

## *“IF YOU ARE A WRITER, YOU WRITE!”*

### *AN INTERVIEW WITH*

### *VIRGINIA SORENSEN*

*Do you consider yourself a Mormon writer?*

Yes. At least I get more pleasure out of being noticed by the Mormons than anyone else!

*You were raised a Mormon then?*

My father was what is known as a “jack Mormon,” and my mother was a Christian Scientist, but they were both descended from fine old Mormon pioneer families. I was born in Provo and I graduated from BYU.

*What are some of your earliest memories?*

It's very odd, the memories I put into *Where Nothing is Long Ago*—about the family having a picnic by the main ditch, playing Hide the Peanuts, and the band playing, I didn't realize for a time were combining the three places of my childhood—Provo, Manti and American Fork. I remember only the bare essentials of Provo—I lived there my first five years—I spent first grade and on until high school in Manti—and then later on I went to high school in American Fork. In my stories I put them all together. Since my dad worked for the railroad, we always lived on Depot Street near the railroad station, in each town. Depot Street in Provo, in Manti and in American Fork were all about the same. You went east and then you turned a little bit north. I realize now why my sisters used to get so upset when they read my stories. They always said I didn't get things exactly right. It was because I mixed the three places together in my mind—and in my stories.

I find that I put in whatever suits the story. It doesn't matter whether it happened now or then. Things can be twenty years apart when I was a child. This makes me realize that I am always busy with fiction and no good at history. When I gather masses of material, as I did when I was studying Hans Christian Andersen, and a book I signed to write about Scandinavians in America, I got masses of material, but I was not able to organize it and use it as it was.

Of course, *Kingdom Come* was quite different because I was using church history very straight, much of it from the *Millennial Star*. I was sent a lot of wonderful material by Bill Mulder. Because of that I felt a great obligation to Bill that my book should be accurate. And *The Proper Gods* was sent to an anthropologist.

*You mean an anthropologist checked it out for you?*

Yes. Some people think there is entirely too much cultural anthropology in it. But I felt, again, obligated as I did to Bill. But those two books were quite different from the fictions that were not based on history.

It's such a special task when you have to fit the lives of your characters into history. The public events impinge on the private events. It complicates the task so much!

*It has been said of you that your work has a strong sense of place. Do you have a feeling of belonging in a particular place?*

I left Provo early, but American Fork and Manti, and later Springville, especially the old Depot Street in Springville, certainly are important places to me. In recent stories about Dad and the end of the railroad, all those places are mixed up in my descriptions.

*I am sure your characters are really more important than place—or you would simply be writing local color—but I think about the heroes in *The Proper Gods* and *Kingdom Come*. They are worried about taking their sweethearts out of the places they seem to belong.*

Well, of course, I think I belong in the kitchen more than in any other place in the house! Working on a long novel, as I am doing now, is much like working in the kitchen from an old recipe. I must find all kinds of different ways to awaken the feeling I need to do the work—letters, journals, everything I can find. It is certainly a female thing, don't you think?

*Yes. There is a strong domestic thread through your work.*

And I feel a great link with my mother in my inability to throw out old clothes. I am always cutting them into strips for rag rugs. My mother made tremendous rugs for the whole family. I now have a Navajo loom made by Moroccan

craftsman. I am now filling my house with rag rugs, but I make them on a loom!

*Beautiful.*

I also use old stockings, all in lovely browns and beiges. How I dearly love to use my hands while someone reads to me. Alec reads to me every night for two hours. Sometimes I work on small frames and make little woolly designs. I have fallen in love with the American Indian God's eyes. I saw them in Albuquerque in the shops there. My daughter gave me a little craft book, saying "Mama, this is something you can do when Alec reads to you." So I've gone all out for God's eyes—all sizes!

I've become crafty in my old age! The discipline of writing—using your hands and your eyes and your head—everything all at once—is very exhausting, and nothing is so relaxing as handwork. I see women waiting in airports with their crochet hooks and their knitting and I understand what I didn't use to. It's a great solace to me now!

*Have you always wanted to be a writer—as far back as you can remember?*

Yes, at least after I discovered that nobody wanted me to play the fiddle!

*You played the violin?*

I learned to play the violin because my mother had three daughters and wanted her own trio. Helen was to study piano, Geraldine the cello, and I was to study violin. Mother had to abandon her project because I was so bad. In the little diary I kept for only one year, I include a sketch with two little figures: one with a violin, the other with a pen and a desk. Underneath it says, "Which?" So music has been the enrichment of my life and writing the major love.

