



FOR THE CHILDREN OF THE PROMISE

Claudia L. Bushman

There must be nearly one hundred separate works interpreting the L.D.S. Church for children. A good number of writers, illustrators and publishers turn out these books, and so, while they all aim at teaching the gospel and building testimonies, the results are diverse. I have not seen them all, but I have read many these last months and would like to offer some personal reactions.

I enjoyed many of these books very much. I have five bright children who did not. The three readers read several books and parts of others under some duress. The two pre-readers were soon saying at bedtime, "Read me a story, not a Church story." I put out a convenient tableful of Church books in the living room, but no one came to browse or borrow. Why should this be?

For one thing, the books lack visual stimulation. Almost every book needs more and better pictures. Other powerful visual media compete for our children's attention, and our books look like poor relations next to the gloriously illustrated productions we find at the library and bookstore. Colorful exceptions are the big *Prayer* and *Tithing* picture books by Karen Dixon Merrell which delighted our younger children. A few of the newer books are featuring these full color, full page illustrations, but most tend to be drab and colorless.

By contrast, *The Children's Friend* has been displaying some lively and colorful art work since the early sixties. At that time it moved overnight from a matronly demeanor to a bright, contemporary style. The metamorphosis was too swift for some faithful primary workers, and after a few sprightly issues, a compromise between the two styles was achieved. Gradually the color and inventiveness of the illustrations have increased so that the total effect now compares to some of those first experimental issues. I particularly like Eleanor Shull's covers, and the more vital and lively children of Virginia Sargent and Dorothy Wagstaff. *The Children's Friend* appeals to all the children in our family, and everybody reads something.

The contents have changed remarkably little, although the editors no longer take the underwear ads that used to fill the pages. One of my children prefers the stories of twenty years ago when the appeal was a little more for the older reader, but the magazine still features the same pleasantly moralistic

and mildly adventurous stories we have seen for many years. In fact, a timeless quality pervades. Current events and fashions are ignored. When an article in 1951 suggested that many readers had probably first seen a harp on a recent TV program, I was shaken to have the magazine squarely placed in time and space. It had always seemed to move in another dimension.

I was struck by the great variety of features, few of which appeared regularly. Exceptions are the ubiquitous "Our Own Page" of readers' artistic contributions and, for a long while, the venerable cartoon characters Zippo Zip and Barnaby Bumbleberry, the paper doll, Frieda Friendly, and the puzzle page "Children's Friendly." Otherwise a great variety of stories, games, recipes, retold classics, culture pieces, nature pieces and poems appear in a different mix each month. I would like to see more serious nature study and more art features. Some nice old features that might be revived are excerpts from diaries of long ago, reports on "What I Read as a Boy," written by General Authorities, and "Pastimes from Past Times," which demonstrated among other things the making of hollyhock dolls. I seem to lean towards the old days.

Another surprise on reviewing the magazine was the comparatively small number of specifically Church features, an average of three or four of thirty or so items per issue. These include scriptural and Church history stories, pioneer stories, poems and illustrated games, and recently the "Shining Moments" series, a collection of faith promoting incidents. *A Hero to Follow*, a lively biography of Joseph Smith, is currently appearing as a serial and will probably be published in hard cover in a few years. Still, this official Church publication carries a light load of doctrine.

I would like to see more religious content in the magazine, not in the historical fields which I think are covered very well, but in the features about contemporary Mormon life (a recent illustration of a daddy in a hard hat with a lunch pail shows an artistic response to the current social scene). Much of the fiction does not seem to pay its own way in terms of gospel or even real life information. How about some clues that these nice children belong to the Church, and that it makes some difference, or some foreign stories that tell specifically what it's like to be a Finnish or Peruvian Primary child.

In the past the Church celebrated its own provinciality, and Saints abroad deplored the scheduling of July 4th fetes, and I in San Francisco resented singing "O Ye Mountains High." Now as an international Church those localisms have been filtered out. But I think that making story backgrounds so blah that they could be any children anywhere goes too far in the other direction. I think children would enjoy knowing how Church members with other life styles go about their business.

One other personal bias: Stories in which animals are portrayed as people and in which their observable characters are perverted seem unnecessarily coy and cute. It would be no loss if the phony Chatty Chipmunk and Beverly Bunny types never appeared again.

The Children's Friend compares favorably to other children's magazines on the market. Appealing enough that it is actually read, it cannot help

but benefit the children of the Church and their friends. Visually attractive and intelligently put together, at \$2.50 a year it is the best bargain in children's periodicals.

