

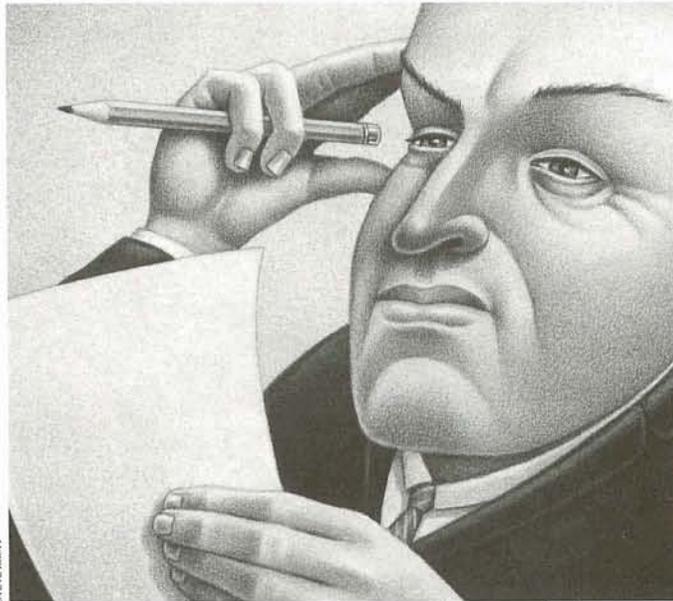
A battle cry for Mormons to write funny.

AND NOW FOR A LITTLE MORMON HUMOR

By Ann Edwards Cannon

I WAS STANDING IN the Acadia National Park gift shop on the coast of Maine this past summer when I overheard two college-aged store clerks discussing Mormonism. Actually, they weren't discussing. She was doing virtually all the listening, and he was doing virtually all the talking, trying his level male best to impress her with the breadth and depth of his knowledge. She looked politely uninterested as only women who have been out on one too many dates with boring guys can look. I, on the other hand, was fascinated, especially when it became clear to me that this eager young man had found himself a warehouse clearance sale on anti-Mormon literature—real vintage nineteenth-century stuff.

With a growing sense of perverse delight, I eavesdropped on their one-way conversation, which wasn't hard to do since he, quite frankly, was pontificating in a voice loud enough to violate noise ordinances throughout the state of Maine. He told her about blood atonement and blood sacrifice. He warned her that gentiles sometimes had their throats slit in our streets. And, of course, he repeatedly mentioned the P-word, polygamy. Indeed, I half expected him to tell her that fair maidens, kidnapped and dragged back to Zion in gunny sacks by lustful missionaries, regularly hurled themselves from the spires of the temple into the murky waters of the Great Salt Lake in an



In a Mormon context, humor helps defuse sensitive subjects such as sex, and resentment toward the Church's authoritarian power structure.

attempt to escape the horrors of plural marriage.

"And do you want to hear something else weird about the Mormons?" he asked, his eyes gleaming.

The girl gave him the go-ahead with a non-committal smile.

"They don't eat or drink anything hot," he told her. "It says right there in their Book of Mormon that they can't drink tea or coffee or hot chocolate. Hey, they can't even drink soup!"

I could contain myself no longer. I walked up to the pair of them and said, "Excuse me. I am a Mormon from Utah, and I just want to let you know that the part about the soup isn't true."

I think it is a fair assessment of the situation to say that I made them gape, and

given what they both knew about the way Mormons deal with mouthy gentiles, they were in no hurry to trifle with me.

It was a *moment*, don't you know.

My amusement persisted for a time after I joined my husband, Ken, who had been waiting patiently for me in the parking lot out front. But as my giddy mood wore off, I was mildly conscious of the sense of displacement one feels when realizing that in a particular instance, at least, he or she is clearly on the outside.