*Were you one of those children who used to tell stories to your friends?*

Yes, my best friend, Carole Reed, who is now Carole Reed Holt, used to make my doll clothes while I read stories. Of course, you should be able to tell a story and sew your own doll clothes, but I didn't think so then.

*You speak of your two sisters. Were there others in your family?*

Yes, three boys and three girls. Two of the boys came along much later, so there were twenty years between my brother Claude and my young brother Hal. Now I am the only sister left. My sisters have both died. That's a tremendous wrenching, you know. You feel that the family has always been there. It was rather natural for Mama and Papa to disappear as long as the six of us were still here. But now I have a shaky feeling about families, and I see why



people want to believe they are eternal. They want to return to the initial closeness and solidarity they once felt.

*You were a close family, then?*

My husband, Alec Waugh, had only one brother—Evelyn Waugh. He says he had never heard of a family like mine with such closeness between the father and mother and all the children. When he visited my brother Paul's family in Washington, D.C., he said, "Oh, that's the way your family was. Now I know."

But it's strange what is happening in families now. People say, "If the parents are solid, the children will be too." But I see so many families now who are like mine. Of six marriages, only two have continued unbroken. Mother and Dad wouldn't have liked it. They would have disapproved! But they were intelligent people; they accepted the world the way they found it and they would finally have understood, I think. You can't apply old ideas and ways of doing things to what's happening now. I guess Mormon country is a citadel of that, though. I like to think of family life as Mormonism's greatest value.

*Your ancestors were pioneer families?*

I've been very much moved by the fact that I have two great-grandfathers who literally walked thousands of miles across this country. And it's one thing that I can tell people when they ask me about my connections with the Mormons. I tell them about my Great Grandfather Simon Peter Eggertsen who walked across the Plains pushing a handcart, and how he later became a landowner and left quite a bit of good land and prosperity to his three sons and a daughter.

*And he showed up in your first novel.*

Yes. And then the other grandfather, Horace Alexander, was a Virginian who went to Nauvoo and became a carpenter on the temple and one of the men chosen for the Mormon battalion. He walked even farther, toting a gun. He went clear to San Diego, you see, and up to San Francisco so that he was on hand for the discovery of gold. Then he went back over the mountains to Utah. Think how far he walked! They make great heroes now out of people who attempt to walk across the nation. I think if I have any strength, I know where it comes from! It's a tremendous heritage, that!

*Have you always felt conscious of it?*

Oh, yes! And the older I get the more I feel about it. When I began giving talks about books—after I became a librarian's writer because I had won the Newbery Medal and was asked to speak at a great many library associations—one

of the stories I loved to tell was about how my Great Grandfather Simon Peter Eggertsen, a school teacher, chose to take his books in his handcart. There were many things he could have taken that weighed less and might seem more important in a pioneer society, but he chose his books. Now I find that when I choose to stay anywhere, most of my weight is in books too.

*Returning to your parents—you say your mother was not a Mormon?*

That was because her mother, Kate Alexander, was an apostate Mormon. Kate was so against the Church because of her experiences as a child that none of her children turned out to be Mormons. My mother, Alice Geraldine Alexander Eggertsen, was a Christian Scientist—a great religion!

*Was she a practicing Christian Scientist?*

Yes, but she was not extreme and she really read the Bible. I can open Mother's bible anywhere and read what she marked. It is always reassuring.

*And you say your father was an inactive Mormon.*

He thought the whole thing was rather funny. He made light of what we learned in Sunday School. There was no bitterness, though. Grandma caused her children to leave the Church, but there was not a bitter hair in my father's head. He wanted us to be a part of our community, and he had such a wonderful Danish humor. He dealt with things teasingly.

Thinking about Dad makes me feel such a need to preserve something. When I realized that I was the only one left of three sisters, one of my first thoughts was "When I finish my next book, I won't be able to send it to them." I think half my audience, half the people I always wrote for are no longer around. Why didn't I hurry? Remember, I dedicated *Kingdom Come* to Esther Peterson's mother, my aunt, Ane Grethe Nielsen Eggertsen. I think I put "For her 93rd Festival."

*Yes, I remember that.*

She was way up in years, and she would say, "If you don't hurry and finish that Danish book, I am not going to read it." I sent her the galleys and she read them with a magnifying glass. And then she died, almost immediately after she read it. I think she felt—and this was important to me—I think she felt I was making a true story.

*I have always felt that you were trying to preserve old people and places.*

Yes, how I loved the old days in Manti. Manti was as bilingual as you can get, you know. Remember that wonderful Brother Petersen story? How he was guard at the Manti Temple when lightning struck it? And one of the brethren said, "Oh, but God would not let lightning strike the temple," and he answered, "Well, He did, and he knocked hell out of it!" That's so typically Danish!

