

## Virginia Is Not Lost!

Stephen Carter. *Virginia Sorensen: Pioneering Mormon Author*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2023. 136 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 9781560854586.

*Reviewed by Laurie Illions Rodriguez*

As a baby, author Virginia Sorensen's first sentence was "tell me a story." According to her mother, this was soon followed by her second sentence, "I'll tell *you* a story" (2).

In his recently released biography, Steven Carter opens up Virginia Sorensen's story, letting us hear her voice. And her voice is one that is worth hearing. Sorensen (1912–1991) was an author of novels and children's books in the 1940s–1970s. Coming from Utah Mormon heritage, she often wrote historical novels about Mormon characters, including *A Little Lower than the Angels*, set in 1840s Nauvoo. As Carter writes, "Open one of Sorensen's LDS novels. . . . In her gentle, lyrical, insightful prose, your own experience—as hum-drum or as dramatic as it may be—will take on a poetry, a nostalgia, a widening that will follow you for the rest of your life" (vii). I felt this myself when I first discovered Sorensen's work and was drawn to immerse myself in her writing for my master's thesis. Carter quotes Linda Sillitoe who mused, "Someone like Virginia arouses hunger . . . to know intensity, to live in beauty" (119).

With this biography, we now have the opportunity to come to know the person behind the creativity. Carter vividly tells Sorensen's life story, continually weaving in colorful threads of quotes, collected and curated from her literary works, speeches, and personal letters, enabling the reader to hear her expressive and lyrical voice, identify with her artistic and familial challenges, laugh at her humor, mourn her sorrows, thrill with her triumphs, and savor her simple delights. Carter creates not only a cohesive picture of her life experience but also gives us a taste of

her vibrant personality—the sound of her voice echoing from the pages long after the book is closed. For instance, as Carter recounts Sorensen's childhood, we can hear her childlike sense of awe in her description of her favorite place to dream and write, a closet underneath the stairs, “a little house of my own, . . . with a tall window . . . which made one miraculous streak of light to read by, . . . [and] a secret view of the yard outside. . . . There was also a private rainbow, for the top pane was a little fan of vari-colored glass” (2–3).

Carter also provides insightful literary perspectives on each of her nine novels, giving plot summaries as well as intriguing theories on how the works might relate to one another. For instance, he shows how *Kingdom Come*, though written later, functions like a “first movement” of a symphony, a foundation that gives the rest of her previous novels their full weight and depth (99). He illustrates how each could be seen as an experiment in characters navigating the integration of conflicting cultures. And he shows how the forms of certain stories match their subject matter, what as a musician I would call text-painting. For example, he points out that in *The Neighbors*, which starts with metaphorical themes of being stuck in Eden, the story structure itself is stagnant until the characters break out of their situation (84).

Sorensen also wrote seven children's books, including *Miracles on Maple Hill*, which was honored with the 1957 Newbery Award. In his analysis of her children's books, Carter highlights her ability to see and portray things from a child's perspective, which he refers to as “lantern consciousness” (110). He illustrates with colorful examples how she portrays children's emotions in their full depth, whether they be wonder, “rapture,” or “tragedy” (114). He also writes about how this perspective allows readers to “follow her child protagonists as they non-judgmentally bring everything they encounter into their newly forming world view, . . . soaking” it all in (111).

Carter shows how Sorensen's works are not only timelessly beautiful but also, surprisingly, newly relevant. He theorizes that just as

technological innovations during Sorensen's day opened a new era of cross-cultural encounters that transformed Mormons' relationship to their church and to the world, today the internet is acting in a similarly transformative way (viii).

He writes:

The young Latter-day Saints of [Sorensen's] time . . . were pioneers, just as their great-grandparents had been, but this new generation was called to synthesize the capitals of culture with the sequestered valleys of Zion. What would that synthesis look like? No one knew—including these budding writers. It was new territory. . . . Virginia Sorensen's Mormon novels were about exactly that. Rather than being prescriptive (as her home literature forebears were), her novels are descriptive, showing readers, with great detail and insight, characters navigating the borderlands between Mormonism and the rest of the world. (72)

He proposes a new term to refer to Sorensen's generation of writers who have, up until now, been referred to in Mormon literary circles as the "lost generation," reminiscent of post-World War I novelists who were disillusioned and critical of their homeland. Carter makes an excellent case for why the label "lost generation" is not appropriate for Sorensen, and then he proposes a much more accurate label for this set of authors—"new pioneers" (74). I approve! I had never felt that the term "lost generation" was an apt label for Sorensen and, in the 1990s, I argued against it in my master's thesis. Carter's new label is much more accurate, and I hope that it catches on.

Sorensen *was* a Mormon literary pioneer. As an author among the first generation of writers to explore the inevitable cultural intersections created by the railroad era, she traversed on uncharted ground that opened up new possibilities for the following generations. As Carol Lynn Pearson says in her poem, pioneers follow "where truth flies":

Pioneers

. . . Where truth flies you follow  
If you are a pioneer.

