

# Margaret Blair Young & Darius Gray

*Margaret Blair Young is a professor of English at Brigham Young University; Darius Gray is one of the three founders of the Genesis Group. Together, they've written a trilogy of novels on black Mormon history, Standing on the Promises. They've also filmed a documentary on African-Americans in the Church, entitled Nobody Knows. Interviewed July 14, 2008.*

**How did you start out as a writer, Margaret?**

MARGARET: I always wanted to do it, and around somewhere in the 1970s, I just became very serious about it. Even though I wasn't terribly good, I was tenacious. And I did a lot of reading—that's what I tell my writing students: that if you're going to write well, you have to read well.

**Describe your writing process in general—how you tackle a project.**

MARGARET: The ideas would almost always come from my own life, with the huge exception of *Standing*

*on the Promises*, where Darius and I had to partner up to do it right, to bring our talents and our knowledge into a cohesive narrative. Until that time all of my short stories and most of my novels were autobiographical. As I would read things, I'd get ideas of possibilities of how I'd create the plot, but the biggest thing was the tenacity. There was never really a day that I wouldn't do some writing. And I did not take rejection letters as being the ultimate sign that I couldn't do it, but as being motivation to do better.

**Who do you see as some of your literary influences?**

MARGARET: It'll be ten years on July 29 that Darius and I have been working together, and from that time I have a tape of Zora Neale Hurston's *And Their Eyes Were Watching God* that I listen to over and over and over again to immerse myself in the voice. And a lot of Langston Hughes, *The Invisible Man*, a lot of black literature and black films. In order for me to feel this—because this was not my childhood, this was his life—Darius made

me a tape of the music he had grown up with, that he actually recorded from record albums, music that was done in the '30s and '40s and '50s, wonderful gospel spirituals, Five Blind Boys of Alabama.

All of this wonderful music would just immerse me in it. For Mother's Day, Bruce gave me *Malcolm X*, and he's given me a huge biography of W.E. DuBois and all of his works. It is a passion in me—that tends to be where I gravitate. Even though I love all of the literature that I teach, I tend to gravitate towards black literature. It still holds me.

**When did that passion start?**

MARGARET: It started actually *after* Darius and I partnered. I had begun the books on my own, from just a complete naïve sense that I could do it. I'm very spontaneous and tend to leap before I look. And I did

it with these. However, I leaped into a place where the Lord had provided somebody to help.

When I met Darius on July 29, Gene England and I had just done a presentation on blacks and the priesthood, twenty years after, and Darius had come to hear it. Afterwards he hugged me and said, "Let's write a book." There was a little more that went on before we actually got started with it, but when he looked at what I had written from my own imagination and the little bit of knowledge I had, he said, "I can help you with this—this is the language of my childhood." So for ten years I've been immersed in this.

**Where is your family originally from, Darius?**

DARIUS: Dad was from Missouri, and Mom from Arkansas, both of them from small towns. They had deep Southern roots. The family moved up to Colorado



in 1932 and so I was raised in the West, with Southern traditions. And to paraphrase someone, having been born of goodly parents. I had both parents in the home and we had an intact family till my father's death, so I had a good upbringing.

### Tell us more about your schooling and work.

DARIUS: I love to say I'm a high school dropout. Which I am. I later was blessed to go to college. My degrees are in broadcast journalism from the University of Utah and a special professional program at the graduate school in Columbia University. I worked as a journalist for a number of years.

Then I decided I wanted to get a second master's, an MBA. I got about halfway through that and decided it was time to earn money again, so I went out and found a job with a Fortune 500 company and worked my way through the ranks. That company was one of the first to be subject to hostile takeover. I had worked my way up to regional management responsibilities, and everyone with regional management authority in the company wound up going bye-bye.

Coming back to our writing and the documentary, I think my one real artistic flair has been behind the camera and in the editing room. Writing was a chore; cinematography was a joy; editing was an absolute joy. I worked on documentaries for KSL and enjoyed it immensely. That's where I think my artistic side is, in telling a story through film.