*That's wonderful.*

I feel that I am in the old timer category now. I get that feeling mostly from reading *Dialogue*.

*Oh, now, did we do that to you?*

Where I live, *Dialogue* is my only source, my only connection with what is happening now in Mormon country. I find that some of my old authorities pass by as times change. It's all right to move ahead, but you have to preserve something. Alec has said to me, "The important thing is to stay the course." And I think, really, to last the distance, to stay the course, to go on doing work that you love is the important thing. Alec is now one of the few members left of the original British P.E.N. He joined back in the early twenties when H. G. Wells and Rebecca West were in it.

Getting back to the present, though, I have wondered how I am going to write about the present generations, the new Mormons. I don't even know what is going on in the temple now. I understand it has changed. Imagine that!

*It is basically the same ceremony, but the technology has changed.*

Don't you think they should do it just the way the prophet did it?

Yes.

The trouble is numbers. They are trying to push too many people through now. Of course, we have another Prophet now, and I am so pleased about the Black revelation.

*President Kimball is quite a mover.*

Doesn't everybody love a story about somebody who has conquered something? You think, well, if I get cancer of the throat, I might still be President of

the Church some day. I loved reading his biography and that other little small book he wrote about his wife?

One Silent, Sleepless Night.

Yes. My sister, Jerry, had that book beside her when she died of cancer. She wasn't active in the Church, but that book was a comfort.

*President Kimball is a great diary keeper. You mentioned that you kept a diary when you were a child.*

For only one year.

*Only one. Why was that?*

I have no idea!

*In an interview we did with James Arrington, he says that he has decided that he could live life or he could record life—not both.*

I decided that what *happened* to me wasn't as important as what I *thought* about it. So I always have had what is called a "commonplace book." The British Museum is full of those beautiful books—Milton, Macauley and others kept them, so I have always had one before I even knew what they were or how significant they were. Mine is a little notebook I carry in my purse. I have hundreds of these notebooks now, and I'm putting them with my papers at Boston University where they are being catalogued.

I am glad I kept that little diary, if only for a short time. I tell in it that when I was a freshman in high school in Manti, I won a class relay. I was so excited and happy that I ran all the way to the depot in my gym suit to tell Dad. I can see myself now, trotting all those blocks without even waiting to change my clothes. It didn't seem complete until I had told my family.

*Did you do your first publishing when you were in high school?*

Junior High School. I wrote the graduation poem and my best friend sent it in to the *Children's Friend*. When I graduated from high school, my valedictory was published in the American Fork newspaper. It was a great prose work called "The melody of life." I thought I had to memorize every word, so I would go out in the back yard at night and declaim it.

*You went on to publish in college, I suppose?*

I published a great deal at the "Y" because by then I knew that writing was it. I thought at first that I would study journalism, so I went off in my junior year to the University of Missouri. It was while I was away that I did my first



consciously Mormon writing. It was a story called, "The Green Road," which I entered in a contest. You see, when I went away, I found my Mormonism was the thing about me that most interested people. And I have found that to be true all through the years. It is what Alec calls "a very great *advantage!*" To have such a peculiar past.

*So you spent one year at Missouri and then returned to BYU?*

Yes, I came back to finish because of the money and because some of my religion credits didn't count elsewhere. I was happy at the "Y," though. I shared a little flat with my best friend Carole, and we separated only to be married.

*You met Fred Sorensen then?*

Yes, he was going with Carole, and studying at Stanford. Carole wasn't very good in English, so Fred would send her letters back corrected. So I wrote to him in her name, rather like Miles Standish. Later, we used to laugh about it.

*So he came back from Stanford and courted you?*

One night I was studying *Beowulf*, and we began to read together. We had common interests right from the start, and they lasted twenty-five years. I graduated from the Y after I was married. In fact, I was in the hospital having my first child—Beth—on Graduation Day. My mother got a great thrill out of walking up and accepting my diploma. My great uncle Simon got his Masters that year, so we were in the paper—the young girl with a new baby and the old man with his master's—both Eggertsens.

*You were at Stanford while Fred worked on his Ph.D. in English?*

It was deep in the Depression. Those were years I haven't written about, but I would like to. People are interested in what people did during the Depression. And I have a whole bundle of detailed little budget sheets that tell what we paid for everything. If you read it now, it is unbelievable. We made fifty dollars a month on Fred's Freshman English class besides his scholarship. I would like to have a picture of me in my old grey coat waiting for canned beef, WPA canned beef. I felt that I knew what it was like to be a woman with a child by the hand and a child under the belt going out to find food.

