



VIRGINIA SORENSEN: A SAVING REMNANT

Mary L. Bradford

I

Nearly fifteen years have passed since I, in looking around for a thesis topic, began to read "Mormon novels." It seems odd to remember how electrifying were the "forbidden" Vardis Fisher and others I hadn't heard of: Scowcroft, Whipple, Robertson, Blanche Cannon, even Samuel Taylor. It must be a clue to our culture that a girl could get through graduate school without such an awakening, especially when many of those writers seem so bland today that I wonder along with Sam Taylor "if most of them weren't mainly victims of bad timing." What my awakening really consisted of was a refreshing realization that some of those giants from our past were really human beings after all ("saints by adoption").

I finally chose Virginia Sorensen because she had been more diligent and productive than other "Mormon" writers, she was alive and still working, and much of what she wrote made me wish I'd thought of it. I called my little work "Virginia Sorensen: An Introduction."

It seems strange that now, several years later, she should still need an introduction. Many Mormon friends who read have not read her, though she is translated into many other languages. It is true that when she began to write, there was no *Dialogue* to give her an appreciative audience. But the basic reason for her neglect stems, I think, from a misunderstanding many Mormons share about the purpose of fiction. We have not always understood that fiction has been and must always be about sinners and their struggles, those struggles between good and evil which Dostoyevsky described as joined on the battleground of the human heart. We have not always understood that fiction writers must stand aside from that which most engages their personal lives, looking to a deeper engagement with their art. Even if this hurts those most engaged with *their* own lives, it may lead to a deeper understanding of that which must engage us all in the end.

At any rate, I take up my task again, with some changes in outlook, and perhaps with less objectivity. For the years have brought me a friendship with Virginia Sorensen, one which no doubt will exclude me, at least this time, from the company of the New Critics.

A Western Mormon is a many-layered thing: a layer of history, a layer of geography, above all a layer of culture preserved by old stories told

by old people with charm, humor, humanity. Some of these layers are peeling off and disappearing, lost through quick conversions (and Puritanical notions from other religions); through a devastating urbanization which is changing the faces of all cities, including Mormon ones; and through the commercial, ambitious materialism of all lives, including Mormon ones. Mormons of this generation tend to be ashamed of the stories told by old people, even of the old people themselves. New members seldom hear the stories at all except in sanitized versions. Having discovered Hector Lee's delightful imitation of that late folk hero J. Golden Kimball, I played the record for a group of Mormons. "He didn't say all those things," someone cried, while another pronounced it unfit for children. It was obvious that we were already ashamed of that great character so recently with us. In a few years will all our "characters" be lost?

In *Many Heavens*, Virginia Sorensen describes "Old Brother Madsen so old and bent his beard fairly reached his toes when he walked. Some folks objected to his sitting like a bum all day . . . but he always replied, 'I helped lay out this town and I'll sit in it where I damn well please.'"

Virginia Sorensen represents a saving remnant of a remnant that should be saved. She writes of her ancestors, her grandparents, her parents, and herself in a way that preserves something of every Western Mormon's personal history. In her works we have a special innocence, part of the fading murals which Mormon historians must rush to save before the zealous white-washers have rubbed them all away. As Wallace Stegner claims in his book, *The Sound of Mountain Water*, we are losing our connections between past and present:

In the old days, in blizzardy weather, we used to tie a string of lariats from house to barn so as to make it from shelter to responsibility and back again. With personal, family and cultural chores to do, I think we had better rig up such a line between past and present.

That many may not have read Virginia because of her penchant for reproducing people who actually suffer, sin, and die a little, seems, especially in today's world, nothing short of blind anachronism. Any Mormon should appreciate her strong sense of history and of place, her domestic love of the hearth, her celebration of love between man and woman, her rendering of the patterns of her background, with sympathy for those who must occasionally break the patterns to find themselves. But along with that, the child-like quality (in the biblical sense) of much of her work has won her two important awards in Children's Literature (The Child Study Award and the Newberry Medal), and has permeated her adult novels so that her most recent — *Kingdom Come* (1960) and *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* (1963) — might well be called children's books for adults.

Where Nothing Is Long Ago is subtitled "Memories of a Mormon Childhood." It seems important to preserve some of the values of a childhood now lost — mine and Virginia's — so different from that of my children. Virginia has worked to preserve these qualities and others of those layers that make a Mormon.

