Good Stories Told Well

A Survey of Mainstream Children's Books by LDS Authors.

Reviewed by Stacy Whitman, an editor at Mirrorstone, *which publishes fantasy for children and young adults. She holds a master's degree in children's literature from Simmons College. A slightly modified version of this review was posted on* By Common Consent, *December 20, 2007 {http://www.bycommonconsent.com}.*

If you're at all familiar with literary talk these days, you might be aware of the chatter about children's and young adult literature[1] being the hot new thing. Everyone's wondering what will be the "next Harry Potter." What was once a ghettoized field of study—because children are a self-perpetuating lower class, and literature for children must therefore serve a purpose (teach a lesson or make kids get good grades)—is now legitimate at many institutes of higher learning. Adults are getting reading recommendations from children and teens, and vice versa. Despite frenzied reports to the contrary, reading is not dead among the younger set.

When people ask what I do for a living, invariably the reaction to my answer—that I'm a children's book editor—is "how exciting!"—especially when I say that I edit children's and young adult fantasy novels. It *is* exciting. We're living in a golden age of children's and young adult literature, full of breathtaking storytelling and artistry. And some of the leading names in this golden age are authors who happen to be Mormons.

When I read submissions at work, any variation on "the moral of this story is . . ." makes me want to stop reading. If a writer tells a good story, the message will take care of itself. Katherine Paterson, the author of beloved children's and YA books including *Jacob Have I Loved* and *Bridge to Terabithia,* explained the religious content of her books thus: "What you are will shape your book whether you want it to or not. I am Christian, so that conviction will pervade the book even when I make no conscious effort to teach or preach. Grace and hope will inform everything I write."[2]

A lot of times I hear, "I liked that book because it was a clean read," implying no sex, minimal violence, and no swearing. While I applaud

those who are looking for stories that don't offend their sensibilities, for me as an editor the question isn't what *isn't* there. Rather, my foremost question is, "Is it a good story, told well?" What do I look for? A story that draws me into a world that I don't want to leave. Characters I empathize with, adventures that I want to go on, and twisty plots that spin my head. All done with beautiful writing.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, "The [story's] the thing." A bad story told well will get more kids excited about reading (and yes, even teach them a thing or two) than a good story told poorly—and all the better if it's a good story told well! That's my agenda as an editor, to find books that fit in the latter category. The story is what matters, making the moral message secondary—a given, if you will (though perhaps depicting evil in the process).[3] Moralizing and excessive preachiness get in the way of the story. A great example of that is a final touch to C. S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicles. In an otherwise excellent story, the mentions of Susan's lipstick keeping her from heaven were a bit heavy-handed[4]—and if I were his editor, I would have tried to convince him to strike those comments. The message was already obvious; no need to bash the reader over the head with it.

This then brings up the question: Am I saying that it's okay to have a "bad" message in a book if the story is well told? As is often the case, it depends. The idea of the power of books is ingrained in Mormon culture. After all, if we believe the Book of Mormon to be the most correct book on the earth, we definitely believe in the power of the word (not to mention the Word) to transform a reader.

But do we believe it to be so powerful that it will take away agency? Unlikely. Interpretation of the message of a book, if one must have a message, is at least in part up to the reader to decide to agree with or not—and the message itself might be up for debate.

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* is a timely, though controversial, example of a story that some would say is a well-written but bad story. Currently, the debate over this trilogy resurfaced and gained attention with a wider audience because of the movie release based on *The Golden Compass,* the first book of the trilogy. The argument against the books—even to the point of calls for banning—crop up because of their message alone: the "Authority," a character set up as a despotic God, must be overthrown for the world to be set to rights. But the message of the *His Dark Materials* story could be reinterpreted as a tale of unrighteous dominion, or perhaps a retelling of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which Lucifer has

won the War in Heaven and must be defeated, a morality tale that many would agree with. As one reader of my blog put it, "If [my children] think that the God Pullman describes is the God they learn about at church, then I need to do a much better job at teaching them who God is."[5] Either way you interpret it, books like *His Dark Materials* can open up conversations, if we allow them to.