*Did you feel it was a hardship at the time?*

No, I just took it for granted. All our friends were scholarship students. I remember some people were rich, but we went to Coolidge Concerts where I learned to love the Beethoven Quartets. Later I managed to find records of the

quartets, and I still play them when I write. They help me to concentrate. Fred was a musician with a beautiful voice, choirmaster in the Palo Alto Ward. I worked in the MIA. I met Crawford Gates at that time. He was very young, living with his mother. I still have the hymn book from the branch—I suppose that's robbery.

*That's where Dialogue began, you know.*

Yes, that was a really good place. I had quite an interesting correspondence with Crawford about an idea I had for a musical. It was about a little French woman who was a camp follower in the army. Maybe that's why Crawford didn't want to write the music for it! It was going to be very facetious, about a chorus of wives singing quotations from Brigham Young about fashions. I loved the lines telling the women that if they wanted silk, they would have to raise the worms! So, this little French girl was a spy who infiltrates Salt Lake City and becomes a seamstress and thinks seriously about becoming another of Brigham's wives. I had a chorus of Indians that came to ask Brigham, "How?" I suppose I wanted to interest Gentiles.

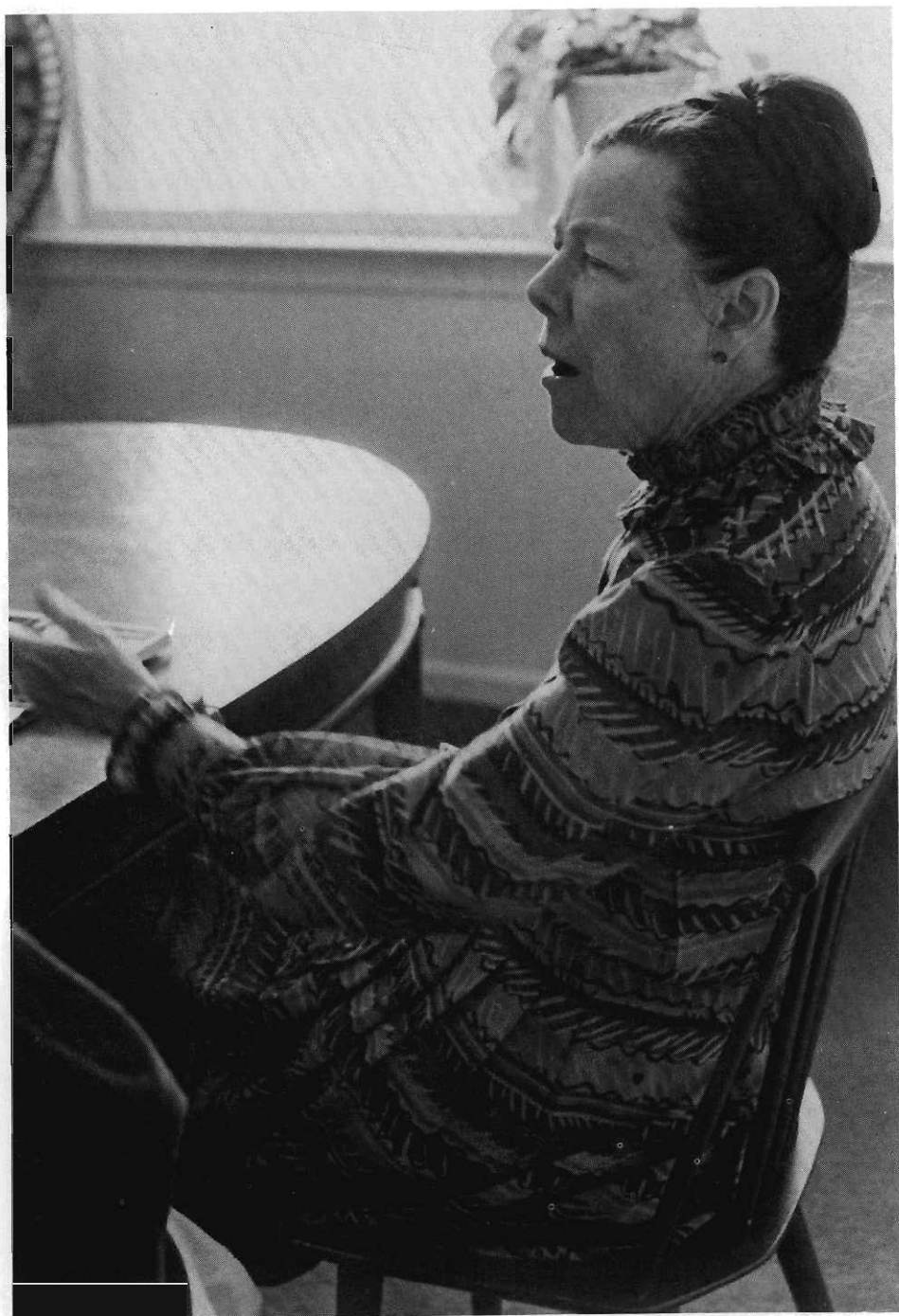
*I understand you also went to school with Sam Taylor.*

