

BOOKS**MORMON NOVELS ENTERTAIN WHILE TEACHING LESSONS**

by Peggy Fletcher Stack  
Tribune religion writer

*This story originally appeared in the 10 October 1998 Salt Lake Tribune. Reprinted in its entirety by permission.*

The world of romance novels seethes with heaving bosoms, manly men, seduction, betrayal. Mormon novels have all of that and then some—excommunication, repentance, prayer, redemption.

In the past few years, popular fiction—romance, mystery and historical novels—aimed at members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been selling by the barrelful.

Anita Stansfield has sold more than two hundred thousand copies of her work. Jack Weyland routinely sells between twenty and thirty thousand novels aimed at the LDS teen market.

*The Work and the Glory*, a nine-volume saga of the fictional Steed family, whose generations live out their days against the backdrop of Mormon history, has sold more than a million copies.

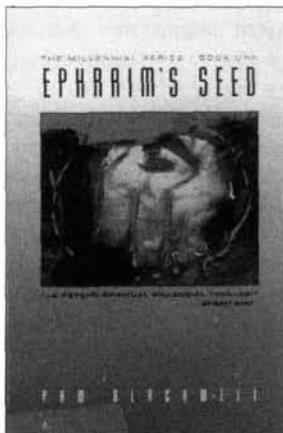
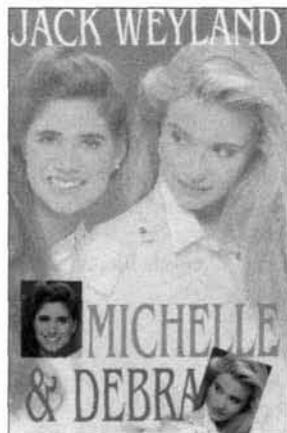
And now there's a new kind of Mormon fiction beginning to garner sales: millennial.

In a market that has traditionally distrusted fiction, why the explosive interest?

LDS women like romance as an escape as much as others, says JoAnn Jolley, managing editor at Covenant Communications who oversees the company's romance writers.

"If they can get it and feel good and clean about it, all the better," Jolley says.

These novels have some "suggestive scenes" but also "show how the gospel can bring life and light into a person's life," she says.



Today's LDS novels deal with serious topics—abuse, adultery, date rape—but they have Mormon theology-based solutions.

Too, such books are peopled with recognizable LDS characters—Brigham Young University students, missionaries, converts, bishops, Relief Society presidents, religion professors, home schoolers.

And they are laced with theological certainty.

"Lots of Mormons feel they can't go to the movies or watch TV. They are starved for a kind of entertainment that carries with it a light didactic pressure," says Neal Kramer, president of the Association of Mormon Letters.

Much of it is "fairly superficial moralizing," he says. "But it is consistent and rings true to the first level of defense most Mormons feel."

The storybook romance ends with a wedding, "but always in the temple," says BYU English Professor Richard Cracraft.

Many Mormons read fiction as an enjoyable but practical way of learning something, says Cracraft, director of the Center for Christian Understanding in Literature at the LDS Church-owned school.

"A lot of Mormons don't want anything to do with fiction," he says. "Those who do want a sense

they are getting something out of it."

**100 Years:** The first Mormon popular novel may have been *Added Upon*, written by Nephi Anderson in 1898, Cracraft says.

It told the story of an LDS couple who met in a pre-Earth existence and agreed to get together in mortal life.

"This is doctrinal conjecture," Cracraft says, "but it struck a responsive cord in the Mormon audience."

The book, in its fifty-fifth printing, has never been out of print. And Anderson went on to write nine more novels, many of which were similarly successful.

Such novels continued to trickle out into the Mormon market, but took off in the 1970s with the work of writers such as Shirley Sealey and Jack Weyland.

For some years, Weyland tried unsuccessfully to market *Charly*, a tale of passion and early death that broadly imitated the popular *Love Story*, by Erich Segal, for an LDS audience.

Finally, the Church's publishing arm, Deseret Book, took a risk on *Charly*, and it eventually sold more than one hundred thousand copies.

Since then, Weyland, a physics professor at LDS-owned Ricks College in Rexburg, Idaho, has written a dozen more, many of them almost as successful.

