

Danger on the Right! Danger on the Left!: The Ethics of Recent Mormon Fiction

By Eugene England

An essay in which England decries a trend in LDS fiction away from “ethical fiction,” which he describes as having the purpose of persuading us “to understand better the values we do or might live by and thus to choose better, to be more humane, sympathetic, compassionate, at least more courageous, more able to endure.”

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THE FIRST EXAMPLE of what could be called a Mormon short story was written by an apostle, Parley P. Pratt. It was published in the *New York Herald* on January 1, 1844, and collected in Richard Cracroft’s and Neal Lambert’s anthology, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1974). It is called “A Dialogue between Joe Smith and the Devil” and is quite witty, imaginative in setting and characterization, lively in its language, and, though clearly pro-Mormon, aimed at a non-Mormon audience. It consists wholly of a conversation between Joseph Smith and “his Satanic majesty,” whom Joseph interrupts putting up handbills calling for all “busy bodies, pickpockets, vagabonds, filthy persons, and all other infidels and rebellious, disorderly persons, for a crusade against . . . the Mormons.”

The story has an obvious didactic purpose, as Elder Pratt has the Devil bring up most of the central precepts of Mormon doctrine, such as “direct communication with God,” and then indirectly praise them by pointing out how powerful they are and destructive to his own evil purposes. The story is important for my discussion here because of the author’s ability to create two characters so completely different from each other in perspective and purpose and keep us interested in, and even sympathetic to, both throughout the story. At the end, the Devil proposes, “What is the use of parting enemies, the fact is, you go in for the wheat and I for the tares. Both must be harvested; are we not fellow laborers?” And Joseph Smith agrees: “I neither want yours, nor you mine—a man free from prejudice will give the Devil his due. Come, here is the right hand of fellowship.” The Devil suggests they “go down to Mammy Brewer’s cellar and take something to drink.” Mammy Brewer is quite surprised but pleased: “If you can drink together, I think all the world ought to be friends.” The Devil then suggests, “As we are both temperance men and ministers, I think perhaps a glass of spruce beer apiece.” Joseph Smith agrees and in turn suggests they toast each other. And they do, the Devil with grudging admiration and Joseph with a fine example of frontier hyperbole:

DEVIL: Here's to my good friend, Joe Smith, may all sorts of ill-luck befall him, and may he never be suffered to enter my kingdom, either in time or eternity, for he would almost make me forget that I am a devil, and make a gentleman of me, while he gently overthrows my government at the same time that he wins my friendship.

SMITH: Here's to his Satanic Majesty; may he be driven from the earth and be forced to put to sea in a stone canoe with an iron paddle, and may the canoe sink, and a shark swallow the canoe and its royal freight and an alligator swallow the shark and may the alligator be bound in the northwest corner of hell, the door be locked, key lost, and a blind man hunting for it.¹

Ethical fiction, I believe, like Joseph Smith here, gives the Devil his due, brings opposites together metaphorically, and thus makes more possible what I believe to be the greatest single ethical ideal—that, as Mammy Brewer puts it, “all the world ought to be friends.”² A few months after this story was published, Joseph Smith was killed, for some of the very reasons the Devil predicts in this story—that in the future he will not be so friendly: “If my former course has excited contempt and caused you to be despised, my future course will be to excite jealousy, fear and alarm, till all the world is ready to arise and crush you.”³ Just a few weeks before his death, Joseph wrote a man who had sent him a book on various U. S. religions, praising him for letting each church “tell its own story” through the words of one of its own believers and then putting those presentations together for comparison because, “By proving contraries, truth is made manifest” (*History of the Church*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 6:428). By “prove” he did not mean to provide a final proof of one or the other contrary, but to test, to try out, to examine both alternatives, or all, in the light of each other; he meant that truth is not found in extremes, in choosing one polar opposite over another, but in seeing what emerges from careful, tolerant study of the dialectic between the two. Ethical fiction brings the great contraries into juxtaposition and moves us to new visions of truth greater than any of the poles.

Perhaps the single greatest contrary, the one responsible for most of the terrible wars and atrocities of history and the divisions and prejudices and hate crimes that continue to plague and divide us, is the contrary of self and others, between private conscience and public responsibility, between the claims of one's deepest sense of selfhood and the claims of the “other.” These are, of course, forms of what post-modern thought has focused on as “alterity” and explored as a central element of all our human experience and constructions, including language, one which often leads to anxiety, oppression, even violence, but consciousness of which can allow for change and healing. Our fear of difference, of otherness, too often results in our inability or unwillingness to respond in love, with a sense of ethical responsibility, to other humans who are unlike us in certain ways (gender, race, religion, tribe, sexual orientation, political party, economic class), our unwillingness even to tolerate such difference and, thus, our various efforts to destroy it. Ethical fiction helps us learn to give such “devils” their due. Ethical fiction is, as Kafka said, an ax for the

frozen sea within us—the frozen sea, I believe, of intolerance, of prejudice, of fear of difference.

