THE MORMON FICTION MISSION

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As Latter-day Saints, we are under obligation to fulfill three specific missions: perfecting the saints, spreading the gospel, and redeeming the dead. As LDS writers, we add a particular covenant and mission to "the word made flesh."[1] Eugene England would probably say that our role in the making of the word precedes that of any other literary redemptive mission: "If [we] cannot do justice to the visible world and make of it fictions which are believable, [we] cannot be trusted to bear witness to the invisible world."[2]

As writers, how do we fulfill these four missions? First, the threefold mission of the church: the work of the ministry requires that we consider audiences outside the LDS experience. Writing to these audiences tests severely any use of "the common metaphors of the Mormon journey"—unless we are so egotistical as to assume that the Mormon journey *is* the human journey. Writing to the Gentile also questions the notion that only Mormons will read a Mormon book.

Redeeming the dead by the word becomes slightly more problematic as redemption comes only through a full confession of actual events: "inspiring stories and uncomfortable truths about . . . the past."[3] This, too, is a difficult mission, just as it was difficult for Ender to confront the truth of the Bugger Queen in Orson Scott Card's science fiction novel *Ender's Game*.[4] It requires us—writer, reader, and critic—to root out the disbelief and shame in ourselves regarding the discord in our past, to present ourselves and our church as true and honest to the world.

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1. Eugene England, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years," *BYU Studies* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 135.
2. Ibid.
3. Michael D. Quinn, "150 Years of Truth and Consequences about Mormon History," *Sunstone* (February 1992): 12.
4. Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (New York: Tor Books, 1992).

Perfecting the saints seems the easiest mission for the LDS writer: writing to a captive audience, about a subject shared in common, in a supposedly common language with common metaphors for the edification of both reader and writer. And for exactly the same reasons, this perfecting of the Saints is perhaps the hardest mission for the LDS writer to adequately, truthfully, faithfully fulfill.

Surprisingly, Richard H. Cracroft considers this perfecting of the saints the major, if not the only, mission of the LDS writer. Expressing disbelief that others outside the church would deign to read an LDS-authored book, he relegates the LDS writer to the position of literary home teacher, placing upon the Mormon writer the restriction of writing only in the metaphors of Mormonism to orthodox Mormon audiences who "cultivate a sense of God in their lives and seek about them the presence of the divine, eschewing faithlessness, doubt, and rebellion—not coddling it—and quietly enduring uncertainty."[5] He reduces the Mormon audience's literary intelligence to a dismay that not all Mormon books "reflect a Mormon world view with which they can identify."[6]

To live as a Mormon and believe as a Mormon is to be constantly aware of the difference of our view: with the world around and in the soul within. Being Mormon means having to live with ambiguity, between how our life is and how we tell ourselves and others it should be. Being Mormon means living with the constant failure to be perfect and the constant possibility of joy. It means not splitting to some theoretical world away from the human condition with its accompanying experiences, mistakes, weaknesses, and ambiguities—which is, however, what some Mormon fiction, claimed by and written to this general LDS audience attempts to do.

To ask writers to tell the truth as some critics expect of them is to ask for writers as missionaries. The impulse of most missionaries is to speak the truth as best they know how, the truth as they know it. Not more, not less. The fear of most missionaries is to speak falsely, to speak more than they know. However, to complicate the missionary's task, we add, to the plain injunction to speak gospel truth gained through faith and experience, cultural notions about propriety and piety which confuse the message with the messenger: no inappropriate relations with the opposite sex; be in at 10:30; avoid dissension; only an hour for dinner at members' houses, etc. If you are the messenger, it is easier, at times, you feel, even more imperative, to satisfy these proper notions than to tell the truth as you know it.

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5. Richard H. Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," *Sunstone* (July 1993): 52.

6. Ibid., 54.

My official mission voice was about as unauthentic a voice as I have ever used: a cross between my mission president's Star Valley, Wyoming, whine, an East Bench real estate developer's confidentiality, and the local Amway salesperson. A sort of desperately authoritarian steam train listing to the beat of seven-syllable discussion lines. But it was official. It was sanctioned. Sure, it taught false doctrine at times, skirted around the truth, but my shirt was always buttoned, my hair always in place, and I was always polite. If people interrupted me while I was picking my teeth to ask me a question about the church, I could feel the lights go on, the spiel about to begin. There were other moments, though, when I spoke plainly, simply, without complete assurance, the truth as I knew it. Not as I had been taught it, not as I knew I should know it, but as I knew it. Even then, it was not without risk. Could I tell my mission president that I cackled like a cowardly chicken when Phil refused to be baptized? Could I share with my companion the fear in my stomach as we reached the Joseph Smith story, the embarrassment rising to my cheeks at just how backwoods all this sounded? So I raced to the "I knew and I knew God knew, and I could not deny it" (JS-H 25) and let Joseph say it for me—Joseph, who knew it so much more than I did.

