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## A PG-RATED SAMPLER

### BRIGHT ANGELS & FAMILIARS: CONTEMPORARY MORMON STORIES

edited by Eugene England

Signature Books, 1992, \$19.95, paper, xx + 348 pages

Reviewed by Tim Behrend

THE 1990S HAVE thus far been a period of continuing fertility for Mormon letters: at least fifteen novels and short story collections (including one anthology) have been published in this three-year period, five of them by presses outside of Utah. At the same time, dozens of stories have continued to appear in *SUNSTONE*, *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, and *Utah Holiday*, and a new journal dedicated entirely to Mormon literature, *Wasatch Review International*, has been launched in Orem, Utah. Criticism, by contrast, continues to lag far behind the advancing edge of Mormon creative wiring. The low critical profile assumed by Gene England in his new anthology of current fiction—*Bright Angels & Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories*—reflects the imbalance between writing stories in the Mormon community and writing about them.

The collection consists of twenty-two short stories, fourteen of which were written within the past five years and so are truly "Contemporary Mormon Stories" as the title suggests. The remaining eight, dating from as early as 1963, are included for their historical or documentary value in contextualizing the more recent fiction. Most of the familiar names are here: the lost generation pioneers Maureen Whipple and Virginia Sorenson; the catalytic duo of BYU professors, Don Marshall and Doug Thayer, who helped kindle

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the New Mormon Fiction; Levi Peterson, whose slow, wise, Western voice dominates the field; the desert-struck baby boomers Michael Fillerup and John Bennion; Linda Sillitoe and Pauline Mortensen, strong women in whose narrative and themes the political and personal tensions inherent in priesthood dominion are memorably portrayed; the experimentalist Phyllis Barber; the prolific and politically conscious Margaret Young; the fantasy superstar Orson Scott Card. Even Judith Freeman and Walter Kirn are included, though these are "Mormon" writers whose connections with the cultural tradition are far less obvious than their writerly qualifications.

A list of "Notable Mormon Stories and Collections," prepared with the assistance of Bruce Jorgensen, forms an appendix to the collection. It allows quick access to part of the corpus of recent Mormon fiction, but its usefulness is greatly diminished by its somewhat haphazard construction. Many *Dialogue* and *SUNSTONE* listings, for example, are missing, perhaps because they are not sufficiently notable to the compilers. Another inconvenience is that the stories mentioned in the "Notes on Authors" section are not included in the master list, so searchers have to flip back and forth between the index and the bioburbs when looking up names or titles.

England opens the anthology with a brief introduction to the large patterns of Mormon literary history, and to the contours of its contemporary forms, making an effortless display in the process of his thorough familiarity with all parts and personalities of the tradition. This excursion through the land-

scape of Mormon literature, however, is conducted on foot: its pedestrian observations do not show the reader much in the way of critical or social perspective on the panorama of publishing events that it records.

The one intellectual issue that England pauses over deals with the "special character" of Mormon literature—how it is Mormon in the first place and what difference that makes to the reader. He does not build a coherent argument to answer these questions, or even address them frontally; instead he proffers a few opinions, much in the manner of a personal essayist, in which he touches lightly on selected aspects of the issues.

Most fundamental among England's ideas, particularly as regards the selection of stories for this anthology, is his feeling that authors' beliefs—which necessarily "affect

the nature and quality of their writing"—are of central interest to us as readers (xviii). Indeed, he explains, the stories of LDS writers gathered in *Bright Angels & Familiars* represent revelations from a divine source that can provide "further understanding" of theological, moral, social, and psychological issues of importance to Mormons. For those readers who might doubt that "these stories [can] be revelations . . . if they describe doubt, despair, failure, and sin," England recommends looking beyond their narrative surface and into "the shape of the author's own belief and moral vision, which inevitably show through to a careful reader" (xix).

I recommend looking beyond England's insistence on the edificatory value of this anthology. For most readers, the hidden truths that God might reveal to some Mor-

mons through the fictive writings of other Mormons, or the special lessons that the Saints might draw from the drama of these tales, will be less important than their own personal and aesthetic responses to the stories as narrative artifacts planted in the cultural ground of Mormon society. The space and energy expended here to argue that literature is not, after all, bad for us would have been better used for less parochial critical purposes. The last thing our community needs is more validation for an admonition-of-Paul style aesthetic of teleology.

