

Illuminating Mormons and Literature

By Kristi Young

On June 30, 2010 the film *Eclipse*, the third installment of the *Twilight* series, opened throughout the United States. Attendance was record setting. A projected five films based on four novels have become a phenomenon stretching beyond literature and film. People talk about “Team Edward” and “Team Jacob” after the two heroes of the novels--and have a strong opinion about which character is the best. Photos, calendars, shirts and mentions of *Twilight* in other media are part of the *Twilight* wonder. The uproar started as a dream Stephenie Meyer, a Latter-day Saint woman from Arizona, had one night. Her books have been published in many countries and languages and the films are marketed worldwide. Like many Mormon authors, her theology impacts her literature. While other LDS writers have not produced works that have generated as much press, they are extremely successful in their own genres.

LDS writers in the early days in Utah focused on home literature designed for Mormons because an understanding of LDS doctrine was necessary in order to comprehend what was written. While focused on sharing their beliefs through literature, Mormons were also aware of what was happening in the literary world outside of Utah. Orson F. Whitney wrote the poem, “The Soul’s Captain” in direct response to William Ernest Henley’s “Invictus” to show that it is Christ, not man, who guides the soul. In 1888 while serving as a bishop, Whitney gave an address at the Y.M.M.I.A. Conference entitled “Home Literature.” A seminal lecture on Mormon Literature, Whitney claimed “we will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own. God’s ammunition is not exhausted. His brightest spirits are held in reserve for the latter times. In God’s name and by his help we will build up a literature whose top shall touch heaven, though its foundations may now be low in earth.”¹

While LDS writers were seeking to follow Whitney’s injunction, non-Mormon writers shared their views of the Mormons. These were often shaped by rumor and innuendo. In 1912 Zane Grey wrote *Riders of the Purple Sage*. Despite liking the Mormons that he met while in the Red Rock country, Grey painted a picture of Mormon men as both cowards and bullies who did not obey the law. Even though it was written 22 years past the Church’s Manifesto, abolishing polygamy as a practice of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon men in the novel were all controlling polygamists—or they left the Church. They used fear to keep Mormon women in their place. The only good Mormons were the ones like the heroine, Jane, who disobeyed the leaders of their faith. And in Utah their only chance for survival was to “roll the stone” that would result in “the outlet to Deception Pass [being] closed

¹ Online site for Home Literature: <http://mldb.byu.edu/homelit.htm>

forever.”² This is interesting given the scripture used by LDS members to describe the Church as “the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth.”³

Arthur Conan Doyle also made sure the world knew the perfidy of the Mormons. *A Study in Scarlet*, the first outing of Sherlock Holmes, portrays Mormon men as lusting for money and power and unconcerned with the welfare of their wives. The heroine of the story, Lucy, was forced to marry young Enoch Drebber. “Lucy never held up her head again, but pined away and died within a month. Her sottish husband, who had married her principally for the sake of John Ferrier’s [her father] property, did not affect any great grief at his bereavement.”⁴ Conan Doyle based his depiction of the Mormons on sensationalized accounts written by former members of the LDS Church.

In 1921 Doyle and his family visited Salt Lake City. Seventy years later, his daughter, Dame Jean Conan Doyle remembered, “You know father would be the first to admit that his first Sherlock Holmes novel was full of errors about the Mormons,” she said. “My brothers Denis, Adrian and I were all very apprehensive when we got near Utah. We thought we would be kidnapped or something.

“We were all so relieved to find out how friendly the people really turned out to be.” “Dame Jean was 10 at the time; her brothers were 14 and 12.”

“Sir Arthur was to speak in the Salt Lake Latter-day Saint Tabernacle, and he would be introduced by Levi Edgar Young, U. of U. professor of Western history and Mormon general.

“In later years, Prof. Young, in casual conversation with a Salt Lake Tribune reporter, was asked how Conan Doyle could have been so well received in Utah in light of *A Study in Scarlet*.

“He apologized for that, you know,” Young replied. “He said he had been misled by writings of the time about the Church.”⁵

In 1885 Robert Louis Stevenson and his wife, Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson published *The Dynamiter*. One section of the novel entitled “Story of the Destroying Angel” also deals with the wickedness and greed of the Utah Mormons. Like Doyle’s father and daughter, Abimelech Fonblanque and his wife and daughter, Lucy and Asenath, claim to be Mormons, but keep themselves apart from the rest of the Saints. Because of their prosperity, they are targeted by the Mormon elite. Abimelech disappears and is electrocuted by their neighbor, Dr. Grierson. Lucy chooses the same fate. Desiring Lucy as his wife for her riches, her beauty, and her youth, Grierson strives to perfect a potion which will restore his youth. Lucy is sent to London to wait for her bridegroom, but is continually under the ever watching eye of Mormonism. Dr. Grierson dies when his youth potion explodes. Pursued by the Mormons, Asenath is still in danger. Then it becomes clear that Asenath is not Mormon and has never seen Utah. She is a

² Grey, Zane. *Riders of the Purple Sage*. Lexington: Seven Treasures Publication, 2009. Pages 177-178.

³ Doctrine and Covenants 65:2.

⁴ Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2004. Page 90.