The central scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and of the Book of Mormon call us to accept the “other” unconditionally, to welcome the stranger, even to extend ourselves to serve those we feel are most different and, thus, undeserving of our love and help. To the House of Israel, who prided themselves on being chosen and thus favored by God, God said, “The stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:34–35). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made an even more demanding proclamation of what God asks of us in order to be his children and follow his example, “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy, But I say unto you, Love your enemies. . . . That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45). And the ancient American prophet Nephi declared, “All are alike unto God, . . . black and white, bond and free, male and female, . . . Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33).

Such fundamental ethical teachings are, I believe, reinforced powerfully by ethical fiction, both through honest and thorough examination of difference and the gaps in our thought structures and institutions that reveal our efforts to suppress it and also in visions of new and healing possibilities. Simply *knowing* how wrong and destructive prejudice is and what its masks are will not move us to change as effectively as *feelings* can, the way ethical fiction can; we need axes for the frozen seas within us.

In 1992 I published an anthology of “contemporary Mormon stories” called *Bright Angels and Familiars*. It was the fruit of the unprecedented, nearly explosive, growth of Mormon literature in the 1980s, when there were huge gains in quality as well as quantity and increasing publication both nationally and locally. In the late seventies you could count the fine Mormon fiction writers on one hand, and all of them were then published only by regional presses and journals. By 1992 I was able to include twenty-two very impressive authors, nearly all of whom had published their own collections and many of whom were placing stories and collections with national publishers—and I apologized that I did not have room for others of similar quality. In an essay in 1980, I had claimed, mainly as an act of faith, that Mormonism was a new religious tradition with a unique theology and powerful ethnic identity and mythic vision of the kind that should produce a good and characteristic literature. Only ten years later, as I read over all the Mormon stories I could find, choosing the best for my anthology, and then reread and thought about the collection as a whole for my introduction, I was elated. Here was a plenitude of rich confirmations of my faith in Mormon literature and much reason for optimism about the prospects of more and better to come.

I was especially pleased that I could find so many stories that were not only esthetically good but *ethically* good. I had long been convinced, due to the influence of mentors like William Mulder and Brewster Ghiselin at the University of Utah and Wallace Stegner and Yvor Winters at Stanford, that any literature that is worth much of our attention is ethical—that it is intended to persuade us to understand

better the values we do or might live by and thus to choose better, to be more humane, sympathetic, compassionate, at least more courageous, more able to endure. I was able to say in my introduction to *Bright Angels* that I had chosen stories that were valuable “not only because they are skillful. . . [but] because they are written by people with a recognizably Mormon background which leads them through their stories to express, reveal, develop, and challenge the shape of Mormon beliefs.” I asserted that “morality—and faith—in fiction are not a matter simply of content nor even a question of whether a matter is presented in a ‘balanced’ way. They have much more to do with the shape of the author’s own belief and moral vision, which inevitably show through to a careful reader.” I claimed that the stories I had been able to choose each give “a new vision of life, filtered and energized through a believing, moral intelligence as well as a gifted and disciplined artistic sensibility.”⁴

Six years later I am not as optimistic—about either the esthetic or the ethical quality of the Mormon fiction now being published. Two anthologies of Mormon short stories have been published since 1992, *Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life* (Bookcraft, 1994) and *In Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions* (Signature Books, 1998).⁵ At first glance, these collections may seem polar opposites of each other: The first, published by what was then the major semi-official LDS press, Bookcraft, is conservative, cautious, earnest, with much amateur writing and much piety. The second, published by the sometimes radically revisionist Mormon independent press, Signature Books, is liberal, experimental, ironic, with much very skilled writing and in-your-face impiety. But my main point here is that the two anthologies are actually very much alike in crucial ways, that many of the stories in each fail—ethically and esthetically—for very similar reasons. If there is anything like a “great tradition” of Mormon literature, a center of integrated artistic and moral quality based firmly in an informed and critical Mormon world-view, one that *Bright Angels* demonstrated and encouraged, then these books show that tradition is in some danger—for quite similar reasons—from both the right and the left.

A great part of the danger is the very division itself into right and left. In the past ten years, the Mormon intellectual community has been riven into two mutually exclusive groups. On the one hand are those who call themselves “faithful” and “submissive”—and who are dismissed as “apologists” by the other group, while on the other hand are those who call themselves “honest” and “revisionist” and are dismissed by the first group as “dissidents,” with each group supporting mainly (sometimes exclusively) its own favored forums and journals and publishing houses. It seems now that the literary community is following suit in this immature divisiveness. Though there are some of the authors I chose for *Bright Angels* in each of these anthologies, not even one author appears in both of them; the right and the left are exclusive of each other, even somewhat militantly so. Ethical fiction, I believe, must not be exclusivist. It must at least *try* to draw circles that include rather than ones that exclude. It must certainly recognize, define, even emphasize contraries, but must be willing to bring them together with demonstrated respect for all the differences.