FUNERAL HUMOR

Let there be anecdotes—the funnier the better

ODDLY enough, I experienced the exact same sensation

ANN EDWARDS CANNON is a writer living in Tuxedo Park, New York. This paper was presented as her presidential address at the Association for Mormon Letters banquet in January 1993.

in a Mormon setting not long afterwards. Ken, who was then the second counselor in the ward bishopric, came home and told me that a visiting high councilman had given the bishopric a pop quiz about Mormon funerals and how to conduct one appropriately. Now I think you will agree with me when I say that the thought of a bunch of grown guys in suits sweating over an unannounced quiz like they were all in junior high English class again is, in and of itself, not an unfunny thing. What did disturb me, however, was question number 23, which went as follows: "As a general rule, which of the following topics are appropriate for speakers at funeral services?"

- A. Resurrection
- B. Mediation of Christ
- C. Certainty of life after death
- D. Humorous anecdotes or vignettes from deceased's life
- E. All of the above."

To my profound shock, the correct answer was not "E. All of the above." Apparently, these days, only answers A, B, and C are deemed appropriate subjects of discourse for funerals. The telling of humorous anecdotes or vignettes from the deceased's life, on the other hand, is to be gently discouraged.

"But Mormon funerals are supposed to be funny," I wailed. "Remember how my Uncle Lew got up at my grandfather's funeral and told the story about the time Uncle Don and Grandpa had to chase all those escaped chickens throughout the entire town of Ferron?"

My grandfather was a truck farmer who used to drive through the southern part of the state, peddling fruit from door to door. Cash was preferred, but he would take payment in kind, too, which explains how he ended up with a truckload of chickens. When he and my uncle stopped in Ferron, Utah, for lunch, the chickens, as they say, flew the coop. Upon discovering this state of affairs, my grandfather and uncle raced through the streets and alleys, the private yards and public grounds, the houses, school, church, and fire station of Ferron, bagging every single chicken they could find. Later as they drove out of town, my grandfather turned to my uncle and said, "Donny, I do believe we are leaving this place with more chickens than we arrived with."

Naturally family members at the funeral had heard the story dozens of times, but it still made us laugh, and on this occasion it gave us comfort, too. Indeed the shared vision of that

sweet-souled man, Philo Edwards, racing through the streets of Ferron, swearing and threatening bodily harm to a flock of fleeing hens, made him seem alive and warmly present to those of us in the chapel, mourning his death. In a very real way that afternoon, our laughter healed us.

That's why Ken's news about funerals stunned me to such an unpleasant degree. In fact, the thought that the public observance of my death just might be turned into another boring sacrament meeting, heavy on doctrine and light on humor, alarmed me to such an extent that I promptly wrote down my wishes for my own funeral. They are as follows:

I do hereby declare my desire for the good old-fashioned Mormon funeral of my Utah County youth.

First, let there be food—lots of it—so that family and friends who drive long distances can be assured of a fine, fortifying meal in the cultural hall after my funeral is over. Let the good sisters of our Relief Society presidency assign everyone in the ward to bring a dish—tater tot casseroles and green bean casseroles and chicken-lickin' casseroles and every other casserole ever invented that has Campbell's Soup as a primary ingredient.

And let there be Jell-O, too. Jell-O with little marshmallows and Jell-O salad with fruit cocktail and most especially that monument to gelatin engineering, which takes no less than twenty-

four hours to make, Rainbow Jell-O Salad!

Let there also be musical numbers, the neighbor lady with the imperfect but sincere soprano voice singing my favorite hymn, the primary children, sweet and silly, singing my favorite Primary song.

And finally let there be anecdotes—oh, yes, let there be anecdotes—the funnier the better, after which please arrange for the Salt Lake Scots to follow the caisson bearing my casket to the cemetery. (Author's note: I realize that, strictly speaking, bagpipes are not a part of traditional Mormon funerals. They do, however, appeal to my sense of the dramatic.) Remember to bury me deep, then place a tombstone at my head which reads, "Here lies Ann Edwards Cannon. She did as she damn well pleased."