⁵ http://www.adherents.com/lit/article_Doyle.html

spinner of a tale that was somewhat believable to her contemporaries and in fact is part of a terrorist group. She tells a tale to each of three friends to cover her tracks and in the end falls in love with one of them and leaves behind the past.

One Victorian author decided to check out the Mormons before condemning them. Charles Dickens went aboard the *Amazon* on June 4, 1863 to observe the behavior of Mormons who were getting ready to sail to the United States. He was prepared to give them a lecture on their behavior. Instead he found "in their degree, the pick and flower of England." and complimented them in his book *The Uncommercial Traveller*.⁶

During the 1940s several disaffected Mormon writers published national novels about the Mormon experience. Virginia Sorenson, Samuel Woolley Taylor, Paul Bailey, Vardis Fisher, and Maurine Whipple were among these writers known as The Lost Generation. Whipple's *Giant Joshua* was acclaimed as the best Mormon literature had to offer for many decades.

While the Miltons and Shakespeares have yet to appear, some remarkable LDS authors are succeeding with international, national and regional readers. Brady Udall's nationally published 2010 novel, *The Lonely Polygamist* has received national acclaim with some saying that it could even be a great American novel.⁷ Other literary novels like Todd Robert Petersen's *Rift*, John Bennion's *Falling Towards Heaven*, *The Tree House* by Douglas Thayer as well as *Bound on Earth* by Angela Hallstrom were published by small LDS publishers specializing in literary LDS fiction. For these writers, Mormonism is integral to the stories they create.

Deseret Book and its imprint Covenant Communications are the largest LDS publishers, but many other smaller publishing houses are appearing. These companies specialize in novels by Mormons, for Mormons and about Mormons. Jack Weyland in many ways is the father of LDS novels for LDS people in recent times. His first novel, *Charly*, was published in 1980. Since that time, Weyland has written more than three dozen books. The big trend in LDS market is genre publications. Scriptural novels like those published by H.B. Moore and Sariah Wilson that expand the stories of certain scriptural individuals like Nephi and Alma, historical novels represented by Gerald Lund, Annette Lyon and Jennie Hansen that focus primarily on the early days of the Church, or suspense novels by Gregg Luke, Stephanie Black and Traci Abramson. Generally suspense novels have an element of mystery to them. Other mystery novels are similar to cozy mysteries. Jeffrey S. Savage, Kerry Blair, G.G. Vandagriff, and Josi Killpack are among those writing these novels. Romance is still popular and many authors write in this genre like Anita Stansfield, Rachel Nunes, Aubri Mace, Josi Killpack, Michelle Ashman Bell and Shannon Guymon. The numbers of LDS writers grows every year; unfortunately, the number of readers is only slightly increasing. This leads to smaller royalties and profits for publishers.

Many LDS writers associate with and support each other. They may participate in writing groups or serve as readers for their peers. Rachel Nunes founded LDStorymakers which is a writers' guild for LDS writers. To join you must have published a book of fiction and be LDS. The discussion of doctrine and

⁶ <http://blog.beliefnet.com/mormoninquiry/2009/04/dickens-on-the-mormons.html>

⁷ Weist, Ellen Fagg. "Born to Tell Stories." The Salt Lake Tribune: May 2, 2010.

politics are taboo. The guild maintains a website where authors and their bios are listed. Links to authors' websites may also be given. LDStorymakers also endorses the Whitney Awards. Named in honor of Orson F. Whitney and his prophecy that there would yet be Mormon Miltons and Shakespeares, the Awards are given to the best fiction written by LDS authors during the year.

LDS authors shine in the national Young Adult field. Shannon Hale won a Newberry Honor Book award for *Princess Academy* and her other novels and graphic novels are well respected. Novels based on fairy tales or creating new fairy tales are written by Jessica Day George who is also published internationally and nationally. Janette Rallison creates YA novels based at least partially in the real teen world. Becca Fitzgerald pens paranormal romances for older YA audiences. Aprilynne Pike's *Wings* series focuses on what happens when fairies and their world mix with the human world. Carol Lynch Williams writes beautifully about non-Mormon polygamy and its impact on a teenage girl. Ann Dee Ellis experiments with different formats for her novels increasing the impact of the story. A.E. Cannon has written several popular novels. Her most recent is *The Loser's Guide to Life and Love* which is loosely based on *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Writing on a variety of topics for young readers, Kristen Randle's best known book is *The Only Alien on the Planet*.

Writers of adult novels such as Anne Perry—mystery, Brenda Novak—romantic suspense, Richard Paul Evans—inspirational fiction, Jason F. Wright—inspirational fiction, and Lynn Kurland—paranormal romance are also popular in their various genres. No list would be complete without the science fiction/fantasy writers Orson Scott Card, David Farland, Brandon Sanderson and Brandon Mull to name a few.

Mormon literature has come a long way since Orson F. Whitney's discourse, and the possibilities are endless. Some LDS writers look outside their theological home for ideas for their literature while still embracing their beliefs. Others choose to write about and for Mormons. Others chose to create their version of Mormons. Each of these authors do not exist in a vacuum. The ideas that begin in their mind are often shaped by interaction with other authors—both LDS and non-LDS. In their own ways, through their own words, they illuminate Mormons in fiction.