

# AN OPEN LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE FICTION CONTRIBUTORS

Incoming Fiction Editor Jennifer Quist

*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* has been changing in 2019, including bringing on a foreigner as the new fiction editor. That's me. None of the fiction I've been curating will appear before this winter, which gives me time to read plenty of submissions—perhaps yours. Writers whose prose touches the Church: please send me something. Don't send me a novel excerpt unless it's been reworked and thoroughly adapted as a short story. I understand the appeal. I prefer novel writing myself. But chances are that I will be able to recognize a cut-and-pasted novel chapter, and that's not the form we're publishing. When it comes to short fiction, however, whatever you're working on: read it again, sleep on it, bring it to your writing group and have them strike out any references to flashing eyes and almost every mention of an erection (they're not actually very interesting), and then send that story to me. Submit soon to catch me while I'm still infatuated with this job and happy to provide feedback on your work. Art means risk and sacrifice. This is how it should be, how it has to be, so of course, submitting a story can be daunting. Let me share a few ideas that might give you confidence to press on with your submission to *Dialogue*, or the inspiration to keep working on it a little longer.

Whatever you do, don't hesitate to send your work to us due to questions of whether it's relevant enough to our subtitle about "Mormon Thought." I interpret the focus of our journal in a broad sense. A Mormon work of fiction doesn't have to have the Church or anyone tricked out like one of its members in it. If the Church is or has ever been a part

of you or people close to you, I expect it will inevitably be a part of the fiction you write. The Church is always there. Trust your readers to be able to see it. They will. There is no need to tack on superficial tokens recognizable to anglophone Americans as Mormon. These tokens not only run the risk of lapsing into cheap shortcuts, but they can also contribute to the privileging of anglophone American experiences over others, giving them a preeminence it is high time they yielded to—or, at least, learned to better share with—other cultural landscapes and voices. We can write as ourselves without nametags, even when writing outside our pet genres of science fiction or fantasy. As I've said elsewhere, there is plenty of middle ground between Rexburg and outer space. Write something beautiful on it.

That is not to say I don't want to read your science fiction and fantasy. For us, any genre will do. I have been delighted by the pile of submissions I inherited from the previous editor, even work that doesn't suit the venue and won't be published in *Dialogue*. Don't ever think editors pass on work because they don't like it. I once read a 110,000-word fan fiction based on an anime I'd never watched because it was written by a beloved teenaged family member, and I liked *that*. Believe me, I like just about everything and could be persuaded to publish any genre if the story was beautiful.

What are we looking for in our fiction for 2020? Something new and true. Allow me to explain.

I can say without exaggeration that all but one of the submissions I have read this year have been submitted by men. I suspect this may be due to *Dialogue* having to compete for contributors with great venues like *Exponent II* and *Segullah*. Please don't forget about us, non-man writers. We would love to see your work. For men who are submitting to us, thank you. What follows are words of caution about overworked themes and tropes in the writing we receive. Please accept them as opportunities.

Think twice before sending us stories of Americans who have lost touch with the institutional church since getting home from their full-time missions. These are stories where we enter the struggles of people (that is, men) wondering if they have transcended their former religious practices. They aren't sure but they think they might have outgrown going through the motions and are looking to live as people of faith in new ways. The reader follows them through their daily lives to see the ennui unfold as these men come to discover they still don't know where to go next. Though there is nothing wrong with this scenario, it's not new. We're super-saturated with it. Presented in a fresh, creative way this story might feel new again, but I haven't seen it yet, so proceed carefully.

Another frequently seen kind of American man story is the one where he gets help with a personal, perhaps even spiritual dilemma from a manic pixie magical minority character—gay, trans, non-anglophone, etc. Even when the magical character is written with a gritty backstory, they usually don't have much of an inner life beyond an interest in the man at the center of the story, and they make doing the heavy lifting in the man's process of self-discovery look easy, which emotional labor never is. This is delicate terrain ranging over vulnerable populations where the utmost care for their humanity, even as fictional characters, is required. Otherwise, it's not true. We still see plenty of standard manic pixie dream girls too. I recommend writers ask themselves if the women and minorities they write have any dimension other than as partners for American men, and if not, is it artfully acknowledged, somehow, that these male characters' shallow concepts of others are insufficient?

All of that said, gender flipping is not a problem in and of itself, especially since women and non-cisgender people have had to write from male points of view in order for their work to be considered non-niche or non-trash for ages. Hooray for people who attempt to take on someone else's point of view and write it with rich, believable dimensions. We will continue to enthusiastically read and publish well-wrought stories written by authors writing from points of view other than their own.

Where this goes wrong most often in our submissions is when men write from the woman's point of view, but she is a woman who is not like other girls. Apart from her, the story's other women are a bunch of breeder ewes. She becomes a self-insert for a male author posing as a woman acting out his distaste for how we live. This is neither realistic nor representative. Beware that in the very worst cases, a female point of view that pits a character against the rest of her peers of her gender reads as benevolent sexism, which is neither new nor true.

Those of us raised in the Church were raised with the ideal of journal keeping as an important historical and spiritual practice. This can be a literary goldmine, but that doesn't mean we can publish unadapted journaling. In fact, the habits of good journaling may leave us too committed to documenting events to allow fictional narratives based on them to blossom into what may be even truer stories. Journaling may enhance our drive to come to learn something through personal experiences. While this may be a productive personal practice, this kind of moral closure is not necessary outside writing fiction fables and nursery stories. Fiction does not require a "therefore what?" moment. When Boyd K. Packer asked this question, so the stories go, it was within the context of writing yet another literary form I am not looking to publish: sermons. While a valid question for a sermon-writer, short story writers do not need to consider "therefore, what?" in developing their ideas. No matter what book marketers are doing, our fiction program does not acknowledge "inspirational" as a genre, especially not when what one reader sees as an inspirational story is another person's idea of a ranting polemic. If a short story inspires, it's through an effect of good art unfolding, not through a clunky, didactic coda. The moral of this paragraph is: let the story find its way.

My final wish for our submissions may be the most delicate of all. Much of what we receive explores personal relationships to God as mediated by the institutional Church and by the family roles it recommends. As a loosely affiliated body of writers, we are good at writing this kind

of story. We typically approach it with sensitivity and open-mindedness, writing with insight and compassion about the realities of the cost of traditional family roles. What's missing from my submission inbox are stories exploring personal relationships to God mediated by the mediator he recommends within the text of the Church's scriptures: Christ. It's rather ironic since what links us together isn't our alignment with traditional family structure—this is common in many religions and cultures across the globe—but our connection to a church adamant that it is the Church of Jesus Christ. Despite this, outside of the genre of sermons and their allegories, and compared to the work of Christian-oriented writers more generally, few of our submitters are writing about it at this time.

At the risk of ending this letter with something too much like my own “therefore, what?” moment, I will hazard a soft call for stories dealing with everything we've been writing about all along—our missions, politics, love affairs, parents and siblings and babies, crops and herds—with the Jesus parts left in, left honest, made speakable, made art. There's no need for Primary clipart beards and halos, just an earnest willingness to open our artistic endeavors to the (small p) primary premises of the Church, a church which, however we may feel about it, made this journal, this thought possible.

I look forward to reading your submissions.

À bientôt,

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*Edmonton, Canada*

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