

# Toward a "Marriage Group" of Contemporary Mormon Short Stories

B. W. Jorgensen

"The truth is that marriage is difficult to imagine."

—Carolyn Heilbrun<sup>1</sup>

IN A NOW-CANONICAL ARTICLE in 1912, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," George Lyman Kittredge applied the term "marriage group" to a subset among Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: the Wife of Bath (and her polemic and confessional prologue), the Clerk, the Merchant, and the Frank-

---

BRUCE W. JORGENSEN lives in Provo and teaches English at Brigham Young University. He is a lifetime member and past president (1990) of the Association for Mormon Letters, which recently awarded him an honorary lifetime membership. He recently published in *Dialogue* an essay, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife; Corianton and the Harlot Isabel," 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 7-34, and a short story, "Measures of Music," 32, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 133-40. He presented an earlier form of this essay at the Association for Mormon Letters conference, February 24, 2001, Salt Lake City, published under the title, "Imagining Mormon Marriage, Part 2: Toward a 'Marriage Group' of Contemporary Mormon Short Stories," in the *AML Annual 2002* (Provo, Utah: Association for Mormon Letters, 2002), 37-52.

1. Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988; reprinted, New York: Ballantine, 1989), 91. Her remark provoked an intermittent ongoing project that I call "imagining marriage," a branch of which became "imagining Mormon marriage." A twig from that branch is a 1996 essay called "Imagining Mormon Marriage, Part 1: The Mythic, the Novelistic, and Jack Weyland's *Charly*," *Mormon Letters Annual, 1997*, edited by Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Association for Mormon Letters, 1997), 128-37.

lin. Later scholars sometimes enlarged the group or questioned the inclusion of various tales, but it has persisted as an object of critical attention. Obviously, in proposing a "marriage group" of contemporary Mormon short stories, I cannot expect to discover the kind of "conversation" or "debate" that Chaucerians from Kittredge to Kaske and beyond have analyzed.<sup>2</sup> Any list I make will be, like the present list, both tentative and incomplete, as well as subject to augmentation as more stories of Mormon marriage are written and published. And though I can't suppose that these stories are "talking to" one another as Chaucer's marriage tales clearly do, yet still they might be listened to as statements in an ongoing, implicit conversation in Mormon fiction about one of the culture's central concerns.

In the introduction to her book *Love's Knowledge*, the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum proposed

that there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it—views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty—that [can] be fully and adequately stated . . . only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars . . . only in a form that itself implies that life contains significant surprises, that our task, as agents, is to live as good characters in a good story do, caring about what happens, resourcefully confronting each new thing. . . .

And what if it is love one is trying to understand . . . ?"<sup>3</sup>

What, I have echoed, if it is marriage? We would need novels, I have suggested, "to imagine Mormon marriage in ways that could help us endure it and flourish in it"; "long ones, . . . to tell the long stories of marriages."<sup>4</sup>

Here I propose, rather, to take up short stories, and I also want to stress the plural: "Mormon marriages." I feel compelled to nominalism: There is no one ideal or archetype or model of a modern Mormon marriage, even if all or most of them might share certain minimal traits or conditions. We can suppose that they will all be (as "The Family: A Proclama-

2. George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," *Modern Philology* 9, no. 4 (April 1912): 435-67; Robert E. Kaske, "Chaucer's Marriage Group," *Chaucer the Love Poet*, edited by Jerome Mitchell and William Provost (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1973), 45-65.

3. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3-4.

4. Jorgensen, "Imagining Mormon Marriage, Part 1," 136.

tion to the World" describes or prescribes) heterosexual and monogamous; yet we can't suppose that all will be temple marriages (though clearly the Proclamation would prefer that). And however "eternal" they may be in wish, intention, or sanction, the ones we can watch and write about, here and now, will be temporal, however long they last.

What have Mormon short story writers, so far, done with the subject? In some stories, such as Doug Thayer's "Under the Cottonwoods" (and several others in his collection with that title), the marriage looks like background circumstance rather than foreground action: the story takes place *in* the marriage, as within a space the marriage defines, but may not be *about* the marriage and may not materially alter it.<sup>5</sup> This distinction will not be easy to maintain. Even in Thayer's story, the marriage is a circumstance that threatens its own continuance, or at least weakens its own chances of flourishing. In Don Marshall's rather similar "The Wheelbarrow," the marriage itself has clearly created the protagonist's perplexity and near-despair, and is at risk because of them.<sup>6</sup>

It has sometimes bothered me that, in Mormon life as I've watched and tried to live it, once certain major choices have been made—wife, work, worship, if you like alliterative (and gender-biased) triads—there seems to be no story, only routine and habit (and, alas for these latter latter days, the culture of the planner); I've thought of trying an essay titled "Life without Story." But perhaps it is not entirely a bad thing to think of marriage as circumstance rather than story; perhaps it is meant at least partly to be the circumstance within which other (and mercifully short) stories play out. As anyone learns who has children, other protagonists soon take center stage, and man and wife, father and mother, begin to play little more than walk-on roles: cook, launderer, chauffeur, answering service, tutor, good cop and bad.

Perhaps one reason marriage is difficult to imagine is that, once underway, it is indeed, and even should be, rather resistant to story—if by story we mean the nonhabitual or nonroutine, the significantly life-altering event or act that happens only "once," and not the common run of days. Elizabeth Tallent, one of the finest contemporary American writers

---

5. Douglas H. Thayer, "Under the Cottonwoods," in his *Under the Cottonwoods* (Provo, Utah: Frankson, 1977), 155-72.

6. Donald R. Marshall, "The Wheelbarrow," in his *Frost in the Orchard* (1977; 2d ed., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 182-206.

of short stories (and so far one novel) about marriage, used as an epigraph to one of her collections this beautifully ambiguous sentence from the Irish writer Edna O'Brien: "They chopped wood, they lit the stove, they kept busy; there is always something to do in a house."<sup>7</sup> Is that a curse or a blessing?

Marriage for the most part is a prosaic rather than a poetic circumstance—"a sequence of terribly time-bound days," in a memorable phrase from Marden Clark.<sup>8</sup> I have in mind here the literary theory proposed by Gary Saul Morson, strongly derived from the work and thought of Tolstoy and Bakhtin, which Morson calls "Prosaics." He stipulates "two closely related meanings" for his neologism:

It is, first of all, a way of thinking about human events that focuses on the ordinary, messy, quotidian facts of daily life—in short, on the prosaic. As it happens, this form of thinking also offers a reason to take novels with renewed seriousness: of all literary forms, novels are best able to capture the messiness of the world. Thus the second meaning of "prosaics," which is opposed to "poetics," suggests an approach to verbal art that focuses not on epics or lyrics or tragedies, but on the novel and other forms of prose. Prosaic facts have been best represented in prosaic art.<sup>9</sup>

Prosaic prose fiction, whether at novel or short story length, may have the best chance of grasping the prosaic circumstance of marriage. And this fiction will require a finely attuned prosaic reading (which Morson exemplifies, and which I also find in Nussbaum's readings of fiction), a continuously attentive "moral alertness" ("Prosaics," 525) to "tiny alterations" (521, 523) in characters' thoughts, speeches, and actions; a reading alert not to the overt "message" of a story or the "moral" it might be supposed to "illustrate," but to the emotional and moral judgments we readers "practice moment to moment while reading it" (527), "the tiny, tiny alterations in [our] consciousness in process," "the moment-to-moment decisions we make in reading" (528). I have only a beginner's sense of how to do this, and will not attempt it in this survey; my attention to any stories I

---

7. Elizabeth Tallent, *Time with Children* (New York: Knopf, 1987), [ix].

8. Marden J. Clark, *Liberating Form* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992), 138.

9. Gary Saul Morson, "Prosaics: An Approach to the Humanities," *American Scholar* 57 (Autumn 1988): 516.

discuss here will simply be too hurried, too impatient, for serious prosaic reading.

