

# mormonartist

ISSUE 10

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# mormonartist

COVERING THE LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS WORLD

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# Editor's Note

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BY **BEN CROWDER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

A couple weeks ago we put out a survey to you, our readers, to get some feedback and see how we can make this magazine better. Thanks to everyone who responded. We appreciate your comments and we're looking into implementing several of your ideas. (You can still take the survey<sup>1</sup> if you have feedback for us, by the way.)

One thing that a few of you mentioned was our rather erratic release schedule. And you're right. Releasing our "June" issue toward the end of July is far from perfect, and we want to fix that. We're now figuring out how to streamline our production process so we can hit our deadlines and get every issue out on time, and we should have a more regular schedule within the next issue or two. Thanks for your understanding in the meantime.

Staff changes: We'd like to thank Kurt Madsen for his work on the magazine and wish him well with his new baby. Liesl Hansen is our new Visual & Applied Arts section editor. ■

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1 <http://blog.mormonartist.net/help-improve-mormon-artist-survey>



# Submission Guidelines

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## LITERATURE

PERSONAL ESSAYS, POETRY, SHORT STORIES  
NO LONGER THAN 1,500 WORDS

SUBMIT WORD/PDF TO

[literature@mormonartist.net](mailto:literature@mormonartist.net)

## MUSIC & DANCE

SONGS, COMPOSITIONS, DANCE VIDEOS  
NO LONGER THAN 5 MINUTES

NOTE: FOR VIDEOS, SEND US A LINK TO YOUR VIDEO, NOT THE VIDEO FILE ITSELF. THANKS!

SUBMIT MP3/LINK TO

[music@mormonartist.net](mailto:music@mormonartist.net)

## GENERAL NOTES

WORK IN ANY GENRE IS FINE AS LONG AS IT'S APPROPRIATE FOR AN LDS AUDIENCE.  
ANYTHING YOU SUBMIT MUST BE YOUR OWN WORK.  
SIMULTANEOUS SUBMISSIONS ARE FINE.  
IF YOUR SUBMISSION HAS BEEN PUBLISHED BEFORE, LET US KNOW.

QUESTIONS?

[editor@mormonartist.net](mailto:editor@mormonartist.net)

## VISUAL & APPLIED ARTS

PAINTINGS, ILLUSTRATIONS, PHOTOGRAPHS  
NO LARGER THAN 1 MB

SUBMIT THUMBNAIL JPEGS TO

[visarts@mormonartist.net](mailto:visarts@mormonartist.net)

## FILM & THEATRE

SHORT PLAYS, SHORT FILMS  
NO LONGER THAN 15 PAGES/15 MINUTES

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# Rachel Ann Nunes

INTERVIEW BY **ANDREA PEARSON** | PHOTOS BY **GREG DEAKINS**

WEB: [RANUNES.COM](http://RANUNES.COM)

Rachel Ann Nunes is the author of thirty books, ranging from romance and suspense to women's fiction and family drama. Her picture book *The Secret of the King* was chosen in Utah by the Governor's Commission on Literacy to be awarded to all Utah grade schools as part of the *Read With A Child For 20 Minutes Per Day* program. Her novels *The Independence Club* (2007) and *Fields of Home* (2008) were both chosen as finalists for a Whitney Award. Her most recent book is *Imprints*, a paranormal romance.

*To be successful, you must pay the price, but you decide how much to pay and that determines how long it will take to get there.*

### What was the first story you ever wrote?

The first book I ever wrote was a science fiction novel called *The Stone Holders*. It first had about 50,000 words but grew to over 120,000. Then I wrote a nonfiction story about my mission. Both of these are unpublished.

These were followed by a book called *In Your Place*, which I call my "Saturday's Warrior novel," because *Saturday's Warrior* was popular when I was growing up and it inspired the book. Eventually, *In Your Place* was published, faults and all, but only after I had a dozen other novels published. The next book I wrote was *Ariana: The Making of a Queen*, which was the first of my novels that was actually published.

