

# The State of Mormon Literature and Criticism

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TWO DECADES HAVE PASSED SINCE *Dialogue* last published an issue entirely devoted to Mormon literature. In the meantime literary writing about Latter-day Saints has been burgeoning both in LDS and national markets—so much so that it is difficult for literary critics to keep up with this growing body of novels, plays, poetry, and literary nonfiction. It is very important, however, that they try. To have a sense of the future of Mormon literature, it is vital that we see how present writings articulate with traditions from the past.

Producing literary criticism to do just that is the central function of the Association for Mormon Letters, whose goal is to serve authors, scholars, and general readers of Mormon literature. In our yearly conference, through readings, book reviews, a very active e-mail list, and now an annual writers' workshop and a small quarterly literary magazine, *Irreantum*, we attempt to introduce people to Mormon literature past and present and to critically evaluate it. In this issue of *Dialogue*, we share with a broader public some of the best criticism that has been generated at our conferences and published in the annuals of the Association, as well as a sampling of new creative works from active writers.

As editors we have found our task different from the one faced by editors of *Dialogue's* prior literary issues because the object of our study has been evolving, as have our means of literary analysis. Discussions of Mormon literature from earlier decades seem to have been controlled by a basic assumption, derived from standards established by the "New Critics" of the 1940s and '50s, that the quality of literature could be de-

terminated based on formal aesthetic qualities as established in conventional literary genres. Thus, critics of LDS literature have asked, "Is there any literature published by Mormons or for Mormons that meets high aesthetic standards?"

This remains an important question, especially since everyone recognizes great differences in the aesthetic quality of literary works by or about Mormons. But it has become more difficult to answer this question, both because the traditional genres have been complemented with new ones, and because literary markets and standards continue to evolve.

In the 1940s and '50s, for example, writers of LDS fiction proved their aesthetic mettle by writing to a national audience, crafting their Mormon subject matter according to the high literary standards demanded by national publishers. For many such authors (sometimes known as Mormon Literature's "Lost Generation"<sup>1</sup>), the result was the achievement of national critical acclaim but rejection from Latter-day Saints. The flip side of this tradition was the ongoing "Home Literature" tradition in which faithful Latter-day Saints published affirmative works supportive of LDS values and goals but generally lacking in literary quality.

Today, even though the national market/LDS market division remains, the lines are blurring considerably. More and more authors of LDS literature are finding national publishing venues, and regional presses such as Deseret Book are both raising their standards and reaching out to non-LDS markets.

Meanwhile, among literary critics and scholars, the standards for judging literary value have been evolving. The new questions raised today are less concerned with aesthetic standards per se, but with how the various contemporary critical approaches allow us to understand the literary dimensions to Mormon culture generally. This is a crucial difference in approach, for it widens the object of inquiry to include all that is literary about LDS culture, while at the same time it returns our attention to established or traditional texts in the LDS canon with new critical tools.

The explosion of the LDS market for fiction, especially genre and serialized fiction, has made the literary component of our culture inescapable, but it also makes that component more difficult to grapple with—not simply because of the number of works published, but also because the ways of reading texts have multiplied. Measured by the varieties of criticism practiced in academic literary studies today, that is quite a lot. Rather than be dismayed at this, we see this as an opportunity to re-

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1. See Edward A. Geary, "Mormondom's Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Fall 1977): 89-98.

visit the past with the new literary tools of today, while using that traditional canon to help situate the newer works and genres that are populating Mormon bookshelves.

During the last 20 years, the focus of literary criticism has turned more and more towards the study not so much of texts, but of contexts. In other words, the line has been blurred between studying literature and studying the culture(s) that produce and consume it. In the Association for Mormon Letters, this has been manifest by broadening our attention to look at folklore, popular fiction, humor, rhetoric (including the sermon), devotional and inspirational writing, and women's issues. The AML board has reflected this change in its personnel, including, for the first time during this past decade, representatives from the popular Mormon presses, and hosting fund raisers and readings that feature less strictly "literary" authors but those who are read by, or who are clearly influencing, reading Mormons.