To be an LDS speaker or writer of truth, gospel, or the personal is to take risks. First, the very notion of writing is belittled by a "uniformly accusatory environment."[7] Second, the messenger may not sound as, or be what, she is supposed to be, and, thus, the message is discredited. See, for example, Gladys Farmer and her collection of short stories, *Elders and Sisters*.[8] It was "banned by Deseret Book" for not making her "characters less human" and consequently more "equal to the task."[9] By the acceptance of the male-authored *Under the Cottonwoods* for sale in the same weeks by Deseret Book, it seems Farmer was not a messenger authorized to bear witness of the "uncomfortable truth" she "revealed about Mormonism."[10]

Third, the writer's truth might not be the officially sanctioned or culturally accepted truth of the general LDS audience. It might be an unwelcome truth, too close for comfort, an insistent reminder that we are also human in this endeavor. About ten years ago, I entered an essay into a writing competition on campus, detailing my experience as a young girl with sexual abuse and the eventual repentance and forgiveness both of myself and of the perpetrator. The essay caused some consternation

7. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "Making 'The Good' Good for Something: A Direction for Mormon Literature," *Dialogue* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 106.

8. Gladys Farmer, *Elders and Sisters* (Provo, Utah: Seagull Books, 1977).

9. Gladys Farmer, "A Footnote in Mormon Literature," unpublished manuscript, 1-2.

10. Quinn, 12.

among the judges. I read one critique which called it "perhaps the most Christian essay in the competition." But ultimately, the subject matter was deemed unfit for a general LDS audience, and the essay was excluded from the competition. President Rex Lee, however, decided to award me $750 for my efforts. At the time, more worried about paying for my wedding dress than making a stand for all sexually abused women who were part of that general LDS audience, I took the money and ran. But I am bothered now. Particularly in the light of subsequent experiences.

She came to me during office hours a couple of years later. A freshman honors student, she had been in my class for only six weeks. I didn't know her very well; she was a quiet but fervent student. The previous week's reading assignment had been another of my essays which hinted slightly at the sexual abuse. She asked me tremulously, "You know . . . this line here, does this mean that . . ." She could not say the words, but I understood. "Yes," I said. Through her tears, she said, "I thought I was the only one."

For the next hour, this young woman unloaded to a virtual stranger ten years of silence about her father, the stellar professor on campus, the stalwart temple attender, the award-winning researcher, the family man who had molested her when she was ten years old. She spoke of feelings of unworthiness as she sat in Relief Society lessons about temple marriage. She tried to understand why she felt such anger and such love at the same time. She tried to explain the hurt, the bewilderment as her father continued his apparently approved life in the church and she fell further and further behind. Most of all, she wondered how God could let this happen. I knew her questions, I knew her pain, I knew her struggles. I had written my answer, but it was judged unfit for a general LDS audience.

The reasoning might be that the LDS story does not include sexual abuse of a child by its parents. That's not one of the six discussions. The Mormon story does not include divorce, suicide, excommunication, apathy, indifference, fraud, domestic violence, a Cowboy Jesus. The Mormon story is faith, repentance, baptism by immersion, the gift of the Holy Ghost, the vision of the boy prophet, a God who intervenes to aid his children. Ironically, the writing of my essay on sexual abuse allowed me to come closer to "the undisclosed center"[11] of the Atonement than any other spiritual exercise. To find the words to describe the act, the reaction, and the healing was to make whole the events, to seal them up as best I could, and offer it as a sacrifice for the building of the kingdom, to lay it on his altar and wait for his acceptance.[12] Perhaps that was my

11. B. W. Jorgensen, "Up Against the Flannelboard," Review of *Corey Davidson*, by Randall L. Hall, *Sunstone* 10, no. 11 (August 1986): 46.

12. See Paris Anderson, *Waiting for the Flash* (Orem, Utah: Scotlin, 1988), 115.

Mormon answer to the human question. And in writing it, I had entered into a discussion, a missionary discussion if you will: intimate, private, not *the* Mormon story, but a Mormon story sharing weakness, trials of the flesh, doubt in the Atonement, the workings of the Savior, the need for forgiveness, the love of a father for a child. It was a story not needed by the general LDS audience, but welcomed by a specific LDS reader. Finally, there is no general audience, only readers one by one, as there are converts, one by one.

