



## MID CENTURY MORMON NOVELS

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One general statement can be made about the Mormon novels published since 1940: they are as varied as the attitudes about Mormonism and the philosophies about literature. There are books which pretend to be novels but which are really treatises, such as Otto Schrag's *The Locusts* (1943), O. F. Ursenbach's *The Quest* (1945), and Roy Lambert's *High Uintas — Hi!* (1964). There are biographies and historical novels and an informal combination of the two which amounts to a kind of family memoir novel. Samuel W. Taylor's *Family Kingdom* (1951) is the best biography; *The Fancher Train* (1958) by Amelia Bean is a well-written historical novel; and John D. Fitzgerald's *Papa Married a Mormon* (1955) and *Mamma's Boarding House* (1958), along with Rodello Hunter's *A House of Many Rooms* (1965), best represent the family memoir novels. Then there are the traditional persecution-pioneering-polygamy novels, but in the middle of the twentieth century these are almost completely pro-Mormon. The anti-Mormon novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth century have now become more objective and less obviously propagandistic, and the novels written in deprecation of Mormons and Mormonism are those which have been written primarily by disgruntled or apostate members. In the traditional pattern are novels such as Elinor Pryor's *And Never Yield* (1942) and Ezra J. Poulsen's *Birthright* (1950). Vardis Fisher, Paul Bailey, and Virginia Sorensen — probably the most prominent writers of Mormon novels — have described the universality of the personal problems of individual Mormons, and other novelists have supported their attitude that Mormons must be described as people first and as Mormons second. Maurine Whipple does that in *The Giant Joshua* (1941) and to a lesser extent so does Richard Scowcroft in *Children of the Covenant* (1955), but the best treatment of Mormons as people is by Samuel W. Taylor in *Heaven Knows Why* (1948). Finally, Mormons are used as major characters in Alan Drury's *Advise and Consent* (1959) and in Mark Harris' *Wake Up, Stupid* (1959), but neither the religion of the Mormons nor their way of life is of prime importance in these novels.

Since Fisher, Bailey, and Sorensen are major authors and since Fisher and Sorensen are treated in separate essays in this issue, I have decided not to discuss them here, but I shall survey others whose novels are representative

of the variety of mid-century Mormon fiction. Maureen Whipple is one of these.

In *The Giant Joshua* she tells the story of Mormon life in Southern Utah from 1860 to 1886, but specifically it is the story of Clorinda (Clory) McIntyre and her Mormon sisters in polygamy. Miss Whipple created the same kind of protagonist that Virginia Sorensen did: a girl who was intelligent enough to know what was happening around her but who was helpless to do anything that would remove her from that unpleasant situation. The novel is naturalistic in the presentation of forces which control Clory's life. She is a victim of both heredity and environment, since she was born a Mormon and was trapped in the isolated area of Southern Utah where she lived for years in a mud dugout. The other characters do not seem to be victims of anything except the author's pen. They are types. Abijah is the typical zealous patriarch who is both bigoted and arbitrary; Sheba, his first wife, is a domineering hypocrite; and Willie, the second wife, is an indecisive sheep who merely follows the flock. The problems of survival in Southern Utah are complex and the Mormon farmers give so much of themselves to the land that when the opportunity to leave presents itself, they find it difficult to go. But such problems, accented by the combined forces of nature and the Church, are standard fare in Mormon novels. Nevertheless, they are both emphasized and personalized in *The Giant Joshua* by their specific effects upon Clory.

Richard Scowcroft's *Children of the Covenant* is cataloged in the Church Historian's library as an anti-Mormon novel, but it is written with much greater understanding of Mormon life than the anti-Mormon novels of the nineteenth century. The power of *Children of the Covenant* lies in Scowcroft's ability to describe in almost painfully accurate detail the Mormon way of life. His protagonist, Burton Curtis, is a returned missionary who has "re-entry" problems. On the train that brought Burton home from his mission he shaved off his missionary mustache because he was afraid to let his mother know that he had grown one and because he was afraid of being called a typical missionary by his less religious friends. Scowcroft used Burton Curtis as the representative of the modern Mormons who want to believe and who want to conform but who want also to be free.

*Children of the Covenant* is very definitely an anti-Mormon novel, but it is just as definitely a credible and well-written novel. The major characters represent certain types of Mormons, but they are also fully developed as individuals in the story itself. The weakness of Scowcroft's novel is that it lacks universality. Persons not intimately familiar with the special circumstances of the modern Utah Mormons — as opposed to Mormons of the past or Mormons in outlying areas of the Church — would not be able fully to appreciate the grim humor in Scowcroft's accurate descriptions of the thoughts and emotions of the twentieth-century Mormon struggling to reconcile his religion and his desires. *Children of the Covenant* is the type of anti-Mormon novel that infuriates the staunch Mormon and amuses the non-Mormon but moves neither to action. It demands too much knowledge of Mormons and

Mormonism ever to have a wide audience, and since it offends the majority of those who do have that knowledge, its obscurity seems inevitable.