I want some rough heuristic categories or phases to sort the stories on my list—nothing more elegant than echoes of Aristotle. Let “Beginnings” refer to stories set anywhere in marital time from the wedding or honeymoon to a first child’s birth, or, say, a first half-dozen childless years. Let “Middles”—or as I will prefer prosaically to say, “Middlings”—refer broadly and vaguely to any time between the Beginning and the Ending of any marriage even nominally intact; we might at times want to distinguish early Middlings from middle and late Middlings. And let “Endings” refer to any temporal dissolutions, separations (which might not prove an ending), divorces, or deaths. Adultery or estrangement might occur in any of these phases but, like separation, would not necessarily prove an ending. John Fowles has remarked that “adultery is the disproof of a marriage rather than its betrayal,”<sup>10</sup> yet some marriages rebut that refutation and survive it.

Second marriages, as in Robert Christmas’s “Another Angel,” Judith Freeman’s “Family Attractions,” Mary Clyde’s “A Good Paved Road,” and some stories by Margaret Young, would by definition follow an Ending, yet would also pass through their own Beginnings, Middlings, and Endings. And Endings themselves will often entail “Afters”: not always “happily ever afters,” but times into which an ended marriage still intrudes its ghostly presence, welcome or not, as in Margaret Young’s edgy and tender “Hanauma Bay,” in which the wife’s ex-husband visits and sleeps in the basement of her present household: “Later, in my husband’s arms, I could hear Gus downstairs, moving around; could hear the bed creak as he climbed into it; could imagine him in the dark, curled up like a comma, a lonely, angry man. Hiding in places I’d never suspect.”<sup>11</sup> “Like a comma”: a pause in a sentence that is not over yet.

All five of the stories in the “Exes” section of Margaret Young’s second collection, *Love Chains*, seem to me to belong to this odd inevitable (and un-Aristotelian) category, “Afters.” So does Phyllis Barber’s award-winning “Ida’s Sabbath,” in which Ida, after nearly twenty years as

---

10. John Fowles, *The Aristos* (1970; reprinted, New York: New American Library, 1975), 167.

11. Margaret Young, “Hanauma Bay,” in her *Love Chains* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 165.

ward organist, comes to church one Sunday morning without her temple garments because she was washing every pair the night before and was stopped mid-cycle by the same electrical storm that destroyed the steeple of the chapel. Blushing "in places no one could see" and feeling that "something in her was set adrift, something was loose," she still does her duties, distracted by recollections of her marriage and her husband Louis leaving her some years ago, and by a vision (fantasy, if you like) of climbing onto the chapel roof for a colloquy with the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

Given the brevity of short stories, and the historically persistent habit of the genre to subtend only a short arc of time (a scene, an episode, a Sunday morning like Ida's), we might very seldom see a short story try to dilate across the full span of a long or even a short marriage. Metaphoric condensation, extended summary, perhaps in retrospect from somewhere in the middle or from near or after an ending, or a chronological series of snapshots seem the most likely narrative strategies. Phyllis Barber's "Almost Magnificence" uses the first tactic to figure the marital career of a woman who "leaked at the edges" and finally "dwindled down to a few powdery body parts, which her pets mistook for catnip."<sup>13</sup> Barber's "White on White" uses the third strategy,<sup>14</sup> as does Neal Chandler's anxious and perplexed "Roger across the Looking-Glass," which frames its snapshots of the history of Roger's and Ellen's nineteen-year marriage within a single (and, on Roger's part, deliberately controlled) act of sexual intercourse ("roger" in the eighteenth-century sense of the word, as in William Byrd's reiterated diary note, "I rogered my wife").<sup>15</sup> Helen Walker Jones's "Six-Buck Fortune" and my unaccountable twin Wayne's "Two Years Sunday" use retrospection (Wayne's from after the husband's death, Jones's from the middle of the marriage but up against a gypsy fortuneteller's predicted twelve-year limit).<sup>16</sup>

12. Phyllis Barber, "Ida's Sabbath," in her *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1999), 37, 41.

13. Phyllis Barber, "Almost Magnificence," in her *The School of Love* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 15, 16.

14. "White on White," *ibid.*, 39-44.

15. Neal Chandler, "Roger across the Looking-Glass," in his *Benediction: A Book of Stories* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), 47-61.

16. Helen Walker Jones, "The Six-Buck Fortune," in *In Our Lovely Deseret*:

I'll pigeonhole and comment on some instances in each of my broad phases.

### Beginnings

No Mormon writer I can think of comes near the power, the beauty and terror, of D. H. Lawrence's imagining of the beginning of the marriage of Will Brangwen and Anna Lensky in Chapter 6 of *The Rainbow*: "a great steadiness, a core of living eternity" near "the supreme center," but also "continually, the recurrence of love and conflict between them"; "some endless contest," "an unknown battle."<sup>17</sup> Virginia Sorensen gave us an idyllic marital beginning, the sheep-camp honeymoon of Call Kels and Cloie Roe in the penultimate chapter of her tragicomic novel *The Neighbors*.<sup>18</sup> Lawrence's novel set a daunting high mark; and after all, Lawrence, more than simply a writer about sex, is, in English fiction, the great anguished poet of relation, who said in a letter to Edward Garnett in 1913: "After all, it is the problem of today, the establishment of a new relation, or the readjustment of the old one, between men and women."<sup>19</sup>

In this latter day of Mormon literary history, John Bennion's "A House of Order" reaches in Lawrence's direction; and now (for another day, another essay, maybe another critic) we may read the novel for which that story seems a forestudy, *Falling toward Heaven* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2000). In "A House of Order," Howard and Sylvia Rockwood, married three years, have gone three weeks since they "last made love," and Howard thinks it will now "take singular effort"; "if he wasn't careful the cultivated green which was his life would slide away into the desert and dissipate in the dry heat." "If he could just keep his patience and humor. They had sacrificed too many days to tension, too many nights of her lying

---

*Mormon Fictions*, edited by Robert Raleigh (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 37-45; Wayne Jorgensen, "Two Years Sunday," *Wasatch Review International* 1, no. 1 (1992): 25-36. Editor's note: Wayne Jorgensen is a pen name of Bruce W. Jorgensen.

17. D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (London: Methuen, 1915; New York: Penguin, 1995), 135, 155, 156.

18. Virginia Sorensen, *The Neighbors* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947).

19. D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Letters*, edited by Richard Aldington (1978; reprinted, New York: Penguin, 1996), 54.

still on her side of the bed." The almost thirty-page story details their "singular effort," tangled and difficult and painfully funny, and they do make love near its end. But although Howard "strain[ed] toward comprehension of the gifts she lavished on him and which he waited and waited to return to her," it's not quite clear at the end that the distance or barrier between them (which Howard has created by fantasizing about his old girlfriend: adultery of the heart!) is yet crossed.<sup>20</sup> No wonder John Bennion wrote a whole novel to imagine the Beginning of Howard Rockwood's marriage, and it's a novel in the line of succession from Thomas Hardy through D. H. Lawrence.

"I'm not yet twenty-one. Patty's just turned twenty," says the narrator of Darrell Spencer's "The 12-Inch Dog." "Isn't there a grace period? Aren't we underage? Don't we get a couple of years during which the good times roll?" Maybe not. Maybe. At the end of the story this couple, six months married, sit on their redwood deck in the sunset, and he asks her, "We doing all right?" and she answers, "Only time will tell" (89). "Quoting who?" he tacitly wonders. "Her mother? Her grandmother? That Victorian lady who's taken up housekeeping in one corner of her mind?" She tells him aloud, "No more peace at any price."<sup>21</sup> This doesn't look like a grace period. It looks like difficulty. And they look like they mean to go through it. The edgy movements and sometimes edgier endings of Spencer's stories leave you wondering if his characters will make it, knowing they don't quit easily.