The fourth reason writing truth is risky for writer, reader, and critic is that truth is uncomfortable, even violent in its capacity to create change. This dynamic is met with great reluctance by a comfortable audience and a comfortable writer. Bruce Young describes the experiences of love and joy as "intense, soul-transforming and thus, not comfortable."[13] I might add encountering truth is one of these experiences. Love, joy, and truth "require some letting go and giving up, and so most people are afraid of them."[14] Receiving, understanding, and writing the gospel is not an easy venture. Christ came "not to send peace, but a sword. . . To set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother. . . . A man's foes shall be they of his own household," his own church, perhaps even within his own self (Matt. 11:34-36). Writing the truth requires each writer to examine soul, conscience, and experience, then commit talent, time, and energy to the building of the image, the rendering of the word in flesh. Receiving this same "truth of the human heart"[15] requires the audience to lay upon the altar "their unique idiosyncracies or even weaknesses,"[16] including their notions of what is proper, what is moral, and what being a righteous people with a mission in this life really means.

This fear of audience, fear of truth and audience intermixing, is what causes most mistakes and, if not mistakes, apprehensions for LDS writers and critics. We write and critique under the impression that Mormon audiences "cannot bear too much reality," to borrow Eliot's phrase. Gladys Farmer, in writing of her experience with *Elders and Sisters*, wondered what would offend the critics the most: "the 'dammit' [she] had one elder mutter as he ripped his new suit? the mention of competitive pressure to baptize, regardless of the preparation of the candidates? the display of personality conflict between companions . . . or maybe the account of the attraction a member felt for an elder?"[17] Paris Anderson

13. Bruce Young, "The Miracle of Faith; The Miracle of Love," *A Thoughtful Faith*, by ed. Philip Barlow (Centerville, Utah: Canon Press, 1986), 270.

14. Ibid.

15. Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, eds., *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1974), 5.

16. Paris Anderson, 114.

17. Farmer, "Footnote," 5.

added an apologetic preface to his missionary novel *Waiting for the Flash:* "I am aware a few passages may offend some readers. For this I am very sorry. . . . I have spent much of my life in a sordid world, and many of my friends are dirty people. . . . [I hope] the readers understand these dirty people are not necessarily evil."[18] Two years later, the judges of the same Christian essay competition awarded another essay of mine, "The Hand of God," which merely hinted at the sexual abuse through a convoluted metaphor involving sunset, a place in the winner's circle, describing it as "a moving paean to the healing power of God seen through nature."[19] Why better because it's "through"? Why is it we rarely write "the world" as it happens? Because we're supposed to be "in" it, not "of" it? The tendency to interpret through metaphors, through literary machinations and familiar phrases, only divorces us more from the actual and makes our tasks as writers and readers so much more difficult. The less clearly we see this physical world, the more difficult it becomes to understand the spiritual. At times there is so much dark glass, I can barely see at all.

The fear of the audience that afflicts LDS writers reminds me of the most acute fear on my mission. I labored continually, frantically, under the assumption that, should I stop, there would be somebody around the corner who would not hear the gospel. They would suffer in their sins because of my transgression or exhaustion or hunger. Similarly, we believe that should we write about something too real, our words will have the same effect on the reader that I supposed my "laziness" would have in the mission field. To impose upon a writer, whose writing is her gift, the responsibility that her words will inexorably affect the eternal salvation of another Latter-day Saint, that it is better not to write at all than to write too much truth, is to lay guilt at the wrong doorstep. What about the injunction that we teach them—members/readers—divine principles and they govern themselves? Apparently we don't trust our readers to embrace our story or us with open arms. We excuse, we preface, we pull punches, we introduce metaphors, we embellish in the fear that our truth and maybe even our testimony will be judged lacking.

Randall Hall's novel *Corey Davidson,*[20] described as a "well-written chronicle of breaking and contrition of hearts following transgression,"[21] does just that. It's a novel with a mission about a mission, spoken by a culturally approved spokesperson (Hall is a CES coordinator). Because of these very factors, it falls into the trap of caring too much about propriety, of making sure the actions are cleverly covered up, the reader

18. Paris Anderson, iii.
19. Presentation program.
20. Randall Hall, *Corey Davidson* (Thompson Productions, 1984).
21. Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Voice," 56

protected, and the writer absolved of any responsibility for the readers' actions. Consequently, it fails to "make the word flesh."