The books for children shake down into several loose groups. The Scriptures retold in simpler form and L.D.S. Church history, including biographies of the prophets and pioneer accounts, dominate the field. A large and generally weaker group includes fiction written around doctrinal subjects. Smaller groups are adventure stories, manners and morals, and story collections.

About the Scriptures: Ideally a child should learn his Bible stories and Church history at his mother's knee while she shells peas or darns socks. When he can read the originals he should be encouraged to go at it straight. Failing that, here are some books to remind the mothers of the facts or to ease the children into the real thing. Emma Marr Petersen, a pioneer in L.D.S. children's books, has prepared volumes of stories from both the Bible and the Book of Mormon as well as the *Story of our Church for Young Latter-day Saints*. Sister Petersen writes well and clearly, and while she does not fictionalize, the stories have a definite L.D.S. point of view. She provides neat stopping places between the many short stories (116 from the Bible), making them convenient bedtime fare. The Church history derives mostly from Joseph Smith's writings, but has some later information on foreign missions and Mary Fielding Smith. Milton Swensen has done color illustrations for each volume.

In *The Book of Mormon Story*, Mary Pratt Parrish abridges the actual scriptures to capture more action per page and maybe more young attention. Ronald Crosby paints and draws memorable pictures in the muscle man school of scriptural heroes. This book is one of the handsomest published by Deseret Book.

Deta Petersen Neeley holds the record for the number of published titles, having written countless small books, some with her husband Nathan Glen Neeley, on the Scriptures and Church history. Sister Neeley is an educator and levels the vocabulary for fourth grade readers. In her book *Jesus of Nazareth* she bases the text very closely on the Scriptures, harmonizing the Gospels, and introducing some explanatory historical background, but using, as she says, great effort to keep the story free from personal interpretation. She fleshes out the spare events a little: "'I have come, John, to be baptized by you,' said Jesus, smiling pleasantly." Each of the volumes has one illustration by Everett Thorpe.

Of Sister Neeley's biographies of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, I preferred the former. Based closely on Joseph's writings, the story moves quickly as long as there is action. It sinks into stilted and mannered dialogue in the imagined scenes. In fact, the events speak best for themselves and need little garnishing. Any reader would be moved by the story of the Church's early days when spiritual experiences were sandwiched with treachery and false starts.

In the Brigham Young book there is also much unreal dialogue with

all characters speaking in the same unctuous voice. The book presents a good chronology of the Saints' early Utah days and would be useful as a source book, but the romantic emotions imposed on the characters undercut the reality. The author avoids mentioning polygamy, and only Brigham's short-lived first wife and Mary Ann Angell are named. Obviously, Brigham Young transcends this book.

The Making of A Prophet by Lindsay R. Curtis tells Joseph's life from birth to the organization of the Church. The book invites young readers in with one or two lively paragraphs per page, as well as charming and imaginative illustrations by Paul Farber. He draws some marvelous bad guys and is always true to Joseph's nose.

Another worthwhile book is *The Coming of the Mormons* by Jim Kjelgaard in Random House's "Landmark" series. This book by a sympathetic outsider concentrates on the westward trek and the founding of Salt Lake City. In language suitable for grade schoolers, the gentility, resourcefulness, and devotion of the Saints are stressed. My children admitted these books interested them.

Another enjoyable book is *Our Utah Pioneers* by Mabel Harmer. Using diaries and letters as well as official histories, she piles up specific details on a variety of subjects: clothes, communications, schools, Indian affairs, and so on. The narrative is not dramatized, but mature young people will discover such delightful facts as: one early Salt Lake dentist filled teeth with alum and borax covered over with beeswax; Brigham Young drove in the golden spike with a special mallet inscribed, "Holiness to the Lord"; a stagecoach ride from Kansas City to Salt Lake City in 1860's cost \$250.

For children from three to seven, Jane Lund has written *Stories of Jesus for L.D.S. Children*. She has conceived two-part chapters on general gospel subjects — prayer, baptism, and so on. The first part tells a scriptural story and the second half relates the scripture to the child's life. The Sabbath section is especially impressive, filled with good specific activities for the child's Sunday. The book is illustrated rebus style by the author with many tiny pictures representing individual words.

These books would all make excellent gifts and be useful for preparing talks and lessons, some even for school work. I am less sure how many will be chosen from the shelves for recreational reading.

In writing these books based on Scripture and Church history, the authors take no great risks, and their works are, therefore, for the most part safely acceptable. The closer they stick to the originals the better they are. The writers that set out to write fiction loosely based on gospel truths attempt more. They may wish only to build testimonies, but they must also be judged as writers of fiction. As I began to work on this review, I was prepared to defend these works, to say that teaching the gospel justified their existence and that judging them as literature was unfair and irrelevant. After reading many books, I can see that they will only succeed in teaching if they are good fiction.