Yes, at the Y, and then he was at Stanford too. When I had my babies and went to the hospital, he brought me reading material. He told me I was a very good writer, and since my husband needed money, it was very silly of me not to earn some. He brought me the pulps, showed me what was in them and was going to help me earn money. I said, "But I have the play to finish." I was taking a poetry class from Ivor Winters, and he liked my blank verse. He read some of it to the class and said, "This is very good. I'm not sure the author quite knows what she is doing, but she's doing it." That interested me and I thought—hmmm, I have an idea for a play. I will do it in blank verse to prove to Ivor Winters that I know what I am doing. That was the first really serious thing I did. I called it the "Hungry Moon" and based it on the legend of Timpanogos.

*So you decided not to write for the pulps.*

I never really thought of the pulps. I was writing poetry during that period. I might have turned into what you call a Great Occasion Poet. In Copenhagen there is a little shop run by a man called a "Great Occasion Poet." You can hire him to do a wedding poem, to accompany gifts, or whatever. I never give Alec a gift without writing a verse with it. You can make so many statements with gifts!

To return to my life with Fred, after he finished his degree at Stanford, we moved to Terre Haute, Indiana State. This Fred Sorensen was a very stormy petrel. He couldn't get along with authority. I don't know why, with his



Mormon background, but I think he expected all authorities to be infallible. Whenever they were not, he battled with them. He was an advanced liberal, too, very much embattled about the blacks. He led a black singing quartet at Terre Haute, and he was embroiled in controversy over the fact that blacks couldn't use the college pool at the same time as whites. My son, Fred, told me the other day that in his later life, Fred Senior was extremely conservative. I think the same pattern is in the whole church. From the liberalism of 150 years ago to today where conservatism holds the fort. It happens to people. It happens to institutions.

*Did Fred's activism bother you?*

I went along with it. I thought he was right in everything he did. I do think I got that from the Saints. Do what your husband does.

*Didn't your mother-in-law live with you for a time?*

For ten years. I dedicated *A Little Lower Than the Angels* to her. It was her story, her family—the Bakers. I used the family names, but it bothered some of the family that the wrong character wet the bed!

*Did having Fred's mother with you help or hinder you in the writing?*

In fact, she helped me rather more than I liked. You see, I liked to be alone in my kitchen. So I began to write and then I was grateful to her because she gave me the freedom to write. In my dedication, I say "to Mother S/who like one divine/dispenses truth and time."

*Did you write Angels while you were in Terre Haute, not far from Nauvoo?*

Yes, I spent some time alone in a little place called the Nauvoo House. There was a great warehouse of Mormon furniture nearby. I still sleep in the bed I bought there—a great showpiece, with a trundle. It is built so high above the ground, I will soon need a ladder to climb into it!

*You spent several months writing in Nauvoo?*

About a month. The family came to visit. It was published in 1942. I remember walking down by the river in Nauvoo and watching nuns gathering tomatoes with their white aprons, each of them carrying a basket. I have always wanted to paint that scene, like a picture I saw at the National Gallery in Washington—picking cranberries on Nantucket. Perhaps I will put the colors into a weaving. It is so enriching to have music and weaving and writing going all at once. I suppose my writing suffers, though. I take my notebook and put it beside the loom. I used to have the theory that you could get your ideas while doing housework. This didn't please the women's clubs,

who asked, "How can you take care of your family and washing and still write?" And I said, "Oh, washing windows is great; hanging out clothes is fine." So weaving is good too.

*It calms the busybody part of the mind.*

When I am reading on my own, I am apt to miss things now and then. When you approach seventy, you start falling asleep, but I can listen to someone else read while I am weaving.

*As you are aware, in Dialogue, BYU Studies, and Sunstone, your work is being rediscovered. Ed Geary, Bruce Jorgensen, Linda Sillitoe, Lawrence Lee and others have studied your novels, especially The Evening and The Morning.*

I have enjoyed reading about myself, of course, and Alec has too. He has been very kind about most of my work although he thinks I'm apt to hold forth too long before I get the story going. He felt that in my last novel—*The Man With the Key*, I could have done without the whole first half.

*I thought it was needed as background for the characters.*

I thought so too, but Alec doesn't think you need any excuse for someone to become fascinated with another race or with something exotic. I see now that it was a book that was necessary for me to write at the time.