Perhaps it's that I grew up in a Latter-day Saint family full of storytellers, but I've always thought that Mormons have a way with anecdotes, some of them obviously growing out of an individual's personal experience, others culled from the body of jokes and stories that Mormons tell each other, which, in fact, as Bert Wilson pointed out in his article "The Seriousness of Mormon Humor," Mormons "have probably always told



Verbal humor is safer in our mission-charged setting: folks laugh, tension evaporates, everybody goes on their way. Recorded, however, words endure.

each other about each other."¹

Indeed, one of the few earthly possessions my aunts found in the drawer of my extremely faithful grandmother when she died—I can't seem to get away from the death thing—was a mimeographed collection of Mormon bloopers. These were embarrassing things that people supposedly have done or said or written while at church, such as a bishop standing before his congregation and saying "gold-rimmed testicles" when what he really meant was "gold-rimmed spectacles." You know the sort of thing I mean. Frankly, I like to think of my little blue-haired grandmother sitting on the back row during sacrament meeting, passing out copies of this silly and mildly naughty collection to all her little blue-haired friends.

As both Wilson and Richard Cracroft have pointed out in their essays on Mormon humor, Mormons, like most groups, have a tradition of oral humor which serves a variety of purposes ranging from self-congratulation to self-deflation. In a Mormon context, humor helps defuse sensitive subjects such as sex, as well as latent resentment toward the Church's authoritarian and sometimes autocratic power structure. Perhaps most important, it can act as a safety valve, enabling believing Mormons, in the words of Cracroft, to "lessen the tension and the incongruity between ourselves and the high and demanding standards of our faith and the Church which houses our faith."²

WRITTEN HUMOR

*Unintentional humor is better
than no humor at all*

WHAT Mormons don't have to quite the same extent is a tradition of written humor, and much of the written humor we do have is purely accidental. I agree with Cracroft's assessment that, with a few notable exceptions, "one must search far into the first half of the twentieth century before turning up any intentionally sustained published humor."³

Actually, unintentional humor is better than no humor at all. When I was in high school, I used to think *Fascinating Womanhood* was a scream, especially when it advised female readers to pout, stamp their feet like vexed little girls, and beat their "puny fists" against their spouses' chests in an effort to make them feel more manly.

Later, when I was in graduate school, I occasionally turned to the fiction of the old *Juvenile Instructor* for entertainment, although a part of me was genuinely moved by its earnest attempt to assist young people interested in self-improvement. The *Juvenile Instructor*, which billed itself as "an illustrated

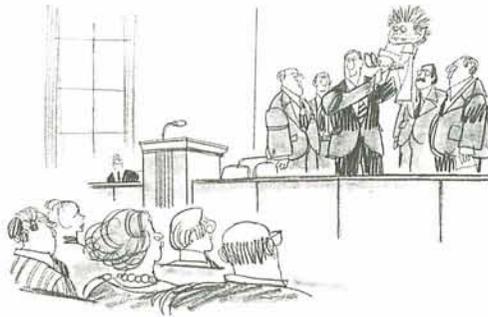
semi-monthly magazine designed expressly for the education and elevation of the young," routinely published stories of high adventure, intrigue, melodrama, and romance. They were, for the most part, much livelier than anything I ever remembered reading in *The New Era* while I was growing up. I remember one western story in particular called "Flaxie," which featured cowboy characters with names like Black Sam and Bronco Dick. It was, as you can imagine, an extremely educational and elevating story.

Later still, after I quit teaching and stayed home to raise children, I came to savor the unintentional humor of ward cookbooks. I especially enjoyed the exotic names of many dishes including "Mexicano Chicken Kiev," "Fondue Mexicana," "Speedy Chop Suey," "Turkey Tetrizzini," "Chinese Hamburger Casserole," and "Waikiki Meatballs." But, of course, what else would one expect from a worldwide church? I deeply regret that Roger Salazar and Michael Wightman got around to doing a parody of Mormon cookbooks before I did. I am, of course, referring to *No Man Knows My Pastries*, recently published by Signature Books.