MARGARET: Because he's not as young as I am, he was assigned to do documentaries in Africa, and it wasn't just a camera in a bag—he would lug all of this huge equipment around. So he comes to the books with his life experience, with all of the voices and phrases and everything we needed to make it authentic.

We hadn't planned on us doing the film. We went through several directors who weren't taking it where we wanted it to go, and we finally realized that for it to go where we wanted it, we had to do it ourselves.

DARIUS: Where it *needed* to go.

MARGARET: Where it needed to go, yes. Darius had that experience in documentary making. I was completely new to it and came with the writing ability and with some artistic sense.

### How did you transition from the book projects to the documentary?

MARGARET: We finished the books years ago. In the meanwhile, I had also done a play about Jane

Manning James that we had shown in several places across the nation. And in Los Angeles, one of the descendants of Jane Manning James who is not LDS but who knew what his legacy was, saw a couple of Mormon missionaries. One of the missionaries had seen *I Am Jane*—remarkably, because it's not like everybody saw that—and told him about it, and so Louis Duffy googled *I Am Jane* and found out about the play. By that he found out about the books, ordered them express mail, read them immediately, and then got in touch with us. And he continues to be a very dear friend.

As we wrote about these people, we started meeting acquaintances, descendants, and we just would get manna. We have so many precious things stored up in Special Collections right now to protect them. Because of what we've done, people have become aware, it just kind of comes out of the woodwork and we call it manna from heaven.

DARIUS: We're no longer surprised when it shows up. At least for me, we halfheartedly expect it to show up. And with that being said, that which we've done, the work which we've shared, has been more than just writing books or doing a film. I really feel we've been on a mission.

MARGARET: And we're still on it—we haven't been released. It's been so gratifying to get to know the people we've written about. For example, Len Hope has become somebody I think we both really look forward to meeting after we die. Elder Marion D. Hanks was the one who introduced us to Len. We met with Elder Hanks five or six times and he gave us a tape of Len Hope's own description of his conversion, which Elder Hanks had recorded in 1945. Len is a man who joined the Church right after World War I and confronted the Ku Klux Klan as a result of it. It's a remarkable story. The branch president had been contacted by the congregants who said, "We don't want a black family in this ward," and so the Hopes were told that they couldn't come to church. Their response was, "Can we still pay tithing?" They would hold meetings in their home, and once a month missionaries would give them the sacrament and sing and bear testimony. Elder Hanks was one of those missionaries.

Jane Manning James has become the matriarch of our project. I feel such a bond with her, and often a sense of her presence and approval of what we're doing. Not for Jane herself, but for what she means to the legacy of black pioneers into the future—all those of African descent in the Church.

DARIUS: Speaking about the mission that we're on, what is the mission? I see the mission as helping to build

bridges between communities, LDS and non-LDS, black and white—to acknowledge the past and to speak about the lives of some remarkable people who have been little known of in years past, to tell their stories. You don't have to be LDS to appreciate their stories, you don't have to be black to appreciate their stories. In the process, we hope to also address some of the wounds and be a part of the healing of those wounds, in both communities. To me that is the mission, to share the lives and experiences of some very remarkable people.

### How did the documentary come about?

MARGARET: It was not ours to start with. A couple of wonderful young men, Wayne Lee and Robert Foster, wanted to start the project. The operative word is *young*. Rob was newly married when he and Wayne wanted to do this, and Wayne joined the military. Before long, Rob was in optometry school, Wayne was at a camp in Indiana, and they just couldn't do it. I had agreed to write for it, so I had helped gather the initial funds for it. We brought Richard Dutcher in as the director, but then his projects became a little overwhelming and he asked to be put in a different position, so we have him as the executive producer. He helped us raise more of the money and helped us get a grant that was *really* important as the seed money.



