

Book Review

Levi S. Peterson, *The Backslider*; Linda Sillitoe, *Sideways to the Sun*; Orson Scott Card, *Seventh Son*

By Eugene Englandp

Review essay discussing *The Backslider*, by Levi S. Peterson (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1986), 361 pp., paperback \$12.95; Linda Sillitoe, *Sideways to the Sun* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1987), 255pp., paperback \$7.95; and Orson Scott Card, *Seventh Son* (New York: TOR, 1987), 241 pp., hardback \$17.95; paperback \$3.95.

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BEYOND “JACK FICTION”: RECENT ACHIEVEMENT
IN THE MORMON NOVEL

ONLY FOURTEEN YEARS ago, Karl Keller called most Mormon novels to that point “jack-fiction.”¹ With that play on the familiar term “jack-Mormon,” used for one whose faith and activity have lapsed and who is loyal to Mormonism only as a culture, Keller was claiming that Mormons had produced fiction essentially irrelevant to the doctrines of Mormonism and therefore removed from the heart of the faith. He offered as a model for what genuinely religious literature could be the work of Flannery O’Connor, whom he quoted as claiming, “I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that.” It surprised and disappointed Keller that his fellow Mormons had not been similarly engaged in creating fictional worlds based on the unique ways Mormon theology and experience would lead them to see the world.

Keller was right. To that point nearly all Mormon fiction was jack-fiction. The first main outpouring, the “home literature” of the 1880s and 1890s (which continues today in the popular Mormon romances published by official and semiofficial presses and magazines) was consciously intended to strengthen young Mormons and convert others. But in blatantly serving *religion*, such writing has not been good *literature*, and in trying so hard to be more “Mormon” it has become less so, often narrowing, or even subverting, the complexity, freedom, and generosity of Mormon thought and life in its preachy didacticism. On the other hand, the outpouring of nationally published and honored fiction of the 1930s and 1940s was too often provincially antiprovincial, regional in focus, and nostalgic for the heroic Mormon past, but ignorant of or hostile toward the richest dimensions of Mormon theology and contemporary life.²

When Keller wrote, in 1974, he knew that a very few examples of something new, like the first buds of spring, had begun to appear, such as Douglas Thayer’s stories “The Red-tail Hawk” and “Under the Cottonwoods.”³ These were powerfully expressive of central Mormon ideas and concerns but not marred as literature by being written to promote either religion or antireligion. Soon after Keller’s essay, in the late seventies and early eighties, there developed a lovely blooming of serious, religious Mormon fiction, very little of it “jack-fiction,” written by Douglas Thayer, Donald Marshall, Eileen Kump, Levi Peterson, and others. Karl Keller died in 1986, just before he could have seen the marvelous outpouring, in the span of just six months, of three excellent Mormon novels that move well beyond jack-fiction.

The first of these, published in late 1986, was Levi Peterson’s *The Backslider*. It is the funniest Mormon novel so far, possibly the best, and worthy to be compared not only with Flannery O’Connor but with some of the better recent American fiction, such as the work of Joyce Carol Oates and Reynolds Price. The questions it raises—and the answers it dramatizes—make it the very antithesis of jack-fiction. It explores the effects on two people, a Mormon and a Lutheran, of various notions about what God is like, what he expects of us, and how he helps us—certainly among the most fundamental religious questions.

Peterson’s protagonist, Frank Windham, is a twenty-year-old cowboy from Panguitch, Utah, imbued with the usual Mormon village virtues of fundamental decency and honesty, self-sacrificing neighborliness, and a certain bent for hell-raising. Unfortunately, he is also indoctrinated in the usual—and some unusual—pemitions (my own word) of popular Mormon theology. He believes in God but he wishes he didn’t—and knows he therefore is in big trouble. God is absolute, inscrutable, exasperatingly contradictory, yet unrelenting in vengeful pursuit of sinners, especially Frank, whose abiding image of divinity is a giant eye looking down a gunbarrel at him, ready to fire. He imagines God treating people the way Frank treats his boney, gristle-teated, mean-spirited milk-cow: “Having decided that splintering a milk stool on a cow’s back was an important part of animal husbandry [Frank realized] it fit in well with the way God treated human beings. He broke up furniture on their heads, so to speak, but it was for the good purpose of making Christians of them” (195). Such a concept of God, of course, defeats any natural optimism. Frank believes that “everybody has misery in this world. That’s what this world is for” (205).