Unintentional humor is fine, but so is intentional humor—especially when it works. Because I'm beginning to feel as British essayist Nancy Mitford did when she said she only wanted to read a book if it made her laugh, I just wish there were more intentional Mormon humor. Indeed, as I was preparing this address, I asked a number of people inside and outside the Church to name Mormon humorists. With very few exceptions, they responded with the same short list of individuals. Furthermore, they invariably mentioned Mormon cartoonists before Mormon writers, which is entirely understandable, given the immense talent and wide-spread exposure these individuals enjoy.

When Calvin Grondahl arrived on the scene in the seventies, he was a breath of fresh air, was he not, poking gentle and often not-so-gentle fun at Mormon ways. Who can forget the cartoon featuring a proud papa holding up the world's ugliest baby for the traditional murmurs of congregational approval after its blessing?

Like Grondahl, Pat Bagley also lampoons Mormon culture in his cartoons. Recently, Bagley put his talent for parody to use in two children's books, *I Spy a Nephite* and *A Nephite in the Works*. Frankly, I find it quite heartening that Bagley's publisher was none other than Deseret Book. I'm certain that ten years ago Deseret Book would not have taken on a project that features a goofy-looking Nephite named Norman wandering Waldo-style through such familiar Mormon scenarios as the pre-existence, the exodus west, and, yes, a ward wedding



FROM FREEWAY TO PERFECTIA, BY CALVIN GRONDAHL

When Calvin Grondahl arrived on the scene in the seventies, he was a breath of fresh air, was he not, poking gentle and not-so-gentle fun at Mormon ways.

reception complete with an Elvis impersonator on the cultural hall stage. I applaud Deseret Book for recognizing that many Mormons can laugh at themselves.

When people finally got around to Mormon writers who have written funny, they mentioned names we're all familiar with: Sam Taylor, the granddaddy humorist of them all, Rodello Hunter, Ardith Kanelly, Elouise Bell, Jerry Johnston, Clifton Jolley, Carol Lynn Pearson, Levi Peterson, James Arrington, Neal Chandler, Don Marshall, Edward Geary, Paul Toscano (although one person did say that funny is not a word she usually thinks of in relation to Paul Toscano), Orson Scott Card, Joni Hilton, Katherine Kidd, and, finally, my own favorite, Louise Plummer.

In her collection of mostly humorous essays, *Thoughts of a Grasshopper* (Deseret Book), Plummer displays a nice range of comic talent. Some of the pieces are gently funny in the tradition of Ed Geary's *Good-bye to Poplar Haven* (University of Utah Press). Others, such as her written audition for a stake-sponsored rendition of *The Book of Mormon Oratorio*, are simply hysterical. And others still have that quality I personally find most interesting in comedy—edge.

Humor also informs her award-winning novels for young adult readers, *The Romantic Obsessions and Humiliations of Annie Sehlmeier* and *My Name is SusSan Smith, the 5 is Silent* (Delacorte Press), which brings another fine Mormon writer to mind I haven't mentioned, Dean Hughes.