It was never our idea that *we* would be the ones to do this—Darius is one of the main interview subjects. In fact, I see him as the still thread throughout the whole thing. I wanted there to be somebody whose life you could follow, and it was really clear to me that Darius was the one we would have access to—the footage and the photos and all of that—so that you could follow one life and have ancillary stories supporting the kinds of

things that he said, with the scholars making comments and all. We never intended that he would be producer/director.

One of the directors we hired quickly revealed that he was going to be putting an anti-Mormon spin on it, and we simply could not have that. That would dishonor all of the people we had brought into this. So we decided that we would do it. For months we met together with our editor. We've had two editors—Danor Gerald, who then took some acting jobs, and then we brought in Jim Hughes, who remains our editor. Danor had a senior project at UVU where he filmed the story of Jane James giving flour to Eliza Lyman, and I paid for the actors and we basically bought that footage for about \$600, which would have been \$20,000 otherwise.

With those sorts of things we've been able to have some reenactments and some really lovely footage on a shoestring. I won't tell you what we've spent, but when I told Sterling van Wagenen, he said, "You've created this for what we'd do a play for." Richard Dutcher filmed a lot of our interviews with the scholars. Other people filmed others, and because it kept changing hands, we had all sorts of different angles, and to bring everything together and try to make it cohesive was a bit of a challenge. We've had a lot of donated work, so we have scholars talking, we have ministers—Pastor Cecil Murray, who's at the Church of First AME in Los Angeles, which was founded by a former slave of Mormon pioneers, and who met with President Hinckley and who talks about that, and Martin Luther King the Third, so we have some good names. Then we have black Latter-day Saints who talk about why they're LDS and what it has meant to them to be LDS.

### How was writing a film documentary different for you from writing books?

MARGARET: In the documentary, I wanted the writing to be as spare as possible, merely transition. I wanted the people, the interview subjects, the footage, the images to tell the story.

DARIUS: That's part of the skill in storytelling, building those bridges, that transition dialogue that's necessary is a part of recognizing where the story is and where it needs to go. So while it may be spare, the concepts are as strong as in writing any novel.

MARGARET: We don't intend this just for an LDS audience. We recognize that the LDS audience will probably have more interest in this than others, but thus

far we've shown it to more black film festivals than we have to general film festivals. Most of the film festivals we've shown it at are black, and we sold out in two. At the one that we just did in San Francisco last month, the response from a predominantly non-LDS audience was extremely positive. One woman came up to my husband and said, "I've got to find out about this. I've been to Ghana, I know that your Church is doing all sorts of things there, but this is such new information—how do I found out?"

When Darius and I have gone, we sometimes get some of the Mormon nervousness about, "Do we really need to talk about the black history? That ended in 1978." But the answer is no, it didn't. If it did, then we wouldn't still have people talking about fencesitters in the pre-existence or about the curse of Cain and Canaan, and we do. Until that's taken care of, we need to address it.

What we've found with our books is we'd do a book signing at LDS bookstores and have a few people come to pick up the books. We went to an African-American conference, a family history conference, and Deseret Book said, "Well, you probably aren't going to sell very many, so we won't send very many with you." We ran out almost immediately and had to take orders for the books. We had *lines* of people, and the way that we were advertised was, "Who knew? Black Mormons." For African-Americans, it's new history.

And it's interesting for Mormons, especially those who have been troubled by the issue, or who want to have something to say about it, who really don't feel like they've been told very much about it, especially the kids who we're teaching now at BYU who were born after the priesthood revelation. And those of us who lived with the restriction, and who were taught the folklore, and then had the revelation, what do we do with all of that folklore? Since nobody has ever said, "By the way, that wasn't true." Just suddenly blacks can hold the priesthood.

There are these hanging issues, and the Latter-day Saints are especially interested in what we have to tell



them in the documentary. We walk a delicate balance. I really like what Gideon Burton said about treading the line so carefully, because we want it accessible, we don't want it to be seen as a proselytizing piece, and we definitely don't want it to be seen as a Mormon-bashing piece.