### Tell us the story behind publishing *Ariana: The Making of a Queen*.

The idea for *Ariana: The Making of a Queen* was inspired by a fellow sister missionary I met while I was serving in Portugal. I didn't know much of her personal story, but what I heard inspired me when I eventually began to write. *Ariana* is in no way her story, of course, but the real-life events were definitely pivotal in pointing my imagination in the right direction. Other experiences on my mission, like teaching and working with members, were also necessary to writing that book, as was living in a foreign setting for so long.

In addition, my father was a college French professor for most of my growing up years, and my entire family went on a BYU study abroad to France for six months when I was eleven. In France I had personal experiences with my siblings that I put in my book, especially the scenes with Ariana and her brother wandering around Paris. My stay in France was where my love for languages and traveling began.

### Tell us about *Imprints*, your newest book. What made you decide to write a story about the paranormal?

I cut my teeth on science fiction and fantasy. I remember when I was eleven reading one story that fascinated me long after I finished it. I wished there was a sequel, or at least that I could find the novel again at the bookmobile in Highland, Utah, where I lived.

I never did, but it was about then that I decided to become an author and write the book I wanted to read myself. That eventually became *The Stone Holders*, the first book I ever wrote but never published. At some point, I became aware of the few LDS novels being published, and after reading them, I decided to write some of my own. It's been so successful that it was easy and fun to continue. Eventually, my love for sci-fi and fantasy, especially in a contemporary setting, resurfaced. As I read avidly in the national market, I realized there were no clean contemporary sci-fi and fantasy novels for adults, and I wanted to change that. I wanted to write something that gave people, especially our young people, a good read without having to skip pages due to content.

So I wrote *Imprints*, and Shadow Mountain (Deseret Book's national imprint) took the plunge to publish it. I'm grateful for the chance they gave me to take *Imprints* to my readers and hope they'll be open to similar books.

However, I should add that not every member of the Church believes these sci-fi/fantasy or "paranormal" books should be carried by Deseret Book. I argue vehemently that they need to be carried there. In fact, I wrote an open letter to readers outlining why I feel so strongly. You can see that letter on the blog for the Association for Mormon Letters.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://blog.mormonletters.org/archive.aspx>, 2010-04-29



**Which book has been the most difficult to write? Which has been your favorite?**

The most difficult book to write for me was *A Heartbeat Away*. As a mother, the idea of having my child kidnapped often kept me up during the long five months it took me to finish that novel.

The book that's my favorite so far is always the current novel I'm working on. It's going to be the best! Then I finish my baby, send it off to school, and start on my new best favorite. I'm fickle that way.