Regarding the stories themselves, England has put together a nicely representative, but overly cautious, selection of the short fiction being produced by Mormon writers today. On the one hand, the compiler's caution is apparent in several entries—those of

*This section will include new titles from Mormon publishers; descriptions are usually taken from promotional materials. Submissions are welcome for future listings.*

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*To Soar with the Eagle.* By Blaine M. Yorgason, Deseret Book, \$13.95.

Yorgason portrays "a tale of love and adventure in the old West.... A fascinating look at relationships between two cultures and the responsibilities they hold toward one another."

#### ARTS AND POETRY

*Crazy for Living: Poems by Linda Sillitoe.* Signature Books, \$10.95.

*Light from the Dust: A Photographic Exploration into the Ancient World of the Book of Mormon.* By Scot & Maurine Proctor, Deseret Book, \$39.95.

This book utilizes 150 photographs, along with explanatory text, to take the reader on a journey to "landscapes that may have been common to the people of the Book of Mormon."

#### CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

*Hana, the No-Cow Wife.* By Pat Bagley and Will Terry, Deseret Book, \$12.95.

Bagley takes the tale of Johnny Lingo and creates a story of "love, dreams, and talking cows to tell the story of a most unusual courtship."

*The Stones of the Temple.* By J. Frederic Voros Jr., illustrated by Kathleen B. Peterson, Deseret Book, \$12.95.

A pictorial story describing the building of the LDS Salt Lake Temple, and the children who set the final stones in place.

## RECENTLY RELEASED

#### CHRISTIAN LIVING

*Cat's Cradle.* By Chieko Okazaki, Bookcraft, \$12.95.

Okazaki weaves personal experiences with gospel principles to create something "humorous, encouraging, and profound."

*In the Eye of the Storm.* By John H. Groberg, Bookcraft, \$13.95.

"This first-person account tells the fascinating story of the three years he [Groberg] spent on the South Pacific islands amidst a kindly people who had deep faith in God."

*Path to Wholeness: A Personal Approach to Spiritual Healing & Empowerment for Individuals Recovering from Sexual & Spiritual Abuse.*

By Carol Tuttle, Covenant Communications, Inc., \$9.95.

The subject of sexual abuse is approached personally by Tuttle, creating a path of healing for LDS women who were sexually abused in childhood.

*In Perfect Balance.* By Spencer J. Condie, Bookcraft, \$12.95.

Condie utilizes both stories and scriptural examples to create a backdrop which, along with insights, helps "resolve the tensions among gospel principles," and acquire some balance.

*Sisters at the Well: Women and the Life and Teachings of Jesus.* By Jeni & Richard Holzapfel, Bookcraft, \$11.95.

A look at how "the modern Church can benefit from a close look at Jesus' teachings to and treatment of women.... A reminder to all Saints that God sees men and women as persons, as individuals equally deserving of his love and attention."

*A Storyteller in Zion.* By Orson Scott Card, Bookcraft, \$11.95.

Card uses his personal style and commitment to the Church to engage the reader as he approaches gospel related topics. The theme of the

book maintains that "Latter-day Saints need to put first things first—Zion over Babylon, the gospel way over the world's way."

*Tolerance: Principles, Practices, Obstacles, Limits.* By John K. Carmack, Bookcraft, \$10.95.

Carmack focuses on tolerance, using examples from the lives of people to identify the "obstacles and wise limits of this essential virtue."

#### SCRIPTURE & THEOLOGY

*Beyond Death's Door: Understanding Near-Death Experiences in Light of the Restored Gospel.* By Brent L. & Wendy C. Top, Bookcraft, \$12.95.

This book "considers Near-Death Experiences (NDE) in light of LDS doctrine—revealed truth.... Offers informed comment on afterlife conditions."

*New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology.* Ed. by Brent Lee Metcalfe, Signature Books, \$26.95.

Ten writers present essays on the nature of Mormon scripture, from anthropology to linguistics, and from demographics to theology. This book "outlines the broad contours of contemporary scholarship which continue to examine issues of antiquity."

#### HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY

*Waiting for World's End: Diaries of Wilford Woodruff.* Ed. by Susan Staker, Signature Books, \$19.95.

Contains the diaries of Wilford Woodruff from his conversion in 1833 to his death in 1898. Staker states that "waiting is the dominant structuring impulse of Wilford's life. And his patient waiting accounts both for that which most distances me from him and that which ultimately calls out my sympathy and admiration."

Whipple and Eileen Gibbons Kump in particular—that draw heavily on the Home Literature tradition and would not be out of place in a collection such as *Especially for Mormons* or *Out of the Best Books*. England's justification for including Whipple's folkloric story (one of several recently discovered posthumously among her papers) derives from the importance of her 1942 novel *The Giant Joshua*, but this little piece adds nothing to the luster of her reputation. Both stories would have been better left out, the more so since neither is very contemporary.