The very titles of the two new anthologies are indicative of separation, of self-conscious moving to the extremes of the right or the left. The phrase “Turning

Hearts” used in the one title refers to a well-known and evocative passage from both the Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants, which announces that the ancient prophet Elijah would return to the earth to provide means to unite in love the whole human family, even across generations: to “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers” (Mal. 3:24, D&C 128:17). In his introduction, editor Orson Scott Card tells us explicitly that the editors’ purpose was “to try to fulfill that prophecy” by choosing stories that “deal with family relationships as we hoped” and he praises one story for exemplifying “all that I hoped for in the fiction of commitment.”⁶ On the other hand, “In Our Lovely Deseret” is the title of a favorite early Mormon hymn which, as the cover blurb reminds us, is used here ironically: “[The hymn] urges Latter-day Saints to be ‘polite,’ ‘affable and kind,’ and ‘treat everybody right.’ In [our anthology], good manners and proper etiquette are no longer even considered virtuous in many situations.” In his preface, in addition to claiming his authors are all “on the periphery” of Mormonism, *Lovely Deseret* editor Robert Raleigh sets them up as in opposition to the Mormon tendency “to see the world in terms of good and evil only” and to use fiction to “instruct and enlighten.” His selections are, in contrast he claims, “not for or against, but about.”⁷ To the extent that is true, his selections tend to be ethical, to allow for the proving of contraries, but it seems to be there is much “for and against” in *Lovely Deseret* as well as *Turning Hearts*.

Both of these editors, coming from very different places, seem to indulge in the same fallacy—that good ethical fiction can be produced by mere commitment to ethical positions, by an ideological design, one that is either already in favor of certain didactic premises or already against them, with either a right-wing or a left-wing cultural agenda. That leads directly to ethical manipulation, not ethical discovery and genuine change. Good ethical fiction, it seems to me, comes about when ethical people, with inborn and well-trained literary ability, engage the world artistically and openly. When this happens, characters are created who are allowed—even encouraged—by their authors to take on a kind of independent existence. Through the essentially mysterious process of imaginative creation, they can thus appear actually to have independent existence, a kind of moral agency, and thus make surprising, unprogrammed, ethical moves and discoveries. In turn, we as readers are open to consider and adopt new ethical perspectives for ourselves, because we too feel our agency is being respected, that we are not being manipulated. The characters thus take on such an appearance of reality that we love them and learn from them—like we do our friends, or even people we know well whom we think are wrong. The stories in both anthologies that fail for me, and I’m afraid that is most of them, do so mainly because I feel equally manipulated by them, whether from the right or the left. Too few of the stories have characters who seem independent from their authors, capable of making decisions the authors would disapprove of and still love them.

In addition, neither anthology is able to supercede the ancient wisdom that good literature both ethically instructs and esthetically delights—and that you can’t really do one without the other. The morality of too much of *Turning Hearts*, no matter how earnest, is flawed because the stories are amateurish, stereotyped, and

sentimentally manipulative; the quality of too much of *Lovely Deseret* is flawed because the stories, however well written, are aggressively, didactically unmannerly, in-your-face, and yet also sentimentally manipulative.

Time for some examples: Though I am going to focus here on the stories that fail for me, both anthologies certainly contain good stories and are worth reading, for positive reasons as well as the negative lessons I will emphasize. Some of the best work in *Turning Hearts* is by the editors themselves. David Dollahite, who has never published fiction before, begins the collection with “Possum Funeral,” a complex study of a father haunted so much by the failures of his own father that he continues to make the same mistakes with his son. Orson Scott Card, who has published lots of first-rate fiction and won national and international prizes, ends *Turning Hearts* with a fine story, “Worthy to Be One of Us,” full of wit and complex characters, including a woman who both uses the name of God in vain and has prophetic dreams. However, Gideon Burton has persuasively argued that even these two stories—and most of the others in *Turning Hearts*—are flawed by leaving us with fathers who have acted like spoiled brats through most of the story and cannot be redeemed into models of maturity and change by a sudden resolution that ends with hugs and kisses.⁸ Two stories that do produce believable characters going through believable change toward maturity, with no sudden and simple solutions, are Margaret Young’s “Hanauma Bay” and Zina Petersen’s “Now Let’s Dance.”

Lee Mortenson’s story, “Not Quite Peru,” is one of the best in *Lovely Deseret*. It is an exceptionally skilled and engaging first-person study of a Mormon woman trying to find her own way, drawn both by actual parents on a mission in Peru and the body-building guru, a “surrogate parent,” she lives with—all of whom both oppress and nurture her: “I think of Linda and her holiness. I think of my parents and their holiness. There are few moments when my brain is not full of the people I love.”⁹ There is also a segment from Levi Peterson’s fine novel, *Aspen Marooney*, where the protagonist, attending his high school reunion, discovers from his lover of forty years ago that he has a son by her. This man is a misshapen reprobate, whom he finds, when he goes to verify her claim by watching him perform at a rodeo, looks just like his own father. We get here a good sense of the huge compassion Levi feels for the grotesques and sinners of the world.

