

Imaginary Worlds and Gospel Truths

THE RATIONAL AND REVELATORY IN THE SCIENCE FICTION OF ORSON SCOTT CARD

By Michael R. Collings

IN AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN *DIALOGUE* IN 1984, "Refracted Visions and Future Worlds: Mormonism and Science Fiction," I explored some responses to Mormonism in the writings of non-LDS science fiction authors, as well as some attempts by Mormons to write science fiction. Among the latter was Orson Scott Card, certainly the best known—and perhaps the most controversial—LDS writer within the SF community. At that time, I argued that other than generalized references in *Capitol*, *The Worthing Chronicle*, and stories such as "Quietus," there was little obviously Mormon material in his fiction (pp. 112, 113) Card agreed with this assessment, going even further to state the relationship between Mormonism and his fictional worlds.

I resolved long ago, when I was a playwright trying not to lose more than a few thousand dollars a year writing plays for the Mormon audience, that I would never attempt to use my writing to overtly preach the gospel in my "literary" works. . . Faith exists in actions, not in emotions; I speak more about my characters and to my audience in what I make my characters do than in what I have them say or think.

Furthermore, I believe that I present Mormon theology most eloquently when I do not speak about it at all . . . expressions of faith, unconsciously placed within a story, are the most honest and also most powerful messages an author can give; they are, in essence, the expression of the author's conceived universe, and the reader who believes and cares about the story will dwell, for a time, in the authors' world and receive powerful vicarious memories that become part of the reader's own.¹

Of course, one of the frustrations (and one of the glories) of writing about living authors is that they cannot be counted on to continue writing stories that neatly fit into preconceived critical

theories while remaining true to the fundamental criteria expressed in his letter, Card has recently published several works that have altered the relationship between his writing and his religion.

Since 1984, Card has reinforced his credentials as a writer with the overtly LDS *A Woman of Destiny* (1984), and the science fiction novel *Ender's Game* (1985) and its sequel, *Speaker for the Dead* (1986). *Ender's Game* garnered both of the top science fiction writing awards for 1986: the Hugo, from the World Science Fiction Convention; and the Nebula, from the Science Fiction Writers of America. Earlier this year, *Speaker* was awarded the 1987 Nebula—making Card one of only two writers ever to receive the award in consecutive years, and the first to receive it for a novel and its sequel.

In addition, since 1985, four of Card's stories have appeared in major science fiction magazines, each building upon LDS ideas and set at least in part in a near-future state of Deseret. And finally, the first volume of a six-volume series, *The Tales of Alvin Maker*, is nearing publication. In this series Card explicitly links LDS history and theology to a science-fiction/fantasy framework by using as a central character an analogue of Joseph Smith in an alternate universe in which George Washington was a British commander originally named Lord Potomac, England was divided between a King and a Lord Protector, and folk-magic forms a basis for life.

As Card has gained prominence as a science fiction writer, he has increased the extent to which LDS backgrounds inform his works. *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead* are extended meditations and definitions of what being a messiah entails. In the first, Ender Wiggin recapitulates an Old Testament definition of Messiah, protecting Earth against the incursions of ostensibly warlike aliens, the Buggers. This element of his mission is explicit early in the original novella, one character says,

" . . . At least we know that Ender is making it possible for

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others of his age to be playing in the park”

“And Jesus died to save all men, of course.” Graff sat up and looked at Anderson almost sadly “But we’re the ones,” Graff said, “We’re the ones who are driving in the nails.”²

Although deleted from the novel, the line is important to understanding Ender’s role. That he is only eight years old when chosen is as irrelevant to his mission as Christ’s youth when he taught the teachers in the temple.

Ender’s heritage includes a lapsed Mormon mother who has superficially relinquished her faith but is nonetheless controlled by it on a fundamental, unconscious level. Her actions and reactions help form Ender into the person he must become to save all humanity.

