



LITTLE DID SHE REALIZE: WRITING FOR THE MORMON MARKET

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So you want to write a Mormon novel? Great! Here's a story for you:—

It's about a Mormon bishop and his family, see, so you can get in all the little inside details about the L.D.S. people. The bishop's wife is an extremely devoted mother of three children, two lovely daughters and a son who is a genius. The mother is so excessively devoted to her genius son that she drives him into a madhouse. But before he is locked up he has an incestuous affair with a sister which ruins her life, he causes his best friend's suicide and drives his other sister into an unhappy marriage with a Gentile. His own disintegration causes his father, the bishop, to die of a broken heart.

You've got to admit that this story has real drama. Also, it's brand new for the Mormon market. We've never seen a novel even remotely like it published in Utah.

You may point out that we never *will*, and that if the author of such a Mormon book got it published in New York it would be furiously denounced by the Saints and, most likely, its author would be un-Churched.

Just goes to show the difference between us and the Jews. If you change "bishop" to "rabbi" in the above story, you have the outline of *Chosen People*, by Bernice Rubens, a novel given a rave review by *Life* magazine, which says, "It belongs to the familiar genre in which the loving unkindness of Jewish family life is explored with horrified affection." In other words, there's nothing particularly new about the type; the book belongs to a familiar genre.

Another recent Jewish book, and a big best-seller, is *Portnoy's Complaint*, by Phillip Roth, which a reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* called, "The dirtiest book I have ever read." Are the Jews up in arms about this sort of literature about their people? Apparently not; the *Chronicle* pointed out, in fact, that the Roth book was pushed into the best-seller class by the enthusiasm of influential Jews in the publishing and book reviewing fields. They loved it. And a great many Gentiles and Mormons are reading it, not just for the dirt. Dirt is dirt cheap; the book must have something else.

But what's wrong with the Jews? Don't they realize that they must never, never, *never* countenance a book that doesn't portray all Jews the way our own approved books depict Mormons — as cardboard stereotypes, perfect, flawless, sexless and gutless? Don't the Jews realize that to put real human

beings with real human problems into their books will destroy their public image? Apparently they're not as smart about such things as we are. They keep right on sponsoring and supporting realistic and honest Jewish books, short stories, stage plays, radio and TV shows, by the scores and by the hundreds.

And have you noticed a curious thing? — no people in this entire world have such a wonderful public image as the Jews. Their literature doesn't seem to have hurt it one bit. Matter of fact, if I weren't a Mormon who knew better because I've been told so a thousand times, I'd say an honest and realistic literature goes a long way to *build* a fine public image.

Remember the old cliché about publicity? — anything at all said about you is good; just spell the name right.

There have been so very few Mormon novels published by our internal press that it's difficult to give you market tips — particularly since every Mormon novel published in New York has been, so far as I am aware, frowned upon. The greatest one of all, Vardis Fisher's *Children of God*, has in fact become a Mormon touchstone: a good word for it brands a man as a negative thinker.

So while I can't help you much with market tips for the Mormon novel, because of lack of available data, I am on the other hand full of goodies about short fiction for the Saints. I had a refresher course as judge of the short stories submitted for the annual Round-Up of the League of Utah Writers. There were 53 stories, and by the time I'd read them all I was astounded. It might seem reasonable to expect that there would be a heavy preponderance of Mormon stories — regional literature — from the League of Utah Writers. Yet on the contrary these authors seemed to avoid their own environment.

In my opinion only one of those 53 stories was what could be classed as Mormon literature, a tale that grew out of the soil and the people. Incidentally, it made no mention of Mormons or the Church, as such; it was truly regional literature born of its environment and peopled by characters who can be found nowhere else on earth.

Some of the other stories gave a rather nervous nod to the locale by use of place names and geographical features; a character called "bishop" might hurry through with a one-line cliché of dialogue, or reference to "Relief Society" be made between commas. But leave these tags out — which would not alter the stories — and they might have happened anywhere.