**What projects do you have in the works?**

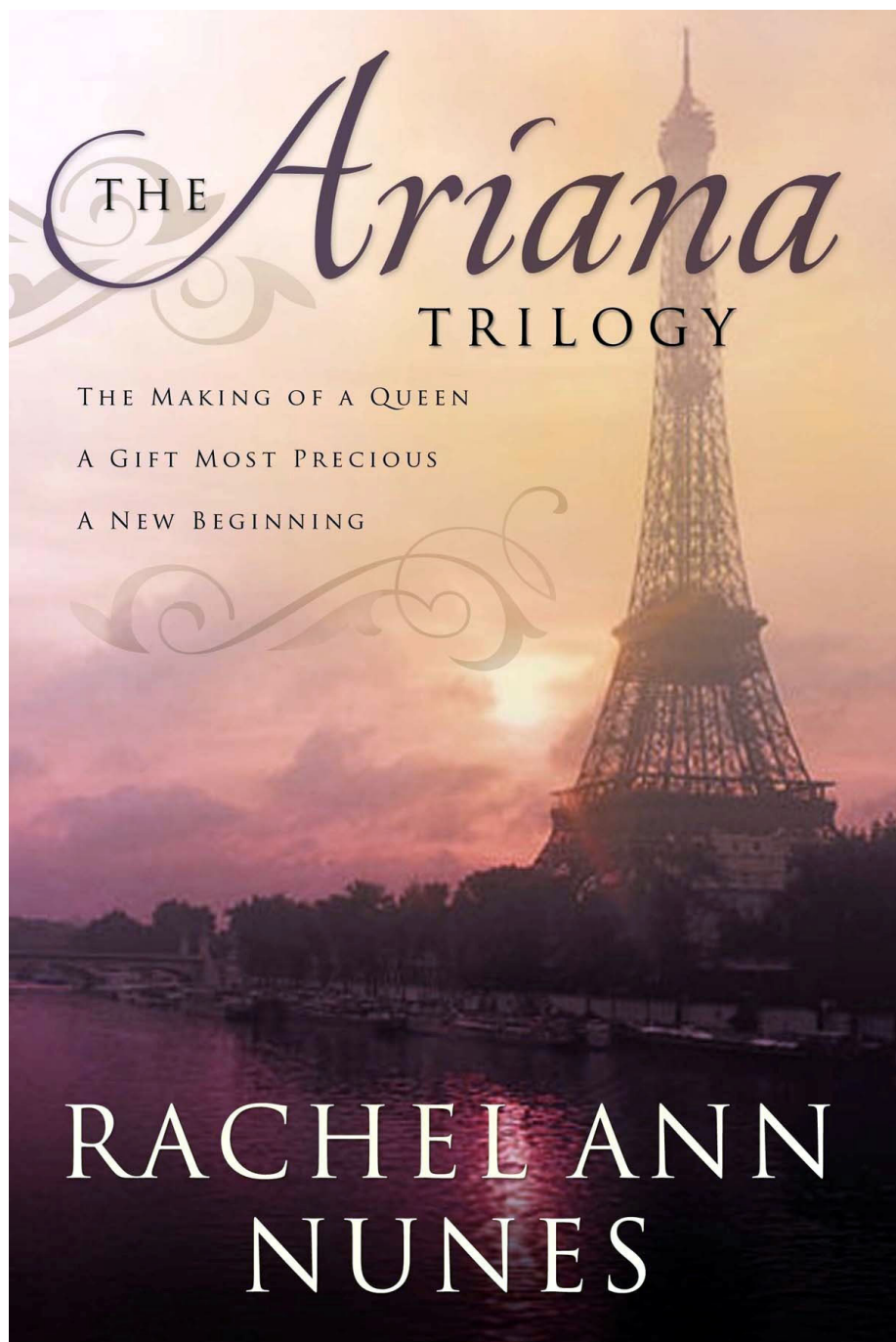
I'm working on the sequel to *Imprints*, which is for the LDS audience but contains no overt LDS elements, as well as an LDS novel that came to me recently out of the blue. I'm really excited about both.

**Describe a typical day. How do you manage to write while running a household of six children?**

My typical day is busy. I'm always working or writing or doing something for the children. We get up at seven, get them scripted, fed, and off to school, and then I head to the computer.

Since my youngest started first grade, I sometimes exercise first because it lifts my spirits and helps my brain create. I have to make a word goal and stick to it. Otherwise, I find myself answering fan mail, taking care of the business aspects, working on something for LDStorymakers, cleaning my desk—you get the picture. Which is odd because once I start writing, I usually want to write forever.

I work until I have to pick up the kids (a forty-minute drive), though many days I have a lot of interruptions from my teens or the younger kids forgetting something at school. I have to prepare lessons, run errands, take care of our endless remodeling projects, etc.



It's often difficult to make my goal. After the children are home, we work on homework, Scouts, dinner, getting the kids to bed. Some days we have time for swimming or a game, and some days I have to leave to speak somewhere (which I've had to limit to keep things running smoothly). It's really crazy.