One of my favorite stories of marital beginning by a Mormon writer is Myrna Marler's "Leaving the Farm," which wryly and comically rewrites the Beginning of Beginnings, Genesis itself. Teenagers Bud and Eve elope, and Bud's wealthy father threatens to annul the marriage unless they live on his summer estate, "a small banana and papaya farm in the back woods of Punaluu," and have "no babies" until they can support them. On the farm, they'll have "nothing much more to worry about than coming in out of the rain." But you guessed it: Eve, abetted by Bud's renegade older brother Stan, develops a bad case of baby fever, and Bud and Eve do have to leave the farm, with "no real idea at all what they'd gotten

---

20. John Bennion, "A House of Order," in his *Breeding Leah and Other Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 69, 75, 96.

21. Darrell Spencer, "The 12-Inch Dog," in his *Caution: Men in Trees* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 80, 89.



themselves into."<sup>22</sup> The story says what all stories of Beginnings say: beginnings middle and end; you won't stay long in Paradise. Or as a better maker put it, "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, / And summer's lease hath all too short a date."<sup>23</sup> In John Milton's rewriting of Genesis, *Paradise Lost*, when Satan first sees the primal couple, he apostrophizes:

Ah! Gentle pair, ye little think how nigh  
 Your change approaches, when all these delights  
 Will vanish, and deliver ye to woe,  
 More woe, the more your taste is now of joy. (Book 4, ll. 366-69)

And as he turns away he says, "enjoy, till I return, / Short pleasures, for long woes are to succeed!" (Book 4, ll. 534-35). Even discounting repitilian envy, he's telling more than a little truth, as Milton well knew.

Zina Petersen's pair of young Provo escapees in "Now Let's Dance" are nominally in a Beginning, married at nineteen and twenty-two, now three years and counting; yet the wife-protagonist Liza has begun to "feel like . . . someone in the background of a grocery store commercial. I consume. All I do is buy things and find a use for them and use them up and buy some more. And if I weren't there it would not distract from the message any." Liza is just doing some of what there is to do in a house, keeping busy (chopping wood, lighting the fire); but "she wanted to say" to her counselor, "My marriage is fine, sort of. It hurts, but so does being alone."<sup>24</sup>

We don't get far into these stories, or far into the marriages they imagine, before the cries or sighs of distress start suspiring. Denis de Rougemont wrote that "Happy love has no history."<sup>25</sup> But stories are about trouble, and some of the trouble Mormon short story writers have to tell us about comes in marriage, and comes early. At the end of her

22. Myrna Marler, "Leaving the Farm," *Wasatch Review*, 3, no. 1 (1994): 35, 37, 53.

23. William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 18," ll. 3-4.

24. Zina Petersen, "Now Let's Dance," in *Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life*, edited by Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 239, 246.

25. Denis De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (1956; reprinted, New York: Harper, 1974), 15.

story, Liza, "hearing pain and music," is laughing in bed with her husband Jay: "they laughed together, in their ancient embrace . . . they laughed at all of it, through it, because of it, with it" (248)—yet this can be only a temporary, temporal respite, no full resolution. The story of marriage, Rilke wrote, is of "two people who were making life difficult for each other."<sup>26</sup>

Joanna Brooks's second-marriage young couple in "Badlands" seem still beginning but edging into middling, as their marriage has "got dark and sinewed, like plums past season," and they've learned "There's nothing nice about love in these parts. It's farther than nice and more dangerous." They're at an edge of temporary separation too, and the wife narrator is sure "that he'll never come back completely, that we'll be sitting at the breakfast table reading the paper with toast and the morning radio and part of him will be far, far away. And that far away part I can't have is what I'll fall in love with, desperate and desperate." To her, and maybe to us too, "What's shocking is this next thought: I'm not horrified."<sup>27</sup>

"Who ever desires what is not gone?" asks Anne Carson, and answers, "No one. The Greeks were clear on this. They invented eros to express it."<sup>28</sup> Erotic desire—or call it romantic love if you wish—rather normally impels toward marriage in our culture. Yet de Rougemont long ago warned of a deep antithesis between romantic eros and Christian marriage: "Passion and marriage are essentially irreconcilable"; "Romance calls for 'the faraway love' of the troubadours; marriage, for love of 'one's neighbour.'"<sup>29</sup> Brooks's narrator exposes this deep problem in contemporary marriage: its Beginning naturally entails not only its Middling (as in Aristotle's definition) but also its instability.

### Middlings

Obviously, marital Beginnings can modulate swiftly into Early Middlings, and sometimes rather directly toward Endings. Most stories

26. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (1983; reprinted, New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 21.

27. Joanna Brooks, "Badlands," in *In Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions*, edited by Robert Raleigh (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 179, 183, 185.

28. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986; reprinted, Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive, 1998), 11.

29. De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, 277, 292.

on my list fall into the Middling phase; and not surprisingly, since the middle is where (and middling is how) most of us live most of our lives, neither beginning nor yet quite ending. We live, in the archaic phrase Frank Kermode used, "in the midst."<sup>30</sup> Among Mormon writers of marriage stories, Darrell Spencer, along with Margaret Young, looks most prolific to me and looks like our most abundant writer of Middlings. His characters, like the narrator in "As Long as Lust Is Short" (actually a Beginning story, a marriage of one year), might always be asking one another Hank Williams's "cowboy questions about why and how"—"Why don't you love me like you used to do? How come you treat me like a worn-out shoe?"—and they might also, like this narrator, "talk hard and sad about love and tears."<sup>31</sup> You might think Spencer's stories shouldn't all count, since only a few are manifestly about characters who are or might be or have been Mormon. But the medieval Catholic Chaucer wrote about ostensibly pagan characters; so I wouldn't be too quick to excuse Spencer's stories from the conversation.

The news from stories of Middlings is much like the news from Beginnings, pretty sobering, though perhaps one hopeful sign is that there are still marriages to write about. The British critic Tony Tanner once quoted Roland Barthes: "If we managed to suppress the Oedipus complex and marriage, what would be left for us to tell?"<sup>32</sup> Every culture will always have something to tell about marriage; in Mormon culture, I've begun to suspect it may vie with missions as one of our top topics, something about which nearly everybody, participant or spectator, could a tale unfold. (In *Falling toward Heaven*, John Bennion takes up both.) It might also be true that, as with missions, the guardians of the culture might rather we not unfold much; in the post-Proclamation era, this preference might prove increasingly true: Mormon marriages as too sacred to tell stories about. Still, though we have a Church Missionary Committee, we don't yet have a Church Marriage Committee. (Stay tuned.)

---

30. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967; reprinted, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17, 58, 64.

31. Darrell Spencer, "As Long as Lust Is Short," in his *Our Secret's Out: Stories* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 126.

32. Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 277.

In Michael Fillerup's "The Bowhunter," the marriage is background for the hunter's story, but also one large reason why the hunter hunts:

Every trip now he drove further and further from home and hiked deeper and deeper into unfamiliar territory, as if intentionally trying to lose himself inside the forest labyrinth. At nightfall when he should have been heading home, he would continue his aimless wandering as the full moon stalked him from tree to tree. . . . Sometimes he would . . . imagine himself falling asleep and waking up like Rip Van Winkle, with a beard to his knees. The thought always enticed him, but, ultimately, he would hike back to his truck by moonlight and drive on home, stumbling into bed at 3:00 or 4:00 A.M. Carmen? She was out. Zonked. Slipping in beside her, he always wondered if he hadn't made a mistake.<sup>33</sup>

We may wonder which mistake, out of several possible? Later in the story, waiting out a hailstorm, Jack wonders: "What had happened to Carmen? To him—*them*? Had they become dumb statistics, victims of the life-cycle: boy meets girl, they fall in love, get married, have children: they grow old, they die" (76). And he muses:

A universal lament among men. Maybe the Italians had the right idea—or polygamy. Then again . . . one wife was plenty. If they only realized their holding power, what just an occasional surprise, to wake up in the middle of the night to her hand stroking you. Yes. No. Go. It wasn't just the raw thrill of it either, but her, your wife, with you and no one else. A stroke of righteous wickedness once in a while. If they only realized. But maybe it was better they remained stale. On ice. Easier to get out the door. (77)

Before the inconclusive end of the story, Jack has curled up on the ground in fetal position (another comma, a suspended sentence) and prayed "Dear God, Father," and lost and found himself in a momentarily paradisaical aspen grove and felt "light as air" and then seen two bull elk, one "slightly larger than the other, like a mature father and son" (79) (an echo of Joseph Smith's Sacred Grove experience); but at the end he is listening to "the sound of twilight, of the wind . . . the sound of the rock he had tossed over the great canyon's rim whistling all the way down to the bowels of the earth. A bird, a falcon falling" (80).

