

Don't Fence Me In: A Conversation About Mormon Fiction

CUSTOM/CULTURE; SACRED/PROFANE; VISION/IMAGINATION; literal/figurative—call them borderlands, call them crossroads—we catch glimpses of possibility and more fully understand the limits of our faith in these places. And the place where “Mormon” crosses “literature” looks like the heart of the heart of the country we’re surveying. No utopia, though—it’s also ground zero in the ongoing “Who’s on the Lord’s side, who?” turf wars of Mormon thought. Our most prominent writers seem to flee from the center—Brian Evenson comes up against the boundaries of cultural acceptance; Terry Tempest Williams calls herself a member of a “border tribe”; and Judith Freeman sets out for a “desert of pure feeling.” But what is more Mormon than this—flight, exodus, redefinition, destiny?

Gathering fiction and poetry for this issue of *Dialogue* was certainly an exercise in this kind of renegotiation, and some editorial selections might seem renegade to those who like their “Mormon” literature well-marked and familiar. The contributing artists themselves had questions and concerns, and it seemed right to bring them consciously into this discussion. Four of us met at a westside Salt Lake City Mexican restaurant to talk over this terrain, to see if we had found a “no-place” or grounds for possibility.

Joanna Brooks: First things first: which of the twelve tribes is your favorite?

Sam Cannon: Ephraim.

Sean Ziebarth: Manasseh—the only one I remember.

SC: We’re all in Ephraim, right?

SZ: We’re all in a cool little town in Central Utah?

JB: And you, David?

David Seiter: Navajo.

JB: You've all given me stories or poems for *Dialogue*.

SC: I felt like my work was expected to be obviously Mormon, that my characters would be obviously Mormon, and I have not at this point written any obviously Mormon characters.

JB: "Obviously" Mormon?

SC: Characters who obviously go to homemaking meeting and priesthood. As it stands, I could take the story I've given you and add a footnote that all those characters are Mormons. Would that make it Mormon fiction?

SZ: As I see it, there are three kinds of Mormon fiction. First, you have the Gerald Lund *Work and the Glory* type, propaganda written to further the church. I guess Jack Weyland falls in this category too, and Spencer Kimball's comment that we would have great artists, Shakespeares, who would talk about Book of Mormon events. Second, I see the Doug Thayer school, guys who studied in Eugene England's Mormon Literature class at BYU, guys who grew up in Utah. Their stories are almost like personal essays. Levi Peterson types. Finally, there are Mormons who write fiction. Mormonism may pop up just as easily as UFOs.

JB: And we'd all place ourselves in that last category. We write fiction, and Mormonism may show up in the furnishings. I'd like to push things a little farther. You can honestly tell me that a lifetime of listening to stories told according to some fairly recognizable cultural conventions—testimonies, conference talks, Sunday school lessons, a lifetime of reading the scriptures, that none of this has affected the way you write? That your sense of development and closure, your conception of redemption has not been affected by so much reading and listening?

DS: You mean, like start a story with *Webster's Dictionary* defines such-and-such as . . . ?

SZ: I see how it could affect my stories sometimes, but probably it has more to do with the reader. A Mormon reader might find Mormon language in our stories. I came across this story in a literary journal (I forget which one) and the author was using terms like "Families are Forever," and I knew, I just *knew* she was Mormon, though none of her characters were Mormon-identified.

JB: Pushing you a little farther, even some of the same props show up in our stories—cups of coffee, cigarettes, half-lit living rooms, dysfunction, and then a dim type of redemption.

SC: You find all that in Raymond Carver, too.

DS: Redemption is an issue in most literature. With the coffee and the cigarettes, maybe those who haven't experienced much of that world tend to relieve the tension fictionally.

SZ: I'm sure there is something in our psyches, and maybe it makes

us write about redemption in more specific and resolute ways.

DS: Redemption can be rich subject matter; it's interesting stuff. I'm fighting this classification, the labeling of redemption as a necessarily "Mormon" part of our fiction.

JB: Who else here grew up reading Jack Weyland and the Yorgason brothers?

DS: I did. I think everybody's read *Charly*.

SZ: I did.

SC: I didn't. But I had this companion who gave me this Yorgason-type book in the M.T.C. [Missionary Training Center], a real gift from his heart. He said that this book meant so much to him, that it represented what he'd been through.

SZ: That's so M.T.C.

SC: I tried to suspend my fiction bias in the M.T.C. But after reading the first twenty pages, I already knew what was going to happen. So I read the last twenty pages and I was right. It was a new copy, so when I returned it to my companion, he could see that I'd only cracked the spine for the first and last chapters. He could see that I didn't read the whole thing and he was upset. He said, "Why didn't you read it?" And I told him, "Because I knew what was going to happen." Which didn't seem to comfort him much.

DS: In the grouping Sean described, which I agree with, groups one and two are very concerned with message and meaning—with significant themes and symbols. I am more concerned with aesthetics, with language. I don't write in order to teach people how to live.

SZ: Good point. Me, too.

JB: If it's just the concern with aesthetics that distinguishes one group from another, how do you explain the congruence in groups one and two of what we might consider not-so-good aesthetics and explicitly Mormon themes and subjects?

SC: I don't think that's necessarily so. Walter Kim's story "Whole Other Bodies" is a stunning, stunning story in terms of craft, and it's explicitly Mormon.

JB: I think you could put Susan Howe's stories in that category.

SZ: Walter's left the church, hasn't he? Can an ex-Mormon writer craft Mormon fiction?

SC: His story deals with Mormon themes. Some of his details are off, but it literally is a conversion story. What's more Mormon than that?