Much of what concerned Mormons who have reacted negatively to the "good" writers of the Lost Generation (those who met the high aesthetic standards from New Criticism) was the perception that Mormon religious life was being used as a prop for aestheticism, which seemed to undercut the power of Mormon spiritual experience. That is to say, the LDS elements in such writings appeared to be exploited rather than respected. That remains a perennial difficulty. However, another bogeyman also confronts LDS readers today: the presence of "cultural criticism" and "postmodern criticism." These are frightening spectres both to more traditional academics and to mainstream audiences. This is unfortunate, since the way that contemporary criticism broadens both the objects and methods of literary studies makes possible an engagement with the full gamut of our LDS history and religious experience.

This was already intuited by the editors of the first major anthology of Mormon literature, Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert, whose *A Believing People*<sup>2</sup> boldly included genres like the personal essay, the sermon, diaries, hymns, devotional literature, etc.—genres only now being recognized and studied by literary scholars. Of course, there is much that seems inconsistent with LDS interests or standards in some versions of cultural criticism today (gay and lesbian studies, for example). But for now, we are confident that more will be gained than lost as we move from text to context in Mormon studies. For example, contemporary critical theory holds out the possibility that readers may find spiritual vital-

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2. Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, eds., *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974). Most of this anthology is included in an on-line anthology at the Mormon Literature Website (<http://humanities.byu.edu/mldb/mlithome.htm>).

ity in all kinds of writing—not necessarily in writing attempting to be aesthetically *or* inspirationally superior.

One reason for our optimism has been the presence of critics who have learned well the newest languages of literary analysis and are articulating these to LDS audiences in ways that make literary criticism seem an opportunity, rather than a threat, to our religion and our literature. This is the spirit of Michael Austin's award-winning essay, "The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time," which would have figured prominently in this volume had it not already been published recently in *Dialogue*.<sup>3</sup> Robert Bird successfully employs a post-modern approach in his essay about Maragaret Young's *Salvador* and Orson Scott Card's *Lost Boys*, included below.

Besides Austin and Bird, other valued voices in this new generation of literary criticism include Susan Howe, John Bennion, Neal Kramer, Orson Scott Card, Tory Anderson, Harlow Clark, Gideon Burton, Benson Parkinson, Eric Eliason, John Needham, Lisa Tait, and Laurie Illions Rodriguez. Happily, these newer critics have not forgotten the pioneering work of earlier critics that have both defined and refined the field of Mormon letters: Dale Morgan, Karl Keller, William Mulder, Richard Cracroft, Neal Lambert, Eugene England, Edward Geary, Bruce Jorgensen, Samuel Taylor, William A. Wilson, Marden Clark, Mary Bradford, Lavina Fielding Anderson, Wayne Booth, Steven Tanner, and Richard D. Rust.<sup>4</sup>

Insightful writers like these have demonstrated how good literary criticism can and should be a crucial mediating force between books and people. We maintain our faith in criticism as a way of winnowing the wheat from the chaff. But the task has become more daunting in recent decades as developments in three important publishing arenas have reshaped the landscape of Mormon literature: national publication, the LDS book market, and electronic publication.

### *National Publication*

The first major development in the landscape of Mormon literature in the closing decades of the twentieth century has been that more and more LDS authors and works featuring Mormons have been published nationally. A few examples include Judith Freeman's *Chinchilla Farm* (Vintage, 1989), Walter Kirn's *My Hard Bargain* (Knopf, 1990), and Brady

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3. Michael Austin, "The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 4 (winter 1994): 131-144. Also on-line at the Mormon Literature Website (<http://humanities.byu.edu/mldb/austin01.htm>).

4. Brief biographies and bibliographies of all the critics mentioned here can be found in the "Who's Who" section of the Mormon Literature Website (<http://humanities.byu.edu/mldb/whoswho.htm>).