But too many of the stories in both anthologies are so driven by didactic purposes that the complexity and compassion of good ethical fiction are missing—and the esthetic quality suffers as well. Stories that are written to prove a pre-determined point, rather than as a journey of ethical discovery, tend both to get the details of everyday living unclear or wrong and yet to find some way to have someone state the “moral” (however immoral it is) clearly and baldly at some point. “Father, Forgive Us” in *Turning Hearts* is a simple lesson against judging: A man reading the Book of Mormon one evening is suddenly struck with the insight that King Benjamin asks his people to “repent of your sins and forsake them” and that for forty years he has been using the safer phrase in his prayers, “help us to overcome our shortcomings and imperfections.” He decides that he is a sinner (uses “cuss words” and misses home teaching visits occasionally, was uncomfortable with a Vietnamese family moving in close by), so that night, in prayer with his wife, asks

God to “forgive us our sins.” His wife gets suspicious that this is guilt over something specific and builds an imaginary case in her mind for an affair with his new secretary, bangs a skillet on the counter, and goes to confront him at his office when he works late. There, she finds she’s mistaken, so she goes home to fix him his favorite foods—and that night surprises him when she too prays, “Please forgive us for our *sins*.”¹⁰

The story has a nice twist, from the husband’s somewhat overzealous focus on his minor sins to the wife’s deep recognition of the serious sin of suspicious judging. But this is merely a clever sermon, not really fiction, not ethical storytelling, no carefully recreated journey and hard-won new understanding and relationship. There is even a cop-out by the author and by the husband. When he comes home to find the favorite foods prepared late at night and a dent in the Formica counter-top, he keeps silent: “He wasn’t sure he wanted to know and he wasn’t sure he would understand anyway.”¹¹ No honest, confrontative journey to new communication here, no testing out, working through, of contraries. And for me this little moral tale further loses its moral force when the author has the bishop, who has also begun to make judgments, call and take the husband fly-fishing in order to fish for evidence of an affair with the secretary. For me a clear symptom of the problem is that the author gets the details of fly-fishing quite wrong.

Does this matter? I think so. If we can’t trust authors about the details of the surface of life, how can they expect us to trust their moral guidance and judgments when they go under the surface to the deepest matters of life, like sexual infidelity and honest prayer? That is, if they are unwilling to focus on the details and do the careful observation and thinking (including doing research and asking those who know) and by these means go beyond stereotypes in some areas, ones we know the truth about, such as a trade or profession of (especially) a culture, we may rightly wonder if they are feeding us clichés rather than fresh ethical thinking in the even more difficult areas.

In another story from *Turning Hearts*, “Birthday Gift,” a father rejects the puppy his children and wife buy him for his birthday because of unresolved guilt and grief about Suzy, a family dog his own father had had to put down when he was a boy because the dog was not consistently disciplined and killed a neighbor’s ducklings.¹² The author is, again, careless about surface details—he describes the wife standing “with hips akimbo” (only arms and legs, not hips, can do that). But he *is* very careful to make sure the *moral* is clearly stated by that patient wife. After the husband describes, looking with her at a photograph of him and Suzy, how his mother only cut his or the dog’s hair when she couldn’t ignore it, he continues: “We’d lope along with everybody doing their own things until something would go wrong” and then Mom or Dad “would get a bee in their bonnet and make life hell for us.” On cue the author tells us, “Janet’s eyes were thoughtful, ‘That’s what happened . . . with Suzy. . . . Instead of solving the problem when it would be easy to solve, everybody let it slide until there was a crisis.’”¹³ And now that he, and we, have learned the moral, the story quickly ends, happily of course, as they keep the puppy, everyone resolved to discipline it properly.

The authors in *Lovely Deseret* do not often make careless surface mistakes in

such details as fly-fishing and usage; they are mainly better-trained writers and seem to value their craft. The mistakes here are more those of sloppy generalization and ideological stereotyping, leading to similarly didactic and ethically sterile conclusions. Every Mormon authority figure is crass, prejudiced, clueless. Almost every first-person narrator is sensitive and misunderstood, with no apparent ironic distance from the author. Nearly every member of a minority group—except the Mormons of course—is intuitively wise, beautiful in their own way, and persecuted.

For instance, in “Almond Milk,” the narrator, a closet gay missionary trying to make it through with his testimony and a new, straight identity still intact, has a zone leader from hell, a one-dimensional Nazi Mormon who speaks nothing but insults—like, when the narrator starts to leave the bathroom, “Wash your hands, Elder. You’ll be out there representing the church. Don’t be disgusting.”¹⁴ The story is one of the better-written and most interesting, exploring the inner conflict of a young man in such a desperate dilemma, but the author seems unable to let that man have agency, the full complexity that he implies by making him both gay and committed to the gospel. The elder’s thoughts regularly slip from that complexity to the direct and bitter denunciations that we must assume are really the author’s own voice drawing an obvious moral: “It seemed there had to be something wrong with the kind of leadership I’d experienced my whole mission which made . . . selfishness almost inevitable. In fact, the whole idea of the mission was to use other people, to baptize others to prove ourselves to God that we were worthy of the Celestial Kingdom.” Or, another time, “I remembered my Sunday School teacher telling our class of fourteen-year-olds that if for no other reason, we should stay in the church and be good so we could have eternal sex. It was a way of keeping us in line sexually, to threaten to take sex away from us.”¹⁵ Such negative stereotyping might work as irony or to reveal an unreliable narrator, but there is no hint of such things going on here.