**What is your writing process like?**

Usually I get an idea long before I finish the previous novel. I mull it

over in my mind, explore different opening scenes, and figure out the general direction I want the novel to go. When I begin writing, I just sit down and begin. I have a goal of 2,000 words a day for first drafts.

**Do you outline?**

I don't outline. The only book I ever completely outlined, I ended up not writing.

I know where I'm going to begin each book, a few scenes





in between, and generally how I want it to end, but for me the joy of writing is discovering where my characters will take me.

I do make little notes at the bottom of the screen about things I want to include, or at the top of the screen if it's something earlier in the manuscript that I need to remember to add on the rewrite, but that's as far as I go with planning. When the notes are all gone, I'm basically finished with the book.

#### **What role does your family play in your writing?**

My older daughters are my first readers, and they're helpful.

My husband maintains my website, and he and my middle daughter often listen to me and ask questions as I talk about my current book. This helps me see any holes in my stories.

#### **How has your writing evolved over the years?**

I used to write very LDS, conversion-type stories, but as I matured, I found my tastes moving toward more common experiences for LDS women. I wanted to show strong women or women who became strong through their trials, because that is how I see women of the Church.

I am also firmly converted to the gospel, and sometimes I feel LDS authors preach too overtly in their books. I know I've done this myself, but I feel the most powerful messages come more from example than preaching. I find myself wanting to extend my readership to LDS people who don't ordinarily choose LDS books because of that preaching aspect, and to good people who aren't LDS. Themes and values can be just as strong in

these types of novel. That's not to say I won't be writing LDS characters. I definitely will.

#### **Which genre do you usually read?**

I normally read contemporary national women's novels, including general fiction, women's fiction, fantasy, science fiction, some contemporary urban fantasy, and paranormal. I also read a lot of youth and young adult novels with my children, but these are more fantasy because I really don't enjoy books that take place in a high school setting.

I read primarily in the national market to keep my skills sharp and to make sure I'm always improving. I try new authors all the time, seeking to learn something from each of them. I don't recommend these authors in a general manner, though, because too often I have

to carefully pick and choose their novels. Far too often, I won't even finish them because of the content, the grammar, or storyline. Life is too short to read something I'm not enjoying.

**So far you've published about thirty books—including two award-winning picture books—each with different and distinct characters. Has it been difficult to keep them separate from one another?**

It's as easy to keep them distinct in my mind as it is to differentiate one neighbor from another. In fact, sometimes they are more real to me than my neighbors because I know them better. I also keep detailed character pages for each novel, which helps a great deal when writing sequels.

**How do you come up with names of books and characters?**

For character names, I look on baby name sites on the Internet or in the phone book. Sometimes I mix and match names of people I know, and sometimes I just make them up.

Titles are more difficult. Half the time they come to me with the first few scenes of a book, and the rest of the time they don't. Then I simply give them a throwaway working title that may change several times as I write the book. After I finish the manuscript, I peruse Internet book sites for ideas, ask my writer friends for suggestions, or even post on Facebook. Without fail someone eventually throws out a title that I like, usually a twist on my working title. Occasionally, the working title feels right by the end of the book, so that's how I submit it. Several times my publisher has asked me to adjust a title for one reason or another, but Shadow Mountain and Deseret Book are very good at letting me have input so that I feel the title is exactly right for the book.

**What would you tell writers who are trying to get published?**

Read, read, read. Study writing books, take classes on writing and other subjects, attend writing conferences, write and let people read it. Read, read, and read some more. Never, ever give up. It's hard to become published, but those who learn the craft and persevere will make it.

**What role do public speaking and self-marketing play for an author? What advice do you have for aspiring authors where these are concerned?**

I believe that public speaking and self-marketing are vital, especially for new authors. Publishers are more and more depending on authors to do the footwork. Every little thing you do helps.