"The ones that have done the best are all issue-related," says Emily Watts, an associate editor at Deseret Book who has worked with Weyland on several of his books.

Watts points to the plot of *Michelle and Deborah* as an example. Two high school friends take dramatically different paths: one walks on the wild side, with drinking and carousing, while the other chooses a temple marriage. The book explores how their choices affect their lives.

"You can give a lecture on chastity to LDS teens or have sixty thousand of them read this book and get the same message," she says.

**Beyond Sugar-Coated:** Anita Stansfield's first novel, *First Love and Forever*, was repeatedly rejected before Covenant Communications picked it up in 1994.

Stansfield was told that the LDS romance market had dried up. And, to some extent, she agreed.

"Mormon women were fed up with trite, syrupy romances," she says.

Instead, Stansfield offers her readers a variety of realistic dramas, including emotional abuse in a temple marriage, date rape, adoption, cancer, second marriages, miscarriages and difficult teen-agers.

"The romantic element keeps you turning pages," she says, "while the characters offer concrete lessons in faith and hope."

Mormon readers are more likely to read a novel about such problems than an essay.

In *Return to Love*, JannaLyn Hayne tells her bishop that her husband, Russell, is routinely beating her. Russell is an active churchgoer with a prominent position in their LDS congregation, and the bishop does not believe JannaLyn.

When Stansfield talked with counselors at a center for domestic abuse, she was told that most of the women in their care had been to an ecclesiastical leader who did not believe them.

"It doesn't make that leader a bad person," she says. "It just means that they don't know what they are dealing with."

Though Stansfield's novels are filled with such problems, there are always Mormon theology-based solutions. And, of course, happy endings.

"In national romance novels, sin just happens," Jolley says. "In Anita's books, people sin but they know better. So they suffer the consequences and become better for it."

**Historical Fiction:** Gerald Lund's multivolume opus, *The Work and the Glory*, has been soundly condemned by literary critics as having one-dimensional characters. But that is beside the point, Cracraft says.

"Historical novels seldom are great in the same sense as *Moby Dick*," he says.

While Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is the exception, most historical novels are more like Irving Stone's books: long on history, short on psychological

depth.

Lund follows the Stone model but adds a "spiritual element," Cracraft says. "He has made Mormon history come alive for a whole generation."

Kramer says Lund has "tapped into something the culture has missed—its popular history."

Professional historians have dominated the writing of LDS history for the past twenty years, he says, replacing early writers of popular history such as Preston Nibley.

Many Mormons want to see the "role of God in bringing their ancestors to Utah," Kramer says. "That doesn't happen much in the world of scholars."

Lund's work "speaks to the people," he says. "He has become the de facto historian for the church."

**In the End:** Now come Mormon apocalyptic novels, drawn from the genre of science fiction.

Pam Blackwell is producing a "millennial series" which began with *Ephraim's Seed* in 1996, and followed with *Jacob's Cauldron*

this year.

The books tell of a time in the twenty-first century when the world is dominated by the United World Economic Network (UWEN), a global power that hates Mormons and free enterprise.

"After a yearlong campaign slurring Mormons as polygamists, unpatriotic, rich and greedy, the UWEN bombed the church administration building on South Temple," Blackwell writes. Eight people, including an LDS apostle, were killed in the attack, which was then blamed on Mormon dissidents.

The protagonist, Ben Taylor, and his wife, Peg, flee Salt Lake City first for a conclave in southern Utah and then to Independence, Missouri, a place Mormons revere as the site of the biblical Garden of Eden.

The novels are filled with LDS doctrinal assumptions, but they are also interspersed with Buddhist meditation techniques, reincarnation and visits from the afterlife.

"I have a novelist's itch to

create plot lines that slightly terrorize me," Blackwell writes in the introduction to *Ephraim's Seed*. "There is nothing that excites my imagination more than the epic return of the Lord."

Blackwell's first book sold ten thousand copies and the second, just out in September, sold out at Deseret Book in a matter of days.

"The challenge and the fun of being a futuristic writer is to take the bare-bone outline of prophesied events from scriptural sources and make up a real-life possibility," she writes in *Cauldron's* introduction.

Blackwell plans two more volumes in the series: *Michael's Fire*, which covers the last years before Armageddon, and *Enoch's Compass*, which describes the first one hundred years of the Millennium—Christ's reign on a glorified Earth.