By the end of the novel, however, Ender has discovered that the Buggers were not inimical, in fact, he has caused the genocide of a sentient species. At that point, his mission shifts from temporal salvation to spiritual enlightenment. He becomes the focus for redemption in a literal sense as he emigrates with his sister to a new world, carrying with him a cocoon containing the last remaining Hive-Mother of the Buggers. The concluding lines of *Ender’s Game* suggest the essential nature of his quest and his own role in the salvation of an *alien* people:

So they boarded a starship and went from world to world. Wherever they stopped, he was always Andrew Wiggin, itinerant speaker for the dead, and she was always Valentine, historian errant, writing down the stories of the living while Ender spoke the stories of the dead. And always Ender carried with him a dry white cocoon, looking for the world where the hive-queen could awaken and thrive in peace. He looked a long time. (p. 357)

In *Speaker*, Ender achieves his quest, discovering an appropriate world and in the process rescuing the Piggies, the third sentient species in the Galaxy. At times, he seems secondary to the vivid characters in Lusitania Colony (based on Card’s experiences as a missionary in Portuguese-speaking Brazil) and to the Piggies themselves. Yet that appearance masks his underlying purpose—to act as mediator, messiah, and savior. In Card’s words, Ender was “thought in every world to be a monster, but in reality was something of a savior, or a prophet, or at least a martyr” (p. 88). His role combines the rational and the revelatory, the scientific and the mystical, a point Card makes clear in passages that consciously juxtapose the two modes of knowing. As two students discuss the recently discovered Piggies, for example, one states that the aliens are “our only hope of redemption.” Ender looks at the second student, Plikt, “who he knew would not be able to endure such mysticism. ‘They do not exist for any human purpose, not even redemption,’ Plikt said with withering contempt” (p. 38).

Only Ender is capable of bridging the gap between reason and revelation, as he functions within the world yet introduces what is, in the context of *Speaker*, revelation; he knows that which no other human could know. Individuals of both other sentient races are equally sensitive to knowledge that cannot be derived

rationally; interactions between Ender, the Hive-Queen, and the piggy named Human form the resolution of the novel.

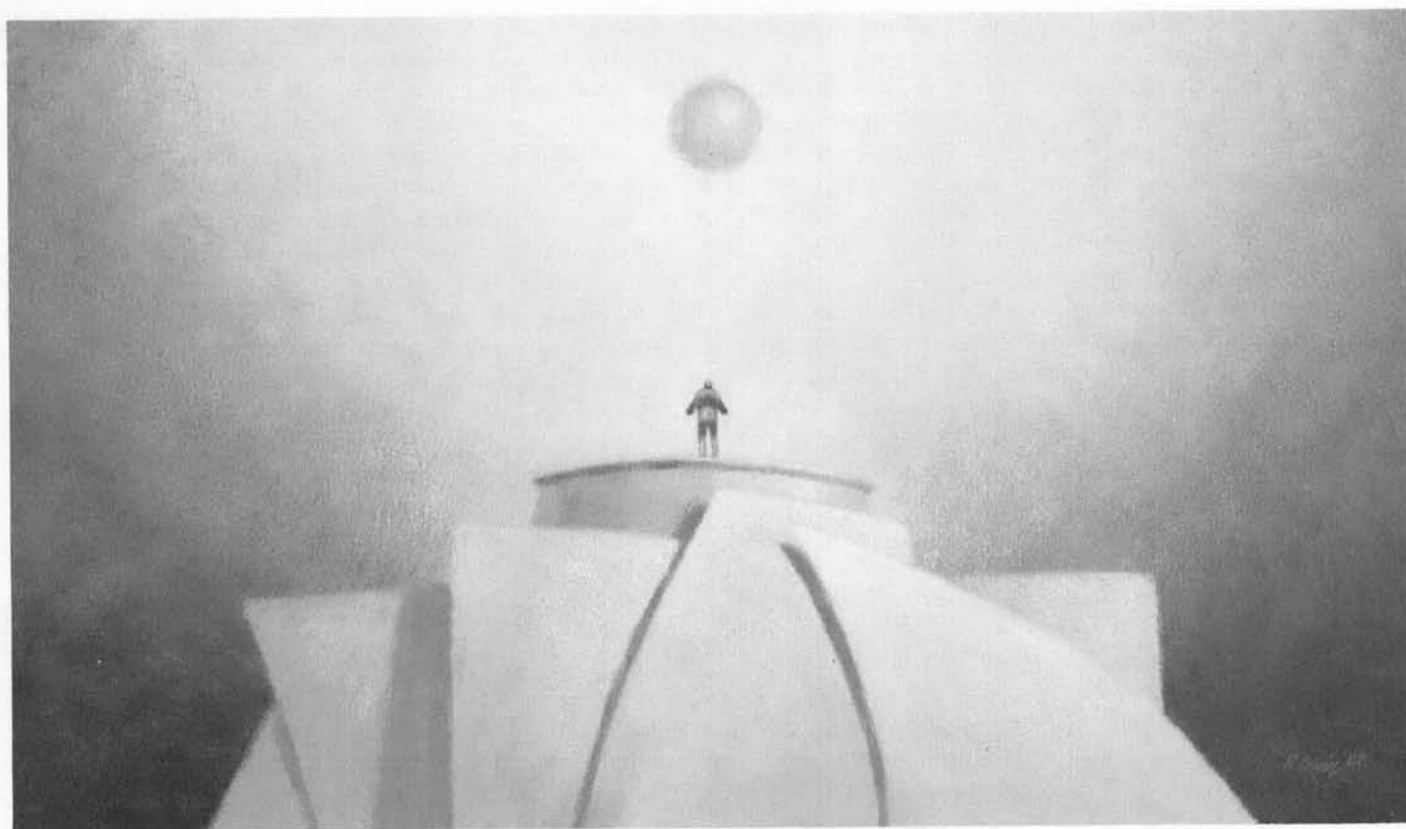
Even more importantly, Ender discovers the obverse of his messianic mission. Having almost sacrificed his life and sanity in *Ender’s Game* to save Humanity, he must now reverse his role to seal a compact between humans and Piggies. He becomes the crucifier, not the crucified. In a powerful episode, Ender kneels by the body of a slain Piggy, a Christ-figure at the foot of an alien cross, crucifying another Savior. Apparent torture becomes a symbol for love and reverence; other traditional mores continuously reverse, as love becomes hate and hatred transmutes into love. Pride of guilt becomes humility. And, without any overt LDS references in structure or narrative, *Speaker* becomes an intensely religious novel that simultaneously avoids platitudes or proselytizing.