One misery seems especially revealing of God’s nature and his intentions for Frank. His brother, Jeremy, is affected even more than Frank by their mother’s various fixations and fanaticisms, especially concerning sexual purity and God’s determination to assign and reveal particular punishments to people. Jeremy makes the mistake of going north to BYU, where his theological confusion is compounded by religion professors and Provo herbal medicine practitioners, whom Peterson creates in hilarious detail. But the result is not funny: Jeremy has a mental breakdown, is picked up by Frank and taken, despite his occasional incoherence, on the fall deer hunt, where, after killing his first deer and gutting it, he proceeds to cut off his own genitals and nearly bleed to death. Frank, in an heroic effort, carries Jeremy up over a steep ridge and saves his life, sees him through treatment at the State

Mental Hospital—where Jeremy develops a new identity as “Alice”—and then brings him home to wonderfully gentle, tolerant care from family and neighbors.

Peterson’s gifts include not only the skill to create the physical and psychological reality of all this but to do so with both exacting attention to the nuances of rural Mormon speech and clear sympathy with *all* his characters. For instance, when Jeremy first goes back to priesthood meeting and is introduced by Frank with his new name, and some deacons snicker, the gruff, pragmatic bishop who is shepherding Frank through his repentance from backsliding announces:

There’s nothing in Scripture that says a man can’t be called by the name he wants to be called by. Come Judgment Day we’re going to see Sister Alice standing on the right hand of the Savior. The Lord has put him among us for a special reason and we better not let the Lord down. Brethren, keep an eye on your kids and if you see them making fun of Sister Alice, larrup the daylights out of them. (244)

This is the benign side of the Mormon ethos, a strong sense of communal responsibility to suffer together and ease each other, along with an emphasis on a God of justice who requires—even metes out—fit suffering for sin. The bad side of such a gospel of works is explored from Frank’s perspective as he becomes increasingly obsessed with God’s intent to punish him—for his hell-raising, for succumbing to various temptations of the flesh, such as good hard work, good food, and even the sexual pleasures he enjoys with his wife, Marianne. In scenes of breathtaking humor combined with terrible sadness, Peterson shows us the perversions that such a mixed-up theology can produce: Frank toting up his good deeds against his sins (such as making love to his wife other than the mutually agreed once on Friday night, or enjoying his work so much that he suddenly realizes “he hadn’t thought about God and spiritual things for three or four hours”); Frank then adding up his credits (reading from the scriptures every evening except Friday) and finally making up for the extra sins over credits by lashing himself with a leather strap. In one of the most horribly funny passages I’ve ever read, Frank and Marianne try to live in their marriage as the kind of Christians “that Frank said God loved.” This discipline includes not salting their beans, lest they tempt them toward carnality by tasting too good, and together fixing Frank up with a contraption to control his wandering hands and induce proper chastity. The scene ends with Frank losing control, making passionate love with his wife, and then punishing himself for being a carnal sinner by mutilating his hand with a vegetable grater.

Later, in his growing despair, as he begins to interpret Jeremy’s earlier puritanism as saintliness, Frank even decides that Jeremy could only have been “wasted” by God as a warning to *Frank*. Finally, in the very process of aiding in a miraculous Easter morning birth by giving a prophetic priesthood blessing and while preparing to baptize Marianne, who has converted to Mormonism in part from unconditional love of him, he begins to seriously consider practicing the old Mormon perversion of blood atonement on himself. He thinks of imitating Jeremy—but when no one is near, as he was for Jeremy, to save his life.