Whether end-time events unfold as she has imagined is irrelevant, she says. Her hope is that these books will "stimulate readers to study prophecy and form their own opinions."

## MORMON NOVELS

*Here is a sampling of novels written by Mormons for the LDS audience:*

**Michele Ashman Bell:** *An Unexpected Love; An Enduring Love* (Covenant)

**Anita Stansfield:** *First Love and Forever; First Love, Second Chances; Now and Forever; By Love and Grace; A Promise of Forever; Return to Love; To Love Again; When Forever Comes* (Covenant)

**Jennie Hansen:** *When Tomorrow Comes; Macady; Some Sweet Day; Run Away Home; Journey Home; Coming Home* (Covenant)

**Rachel Nunes:** *Ariana, the Making of a Queen; Ariana: A Gift Most Precious; Ariana: A New Beginning; Love to the Highest Bidder* (Covenant)

**Pam Blackwell:** *Ephraim's Seed; Jacob's Cauldron* (BF Publishing)

**Gerald Lund:** *The Work and the Glory*, Vols. 1-9 (Bookcraft)

**Adrian Gostick:** *Impressing Jeanette* (Bookcraft)

**Shelly Johnson-Chong:** *Lilies and Clove* (Bookcraft)

**Janette Rallison:** *Deep Blue Eyes and Other Lies; Dakota's Revenge* (Deseret Book)

**Don L. Searle:** *Two Worlds: A Love Story* (Deseret Book)

**Jack Weyland:** *Brittany; Lean on Me; Michelle and Deborah; Charly; Nicole; Kimberly* (Deseret Book)

**Dean Hughes:** *The Children of the Promise* (3 vols.) (Deseret Book)

**Orson Scott Card:** *Stone Tables* (Deseret Book)

**Joni Hilton:** *As the Ward Turns; Around the Ward in 80 Days; Scrambled Home Evenings* (Covenant)

## BOOK NOTES

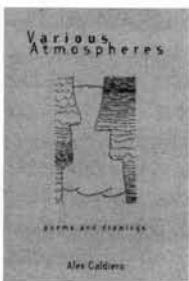
### VARIOUS ATMOSPHERES: POEMS AND DRAWINGS

by Alex Caldiero

Signature Books, 1998

59 pages, \$10.95

Reviewed by Brian Evenson



BORN IN SICILY, raised in Brooklyn, somehow thrown into Utah, Alex Caldiero is hardly your typical Utah writer. Nor is *Various Atmospheres* your typical book of Utah poetry. Indeed, it seems more indebted to language poetry and performance traditions than to anything to do with Utah or Mormonism.

The poetry collected here ranges from the comic to the insightful, often using one to lead to the other. In "I enjoy reading the biographies of suicides," for instance, the speaker talks of reading such biographies backwards, watching death bloom back into life. In another poem, he barricades himself away from death only to find himself barricaded in with death, who responds to his shock with "Just testing. / Just testing." In another, a shaman cowboy takes center stage. And other poems strive to express moments of sublime insight: "the sudden knowledge of what his life would have been had she never touched his heart laid bare at night's edge."

Just a few poems, such as "This is not the time to think about," deal directly with Utah or Mormon experience:

This is not the time to think about  
growing a beard. You just  
got laid off and you're in  
Utah and you're a minority and  
you're a little weird. . . .

However, it could be argued that the subtext for a great many of the poems seems to be the sense of dislocation, of alienness that one can feel living in Orem, Utah, when one is not Mormon and not part of the dominant culture. There is, in addition, a "Songprayer," which is a plea to God and a poem as well that invokes the Holy Ghost as "that old-time ancient Muse Mother," but at least as telling is the belief in the absurdity of belief expressed in "Bozo and Elvis":

Bozo and Elvis  
are exactly the same age—

That's the answer  
I received when I enquired  
as to the best course of action  
to take in my life.

As a performer, Caldiero has an uncanny ability of managing to couple the insightful with the strange, and when performed or even dramatically read out loud, much of his poetry gains a level of insight and depth that is difficult to convey on the page—certainly his performances are worth attending. At the same time, however, the poems of this collection have been chosen with sufficient care that they generally stand well on their own. One of Utah publishing's rare excursions into the larger world of poetry, *Various Atmospheres* is a sometimes quirky, sometimes moving collection of poetry that is deserving of support. ☐

**BRIAN EVENSON** is a professor of English at Oklahoma State University and the author of the novel *Father of Lies*. He may be contacted by e-mail at <evenson@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu>.