Because a "bad" message can be interpreted with such wide variation, it's hard for me to call *His Dark Materials* "bad" for its message. I would instead say that sometimes the preachiness of that message, however you might interpret it, overshadows an otherwise romping good tale.

And I don't just look for romping good tales in my slush pile. I look for them in my personal reading, as well. Which is why I'm excited to share with you a brief sampling of the excellent books out now in the mainstream children's and young adult market by LDS authors. Some names you might recognize. Shannon Hale received a Newbery Honor for her middle-grade[6] novel *Princess Academy.* Stephenie Meyer's YA novel *Twilight* and its sequels have topped bestseller lists. Several other authors may not be as widely known, but each fits my criteria of a good story told well. These writers are tackling the age-old questions of good and evil in a way that resonates beyond their LDS culture into a world welcoming stories about that deep struggle.

The Goose Girl by Shannon Hale (Bloomsbury, 2003) is a young adult novel. Shannon and I were once on a convention panel together, and someone asked her why she wrote this retelling of the Grimm's fairytale by the same name. She said something to the effect that the tales are intriguing because they leave so much out. It's just so fun to flesh out a story, to give motivations to inexplicable actions and figure out how the magic in that story would actually *work*, she said. *Goose Girl* is an excellent representative of this genre, the story of Princess Anidori Isilee and her conniving handmaid who forces Anidori to switch places with her while journeying to the home of Anidori's betrothed prince. Finding employment as a goose tender in the new city, Anidori begins to better understand her ability to talk with the wind, and makes friends with her fellow animal workers. These relationships and her newfound power make all the difference in Anidori's eventual triumph. Other great Hale titles are *Enna Burning, River Secrets, Princess Academy,* and *Book of a Thousand Days*.

Twilight by Stephenie Meyer (Little, Brown, 2005) is also a young adult novel. Edward is a brooding vampire whose love interest is in danger

just from being near him. But Bella Swan is a little too curious and a little too fascinated with Edward for her own good. This book gets rave reviews—and not always from the people I expect them from. It's well written and there's plenty of romance, but I wasn't convinced by Bella's attraction to Edward simply based on Edward's utter beauty. Hey, he's a *vampire.* He wants to *eat you!* But Meyer's Edward is much more nuanced than many vampires in popular culture; Edward chooses to abstain from his monstrous side, and that sets up an intriguing situation of denial and passion. This book might be the best example of how a well-written story done well will attract the right reader—and a lot of them. Just because *I* don't necessarily love vampire stories doesn't mean that it isn't a well-drawn story that appeals to its target audience. Other great Meyer titles: *New Moon* and *Eclipse.*

The Princess and the Hound by Mette Ivie Harrison (Eos, 2007) is also young adult. Prince George has a secret: He can perform forbidden magic. When he becomes betrothed to a princess from a neighboring country whom he's never met, he figures it's best to never fall in love. George, who lost his mother early in life, doesn't want his life complicated by a second loss. But Princess Beatrice has her own secret; and as George and Beatrice near their wedding date, the expectations a reader might have of this original fairy tale that feels like a retelling are all turned on their head. Other great Harrison titles: *Mira, Mirror* and *The Monster in Me*.

Alcatraz vs. the Evil Librarians by Brandon Sanderson (Scholastic, 2007) is a middle-grade novel. A prolific author of fantasy for adult readers, Sanderson made his first foray into children's literature with this title. If you like whimsical humor coupled with original adventures, this is a book for you. The protagonist Alcatraz Smedry has been raised in foster homes most of his life, shuffled from home to home due to his exceptional ability to destroy everything around him. On his thirteenth birthday, everything changes—opening a door to an unseen world of evil librarians trying to dominate the world's flow of information. All that stands between them are one boy who breaks things, his perpetually late grandfather, and a bag of sand.