Living in the midst, trying to write stories of middling marriage (of "midlife crisis," if you like), how shall we end our stories? (Will visions help?) How shall we go on to tell them out? The final image here looks

---

33. Michael Fillerup, "The Bowhunter," in his *Visions and Other Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 64.

oddly like that at the end of Thayer's "Under the Cottonwoods": enacted or only anticipated, a gesture of letting something go; or, more clearly here, an image of entropic decline, a fall strictly subject to inexorable natural law. It feels as if Jack will go home again, and this time maybe before midnight; and maybe if he does he will not find Carmen has already "slipped off to bed to play possum" (78). But who could tell?

Divine intervention may have helped this story's protagonist to go on in what the narrator of another Fillerup story calls "a game of inches."<sup>34</sup> Divine or angelic or Three-Nephtie intervention appears to resolve Margaret Young's "Zoo Sounds" too: a "vagrant . . . preaching near the seals" who conveys guilty and angry runaway Martha back to her husband Ross, and at the end "makes a simple, graceful gesture with his arms, . . . upward and out," and "there's a sound like wind. Or wings."<sup>35</sup> Are the vibrations or (Lawrence's word) "tremulations" starting to come through? Are we hearing the still sad music of humanity, the faint pedal-steel wail of slow-dance heartbreak, the gasped prayers for deliverance from the body of this death, from devouring time?

But after all, this is nothing new in the literature of marriage. In chapter 20 of *Middlemarch* (1874), one of the great English novels on the subject, George Eliot interrupts her account of Dorothea Brooke's very early marital misery in Rome:

Not that this inward amazement of Dorothea's was anything very exceptional: many souls in their young nudity are tumbled out among incongruities and left to "find their feet" among them, while their elders go about their business. Nor can I suppose that when Mrs Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we

---

34. Michael Fillerup, "A Game of Inches," in *ibid.*, 101-16.

35. Margaret Young, "Zoo Sounds," in *Love Chains*, 3, 20.

should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.<sup>36</sup>

Mormon writers of marriage stories, beginning, middling, or ending, are trying to hear the roar on the other side of our pervasive cultural silence about what the Wife of Bath called the “wo that is in mariage,”<sup>37</sup> and the rumors they bring back will not likely thicken the cultural wadding of our encouraging rhetoric about “celestial marriage” and “eternal families.”

Every celestial marriage works out its eternity in fear and trembling here on earth, in the teeth of time. In an AML meeting more than two decades ago, Marden Clark invited us to

consider the potential for tragedy that is built into the Mormon vision of eternal marriage and eternal family, surely one of the most sublime parts of the total vision of our destiny. Most of us catch at least part of the vision, respond to the marvelous promise, and willingly accept the responsibility. But having done so, having made those covenants in the joy and flow of young love, we find ourselves in our time-bound bodies and time-bound wills having to work out that eternal destiny in a sequence of terribly time-bound days, in the routine of home and work and child bearing and child raising with their joys, to be sure, but also with their frustrations and disappointments and sorrows and sometimes downright tragedies.<sup>38</sup>

Clark went on to regret that “as a people we have implicitly denied the tragic implications of what I have been outlining, largely because we have kept our eyes so firmly fixed on the ultimate resolution in Heaven that we have denied the earthly paradox,” and to suggest that the “heavenly resolution makes of our earthly suffering and tragedy divine comedy, to be sure. But much of it cannot be easy comedy” (139).

“Uneasy comedy” makes a good rubric for many of the stories I’ve surveyed about marital Middlings. What I like about the word “middling” is its sense of the “not unusual,” the “average” or “ordinary,” its noise of a ball bouncing faster but ever lower, its rhymes with “fiddling,” “diddling,” “twiddling,” “piddling,” and “riddling,” its cousinlike semblance to “earthling” (children of this world, who marry and are given in marriage), its near-pun with “muddling,” its hint of a ghostly revenant verb, “to mid-

---

36. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, edited by Bert G. Hornback (1874; reprinted, New York: Norton, 1977), 135.

37. Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 1, 3.

38. Clark, *Liberating Form*, 138.

dle.”<sup>39</sup> Lovely word. (My dad used it, as in “fair-to-middlin,” his answer to “How you doin’?”) True word. We’re middling through, here in the midst. So it’s not surprising if stories of middling Mormon marriage are often uneasy comedies, like Darrell Spencer’s “There’s Too Much News” (a temporary separation) or his earlier “Planet of Surprise” and “Nothing Sad, Once You Look at It,” which might be an Ending to a five-year second marriage (unless these two are just living together), since the narrator’s wife Francie “was flying the coop because Francie was flying the coop. Nothing could stop her”; “her leaving grew into a God-given stubborn fact.” She has told him, “I’ve got to go, for good,’ as if that could mean something between two human beings, something other than a fist crammed down your throat, a fist squeezing the shit out of your heart while it beats.” “I’m a forty-five-year-old roofer,” the narrator tells us at the end, “and I sat there amazed. What did you expect?”<sup>40</sup> For all the headspin and heartbruise in Spencer’s stories, I think he is one of our least desperate writers; uneasy, yes, but resiliently comic.

The unease of Middlings may become acute, dangerous, even horrific, as in Brian Evenson’s “Bodies of Light,” in which a young husband wakes to find his infant dead in its bassinet, cleans it of the vomit which has apparently suffocated it, and does not tell his wife before he leaves the house, tragically denying and evading the monstrous bad luck of the infant’s death.<sup>41</sup> The unease might be milder, temporary, and funny, as in John Bennion’s “Breeding Leah,” with its last line like the ending of a sitcom, when the husband whose hog-farming project has failed conceals “pamphlets on beef cattle” under his side of the bed.<sup>42</sup> In Pauline Mortensen’s brief monologue “Woman Talking to a Cow,” the unease feels keener, or jaggeder, than in Bennion’s story, though its occasion is similar—a husband’s failed scheme to make money raising Karakul sheep:

39. My *American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed., does give two transitive verb senses for “middle,” and three noun senses for “middlings,” none directly related to my uses in this essay.

40. Darrell Spencer, “Nothing Sad, Once You Look at It,” in *Our Secret’s Out*, 51, 52, 55, 68.

41. Brian Evenson, “Bodies of Light,” in his *Altmann’s Tongue* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 135–39.

42. John Bennion, “Breeding Leah,” in his *Breeding Leah and Other Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 26.

So we got those six sheep over there eating us out of house and home, and we got a fistful of black curly hides drying hard in the barn, and we got two kids in the house breaking everything I got and waiting to be fed, and we haven't got enough of those black curly hides to make one coat.

And he goes off like that to crack one more deal.<sup>43</sup>

The unease may be mostly implicit, covered over with tenderness, as in my twin Wayne's "A Song for One Still Voice," in which a husband lets his wife sleep despite his desire for her and reflects that "There is no loneliness like the body, nor any delight." His lit-up moment of solitary grace at the story's very end, like Fillerup's bowhunter's vision, might help him go on, though it also seems to cover or try to compensate for something he misses in his marriage.<sup>44</sup>

The "universal lament among men" may not be universal (a word I habitually mistrust) and it is not heard solely "among men." (In Mormondom, consistent with our general silence, I don't think it's much heard *among* men, mostly just within them.) It's sometimes a woman's lament too, as in Linda Sillitoe's "Susanna in the Meadow." The story is about a good deal more than sexual deferment—for one thing, a woman's sense that her husband presumes the privilege of naming her; for another, a separation of the spaces in which men and women can share spiritual company (her husband Finn has high council meetings, and Susanna has her women's "dream group").<sup>45</sup> This night, while Finn is gone to a disciplinary council, Susanna takes a perfumed bubble bath by candlelight to "summon up Lila"—a sensual, inner self—"to bring her closer to Finn":

Oh, she had denied Lila's existence for a long time, even as a teenager, certainly as a bride, then as a young mother. She could remember lying in bed one Sunday night wondering if a pregnant Primary president could or should ever be sexy. Most of the women in her dream group had trouble admitting they had a Lila in them somewhere, but, Susanna confessed, she

---

43. Pauline Mortensen, "Woman Talking to a Cow," in her *Back before the World Turned Nasty* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989), 161.