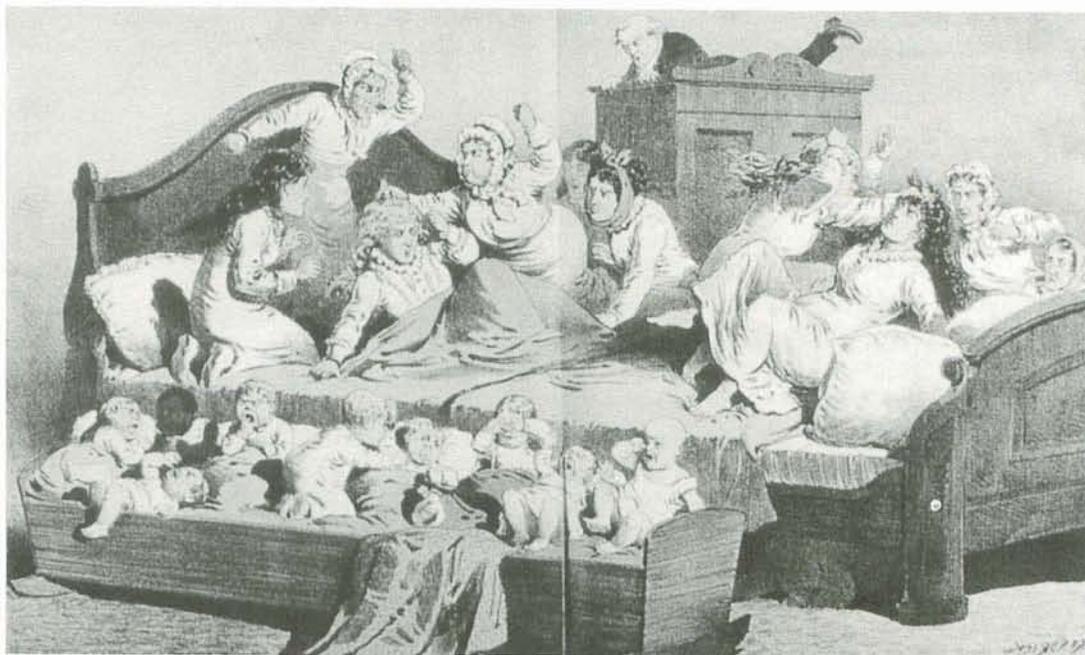
Hughes writes books for children and is fond of saying, like Rodney Dangerfield, that he gets no respect because of it. My response to Dean is that plenty of readers from young people to teachers and librarians all over the country admire his work for many reasons, not the least of which it is often very funny.

Now, the good news is that this list from Taylor to Plummer and Hughes includes talented individuals who have made a genuine contribution to the body of Mormon letters. The bad news is that except for the addition of a few more names, it's practically identical to the list of people mentioned by Bert Wilson and Richard Cracroft in their articles on Mormon humor published by SUNSTONE clear back in 1985—1985 for mercy's sake! That's eight years ago!

WHY MORMONS DON'T WRITE HUMOR

They crave respectability and credibility

THERE has been some—although probably not very much—speculation as to why Mormons don't do more written humor. Much of it has to do with the inherent seriousness of the Mormon agenda, which, among other things, includes that minor matter of building God's kingdom here on earth. Verbal humor is safer in this kind of a mission-charged setting: folks



Elder's Happy Home, a nineteenth-century caricature of Mormon Polygamy.

The major thrust of the twentieth-century Church has been to distance itself as far as possible from its truly radical roots in order to make itself fit for the polite society that condemned it one hundred years ago.

laugh, tension evaporates, everybody goes on their way. Once spoken, words turn into so much wind. Recorded, however, words endure. Recorded on stone, they can even become commandments.

I think, however, there is another factor that is at least partially responsible for the short list of Mormon humorists. I'm reminded of the year my husband, Ken, and I lived in Finland. A question often put to me by the people we met was "What do Americans think of us Finns?" I couldn't bring myself to speak the naked truth which, of course, is that we don't think of Finns at all. So instead I told them that whenever the subject of Finns comes up in our conversations back home, we always, *always* say they are the toughest folks God ever made. This answer managed to please a lot of people because inner fortitude, or *sisu* as they call it, rates a solid ten on the Finnish Scale of Desirable Personality Traits.

After several encounters of this sort with eager and earnest

Finns, I remarked to my husband that I had never met a people who were so concerned with how others perceive them—except, of course, the Mormons.