### IN OUR LOVELY DESERET

edited by Robert Raleigh  
Signature Books, 1998  
286 pages, \$17.95

Reviewed by Todd Petersen



WALLACE STEGNER once observed that the great Mormon novel had not been written because the literature's constant defensiveness did not permit "the kind of impartiality that a great Mormon novel would have to have." Indeed, for most Latter-day Saints, a "great Mormon novel" would require an attempt to justify, defend, or evangelize the faith, even if that attempt came at the expense of artistry. This kind of parochial thinking has kept LDS writing from fully realizing itself, leaving Mormons with a legacy of moderately interesting hymns, lame historical novels, cheesy inspirational bathroom books, and saccharine young adult moral propaganda which we struggle to call a literature.

Nevertheless, serious literary fiction within Mormonism is on the rise, a rise marked by Signature's new anthology of contemporary Mormon fictions, *In Our Lovely Deseret*. Editor Robert Raleigh observes in his preface that when we "see the word 'Mormon' on the cover of a collection we have some expectations, however vague." One of the many expectations is unfortunately (although in many cases accurately) that the work, though admirable in many respects, won't measure up aesthetically. This expectation does not come because Mormons are without literary sensibilities; rather it results from the Church's tenuous relationship with serious, faith-challenging writers. Be serious, the Brethren command, but be uplifting; seek to edify others, just don't damage their faith. In the wake of such a conflict, an anthology such as *In Our Lovely Deseret* becomes vital for development of a true and serious Mormon literature, not because all the stories are sterling examples of contemporary fiction, but because it lays the artistic and aesthetic groundwork for that first great Mormon novel when its day finally does arrive.

Though this collection is uneven, it is a fairly complete example of the current literary production of Latter-day Saint writers. The worst stories in this collection exhibit a decidedly limited range of thematic content, usually limited to the violation of LDS sexual norms (whatever they might be). Sexuality has and always will be an important source for literature because culture and emotion connect so fundamentally in our sexual expressions, but this anthology's focus on them seems to promote the idea that little else is wrong in Zion. Mormon culture today is fraught with troubles such as racism, classism, rampant consumerism, the insularity and xenophobia of Mormon communities (particularly in Utah and Southeast Idaho), any of a hundred other issues, though one could hardly tell it from this anthology.

Yet, the best pieces in this anthology challenge readers to expand the definitions of Mormons and Mormonism and facilitate what Brian Evenson has called a "more complete understanding of the idiosyncrasies of our culture" (SUNSTONE Mar.-Apr., 1998, 67). A number of these "Mormon fictions" tackle the serious challenges of faith in the modern world. They encourage readers to ask serious questions about their beliefs and behaviors, showing that life in the Church, much to the chagrin of the Church media makers, is dirty, difficult, and often ugly. The best of these stories surpass the scope of their Mormonism (but, paradoxically, they are

richer because it), not necessarily because of the LDS doctrine and world view as such, but because of their attention to mystery and faith. Few contemporary writers deal with these issues, and those who do, address them in narrow evangelical terms.

Brian Evenson's "The Prophets," chronicles the darkly comic exploits of a recently apostate man who disinters President Ezra Taft Benson's body in order to bring him back from the dead so he can "come to lead the church back to the track." Joanna Brooks's story, "Badlands," charts the disintegrations of a romance over time and space. "Twinkle," by Thomas Burgess pictures a young man's affair with, and attempts to convert, a Hong Kong prostitute. All these stories share a great concern for language, narrative, and character that is equal to their concern with issues of LDS faith. They are exciting because of their craft and their ability to overturn our "vague expectations" of what Mormon literature is and what it has the capacity to do.

Non-member Ron Carlson's and one-time member Walter Kirn's stories are wonderful, but they don't seem to be important to the development of a Mormon literature since, in my mind, a Mormon literature is about Mormon experience and not necessarily about the observation of Mormons. I doubt that this will always have to be the case, but until the literature is self-defined, it seems best to focus our attention on those who are participating in the religious culture in one way or another. To include non-LDS writers at this point would push the literature in too many directions.