On the other hand, England's apparently cautious position has led him to avoid some potentially difficult materials. Technically obscure or modernist styles as found in the more surrealistic works of John Bennion and Phyllis Barber, for example, are not included. Though this editorial decision makes good aesthetic sense to me personally, an anthology attempting to represent contemporary literature should have included at least one example of non-linear or non-traditional narrative styles.

I also have the nagging sense that vulgar language, human intimacy, infidelity, and other moral missteps, as well as characters or themes with an "anti-Mormon" bent, may be underrepresented in this collection. What originally triggered this feeling was a sense that my literary tastes seemed to differ radically from the editor's. In nearly every case where I was familiar with the published works of an author anthologized in *Bright Angels & Familiars*, I disagreed with England's selection. This applied particularly for Peterson, Sillitoe, Mortensen, Fillerup, Freeman, Barber, and Kirm. The only selection I fully agreed with was John Bennion's "Dust," which is the most technically and conceptually challenging story in the book.

While mulling over this odd lack of convergence in our opinions, it struck me that for many authors the story that would have been my first choice had elements of language or subject matter that might have been judged potentially offensive to some LDS readers. I began to wonder: Could it be that Gene England had chosen to target this sensitive audience? Had he deliberately served up a somewhat bowdlerized, PG-rated version of contemporary Mormon fiction catering to this group? The introduction, with its description of divinity conducting revelatory work in part through fiction and its promise of edification or instruction to Mormons who read this collection with sufficient care, does nothing to undermine the suspicion that his editorial choices might be undersprung with a conservative "moral" agenda, or at the least

by somewhat prudish literary tastes. Since my own predilections run to the dark and earthy, I would have preferred an editorial policy that in no way seeks to further exaggerate the already overly chaste proclivities of much Mormon fiction.

Nevertheless, England has given us a collection of well-written stories that speak in special ways to Mormon readers. In a few cases that communication is deeply cultural, deriving from ecclesiastical or nostalgic themes in which the chords of Mormon church life or the communal Mormon past resonate—often colored with an ironic or bemused tone. The parodies of Peterson and Neal Chandler offer the most entertaining variations on these themes, though they may also be the least culturally portable stories in the collection (excluding Whipple's fairy tale).

The more serious contributions in this category, particularly Barber's "At the Talent Show" and Kirm's "Whole Other Bodies," present real characters experiencing small family dramas accessible and relevant to any audience. For Mormon readers, though, who share personally significant cultural experiences with the characters in these stories, their potential impact extends beyond the ruminations of a fireside read and back into the private memories and interior tectonics of a Mormon childhood and heritage.

For me, however, the best stories in *Bright Angels & Familiars* are those that begin from Mormon premises, but then transcend them, or make them incidental, in the creation and movement of characters transposed by experiences of universal import. The interior struggles, the imperfect relationships, the spoiled expectations, the sad realizations that make up much the more significant part of life are here explored through characters who are first and foremost familiar because they are human. That they are close to us in their styles of worship, the patterns of their social organization, or the demands of their Sunday obligations, makes them more recognizable on the first page, and creates greater sympathy and interest on our part—both for the characters and their creators. Once the tale is in motion, however, the external details of Mormon affiliation recede in importance. The narrative architecture of the best of these stories is founded on the solid humanity of their characters; the ecclesiastical drapery in which they are wrapped becomes secondary. Marshall's "The Week-end," Mortensen's "Woman Talking to a Cow," and Sibyl Johnston's "Iris Holmes" are among the more exceptional selections because of their deeply humanist portraits of characters who

are you and me much more fundamentally than they are Saints and Gentiles.

*Bright Angels & Familiars* is a highly readable book, a handy, portable collection of current Mormon fiction in which snippets of the most important voices in our literary discourse can be heard first hand. Since no story appears here for the first time (for a half-dozen this is the third outing), its most practical contribution lies in presenting a sampler of available texts for newly interested readers. Its delimited scope makes it especially suitable as a gift book, or as a textbook for the college classroom or local reading group.

Eugene England and Signature Books deserve credit for repeating the service performed with the 1989 publication of the poetry anthology *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*. Once again they have brought together diverse texts and authors, making them easily available to the one-stop literary shopper. For a deeper understanding of contemporary Mormon fiction, however, more serious students will have to await future publications of England and other literary critics interested in the tradition.



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