What Mormons crave, it seems to me, is respectability and credibility with those outside the faith. And who can blame them? Standing there in that isolated gift shop in Maine, I had the merest taste of what must have been a steady diet for my pioneer great-grandparents. In their fascinating book *The Mormon Graphic Image, 1834–1914: Cartoons, Caricatures, and Illustrations*, Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton vividly demonstrate the derision with which Mormons were viewed during the previous century. A representative cartoon, entitled “The Elders’ Happy Home,” for example, shows a large bed in which the (a) old and ugly wives are beating up on the (b) young and pretty wives.⁴ And, of course, who can forget Mark Twain’s pithy observation that after seeing for himself the extremely homely sisters of Zion, he considered any man who would marry more than one of them a true saint.⁵

Sometimes I feel that the major thrust of the twentieth-century Church has been to distance itself as far as possible from its truly radical roots in order to make itself fit for the polite society that condemned it one hundred years ago.

In short, Mormons wish to be taken seriously.

Plenty of Mormon writers, whether they’re the kind that write for the faithful or the kind that don’t, want the same thing. Of course, they may want to be taken seriously by different groups—some, perhaps, may wish to be taken seriously by the general authorities. Others may wish to be taken seriously by the mainstream membership of the Church. Others may crave the approval of the Sunstone set, while still others may wish to be acknowledged by the literary establishment outside the Church. And the best way to be taken seriously is—you guessed it—to write seriously.

In his essay entitled “Some Remarks on Humor,” E. B. White has this to say:

The world likes humor, but it treats it patronizingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurel, and its wags with Brussels sprouts. It feels that if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be something less than great, because if it were truly great it would be wholly serious. Writers know this, and those who take their literary selves with great seriousness are at considerable pains never to associate their name with anything funny or flippant or nonsensical or “light.” They suspect it would hurt their reputation, and they are right.⁶

NOW I realize that this address sounds suspiciously like a call to action, a battle cry for Mormon writers to write funny. And on a purely selfish level, I would like to see that happen. I can’t begin to describe the enormous pleasure I have taken over the years in our writers who possess a light touch. And yet, as American humorist Frank Colby warned,

The only really fatal thing is the shamming of humor when you have it not. There are people whom nature meant to be solemn from their cradle to their grave.

They are under bonds to remain so. In so far as they are true to themselves they are safe company for any one; but outside their proper field they are terrible. Solemnity is relatively a blessing, and the man who was born with it should never be encouraged to wrench himself away.⁷

So perhaps I will conclude this way: writers do come with their own set of fairy gifts, and they should be allowed to do with them what comes naturally. In short, they should be encouraged to fulfill the measure of their own creation. In the final analysis, this is what I believe absolutely. Like Shakespeare said, “At Christmas I no more desire a rose / Than wish a snow in May’s new-fangled mirth,”⁸ I no more desire that a Judith Freeman write like a Sam Taylor or that a Terry Tempest Williams write like an Elouise Bell.

I’m just glad we have them all. 

NOTES

1. Bert Wilson, “The Seriousness of Mormon Humor,” *SUNSTONE* 10 (1985): 6–13.
2. Richard Cracroft, “The Humor of Mormon Seriousness,” *SUNSTONE* 10 (1985): 14–22.
3. Richard Cracroft, “Freshet in the Dearth: Samuel W. Taylor’s *Heaven Knows Why* and Mormon Humor,” *SUNSTONE* 5 (1980): 31.
4. Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Graphic Image, 1834–1914*, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 89.
5. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Harper & Row, 1913).
6. E. B. White, “Some Remarks on Humor,” in *Essays of E. B. White* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1979), 244.
7. Frank Colby, quoted in E. B. White, 246.
8. William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, I.i.105–06.



REPOSE

Contemplation is the praxis of loss:
I sit, balancing my head of marble,
smile as the neck stiffens,
jugulars coagulate into golden cords,
arms paling in their gesture
of supplication:
I bend the elbow forward,
ever so slightly
until the fingers freeze,
pointing at no one,
and the stone cells descend
hardening vitals, trunk and toes:

One century, a lovely century,
I absorb wind and rain until
what I was—man—
calcifies into the solid, fluted,
figure I am proud of:
I am so still
I no longer frighten birds.

—SEAN BRENDAN BROWN