Udall's *Letting Loose the Hounds* (Simon and Schuster, 1997). National publication in specialty genres has been particularly fruitful recently for works by or about Latter-day Saints. In nonfiction, for example, Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (Vintage, 1991) has earned great notoriety. In young adult fiction, Dean Hughes has published multiple titles through Atheneum and Alladin. In science fiction, Orson Scott Card's many novels and series published through Tor have retained their national appeal while becoming more explicitly LDS. Dave Wolverton joins Card as another LDS science fiction author gaining prominence nationally, publishing his own novels through Tor, and *Star Wars* novels through Bantam. In the mystery genre, Ann Perry's novels continue their broad international exposure through Fawcett, Ivy, and Ballantine, with recent settings and characters becoming more explicitly Mormon.

The number of Mormon poets publishing in national forums has increased dramatically over the last 20 years, and includes Kathryn R. Ashworth, Danielle Beazer, Colin B. Douglas, Kathy Evans, Laura Hamblin, Lewis Horne, Susan Howe, Lance Larsen, Timothy Liu, Karen M. Moloney, Dixie Lee Patridge, Loretta Randall Sharp, May Swenson, Anita Tanner, Sally Taylor, and Richard Tice.

The trend towards more national publications is a very positive one, of course. It broadens the exposure of LDS writers and themes, forces LDS writers to meet higher literary standards, and lessens possibilities of parochialism.

### *LDS Publishing*

While more LDS authors and more works featuring Mormon elements have been making their way to national markets, the world of strictly LDS publishing has been growing by leaps and bounds in the past 20 years. Mormon retailers and Mormon publishers together vie for a market that currently spends over 93 million dollars annually, according to the LDS Booksellers Association. LDSBA has been a very important force in organizing and professionalizing retailers, publishers, and authors. At least for English-speaking areas of the world, distribution channels are now well established and growing, enabling Latter-day Saints to produce and consume many bookstore products.

Ironically, however, books often seem secondary to the flood of other LDS-oriented products marketed through LDS bookstores: CTR rings, scripture cases, videos, music CDs, art candles, sheet music, t-shirts, tie tacks, puppets, genealogy aids, recipes, key-chain oil vials, refrigerator magnets, wheat grinders, dolls, cassette tapes, scrapbook supplies, etc. The annual meeting of the LDS Booksellers Association often seems less a clearing house for literature as it does a carnival of pop culture and kitsch.

The silver lining to finding an angel Moroni hood ornament or a gold-plated bust of Lavell Edwards in an LDS bookstore is that one will also find there books from many new publishers. Despite some legitimate concern that this year's acquisition of Bookcraft by Deseret Book would result in a huge, restrictive LDS publishing conglomerate, the new entity shows little intention of monopolizing a market it already dominates, and is instead pushing to reach non-LDS and national markets through its Shadow Mountain imprint and capitalizing on the new electronic market for LDS titles. Deseret Book may have the best publication record and distribution for LDS buyers, but there is strong and healthy competition from both publishers and distributors that have come into their own in the last two decades.

Prominent competitors to Deseret Book/Bookcraft include, for example, Covenant Communications, which has graduated from selling scripture cassettes and become a bonafide publisher of popular titles, putting out the well-received *Tennis Shoes Among the Nephites* juvenile fiction series by Chris Heimerdinger and the *First Love and Forever* romance series by Anita Stansfield. Aspen Books has also met a wide variety of LDS tastes. It has published more literary authors in its past—such as Samuel Taylor, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Margaret Young, and Marden Clark—but is now succeeding in marketing young adult fiction (the *Latter-day Daughters* series by Carol Lynch Williams and Launi K. Anderson and the *Values for Young Women* series by Shirley Arnold and Kathryn Palmer), Mormon humor (Robert Kirby's *Sunday of the Living Dead*, Robert Smith's *Baptists at Our Barbeque*), and some LDS historical fiction (Marilyn Brown's *Statehood*). Cedar Fort Inc. (CFI) launched the popular *Storm Testament* series in 1982 by Lee Nelson (now published by Council Press), and has become a major publisher/distributor of popular LDS titles. Horizon Books has branched out from its titles in camping, cooking, and near-death experiences (not necessarily related!) and is publishing some fiction aimed at teens and children.