Besides the fact that their stories are well-told and enjoyable, Carlson and Kirn seem to have been included in order to legitimize Mormon literature on a larger scale. I don't imagine that LDS writers need that kind of sponsorship. Mormon literature ought to be able to stand on its own; too much help will leave it weak. Non-Mormons are certainly able to write of Mormons, but that doesn't make them Mormon writers. Rick Bass, Wallace Stegner, Cormac McCarthy, and Peter Rock have done so to great effect, but they have overcome their own issues of appropriation by doing their homework. Kirn, although he has written a fine story, has not. These two stories' being included in this collection asks the question: can non or inactive members write Mormon fiction?

While the best stories in this anthology seem to reach beyond a Mormon audience, some rely on a fairly complete knowledge of LDS doctrine and tradition; consequently, they don't seem to speak to outsiders. Granted, stories like David Brandt Cooper's

"Beyond a Certain Point," Lee Anne Mortensen's "Not Quite Peru," and Levi Petersen's "Dursey Renews an Interest in Rodeo" are beneficial to a collection of Mormon fictions. But the best LDS literature will not be for Mormons alone. As Mormons, we need to tell ourselves important and challenging stories, but we also need to share them with the world or Mormon literature will stay second-rate.

*In Our Lovely Deseret's* primary deficit is the absence of any real sense of a world church. Though "Deseret" has become synonymous with Mormon Utah, the collection itself is not limited to the geographical boundaries of the state or even of the Intermountain West. Were the collection clearly limited to Utah and its environs, this would not be so great a concern, but the introduction and the stories position themselves beyond Deseret. Consequently, the anthology opens itself up to the criticism that it doesn't deal equitably with the larger world. Of the three stories that do reach beyond America, Thomas Burgess's Hong Kong story is the only one that really explores the Church's existence as world organization.

In a similar vein, only three stories employ a minority character that's 10 percent, a bad tithe to the mostly non-white world. Only one piece takes a person of non-European descent as its main protagonist, and that distinction goes to Lee Ann Mortensen for "Not Quite Peru."

For all its virtues and failings, this collection does render a fairly accurate picture, for better or worse, of the contemporary scene with only two significant omissions: Linda Sillitoe and Margaret Blair Young. Their absences are a shame. Their work is strong and challenging both in its craft and its faith. A Mormon novel—or a Mormon literature for that matter—that does not examine, challenge, or question its own faith and culture ceases to be a novel (or literature) and fast becomes simply more reading material, no different intellectually, spiritually, or emotionally from the phone book or the side of a cereal box. Stegner's observations are a useful litmus test: Does our literature have the necessary impartiality? Does it document Mormon experience instead of merely justifying it? Historically it hasn't, but this anthology seems to suggest that it is beginning to.

Margaret Blair Young observed that "We need good artists, and they need a forum" (SUNSTONE, Dec. 1997, 56). We do need that, but we also need good artists who can render Mormon experience in all its forms and do it well enough so that the sto-

ries will be accepted in the forums of the larger literary scene as well as within the body of the Church. This new anthology is a good start on the uphill side of that long and twisting road.

TODD PETERSEN is a Ph.D candidate at Oklahoma State University in creative writing and critical theory. He may be contacted via e-mail at <peterst\_osu@osu.net>.



## YET, GRIEF

These fingers, these eyes,  
those faces across whose blue waters  
I rowed not knowing the point  
of my arrival, those dawn-white  
anecdotes which do not make history,  
the womb that made me  
listen to the song of dust  
and birds, the heart that howls  
in the cave of my bones,  
the mind that floats like cloud  
and sinks like a pebble,  
the slate that taught me words,  
the school that made me learn  
the gap between good and bad,  
the temple where I pray  
not knowing why—  
are the instruments of my grief.

It's a tiger. It can smell  
the scent of blood and sweat.  
Like a goldsmith, it can hammer  
me to a thin gold leaf. Like a blacksmith  
it hammers me to red hot.  
It's like a village money-lender  
counting interest every pie,  
not, precisely, knowing why.

Surely, I won't spare him.  
I shall take away his peace  
by the blow of my own absence.

—NIRANJAN MOHANTY