*I think it a good picture of the sixties.*

Of course, I regarded it as an opportunity to look at the campus and some of the things that happened to me there. I put all my campus experiences together, all the problems, the flavor of campus life. That is the only time I ever wrote about it even though I spent many years living on campuses when I was married to Fred.

*Was your life so difficult that you felt it easier to escape into the past?*

Oh, all my life I was escaping into something—my poetry, my stories. I liked to embroider things even when I was telling something that had just happened. I romanticized it. I made it more interesting than it was.

*Was that escape or was it simply your gift?*

I think both, don't you?

*Some people don't feel a need to embroider the present.*

They don't? Of course, some of my experiences really can't be bettered.

What are some?

Well, love. I have never felt able to satisfy myself with any description of how it feels to be in love.

*You may have been the first Mormon novelist to deal with a love story in a modern way, especially explaining the feelings of a woman. You also dealt with illegitimate love in a Mormon context. That was really rather daring. First, in Angels. . .*

Then, in *On This Star* and *The Evening and The Morning*.

*The meeting between East and West. . .*

I see now why some people found those stories unsavory. But I didn't think so at the time. It seemed to me to be how life was. I thought every kind of love fascinating. And every age added varieties of feelings. That's why I wanted to write *The Evening and The Morning*. I wanted to compare the child, the mother and grandmother. When you think that I had five generations of experience available to me—my grandmother telling me stories of her childhood and my mother and myself and my daughter, and now my granddaughter! By the time I started writing for children, think what riches I had! Isn't that exciting? You touch five generations.

I think I'd like to do some more of that. I've always dreamed of doing a family reunion. I've had it in my imagination before Eudora Welty wrote her reunion book. It's fascinating how different Mormon family reunions are! I envy the Mormon families who have enough cousins and second cousins to take over a whole area for a day—like Aspen—and read papers to the group.

*That's a popular theme right now. Will the character in your novel return to her family reunion?*

Yes, that's why I have done all these beginnings. I've considered leaving all the history out and have some family scholar read a journal—like the journals collected by my dear friends, the Hafens. Some scholarly member of the family could read an article, one that *Dialogue* might publish. Or perhaps a little journal could be discovered.

*Is your novel going to be a sequel to Kingdom Come?*

No, I don't think so. I have invented so many things! I have six or seven chunks of material that will probably end up being chunks. I am writing a great many different beginnings and some endings. I had a notion that I would come back to America to finish the book, but I felt it must be justified so I wrote up quite an application for the National Endowment hoping to get a fellowship. This bothered me, though, because I don't really need the money. I was using it as an excuse to come back, so I abandoned the idea. I began

feeling rather deperate because in Morocco, there are small groups of Americans and English who go out to lunch every day. I was going to lunch and wasn't doing a morning's work. The day is spoiled and I am loggy. I came back to America to finish *The Man With the Key* and *Around the Corner*, you see—but it took a stint at MacDowell. I have never delivered a story in Morocco, except *Friends of the Road* a year ago last March.

*Didn't you and Alec first meet at MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire?*

Yes, I was working on *Miracles on Maple Hill* and *Plain Girl*, my greatest successes!

*They sold more copies and won prizes.*

Yes, and twenty years later, they are still providing me with an income. When I worked at MacDowell, that was the absolute peak! I considered that the peak of my efficiency. As you know, MacDowell is a colony for writers to which we come and finish our work in absolute privacy. I was having difficulty working at home, and my agent persuaded me to go. I was getting ready to go to Denmark for my second Guggenheim, so I used the first part of it to go to MacDowell to finish the work at hand, and then to Denmark for *Kindom Come*.

*You were greatly helped by fellowships, then.*

Yes. They helped me to do *The Proper Gods*. Actually, the first Guggenheim was for following Sam Brannan around, but when I met the Yaqui Indians, I fell in love with them and out of love with Sam. After all, he was interested only in land, mining and railroads. Of course, when Brigham sent his emissary at San Francisco to collect Sam's tithing, Sam said, "I will send him ten percent when he sends me a receipt signed by God." I rather liked that.

*The Proper Gods certainly has a strong sense of place.*

I try to find stories that came out of the ground wherever I am. Consider the Amish and their big farms—in *Plain Girl*, and the poor in Alabama, which led to *Curious Missie*. Now Morocco has become a strong place in my consciousness, but I may have to leave it to write about it.