The general level of the contest stories was high; a number of them were excellent, while a few, I felt, were jewels. But if only one out of 53 authors submitted a truly Mormon story that got inside the character of the Peculiar People and that could have happened nowhere else, then it seems evident that these writers were not searching their environment for its unique flavor but were deliberately avoiding it. Why? Well, the burned child avoids the stove. It was no coincidence that the author of the only truly Mormon story had not been able to find a market for it. The Saints simply do not want searching and truthful stories about the Peculiar People. They

want to be called peculiar while being exactly like everyone else.

Utah authors know that while we take such pride in Mormon cooperative effort — which performed miracles at Kirtland and Far West and Nauvoo and Winter Quarters and in the Great Basin and is seen today in the Welfare Plan — yet we bitterly resent any implication that there can't be united effort without united thinking. We boast of the results of our remarkable solidarity while denying the awesome facade — sometimes called the Zion Curtain — of uniform attitude reflected in the press, radio and television of Mormon country. Utah is a place where a person's status depends upon his underwear, yet it is taboo to mention it. All writing must have the flavor of the press agent handout.

Writers must be aware of the peculiar reading habits of the Peculiar People. We stress education, yet at Provo, home of Brigham Young University and intellectual center of Mormondom, there is no newsstand in town except for the miscellaneous racks at the supermarkets designed to entertain small-fry while mama shops. The bookstore situation is even more peculiar. Aside from the one at the university itself, the town affords only two specialty shops, one operated by the Seventies and the other by the John Birch Society. Where a literate citizen would buy a copy of *Portnoy's Complaint*, I just wouldn't know, except that he might get it at the same place he buys his whiskey (for entertaining Gentiles, of course), out of town where he isn't known.

The wise author will avoid the Word of Wisdom like the plague. I once talked with a man and wife who were anticipating with mixed feelings the return of their son from a mission. "We smoke," the wife said, "and things will be difficult, I'm afraid, until he's been back long enough to become human." Here is the basis for what could be a charming story, yet the housebroke Utah author wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. I once wrote a book in which Mormons were passionately seeking a coffee substitute that had the exact taste they loved but wouldn't be forbidden. I intended it as humor, and at least the Gentiles found it amusing; yet word from above sent an embarrassed bishopric to my home on a formal visit to inquire about the status of my soul.

This brief mention of a few peculiarities is to warn Utah writers that they must avoid in-depth character work at all costs. Books on the technique of the short story tell you to write of what you know, to reach within yourself for universal truth, to use real characters with problems arising from their environment, to get inside these people and make human beings of them. But this, apparently, is for Gentile authors. Utah writers must carefully skirt a dominant factor of their environment; if they want to write for the local market, they must conform to what that market demands.

Among the 53 entries there were a considerable number of the "little did she realize" type. This would be surprising with stories intended for the professional market, because it is virtually impossible to sell a come-to-realize story there. However, Utah writers know that Church publications love it. So if you want to do a sure-fire Mormon story, here's one: —

Janice is a beautiful and talented girl, see, who takes drama at BYU and yearns to be a great actress. But her boy friend, Claude, wants her to stay home, marry him and have babies. Claude, however, runs a dairy farm, and Janice wants fame and glamour, not manure on her shoes. Well, Janice is in an MIA play and by an astounding coincidence a great Hollywood producer is in the audience (how he got there is *your* problem). Anyhow, the producer flips over Janice's talent and beauty. He's got to have her for the starring role in his new \$50-million movie. So Janice's fondest dreams have come true. Everybody thinks it's a wonderful thing, and she's packing her bags when in comes Claude with hay in his hair and manure on his shoes (he heard the news while milking), and he says he's just come to say goodbye and gosh, honey, I'm going to miss you something terrible because, gee-whiz, I love you. At this moment Janice comes to realize that she doesn't want the tinsel and glitter of Hollywood; what she really wants is to be with Claude and have manure on her shoes, bear his babies and use her great talent as ward drama director of MIA. Fadeout.