44. Wayne Jorgensen, "A Song for One Still Voice," in *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon Short Stories*, edited by Levi S. Peterson (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1983), 5. Susan H. Miller, "'A Song for One Still Voice': Hymn of Affirmation," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 80–85, noted this "one disquieting feature of the story" (84).

45. Linda Sillitoe, "Susanna in the Meadow," in her *Windows on the Sea* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 80.



had been rather eager to discover her. Someone, after all, let that top button slip open and her skirt creep above her knee. When Susanna noticed, she hurriedly adjusted her clothing, her eyes as innocent as dawn. (83)

By the time Finn comes home, late, tired after “excommunicat[ing] two people, disfellowshipp[ing] one. Adultery, homosexuality, and heresy” (85), and talking in his car with another high councilor, Susanna has fallen asleep, and when wakened she can’t “recover her mood,” “her body lay stiff as a fork in a satin case” (85). A dream has shown her the ground cracking between her and Finn, and “remorsefully, she gave Lila the night off” (86–87).

Is the lurking narrative question, the “subtext” underneath a lot of these Middling stories, none other than “When do we make love?” It’s not a bad question. Not frivolous at all. The “act of love” (as we’ve learned euphemistically to call it) is the body of marriage, the “one flesh” a man and wife may graciously make; the only “one flesh” they might sustain eternally. (Unless you think it’s logically possible for each and every “eternal family” to inhabit its own celestial mansion just like a late twentieth-century American nuclear family in its suburban split-level. Which “eternal family unit” do you and your spouse figure to live with, and which does each of your kids?) We might take our euphemism “make love” seriously and suppose that “making love” or even “making the beast with two backs” (or whatever you call it, since no name really comprehends it; we just talk as if we knew what we were talking about) really does make something; and that what this act, this deed of two, makes really is something: a “symbol” and a “sacrament,” as Jeffrey R. Holland said,<sup>46</sup> yes (and “sacrament” means something made holy); but still more than those. Call it Love. Call it Marriage. Suppose that making it might help it persist, endure. This seems to happen between Tom and Lydia Brangwen at the end of Chapter 3 in Lawrence’s *The Rainbow*: “At last they had thrown open the doors, each to the other, and had stood in the doorways facing each other, whilst the light flooded out from behind on to each of their faces, it was the transfiguration, the glorification, the admission”; “When at last they had joined hands, the house was finished, and the Lord took up His

---

46. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments* (pamphlet) (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001).

abode. And they were glad."<sup>47</sup> There could be some hope in that. So, no wonder if a marital embrace seems (alas for the pun) a fit climax for a story; or, as in Wayne's "Who Jane, Who Tarzan," the terminus and telos the story aims at, but which we must suppose it reaches (as in old-fashioned romantic movies) somewhere past the closing lines, offstage, off-camera.<sup>48</sup>

We might be of several minds about whether it is fit to present marital sex in fiction. I think it is, and I'd rather see more than less—if for nothing else, to balance the overabundant nonmarital varieties. My twin Wayne has tried to do this obliquely in his recent "Measures of Music," a decidedly Middling story (if it is a story and not just a middle, an evocation of incipience or inchoateness, in which nothing either quite begins or ends).<sup>49</sup> But still, one cannot deny the wisdom of both Chaucer's Franklin and the American philosopher Stanley Cavell. "Who coude telle but he had wedded be," the Franklin asks near the start of his marriage tale, "The joye, the ese, and the prosperitee / That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wyf?"<sup>50</sup> Near its end, when Dorigen and Arveragus have happily rejoined, he says, "it were impossible" for him "to wryte" (1549), and thus "Of thise two folk ye gete of me namore" (1556). And Cavell with less charming music takes the marriage bed "to stand for everything in marriage that is invisible to outsiders, which is essentially everything, or everything essential."<sup>51</sup>

The dazzling philosopher-critic and fiction writer William H. Gass alludes to "that dangerous feeling" we have in reading fiction, "that through that thin partition [the page] we can hear a world at love."<sup>52</sup> But we do indulge that feeling—because ours is *not* a world at love? Reading fiction *does* feel a bit like eavesdropping, or like window-peeping, though I

47. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, 90–91.

48. Wayne Jorgensen, "Who Jane, Who Tarzan," *High Plains Literary Review* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 6–30.

49. Wayne Jorgensen, "Measures of Music," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 133–40.

50. Chaucer, "The Franklin's Tale," *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ll. 803–5.

51. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 195.

52. William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1971; reprinted, Boston: Godine, 1979), 54.

prefer to liken it to the kindly knowledge of the angels. Shannon in Linda Sillitoe's (likely Ending) story "Coyote Tracks," like perhaps a lot of us, "couldn't help herself" looking through lit windows of houses driven by at night: "She'd never seen anything obscene or unusual, just a head bent over a desk, graceful arms reaching into high cabinets, children whirling to silent music, old people criss-crossing a golden dining room. It did her good, that lamplit domesticity."<sup>53</sup> Our hunch that it does us good might be one reason we read fiction: "people in their lighted windows, so peaceful as they went through the tired motions of living" (45).

Perhaps it does us some good even when the world we listen in on is not at love, as in Wayne Carver's searing story of a Middling marriage in its tenth year, "Benvenuto ad Anzio." An American academic couple staying in Rome on foundation grants drive to what was *not* the site of the husband's wartime experiences: On January 22, 1944, he "was flat on my rosy red rump on my bunk at Fort Benning" when more than sixty thousand men left their "face-prints in the sands of time" on that beachhead.<sup>54</sup> This pair's scorched quarrel, I've long thought, is literarily fit to stand beside Katherine Anne Porter's "Rope"<sup>55</sup> as a story of a man and woman at war. It's not clear if these two will survive their Roman holiday. The wife has told "assorted drunks" at the shipboard bar, "We're not going to Italy to *visit* the ruins. We're going to Italy to *reconstruct* one!" (49). But at the end the husband reflects that "they were separated by all the years that nothing—absolutely nothing—he knew it now—could ever span" (58).

For a slightly kinder, gentler case, put Lewis Horne's "What Do Ducks Do in Winter?" alongside Carver's story: this Later-Middling academic couple go to a conference dinner where the husband does his old standup comic routine, and she slips and falls on the icy sidewalk as they leave and gets furious when he tries to help her up. They come to words and then to blows, and end in an ambiguous, unnameable gesture: "His knuckles touched her temple at the hairline. He moved them back and

---

53. Linda Sillitoe, "Coyote Tracks," in her *Windows on the Sea* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 45.

54. Wayne Carver, "Benvenuto ad Anzio," *Carleton Miscellany* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1963): 56.

55. Katherine Anne Porter, "Rope," *The Collected Stories* (1965; New York: Plume, 1970), 42–48.

forth briefly, not in a caress—the bone was too hard, the skull too prominent—but as a reflex of a purer and older act.”<sup>56</sup> Uneasy comedy again.