*There is much talk nowadays about how women can free themselves to write.*

Yes, I know. They do need help. If children are omnipresent, you aren't going to do much. I didn't write for children until my children were grown up. It seems very odd to me now. I told them stories, and I used to read to them every night, but I didn't write my stories down. The occasion didn't come until after they were grown. Then I ran into the bookmobiles, and my interest

in both children and books finally came together. When someone said to me, "Your children are the best characters in your novels," I realized that it would be beautiful to write for children. It would get me out from under the obsessive problems of scholarship.

*Tell me about the bookmobile.*

We had moved to Alabama, and the librarians in Auburn invited me to a dinner honoring writers. I told the story of my grandfather and his handcart full of books and about the Carnegie Library in Manti that didn't refuse me anything! I could take home six books if I wanted to. I told them how awful it was that they had so few libraries, how difficult for their young people, how deprived they must be!

Afterwards, they asked me if I would do a little story explaining to the people how they could get a bookmobile. So I went all over the state on the bookmobile and fell in love with the people who came for the books. It became a very exciting job and I found myself with quite a career, I was even quoted in the *Congressional Record* and that did impress my father. He didn't know that everything gets into the *Congressional Record*!

*Shall we talk about Alec some more?*

He has written the third volume of his memoirs. It has a chapter called "Virginia Sorensen" and a chapter called "Virginia on Her Own" that ends with his proposal. He says, "And now I think we should be married." He has said elsewhere that it wasn't because his life ended there but because he thinks the marriage is my story to tell.

*Has he been a great help to your writing?*

Oh, yes. The best thing about it is his idea that there is nothing in life as important as doing your work.

*That is not what you were led to believe before?*

No, it was always secondary. I always had a guilty feeling when my work succeeded. Maybe success would cause problems at home, or maybe it would hurt somebody. Maybe my children would be better without it. I don't think you ever get over that. But Alec has helped me to believe that staying with my work was the best thing I could do. It was essential to what I was, what I loved to do, what I did well. "You are a born writer!" That was his attitude! If you are a born writer, you write!

*Wouldn't it be grand if we could all do that for each other?*

Ideal. I have one editor who says, "Virginia only writes when she is unhappy, so we can hope that Virginia will be unhappy." I think she is right. I have



been far too happy the last ten or twelve years. My life seems exactly what I want. I need to come back to America, but I have been happy in Morocco. We have had our flat eleven years, and I have produced only *The Man With the Key* and *Friends of the Road*. Not very much, is it?

I do think though that complete concentration is what leads to fantastic production. That's what MacDowell is and I do wish you could go there. It's really more a case of putting yourself in a position to concentrate rather than being happy or unhappy. Nothing is permitted to interrupt at MacDowell. That is the one place in the world where work is sacred. You forget that things are bothering you. What happens in the real world when a poem is interrupted? You lose the train of thought. It leaves you feeling desperate, you can't get back, and you give up. Now Katherine Anne Porter had a tremendous reputation and very little production. Tillie Olsen published only a handful. The important thing is not doing a great deal but doing whatever you do very well. I can't be satisfied now. I have all these little notebooks, and I do them over and over. I had my son type six chapters from my notebooks so that I could stop writing in them. And the first thing I did was go over his work and change it and start on another notebook.

I don't know how I will ever get complete concentration again. I may have to go to MacDowell, but I hate to leave Alec that long. He'll be eighty-two next July. I need to concentrate long enough to make the characters come into my life and stay with me. Until that happens, the book is not on its feet.

*It's not happening yet with your new novel?*

Well, I am thinking about it most of the time. And I think I am putting in, quite helplessly, a whole wad of autobiography. I have the character returning to Utah just as I did after my sisters died. There are so many feelings and bits of feelings, reflections about the family, even stories that have come down through the family. My great-grandfather, for instance, Grandfather Blackett, carried lumber over the mountains and was killed by drinking from a poisoned spring. And I want to write about my father. But I think of what Ed Kimball said in his interview about the biography of his father. "Well, you ask me if I've put in any warts. I didn't see any." I feel that way about my own father. If I were to write a biography of my father, he would seem the perfect man.

*What other characters will you put in the book?*

I've wanted to follow my young man from Copenhagen, you remember Svend Madsen in *Kingdom Come*? I want to find out what happened to five generations, but it's so immense! The number that came from just two people is frightening!

*You will have to pick and choose.*

Yes, I have the old aunt who is a genealogist—I love her character. Like

many, congenial, testy smart old women I know. When they abandon genealogy, something will be lost. It will be just a bunch of statistics. Anyway, I have her making the family book, the Madsen book. She is the focal point.

*Sounds like another wonderful female character. You know, Linda Sillitoe wrote a paper on the women characters in Mormon literature. She pointed out that Kate Alexander is the only one who did not come to a bad end. She was the most fully developed character, almost a feminist.*

I am delighted that people thought she was a feminist character. I have always felt that things must change so women can be themselves. Because your children don't last. I sometimes think the Church forgets that. Your children grow up! They're so soon from the nest. In our culture, children are gone by high school.