By this time most readers might agree with the long-suffering Marianne when she says, “All the Mormons I know have gone crazy.” But Marianne’s wonderful

religious sanity is formed partly through her *becoming* a Mormon. At first she has both the qualities and the weaknesses produced by a pure Lutheran theology of grace: she is vital and hearty and generous and at peace but of somewhat easy virtue. When she and Frank first fall into sexual sin, his problem is that he is obsessed to despair with sexual initiation and evil; her problem is that she is not serious enough about the dangers, the reality, of sin. She is afflicted with that perversion of Protestant thought that the theologians call “cheap grace.” She has a moving but sentimental and limited understanding of Christ and the Atonement:

I daydream about a cowboy Jesus . . . coming through the trees on a horse. . . . He is riding a double rigged saddle and he’s got a lariat He’s got on chaps and spurs and a blue denim jacket and a ten gallon hat. But when he gets up close I see he really is Jesus. He has a beard and he looks like there isn’t anybody in the whole world he can’t love. He says. I found you; you were lost, but I found you. (27)

Marianne’s somewhat shallow sense of who God is and how he helps us deepens steadily through the book as she gets pregnant and deals with her troubles alone for a while. Then, when Frank recognizes he has been trapped by God, she agrees to marry him just long enough to legitimize their child. Finally, as they fall genuinely in love, she even agrees to try out Frank’s strange notions of what good Mormons must do: “We wouldn’t have sex except to make babies. We wouldn’t eat fancy food—just plain stuff to keep us going. We wouldn’t keep a fancy car. . . . It’s a vanity. We wouldn’t ride and hunt and fish for fun. We wouldn’t laugh out loud” (298).

Marianne’s own growing spiritual maturity helps her recognize what is happening to Frank. After hearing a Sunday School lesson on the Atonement, she comments, “I wasn’t sure Mormons believed in the Atonement at all,” and when assured that Frank has a great testimony of it, she continues, “You can’t tell it by the way he acts. He doesn’t act very atoned” (288). Even though she is willing, because of her own love for Frank, to try to act as unloving of God’s world and gifts as he is, she prays, “Sweet Jesus, please don’t be like Frank thinks you are.” She constantly assures Frank in his despair, “Jesus loves you,” and bears her testimony to him: “No matter what you say, Frank, Jesus is kind. I can’t believe in no other Jesus.” As she sees what final direction Frank is taking, she pleads, “Why can’t you believe his blood was enough? Why do you have to shed yours too?” and prays alone: “Sweet Jesus, help us before it’s too late.” Jesus answers her prayer and appears to Frank in the form her faith has prepared him to see, “His face as kind as an August dawn.” Jesus listens to Frank’s troubles and gives him some straight talk in Frank’s own language: “That Marianne is one hell of a good woman. Why don’t you just settle down and enjoy her like a husband would who has some good sense. . . . And work on that crap about hating God. See if you can get over it” (355–56).

That vision is one of the most lovely and believable epiphanies I have encountered in modern fiction. It is the capstone to an extraordinary achievement, not only in thematic content that is seriously theological but in form that is meticulously crafted to give permanent being to that content. The narrator is a combination of a more mature Frank and the more rural side of Levi Peterson himself, populating this

imagined Mormon world with richly textured beings and a pungent vernacular. The marvelous range of that vernacular also includes the humble poetry of good things seen straight on. Here is Frank, touched by Marianne’s tender voice on the phone asking after him just as he is approaching the depth of his despair before his vision:

[Her voice] made him remember how much he loved the world. The highway and truck, the river glinting in the sun, the clouds climbing into the blue sky, the sage brush plains, the high timbered mountains, the pastures full of horses and cattle, the furrowed fields, the little towns, the people eating, talking, loving, all these numbed him with sweet grief. (343)

And this is Marianne, being greeted by her new fellow saints in the Relief Society room after her baptism: “Her hair still damp, her cheeks radiant, [she] took the hand of each person. . . . Those waiting their turn stood with curious, reverent faces, as if she was fresh from heaven and a blessing to touch and to talk to” (357).

Peterson has presented himself, both in person and in most of his fiction before this novel, as something of a Mormon backslider. The quality of theological insight, moral clarity, and achieved conviction here suggest to me that, whatever he may claim, he has backslid a bit from that backsliding.