DS: The key thing is that he doesn't reduce the fiction to a vehicle.

JB: What about the other end of the spectrum—like Brian Evenson? I want to make it clear that I respect him and his work and that I think BYU handled him very poorly, but I get the sense reading Brian that he's responding to the Mormonism in his writing by trying to be punk, trying

to be hard-core. Kind of like the kids you see stomping around Salt Lake in their all-black Gothic wear listening to industrial music.

SZ: He's definitely trying to be hard-core. He likes industrial music, in fact. What was horrible is that his book jacket pinned him: "active Mormon, former bishop." And when the label doesn't seem to fit, he gets marginalized. People reduce everything to fiction equals lie, Mormonism equals true. There's this tension, that everything one writes has to point to Christ, or the Thirteenth Article of Faith: "If there is anything of good report or praiseworthy . . ." The writing can be praiseworthy in other ways.

SC: And to be judged by the things your characters do . . .

SZ: It just shows how dangerous it is to get pegged like that. The threat of excommunication over a piece of fiction.

DS: I would hate to be pigeon-holed on a dust jacket. When I married Eryn [Berg], I went to court to get my name legally hyphenated. But when I send my stuff out, I do it as David Seiter, not David Berg-Seiter so that no one will pre-judge me or my politics based on a hyphenated name.

SZ: You could change your first name to Kelly, so there'd be no gender.

DS: I heard this writer critiquing Brian Evenson, demanding, "You've got to remember your audience." He was so insistent that writers can control what their readers think, like somebody would read your story and go out and do the same thing in real life. Those kinds of writers, their stuff is not going to get published in the literary journals. It's only showing up in BYU-sponsored publications.

SC: But what about *Battlestar Galactica*?

JB: Or *Natural Born Killers*. Someone in my stake wrote that.

DS: I don't sit down and say, "I want to inspire the youth of Zion." My drive is aesthetic, not moral.

SZ: So Mormonism appears as a prop in the story.

JB: Beyond the prop level. Bear with me as I propose this again—isn't it possible that after years of filmstrip-watching and seminary-attending and Cougarettes and casseroles that some of that aesthetic is Mormon-cultivated?

SZ: Yes, I think we're tainted by it, colored by it.

SC: But my fiction is equally, if not more, tainted by the fact that I am a man.

DS: My impulse is to say that I am not affected by Mormon storytelling, but I think that would be really presumptuous. It's probably at work, but subtly.

SZ: Although I did use chiasmus—that Book of Mormon trick—in one of my poems the other day. I was like, "Hmmm, let's see how this

works.”

SC: But you didn't use it to teach anybody.

DS: Now I'm curious. I want to start a story with “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents.”

SZ: But it's not like we all learned to write through the *Ensign*.

JB: Didn't anyone else here enter those *New Era* contests? What I'm talking about is structural, and yes, it's subtle.

SZ: I love how Darrell Spencer ties it together: God reveals things through language, and everything in the universe is in flux, including language.

SC: The way I think about fiction and doctrine is dichotomized really; they are two separate things.

SZ: Now that I think about it, I read doctrine through fiction, not fiction through doctrine. What I love in fiction is what I love in our doctrine.

JB: That's how I read the Book of Mormon, actually. FARMS is busy running around Central America, digging up artifacts and scrutinizing geography. That stuff has nothing to do with my belief. I am a literary scholar and a writer—I believe words can be inspired and inspirational and true without having any actual reference to real life and material evidence.

SC: To me, it doesn't matter how doctrine gets presented. Even if a general conference talk is boring and monotone, I say, “So what?” I focus on the content. Fiction and doctrine are split for me. Two separate things.

JB: Why can't our culture recognize that split? Why doesn't BYU see things that way?

SZ: Look at what happened to Brian Evenson. I could never teach at BYU.

SC: It is bad at BYU. When we did a *Sunstone* panel, someone asked me, “My daughter writes, should she go to BYU?”

JB: And I hope you said that no young woman with professional aspirations should subject herself to BYU.

SC: Not quite, but I did tell him they were chasing away some fine teachers.

DS: Except the best fiction teacher ever—Darrell Spencer. [*Everyone present is a former student of Darrell Spencer, and everyone vigorously assents.*]

SZ: Calling our work “Mormon fiction” really puts it in danger. I didn't even want to do this interview for fear of being pigeonholed, for fear of scrutiny, even though I haven't published a book yet.

SC: I don't live under paranoia . . . yet.

SZ: And our names are here, and who knows who reads *Dialogue*.

SC: If your name is associated with Brian Evenson's, people will think, “He might be one of *those* . . .”

SZ: I saw this profile of a Mormon cartoonist in the *Ensign*. His car-

toons have little temples in the background, and there's a quote from him saying, "I never show my characters drinking or smoking . . . I've never been happier in all my life." Do I have to make all my characters active Mormons? Do I have to play that game?

SC: Does everyone in my imagination have to be an active Mormon?

JB: I know that you were all hesitant to do this interview, and that you've been pretty resistant throughout to being identified or pegged. We're all cautious—we were at BYU during the September 1993 excommunications, during the Farr/Knowlton firings. I was baptized in the year of ERA—and you bet I knew who Sonia Johnson was. These things will affect us for the rest of our lives.

SC: Even at the *Sunstone* panel, even what I thought should be a pretty liberal, sympathetic crowd totally resisted the assertion that fiction is just fiction.

SZ: Even left-wing Mormons are not an entirely friendly bunch.

JB: Still, at the cultural center, we have these narrowly defined expectations, these preconditions as to what we will recognize as our own, as Mormon art.