*Of course, the idea is to have so many of them that by the time the older ones leave, the younger ones are still there.*

Oh, I see. I had forgotten. If that's the one thing you felt was of any value, you would go on producing children. I do feel a little pang when my best friend writes and says, "I'll soon have my fiftieth wedding anniversary. I have eighteen grandchildren." I have only three. I am not jealous of her life, though. Yes, I had forgotten that they keep on having babies. In this world that seems a reckless thing to do. The Church doesn't feel that there are too many people in the world?

*I suppose there is always room for more.*

Of course, there is the universe. All time, all space.

*When you were growing up, the emphasis was on gods and goddesses. Now the emphasis is "I am a Child of God. I must become worthy to return and live with my Father." A slightly different concept.*

I felt that very much when I was a child—To become a god! My mother sent me to all the meetings and there I learned a sense of becoming. My mother gave me roots in that way. Roots that may shake a little but still they hold fast. They provide nourishment.

*Some people think that if you are not a card-carrying temple recommend member, you are not a Mormon writer.*

I was married in the temple. I was very active in Palo Alto. When I wrote *Angels*, I was going to a little church that met in a lodge hall. It was a very amusing group of people. They all wanted to be officers. I must admit that the

apostasy of my mother's mother—Kate Alexander—had a great influence on my life. You know, I rather like scamps and skeptics in novels. You can do so much more with them than with a saint.

*When you were active in the Church, was it easier to write about Mormons?*

Oh yes, I am very deprived now that I don't know what's going on. That's one thing stopping me. If I have my character return to Mormon country, I don't know what she will be returning to. I don't know how they're holding their meetings or what they are up to.

*You'll just have to come to church with me.*

I have a Mormon library in my bedroom that fills four shelves. I have a battery of material that is old, old—

I am almost finished with my children's handcart story, and I am doing a strange thing with it. I found in Bill Mulder's collection—*Among the Mormons*—an account of Dickens visiting a Mormon ship. So I thought, why doesn't Dickens visit my Mormon ship? He describes the young people writing and studying English. My little girl is there and Great-Grandfather was the teacher, so he would be on the ship. I have Dickens talk to this young girl the way he does in his article. He tells her that he publishes a magazine called *Household Words* and he would very much like to know what happens to her and where she goes after she gets to America. He says, "It will be a wonderful story and I'm a story teller," so I have her doing the story for Mr. Dickens. How does it strike you?

*I like it.*

And then, of course, he was a great friend of Hans Christian Andersen, whom she adored, so I bring in Hans Christian Andersen. Dickens could be on the docks to meet Andersen. There's no reason why he shouldn't be there! And that's the way I will use history. I do think it's a very good idea. When I had the inspiration of bringing in Dickens and Andersen, I rushed to tell Alec about it, and I brought him this article of Dickens and he was very doubtful about manipulating history that way. I scolded him, "Why do you discourage me?"

*If you have already played a love scene between Eliza Snow and Joseph Smith, surely Dickens can be brought in!*

I think I will finish the little book this summer. My agent is waiting.

*Do you write differently for children? Do you adjust your style?*

I haven't found any adjustment necessary. I have children in my adult novels.

You can tell the same story to a child and to a grown-up, and you will adjust it quite without thinking. There are things that don't interest children.

*Where Nothing is Long Ago is a good bridge between children and adults.*

Of course, I actually used part of *The Evening and Morning*—in there—"The Secret Summer." It seemed the part of the book that hadn't fit in.

*You have been able to write on several levels. The Man with the Key was a picture of a mature woman's sexuality, a subject not much written about in Mormon culture.*

Yes, quite a few women have written me about it. Of course that was not a Mormon novel.

I work so slowly now that I get discouraged with myself. I think that life handed me some big slaps when it took both my sisters and when something went wrong with me too. I thought I wouldn't be here now. I hadn't expected to be alive still. I don't know why I didn't think of leaving some important messages, but I didn't. Now I expect to be around for a while, and I very much want to finish the work I've begun. Life seems more precious to me now. For the last few years I have developed a superior awareness. I am much more calm in spirit.

*What do you think about some of the articles and pamphlets being written about you now?*

They actually give me a tremendous lift! When your books are out of print and you've given them up to find that someone is reading a book that came out over twenty-five years ago is also very hopeful. When I learned that *Dialogue* readers and professors and writers at BYU and in Salt Lake were reading me again, it made me very much want to do a good modern Mormon novel. I need to get to work!