II

"How priceless it is," said Goethe, "when a human brain can reproduce what is mirrored in it." Virginia Sorensen began early to assimilate experience, storing it for good use. She began early to set her thoughts on paper. Her mother remembered that as soon as she could hold a pencil, she began to write "because she had to." Her Manti novels — *On This Star* (1946) and *The Evening and the Morning* (1949) — attest to her ability to utilize the memories of her hometown. She lived in Manti until her high-school years, dividing her reading and writing time between the "22-ounce apple" tree in her front yard and the "house of my own" under the stairs in the Eggertsen home.

Even though her father was an inactive Mormon — a "Jack-Mormon" as she describes him in one of her stories — and her mother not a member at all, she was baptized and attended Church meetings with friends, listening to the old people and their stories until they became a part of her memory. Her novels carry a load of these stories, gleaned not only from memory, but from later reading of diaries and journals.

The title story of *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* recalls a home-town killing over water rights. This same incident, somewhat changed, provides the climax to her Colorado novel, *The Neighbors* (1947). "People out west," she says, "remember when things were settled violently and they remember the dry wastes before the mountain water was captured and put to use."

Some characters appear and reappear. An apostate grandmother, described in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, all her life a rebellious feminist, insists on dying with her temple garments on. She is also the spirited heroine of *The Evening and the Morning*, Kate Alexander. An aunt who was once struck by lightning, is recalled in *The Neighbors* and then given a story of her own in "The Teacher." Virginia describes her aunt's reaction to this story:

. . . when she saw it, she nodded and said, "It's all right, but so little. It's not one hundredth the way it really was." Which I thought a very good description of fiction in general. Lightning seldom strikes in words.

Virginia's first novel, *A Little Lower Than the Angels* (1942), elaborates the life of an ancestor who settled Nauvoo and died before the trek west. It also carries a romanticized version of Joseph Smith's love affair with Eliza R. Snow. A few years later she read excerpts from a history of Scandinavian Mormon immigrants being prepared by William Mulder and wrote him a letter:

Your article in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* was so exciting that I immediately began getting ideas of how I must somehow do better. For years and years I have believed — for what reason I wonder, since I never really lived in the houses where the true tradition was but could only visit awhile, and listen, and pause always by the gate where I could hear and see it — that I was the one to tell this story you speak of. Almost I have heard the Call.

It was this call that sent her to Denmark to study the journals and the geography of her Danish ancestors, leading to that most missionary-minded of all books — *Kingdom Come*.

Sometimes she savors her stories too much, allowing them to interfere with her narrative, but in *Many Heavens* (1956), set in a small northern Utah town just after the Manifesto, she seems to blend her best themes: scenery with history and personality, physical love with spiritual love, the excitement of learning with the simple, domestic truths, the certainty of religious faith with the complexities of doubt. This book seems best to blend Virginia's own peculiar people with her own particular art. Here is her feeling for the small towns of her youth:

this valley set like a particular jewel in the State of Deseret and that State in the Union and the Union in the great world flowed together . . . , and a man, and his family, past, present, future flowed together too.

Here is her feeling for her Church as symbolized by the Tabernacle:

. . . all of these people were my people, the church my church, the huge vaulted roof over me a kind of personal possession, along with the golden wonder of the organ.

And her love of particular customs, such as "Conference":

All the faces I saw seemed eager and glad and proud; people met with a hard Mormon handshaking, with splendid laughter, and so many warm greetings that the whole was like an immense overgrown church supper, . . . for the missionaries had made Utah a gathering place from everywhere. It had its own peculiar melting in the great American pot. . . . As Neils always says, Conference is a tremendous portrait of the people at their best.

And always through this book, and all her books, there are the beloved old people — like Billy Huckabee, who votes against the Bishop every year for six straight years and plays "Kathleen Mavourneen" for the sacrament music. She speaks of the "invisible freight of the immigrant, brought with them in their minds and their hearts and their ways of doing." She laments the dying of the old ones who took "all their lovely queerness" with them and left the valley the poorer.

She celebrates Mormon domesticity: "I needed the feeling of order in Leah's house, the washedness of her linen, the savory homelike tastes and smells that kept eating important in that house and so kept all the senses important along with it."