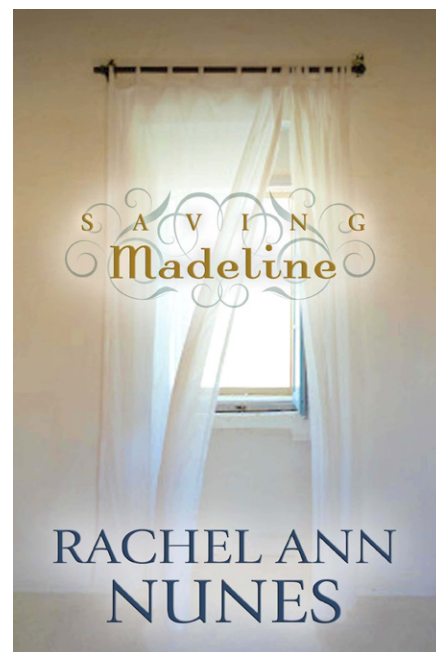
At the same time, you don't want to be so involved in marketing that you lose the magic of writing or use time that you should be with your family. It's a balance each author individually must decide for his or herself. To be successful, you must pay the price, but you decide how much to pay and that determines how long it will take to get there.

**Tell us about creating the LDStorymakers group.**

In creating LDStorymakers, I wanted a group that could offer support, help, and advice to published authors in any situation, as well as raise the quality of LDS genre fiction. I feel we have succeeded in doing these very well, though there is always room for improvement, especially in the quality of fiction.

I also hoped that we would become a powerful enough group that we could influence publishers with unfair contracts to adjust them to better help authors, as author guilds do nationally. We aren't quite there yet. Though there

*I find myself wanting to extend my readership to LDS people who don't ordinarily choose LDS books.*





*I want to give readers a glimpse into new worlds, show them new ideas, and maybe along the way lighten their burden in some way.*

seems to be a change in certain publishers, this may be related more to ownership and policy changes than anything else.

### **How do you become a member of LDStorymakers?**

The full guidelines are posted at LDStorymakers.com, but essentially you have to have be LDS in good standing (of which you are the judge), have published a book with a traditional publisher within the past three years, and can have in no way contributed financially to the publishing of the book (vanity publishing, etc.). You fill out the membership form on the website and pay your dues, and you become a member.

### **Tell us about the LDStorymakers annual conference.**

We've held an annual conference every year since 2004 to help current and aspiring authors improve their craft. It's grown a great deal in the past seven years, and it has become a very valuable conference, offering a wide range of classes.

To attend, you simply visit [LDStorymakers.com](http://LDStorymakers.com) and sign up. We usually have the next year's conference classes up by the first of the year. We draw upon Storymakers, other published authors, local and national editors, and national agents for our presenters.

### **How does being a member of the Church influence your writing?**

Even when dealing with difficult scenes, I think about the long-term effects of choices my characters make, and that is likely part of my LDS upbringing. Many times when I read books, the consequences for actions don't exist or don't to the degree I feel they should.

Adultery, for instance, isn't as painless as it appears in some fiction. People have a harder time forgiving. As a member of the

Church, I have very solid views on what is right and what is wrong. There is less gray, and that is reflected in my work.

At the same time, I worry that in LDS fiction we aren't yet showing what is out there in our neighborhoods. We have a tendency to gloss over some of the more difficult aspects of certain issues. I have to struggle against that when I write because I believe if we show the reality, or close to it, we will ultimately do our readers a favor. LDS authors as a group are making good headway on this, but we still have a long way to go.

### **Have you ever felt an impression to write a certain story?**

Several times I've felt inspired to write a certain story. These include *Ariana: The Making of a Queen*, *To Love and To Promise*, *A Heartbeat Away*, *Fields of Home*, *Saving Madeline*, *Imprints*, and my picture book *Daughter of a King*. I'd go so far to say that in most of my stories there is at least one scene I've put in for no solid reason except that it had to be there. Sometimes I believe the inspiration was for me to learn something that would be helpful for myself or for others I meet. At other times, it was for certain readers (judging by the letters I received), and at other times it was to offer a better solution than what is available in the national market.