So, we're very true to the history, and we have the very best historians—Newell Bringhurst, Armand Mauss, Greg Prince, Ron Coleman. I tried to keep the gender balance, and if we have a white scholar, I'd try to have a black scholar, as much as possible. We've gathered the very best scholars to talk about the history and

then the last fifteen minutes of the film is black Latter-day Saints themselves, who've chosen to be LDS, telling how they've done it and why. We keep it with African-Americans—the Church has done films on the Church in Africa, and there are different struggles there. We simply don't talk about those, because we're maintaining our focus with African-Americans.

**With the structure of the film, how much was planned in advance and how much of it grew spontaneously out of the materials themselves?**

DARIUS: You have to work with what you have. And within that—it's not just a tape, but a body of stories and of lives—you have to go fishing and find out, "Okay, where's the balance in here? What are these people saying?" At times, when we've worked on this, there might be an interview subject saying something with which I personally would take issue. But it's *not* my story, it's his or her story.

You can see the obvious answer to your question. We did not have an agenda and say, "We're going to go out and do this." But the materials were gathered, and based on those materials, we then asked, "What do the people tell us? What are their stories telling us?" Some of it was happy and joyful, and other elements were troubling and challenging. And if that's what they're telling us, that's what we put in.

MARGARET: The other thing with making it accessible to a non-Mormon audience is that there are doctrines that we as Latter-day Saints understand. We



don't have to be told about the second Article of Faith, that men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression, but a non-LDS audience doesn't know that that's a tenet of LDS doctrine. So, we need to explain certain things that the non-LDS audience wouldn't understand—the concept of a pre-existence, and the whole idea of, “Well, since we don't believe that they would be punished for an ancestor's deeds, they must have done something themselves in the pre-existence.” That was a lot of what the narrative did, taking care of the spaces that the non-LDS person is going to need to understand, like what the priesthood is. For most people outside the Church, if you say blacks didn't hold the priesthood, they'll think, “They didn't allow blacks to be priests in their church.” There's a concept that if you hold the priesthood, you're a priest, like a Catholic priest. So we have to explain that that's not what the priesthood is in the Mormon religion.

It's one of my favorite parts of the film, actually, talking about the lay priesthood, where every young man before '78—except African-Americans—would be ordained in the priesthood at age twelve, and we have Armand Mauss talking about his own life and saying, “A family moved into our ward and all of us at age twelve were ordained to the priesthood except this one.” Catholics didn't ordain blacks as priests either for a long time, you know, but it's more significant than that, because the priesthood is everything—it's temple privileges, it's the most fundamental, most sacred things of our faith.

**Since completing the film, you've gone to some film festivals. Could you tell us more about those?**

**DARIUS:** They've been fun, and it's been interesting to me to see the response from the various audiences. Again, some have been predominantly non-LDS and black, and others white and LDS. The film has found favor with both groups. At the San Francisco Black Film Festival—there are some humorous points in the documentary, some laugh lines, as it were—the black audience found more humor in it than the white audience who saw it the next day. It's interesting to see where people laugh, and what they glean from it.

We had also been at the San Diego Black Film Festival a number of months ago, and one of the key points for me after the film received a standing ovation from this mixed audience, black, white, LDS, non-LDS, was there was this fellow who

was working with the San Diego Black Film Festival. We had watched him running around getting people in the right places and opening up the theaters and whatnot, and I noted that he attended our screening and stayed for the entire thing, where normally you would see him dip in and out to the various theaters. Afterwards he approached me and he had tears in his eyes, he had been very moved and was very positive about the film. So here we had a person whose primary responsibility was just to see that things worked well at the festival, but he was moved by the stories that were told in the documentary—black, non-LDS.

**MARGARET:** In San Francisco, the guy who was running the equipment had had a really bad day because his equipment had gone out on him and he'd had to really scramble to get things working, and the sound wasn't quite where it should have been, so he was in a really grumpy mood. Darius is just such a calming presence, he calmed him down and we showed the film. And afterwards he said, “I would really like my wife to see this.” I said, “Well, we're showing it tomorrow in Oakland.” I didn't think he would come, but he and his wife came. The people there—a fully LDS audience—asked how it was received in the film festival. We said, “Well, somebody's here from the festival.” And he said it was one of the gems of the festival. Good reactions from all sides.