Among the alternatives to Deseret Book and Bookcraft, special mention must be made of Signature Books. Since its inception in 1981, Signature has been a significant outlet for more "literary" LDS literature, publishing essays by Eugene England, Elousie Bell, and Ann Edwards Cannon; fiction by Bela Petsco, Michael Fillerup, Douglas Thayer, John Bennion, Levi Peterson, Linda Sillitoe, Marden Clark, M. Shayne Bell, Rodello Hunter, and Phyllis Barber; the poetry of Clarice Short, Emma Lou Thayne, Linda Sillitoe, Lisa Orme Bickmore, Kathy Evans, Marilyn Bushman-Carlton, Susan Howe, and Alex Caldiero; several biographical, theological, and historical studies of literary importance, a Mormon Classics Series that includes three long out-of-print works by Virginia Sorensen; and most notably, several influential compilations and anthologies: (all but the last two out of print, sadly): *Greening Wheat: Fifteen*

*Mormon Short Stories* (1983); *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* (1989); *Bright Angels and Familiars: Mormon Short Stories* (1992); *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature* (1996); and *In Our Lovely Deseret* (1998).

In 1989 the Association for Mormon Letters presented Signature Books with a Special Recognition award for providing a much-needed venue for more literary sorts of LDS publishing. As an "alternative" press, Signature has dared to publish what the official and quasi-official presses could not. Its more liberal editorial policies have made possible publication of works of a high literary quality, but such policies by no means guarantee literary quality, and can, in fact, prove very narrowly liberal, as Eugene England argues in his review of Signature's *In Our Lovely Deseret* in this volume. The publisher's liberal reputation has estranged not only mainstream LDS audiences but many authors and academics uncomfortable with the ways LDS leaders and culture are not respected in some Signature titles.<sup>5</sup> Signature has thus both filled a gap and created another.

Many smaller publishers have appeared in recent years attempting to fill that gap, at least in part. In 1989 Orson Scott Card inaugurated his publishing company, Hatrack River, with the publication of Kathryn H. Kidd's *Paradise Vue*. In his preface to that novel, he provided a manifesto for popular and literary LDS fiction that he has tried to realize in sponsoring nine novels to date from that press. In 1999 Tabernacle Books began the *Mormon Literary Library* series, reprinting the fiction and non-fiction of critically acclaimed works by Eugene England, Douglas Thayer, and Donald Marshall, and promising to feature new fiction as well. Eborn Books has published reprints of early LDS tracts, pamphlets, and histories (LDS "literature" in its broadest sense). Although there is much that is peripheral to literary interests on their list, Eborn has made available some essential, but otherwise inaccessible, early LDS fiction and literature, such as the first LDS short story, Parley P. Pratt's *The Angel of the Prairies*. With the ease of desktop publishing and with publishing-on-demand technologies making possible economical press runs of small quantities, we are sure to see an increasing trend towards self-publishing, publishers issuing reprints, and specialized new publishers that can afford to stay small. One such example is Zarahemla Motets/White Crow Press in Thousand Oaks, California, which has allowed poet Michael R. Collings to produce several high-quality poetry monographs, including *The Nephiad*, an epic in blank verse based on the Book of Mormon and done in the style of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

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5. Signature has earned the sobriquet of "Korihor Press" during an altercation with FARMS not long ago, and has become for many a litmus test for Mormon liberals. See, for example, John W. Redelf's much-circulated and debated internet essay, "Who are the Signaturi?" (<http://www.ptialaska.net/~la7878/signatur.html>).