IN MORMON THEOLOGY, Christ’s atonement is the means by which God gives us the power to accept ourselves and overcome sin—and thus be saved from this world’s greatest problem. To *continue* to progress in the image of God the Father and Mother, Mormons believe they must build an eternal marriage. Thus, relationship, particularly in the family, is central to Mormon thinking about what is best in this life and eternal life—what in fact makes up our own as well as God’s work and glory. But our theology, more than any other I know, also posits radical individuality. We each have necessary, unconditioned, unrelated being. We have always existed and will always exist autonomously. As the Mormon amateur theologian B. F. Cummings writes, “The self is insubordinate, wandering, imperially aloof, solitary, lonely, withdrawn, unvisited, impenetrable”; it “cannot escape from existence nor can it escape from the awareness of its existence” nor from “the inevitable sense of solitude” that is born from “being an eternally identical one.”⁴ And yet, as Cummings also notes, for Mormons “nothing that [the individual] can do is of avail without . . . affiliations. Through all eternity he remains an individual but through eternity he will remain a social individual.”⁵ This is certainly one of the “oppositions” that Lehi declared all progress, even existence itself, depends upon (see 2 Ne. 2:11–13). It is this opposition, the central paradox of life in a Mormon society, that Linda Sillitoe explores with persuasive skill in *Sideways to the Sun*.

Sillitoe goes beyond jack-fiction because, though more indirectly than Peterson, she also grapples seriously and helpfully with central issues of Mormon theology, without, in the main, using her fiction for ideological purposes. Hers is the first good Mormon novel about immediately *contemporary* Mormon life, and it brings us into that world with dramatic force. Megan Stevens, a typical Mormon mother of four, married to a typical faithful Mormon elder and living in a typical Mormon suburban neighborhood in Bountiful, Utah, suddenly finds herself in the atypical but increas-

ingly common condition of single parenthood. Her husband simply disappears, and the novel is her pilgrimage to discovery and creation of self apart from the relationship that had defined and enclosed her for half her thirty-five years.

First she must break the enclosure built by thoughtless Mormon “families are forever” theology. This comfortable but often superficial and imprisoning world is imaged by Sillitoe, in the voice of Megan’s newfound divorced friend, as a “golden circle of married women,” the “perfect ones” (39) in the ward. With even more satiric bite, Sillitoe pictures the same group of women in a pool, swimming in a circle like fish in an aquarium, talking only about their husbands.

Megan, who had once even misread her street’s name, “Stonybrook,” as “Storybook,” gradually, then forcefully, breaks out of this dreamworld, and Sillitoe creates in convincing complexity the pain and beauty of such a discovery of self. The Mormon women I know, once they start reading, cannot stop until they finish, they are so engrossed with the power of this first fiction about a process so relevant to their own lives. For a time, Megan tries to fall back upon the inauthentic structures of popular Mormon theology and mythos, symbolized most daringly and yet effectively by Sillitoe in the sacred temple undergarments. Early in her growing sense of loss, as she folds her husband’s garments, these symbols of him and his priesthood absorb her tears without a trace, and the warmth of her own garments comforts her, as though she were sleeping in his embrace. But she discovers increasing evidence that her husband has not been hurt or victimized but has simply abandoned her. She also discovers that other Mormon women (who “are just like me, really, right down to the garment lines we can all see under our clothes” [134]) not only fail to understand her increasingly desperate needs but regard her as if she is “‘ruined’—not a widow, not a divorcee . . . no right to grief or anger or comfort. . . . She was nothing. Nowhere” (28). In a movingly believable and yet terrifying passage, Sillitoe takes us down with Megan into that nothingness, a “black hole” she feels growing in her that will “devour the remains of her world.” She has a miscarriage in which her body, seeming to want to be hollow, actually absorbs the fetus, and soon after she collapses inward:

On Tuesday morning she reached the bottom of the well, a place soft, plush, and utterly empty, like black snow. There she found a clarity she hadn’t discovered on her way down. Even with her eyes closed, blankets clutched around her face, and sunk into herself as far as she could so, Megan felt herself within an opening.

“Do you want to die?” she heard herself ask, respectfully. She waited as the question reverberated gently. The darkness caressed her face like a loving hand. It soothed her nostrils, her lungs, stroked her flesh as if she were infinitely precious. . . .

From this safe nucleus, Megan could see herself clearly—so inadequate, so sad.

Thinking this, she seemed to be both at the top of the well looking in and at the bottom peacefully considering her fate.