Another joker husband—“Why had she married him? Why hadn’t he told her she was in for this kind of humiliation?”—makes for uneasy comedy, too, in Linda Sillitoe’s “The Spiral Stair,” though at the end of that story it looks as if Gina might begin to be won over by Ken’s antics that likely have cost him a chance of being “asked to serve in a bishopric.” She’s probably right that Ken “would happily teach the Blazers forever,” and she may be discovering at the end how lucky she is in that.<sup>57</sup>

Janet, wife of a punster husband named Everard Cormier, in Dennis Clark’s “Answer to Prayer” is so tired of middling and mothering that she warns him she’s about to turn into “a witty jello salad”; and she’s understandably put off by his jokey “feeling of [her] from behind” at the kitchen sink. He’s desperately seeking divine help and guidance in overcoming occasional masturbation and deflecting his erotic attention from a co-worker named Janis who wears a black jumpsuit. One sort of answer to his candid prayer precedes it in his punning scramble of “men’s magazines whose names formed a litany of reproach in his mind: “*Playhouse, OuiPent, Boy.*” Another sort arrives when his co-worker starts to make friends with him; beginning to know her, he forgets to notice what she wears, can’t just abstract her into his fantasies.<sup>58</sup> That, we might say, was God’s move; the next move is Everard’s. The ending is open, uneasy, guardedly and ironically hopeful.

Michael Fillerup’s “Family Plantation Day” might be an explosive Ending for one of its Middling couples, Floyd and Charlene Fairbanks, “the couple with the proverbial everything” except children, in an Arizona Mormon ward where everybody else seems pregnant and prolific and “the final verdict was family.” “We’re not, after all, talking hard-core tragedy.” But at the ward’s “family plantation day,” Floyd cracks and drives “a rented John Deere tractor across the ward garden, through the picket fence, across Brother Guillermo’s weed field, through another fence,

56. Lewis Horne, “What Do Ducks Do in Winter?” in his *What Do Ducks Do in Winter? and Other Western Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 89.

57. Linda Sillitoe, “The Spiral Stair,” in her *Windows on the Sea*, 108, 104, 94.

58. Dennis Clark, “Answer to Prayer,” in *Greening Wheat*, 163, 152.

across the dirt highway, and into the irrigation canal." For its more fortunate narrator, "a partaker of the fulness" with his wife Jenene and four kids, it looks as if Middling marriage will go on more or less as usual after that startling afternoon. They've agreed they've reached their limit of kids but can't agree yet on whose surgery will set that limit once and for all. Their story ends that night in unprotected sex on the bathroom floor before Jenene can find her diaphragm.<sup>59</sup> When do we make love? And how and why?

### Endings

In this world, Mormon marriages are supposed to middle till death temporally suspends them. "Eternal marriage"—however it carries on in the world beyond—by definition would be all Middling, no Ending. That story will be difficult indeed to imagine or tell, and the better part of this-worldly narrative and marital wisdom might be to try to imagine temporal marriages that do middle until death. Still, Beginnings and Middlings do sometimes come (sadly but sometimes gladly) to other Endings—to "finalities / Besides the grave,"<sup>60</sup> in Robert Frost's line. And some of our writers have imagined those.

The early Middling marriage in Margaret Young's "Grandpa's Growth" is tearing apart from the husband's cruelty. The wife's second pregnancy (she miscarried the first and tried to leave him then) parallels the growth of his grandfather's stomach cancer. At the end, after Grandpa has died, "the future kicked at Linda's womb. Wanting, wanting, wanting out."<sup>61</sup> In "Grandma's Dying" a similar marriage has ended, and the ex-wife tends her ex-husband's dying grandmother: "I get her one of my nightgowns. One I kept in this room for nights when I wanted to sleep alone. She puts her arms out to accommodate the sleeves. And when her face is covered and my gown half on her, I shudder deep and beg God to

---

59. Michael Fillerup, "Family Plantation Day," in his *Visions and Other Stories*, 3, 8, 4, 6.

60. Robert Frost, "The Impulse," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 128-29.

61. Margaret Young, "Grandpa's Growth," in her *Elegies and Love Songs* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1992), 44.

finish his work. I tell him I will not last the night. Some things, I say, are too hard to be borne.”<sup>62</sup>

Early Middling comes to early Ending in Judith Freeman’s “Going Out to Sea,” in which a very young Utah Mormon couple’s marriage fails in the Midwest under the pressures of graduate school, a heart-damaged child, and the husband’s infidelity. Driving to Minnesota, Marva feels as if she’s “headed for the most unfamiliar place on earth”; and once there, she discovers that “so many things were uncontrollable, even when you thought you had control,” and at the end that “the shoddy, provisional fragility of chance brought her here, kept her here, made all things possible, resulted in the terrible as well as the good.”<sup>63</sup> Another of Freeman’s stories, “Clearfield,” imagines the After to this Ending.<sup>64</sup>

In Darrell Spencer’s “I Am Buzz Gaulter, Left-Hander,” Buzz has, for some reason, kicked his wife Lois out of the family home they “stole” from her brother for \$60,000, and “ripped [their] king-size bed in two from baseboard to headboard” with a McCulloch 510 chainsaw and burned her side of it. West of Orem, Utah Lake rises and encroaches. (This is floodtime, 1983.) Elsewhere on the Wasatch Front, “polygamists were shooting each other in the head”; and “obeying a revelation from God, two crazies slit the throats of a twenty-four-year-old mother and her one-year-old daughter.” This might be an Ending; Buzz feels it might be The End: “Leland Freeborn the Parowan prophet” has warned, “Say your goodbyes,” and behind Buzz “the Wasatch Fault grins.”<sup>65</sup>

It looks as if an Ending might have come—albeit a less apocalyptic one—in Linda Sillitoe’s “Coyote Tracks,” too. Married in the temple at twenty to twenty-year-old Don but not going back to the temple after that, and having suffered with Don the crib death of their first child, a son, then “fighting” and “silence between them,” Shannon has left him after

---

62. Margaret Young, “Grandma’s Dying,” *ibid.*, 134.

63. Judith Freeman, “Going Out to Sea,” in her *Family Attractions* (New York: Viking Press, 1988), 181, 188, 202

64. Judith Freeman, “Clearfield,” in her *Family Attractions*, 203–27.

65. Darrell Spencer, “I Am Buzz Gaulter, Left-Hander,” in his *A Woman Packing a Pistol* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Dragon Gate, 1987), 66, 69, 63, 74.

discovering his affair with a young clerk in his law office.<sup>66</sup> She has renewed her teaching certificate and relocated from Salt Lake City to the Navajo reservation with her small daughter Marci. Yet when Don calls her, his voice, “as familiar as a warm hand on her skin, . . . lock[s] the tension into her bones” (39), and she admits to a friend in Monument Valley, “Maybe I’m more married than I think” (51). She’s separated, an “amputation” that leaves her “maimed” (40), and expects soon to make her divorce final, though Don has now broken up with his girlfriend Heidi and wants Marci to stay with him through the winter holidays.

Yet when Shannon’s friendship with her colleague and neighbor Stan Yazzie, the Navajo football coach and “son and grandson of Navajo medicine men” (41), becomes sexual, she finds “herself thinking more kindly of Don” and “thinking more seriously about home” (57). Stan’s friendship, including his sexual tenderness, begins to heal her grief and anger, even her guilt, to the point that she can “imagin[e] Don and Heidi together . . . and for the first time [feel] no pain. If Don had found solace even temporarily—a possibility that had struck her as terribly unfair at the time—she could almost be happy someone had given him what she could not. Not then” (63). At this story’s somewhat uneasy open end, the trickster coyote is still at large, yet *hozros* (Navajo harmony and wholeness) might be reconfiguring, as Shannon “turn[s] north up the highway” toward Salt Lake City for the holidays, “watching for livestock and creatures, confident that they could all share the unfenced road” (64).

### Middling Till Death

E. M. Forster once “put forward,” as he remarked to Angus Wilson, “the golden wedding as one of the great achievements of civilisation.”<sup>67</sup> “Long marriages,” writes Louise Erdrich, “are beyond anyone’s explanation, perhaps most especially those who live within the

---

66. Linda Sillitoe, “Coyote Tracks,” in her *Windows on the Sea*, 38.

67. J. H. Stape, ed., *E. M. Forster: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 34. Wilson reports that this “was said lightly but with marked seriousness.” Forster referred to his then forthcoming brief (and wry) essay, “De Senectute,” in *London Magazine* 4, no. 11 (November 1957): 15–18, which was reprinted as “One Cheer for Old Age” in the American magazine

bonds.”<sup>68</sup> What are the great or even good stories in the English language—or for that matter, any language—about long marriages?—if it is not indeed the case that long happy marital love has no history and is simply too difficult to imagine. We need a good syllabus here; maybe it starts with Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and might include Wendell Berry’s *The Memory of Old Jack*, Wallace Stegner’s *The Spectator Bird* and *Crossing to Safety*, Reynolds Price’s *Good Hearts*, and (thanks be to Oprah) Robert Morgan’s *Gap Creek*. Few Mormon writers that I know of have written stories, long or short, about long marriages, or stories focused on Late Middling. But I can mention three.