Speaker for the Dead presents a symbolic treatment of the Plan of Salvation. The Piggies live through three stages that parallel the three estates of human life. “The first life is within the mother-tree, where we never see the light. The second life is when we live in the shade of the forest, the half-light, running and walking and climbing, seeing and singing and talking, making with our hands. The third life is when we reach and drink from the sun, in the full light at last, never moving except in the wind; only to think, and on those certain days when the brothers drum on your trunk, to speak to them. Yes, that is the third life” (p. 369). The stages of grub, piggy, and tree stand for pre-existence, mortality, and after-life, defining the god-like qualities of the trees and their paternal care for their children. As Ender says to Human about a father-tree, “All the children that he fathered are still part of him. The more children he fathers, the greater he becomes. . . . And the more you accomplish in your life, the greater you make your father.” (p. 365).

Card makes explicit his religious purposes when he writes that in experiencing vicariously the death and transformation of Piggy into father tree, “suddenly we find the flesh of God within us after all, when we thought that we were only made of dust” (p. 385). In fact, one non-Mormon student noticed the three divisions of Piggy life and became frustrated because he felt that Card was working toward a symbolic reading, but he could not understand why the stages were important or what Card intended to say through them. They are so integrated into the novel that to extract them as “symbolic” references to Mormonism would destroy the narrative. And yet they only resonate fully to readers aware of the LDS teachings about the Plan of Salvation.

The three stages of existence are fundamental to Ender’s story. *Ender’s Game* concentrates on Ender’s isolation from humanity. He is systematically separated from everyone, beginning with the argument that he must be “surrounded with enemies all the time” (p. 1), a restatement of the Book of Mormon insistence on opposition in all things. Ender cannot become fully human, he is constantly manipulated by others.

In *Speaker for the Dead*, he enters a second stage. He integrates with humanity, exploring for the first time a full range of



emotions and experiences. His arrival on Lusitania becomes a symbolic birth as he enters into family relationships and expands the definition of what it is to be "human."