Red Dragon Codex by R. D. Henham (Mirrorstone, 2008), middle grade, is a book I edited but which I couldn't resist including on the list. Rebecca Shelley is the author behind the pen name of this adventure. A boy named Mudd sets off on his own to seek a silver dragon who can help him rescue his friend Shemnara from an evil red dragon. Mudd must nav-

igate all sorts of dangers, not the least of which is the decision to team up with his little sister, Hiera. I chose to work on this book precisely because Shelley's writing fits my criteria of a good book. This is a tale of high fantasy adventure peopled by characters that a reader can't help but root for even while you're laughing at them.

Fablehaven by Brandon Mull (Shadow Mountain, 2006) is another middle-grade novel. When Kendra and Seth go to visit their grandparents for a two-week vacation, little do they know that they're visiting a forest reserve for magical creatures. Their secretive grandfather insists that they stay in the yard and never go into the woods; but Seth, inquisitive and adventurous, ventures out anyway and meets an old woman in the woods who proves to be both friend and foe. Meanwhile, Kendra tries to find the locks that three mysterious keys open. What she finds unlocks Fablehaven's secrets to the siblings—leading to danger and intrigue.

Shadow Mountain, the publisher of *Fablehaven,* is an imprint of Deseret Book that publishes books by Mormon authors for a mainstream audience. This book skirts the edge of the line between telling a good story well and allowing the message to overshadow the story, but the slightly preachy parts serve the adventurous story; after all, the folklore of the fairy world depends on agreements, negotiations, and abiding by complicated rules. So this one remains on my "recommended" list. A good Mull sequel is *Fablehaven: Rise of the Evening Star.*

You might notice that every single one of these recommendations is a fantasy book. Space limits me in my ability to recommend all the many books I'd like to; and because of my line of work, I'm partial to the genre. There's a lot of really great fantasy out there, written by Mormons and those of other faiths. Several LDS authors write realistic mainstream YA and children's literature—Ann Dee Ellis, Louise Plummer, and Kristin Randle are three examples—and several other authors write crossover titles, published for adults but accessible to younger readers—such as Orson Scott Card and Tracy Hickman. Other excellent LDS authors writing mainstream children's fantasy not covered here include Dave Wolverton (sometimes writing as David Farland), Dan Willis, James Dashner, and Jessica Day George.

Every single author I mention writes good books well—adventure, fantastic creatures, absorbing characters, and engaging plots. Anything less would be to underestimate the intended readers of these excellent stories: children of all ages. Including me.

Notes

1. "Children's literature" includes picture books for very young children all the way up through novels for older readers—and technically includes the subgenre of young adult literature, meaning novels and other forms of literature for readers twelve and up. However, generally the designation "children's literature" means literature for children under twelve, while "young adult" means the twelve-and-over set. Both are very broad categories that take in wide developmental ranges.

2. Katherine Paterson, Official Website, Questions (2007), http://www.terabithia.com/questions.html (accessed November 29, 2007).

3. Orson Scott Card wrote an excellent essay on what I'm referring to here, addressing how *depicting* evil and *advocating* evil are two very different things, a nuance lost on some audiences. See his "The Problem of Evil in Fiction," available in the collection *A Storyteller in Zion: Essays and Speeches* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 69–98.

4. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (1956; rpt. New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 154–55.

5. Scott M. Roberts, comment, *Stacy Whitmore's Grimoire* [blogsite], November 21, 2007, http://slwhitman.livejournal.com/78603.html#cutid1 (accessed November 29, 2007).

6. Middle grade is a subclassification of children's literature, novels for independent readers of about ages eight to twelve.

Innocent Hooligan

Douglas Thayer. *Hooligan: A Mormon Boyhood*. Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2007. 186 pp., paper, $14.95

Reviewed by Edward A. Geary, professor emeritus of English, Brigham Young University

A staple of Douglas Thayer's fiction is the sensitive, adolescent or young adult Mormon male struggling to come to terms with the burdens of mortality, a sense of sin, or the pressures of exemplary living. Now, in a memoir, Thayer deals more directly with his own experiences of growing up in the old Provo Sixth Ward during the 1930s and '40s. Curiously, the authorial voice in the memoir is almost entirely devoid of the complicated inner life of Thayer's fictional protagonists. He maintains a cool, rather