow but multi-dimensional. So often in the Mormon world (actually in almost all of Christendom), the fallen are not represented in their fullness but in a sort of half-state reserved for those whose primary purpose is to tell a story in which the white and delightsome people are victorious.

On the flipside of all this, Douglas Thayer's latest novel, *The Conversion of Jeff Williams,* delineates the elite of Provo in strokes that scream "pride cycle of the Nephites." While Thayer clearly wants us to see the great spaciousness of the houses on the hill, he does his best to make sure we know that the rich have feelings too, that they are multi-dimensional and maybe not the phonies we working stiffs think they are.

Thayer's narrator, Jeff Williams, is a callow, self-absorbed teenager who is called to spend the summer with his cousin, Christopher Lowery, who is the son of a multi-millionaire stake president who, like Stephen Covey, got rich by marketing and selling gospel principles. The doting but detached mother has an obsession for all things genealogical and is an apt updating of the Victorian "Angel in the House." Christopher has recently recovered from a serious kidney problem which has forestalled his going on a mission, and his parents think Christopher could use a little company.

But the whole plan smells fishy. Jeff rightfully believes he's being shuttled off to a kind of spiritual fat camp, where he can cultivate his testimony in the presence of his talented, pious, wealthy cousin. Jeff isn't a bad kid; he's what you'd get if Holden Caulfield had caring parents and the Aaronic Priesthood. He is sensitive but superficial. He wants to be rich, likes girls better when they are in their bathing suits, and thinks his schoolteacher father and nurse mother are a pair of goons. So, he's normal. The edge that breathes so much life into Caulfield is missing in Jeff Williams because he is no great tormented and idealistic soul; he's a Mormon kid living on borrowed light.

On the other hand, Jeff's Provo relatives, the Lowerys, are straight out of Stepford, Connecticut. Everyone who enters their $8 million mansion must exchange their shoes for white slippers, except the housekeeper—she wears white shoes. The gardeners and cleaning staff (known as the Professionals) cart around white tools and equipment and move spectrally throughout the property like some crew out of *The X-Files.* The house is immaculate, massive, and soulless. The whole family seems like a team of androids. In fact, I was so suspicious of these people, I kept waiting for Jeff to stumble onto the pods that held his real aunt, uncle, and cousins captive.

Granted, Thayer *tries* to sculpt them into fuller characters, but I never felt

fully persuaded, because Jeff himself, as the narrator of the novel, seems conflicted about them as well. He portrays the Lowerys and their neighbors as the kind of shallow Mormons who have wallpaper sporting images of the temple and who bear their testimonies as if they were reading from an eye chart. But at the same time, Jeff maintains that these people are genuine, and the Marxist in me doesn't buy it.

The problem is that, when you get down to brass tacks, the Lowerys are completely static. Even Christopher has no character arc. Somehow I think this is the point, but I'm not sure what to make of it. Is this what you become when you're that close to being perfect? As the title indicates, this is Jeff Williams's book, and the arc is his—maybe that's all there is to it. In any case, this confused focus creates a strangeness in the narrative.

However, plot and character development are not the main features of this book: it's the writing. The beauty here is to be found in its pacing and textures. If it were a film, *The Conversion of Jeff Williams* would be more like *Lost in Translation* than *The Bourne Supremacy*. In fact, the slowness and indirection of this novel might put off readers who prefer books that are a little more skimmable. Thayer doesn't give us a plot so much as he gives us the conditions of this young man's life over a few months, and by the end he's converted. No trumpets, just life as it happens.

Thayer's prose has a honed haiku-like austerity to it, which is engaging and refreshing. He also makes a number of dead-on observations about Mormon culture. For example, during one of Jeff's ruminations on the Mormon drive for large families, he quips, "If you showed up in a restaurant in San Diego with ten or twelve kids, they would probably arrest you" (145). In fact, I wouldn't have minded more "scenic stops" like this one. Be that as it may, I think that, without being an insider to the Church or even to life in and around Provo, a reader might not catch the delicate overtones of Thayer's novel. Similarly, a non-Mormon reader of Harrell's novel might not understand the significance of giving in and taking a smoke or drink or even not going to church every Sunday, which is the main gear of that story's plot.

As far as Mormon novels go, these two currently lead the pack, which is clearly why both were recently given manuscript awards from the Association for Mormon Letters; however, I don't think they'd work with a cross-over audience, and I think LDS writers should be setting their course for the Gentile. In an interview in *Irreantum*, Brady Udall called writing for Mormons a "fool's errand."[1] It is his contention that very few Mormons actually read serious literary fiction, opting instead for devotional materials or hefty pseudo-historical novels. Udall has never written for Mormons, and he recently told me that setting the goal of writ-

1. "Interview," *Irreantum* 3, no. 4 (Winter 2001–02): 16.

ing only for Mormons would be as silly as Saul Bellow wanting to write only for Jews.

More to the point, I don't think we'll see a great Mormon novel until Mormon writers cast their nets a little wider and write about characters who happen to be Mormon rather than Mormons who happen to be characters. Both of these novels are this second kind of book, more so with Thayer than with Harrell, but Harrell's writing is not as well-crafted as Thayer's.

Wallace Stegner said that much of Mormon literature has been written in defense of the faith.[2] These two novels don't really try to defend anything, which is nice to see. Our faith doesn't need apologists. Still, Harrell and Thayer's books are really only for Mormon readers. In fact, I can't imagine a non-Mormon finding either of these books understandable, much less appealing. While I'm not sure that any LDS novel can help redeem the dead, they can certainly do more than help perfect the Saints. These books represent the crest of a recent wave of solid faithful storytelling by Mormon writers for Mormon readers. The next wave needs to feature faithful novels for non-Mormon readers, stories that tell the world "this is what it's like to be one of *those* Latter-day Saints" rather than "this is what it's like to be us."

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2. Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, *Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1996), 113.