

Vardis Fisher Pioneered Literary Mormon Writing

Michael Austin. *Vardis Fisher: A Mormon Novelist*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021. 128 pp. Paper: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-0-252-04409-0.

Reviewed by John Bennion

Michael Austin's biography positions Vardis Fisher as the first Mormon novelist to escape the binary of ardent anti-Mormon writing and just as ardent home literature. This work is one of the first two books in a series published by the University of Illinois Press—Introductions to Mormon Thought. The second being *Eugene England: A Mormon Liberal* by Kristine L. Haglund. According to the UIP website, the series will provide 40,000–45,000-word “reassessments of leading figures in the development of Latter-day Saint thought and culture, synthesizing and systematizing their contributions and influence.” The general editors, Matthew Bowman and Joseph Spencer, intend to use an expansive definition of Mormon thought and to include underrepresented authors. Such a series from such a press will help increase the stature of Mormon studies inside the tent of American studies.

If future books in this series are as authoritative as Austin's biography of Fisher, the series will illuminate and transform our concept of many Mormon thinkers and writers we have either ignored or valued only in regional rather than national terms. The book is set up for dual audiences—general readers interested in Mormon literary history and specialists who want a gateway to a serious study of Fisher and other pioneers of Mormon literary fiction. The text is both readable and rigorous, as much about Fisher's milieu as it is about Fisher. The notes are at the end, enabling the reading to flow. Also, the text contains a bibliographic essay about everything Fisher wrote.

A good critic is a good reader and establishes contexts and ways of thinking that open the text to other readers who haven't examined an author's entire corpus, his correspondence and interviews, and the historical context of his work. Both writers and critics stand on the shoulders of archivists, transcribers, and researchers, and Austin acknowledges the help of friends in the production of this work, notably of Ardis Parshall, who retrieved and transcribed hundreds of letters stored in the Church archives. Many contemporary critics are narrow specialists, but Austin, who has published ten books about literature, rhetoric, reading, and civil discourse, as well as essential essays about Mormon literary studies, has one foot in national discourse and one foot in what is often the more insular area of Mormon literature. He is an apt scholar to fulfill the objective of the series editors to provide wide and deep context in order to reassess the writer's life and work.

The first chapter describes Fisher's youth and influences—hard-laboring Mormon parents in rural Southern Utah, education at the University of Utah and the University of Chicago, and early marriage to a traditional Mormon woman. This chapter also describes Fisher's departure from the Church. The second chapter describes his autobiographical novels about Mormon families pioneering in the landscapes and communities of Fisher's youth. His characters are forged between the rock of the desert and the hard place of Mormon zealotry. The chapter also discusses Fisher's groundbreaking role in literary Mormon regional fiction.

The next chapter discusses Fisher's historical novels including *Children of God*, his epic of Nauvoo and the Mormon exodus to the West. Austin places *Children of God* in the context of the golden age of Mormon literature, along with Maurine Whipple, Virginia Sorensen, and Samuel Taylor. The fourth chapter discusses Fisher's final series of novels, *The Testament of Man*, which describe the development of the human race from prehistory to modern times. These novels embody Fisher's departure from Mormon cosmology. Through all these

chapters, Austin continually follows the thread of Fisher's work inside the tapestry of Mormon and American Western literary history. He crafts an engaging narrative out of Fisher's struggle against the religion that created and irritated him and with the East Coast publishers who wanted him to write what would sell well.

As I've tried to make clear, this biography is not merely a chronology but a thesis-driven literary history. Austin uses what has been a central critical concern with Fisher—*Is he a Mormon writer?*—to explore the general question *What makes anyone a Mormon writer?* Fisher's wife at the time of his death claimed "Vardis Fisher was not a Mormon." She had been upset by Leonard Arrington's paper presented at the first Association for Mormon Letters conference, "The Mormon Heritage of Vardis Fisher." Fisher's own answer to that question, written in an autobiographical novel, was, "Religion is like smallpox. If you get a good dose, you wear scars" (1). Fisher's work, according to Austin, depends on Mormon culture, even as it rejects much of the theology. To understand writers like Fisher, Austin argues, readers must distinguish between being a practitioner of the religion and having a specific regional experience. Before there could be a Mormon culture region, Austin claims, Mormons and non-Mormons had to begin to see themselves as living in a common culture. Fisher forged a literature that demanded that the nation recognize that Mormonism was not just a historical but a cultural force and that writers from Mormon culture were developing a literature of their own. Fisher's work created a space for Mormon fiction in part because he was an intellectual writer, concerned as much with ideas as with stories. He was atheistic, libertarian, anti-communist, anti-federal government, and anti-Puritan. Through tracing the forces that defined Fisher culturally and intellectually, Austin establishes Fisher's essential Mormon-ness.

As I said earlier, Austin claims that Fisher was the first who escaped the anti-Mormon caricatures of the religion and the faith-promoting home literature, neither of which captured the essence and vitality of

Mormon culture. Austin suggests that “successful regional writing rarely comes from the center of a region’s culture” (27). Fisher was raised as Mormon but became disaffected, so he established a mode of narrating from an insider/outsider perspective. Austin writes, “because Fisher had a greater stature with the Eastern literary establishment than any other Mormon writer of the first half of the 20th century, his framing of the Mormon experience has had profound implications for the way that Latter-day Saints have been portrayed in American literature since” (23). Fisher pioneered way for future writers by creating both the writerly tradition of working realistically with Mormon materials and by opening the market for Eastern publishers to accept that work.

I eagerly read most of the book in one day and discovered again that Michael Austin is not just a significant critic but an excellent word-smith. This book establishes a high benchmark for future work in this series because of how eloquently and convincingly it places Vardis Fisher not only in the center of Mormon thought but in the center of American thought and literary studies.

JOHN BENNION {johnsergebennion@gmail.com} is an emeritus professor of creative writing at Brigham Young University. He writes about people living on the eastern edge of the Great Basin. He has published a collection of short fiction and four novels. Another novel is forthcoming from BCC Press. He has published short stories and essays in *Southwest Review*, *Utah Historical Quarterly*, *Journal of Mormon History*, and others. He is a recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award (2021) from the Association for Mormon Letters.