Virginia herself has always refused to hire a housekeeper because

. . . there is a time with any project, large or small, when one becomes discouraged and quite certain it is all in vain and useless. At any rate, that always happens to me. Just now I'm housecleaning (which precious digging into corners and splashing suds to the elbows I would not give to any scrubwoman on earth, for it clarifies my immortal soul).

All of her books mirror her life — her growing up in Sanpete County, Utah, attendance at Brigham Young University, and her marriage, which led her to many parts of the country. She has had Guggenheim Fellowships to Mexico and Denmark. She has also moved away from activity in the Church, but as she moved “outside,” her books gradually became more “inside,” so that the recent ones are much closer to those “faith-promoters” we all know. This is as one who leaves his home forever, but looks back in pleasant nostalgia, as she puts it in her dedication to *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, to a “dream dreamed out of memory.”

To that question often asked, “Are you a defender of the faith?” she answers, “How could I be anything else? When we write of the things we know and love best, we cannot but be defending it to the world.” To the whitewashers and to those who object to some of her portraits, she would probably say with her Doctor Neils in *Many Heavens*: “Too many of us in this country expect to know just the sweet side of everything. . . . We bury half the truth of life in the privies back of the house. Under the ashes.”

And to those who think her *too sweet*, she could say with Zina: “If I am sentimental, then, all right, I am.” The titles of her books seem to attest to her aspirations: *A Little Lower Than the Angels*, *On This Star*, *The Evening and the Morning*, *Many Heavens*, *Kingdom Come*, *The Proper Gods*.

III

In *The Sound of Mountain Water*, Wallace Stegner describes western novels (with a small *w*) as historical and rural by definition, sharing certain tribal qualities, and containing a nostalgia inherited from Fenimore Cooper. Virginia Sorensen is no exception, but she has tried to find in her tradition a “web of significance”:

For writers, what is the lesson? The necessity for creating freely, certainly, but something more, the responsibility of preserving some web of significance men can live by. And this too is only a part — for it demands not only freedom within a tradition, but an ever-widening tolerance for the traditional values of others.¹

What is this web? She sees it in the conflict of old and new, of sacred and profane, adjustment and estrangement, love and rebellion. Most of her characters must face inevitable conflicts without sacrificing their traditions. The Mormon culture seems to provide the best framework for characters growing up in a protected society, growing out into an unprotected and confusing world. As Zina says, “Not only had my mountains protected me, but had hidden much of the world from me, with its endless beauties and wonders.”

Her non-Mormon novels and her children’s books are thematically similar. Adan, of *The Proper Gods* (1951), must return to his own protected Yaqui culture to reconcile new-found philosophies with his ancient heritage.

¹Virginia Sorensen, “Is It True? The Novelist and His Materials,” *Western Humanities Review*, VII (1953), 283.

The little Amish Esther, in *Plain Girl* (1955), overcomes her envy for her well-dressed friend from the outside world to reaffirm not only that friendship but her own values. Many of Virginia's characters seem to say with Anne Morrow Lindbergh: "I mean to lead a simple life, to choose a simple shell I can carry easily — like the hermit crab. But I do not. I find my frame of life does not foster simplicity."

Mercy Baker, heroine of *The Angels*, is forever asking why. She accepts her husband's religion, not because she deeply believes it, but because she deeply loves her husband. In her heart she rebels against what she feels is the smug faith of simple believers and must face the frustration of polygamy. Chel Bowen, heroine of *On This Star*, has grown up with a strong faith, asking no questions, until she meets Eric, whose desires work against her simplicity. Kate, of *The Evening and the Morning*, rebels early against her implacable surroundings, but discovers that rebellion can bring heartbreak:

"It had sometimes come to her that she had lost God too early, when she still needed the sustenance of her belief, and she had given her love the reverence she must give to something."

Zina, the nurse-midwife of *Many Heavens*, though never actively rebellious, finds her life shaken out of its pattern by a strange love for a married man. The ingenious solution to her problem echoes Emerson's statement, "Heaven is large and affords space to all modes of love and fortitude."

John, of *The Neighbors*, has rebelled against narrow modes of living. He believes in one thing: his right to think. He breaks away from the "self-conscious authority" in the mountains of Utah only to find the same insulated narrow-mindedness among the mountains of Colorado. The Yaqui young man, Adan, rebels against his ceremonious life because it never changes. "I know it will be better to leave," he tells his sweetheart, "because I could never learn to accept everything." In the end, however, he reconciles the things he does not accept with the things he does.