The novel opens with Corey Davidson, the mission financial secretary, traveling on the bus to his new city. His new assignment is to be zone leader, but in his heart he carries his secret. In his daily dealings with the finances, he had found himself at the bank "when suddenly her eye caught his."[22] Flushing, he turns away, vowing to return to "the strict visual chastity expected of him."[23] But she writes him a note; helpless he responds, already "haunted by guilt and wondering and dark eyes and the bust of Nefertiti sitting provocatively on his desk."[24] After meeting with her alone two or three times, being "careful to keep his imagination from going too far, for he knew the enormity of sexual sin,"[25] he sins. And this is how the crucial event is described:

> There, swept into the whirlpool of her beautiful eyes and the eagerness in her soft, desiring voice, he had done what he never had, even in his imagination, supposed he would do. He had done what he had vowed he would never do. And he split himself in two.[26]

Sin is thus presented as a big surprise: He found himself doing things he never imagined, for no specific reason. As readers we like this plot: it keeps us comfortably removed from responsibility in the whole process, allowing us to still keep the vision of "pilgrims wandering by faith across a twilight stage buffeted by the forces of evil"[27] firmly in place.

In relation, sin is not the result of our own doing; neither is the journey to forgiveness. Some will seduce us into sin, and others will seduce us out: Terzhina's whirlpool eyes and soft, desiring voice sucked Davidson into sin. The notion of sin, especially sexual sin, as a female two-by-four which slams you upside the head, stunning you, so you hardly know what you're doing, rings loudly of the oldest, most preferred, male sexual fantasy: woman seduces unsuspecting male into sexual sin without his consent. She may, according to Hall, also seduce you out of sin. Christina, who "tried to love [Corey] purely, as a mother or a sister,"[28] sucks him back out. She is supposedly a "gracious and intelligent [woman] who befriends him,"[29] but the prose betrays Corey. He watches as she "walk[s] gracefully, easily, smiling at him, her long white gown

22. Hall, 5.
23. Ibid., 6.
24. Ibid., 7.
25. Ibid., 8.
26. Ibid., 13.
27. Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Voice," 53.
28. Hall, 146.
29. Ibid., jacket cover.

clinging to her."[30] He finds it "subtly invigorating"[31] to watch her paint. "From time to time she would draw her eyebrows up pensively, and bring her tongue slowly along her top lip; then, quickly pursing her lips together, she would paint for several minutes . . . her lips returning to their fullness."[32] It is this woman, this *female* Christ in a figure who paints the world, allowing Corey to see himself with new eyes, who seduces him back to his old world self.

Perhaps the Mormon reluctance to speak of the sin, and thus to speak inaccurately, stems from two notions: one, the admonition of the brethren not to dwell on our past sins, but rather to press forward; and two, the reluctance of the LDS audience to view themselves as sinners. The metaphors with which we are most familiar are "chosen people," "city on a hill," "a peculiar people," "saved for the last day," "pilgrims in a lonely wilderness," "Saturday's warrior." It is not easy to combine the apostolic caution with these metaphors without producing a peculiar aversion to the discussion of sin, a refusal to see ourselves as sinners, which makes the redemptive process all the more difficult and the writing of that redemptive process almost impossible. Once we, surprised, see ourselves as sinners, the tendency is to beat ourselves with more than enough stripes, as if attempting to redeem ourselves.

And so Davidson, in his prideful remorse, finishes the rest of his mission as ZL, then disappears on the last day into the Brazilian countryside, with no more than a terse letter to his parents and mission president. ". . . Have decided to stay in Brazil for a few more months. . . . Do not try to locate me. I will be in contact with you from time to time."[33] For five isolated months, he lives by himself in a small apartment kept company by visions of Terzhina after which "ashamed, he would flay himself with blame, his desire to be with her waning, then disappearing into the weary darkness of his mind."[34] On the eve of his departure, after a confession to the new mission president and a terse conversation with Terzhina in which he asks for forgiveness and she doesn't understand, we find him before the sculptured Christ on Sugarloaf Mountain realizing Christ is real.