Maybe you think this isn't much of a story because you've already read it a dozen times in the *Improvement Era* and *Relief Society Magazine*. Well, if you've only read it a dozen times, that shows how young you are. Utah editors *love* the come-to-realize story. Janice is sometimes a great writer, sometimes a great painter or singer or violinist (you've got all the arts and the instruments in the orchestra, see, before you run out of material) who comes to realize. Fadeout.

There are infinite variations to the come-to-realize story: Janice is an orphan girl whose foster parents don't love her; so she's going to run away, but then she comes to realize that they *do* love her. Fadeout. Janice is a little old lady who rebels at going into an old folks' home; but she comes to realize that that's what such homes are *for*, old folks like her. Fadeout. Janice is a housewife who can't have babies, so she takes in a foster child; but the child doesn't love her and she's going to take it back, when she comes to realize . . .

Trouble with the come-to-realize plot, my agent told me years ago in kicking back the only one of that type I ever sent him, is that there's no actual story-development; the only thing that happens is that Janice changes her mind. For the professional market, this won't do. But Utah editors can't get enough stories of Janice changing her mind, particularly the one where she comes to realize that manure on her shoes is better than pursuing the arts.

In this market the professional arts are a handy whipping-boy; your ready-made villain is the Hollywood producer luring Janice away from Claude and babies with the false tinsel and glitter. This literary convention is a bit difficult to understand in light of the adulation the Saints pay to financial success; apparently it is spiritual to make your pile in real estate, banking or insurance but not in creative pursuits. It also is a fact that a visit to the Hollywood Ward of the Church will reveal that a good share of its members are connected with the "industry," as show biz is called locally, while also having babies. But as a writer you won't quibble about market require-

ments; give the editor the stereotypes he demands.

Now that you've learned all you need to know about writing fiction for the Utah market, let's take a look at non-fiction, factual writing about our people and our history. This telling and retelling of the Mormon story comprises the great bulk of our literature. A close study of market requirements can be rewarding, for the Saints adore the well-known Mormon story; a successful retelling can mean book sales of 100,000 and more, which is a best-seller in any company.

The beauty of the Mormon story is that it *works* — it brings in thousands of converts and satisfies the great body of Saints who want their Mormonism simple, uncomplicated, sugar-coated.

It is fatal to success in this market to suppose that to write the Mormon story an author must do research in our history. David and Karla Martin found that out when recently launching a new quarterly, *Mormon History*. Their prospectus stated, "Our aim is to bring as much history as possible to as many people as possible, at the lowest possible cost. . . . The bulk of the contents will be made up of college theses on church history subjects, reprints of out-of-print books . . . and various early Mormon Church publications." Sounded great to me; but with the first issue came a letter admitting that "In spite of our heavy advertising and letter writing, response has been most disappointing. We have come to the conclusion that most members consider us a threat to orthodox Mormonism. Nothing could be further from the truth." Because of the reaction, they felt it necessary to bear their testimonies in the first number, as active Church members and former missionaries.

Inasmuch as they asked for comments, I sat down and wrote a letter of market advice:

Regarding your editorial stand, I believe you will find out that the Mormons don't really want historical fact; they want the Mormon *story*. They want that story over and over again, as a child asks for the retelling of his favorite bedtime tale; and, like the child, they don't want changes. They don't want to be disturbed by the fact that in many respects the story does not coincide with history. Thus the very name of your magazine is a red flag to the ones who contrive the story and the happy throng who want it told again and again without change. For you to protest that you don't intend to be anti-Establishment will do no good at all. What you must do is fall in line, or else.

You've already alerted the opposition with a phrase of my own, by saying that your publication won't be a "house organ." Thus by implication you are agreeing with my thesis that our internal literature is propaganda; and that attitude, folks, is the worst of all modern sins, negative thinking.