The worst offender in this kind of surface inaccuracy and bald didacticism that undermines the possibility of ethical insight is in the last story in *Lovely Deseret*, usually the place of honor for highest achievement. Indeed, that place is given to Walter Kirn, the writer here with the largest national reputation, whose story, “Mormon Eden,” was published in 1997 in *The New Yorker*. The narrator, a teenager recently converted to Mormonism in Minnesota, just as Kirn himself was, is much like the one in Kirn’s other Mormon stories—somewhat naive, genuinely converted to Mormonism’s practical, good influence on his dysfunctional family. Here, the young narrator is further impressed by being in a religion whose sacred places are close by in America—New York, Missouri—“where a person could actually see for himself.”¹⁶ Indeed the story is of a church youth trip by bus to Nauvoo, Illinois, and the places in Missouri where Joseph Smith said Eden had been and Christ would come again.

But Kirn gets many of the details of Mormon life wrong and gives us crass stereotypes: The ward youth leader is called “Elder Tinsdale” and says things like, “The seating arrangements are fixed. . . . They’re the result of careful prayer.” A more serious error is Kirn’s description of a Mormon priesthood blessing, given when the narrator is ill: “Two elders sat me in a folding chair, settled their palms on

my skull, and started muttering. After requesting Heavenly Father's aid, they went on to predict my future."¹⁷ Besides the gratuitously belittling tone, that passage is extremely unlikely in its details.

The most seriously mistaken and unethical claim of the story concerns the girl who sits by the narrator on the bus and that night seduces him with oral sex when she takes him out from the chapel where they are all staying. Kirn has the narrator claim she does all this because of "an assignment" from church leaders who think he is falling away from his conversion—and then, believe it or not, deserts him in order, by assignment, to do the same to his bitterly sophisticated, skeptical friend ("other people need me too"). This is not just bad writing. It is ethically corrupt, not interested in breaking down stereotypes and creating new ethical insight and compassion for the other, for those who are different (in this case mainstream Mormons), but contemptuously willing to provide readers a safe kind of voyeurism, even a vicarious violence that can only increase prejudice. The story makes vicious fun, through extreme caricature, of one of the few minorities it is still politically correct to bash—that weird, ultra-conservative sect, Mormonism. And Raleigh and Signature Books—and perhaps most of all *The New Yorker*—ought to be ashamed of themselves for promoting such violence.

But there is a greater shame, one all the editors and publishers of both anthologies must share. That is the shame of promoting an agenda, without self-criticism, whether from the cultural correctness of the right or the political correctness of the left, so single-mindedly that very serious ethical *blindness* results. The most damaging example of this in *Turning Hearts* is "The Door on Wickham Street," in which a first person narrator, visiting his dying grandmother each Thursday, gradually learns that she believes firmly she will "be in hell perpetually."¹⁸ She had had five children in seven years and was pregnant with another when the trusted community doctor told her it wouldn't be wise to bear another child so soon, that she would die and leave her other babies and husband alone—and she agreed to an abortion. But afterwards she feels that "when that little soul was ripped from mine I knew I had done wrong . . . like a little light inside me had gone out," and prays that God will give her a chance to "make things right with Him."¹⁹ Soon another baby comes—but as a young child is accidentally run over by the husband. She begs God, "If you want to send me more children I'll take as many as you send me. I won't complain. And I won't do that awful thing I did before. But, Father, please, please don't take any more babies from me. . . . You can take away anything else from me and let the devil have my soul when I die. But please don't take any more babies."²⁰

The narrator reflects on what he knows of his grandmother's heroic life and about the times of her being honored, and he finds and copies for us her humble, one-page, life story of self-sacrifice. As the grandmother dies, he is granted a vision of her child that was killed coming to take her home, and then, at the funeral, given another vision of his grandmother's mother birthing her as they crossed the plains, after helping push a wagon up a hill, and then singing a hymn of peace and God's unending love—all of which he calls "little snippets of light granted to me by Divine Providence."²¹

Some may see this as all very edifying, an example perhaps of what Card in his introduction praises as “visionlike spirituality,” but to me it borders on blasphemy. The narrator never attempts to disabuse his grandmother—or us—of the utter wrongness of such a concept of God or the injuries done to whole lives by the popular Mormon theology that gave her such a concept. This seems to me an insult both to God and to Mormonism. The God who reveals himself through Christ would never punish such an innocent mistake made under the pressure of authority, certainly not by taking away another child or condemning the mother to hell. The author’s anti-abortion agenda has led him (and, indirectly, the editors and publisher) to condone an ethical mistake much worse, I believe, than the grandmother’s frightened, obedient abortion.

