

Book Review

Levi S. Peterson, ed., *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon Short Stories*; Douglas H. Thayer, *Summer Fire*; Donald R. Marshall, *Zinnie Stokes*

By Eugene England

Review of *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon Short Stories*, edited by Levi S. Peterson (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1983); Douglas H. Thayer, *Summer Fire* (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1983); and Donald R. Marshall, *Zinnie Stokes* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984).

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FAITHFUL FICTION

GOOD FICTION STRIKES me with that same mysterious combination of exhilaration and grief that comes from new knowledge, from new visions that replace the dear old ones. Because they are good fiction, I recommend that you make any sacrifice necessary to get all three of these books and read them soon. They are quite different from each other, but they are all evidence that serious (as opposed to popular) Mormon fiction is maturing, reaching a level of both excellence and faithfulness that it has never enjoyed before but that has been both rationally and prophetically expected.

Mormon fiction does not need to be rebellious to be excellent, though most of our best fiction in the past, especially that of the regionalists of the thirties and forties like Vardis Fisher, Maurine Whipple, and Virginia Sorensen, was self-consciously expatriate. Nor does it need to be blindly affirmative to be faithful, though almost all of our popular home literature, from Orson F. Whitney and Nephi Anderson in the nineteenth century to Shirley Sealey and Jack Weyland in the twentieth, has been essentially devoid of genuine conflict.

The best Mormon fiction will avoid neither conflicts nor affirmation; it will be neither self-consciously critical nor merely didactic. It will be “faithful” in the sense Richard Bushman used the term in his Winter 1969 *Dialogue* essay, “Faithful History.” He clarified the dangers both of the defensive mode of “official” Mormon history and of the uncritical secular assumptions underlying the graduate training of recent Mormon historians. After suggesting some characteristically if not uniquely Mormon approaches to the history of the world and the Church that could be particularly illuminating for all humankind, he ended with a brisk challenge capped with a brilliant inversion of a classical Mormon adage: “The enlargement of moral

insight, spiritual commitment, and critical intelligence are all bound together. A man gains knowledge no faster than he is saved” (p. 25).

President Spencer W. Kimball gave a similarly refreshing challenge in his July 1977 *Ensign* essay, “The Gospel Vision of the Arts”:

For years I have been waiting for someone to do justice in recording . . . the story of the Restoration, . . . the struggles and frustrations; the apostasies and inner revolutions and counter-revolutions of those first decades; of the exodus; of the counter-reactions; of the transitions; of the persecution days; of the miracle man, Joseph Smith, of whom we sing “Oh, what rapture filled his bosom, For he saw the living God.” (PP. 2–5)

This is surely a call for “faithful fiction” as well as faithful history—for examination of Mormon experience without avoiding either its human frustrations or its godly raptures. Thayer and Marshall, in their novels, as well as most of the best Mormon short story writers collected in *Greening Wheat*, give us precisely that. And most of these Mormon writers, especially Thayer and Marshall, fulfill Bushman’s uniquely defining characteristic for faithfulness: They are basically good human beings who are struggling—vulnerably and seriously (though often through humor)—with their own moral insights and spiritual commitments as well as those of their characters.

The best and most important of these works is *Summer Fire*, which is not only Thayer’s first novel but the first “real” Mormon novel in nearly thirty years, that is, the first to deal seriously with Mormon characters and ideas and to use them to create versions of the central human conflicts that energize good fiction. Don Marshall’s first novel, though less substantial and powerful than Thayer’s, is very good; and it is important in a different way. It is the first “real” novel to be published by the official Mormon press and seems to be selling well enough that Deseret and Book-craft may finally be persuaded (if not by the prophets then perhaps by the profits) to publish more of such faithful fiction. *Greening Wheat* is the first anthology of Mormon short fiction ever; and it provides, despite the unfortunate omission of Thayer, Herbert Harker, Helen Walker Jones, and Dian Saderup, a nearly complete sampling of our best contemporary writers of fiction.

Thayer’s novel, like all good and faithful writing, is about the greatest human problem, the pain of sin, and the greatest human joy, the hope of redemption. The main flaw is that this first novel by a brilliant short fictionist is still a bit too much like a short story. It is certainly long (240 pages) and substantial enough but lacks somewhat the rich diversity of characterization and plot development of traditional novels. It seems at times a little too well-crafted by the five years and multiple revisions Thayer has given it; it lacks some of the rough, risk-taking passion and experimentation with form (think of Melville’s *Moby Dick* or even “Billy Budd”) characteristic of great long fiction. But Thayer’s work does have the virtues of meticulous revision; Mormon critic Bruce Jorgensen calls him, quite accurately, a “draft-horse.”