### **What do you hope to accomplish through your writing?**

Authors often talk about their deeper purposes, but I have the same goal now as when I began writing. I want people to be able to immerse themselves in my work, to be entertained, and uplifted. I want to give readers a glimpse into new worlds, show them new ideas, and maybe along the way lighten their burdens in some way. ■



**Author**  
at work

# Imprints

CHAPTER ONE FROM THE NOVEL BY **RACHEL ANN NUNES**

FROM *IMPRINTS*, BY RACHEL ANN NUNES, © 2010 NUNES ENTERTAINMENT, LLC. USED BY PERMISSION.

My breath came faster as I stared into the shoe box sitting on the counter at my antiques shop. Not one of the items inside was exceptionally valuable or remarkable in any way—a kaleidoscope of bric-a-brac and childhood keepsakes that had once made up a young woman’s life.

A missing young woman.

I met Mrs. Fullmer’s swollen, tear-stained eyes, small and brown inside the fine scattering of wrinkles that were evidence of her suffering. Her hands tightly gripped the edges of the box holding her daughter’s possessions, though the box sat on the counter between us and needed no support.

I didn’t want to do this. I didn’t have to. If I refused, Jake would escort the couple quickly outside and make sure they didn’t return. I was very near to fainting as it was, though more with fear of what I would discover than of what the box contained.

“You okay, Autumn?” Jake’s voice was both worried and curious. He smiled tentatively, his teeth white against his brown skin.

“I’m fine,” I said.

A soft snort came from Mr. Fullmer. “Maybe we should be going.”

An unbeliever. I didn’t blame him. I didn’t believe it myself for the first six months, and I hadn’t told anyone about my strange gift for a month after that. I’d confessed to Tawnia first, and that my practical sister believed me was a testament to the connection between us—despite our having spent the first thirty-two years of our lives apart.

Jake Ryan was the second person I’d told. Solid, reliable Jake, who was gorgeous despite—or perhaps because of—his chin-length dreadlocks. When he was at the counter in my store, women bought more of my antiques just to see him smile or to have an excuse to talk to him. He had increased the sales in the Herb Shoppe considerably since I’d sold Winter’s business to him. Winter Rain, my father.

Silently, I met Mr. Fullmer’s gaze and saw him notice my eyes, his mouth opening slightly in surprise. People are always surprised when they look at me long enough to actually see my eyes. I didn’t give him credit for seeing, though, as we’d met already once before and



because he'd been staring at me for the past five minutes, searching for obvious flaws. He took a step back, which I took as defeat.

"If there's any chance Victoria left a clue," Mrs. Fullmer said in her breathless voice, "we have to try. She's been gone for months."

When no one spoke further, I slowly removed the oversized antique rings from my fingers and handed them to Jake, the comforting, pleasant buzz they gave off ceasing the moment I released them. I reached for an object. A hairbrush. I held it in one hand, running the fingers of my other hand over the polished length, pushing at the hair-entwined bristles.

I saw a face in a mirror, a narrow, pretty face that I knew from the pictures they'd shown me as belonging to Victoria. Her hair was long and blonde. There was a sound at the door and a flash of an angry man staring down at me, words falling from the lips: "You are not going tonight, and that's final!" The urge to throw the brush at the face, an urge at least nine months old. Nothing more.

I shook my head and set the brush back in the box. I'd recognized the man as Mr. Fullmer, but the scene hadn't told me anything except that once last year Victoria had been angry enough to want to throw the hairbrush at her father. She hadn't done it, though, and the memory was already fading. Mentioning it now wouldn't help them find her. I moved to the next item, passing purposefully over the new-looking socks and worn swimming suit.