The big sellers in LDS publishing are fiction series. Gerald Lund's *The Work and the Glory* series (Bookcraft) has awakened a whole new generation of LDS readers to the vitality of the fictional medium for experiencing LDS history, and its runaway success has given momentum to other historical fiction series, such as the *Children of the Promise* series by Dean Hughes (Deseret Book). As mentioned above, genre series are also now very prominent in LDS publishing, including children's, young adult, science fiction, and romance series. If 25 years ago authors like Shirley Sealy and Jack Weyland were proving to Deseret Book that fiction would sell, Lund and Hughes have now proven that the fiction series will sell best to a Mormon market.

### *Electronic Publication*

A third important development in the landscape of LDS literature is the advent of electronic publication. As Robert Hogge asserted in his recent presidential address to the Association for Mormon Letters, electronic publishing is changing LDS publishing dramatically.<sup>6</sup> This can be seen on several fronts.

First, major LDS publishers have assembled CD-ROM products that make available many literary titles long out of print. The Infobase Library (Bookcraft) and Gospelink (Deseret Book)—now being merged along with their parent companies—are primarily gospel study aids, but include literary titles or other writings very relevant to literary research. Signature Book's *New Mormon Studies* CD-ROM is a more expensive but very useful CD-ROM for literary purposes, including many of Signature's own out-of-print literary titles and the full text of all back issues of *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, and *Sunstone Review*. All of these CD products suffer from "shovelware" marketing, the attempt to digitize and dump onto a disc public domain or out-of-print titles that are not necessarily of superior quality in order to advertise the greatest number of available works. All of them have interfaces that are frustrating to use for computer novices and experts alike (despite all advertising to the contrary). And all are much more likely to be used for occasional reference than for any serious, continuous reading. These are problems more of the medium than the content, but the problems remain. The upside is that titles unlikely to be reprinted are receiving a new life, and this opens up real possibilities for literary research, if not for popular literary consumption. What does not exist is a CD of out-of-print or public domain LDS titles of a purely literary character, but that may be too much to hope for. However, Brigham Young University has recently committed enormous re-

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6. Robert M. Hogge, "Mormon Literature in Cyberspace: The New Frontier," *Annual of the Association for Mormon Letters*, 1997, ed. by Lavina Fielding Anderson, Salt Lake City: Association for Mormon Letters, 1997. 1-5.



sources to transcribing and digitizing numerous pioneer diaries that will open up both literary and historical study of these cultural treasures as these diaries get published electronically.

Second, the electronic realm is now becoming a principal medium for marketing books. Deseret Book on-line, LDSWORLD, seagull-book.com, and most recently AllMormon.com<sup>7</sup> are regional equivalents of Amazon.com (where LDS books are also regularly sold), and these reach many people who do not have an LDS bookstore around the corner where they can shop. Regardless of the products currently being sold, the avenues of advertising and distribution are being laid like so many train tracks across the desert, and this means more books and more kinds of books will be reaching more and more people (LDS or not). One negative note on the commercial electronic frontier is the attempt by Deseret Book to monopolize LDS on-line sales. While offering all vendors of LDS titles free promotion on their website, they threaten to pull those vendors' titles from their bookstore chain if they ever set up an on-line presence to compete with Desert Book's on-line storefront. This seems very much against the democratic and entrepreneur-friendly environment of the web, and will perhaps not last.

Many of the smaller publishers alluded to above are staking a claim on the electronic frontier with small on-line stores. For example, Encore Performance Publishing<sup>8</sup> offers more LDS plays, musicals (and even puppet shows) for purchase on-line than you ever knew existed. It isn't hard to set up a website and begin selling one's wares directly to the public, and little LDS publishers and vendors come and go with some regularity.<sup>9</sup> An example of a more established, single-publisher website (in contrast to the all-things-LDS megasites) is Orson Scott Card's Hatrack River. Besides having its own web address, this publishing company is part of Card's well-known and much visited on-line community, "Nauvoo."<sup>10</sup> There, in a model of how the electronic environment can really service literary interests, one cannot only purchase books, but chat about them in live sessions with authors, and download first chapters or drafts of Card's works in progress. Card is to be applauded for innovating reader feedback and for taking seriously the integration of literature within the framework of LDS living generally. (His on-line community also includes "Vigor," a pragmatic newsletter on living the gospel.)