But when it was ready for mailing I peeled off the stamp and tore the letter in half. They didn't need me to tell them; they'd find out.

The best market advice I know of about how to write the Mormon story came from a man who'd made a lucrative career of it. When I published a piece about the Saints in *Holiday* magazine he criticized the tone, the anecdotes, and my attitude. So I asked this expert in the field what

rules should be followed, how an author knew what could be said and what couldn't. His reply, like all great truths, was remarkable for its simplicity.

"Let the spirit guide you," he advised.

To understand this in its full richness, let's look at another branch of arts among the Saints. The *Church News* printed a picture of a statue of Adam and Eve, to be placed in Temple Square, that fascinated me. I hadn't realized that there must have been a beauty parlor in the Garden of Eden to do Eve's hair or that Adam had mastered the science of metallurgy, for he was freshly shaved (was there also a barber shop?). Equally amazing was evidence that in their brief period on earth Adam and Eve had mastered the textile-making skills; they had spun and woven cloth, and had sewed it into handsome robes.

Here, I believe, is a commentary on our attitude toward historical accuracy. We are required to believe literally in the Bible; yet if Eve's bronze knee or bosom might excite lustful thoughts in the beholder, then cover her, regardless of whether it contradicts Genesis.

My purpose is not to point out the discrepancies between the Mormon story and facts of history — this is a separate study, with a voluminous literature of its own — but rather to help you meet the market that exists. Writers don't make the market, they simply fill its requirements.

In preparing yourself for this market you must work very hard to develop your adjectives of praise. Competition here is very tough. Our internal writers display an astounding talent for panegyric. When conducting a class in writing at a local Education Week, I read as a typical example a solid page and a half from a Mormon book, then asked the class what facts it contained. There was actually just one fact in 800 words, the man's name; all the rest was praise. If you think this is poor writing, just try it; here is a skill you'll learn only through hard work and application. But it is a must for the market. When in doubt, praise.

Controversial material can be used in this market only if you give it the positive approach. For example, it recently was announced that the Church TV and radio stations would phase out cigarette commercials. So now it's okay to boast about standing up for our principles. For the past forty years it was negative thinking to mention that we were beating the pulpit with one hand about the Word of Wisdom while taking money with the other for huckstering the forbidden. Now it is positive to boast about banning cigarette commercials, but it is still negative to mention that the Church stations continue to plug beer, wine, tea, and coffee. But if you wish to write about our great stand against cigarettes, do it fast, for past history would indicate a very short memory about such things, and presently it will be negative to mention that we *ever* took money for selling cigarettes. So strike while the market is hot.

For authors who want to broaden their horizon by writing Mormon material for the national market, I must tell you flatly that New York editors will not buy Mormon propaganda. If you give *this* market what it demands — reasonable objectivity, accuracy and truth — you run a grave

risk of being accused of "sensationalizing" our history, selling out for gold (part of our mythology is that anti-Mormon books make millions, which isn't so). At the best you will be damned for negative thinking; while if you dig up enough fascinating truth that cuts too close to the bone, you may risk your Church membership for publishing it — not for printing lies, but for stepping on corns we insist must be avoided.

There does seem to be just one type of Mormon literature acceptable both in the national market and among the Saints. This is the memoir — life-with-father, how-dear-to-my-heart-is-the-old-nostalgia. I have no quarrel with this genre; it is Americana, and I like it. But certainly with the infinite richness of the material, there really ought to be a broader field. Matter of fact, I feel so strongly about this that I dug down and ponied up \$100 as an award for regional writing, sponsored by the League of Utah Writers. At least I'm putting my money where my mouth is.

In conclusion, let me say that while I'm sure these tips will help you meet the Utah market, if you really have ambitions for writing professionally, for heaven's sake ignore everything I have said. Our ways are not the ways of the world. If you learn your trade by writing praise propaganda for a controlled press, you will by that very fact blight your career in a free one.