I'd learned by touching everything of Winter's that distinct feelings remained intact only on belongings connected with great emotion: objects a person treasured most; items held while experiencing extreme levels of joy, fear, worry, or sadness; articles that weren't often washed or forgotten.

For Winter that meant the colorful afghan my adoptive mother, Summer, had crocheted, the first vase I'd made on my wheel when I'd gone through my pottery stage, his favorite tea mug with the sad-looking puppy on it, his plain wedding band. And of course, his cherished picture of Summer, the one I'd dropped in shock and surprise on the day of his funeral, causing the glass to shatter. It was the first object that had "spoken" to me.

Other objects gave off a muted sensation, a pleasant low hum, but no clear images or scenes I could relive when the burden of missing Winter became too great. I never found anything among his possessions that contained angry or hateful imprints. He must have long ago come to terms with those feelings. My adoptive father had been an exceptional man.

My hand settled on the journal from the Fullmers' box, but I could tell right away this hadn't been a real

journal for the missing girl. No emotional imprints, except perhaps the barest hint of old resentment. If she'd written in the book at all, it hadn't been willingly. I picked up the prom pictures instead. Victoria was a slim, pretty, vivacious girl, and her date equally attractive, but though he was nice enough, the girl hadn't been attracted to him. The feeling had been strong enough to leave a faint residue of distaste on the picture when she'd held it in her hands as recently as six months earlier, which would have been mid-December, several weeks before her disappearance. I set it down.

The shell hinted at the ebb and swell of the ocean, the girl's possession of it not long enough or felt deeply enough to make an imprint. An old compact mirror with jeweled insets radiated a soothing tingle. Most of my antiques were like that, the emotions clinging to them soft and old and comfortable. I believe that feeling is why I went into the antiques business. Perhaps the objects had quietly hummed to me all along, though I hadn't yet understood their language. Even in the old days there had been attractive items I'd never pursued, and now that I was conscious of my paranormal gift, or curse, as I sometimes thought of it, I think those were the antiques that had fresher, negative imprints, perhaps even violent ones. A cast-iron statue at an estate sale last month had flashed a terrifying image of crushing a human skull. No way did I want that statue in my shop. I didn't care that my markup would have been phenomenal.

I let my hand glide over several more objects in the Fullmers' shoe box, scanning for emotions that might be clues for Victoria's mother. The letter (contentment long faded), the porcelain figurine of a ballet dancer (sleepy dream of the future), a book of poetry (whisper of an old crush). To tell the truth, I wasn't positive any of these weak impressions were real or if my mind showed me only what I expected to find. These items had obviously been important to the missing girl at one time, though, or she wouldn't have kept them all these years.

Not until I reached the black velvet jewelry box did I feel a jolt. My hand closed over it, my palm covering the small object completely. Even through the box, the emotion was strong—too strong to come from even my active imagination.

"What is it?" Mrs. Fullmer asked. "That's my daughter's—" She was hushed by her husband, who probably thought I would make something out of whatever information she might let slip. But I didn't need anything from the mother to tell me the girl had loved whatever was inside.

I opened the box and took out a fine gold chain with a heart-shaped pendant that sported a diamond at the top where the heart dipped in the middle.

A beautiful piece, though decades outdated in style. Not outrageously expensive but worth more than many girls in their first year of college could afford. I knew Victoria had loved it because it had been her grandparents' high school graduation gift to her mother and then her mother's to her. Yet the overall feeling emanating from the piece was not love but guilt, one emotion overlying the other.

I gently rubbed the heart between my fingers, my eyes closed. Jewelry often retained the best imprints, which was why I'd saved the velvet box for last. "She wants to take it with her," I said aloud, "but everything she has will become theirs, and she knows it's not right to give them her mother's necklace. It should stay in the family. She thinks you will give it to Stacey when she's gone." I very clearly felt Victoria replacing the necklace with a sigh. She hadn't wanted to pass it to her younger sister, and that's where the guilt came in. She'd wished there was a way to follow her dream and keep both her family and her necklace.