The final, as-yet-unwritten portion of Ender's story, *Ender's Children*, may complete the pattern as an analogical treatment of humanity achieving godhood. It is dangerous, of course, to speculate about unwritten novels, but in this case, Card has told us that the third volume will differ radically from the first two. In answer to the question, "Will there be another *Ender* book?" he responds "Yes, there will, but it will be even more different from the first two than *Speaker* was from *Ender*. It's cosmic Sci-Fi—discovering what everything is made of, what underlies the laws of the universe, that sort of thing." Card also noted that the novel *cannot* yet be written: "I don't feel I'm mature enough as a writer to handle it yet."³

Given Card's demonstrated mastery in such novels as *Songmaster*, *Ender's Game*, and *Speaker for the Dead*, his hesitance over *Ender's Children* suggests that the novel might indeed become an attempt at defining the third estate: what it is to become as a god.

In these novels, Card achieves something rare and difficult. He writes with religious fervor, but without the surface elements of Mormonism. Instead, he infuses the narrative with the "substance" of LDS thinking, the complex of beliefs that acts as the foundation upon which the superstructure of his fiction rests. Although the novels only refer in passing to the lapsed Mormonism of Ender's mother and many of the characters are stridently and forcefully Catholic, the stories are LDS at heart. Card is confident enough in his own beliefs not to feel any pressure to

continually refer to them for artistic justification. As a result, *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead* do not sound LDS but *feel* intensely so. The communication occurs beneath logic and rationality, at an instinctive emotional level.

More recently, however, he has approached directly the question of religious faith in the context of science-fictional extrapolation. Church members who picked up the February 1986 issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* were perhaps startled to see the introductory illustration to Card's "Salvage": a two-page drawing of the Salt Lake Temple half submerged in the "Mormon Sea." Even more startling is the content: the story takes place in a future when most religions have died, when the Temple is apparently important primarily because of stories that it contains hidden treasure. On the surface, the story runs counter to common beliefs within the Church as to what the future holds; Card himself noted after writing it that the story was "threatening to a good many folk doctrines about the future of Salt Lake Valley."⁴

But beneath the "accident" (to borrow an Aristotelian term) of an imaginary future and a science-fictional extrapolation of "what if" lies Card's "substance"—an account of the enduring, often unconsciously enduring power of faith. Deaver, the non-Mormon character, understands at the end that there is treasure inside the half-submerged, empty Temple—an intangible yet infinitely precious treasure that he cannot fully know: "I came to find something here for *me*," he says, "and you knew all the time it was only

your stuff down there” (p. 74). Structure may decay, the story asserts, but faith abides.

Several months earlier, Card published “The Fringe,” a story that was well received by the SF readership in general; so much so, in fact, that it was included in Gardner Dozois’ collection *The Year’s Best Science Fiction* (1986). This story also takes place in a near-future Salt Lake Valley, an outpost of life against a backdrop of destruction and desolation. Card does not preach in the story, but Mormonism is inherent throughout.

The story was completed in a single weekend, along with “Salvage”—then titled “The Temple Salvage Expedition,” while Card was participating in the Sycamore Hill Writers’ Workshop in January 1985. Writing the stories was a revelation for Card, who had stopped writing short fiction after publishing forty-one stories between 1978 and 1981. Not only were they stories, but they were stories of a new sort: “‘The Fringe’ had to be a story,” he writes, “It was not an *accidental* story, it was an inevitable one.”⁵

Even more importantly, he had discovered something about the relationship between his own heritage and the kind of science fiction he was writing. Speaking of the other writers’ reactions to “Salvage,” he said:

The thing that had worried me most—that the intensity of the religious elements in it would put them off—turned out to be not a problem at all. Though few there had particularly strong religious impulses, the sense of holiness that the story depended on seemed to work.

I realized then, that this milieu—of Mormon country underwater, the survivors struggling to keep civilization alive—was viable. . . .⁶

This discovery may have marked a turning point in Card’s writing; certainly it reflects positively in “Salvage” and in “The Fringe.” Mormonism is critical to both, but on an instinctual level rather than as surface element. Neither story preaches Mormonism per se, yet neither could exist without the underlying assumptions inherent in Mormonism.