Perhaps this author can be excused in part by his earnest naivete and lack of writing experience. But no excuses can be found for an equivalently bad story in *Lovely Deseret* called “Sleuths,” whose author has published before and is the very opposite of naive. His calculated, in-your-face sophistication is revealed in his author’s note, where he chooses to tell us only that he is “a returned Mormon missionary” who “lives in New York City with his boyfriend.”²² The “sleuths” of the story are two missionaries, companions who are AWOL, driving out in their mission car to hike the Appalachian Trail (with the car’s odometer disconnected to hide the evidence) because they suddenly feel they “deserve a weekend off.”²³

This isn’t entirely improbable, but the details of the weekend are: These two “sleuths” seem to be searching out some meaning for their boring, over-regulated missionary lives—and the author rewards their search with his own sophomoric nihilism. One elder tells of stuffing a ring in a couch, saying some hocus pocus over it, and then finding it in an antique dresser. The two argue blandly whether this is a miracle or just magic and then shift to similar skepticism about the narrator’s early experience with a priesthood blessing that he had been told brought him back to life. They get to the trail head and sleep together on the blankets they’ve brought, engaging off-handedly, uncertainly, in homosexual petting. The next day they “traipse around the Appalachian trail for the greater part of the day. In the afternoon we take pictures of each other acting like explorers, like Lewis and Clark looking for signs of civilization in a new, untamed world. We’re bored.”²⁴

Of course, by this time we readers are bored too, by this all-too-common form of the imitative fallacy: trying to capture the quality of repetitive, everyday, meaningless existence with boring writing. And so the author tries a familiar cop-out of inferior writers: Rather than stepping back from meaninglessness and attempting to define clearly the shape of its boundary and its ethical significance, he simply tries to shock us with its meaningless horror. The two decide to go back that night, “so as not to press our luck,” are passed by two racing cars, and later pass those cars “in a ditch, soldered into each other.” The narrator asks, “Do you think they’re dead?” and his companion answers in the affirmative with an obscenity that I’ll spare you.²⁵ The main point is that they then drive on without helping. The two sleuths have found reality all right—and deserted it.

All this might serve as some kind of cautionary tale, if we could locate an ethical perspective in the story. But the author’s tone suggests he’s precisely as irresponsible

as his characters, as bemused by the quotidian, meaningless world as they are, with only an occasional sexual titillation or religious debunking to relieve it. And those are presented as if they warrant more of the author's (and our) attention than the large ethical questions raised by his attempts to shock us.

But perhaps I'm being unfair in suggesting that this story, and others in *Lovely Deseret*, are merely cynical, even nihilistic. The great Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor produced fiction full of grotesque human beings who mainly failed ethically and spiritually. She was accused of cynicism and even nihilism, despair. But she wrote something that describes herself and all those willing to make the huge effort to write fiction, including those in *Lovely Deseret* I've been critical of:

People without hope not only don't write novels, but what is more to the point, they don't read them. They don't take long looks at anything, because they lack the courage. The way to despair is to refuse to have any kind of experience, and the novel, of course, is a way to have experience.²⁶

Let me end on a more positive note. The chief formal tool of an ethical storyteller, I believe, is the skillful use of point of view, especially first person or implied persona, to communicate powerfully to the reader both intense sympathy for the characters and also various means of evaluating their moral journeys. Especially since the brilliant achievements of Robert Browning with dramatic monologue and of Henry James with roving central consciousness, there have been marvelous developments in both technique and skill as writers have learned to use variations in point of view to both delight us esthetically and move and instruct us ethically. Robert Langbaum, in *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), and Wayne Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1960), gave us the first major critical examinations and evaluations of these tools, especially focusing on the power of first-person narration to gain our non-judgmental sympathy for the main character and yet the subtleties by which the ethical naivetes and immaturities of that unreliable narrator could be signaled by a skillful writer.²⁷ The best of Mormon storytellers, I believe, have used these tools well, for profoundly ethical purposes, and thus have not merely conveyed the author's own prejudices—as, for instance, the authors of "Almond Milk" and "Mormon Eden" do.

Virginia Sorensen grew up in Manti, published three excellent novels about Mormon experience with national publishers in the 1940s, including *The Evening and the Morning*, perhaps the finest Mormon novel.²⁸ She won national prizes for her children's books in the 1950s, and began to write fictionalized essays about her own life. About forty years ago, like Walter Kirn, she published a first-person narrative in *The New Yorker*, but that story, "Where Nothing Is Long Ago,"²⁹ is, I believe, much superior ethically and artistically to "Mormon Eden." It even more powerfully reveals some flaws in Mormon culture but does not belittle that culture or its people—and it uses a complex point of view to show the author subtly learning ethical maturity and drawing us into that same process, rather than into mere prejudice.

As in all her work, Sorensen's subject is sinners, but here these include herself. The implied author is a mature woman looking back on her childhood self but also

re-imagining her childhood from the point of view of her younger self. The story refers to a poem which begins, "Here in America nothing is long ago," and Sorensen reminds us that Utah Mormon culture is such a place, a place where all the history, including the initial struggle to survive and create a civilization, is recent. The narrative, in Sorensen's mature voice, begins with her telling of a recent letter from her mother about the death of "Brother Tolsen" and a reminder that many years ago that good Saint had killed a water thief with his shovel. The voice and point of view shift to that of Sorensen the summer she was nine, when the killing took place, reflecting in the child's way about her morbid interest in the affair and her apparently uncomprehending awareness that she was "absolutely certain for years afterward that two piles of bloody rabbits' ears I saw on the courthouse lawn at the time of Brother Tolsen's trial had something to do with the killing he was being tried for. They hadn't. They were merely tokens of the fact that the annual county rabbit hunt had gone off according to schedule."³⁰

