

Book Review

Orson Scott Card, *Folk of the Fringe* and  
*The Tales of Alvin Maker*

By Eugene England

Review essay about Orson Scott Card's *The Folk of the Fringe*, (West Bloomfield, Minn: Phantasia, 1989), and *The Tales of Alvin Maker*, vols. 1–3 (New York: TOR, 1987–1989).

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ORSON SCOTT CARD: HOW A GREAT SCIENCE FICTIONIST  
USES THE BOOK OF MORMON

**I**N THE PAST twelve years Orson Scott Card has published a huge volume of work and reached the pinnacle of recognition in both science fiction (having won the two top prizes, the Hugo and Nebula, in 1986 and 1987) and also in fantasy (having won the 1987 World Fantasy Award for his novella, “Hatrack River,” part of *Seventh Son*, the first of his *Tales of Alvin Maker* books). Until fairly recently Card’s work seemed to have little or nothing to do with his Mormon faith, but in the past three years he has developed a fantasy series based on the life of Joseph Smith, planned a science fiction series based on the Book of Mormon, and written a number of explicitly Mormon stories set in the America that might survive after a limited nuclear war.

I will begin with the last mentioned, *The Folk of the Fringe*. Four of the five stories have appeared in leading national publications like *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*. *Fringe* uses for its enabling science fictional “what if” an expressly Mormon gambit: What if the prophecies of the Book of Mormon and modern seers came true, but not in the easy, self-serving way many Mormons sometimes imagine, with everything rosy and themselves at the center of things after Armageddon. What if God has the whole earth, in fact a sentient and wounded earth, and all his children in his hands. What would Mormons experience as they trekked back to a Great Basin covered with water and a submerged Salt Lake Temple and tried to create a new civilization while trying to cope with American Indians as resurgent as Christ in the Book of Mormon promised?

For instance, “America,” the ending story, is both a wonderfully entertaining futuristic version of the Quetzalcoatl and Virgin Birth myths but also an extremely challenging version of the Book of Mormon prophecies and Mormon myths about their own role in the last days. As the Amazon forests are destroyed and the pollution engendered by European technological civilization proceeds apace all over, the American land, which is explicitly equated to God or Christ, calls forth the American

Indians to inherit and save: “It sounded so close to what the old prophets in the Book of Mormon said would happen to America; close, but dangerously different. As if there were no hope for the Europeans anymore. . . . Someone else would inherit” (p. 209).

Of course some passages in the Book of Mormon do leave open the possibility that it is the Indians who will inherit; we Europeans just choose to ignore them. But even more important to Card, I believe, is his feeling for the land in the present and our Mormon responsibility to it. “America” could be read as a tract against all the evils we commit against the land, but it is even more an evocation of what might still happen, by giving us a *possibility*, lodged in the future, for us to contemplate and believe and achieve. As the narrator looks back on what God and the land have used both Mormons and American Indians to achieve, he reflects: “Even if we took twisted roads and got lost or injured on the way, even if we came limping to this place, it is a good place, it is worth the journey, it is the promised, the promising land” (p. 217).

*Seventh Son*, the first of the Alvin Maker volumes, is the story of a “Maker,” claimed to be the first one born “since the one who changed water into wine.” His birth year is 1805; he has the same name as his father; is a good wrestler; early in life he has a vision of a man in white, with 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 a sense of their destiny; he suffers from an infected bone in his leg, 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.

However, I haven’t just described a biographical novel about Joseph Smith, but rather a fantasy tale about a folk magician growing up using his “knacks” or 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 forces because of protection by benign 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. And that’s enough to make any twentieth-century, rational Mormon uneasy, especially following the Hoffman 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 might appear to undermine Joseph Smith’s status as a divinely called prophet (in fact, I believe, on the evidence of the second and third volumes, that the projected sequels to this novel will create for us a very believable as well as challenging prophet). Rather, *Seventh Son* is challenging because it raises the most fundamental questions about what a prophet, a spokesman for God with divine powers, really is, in fact, what divine power itself is, and how and why it intersects with our mundane, rational world.

Non-Mormons should be uneasy as well, not because this is pro-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 that seems to me not generally taken that seriously, at least in that way, even by its devotees. The books are not written in service of religion but are religious in the most important way: They challenge serious readers to be religious. They are the only fantasy novels I know about that are, in a sense, profoundly anti-fantasy. And perhaps only a Mormon can see that fact, that the world they create, despite the unusual folk vocabulary and the strange doings that we have learned to deprecate with the word “magic,” is for the author the only “real” world, a world whose spiritual powers form a seamless whole with everything else and reveal the true meaning and possibility of everything else.

Some commentators on the evidence for Joseph Smith’s involvement in “the” magic worldview—the money-digging, amulets, etc.—simply reject all that as rural superstition, quickly outgrown by the prophet as he matured; others show how pervasive that view was in Europe and America, merging easily for many people into their religious beliefs and practices, and continuing for Joseph and many other Mormons throughout their lives.

But the commentators tend to make the fundamental mistake of assuming that all who practiced these hidden arts had the same worldview and that the same practices meant the same to everyone. And for all their sympathy and attempts to show that such practices do not undermine Joseph’s prophetic claims, they don’t seem to me to really believe in the power of such doings. I think Card does, and that he also has a very sophisticated view of how complex the magical-religious world is. Young Alvin’s powers, though similar in form to those of many others in the unusual American-frontier analogue world Card creates, become progressively unique as he matures. The “knacks” of the Whites, in turn, are quite different from the unusual powers of Indians, the Reds, which have to do with living in absolute harmony with the land and its other creatures, even killing for food only when the creatures offer themselves. But in the second novel, *The Red Prophet*, Alvin develops these powers as well and is recognized by the Indians as having certain powers beyond those of either Whites or Indians. Card is clearly on his way to exploring where the powers of a divinely called prophet fit into this world where there are stranger things than are dreamed of in any of our philosophies—things that are real and which we must come to real, not merely imaginative terms with.