The Mormon society, the Yaqui society, and the Amish have preserved their extreme individualism and their isolation only through the severest of tests. It is natural that such a struggle should give rise to groups of smug believers who refuse to see validity in other ways of living. In Mormon society, some feel that literature must express nothing but the highest and purest in an ideal culture. (In reviewing Virginia's first book, John A. Widtsoe praised her gifts, but deplored what he called "unlovely" incidents — as if all books must be "lovely.")²

Virginia Sorensen characterizes smug believers with tolerance, sympathy, and insight. In most of her stories guilty ones usually reach at least a partial realization of their mistakes. Zina (in *Many Heavens*) vividly paints the self-righteous Stanley Widdeman, who "knew his proper spot in the great triangle with God at the top and the people at the bottom, the Word pouring downward to him through the authorities of Church and State, and his own Word pouring downward to the members and the officers below him. He

²John A. Widtsoe, "On the Book Rack," *The Improvement Era*, XLV (1942), 380.

was loving and benign to the good child in his house . . . and quick to punish wrongdoing, so it would never get out of hand." How wrongdoing does get out of hand precisely because of his one-man crusade against sin provides an exciting denouement. Widdeman himself lives to repent of his blindness.

In *The Neighbors*, John, in a scene with his relatives from Utah, states his belief in the universality of human suffering. His father-in-law agrees, but adds that "there is nothing we can do until Christ comes." Whereupon John, losing his temper, expresses contempt for religions whose "dependency on old prophecy" prevents people from doing their duty.

Most of Virginia's characters must give us their innocence, their sense of belonging, and then must somehow regain them in altered forms. In fact, characters in the Mormon novels are sometimes converted because the faith seems to offer a unity they once felt. Mercy's Simon finds happiness in the doctrines surrounding "family life, eternal family, the first family of God" wherein each would someday "achieve glory through this endless process of growing in his children." Even Erik, who has pulled away from his roots, loves the songs of the Church, "so familiar, so changeless, so incredibly, sweetly the same." The Yaquis feel this too, and Adan is finally able to reconcile himself to it, to feel himself at one with the earth, like a tree, which gives him "a swelling of energy that made work good."

Some characters, however, find a knowledge of complexity which brings an extreme consciousness of the boundaries between people. Of all Virginia's characters, Mercy Baker is most afflicted. The feeling of estrangement becomes most difficult when, through hard work and childbearing, she begins to lose both her beauty and her capacity for work:

It had occurred to Mercy in the first fear and uncontrollable anguish of knowing that she was caught within a body that refused to give her any longer what she desired from it, that perhaps she was old already, and that perhaps there was no real difference between sickness and age.

Zina Johnson, all youth and reaching-out, discovers early that ambition can bring loneliness. She describes it as "an unreasonable strangeness in the midst of familiar things" and adds, "I longed to do great, unselfish, beautiful things with my life, but what things?"

The most painful estrangement comes through rebellion, and Kate Alexander is Virginia's greatest rebel. Though characters in other books rebel in many ways, Kate rebels in all ways. And for this she reaps suffering:

If you were a woman and a rebel the only thing you could tear to pieces was your own life. So you turned upon yourself. There was no institution you could rend except at the place where it touched you; and so always you were the thing to be cut apart.

Erik is possessed by a bitterness continually stoked by smug members of his family who must fit everything into the pattern. When Chel accuses him of being a doubting Thomas, he explains that it is "simply that when you go away, you find a lot of beautiful places with a lot of different myths

attached to them. You get some different ideas about your own myths." Virginia often presents rebellion as a real result of growing up and fitting into a mature society. She seems to think it normal, but seems to believe it should fade when the rebel discovers his own purpose in the world.