Then an answer began forming deep in her solar plexus, hard and

unmistakable. No, I want to live; she considered this. She almost smiled when she understood that her reason was curiosity. She wanted to see how everything turned out. Drawing a deep breath, she gave the rope a tug so that Megan at the top would start to pull her out. (86–87)

This is one of the best creations of a sense of being reduced to fundamental identity I have seen anywhere, but it is particularly appropriate to serious fiction about Mormon experience, where the poles of identity and relationship are in constant tension. Megan soon finds how true this is when, as part of her gradual development of a new self, she takes an evening class in the sociology of the family to renew her teaching certificate. She feels a pang of fear and sorrow as she leaves her children to go to class and sees them taking on new responsibilities, but then she senses the pang is “more like the ache under a bird’s wings, a bird on the far end of a branch sensing the first inkling of flight” (112). In the class she learns how much more poverty there is in female-headed households and how little her college degree counts in economic terms compared to being or having a man. The teacher asks, “Why aren’t women more independent?” But the other women, all married, want instead to talk about “partnership.” When Megan, advocating more independence, tells her own story, they respond with embarrassment and condescension that enrages her.

The symbol of complete casting off of her old, delusory sense of identity based only in relationship—as daughter, sister, wife, mother—is her pained but decisive removal of her garments, which had clearly become identified with the male-dominated marriage and culture that had failed her. Sillitoe is careful to show that this is not merely an angry lashing out at the Church and the gospel, but a radical rejection, in the spirit of section 121 in the Doctrine and Covenants, of priesthood as authority and power rather than long-suffering love. This is dramatized, along with Megan’s hard-won new powers of self-direction, when she confronts (and routs) a polygamist seminary teacher who has attempted to seduce her daughter into his cult with claims of priesthood power.

Sillitoe’s ground-breaking creation of the struggle for identity by a contemporary Mormon woman sometimes leads her to extremes that make me uneasy. All the major women figures in the novel are essentially innocent, the men weak if not wicked, and the marriages fail essentially because of men’s failures. This failure of generosity or imagination on the author’s part ends up damaging her heroine. When Megan finally, through a quite improbable set of coincidences, finds her husband—and also a perfect opportunity for revenge, she does not hesitate to take it, acting with the full decisiveness and ingenuity of her new identity: “Thoughts marched through her mind, orderly and logical, as if she had planned this random event for months. Vengeance is mine, she thought” (221). But of course only the Lord, as he reminds us constantly, can rightfully say that. And Megan’s surrender to the sin of revenge, though very human, tends to flaw the remainder of the novel.

But this flaw is small compared to the achievement, which is, like Peterson’s, an achievement of form as well as content. Sillitoe experiments with a roving third-person narrator, who moves chapter by chapter into the consciousness of a different

one of the main characters and then back to others, returning most often to Megan. This gives some delightful and challenging perspectives from inside the minds of children and teenagers, men and women, and it allows for an unusual and appropriate mix of judgment and sympathy from the reader. The writing, though given to occasional repetitions of arresting phrases (almost like intentional clichés), is consistently alive with the play of deeply felt metaphors, such as the final image Megan herself articulates, of her home full of marks and prints from people, mainly her own, “like a potter’s hands on clay” (255). This develops an earlier image of herself as a “new wet pot” (168), so we see her finally—and she sees herself—as both shaper and shaped: “Even if her touch was forgotten, it became imprinted. Everyone’s did. Now distracted, now intent, they all went on shaping by sun and dusk what never seemed quite ready for the kiln” (255). This complex image unites perfectly with Sillitoe’s central theme, the achievement of wholeness through the proper tension of integrity and relationship, of shaping and being shaped.

ORSON SCOTT CARD’S *Seventh Son* tells about another kind of shaper, literally a “Maker,” claimed to be the first one born “since the one who changed water into wine.” He lives in early nineteenth-century America, has the same name as his father, is a good wrestler, and early in life has a vision of a man in white, his garment open at the breast, who appears three times and teaches him things crucial to his salvation and the salvation of all others. The boy has a special relationship to American Indians and sense of their destiny; he suffers from an infected bone in his leg but refuses strong drink when it is operated on without anesthesia, saying he can bear it if his father holds him.