Samuel W. Taylor has written both fictionally, *Heaven Knows Why* (1948), and factually, *Family Kingdom* (1951), about Mormons. The former is a comic novel and is the most delightful of all Mormon novels. The latter is the biography of John W. Taylor, the author's father. Comedy is outstandingly absent in most Mormon novels; there are some amusing scenes in a few, but none is completely devoted to humor. *Heaven Knows Why* is the exception, and it is a welcome one indeed. The novel is about Jackson Skinner Whitetop, a young man recently discharged from the army and living alone in the rundown cabin of his dead grandfather, Moroni. This modern angel Moroni becomes upset at his grandson's lackadaisical attitude, visits the earth, and commands Whitetop to marry Bishop Waldo Jensen's daughter, Katie. The events which follow are highly humorous and fully entertaining. The entire book is filled with Mormon humor: problems with coffee, tobacco, and hard cider are abundant; Bishop Jensen's first counsellor, Henry Brown, is a crook whose schemes backfire; two apostates add local color; all of the Smith girls are married with the help of a 30-30 carbine; and the good Mormons argue about where their chapel should be built, with the result being that they continue to hold meetings in the school.

The characters speak in the Utah idiom — clichés and bad grammar — and they have trouble with the Word of Wisdom. In other words, they are real people. Even though this is an exaggerated comedy, there is no other Mormon novel as true to life as this, and it is refreshing to see a healthy comic novel after so many "thesis" types concerning the hardships of pioneering, the hardships of polygamy, and the struggles of individual Mormons coming to terms with their religion. This book has none of that. The Mormons here crave coffee and sneak a cigarette now and then when the Bishop is not around. And when Bishop Jensen catches Whitetop brewing coffee, Whitetop says that it is an old recipe of his mother's for "coffee-near." He gives the Bishop a cup.

But there is more to *Heaven Knows Why* than simple comedy. Taylor draws a parallel between his protagonist, Jackson Skinner Whitetop, and Joseph Smith. Whitetop is the common name for a pesky, noxious weed (*Lepidium draba*) found throughout the Western States; Joseph Smith was looked upon by his opponents with the same kind of distaste for something unpleasant that Mormon farmers feel when they see patches of whitetop in their fields, and Taylor's protagonist is equally unpopular in his community. His middle name is a trade name, as is Smith. Jack is a common first name and so is Joseph, and there is not much difference between Jack-son and Joseph-junior. By combining the initials of Joseph Smith and Jackson Skinner Whitetop, we can see the parallel more clearly: J. S. (Whitetop) receives a visitation from an angel (grandfather) named Moroni. This angel tells J. S. (W) to organize a new religion — that is, to convert the followers (daughters) of the clergymen (Bishop) of the area. J. S. (W) tells a local minister (Bishop) about his visitation and the minister (Bishop) reacts negatively.

The hiding place of J. S. (W)'s gold (grandfather's money) is sought but no one finds anything. And the parallel continues.

In *Heaven Knows Why* Taylor succeeded in writing a Mormon novel that is different from all other Mormon novels. It is a story about modern Mormons and the characters are real enough that one might expect to see them on the streets of any small town in Utah. It is the kind of comedy which effectively amuses the reader while holding his interest, and it furnishes a parallel with the story of Joseph Smith. In other words, it is the kind of novel that one is compelled to read without interruption.

Ardyth Kennelly has written two novels that must be examined together, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1949) and its sequel *Up Home* (1955). These novels tell about Linnea Ecklund's life in Utah as a plural wife. The author uses the technique of the short-story writer to give charm to the individual anecdotes which make up the novels. Each chapter of the novels is a short story and could be separated from the other chapters easily. In fact there is very little to hold the chapters together except for the fact that Linnea is involved one way or another in each one. She is a coarse, jealous, poorly educated woman who uses bad grammar and keeps a messy house. *The Peaceable Kingdom* moves too slowly to maintain reader interest and the style is distracting. Kennelly fills passages with parenthetical asides which are usually pedantic and boring. On the other hand, *Up Home* has a more carefully controlled style and the result is a better book but not an impressive one. Kennelly tightened her style by cutting down the number of asides, but *Up Home*, like *The Peaceable Kingdom*, is still a collection of anecdotes. Although some chapters have conflict and climax, others are sermons; still others just pass the time of day.

John D. Fitzgerald's *Papa Married a Mormon* (1955) and *Mamma's Boarding House* (1958) are family memoir novels. In the first Fitzgerald tells the story of his father's life and the varied experiences of Mormons and others in a Utah mining town. Papa runs the local newspaper and marries a Mormon, and Uncle Will owns a gambling hall and marries a prostitute. There is woman trouble, gambling trouble, and trouble with nature — the mine runs out and a flash flood destroys the town — but it is a satisfying life. *Papa Married a Mormon* concludes with Papa's death; *Mamma's Boarding House* begins at a point just after that death. It follows the pattern set by *Papa Married a Mormon* in uniting a series of stories; however, *Mamma's Boarding House* is not as tightly controlled as the first book. These two works are interesting reading, but as family memoirs they are little more than romanticized biography with a touch here and there of general history.