I prefer the understated soft-sell and find a heavy burden of piety op-

pressive. How easy it is to skip over the preachy parts, slightly diluted with dialogue, and get back to the action. How heavy with doctrine the latter parts of the chapters can be. How foreign to my own experience are the pleasant parents and agreeable children. When the fiction can be so easily dismissed, it is not likely that the freight of morals and doctrine will be remembered.

Among the books I found interesting was *About Baptism* by Emma Marr Petersen, the story of an orphaned Danish boy who comes to live with his cousin in Utah. Although doctrinally heavy towards the end, it treats real life in charming detail.

Jane Lund and Nancy Menlove have written *The Story of Life for L.D.S. Children*. My little children enjoyed the story of Tommy, the not quite too good boy who visits his grandparents while his mother gives birth to a new baby. The authors honestly face up to conception and death.

When He Comes Again by Mirla Greenwood Thayne, a long poem, answers the request of a little boy who wants his mother to tell the Christmas story "with me in it," giving a "You Are There" quality to the familiar events. Extravagant full color pictures appear on every page showing fantastically romantic children with curly hair, immense long-lashed eyes and little round limbs. This might be a memorable book for some children.

In *Young Brigham Young*, S. Dilworth Young cleaves to the true chronology and characters of Brigham's life and constructs fictional events that might have occurred before his conversion. He details much pioneer lore: how to build a log cabin, harvest maple sugar, and trap animals. The book is illustrated by Brother Young's own pen and ink sketches of candle molds, sap basins and such. The style is simple with balanced and measured sentences that make Brother Young one of the most eloquent of our Churchmen. But there are moments of high drama as when the starving boy shoots the first robin of spring for his supper. My boys liked this one.

As to some of the others, I do not think we need to work as hard as some of these writers do at teaching the gospel. If we are not so explicit in telling all, we give children a chance to ask questions. What they ask, they remember. The most convincing teaching assumes rather than asserts, and believing in the gospel as I do, I think we can use more attractive means of interesting our children in the Church. I would like to see more engrossing stories that speak about the gospel rather than teach it. Can't we be sure enough of our beliefs to present them undefended?

Let us also have an unaffected portrayal of Mormon life that speaks truly to our experience, such as some of those in the *Family Home Evening Manual*. The poems of Virginia Maughan Kammeyer recently printed in *The Improvement Era* say a great deal about being a contemporary Mormon. Children have a good ear for the actual. If they are given stories about children who never feel defiant and never do anything worse than break grandmother's prized cream pitcher, they may either dismiss the stories out of hand, or feel guilty and inadequate because they do not measure up.

When writers write their own lives, when they create from their own

experiences rather than from whole cloth, and the bones of their own learning show through, we listen. We could use some memoirs that tell how it was or is. Virginia Sorenson's *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, specifically subtitled *Memories of a Mormon Childhood*, gets through. While hardly a reverent book, it recreates the tone of a small Utah town (Manti) of several decades ago through the eyes of a believing child. And when one good brother bashes in the head of another who was stealing his water, and when the murderer arrives at the funeral and has his hand shaken by everyone standing in front, then I know that's just how it was. Sermonizing on the weakness of men and their willingness to help their troubled brothers would detract from the effect. Just describing the life is powerful.

Adventure stories as well as memoirs have unlimited appeal. When the frozen limbs are amputated and the wolves rip out entrails, classes sit up and listen in delighted horror. Preston Nibley has compiled several books of stories from L.D.S. publications, and they make good reading, though some have such strong supernatural overtones and faith promoting qualities that I doubt they would be published in this rational day. Too bad. I like spiritual experiences and think we should have more.

Let us have some rollicking verse that bypasses the singsongy iambs. Few of our pious poems are memorable. Could religious subjects be treated in new forms and fresh images? The Church has some experienced poets who could write better children's poetry.

Another book I would like to see for children is a lavishly illustrated book on temples. The best manifestation of the skill and sacrifice of the Saints, temples naturally appeal to the mystical and imaginative qualities of children. Pictures of interesting details and murals should be included along with standard views.

Mormons have a rich cultural heritage. To help our children to be true believers and good members, we should teach them to tie into that past in all its abundance and accept it as their own. Like happiness, a testimony is best sought by indirection, and those who range widely in their reading will become stronger than those who learn selected truths. Those who know our history as it really was are more likely to tolerate weaknesses and be unshaken by unfortunate incidents.

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