In Darrell Spencer’s “Park Host,” Red and Rose Cogsby have been park hosts at Canyon Glen in Provo Canyon every summer for twenty-three years, and “they get into these one-on-ones where they lock horns”; “these give-and-takes, push-and-shoves.”<sup>69</sup> “Red and Rose, their talk’s turned basic. You up. I’m up. Good. Do this. Do that. Curt and fundamental, that’s Red and Rose Cogsby. Red misses their pillow talk, their comparing of notes,” but also “he’s a man who relishes the bones they pick” (3). This summer, right after the 5th of July, a man broken by Alzheimer’s asks Red to shoot him and “Red won’t take the gun” (19) though the man’s “sadness cuts up Red” (20). Later he and Rose read the man’s obituary and Red “puts in a few phone calls” to find out how he died: “Accidental, he is told. While Earl was cleaning his guns” (22). “The day of the funeral, the O. J. Simpson trial is in recess, and Red talks Rose into driving up to Bountiful with him” (22) for the graveside service, full military honors.

After the service, Red starts telling lies to family members about military service with Earl, and Rose, disgusted, heads for a cemetery exit: “It’s an eighty-mile walk if that’s her plan” (24). Red thinks: “He could have shot Earl Tall. He could have done that favor for his friend”; and he

---

*Harper’s Bazaar*, April 1957, 186–87, 212. In the essay, Forster says that “any civilization that hinders it [the “golden wedding” class] from coming into being has failed” and that this class is “the highest manifestation” of “the true history of the human race [as] the history of affection” (18).

68. Louise Erdrich, introduction to Robert Stone’s short story “Helping” in *You’ve Got to Read This*, edited by Ron Hansen and Jim Shepard (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 490.

69. Darrell Spencer, “Park Host,” in his *Caution: Men in Trees*, 1.



thinks, "Maybe he'll get in the truck and just drive. Let Rose walk. Get a lift. Do whatever she can. . . . But he won't." He sees himself overtaking her and "talking a mile a minute, . . . lay[ing] down a ladder of logic, rung after rung," on which "Rung two" is "love never dies." "She'll trudge on, and Red'll beg. Red'll court her" (25). Yet in the story's last moment, Red is thinking (and the narrator is guessing), "Maybe, when [he] locates the truck, he'll head east. Or west. . . . America was built on the concept that this is a big country. . . . There are places where no one knows Red and he can stop . . . and tell any story he wants. He can tell the one about how Red Cogsby shot a man as a favor simply because the man asked him to" (25). It comes down to this: Red could try another life. Will he? Won't he? Willy Wonty? Reader, choose: any story you want.

Wayne Carver's cluster of Plain City stories all deal with one family in northern Utah, one long-married couple, Josiah and Louisa, though "With Voice of Joy and Praise" takes place in the Salmon River country of Idaho. Here, sixtyish Jos and Lou take a sidetrip from an Idaho Falls Temple excursion into memory, nature, and myth. To Jos, "it just sort of seems like something in me today wants to reach out to this country here."<sup>70</sup> But to Lou, "a temple excursion's one thing and it's our duty to do the work for the dead, but tramping through all God's green earth is another. And following some fool river called the River of No Return appears somewhat out of the way" (33). The story assesses the cost their conventional lives have exacted in terms of youthful passion, adventurousness, and hope but also reveals the tired, kindly, habitual devotion with which they bear that cost. As they prepare for bed in a motel room in Salmon, Josiah hears "Louisa's voice behind him, 'Jos? oh Jos'" (33), and we recognize how this raises in his mind the echo (or persistent dream) of her young voice "stricken and crying with desire" (23). But here and now she just tells him, "Jos, I just don't know when I been so wore out," and he answers, "Well, Lou . . . I guess we better get to bed. If we don't want to fall asleep on the road tomorrow and kill ourselves." Then "he stood up, reached down for the road map, and began to fold it up as he walked over to flip off the light so they could undress in the dark" (33).

Wallace and Zelva Rucklestead, in Levi Peterson's "A Wayne County Romance," "had unwittingly, in the front seat of a car" in 1946, "forged a

---

70. Wayne Carver, "With Voice of Joy and Praise," in *Greening Wheat*, 32.

marriage from uncircumspect disrobings and acrobatic couplings”<sup>71</sup> that has lasted forty-two years, till Wallace feels their friends think of him “not as an individual but as an indispensable component of an entity known as Wallace and Zelva” (171). The story covers just a few days, beginning on a Monday morning in August when Zelva is set to depart for a week of supervising girls at camp, and Wallace asks her to “get back in bed after breakfast . . . for just a little quick one” (144). True to her good-natured habit, Zelva tells him, “Well, gosh, yes, if you really want to.” But then the phone rings for Wallace: a load of lumber to deliver to a construction crew waiting at a ranch. Zelva is still cheerfully “ready to go upstairs” and “do one of your little slam-bam jobs and get you on your way in ten minutes”; but Wallace has “lost [his] spirit for it” (144) and suggests they wait till she gets home Saturday night. “He hated to concede to age, hated to admit the fire in his stove was dying down to a few banked embers” (145). When do we make love?

Wallace secretly reads romances and wants to express his love to Zelva with “tender, solicitous words” (144); he likes romances because in them “things get said that should be said” (160)—perhaps in contrast to Zelva’s earthy sexual candor. Wallace is scheduled to stand guard at the girls’ camp Wednesday night and spends three days dealing with other obligations. Monday, on a fast trip to Salt Lake and back for parts to repair a log loader, he stops to visit their daughter in Springville and tells her, “It has weighed on me lately . . . and made me somewhat depressed that I have never, not once in our entire marriage, told Zelva I love her. I got that trait from my old daddy. Father would have rather had his tongue jerked out than say something personal” (151). At the airport in Salt Lake, Wallace “longed to be made a new man. As for the fresh, novel, virgin setting of his transformation, it could be any of the great coastal cities” (152). Tuesday he substitutes for Zelva driving the county library bookmobile; that evening he delivers a book to the Californian newcomer Judith Swaner at the ranch where he’d delivered lumber, stays for dinner with her, admits to her he’s “puked on Wayne County. It bores me. It has always bored me. It hasn’t bored me just a little. It has bored me high as a mountain, deep as a canyon” (162). She hugs him a couple of times but tells him she “couldn’t be a man’s mistress” and hopes they can “still be friends.” He spends the night “on the cushions of her dinette” and leaves

---

71. Levi S. Peterson, “A Wayne County Romance,” in his *Night Soil* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 173–74.

"in desperate haste" before dawn (163). He spends much of Wednesday using a crane to help a Richfield undertaker lower the coffin of a 543-pound woman into her enormous grave in Bicknell cemetery. He tells the undertaker, "Don't be surprised if you hear I'm walking out on Zelva," and explains, "The problem is she and I have run out of things to say to each other" (167). He hauls a load of firewood to the camp, still "confront[ing] the imminent necessity of informing Zelva that their marriage was at an end" (170), and the campfire program that night seems "a second funeral, . . . a grieving farewell to Zelva" (171).