This direction is even more apparent in the next story Card published: “Hatrack River” (1986). The editorial introduction to the story states that “the following fantasy is set in eastern Ohio in 1805, and Mr. Card tells us that it uses authentic frontier magic practice.” The statement is mildly misleading, although probably not intentionally so. “Hatrack River” comprises the first five chapters of *Seventh Son*, the first novel in Card’s series *Tales of Alvin Maker*. As a short story, it is complete and self-sufficient, coming to an acceptable resolution. But reading it in isolation disguises two central points.

First, the Ohio territory represented is not the Ohio we know from history but an alternative-Earth Ohio; the story may be less fantasy than science fiction, extrapolating to an Earth-analogue in which magic is a viable mode of knowing and acting. To understand this point alters the nature of the story.

The second point is even more telling. *Seventh Son* recounts the early years of Alvin Miller, Junior, born a “maker” and holder of

unusual powers, even within a society that encourages magic. For most readers, it might seem a fascinating character sketch, bolstered by Card’s meticulously re-created folk rhythms in speech, his carefully researched magical practices, and his curiously off-beat references to historical characters that immediately set the story beyond the history we know.

For LDS readers, there is infinitely more to see. “Hatrack River” details the birth of a Joseph Smith-analogue; *Seventh Son* continues his life to age ten. Throughout, Card has intricately interwoven elements of Church history until they are integral parts of the narrative, but in such a way that they are not immediately apparent. In much science fiction, for example, references to gods, angels, or other supernatural beings are frequently intended metaphorically; the authors take great pains to define the intrusions as within the laws of the universe postulated, since to do otherwise would break the conventions of science fiction itself. In *Seventh Son*, Card inverts the process, using incidents, characters, and other elements to symbolize the divine. Point by point, the narrative parallels episodes of Joseph Smith’s life, culminating with the well-known incident of his infected leg bone. Card borrows much from the stories that have grown up around that incident, yet he simultaneously makes his version seem a logical outgrowth of earlier incidents. Essentially what he has done in “Hatrack River” and *Seventh Son* is to transport Joseph Smith and the Restoration into an alternative frame; the underlying truths remain, but now Card is free to explore and extrapolate *within* the context of LDS theology and history. He has, in fact, written LDS science fiction, a novel “thick with Mormon allegory.” And the novel succeeds both as literature and as religious allegory.

One of the most recent Card stories to be published is “America,” appearing in *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine* for January 1987. In this *tour de force*, Card’s Mormon heritage is so important that the editorial headnote refers directly to it: “Mr. Card was able to draw upon his first-hand knowledge of Brazil, where he served a mission for the Church of the Latter Day Saints [sic] from 1971 to 1973, to create this powerful story.”

The story revolves around two characters: Sam Monson and Anamari Boagente. The first is a “scrawny teenager from Utah,” the son of a Yanqui engineer working in the Brazilian jungle; at the end of the story, we meet him again as the governor of Deseret, “the last European state in America.” She is a “middle-aged spinster,” a pure-blooded Indian proud of her ancestry and contemptuous of most Europeans. Much of the story details their first meetings in the Brazilian jungle, identifying Sam Monson’s hatred of his adulterous father, his fear of his dreams, and his increasingly difficult relationship with Anamari. She, on the other hand, develops a deep attachment to the Yanqui youth, even though that attachment often manifests itself in sarcasm. Yet they are inextricably linked, at first through Sam’s defiance of his father’s orders to stay away from the natives, then later through his dreams. He becomes her revelator, explaining the meaning of her repeated dreams of a huge bird, its unevenly sized wings

brittle with corruption. Sam interprets the symbolism: the bird is America, with the wings representing the northern and southern hemispheres. The corruption represents the corruption of European cultures; the healthy places "are where the Indians still live" (p. 40).