Third, the electronic realm is proving a wonderful new resource for literary research. Along with the CD-ROM products mentioned above,

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7. <http://deseretbook.com/>; <http://www.ldsworld.com/>; <http://seagullbook.com/>; and <http://www.AllMormon.com> respectively.

8. <http://www.encoreplay.com/>

9. See, for example, Zedek Books (<http://www.mormonprophecy.com/>).

10. <http://www.hatrack.com/>; <http://www.nauvoo.com/>

websites devoted to LDS literature, authors, or to things Mormon in general are becoming very important. The Mormon Literature Website<sup>11</sup> is maintained at BYU by Gideon Burton, who teaches LDS Literature there. This contains an electronic bibliography of LDS literature developed by Eugene England, a large and growing on-line anthology of LDS literature, many full-length historical and critical articles on LDS literature, as well as on-line biographies of authors, critics, and others important to the LDS literary scene. Some websites are devoted to individual authors, such as the sites featuring poet Charis Southwell,<sup>12</sup> children's book author Rick Walton,<sup>13</sup> mystery writer Anne Perry,<sup>14</sup> or Rachel Nunes,<sup>15</sup> author of the best-selling *Ariana* series (Covenant). Other general LDS websites sometimes include a literary dimension, such as familyforever.com. That site is devoted mainly to genealogical help, but includes a section profiling LDS artists, including authors.<sup>16</sup> The church's official website now includes full-length General Conference addresses. As the sermon becomes more studied as literature, this will increase in importance (as will the full-text version of all past issues of the *Ensign* that the church has promised but indefinitely postponed publishing on CD-ROM). Anyone on-line knows that many a web-savvy Mormon has created his/her own website, and a number of these present general information or links to LDS materials that include much of literary and cultural interest. Perhaps most prominent among these are LDS-Index.org, "The Index for LDS Readers"; MormonLinks; LDSDirectory.com; About.com's LDS site; CyberSaints; the Bengali Project's LDS Internet Resource; and Gregory Woodhouse's LDS Resources.<sup>17</sup> The most extensive effort yet to canvass, catalogue, and categorize the Mormon electronic frontier is Lauramaery Gold's book, *Mormons on the Internet*,<sup>18</sup> whose 2000-2001 update is in the works. Not all of this impressive resource concerns the literary dimension of Mormonism, but it is the current "bible" of LDS on-line sources. Benson Parkinson maintains a much smaller list, but one focused exclusively on Mormon literature. His includes literary events, LDS publishers, journals publishing LDS writing, and links to relevant newspapers, bookstores, libraries, and other websites relevant to LDS writers.<sup>19</sup>

11. <http://humanities.byu.edu/mldb/mlithome.htm>

12. <http://www.rfgreenwood.com/charis/>

13. <http://users.itsnet.com/~rickwalton/>

14. <http://www.plcmc.lib.nc.us/find/bios/perry.htm>

15. <http://www.ranunes.com/>

16. <http://www.familyforever.com/artists.htm>

17. <http://www.lds-index.org/>; <http://www.mormonlinks.com/>; <http://www.LDSdirectory.com/>; <http://www.LDS.about.com/culture/lds/>; <http://www.ptialaska.net/~la7878/>; <http://www.lds.npl.com/>; <http://www.wnetc.com/resource/lds/>

18. Lauramaery Gold, *Mormons on the Internet* (Rocklin, California: Prima Publishing, 1997).

19. <http://www.cc.weber.edu/~byparkinson/aml-list.html>

Fourth, the electronic realm has proven to be a healthy medium for budding writers to form communities, exchange information, and develop their craft. The AML-List email list,<sup>20</sup> moderated by the indefatigable Benson Parkinson, has become a staging grounds for many up-and-coming writers, as well as a forum for those posting queries or interested generally in issues relating to LDS literature. It has spawned a sister list, LDSE, that discusses and promotes LDS speculative fiction.<sup>21</sup> Another focused on-line forum is ANWA (American Night Writers Association—formerly the Arizona Night Writers Association), which is for LDS women writers.<sup>22</sup> The Association for Mormon Letters has noticed its membership swell ever since the inception of AML-List, testifying to the way that a new generation of writers is both interested in writing and discussing LDS literature, and that the tools and communities necessary for becoming bona fide writers are being brokered on-line.