Jorgensen, who seems addicted to . . . well, *punishing* Thayer, has a name for Thayer’s remarkably similar heroes: “Protagonists.” And we have one in *Summer*

Fire, a righteous and self-righteous sixteen-year-old Mormon who leaves his protective mother and grandmother and antiseptic Provo home to work for the summer on a Nevada ranch. There the ranch foreman, Staver (one of Thayer's most unusual and powerful fictional creations), rubs Owen's face in dirt, manure, and disgrace. More subtly, he attempts to initiate him (as he does with all summer hands) into error and sin.

But Owen is no Billy Budd, fixed forever in beautiful innocence; he begins, granted, as an offensive prig, but he is also touchingly reflective and determined as a moral being—much as I suspect Thayer himself and most Mormon young people are or want to be. He learns not only to be less naive and more tolerant but, more importantly, he discovers that he is capable of terrible sin—he comes to the point of very nearly killing Staver—and must be able to accept Christ's atonement and forgive himself as well as others.

By the same token, Staver is no Claggart, fixed forever in a mysterious, yearning love/hate for goodness and a compulsion to destroy it. Thayer skillfully evokes the "mystery of iniquity" in Staver, using the fine symbol of his being wounded in the heart in Korea and evoking his Claggart-like despair in violent midnight rides he takes on a half-wild stallion. A friend had joined the army to be with him in Korea and was killed there trying to save others the day before Staver himself was wounded in what seems to have been some desperate, even suicidal, action. Staver would not accept that sacrifice; but through Owen's only partly comprehending vision, we see Staver teaching Owen crucial things about work and caring, even about giving, and see that his flaw is a complex one. There is hope, which even Owen can finally feel because of his own self-discovery as well as from the example of others, that Staver too might be healed.

The main source of that hope, and for me the most interesting secondary figure, is Mrs. Cummings, cook and housekeeper for the ranch, who, besides striving to heal Staver, becomes, in effect, Owen's pastor. Raised a Mormon in Manti but married outside the Church, Mrs. Cummings is now a devoted but pragmatic evangelical Christian, faithfully enduring despite serious illness, a son (Dale) in jail, and the continuing prospect of Staver's evil:

We all need the Lord Jesus Christ, son. . . . We need to let him love us and wash us clean with his blood; we all need that. It takes a lot of suffering sometimes before most people are willing to let the Lord teach them anything, and some never are. . . . Dale, he needs the Lord. So do all those other poor men [in prison], hundreds of them. They got to accept love, the Lord's and everybody else's, or they're just going to get mean and stay mean. . . . Staver had that terrible wound in his heart. . . . I tell that boy he's got to let the Lord teach him and love him, but he won't listen. . . . Helping everybody and having party friends ain't enough. A man's got to have the love of a wife and children to make any sense. Staver's got a lot of good in him. (PP. 28, 68–69).

Mrs. Cummings's simple but unsentimental goodness, together with her steady, Christian (but non-Mormon) voice for redemptive love, is an important innovation

in Mormon fiction. It allows Thayer to place his own moral and spiritual authority firmly within the story without intruding on Owen's first-person naiveté, thus giving us a fine balance of sympathy and judgment; and it allows Thayer's deeply Mormon convictions to be voiced and acted upon in language that is Christian and scripturally grounded but still unusual enough to avoid sentimental cliché, to be both arresting and clear. And Mrs. Cummings becomes Thayer's direct agent for literally saving as well as teaching Owen. Finally pushed too far by Staver's success in corrupting his cousin Randy (the other summer hand), Owen becomes enraged enough to try fighting Staver and then, after a humiliating defeat, to aim a gun at him from outside the bunkhouse. But Owen is stopped by a providential appearance:

"Son, son."

I turned. Mrs. Cummings stood under the trees in her long, white nightgown, her white hair down over her shoulders (p. 247).