If making the word flesh—not proper—is the LDS writer's responsibility, does the "aw-shucks Cowboy Jesus (in Levi Peterson's novel *Backslider*[35]), who straightens Frank out by dishing out, while smoking a Bull Durham cigarette, homely counsel about Frank's sexual hangups,"[36] fail

30. Ibid., 112.
31. Ibid., 120.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 75.
34. Ibid., 81.
35. Levi S. Peterson, *The Backslider* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).
36. Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Voice," 55.

any less dismally than a marble Christ? Levi Peterson attempts to "find new forms, adequate to the meaning"[37] of meeting Christ if you're a backslider, while Hall provides an ending grounded not in Mormon but in Catholic metaphors. Which *deus ex machina* is more believable: Peterson's protagonist "flushing the urinal, retching, vomiting, then crying"[38] as he realizes the reality of an understanding God or an officially, fully confessed Corey Davidson, seeing Christ for the first time on the Sugarloaf as he looks at the statue, "offering the possibility of life, of change, of overcoming fear and darkness . . . and [he feels] the gentle wash of peace upon his soul"?[39] A cowboy Christ or a statue—which is more troublesome? That some resurrect the Savior in their most personally appealing image or that the most intimate moment of redemption in a novel comes second-hand, through a statue? Which is more authentic, more Mormon?

To strip Hall's book to the bare bones, to uncover the metaphors used which Mormons relate to so easily, is to find yourself, as Bruce Jorgensen describes it, "up against the flannelboard."[40] The story of sexual sin is one told over and over again in priests' quorums and Laurel classrooms around the world and in all classrooms at the MTC, using every kind of literary and theatrical device: chewed bubblegum, ink in milk, crushed flower petals; still, it seems capable of literary conception only in whirlpools and soft, desiring female voices, and sunsets on beaches.

But what some Mormons desire to read more than anything else is a representation of life as they live it. To know that they are not alone. They do not want to read only "the firm, unvulnerable voice of success: the voice in the middle, about setting goals, establishing yourself, and being simply good." At times, they also yearn for "the dark night of the soul and its exaltation."[41] They want to be strengthened by writers, true and honest to what they know, not protected by benevolent voices speaking old, familiar phrases.

Ironically, and perhaps with real reason, I must turn to Orson Scott Card writing for the general human audience, for a more truthful rendition of my Mormon condition:

> It gave her a chance to brood about her life and whether she was a good wife and a good Mormon and even a good person, which she secretly knew she was not and never could be, no matter how she seemed to others, because none of them . . . knew what she was really like inside. How weak she was,

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37. Lavina Fielding Anderson, 111.

38. Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Voice," 55.

39. Hall, 188.

40. Jorgensen, 45.

41. Eugene England, "We Need to Liberate Mormon Men," *Dialogues with Myself* (Midvale, Utah: Orion, 1984), 168.

> how frightened, how uncertain of everything in her life except the church—that was the one thing that did not change. . . . Everything else was changeable. . . . [Someday she might] turn to face her husband and find a stranger in his place, a stranger who didn't approve of her and didn't want her in his life anymore. DeAnne knew that to hold on to any good thing in her life—her husband, her children—she had to do the right thing, every time. . . . If only she could be sure, from day to day, from hour to hour, what the right thing was.[42]

Why the difference, the sense of recognition? Because of the ambiguity, the lack of interpretation. Because of the attempt to "make sense out of human interaction that includes both the deepest doubts and anger. . . And swelling rejoicing and gratitude."[43] Because this passage feels not like a teacher, but like a friend, soul to soul. Ironically, we do that better with non-members than with our own kind. Non-members need the truth to be redeemed. As missionaries, making real the word, testifying of the other world, there is no other option. There is no expectation, no common metaphor, no shared world view, no appropriate behavior or sense of propriety, no phrases which will substitute for actual experience. There is only the truth. But, I sense, should we be brave enough to write our personal, Mormon truth, our audience, our specific, one LDS reader (we don't get in at every door) who will pull us to her bosom, crying, like DeAnne on reading Anne Tyler: "I'm just going to hold [the book]. . . . It's an anchor. It's another woman telling me she knows about things going wrong, and I just need to hold the book."[44]

So what are we left with? What kinds of literary missionaries on what kinds of literary missions? We have tender, soft-hearted ward missionaries like *Corey Davidson* speaking half truths but in a voice we easily recognize. We have missionaries nobody wants like Levi Peterson, who claims, "This is my place and these are my people."[45] But he never teaches from the discussions, exasperating his mission president and answering only to the Lord. We have missionaries, ashamed of their meager offering, of their "dirty" lives but willing to speak anyway. We have missionaries unwanted, banned from circulation because they offer a different story. We have "garden, hybrid [and] noxious weed."[46] We have, I suppose, some form of vineyard in which we must write until the night of darkness comes.

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42. Orson Scott Card, *Lost Boys* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 54.

43. Lavina Fielding Anderson, 108.

44. Card, *Lost Boys*, 383.

45. Levi S. Peterson, "The Art of Dissent Among Mormons," *Sunstone* 16, no. 8 (February 1994): 35.

46. Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Voice," 52.