Even when she wakes him in the bed of his pickup at 3:30 A.M. and asks him, "Do you want to hoe my garden?", Wallace "slip[s], almost consciously, into an evasive vacillation over the question whether it was ethical to make love to a spouse one has decided to abandon" (172). But when she moves under the big double sleeping bag with him, "an utter incontinence came over him," and they make love, after which "Wallace mulled the deceitfulness of tactile experience, the willingness, that is, of his roving hands to persuade him, in contradiction of what his eyes had for many years too clearly discerned, that this woman who lay pressed against him in the dark had neither aged nor deteriorated but was young, virginal, and ripe with promise and expectation" (174). He weeps "maybe a little" (174), tells her a childhood story about his old dog Jack, and apologizes "for never having any sweet words" for her. "Who wants fancy words?" she says. He tells her, "I couldn't ever leave you, no matter what," and she answers, "Of course you couldn't. . . . I couldn't leave you either" (175). As Wallace said about old Jack, "Sometimes things turn out all right in this world, don't they?" "That's the truth,' Zelva murmured" (175).

### Conclusions?

This has been more ramble than guided tour, and I have, here at a middling end, nothing so firm as conclusions. Most of the interesting implications have come up by the way; and my second hope for this essay is to provoke further conversation about what Mormon writers have written—not only in fiction, but also in essay, poetry, or drama—on a topic that persists with some urgency for not a few of us.

My first hope is to provoke the writers. I don't know any fiction writer or poet or philosopher any smarter about this subject than, for in-

stance (well, a favorite instance, I admit), Bruce Springsteen. For starters, listen hard to his 1987 *Tunnel of Love* album.<sup>72</sup> It's like he says: "spare parts and broken hearts keep the world turnin' around"; and "if you're rough enough for love" you need somebody "tougher than the rest." You'll have to do what you can to "walk like a man and . . . keep on walkin'"—maybe "one step up and two steps back." For sure, "there's things that'll knock you down you don't even see coming," and "it's just nobody knows honey where love goes, but when it goes it's gone gone" and "when you're alone you ain't nothing but alone." As the title cut says:

It ought to be easy ought to be simple enough  
 Man meets a woman and they fall in love  
 But the house is haunted and the ride gets rough  
 And you've got to learn to live with what you can't rise above  
 if you want to ride on down  
 down in through this tunnel of love.

### A "Marriage Group" of Contemporary Mormon Short Stories: A Selected Reading List

- Barber, Phyllis. "Almost Magnificence," and "White on White." *The School of Love*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990. 15-16, 39-44.
- Barber, Phyllis. "Ida's Sabbath," and "Bread for Gunnar." *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999. 37-51, 75-88.
- Bennion, John. "Breeding Leah," and "A House of Order." *Breeding Leah and Other Stories*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991. 15-26, 69-77.
- Brooks, Joanna. "Badlands." In *Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions*. Edited by Robert Raleigh, pp. 179-87. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998.
- Cannon, Ann Edwards. "Separate Prayers." *Sunstone* 6, no. 6 (November-December 1981): 32-37.
- Carver, Wayne. "Benvenuto ad Anzio." *Carleton Miscellany* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1963): 45-58.
- Carver, Wayne. "With Voice of Joy and Praise." *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon*

---

72. Bruce Springsteen, *Tunnel of Love* (New York: Columbia Records, 1987).

- Short Stories*. Edited by Levi S. Peterson. Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1983. 17-33.
- Chandler, Neal. "Roger across the Looking-Glass." *Benediction: A Book of Stories*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989. 47-61.
- Christmas, Robert A. "Another Angel." *The Fiction*. Springville, Utah: Art City Publishing, 1997. 66-86.
- Clark, Dennis. "Answer to Prayer." *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon Short Stories*. Edited by Levi S. Peterson. Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1983. 151-76.
- Clyde, Mary. "A Good Paved Road." *Survival Rates*. 1999; reprinted New York: Norton, 2001. 35-52.
- Edwards, Jaroldeen. "Me and the Big Apple." *Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life*. Edited by Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994. 91-105.
- Evenson, Brian. "Bodies of Light." *Altmann's Tongue*. New York: Knopf, 1994. 135-39.
- Fillerup, Michael. "Family Plantation Day" and "The Bowhunter." *Visions and Other Stories*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990. 3-27, 55-80.
- Freeman, Judith. "Family Attractions" and "Going Out to Sea." *Family Attractions*. New York: Viking, 1988. 1-16, 177-202.
- Hall, Randall. "Father, Forgive Us." *Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life*. Edited by Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994. 61-67.
- Horne, Lewis. "What Do Ducks Do in Winter?" *What Do Ducks Do in Winter? and Other Western Stories*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993. 75-89.
- Jones, Helen Walker. "The Six-Buck Fortune." *In Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions*. Edited by Robert Raleigh. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992. 37-45.
- Jorgensen, Wayne. "A Song for One Still Voice." *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon Short Stories*. Edited by Levi S. Peterson. Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1983. 1-5. This story is signed Bruce W. Jorgensen.
- Jorgensen, Wayne. "Two Years Sunday." *Wasatch Review International* 1, no. 1 (1992): 25-36.
- Jorgensen, Wayne. "Who Jane, Who Tarzan." *High Plains Literary Review* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 6-30.
- Jorgensen, Wayne. "Measures of Music." *Dialogue* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 133-40. This story is signed Bruce Jorgensen.

- Kump, Eileen G. "Sayso or Sense." *Bread and Milk and Other Stories*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1979. 71-80.
- Marler, Myrna. "Leaving the Farm." *Wasatch Review* 3, no. 1 (1994): 35-53.
- Marler, Myrna. "Balancing Acts." *Dialogue* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 169-77.
- Marshall, Donald R. "The Wheelbarrow." *Frost in the Orchard*. 1977; 2d ed., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985. 182-206.
- Mortensen, Pauline. "Woman Talking to a Cow." *Back before the World Turned Nasty*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989. 97-99.
- Mortensen, Pauline. "Something in the Shape of Something." In *Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions*. Edited by Robert Raleigh. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998. 143-52.
- Petersen, Zina. "Now Let's Dance." *Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life*. Edited by Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994. 236-48.
- Peterson, Levi S. "A Wayne County Romance." *Night Soil*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990. 143-76.
- Rosenbaum, Karen. "Hit the Frolicking, Rippling Brooks." *Bright Angels and Familiars*. Edited by Eugene England. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992. 81-89.
- Saderup, Dian. "A Blessing of Duty." *Sunstone* 4, no. 3 (May-June 1979): 17-20.
- Sillitoe, Linda. "A String of Intersections," "Coyote Tracks," "Susanna in the Meadow," "The Spiral Stair," and "Mornings." *Windows on the Sea and Other Stories*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989. 1-14, 37-64, 79-87, 89-110, 119-45.
- Spencer, Darrell. "Doing the Bats," "Rooster Loves," "I Am Buzz Gault, Left-Hander," and "The Planet of Surprise." *A Woman Packing a Pistol*. Port Townsend, Wash.: Dragon Gate, 1987. 3-6, 17-24, 63-74, 99-112.
- Spencer, Darrell. "Nothing Sad, Once You Look at It," "As Long as Lust Is Short," and "The Glue that Binds Us." *Our Secret's Out*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993. 51-68, 115-26, 134-51.
- Spencer, Darrell. "Park Host," "There's Too Much News," "The 12-Inch Dog," "Caution: Men in Trees," and "Late-Night TV." *Caution: Men in Trees*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000. 1-25, 52-71, 72-89, 90-111, 112-31.
- Strange, Susan Dean. "Still Dancing." *Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life*. Edited by Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994. 200-6.

- Thayer, Douglas. "Under the Cottonwoods." *Under the Cottonwoods and Other Mormon Stories*. Provo, Utah: Frankson, 1977. 155-72.
- Young, Jerry M. "Mallwalker." *Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life*. Edited by Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994. 106-31.
- Young, Margaret. "Grandpa's Growth," "Invitations," and "Grandma's Dying." *Elegies and Love Songs*. Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1992. 31-44, 89-101, 123-34.
- Young, Margaret. "Zoo Sounds," "The Affair," "Hanging Out the Dirty Language," "God on Donahue," "Hanauma Bay," "Balance Beam," "Griever," "The Go Between," and "Project." *Love Chains*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996. 3-20, 21-27, 29-33, 35-55, 157-65, 167-74, 175-86, 187-96, 197-200.