**Do you have plans for more film festivals?**

**MARGARET:** No, except Barbados. We can't afford it at this point. The truth is, our money now has to go towards duplication and packaging. We *are* going to

go to Seattle, and we've already arranged that one—it's not a film festival, we'll show it at a theater, and that's just because there were so many requests in that area. We found a really good deal on plane tickets. And then we've got one at Fort Douglas in October, but pretty much now we're just focused on wrapping this baby up and getting it packaged and distributed. We would like to be on a PBS station. We've been working so hard on the doc itself that we haven't really moved in trying to get that other to happen, but we plan on it.

I think we'll have things ready to sell in September. We had hoped it would be August, but we're a little behind, so I think it'll be September. It's been a long project—because it started with these two young men way back there. But I actually feel that there's good timing.

DARIUS: Exactly what I was thinking. These things are occurring as they should. We're doing our part, we're continuing to try to move forward, but it's going to happen as it needs to happen. We've found that all along—that there are elements that have needed to happen at a particular time, whether it's the manna from heaven that dropped down or an individual being available. I think it's going to happen just as it needs to. So we'll keep moving forward doing our part.

#### Darius, what was it like founding the Genesis Group?

DARIUS: Considering what I think its importance was, I'm not sure we fully recognized that significance at that time. Three black male converts to the Church meeting, praying, asking God to guide us, what we can do to hold onto black members—and there were too few, and too many of that few falling away from the Church—feeling led to approach the senior brethren, and meeting with a positive response, where three junior apostles were assigned to meet with us. When you consider just that—you know, if you are privileged to be able to meet with a member of the Seventy, you're a happy camper. But a member of the Twelve? No, *three* members of the Twelve. And to meet in an ongoing way over a period of months to talk about these issues of blacks in the Church and priesthood and some of the pain.

I don't know that we realized the significance of it. Gene Orr, Ruffin Bridgeforth, and myself—Ruffin was the senior among us. He had joined the Church in 1953, he was the elder statesman. I was in the middle, I joined in '64. And Gene joined in '68, I believe. But in Gene's wife's journal, she noted that the first day we met with those three apostles—who happened to be Elders Gordon B. Hinckley, Thomas S. Monson, and Boyd K. Packer—was June 8, 1971. Now, that date is significant

if you fast-forward exactly seven years to the day, June 8, 1978: the reversal of that policy on priesthood restriction.

We didn't know what was in the future, any of us six. But God knew. And we were just trying to move forward and do that which we saw that was immediately in front of us. We were so busy watching the trees, I don't know that we noticed the forest. But indeed it was a forest.

They're wonderful men. Ruffin Bridgeforth has since passed away, in 1997, after having served as the president of the Genesis branch for twenty-five and a half years. Any time a member of the Church thinks they've been in a calling for too long, think of Brother Ruffin. Gene Orr has moved with his wife to Canada, north of Edmonton, St. Albert, active in the Church. They've raised their family in the Church, and they have seen the change that has come about.

When I joined the Church in '64, it was estimated that worldwide there were 300–400 black members. And now to hear at the recent commemoration of the priesthood official declaration #2, that Elder Child estimated that there are, worldwide, possibly as many as a million blacks in the Church. To go from 300–400 to a million, to see that growth, has been a remarkable experience for all of us. Ruffin saw part of it, Gene and I are still watching and are amazed.

And yet we know there's more to be done. We are not the people, I believe, that Christ would have us be. We haven't learned quite yet fully to respect one another as brothers and sisters, regardless of race or ethnicity. We're working at that, and the work isn't done. It likely will never be done until the return of the Savior, so we have a job in front of us.

But looking back at that, I am amazed at the growth, at the changes that have come about since 1971, and even more amazed at the changes since 1978 and the reversal on priesthood restriction. God is good. ■