This redemptive figure has done much more than prevent Owen from committing a terrible sin; she has helped him toward the essential understanding of himself and Christ that now begins to dawn. On his way home to Utah, he looks at a section of famous war photographs in *Life*. Included is one of a young German soldier

holding a rifle and looking down from a guard tower at the people in a concentration camp. [Thayer has prepared for this scene through a powerful supportive theme of Owen's preoccupation—induced partly by a creative and passionate seminary teacher—with irrational evil, focused in the Holocaust.] I looked at him. ... I looked at my hands, and then I looked at Randy and the other people in the bus whose faces I could see. I knew that I wasn't any different from them, and I knew that was part of what I'd learned. But there was something else, something even more important, that I didn't have a word for yet. But I would. It was a word like *prayer* or *faith* or *love*. (p. 256).

The word, probably, is *grace*.

Grace is what Donald Marshall's novel is about as well, though at first it seems more about atonement as paying for sin rather than as a healing through grace. Gavin Terry, whose dying wife had asked him to return a borrowed and damaged book (something she had neglected to do out of embarrassment), finds that to "clear the slate" (p. 6), as she had called it, is so satisfying that he later returns to Cedar City, Utah, to wipe clean his teenage mistakes.

So far we have the makings of what has been the usual Deseret Book (or Book-craft) fictional fare—happy people with happy problems. But what lifts *Zinnie Stokes* into the realm of good and faithful fiction is Marshall's skill, integrity, and honest vulnerability. His protagonist, clearly a version of himself, experiences the minor discomfort and immense satisfaction of minor league slate-clearing: returning some kept change, admitting plagiarism to his former English teacher, compensating for a job paid for but never completed—all in the presence of his young son, who is surprised ("How come you did so many bad things when you were little?") but satisfactorily forgiving ("You're a good dad," p. 80). Slowly, though, Gavin begins to learn that clearing slates is not simple, first by finding that people and circum-

stances change, making real compensation impossible, then by struggling with his fear of and hatred for a teenage bully, and finally by being confronted with a suppressed wrong that is now tragically mixed up with adamant death and undeniable love.

It is this wrong he had suppressed, and Gavin's fumbling but courageous and faithful working it through, that make *Zinnie Stokes* into fine fiction. And it is a wrong from Marshall's own past in southern Utah, apparently a schoolboy cruelty toward some plain and rejected farmgirl with foreign-born parents, that haunts this novel with moving credibility. The same haunting, personal memory gave power to Marshall's story of ten years ago, "Christmas Snows, Christmas Winds," which was made into a prize-winning PBS drama still shown each Christmas. On the evidence of *Zinnie Stokes*, we can trust that Marshall, like Gavin, has realized that slates cannot be wiped clean by human payment but can only be brought out for further and better writing by the power of grace. We can also be grateful that Marshall's faithful conscience continues to energize his talent.

Levi Peterson hopes that *Greening Wheat* will appeal to gentile as well as Mormon readers, claiming in his introduction that the stories are all skillful exercises in "the conventions of modern fiction." I agree. Though they all partake somewhat of the paradox inherent in what I am calling faithful fiction, Peterson is right that they thus belong to "a large and venerable literature featuring the conflict between orthodoxy and the world at large" (p. vii). He recognizes that most of the stories include unusual, if not unique, Mormon aspects and ideas: missionaries, sacrament meetings, the obsession with sin, the anguish over failed blessings and promises, the responsibility of new creatures in Christ to create a new civilization, the struggle to comprehend evil in a universe ruled by a good and omnipotent God. But according to Peterson, the stories thus provide mainly "a new sweep over the old battleground in the human mind between faith and doubt, myth and science, revelation and reason," and they can claim to be "moral" mainly because they achieve "breadth, balance, and proportion" (pp. viii-x).

I disagree. Though Peterson admits that literature "ought to enhance life rather than to depress it" (p. ix), his defense of unrestricted subject matter on the grounds of proportion and neutrality does justice neither to the stories he is defending nor to the power and influence good literature has always had. Some things (fundamental nihilism, for instance) have no place in literature. And the best Mormon fiction, including much of Peterson's, gives us much more than balance; it gives us new visions of life, filtered and energized through a unique and serious moral intelligence as well as a gifted and disciplined artistic sensibility.