Sound familiar? Well, it is *very* familiar if you are a Mormon or have read a biography of Joseph Smith. But *Seventh Son* is not a biographical novel about Joseph Smith, but rather a fantasy, the tale of a folk magician growing up using his “knacks,” gifts based on hidden powers: drawing a perfect hex on his house to ward off danger; splitting stone by feeling its hidden structure; healing the spiritually ill and seeing into the future; barely surviving constant threats to his life from dark, watery forces because protected by divine ones, including a young “torch” who can see his heartfire and a “Taleswapper” who senses that his story is the most important one on earth. That’s enough to make any twentieth-century, rational Mormon uneasy, especially after the Hofmann forgeries and murders and the rearing of a salamander’s head into our comfortable world of rational theology and modern science. Mormons *should* be uneasy, not because this book undermines Joseph Smith’s status as a divinely-called prophet (in fact, I suspect the five projected sequels to this novel will create for us a very believable and challenging prophet), but because it raises the most fundamental questions about what a prophet really is, in fact, what divine power itself is and how and why it intersects with our mundane world.

Non-Mormons should be uneasy as well, not because this is Mormon propaganda in disguise, but because it raises the most fundamental questions about fantasy itself and injects profoundly religious questions—and implied answers from a Mormon Christian bent—into a genre not generally taken seriously except by its devotees. The book is not written in service of religion, but it is religious in the most

important way: It challenges its serious readers to *be* religious. It is the only fantasy novel I know of that is profoundly antifantasy. And perhaps only a Mormon can see that, despite the unusual folk vocabulary and the strange doings we have learned to deprecate with the word “magic,” the world the author creates is for him the only “real” world, a world where spiritual powers form a seamless whole with everything else.

So far, readers don’t seem to be uneasy with this book. Its first five chapters were published in *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine* in 1986, under the title “Hatrack River,” and won the World Fantasy Award for best novella. It was featured in a half-page ad in the *New York Times Book Review*, is selling extremely well, and gets rave reviews from the Eastern press and also Mormon readers. I wonder whether people are reading closely enough, because this is no mere popular fantasy novel, nor is it jack-fiction, written to serve comfortable Mormon ideology. It is subtly written, the narrator, like Peterson’s, using a vernacular akin to but somewhat more flexible and knowing than that of the main character’s—in effect, he is one who speaks from their community but with more insight and authority. We trust the narrator and thus his story and his people, but we also stand just a little apart from them with him.

The book is dense with well-researched, believable (and, I think, believed) folklore and folk magic and a great variety of folk magicians. With all this, Card makes a more sophisticated contribution to Mormon thought than most of the commentators who were stimulated by Hofmann to reexamine Mormonism’s beginnings. Using the powers of good fiction, Card shows from *within* what a magical worldview looked like and thus how complex, believable, and actually like our own Mormon religious worldview it really is—despite our allegiance to post-Enlightenment rationalism (which I believe is one of the creeds that Christ told Joseph Smith was an abomination in his sight).

For the present, let me merely call attention to two major theological contributions Card makes in *Seventh Son*. The “Shining Man” who appears three times to young Alvin Miller, Jr., cuts his own palm with a knife and as the blood drips gives Alvin a vision of a lie and cruelty he had just committed with his special powers in order to get *even* with his sisters. He promises during the second visitation never to use his powers for himself again, and in the third he learns that his real knack and lifelong mission is not simply cutting stone and fixing things but to “make all things whole,” beginning with the drunken, one-eyed Indian who suddenly appears in his room. He reaches out in compassion and heals the Indian of something more than drunkenness or blindness. The Indian drops out the window and we next learn of him organizing a peaceful, sober nation of Indians nearby. (The second volume in the series, *The Red Prophet* [New York: TOR, 1988], using much imagery from the Book of Mormon, develops the story of this pacifist seer.) In all this we have the beginning of a profound struggle by Card with something he already dealt with brilliantly in his prizewinning science fiction novel, *Speaker for the Dead*: How is one moved by Christ to exercise Christ-like ethics and powers? And the question is particularly challenging as well as gratifying to Mormons because, as Peterson dramatizes in *The Backslider*, we have great resources for answering that question

theoretically but haven’t done so very well in popular theology and living.

Particularly challenging for serious readers is Card’s stunning evocation of what it is young Alvin, the Maker, has come into being to oppose and what power he has to oppose it with. He has a recurring nightmare: “[It] came on him, waking or sleeping, and spiked his heart to his spine till he like to died. The world filling up with an invisible trembling nothing that seeped into everything and shook it apart. Alvin could see it, rolling toward him like a huge ball, growing all the time” (124).