Unfortunately, penetrating to the truth of her dreams forces him to penetrate to the truth of his own—sexual dreams, in which he couples with Anamari, the "Virgem America." Then, in a dream that merges with reality, the coupling occurs. Before, "she had been a virgin, and so had he. Now she was even purer than before, Virgem America, but his purity was hopelessly, irredeemably gone, wasted, poured out into this old woman who had haunted his dreams" (p. 46).

Almost immediately thereafter he returns to Utah. Forty years later, they meet again, he as the governor of Deseret, she as the mother and emissary of Quetzalcoatl, the incarnation of the Aztec god; she accepts the tribute offered by the European to the true American.

A plot summary such as this is not a particularly effective way to talk about "America," simply because on the deeper levels, the story is *not* about Sam Monson and Anamari Boagente. It is about America, but an America seen through a distinctly LDS perspective.

At first, Anamari says, the Indians knew "the god of the land." They lived with the land in harmony and the land gave them its bounty. Then they forsook the land. The Incas worshipped gold; the Aztecs defiled the land with the blood of human sacrifices; the Pueblos turned forests into desert; the Iroquois took joy in the screams of tortured enemies. They turned from true dreams to the false sleep of drugs: coffee, peyote, coca, and tobacco. And the land rejected them: "The land called to Columbus and told him lies and seduced him and he never had a chance, did he? Never had a choice. The land brought the Europeans to punish us" (p. 44).

When Sam objects that her tale undercuts her professed Catholicism, she responds with a sentence that lies at the heart of the story: "Say *deus* or *Christo* instead of *the land* and the story is the same."

Yet the Europeans did not prosper, either. They poisoned the land with more poisons than the Indians could imagine. And now that the Indians have been punished sufficiently, the land will turn back again to them.

"It sounded so close to what the old prophets in the Book of Mormon said would happen to America," Sam realizes—but with a dangerous twist. Here Card defines the essential "what if" that defines "America" as science fiction. Given the LDS assumption about the destiny of the Americas as fundamental to the fictional world, *what if* the Europeans proved unworthy of the promises? "They would not be able to pass the land on to the next generation. Someone else would inherit. It made him sick at heart, to realize what the white man had lost, had thrown away, had torn up and destroyed" (p. 44).

Thus Card speaks to the central issue of the story, one initiated by the title itself. As fascinating, as mythical and archetypal as Anamari may be (and her name was surely not accidental); as

engaging and frightened and narrow and confused as Sam Monson is, they are not the true focus of the story. "America" is about America, the promised land. It is about the machinations the land sets in motion to insure its survival; from the single act their dreams lead Sam and Anamari to perform will come the new God, the new Quetzalcoatl to inherit the promises of the land. The Europeans will dwindle; the Indians again will prosper, recapitulating the cyclical movements so common in the Book of Mormon.

The story ends, in fact, long after the deaths of Sam and Anamari, as the narrator concludes his recollections with the words:

... I write this sitting in the shade of a tree on the brow of a hill, looking out across woodlands and orchards, fields and rivers and roads, where once the land was rock and grit and sagebrush. This is what America wanted, what it bent our lives to accomplish. Even if we took twisted roads and got lost or injured on the way, even if we came limping to this place, it is worth the journey, it is the promised, the promising land. (p. 53)

Here we have an explicit statement of the focus of Card's interest: a fictional, extrapolative exploration of the assumptions of Mormonism themselves. He is not, he assures us, attempting to write prophecy of his own; rather, like most SF writers, he uses "as speculative future as a milieu for telling the stories" he wants to tell.⁷

And most recently, those stories have centered on essentially LDS themes, settings, and characters, allowing Card to write what may be among the purest examples of LDS science fiction as he applies rational extrapolation to a universe of revealed truth.

NOTES

1. Card, Orson Scott. "SF and Religion," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, (Summer 1985) p. 12.
2. Card, Orson Scott. "Ender's Game" *Analog* (August 1977) p. 106.
3. Shirk, Dora M. "An Interview with Orson Scott Card." *Westwind* 113 (January 1987) p. 12.
4. Card, Orson Scott. Letter to Michael R. Collings, 20 February 1985.
5. Card, Orson Scott. "On Sycamore Hill." *SF Review* (May 1985): p. 11.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Card, Orson Scott. Letter to Michael R. Collings, 20 February 1985.