For instance, Peterson's own story in this collection, "The Gift," is like R. A. Christmas's "Another Angel" in its unmerciful, even embarrassingly accurate look at the "foolishness" of traditional faith as it appears to people in our increasingly secular world. But also like Christmas, Peterson's main achievement is to convey the yearning for faith that persists among the secularized. His protagonist, a skeptical "existentialist" with a mistress, is touched by the spiritual charisma of a young Mormon elder. Though unable to accept all of the gift offered, he is able, like Christmas's heroine (the wife of a former Mormon who reads the Book of Mormon to

better understand him), to accept some of the grace and to feel deep nostalgia for the rest: “Gerard was determined to marry Katrine, to give children to the world, to forgive God for not existing” (p. 117).

Two other stories look at another dimension of grace: how ineffably it comes—and goes. Bruce Jorgensen’s poetically crafted jewel, “A Song for One Still Voice,” gives us an ordinary man with extraordinarily firm and reflective sense of husbandry over crops and family. One night while irrigating, he is given a vision that “stuns him with delight and fear harmonized like a major fifth,” one that has no apparent reason or implication but which enhances his life and ours through the power of words to imitate the power of actual experience: “Looking at it, he is weightless, in free fall as if the earth has dropped from under him, or as if he is drawn up with the world’s tidal bulge and loosed in the gravity of light, yearning farther out and from deeper within than in any prayer he has ever spoken. Undeserved, abounding, grace rings in his bones.” (p. 5)

Wayne Carver’s “With Voice of Joy and Praise” is as ironically overstated in contrast with its theme as Jorgensen’s “A Song for One Still Voice” is understated. It documents the poignantly banal conversations and reflections of a middle-aged Mormon couple traveling through the southern Idaho landscape of their youth (on the way home from a temple trip), who have unaccountably lost even that grace they once had.

Most of the other stories also come together in pairs: Donald Marshall’s “Lavender Blue” and Lynn Larson’s “Original Sin” both capture the strange mixture of anger, regret, and hope in their young Mormon protagonists’ close escapes from sexual sin.

Linda Sillitoe creates an unforgettable Mormon teenager, whose attempt to be and appear a skeptic is tragically complicated by her desperate and faithful love for a quadriplegic whose priesthood blessing promises seem to fail. Kevin Cassity gives us another young Mormon, inexperienced, narrow, even bigoted, who, while working a summer in Alaska, finds himself slowly learning to appreciate the moral sincerity and life-changing spiritual experience given to non-Mormons.

Karen Rosenbaum’s “Low Tide” and Joseph Peterson’s “Yellow Dust” both provide harrowing confrontations with ‘the possibility of moving from the security of religious faith and reliance on grace to the honest but terrifying faith that the universe is ultimately meaningless and death truly ultimate.

Dennis Clark, one of our most talented but so far least published writers, tells of the complex struggle of a young Mormon husband to be fully faithful to his wife, to avoid both self-gratification and gratifying flirtation, and of the small, uncertainly permanent, but certainly real gain he makes through prayer, good humor, and persistence.

David Wright, the talented playwright, poet, and fictionist who died twenty years ago, tells of a very different struggle than Clark examines but one that engages the similar paradox of freedom and order: a boy must learn to accept disappointment and limitation without losing passion and idealism. His father helps with a natural parable, “‘Maybe you think that the hawk is free as an angel,’ he said, ‘but he don’t get far from home,’” (p. 186) and by sending the boy on a mission as part of his

planned trip to Salt Lake City: “‘After Mr. Burns takes you to Temple Square,’ he said, ‘tell him to let you walk down Second West Street. Go alone, and don’t you be afraid. Don’t you say anything or think anything bad about the people you see. And if someone comes up to you and asks you for a quarter, I want you to give him a dollar. Promise me right now you’ll give him a dollar’” (p. 190).

Most of these writers, like Wright in his probably autobiographical sketch, are more comfortable with the grace of moral passion than with the grace of spiritual energy and conviction. But their honesty and hope, their desire “to enhance life rather than to depress it,” as well as their professional skills and experience with great literature, lead them to allow both kinds of grace to show through in their stories. They are writing, in the main, “faithful fiction,” fiction that compellingly images the courage to rebel, to be free of the compulsions and absurdities of orthodox religion—indeed of any structure. But it is fiction that just as effectively, and increasingly, images the greater courage to stay within a carefully chosen structure and to fight there for the only freedom that ultimately redeems, that which remains in tension with structure and which thus must be paid for with the terrible price of making covenants and keeping them.

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