Not to be overlooked is *Harvest: An On-line Magazine for the LDS Community* ([www.harvestmagazine.com](http://www.harvestmagazine.com)), which promises to enrich LDS literary culture generally and to provide a publishing outlet for LDS writers especially. This recent comer to the Mormon internet is an attractively designed on-line periodical which, in addition to posting current news of interest to Latter-day Saints, features columns such as "Discipleship," "History," "Classic Mormon Discourse," "Building Bridges" (devoted to appreciating non-LDS culture from a Mormon viewpoint), and "World at Large." This last column is to feature "LDS and non-LDS writers who focus on topics, stories, books, history, films, etc., that are from the world in which we live." Current offerings in the magazine include a rather eclectic mix of both LDS and non-LDS writings, reprints, and new material: Lowell Bennion, Eugene England, J. Reuben Clark, Jr., Fyodor Dostoevsky, Henry David Thoreau, and Seamus Heaney. Time will tell if the editor, Dallas Robbins, can sustain interest in such diverse offerings and if he can both solicit and require quality material from new writers.

We see the burgeoning electronic realm with both optimism and caution. On the one hand, it makes many more texts available to more people—both new titles being marketed on-line and older texts being resurrected or archived digitally. Through electronic discussion lists and e-mail generally, critical discussion about LDS literature occurs constantly and brings together people of different backgrounds, disciplines, and tastes who would otherwise be unaware of their common interests. On the other hand, much of the discussion of LDS literature can be superficial, uninformed, or redundant. On the AML-List, for example, certain issues are revisited regularly without adding particularly to the

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20. <http://www.cc.weber.edu/~byparkinson/aml-list.html>

21. <http://www.zfiction.com/l dsf/>

22. <http://www.netzone.com/~pegshumw/>

most cogent statements that have been published on a given issue. However, e-mail discussions often include references to, or reminders of, such seminal works. And from time to time a discussion "thread" will indeed add something significant to larger critical discourse, and has become the basis for more developed print articles. Still, the nature of e-mail today remains informal and underinformed. It need not, since a lot of the primary works, bibliographical references, and criticism about LDS works are archived and growing on-line. Perhaps in the future online critical discussions will become as informed as they are lively. Promoting such critical forums lies at the heart of the Association for Mormon Letters.

In a seminal review of LDS literary history, Eugene England referred to the dawning of a brighter day as he assessed the breadth of new writers and subjects that had come to be since the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> At the turn of the century, we reiterate his theme and his optimism. The numbers of writers, publishers, publications, genres, journals, publishing venues, and media have all increased, multiplying the amount and the significance of LDS literary adventures. The Association for Mormon Letters wishes to provide and encourage the criticism so needed to match this output. Our hope is that each of the works in this issue continues to move us in that direction. We strongly believe, along with Wayne Booth, that Mormons "won't get a great artistic culture until we have a great critical culture."<sup>24</sup> This, we feel, would give Mormon literature its best chance to meet Orson Whitney's prophetic dream of creating Miltons and Shakespeares of our own.<sup>25</sup>

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23. Eugene England, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature After 150 Years," *BYU Studies* 22 (Spring 1982): 131-60.

24. Ross, Joy C., and Steven C. Walker, eds. *Letters to Smoother, etc.: Proceedings of the Fifth Annual BYU Symposium on the Humanities* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, n.d. [1980?]), p. 32.

25. Orson Whitney, "Home Literature," *Contributor* (July, 1888). Rpt. in *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), 206.