A more specifically historical work appeared in 1958 with the publication of *The Fancher Train* by Amelia Bean. The subject of the novel carries reader-interest by itself: the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Mrs. Bean was generally accurate as far as historical events are concerned, but she was also telling a story and she yielded to the fictional need for a hero and a heroine. She built sympathy for the protagonists, Jed and Melissa, early in the novel, and all the way through one hopes that at least these two will escape the massacre.

Then when that romantic desire is granted, one feels both relief and irritation because although the escape of Jed and Melissa is plausible, it is also contrived.

Along with the conventional and unconventional Mormon novels written during the middle twenty years of the twentieth century, there have been some novels which either use Mormon characters or discuss Mormonism or do both, but which are not Mormon novels because they are not primarily about Mormons or Mormonism. Such works use Mormon subject matter only incidentally. Wallace Stegner's *The Preacher and the Slave* (1950) is an example. This book is about the activities of Joe Hill (Joseph Hillstrom) in the IWW and the events which led to his conviction and subsequent execution for murder, but while this story is a notorious part of the history of labor unions in the United States, Stegner made it clear that his book was fiction. It happened that Joe Hill was tried and executed in Utah, so Utah is the setting for the latter half of the book. The Utah courts are presented as somewhat less than objective, and the "system" — the copper industry, the Mormons with their anti-labor feelings, and Utah business in general — is attacked by Joe and his friends, but Mormons and Mormonism are not attacked *per se*. Nor are they defended. The people of Utah and the major religion of the state are simply a part of the setting; the focus is upon Joe Hill.

Another recent use of Mormons and Mormonism in a non-Mormon novel is that of Robert Lewis Taylor in *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters* (1958). About eighty pages of this 535-page novel are devoted to Jaimie's adventures with the Mormons. This section of the book is anti-Mormon in tone yet it is also sympathetic since it is a Mormon who helps Jaimie escape from the vengeance of the Mormon secret police — the Danites. The Mormon subject in *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters* serves merely as another adventure in a book filled with a great variety of adventures.

Allen Drury's *Advise and Consent* (1959) has a Mormon as a major character, Senator Brigham Anderson. But his Mormonism is not at all a part of the story; in fact, Drury was especially careless about Brigham Anderson's religion, saying that Anderson did not want to "make the church his life's work" because his brother had decided to enter that profession. Drury was obviously not concerned about Mormonism or Mormons. He simply chose to make one of his characters a senator from Utah, and Utah senators must be Mormons. He might have been able to make the senator's homosexuality and his suicide more poignant had he shown the strong religious factors that would have been present in such a situation, but he didn't.

Finally, Mark Harris' *Wake Up, Stupid* (1959) completes the picture of this casual use of Mormon subject matter in modern American fiction. The protagonist of this novel is Lee Youngdahl, a college professor and recently excommunicated Mormon. The story is about Youngdahl's many adventures but it is not about his religion. With this novel one sees the Mormon heritage used as any other part of American life might be used in any other novel. It is part of the background of the main character and it is important in

that respect (and Harris is much more informed about the Mormons than was Drury) but that is all.

Perhaps novels such as these are a sign that regionalistic Mormon literature is out of date. Certainly Mormons have become more sophisticated as they have spread across the continent. As knowledge of the Mormons has spread, acceptance of them as individuals has also spread. In fiction this acceptance is shown by the inclusion of Mormons in works which have nothing to do with religion or pioneering or polygamy.

However, there are still writers who elect to write about Mormons in the traditional manner; Rodello Hunter is one. *A House of Many Rooms* (1965) is subtitled "A Family Memoir" and that it is. There is no climactic plot structure, but there is instead a series of anecdotes that highlight the history of the Woodrow family. Hunter relates the experiences that often occur in a large house in a small Utah town. The family is blessed with numerous progeny and there are several "borrowed" children but it is not a polygamous family. The homey anecdotes that make up the book are the kind that appeal primarily to those who have been acquainted with families such as the Woodrows. Thus it is representative of the kind of nostalgic reminiscing that many Mormons enjoy.

In summary, modern authors have written Mormon novels of a wide variety: propagandistic treatises, historical novels, biographical novels, family memoirs, traditional nineteenth century novels, and novels which treat Mormons and Mormonism only incidentally. Most of the mid-century authors have portrayed their Mormon characters as types rather than as individuals, but some authors, notably Samuel W. Taylor, Richard Scowcroft, and Mark Harris, have emphasized human nature first and Mormon characteristics second or not at all.