“Taleswapper” (a marvelous creation by Card of a Romantic poet-seer modeled on William Blake) helps Alvin to name and thus better identify this “nothing” and to understand why when its presence intrudes on his mind he “couldn’t stop fidgeting until he’d done some weaving or built a haystack or done up a doll out of corn shucks” (127). It is the Unmaker, an evil more fundamental and dangerous than the devil (“who can’t afford to break everything down . . . or he’d cease to be”). The Unmaker is radical cosmic entropy, the tendency of all being toward nothingness, something Martin Heidegger spent a brilliant career helping us to learn how to oppose by *increasing* being, especially through language. Alvin learns this, and more, because his creator has read Lehi’s great discourse on ultimate being in the Book of Mormon (2 Ne. 2):

Alvin knew all kinds of opposites in the world: good and evil, light and dark, free and slave, love and hate. But deeper than all those opposites was making and unmaking. So deep that hardly anybody noticed that it was the most important opposite of all. But he noticed, and so that made the Unmaker his enemy. (129)

Alvin’s creator, Orson Scott Card, believes there are more weapons to fight nonbeing with even than brilliant philosophers and poets, that powers beyond man are engaged in the fight, beings who come to earth themselves to help, as well as sending humans with special gifts. As Alvin tells Taleswapper:

[The Shining Man] showed me what my knack was for, and now I see it’s the same thing you’re talking about. I saw a stone that I pulled out of a mountain, and it was round as a ball, and when I looked close I saw it was the whole world, with forests and animals and oceans and fish and all on it. That’s what my knack is for, to try to put things in order. (130)

So, within the space of just six months, we have seen published a Mormon novel that creates the reality of salvation from sin by neither grace nor works but by a change of being that transcends both those categories and is motivated by a marvelous, utterly real vision of Christ; another novel that engages us fully in a modern Mormon woman’s struggle to find authentic identity and forge new, more authentic relationships when her old identity and relationships are destroyed by a false, priesthood-bearing husband and some confining, dominating notions of priesthood perpetuated in Mormon culture; and finally a “fantasy” novel that raises the most troubling questions about the supposedly sharp borderline between magic and religion, between magicians and prophets, and the most sobering questions about the continual encroachment of nonbeing upon being, the Unmaker on all Makers.

This is not jack-fiction. It is fiction that is formally experimental and powerful,

lovely in its skill, but it is more. It begins to fulfill a hope Karl Keller expressed in an essay written even earlier than his lament about jack-fiction:

A great work of *Mormon* literature will be like all great works of literature; it will be one that makes me wrestle with my beliefs and which stimulates me by the example of the author’s own effort to recreate my own life on surer grounds of belief. It will be one that doesn’t program life for me, but leaves me free from constricting assumptions to wrestle, rebuild, and search for meaning.⁶

Keller recognized that there were a few pieces that did this but that the list was small, and he predicted:

Perhaps when we realize that literature cannot be written or read in the service of religion but that like religion it is an exercise in otherness, an exercise in faith, an exercise in renewing our grounds of belief, then we will have an important body of Mormon literature.⁷

I wish he had lived to see his prophecy fulfilled in these novels.

NOTES

1. Karl Keller, “The Example of Flannery O’Connor,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Winter 1974): 62.

2. See Edward A. Geary, “Mormondom’s Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s,” *BYU Studies* 18 (Fall 1977): 89–98; also my “‘The Dawning of a Brighter Day’: Mormon Literature after 150 Years,” *BYU Studies* 22 (Spring 1982): 131–60, especially 141–44.

3. “The Red-tail Hawk” appeared in *Dialogue* 4 (Autumn 1969): 83–94; “Under the Cottonwoods” first appeared in *Dialogue* 7 (Autumn 1972): 18–26, later reissued as the title story of Thayer’s volume *“Under the Cottonwoods” and Other Mormon Stories* (Provo: Frankson Books, 1977), 155–72.

4. B. F. Cummings, *The Eternal Individual Self* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Co., 1968), 7, 69, 70.

5. *Ibid.*, 121.

6. Karl Keller, “On Words and the Word of God: The Delusions of a Mormon Literature,” *Dialogue* 4 (Autumn 1969): 19.

7. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

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