But, of course, this is the mature author subtly giving us a crucial hint that there is a connection, one that Sorensen's mind had intuitively preserved, and her artistic skill puts it in the story in a way that it begins to work on our minds and its journey of ethical discovery, especially as it is reinforced by another seemingly off-hand reference to those rabbit ears. The child's narrative voice notices they are being counted on the courthouse lawn while the jury is being selected, and the mature narrator makes the jarring comment, "Those piles of ears I see to this day."³¹ But before we see the full connection, Sorensen establishes the range of ethical complexity by dwelling in loving detail on the water of her childhood and its fundamental importance to the community. For instance, she reveals its effect on Bishop Peterson, her best friend's father, who was able to leave his lovely Denmark only when he became certain he was going to the Kingdom of God on earth and who found the mountain water "so pure, so shining, so cold, so free,... an unmistakable sign of the Kingdom."³² Sorensen includes the naive viewpoint of the child, observing the lonely grief of the murdered man's widow, and the simple sense of justice in the town as Brother Tolsen is acquitted and there is no more water stealing in the valley. But she also includes her mature reflection on how close we still are in the West to the time "when important things were settled violently," how "we remember the wide dry wastes before the mountain water was captured and put to use. Even now, the dry spaces, where the jack rabbits hop through the brush as thick as mites on a hen, are always there, waiting to take over."³³ And that, of course, gives us the clue to the irresistible connection of those rabbit ears to Brother Tolsen's killing of his neighbor.

We still retain in the West, beyond any possible need, a sympathy with, even tendency toward, casual violence—whether in the mass rabbit hunts that even in Virginia's childhood had become mere rituals, no longer necessary to protect the crops, or in deer hunting rituals today no longer necessary for survival, or our more serious general acquiescence in vigilante justice, both local and international. Sorensen reminds us of all this, subtly, with her skillful use of complex point of view, and then she ends her essay with a reversal of roles, the naive child confronting the horror and the mature woman showing her compassion for the "other" in her

determination to write about her own people's strange but understandable ways. She both increases our ethical judgment of wrong and our empathy for those who are wrong:

. . . I recall an evening, months after the trial was over, when my parents and I were driving along the road where his fields lay and saw Brother Tolsen working with the little streams that were running among his young corn. Dad and Mother waved and called to him. He lifted an arm to answer, and I saw that he held a shovel in the other hand. "I wonder if he bought a new shovel," I said suddenly.

For a minute, the air seemed to have gone dead about us, in the peculiar way it sometimes can, which is so puzzling to a child. Then Mother turned to me angrily. "Don't you ever let me hear you say a thing like that again!" she said. "Brother Tolsen is a good, kind man!"

So until this very hour I never have.³⁴

That first-rate story was collected in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1963), which, to their great credit, Signature Books republished in 1999 as part of a series of Sorensen's major work.

Levi Peterson began writing fiction in the 1970s and won the Illinois Short Fiction prize in 1981 for his first collection, *The Canyons of Grace*, which included publication by the University of Illinois Press. In 1986 he published his first novel, *The Backslider*, with Signature Books, another great debt we owe that publisher, which has almost singlehandedly kept serious Mormon fiction on the market the past twenty years. *The Backslider*, in my opinion, rivals Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning* as the best Mormon novel. Peterson is comparable to Flannery O'Connor in his ability to deal seriously with the theological issues as well as the history and culture of his religion and in his use, for ethical insight, of "grotesques"—the physically or spiritually wounded and marginalized humans who, paradoxically, can be made to touch the very center of religious and moral experience and feeling. He is comparable to Faulkner and Morrison, as well as Virginia Sorensen, in his use of complex point of view, often a mature narrator telling a story from a younger, more naive point of view, that leads the reader to share in the ethical growth the narrator has experienced—or failed to experience—since the time of that earlier story.

For example, "The Confessions of Augustine" explores both the illusion of wilderness as an escape from God and the experience of wilderness as the place of an overwhelming encounter with divine grace that "saves" the protagonist but leaves him beaten down, destroyed in will—and still yearning for his lost freedom.³⁵ The narrator, Fremont Durham, is led by continuing guilt and uncertainty to read St. Augustine and then in turn to reflect on an experience from his teenage years when he had worked as a logger, had fallen in love and slept with a non-Mormon woman, then felt suddenly alienated from her, as if God had suddenly interfered. The no-longer-naive narrator insists on the terror just under the surface of his present desperate, heretical theologizing and his life of Mormon orthodoxy haunted by the memory of helping to devastate the forest that he loved. Great ethical complexity is

achieved because Fremont, in his presented first-person telling twenty years later, is both a tamed rebel and a successful lumber merchant. Peterson lets a slight edge of irony in Fremont's narrative voice reveal the cost he has paid for such abject surrender to what he thinks is divine grace:

The love of God is obedience. Like Augustine, I know that God will not be scorned. If it suits Him, He will feed me tragedy on the instant. He will shatter me. ... I will be put into the fiery furnace and whatever is base and impure in me will be burned away and I will be the pure metal that God desires me to be.³⁶