I have searched the skies  
And now and then  
Another feather has fallen.  
I have packed the handcart again  
Packed it with the precious things  
And thrown away the rest.  
I will sing by the fires at night  
Out there on uncharted ground . . .  
([carollynnperson.com/pioneers](http://carollynnperson.com/pioneers))

Unlike the prescriptive “home literature” that came before her, where, as Carter points out, characters were “punished and rewarded according to their beliefs and actions . . . pawns of the story . . . pushed toward redemption or destruction by the theme’s invisible current” (73), Sorensen did not write to preach with a fixed spiritual journey for the reader in mind. Nor did she write to condemn. Her characters are not heroes or villains but are, as Carter poetically describes, “feeling their way along; interacting with the world as they find it; picking up the disparate oddities, tragedies, and treasures they find along the way and trying to make something new out of them” (73). Or as Carter aptly puts it: “None of Sorensen’s characters travels the sure path laid down by the traditional Mormon story structure. Her stories do not end with her characters either triumphant or destroyed. No particular values are being promoted, and none roundly condemned. Rather, readers are presented human beings trying to make their way through a complex and shifting world with no iron rod in sight” (70). As Sorensen herself said, “A novel is seldom an explanation, but rather an exploration” (104).

Sorensen was able to escape taking sides because she had both an insider and outsider view (ix). Richard Rohr calls this the “edge of things,” a “liminal space,” and “a holy place.” He states:

To take your position on the spiritual edge of things is to learn how to move safely in and out, back and forth, across and return. It is a prophetic position, not a rebellious or antisocial one. When you live

on the edge . . . [y]ou are free from its central seductions, but also free to hear its core message in very new and creative ways. . . . Not an outsider throwing rocks, not a comfortable insider who defends the status quo, but one who lives precariously with two perspectives held tightly together—the faithful insider and the critical outsider at the same time. Not ensconced safely inside, but not so far outside as to lose compassion or understanding. . . . [H]old[ing] these perspectives in a loving and necessary creative tension. It is a unique kind of seeing and living. (Fr. Richard Rohr, “Life on the Edge: Understanding the Prophetic Position,” *HuffPost*, May 25, 2011, [www.huffpost.com/entry/on-the-edge-of-the-inside\\_b\\_829253](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-the-edge-of-the-inside_b_829253))

Perhaps this is why Sorensen’s “one foot inside and one foot outside” position, as Carter describes it, gives her the freedom to be what he calls an “ethnographic novelist of Mormonism” and allows her to have the creative, insightful, and compassionate perspective that he highlights (ix).

Sorensen and her characters were never lost. Yes, unlike the writers of “home literature” that came before, neither she nor her characters were on a prescribed path, and Sorensen did not write to preach nor to malign Mormonism. Carter quotes Sorensen as saying she was not “interested in Mormonism particularly. Not *particularly*” (101) but posits that she created stories about her native community of Mormons in order to explore her real subject, “love” (101). He writes, “The hallmark of Sorensen’s writing . . . is her ability to empathize with every one of her characters. Though Sorensen’s characters may wander the wilderness of belief, they are not lost, because they are deeply understood and loved, both by the author and, soon enough, by the reader” (74).

However, in emphasizing the significance of the empathy and compassion in Sorensen’s writing, Carter draws an unnecessary and misleading parallel. He states, “The difference between home literature and Virginia Sorensen’s novels is like the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is about how a peculiar people establishes itself in the world [which] requires

judgment. . . . The New Testament is about God's mercy." He suggests that in Sorensen's time, Mormonism had moved on from the judgmental identity-establishing stage to the merciful connecting phase. He concludes, "Just as the central theme of the Four Gospels and Paul's writings is that God's great miracle is coming into atonement with all of creation, so is it in Sorensen's Mormon novels" (73–74).

While examining the tension between establishing identity and expansiveness is relevant, it is a false dichotomy to credit the New Testament with one side of the tension and the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) with the other. The age-old trope of equating rigid expectations, judgment, insularity, and punishment with the Hebrew Bible while equating spirit of the law, mercy, connection, and love with the New Testament is an inaccurate view of the Hebrew Bible. Though it is common to portray Jesus' teachings about love as revolutionary by painting his backdrop to be the darkened opposite of whatever is being highlighted, actually, all of the mercy, emphasis on spirit of the law, flexibility, and love of neighbor and stranger have their roots in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic teachings themselves. By leaning on this erroneous trope, Carter fails, in this instance, to escape the parochialism that he praises Sorensen for transcending. Through his Mormon- and Christian-influenced lens, he fails to see a tradition that is not his own for what it truly is.

He goes on to make the bold claim that in "trying to bring Mormonism into conversation with the rest of America," Sorensen "took a path of atonement and ushered in the most Christlike novels the Mormon tradition has produced" (74). Despite his Old Testament/New Testament false dichotomy, I *do* wholeheartedly agree with the essence of his central claim, that Sorensen "ushered in" the most universally sympathetic and thoughtfully connective novels the "Mormon tradition has produced" (74).

In the epilogue, Carter quotes Cynthia Sillitoe who cried after reading *The Evening and the Morning* "because the writing was so beautiful;

because Virginia was so present; because Virginia was gone.” Carter concludes that this is how he feels as well. After reading her novels, he says, “I desperately miss someone I have never even met” (119).

I also feel this after reading Sorensen’s novels, as well as after reading Carter’s biography. It is filled with detail and insights that helped me to know Sorensen more deeply and made me hunger to know her even more. This biography is a delightful and thoughtful introduction to Virginia Sorensen for those who have yet to discover her, and it is a rich resource for those of us who already know and love Sorensen’s work.

LAURIE ILLIONS RODRIGUEZ {laurie.illions@gmail.com} has a BM in violin performance and pedagogy and an MA in English from BYU. She has written articles for *Colloquium: Essays in Literature and Belief*, the *AML Annual*, and *Affirmation* as well as *divrei Torah* for her synagogue. Laurie teaches violin, viola, and chamber music at NIU Community School of the Arts.