IV

Dale Morgan, reviewing *On This Star*, said, "One who feels [that] Mrs. Sorensen has larger capacity than the purveying of love stories closes the book with a feeling of sharp disappointment." Others have accused her of undue sentimentality. I must occasionally side with them but in the end assert that not only could one do worse than purvey love stories but that the theme of love between men and women perfectly suits Virginia's background and tastes. Through love stories she can write of women and their domestic problems, a theme she understands intimately. She has often used the theme of polygamy because it embodies so much of what is complex and simple about love. Polygamy, originally meant to simplify problems of men and women, was to give opportunity to all. Women might fulfill their purpose on earth, arrest the waste of character, avoid prostitution. Men could learn unselfishness and responsibility. But it was difficult to change the shape of pride. Kate explains it to her daughter:

You know how much of it is pride. If you change the things you are proud of, you change practically all your feelings about everything. The women who had the beginning of polygamy . . . they were the ones who had the worst of it, of course. The objections of Emma Smith made perfect sense to me. She knew people didn't understand, and she had to face them somehow.

When Zina decides to resolve her love problem in terms of polygamy, she does it after years of suffering. Mette, the first wife, explains that when a man loves two women and cannot have both, one will always be afraid and the other alone. Her decision comes clear: "Why should all of us go on suffering so much?"

Before such conclusions may be reached, however, love must go through many stages. The first is the feeling of absolute privacy and oneness expressed by Eliza R. Snow at Joseph Smith's first kiss:

Then he took her and kissed her mouth with a passion that flowed into her and she knew for the first time the exquisite merging of herself with another. Nothing remained in her brain except the memory of all this and awareness of herself and of all the beauty in the world, rushing upon her in one terrible, beautiful wave. Stiffness left her and she began to flow like water, a movement in time.

This scene is repeated many times over, with only slightly different words, in several other novels.

Virginia's view of love is typically Mormon and patriarchal. Almost without exception her women love their men as they love their God, looking for guidance, obeying "in righteousness," quite often mixing up the loving with the worshipping. This is expressed by a character in *Kingdom Come* who describes his marriage: "Every time I go back to Hansine, it's better.

Nothing but perfect communion with God himself can be compared to it, but I wondered if that was blasphemous when I first said it, but she told me sometime afterward I knew was true. 'God is there,' she said. 'And He is there, Svend — in a good, true love. It's a kind of trinity — for creation.'

Though some of these love scenes may sound adolescent and diffuse to the modern reader, Mormons should recognize some symbols of their religion in them. Wallace Stegner's description of the western writer applies: "He had only a little to say about sex, which in his innocence he had confused with love, but until now he had thought that little was definitely good stuff; one big scene had made it exciting."

If the women in the novels see their men as gods, the men in her books see their women as one with their surroundings, celebrating a love of place. Adan describes his Yaqui sweetheart: "Michaela belonged here in all ways, and he sometimes felt that her walk was beautiful because the street was familiar, every stone and the whole village and the people she met." Erik realizes that Chel turns "to the contours of the land like the sunshine itself." And John describes his wife in these words: "The pride of plain people was in Paulie; maxims made sense to her; children came easily from her body." Svend, the Danish missionary, hesitates to remove his sweetheart from her natural habitat: "She belonged where she was, bowing her head on the communion rail with her braids shining like metal, sipping wine in reverent silence from a silver cup, taking the Host from the white hands of a cassocked pastor in the reverent silence of an old church. She was right that if he loved her, he must belong in the same place."

The need to belong, the sense of belonging in a church, in a place, in a heart, are all important to Virginia's love stories.

When I first introduced Virginia Sorensen, I meant to emphasize her universality, her realism, denying her importance as a regionalist, and emphasizing her objectivity. I do not make these points today. I see her now as a defender of the faith; of all the stories told by our people, hers have an inescapable dedication to a place and a history.

She represents much of the Mormonism I was taught in my youth: a Mormonism that recognizes the "human condition," that accepts "different ways of looking," that places people before ideas; a Mormonism that recognizes that true religion is not so much unity of opinion, as unity of action. I admit to her womanly sentimentality, her love of particular places; I affirm her, using Wallace Stegner's phrase, as a Western writer "incorrigibly wholesome and life acceptant."

I think she is probably speaking for herself through her character, Zina, when she writes:

I've got less and less religious in the organized sense over the years, but to this day I can't think about the notion of sharing, about people who go out into it for whatever reason, the doctor, the missionary, priest, elder — anybody, without getting a feeling as wide and deep as a woman my size can hold. The really great ones got the farthest out, reaching more and sharing with more. And the Greatest One was a friend to them all, born and unborn.