This seems to me, like Sorensen's story, both a more devastating and a more compassionate critique of Mormon culture—and thus more ethically true and helpful—than most of *Lovely Deseret*. Without mere stereotyping, Peterson gives the devil his due and moves toward making the world friends. On the other hand we have, in the work of people like Douglas Thayer, more complex and convincing—and thus more ethical—stories about “turning hearts” than in the anthology of that name. In a story from his first collection, *Under the Cottonwoods* (first published in 1977), called “Opening Day,” Thayer gives us an ethically revealing double voice by having a middle-aged Mormon recount the story of his first deer hunt after returning from his mission in Germany.³⁷ There, after seeing the horrors that resulted from WWII, he had vowed never to kill anything again. Thayer gains our full empathy by creating the hunt with the immediacy of the young man's naive voice, but the narration is constantly, though subtly, informed by details and symbols only possible from the older man's sorrowing, repentant, possibly redeemed, point of view. This includes the final lines, when the young boy, after arrogantly tempting himself by going on the hunt, succumbs to temptation and shoots: “Still trembling, I knelt down by the big buck's head. His pooled blood started to trickle down through the oak leaves. ‘Oh, Jesus, Jesus,’ I whispered.”³⁸

There is little as truly orthodox religiously as this in *Turning Hearts* and little as truly sophisticated esthetically and both moving and challenging ethically in *Lovely Deseret*. And yet Thayer was not invited to contribute to either anthology. We are suffering, I fear, from a version of the old logical fallacy of the excluded middle, ripping Mormon literature apart to the remarkably similar extremes of right-wing and left-wing piety and cultural correctness and mutual exclusion. Of course, there are honorable exceptions, which all of us should encourage by careful reading and recommendations to others. Signature Books is soon to publish a fine novel by John Bennion about Mormons recovering from sin and making a marriage work and Deseret Book has been publishing a series of novels by Dean Hughes that is a well-crafted look at a complex Mormon family (good but over-bearing, patriarchal father, submissive but resentful mother, variously rebellious children) in a World War II presented not as “the good war” but as very complex (with Mormons fighting on both sides, terrible costs, and the acknowledged pacifism of President J. Reuben Clark). However, except for the reprints of classics like Thayer's *Under the Cottonwoods* and Donald Marshall's *The Rummage Sale* by Tabernacle Books (whose efforts to encourage fine Mormon literature we should encourage with our purchases), too many of those writers in what might be called the radical middle,

who have no simplistic pro-Mormon or anti-Mormon agenda, but try to practice their craft with careful esthetic skill and ethical insight, can't seem to get themselves published to a Mormon audience. It's a shame. I might even say, if I were an extremist, a damn shame.

NOTES

1. Cracroft, 339.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Eugene England, "The New Mormon Fiction," in *Bright Angels and Familiars*, ed. Eugene England (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), xviii–xix.
5. Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite, eds., *Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992); Robert Raleigh, ed., *In Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).
6. Orson Scott Card, "Families in Fiction," in Card and Dollahite, 3–4.
7. Raleigh, "Editor's Preface," viii.
8. Gideon Burton, "Aspirations to the Spirit of Elijah: Can Mormon Fiction Transcend Its Adolescence? Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite *Turning Hearts: Short Stories of Family Life*." Annual Conference of the Association for Mormon Letters, February, 1998. Available online at <http://humanities.byu.edu/MLDB/burtcard.htm>.
9. Lee Mortensen, "Not Quite Peru," in Raleigh, 173.
10. Randall L. Hall, "Father, Forgive Us," in Card and Dollahite, 61–62, 67.
11. Ibid., 67.
12. Carroll Morris, "Birthday Gift," in Card and Dollahite, 68–84.
13. Ibid., 81.
14. Johnny Townsend, "Almond Milk," in Raleigh, 67.
15. Ibid., 72.
16. Walter Kim, "Mormon Eden," in Raleigh, 273.
17. Ibid.
18. Robert England Lee, "The Door on Wickham Street," in Card and Dollahite, 261.
19. Ibid., 253.
20. Ibid., 255–56.
21. Ibid., 263.
22. Raleigh, 288.
23. Derek Gullino, "Sleuths," in Raleigh, 154.
24. Ibid., 155.
25. Ibid.
26. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 78.
27. Robert W. Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Random House, 1957); Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961). An enlarged second edition of Booth's work was published in 1983.
28. Virginia Sorensen, *The Evening and the Morning* (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1949; Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999).
29. Virginia Sorensen, "Where Nothing Is Long Ago," in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963; Salt Lake City, Signature, 1999).
30. Ibid, 3–4

31. Ibid., 13.
32. Ibid., 7.
33. Ibid,4.
34. Ibid., 14.
35. Levi Peterson, “The Confessions of Augustine,” in *The Canyons of Grace* (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1982; Urbana, University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1–26. The story first appeared in *Denver Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Winter, 1978).
36. Ibid., 25.
37. Douglas H. Thayer, *Under the Cottonwoods* (Salt Lake City, Tabernacle Books, 1999), 17–38.
38. Ibid, 38.

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