Particularly challenging for serious readers, including Mormons, though they will find the notion is based on Book of Mormon theology, is Card’s stunning evocation of what it is young Alvin, the Maker, has been sent by God to oppose and what power he has to oppose it with: Alvin has a recurring nightmare, “a terrible dream that 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” (p. 124). His friend Taleswapper is a marvelous creation by Card of a Romantic poet/seer modeled on William Blake, whose poetry Card even uses for him to declaim as his own. Taleswapper calls the nightmare force 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,” p. 128). This is radical cosmic

entropy, the tendency of all being toward nothingness, something Martin Heidegger spent a brilliant career helping us understand and learn how to oppose by *increasing* being, especially through language. Alvin learns this, and more, because his creator has read Lehi's great statement on the nature of being (2 Nephi 2:11-13) in the Book of Mormon:

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. (p. 129)

Alvin's creator, Scott Card, also believes there is more in the universe to fight nonbeing with even than brilliant philosophers and poets, that there are powers beyond man engaged in the fight, 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. (p. 130)

In *The Red Prophet*, the story picks up with the Shining Man of Alvin's first vision, who turns out to be an Indian born so sensitive to death that he can feel the millions of bees dying in the winter as if each were a wound. When his father is killed in his presence by a white man, the young Indian suffers a debilitating shock from that close death that shuts out the green music of the land that sustains the special powers of Indians, fills his head with blackness, and reduces him to perpetual drunken anguish. Led to Alvin in a traditional Indian search for his dream beast, he is healed and at the same time serves as a kind of dream beast for Alvin, evoking the vision that gives Alvin his first sense of divine mission. As a result of that vision, the Indian receives a new name, Tenkswa-Tawa, and becomes an absolute pacifist Red Prophet. He gathers his people in a huge town near Alvin's home, preaching the gospel of peace as the only resolution to the growing struggle with the invading Whites. He advocates total withdrawal across what is called the "Missipy," where the land will protect them from invasion. He teaches they should leave the White man to poison the east and live his own punishments.

But the Red Prophet has a brother, Ta-Kumsaw, who has an entirely different though equally possible and believable vision of rallying the Indians to a united, total war with Whites, not in massacres or vengeance, but as a just war to drive the Whites back to Europe. Alvin is convinced of the vision of the Red Prophet, and wants to return to stop the impending attack of the Whites, but he is told to send his brother and stay with the Red Prophet's angry brother to keep him alive with his healing knacks. In obedience to this task he travels with Ta-Kumsaw, unavoidably helping him spread his vision of justified violence. At one point he has a crucial vision, for which Card uses imagery taken directly from the seminal vision of the whole Book of Mormon, Lehi's dream (p. 220). But meanwhile the Whites attack

the Prophet's pacifist Indian city. This brings about the most remarkable scene in the novel, what I find one of the most unusual and moving in any literature, and it is that, I believe, because it is modeled directly on one of the greatest scenes in the Book of Mormon, the refusal of the people of Ammon to take up arms when attacked and the resulting conversion of their enemies (Alma 24:16–26).

In the massacre, the Prophet leads his people in passive resistance that, just as in the Book of Mormon, shows the unique healing power of love and the enormous cost of such redemptive love. Card creates the scene through the eyes of one of the attacking Whites:

The city turned up empty, and they found the Reds all gathered in Speaking Meadow, just like they was ready for a sermon from the Prophet. . . . He shot his musket, . . . just like the other men, firing and reloading. . . . The bloodlust was on him then, he was crazy with anger and the power to kill. He didn't notice how some of the other men were getting quieter. Shooting less often. . . .

They were just standing there, men and women and children, just looking out at the White men who were killing them. Not a one even turned his back to the hail of shrapnel. Not a parent tried to shield a child from the blast. They just stood, waited, died. . . .

During the lulls between cannon volleys, [he] could hear men crying. Not the Reds, the ones still living, huddled in an ever-smaller mass down toward the river. No, the men crying were his neighbors, White men standing beside him, or behind the line. Some of them were talking, pleading. Stop it, they said. Please, stop it. (pp. 241–42)

As Alvin realizes as he struggles to heal the wounded Ta-Kumsaw during the great, doomed battle that Ta-Kumsaw finally achieves, violence only unleashes the Unmaker:

Beyond the edges of his vision, just out of reach, there was the Unmaker like a transparent shadow, shimmering fingers slicing through the wood. Ta-Kumsaw, him Alvin could heal. But who could heal the greenwood? Who could heal the tearing apart of tribe from tribe, Red from Red? All that Ta-Kumsaw had built was shivered apart in that single fraction of an hour, and all Alvin could do was keep a single man alive. . . . Likely enough the Unmaker didn't begrudge Alvin his friend's life. What was Ta-Kumsaw, compared to what the Unmaker was consuming at this feast? Just like Taleswapper had said so long ago, the Unmaker could tear down, eat through, use up, and crush things faster than any one man could ever hope to build. (pp. 302–03)

So what do we have in these supposed “fantasy” novels? Books that raise the most realistic questions about the supposed borderline between magic and religion, magicians and prophets, the most sobering questions about the continual encroachment of nonbeing upon being, the Unmaker on all Makers, questions about the role of violence in redemption and about the possibility of pure pacifism, however costly,

questions about what Mormonism was, is, and could be. But especially they are books that are a continuing pleasure to read and a continuing evidence that the Book of Mormon is true—because it clearly can be the kind of unique stimulus to the imagination that rich moral and religious history has always been.

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