Several other flashes of memory rushed like water through my hands to my brain: a college campus, a park, a man dressed in a flowing, button-down shirt with a wide, pointed collar and elaborate cuffs turned upward, the tails of the shirt untucked. He had kind eyes and longish black hair, and he was surrounded by younger people wearing white T-shirts.

"Yes, I'm going with you," Victoria said to him, her hand going to the pendant at her throat. "But I have to go home first. There's something I have to do."

When I opened my eyes, everyone was staring at me. "She left on her own," I said. "Or at least she was planning to leave with a man in an old-fashioned white shirt. He had blue eyes, black hair down to his collar, a short beard. She wasn't the only one to go with him. Did you ever see her wear a white T-shirt with navy blue lettering that says Only Love Can Overcome Hate?"

Mr. Fullmer paled noticeably, but Mrs. Fullmer was nodding. "She had one."

"A cult then," Mr. Fullmer sputtered. "That's what you're saying."

I shrugged. "Maybe a commune."

"Same difference," Mr. Fullmer said.

"I can't say for sure. I do know that she believed anything she took with her wouldn't be hers anymore. She wished she didn't have to choose between them and you." Almost as an afterthought, I added, "They were selling Christmas cakes at a park. Near a university, I think. That was when she met them."

"She came home early on break," Mrs. Fullmer whispered. "She'd been having a hard time, but we didn't know until later that she missed all her final exams. She never registered for the next semester."

That explained the despair Victoria had left

imprinted on the necklace. "She was more hopeful when she met them," I said, meaning it as a comfort.

"Stupid child." Mr. Fullmer's gruff voice was tinged with pain. "She should know better than to talk to crazies."

"She could be in danger," Mrs. Fullmer protested. "She's too young to know better."

I didn't respond. I didn't need to. There was nothing more I could give them. I stood back from the counter and waited for them to leave. Jake handed me my rings. As I slid them on, his warm hand touched the middle of my back, and I was grateful for the support. Last September I'd begun entertaining the thought that we could be more than friends, but our relationship remained mostly linked to business. I didn't mind too much. After my sister, he was my best friend, and since Tawnia had married and was now expecting her first child, her attention was divided. At this point I needed Jake's friendship more than I needed a romance.

The Fullmers were leaving, and I watched them go. Mr. Fullmer, his rigid back clad in a dark suit, was carrying the box of his daughter's belongings. His sandy hair was thinning in the back. Jake had a natural remedy that would halt the hair loss, but that wasn't why he'd come, so I remained silent. Next to him, Mrs. Fullmer looked shrunken, her shoulders hunched forward, her blonde head bowed. She clung to her husband's arm, staggering more than walking. Below her dress I could see a run in the back of her nylons.

Before she reached the door, she paused, stepped away from her husband, and retraced her slow steps to the desk. "Thank you," she whispered. She looked around somewhat frantically before her hand shot out to grab the Chinese thirteenth-century Jun Yao vase that sat in glory next to the counter. It was wider than it was tall, a dark, glossy red piece with bright blue highlights. The sale price was seven hundred dollars and a steal at that because it was in extremely good condition. I'd found it in a basement in Kansas when I'd sheltered with some people during a tornado.

"I want to buy this," Mrs. Fullmer said.

I arched a brow. I didn't think she really wanted the vase, but business had been slow, and I wasn't going to turn her down. I took it from her, enjoying the pleasant tingle of the thoughts that surrounded the piece. Not an image I could see but nice and comforting feelings. At least one person who'd owned this vase had cared for it lovingly and had lived a life of quiet contentment. I wrapped the vase as Jake rang up the sale. Mr. Fullmer waited by the door, impassiveness and impatience alternately crossing his stern features.

As I passed the bag with the vase to Mrs. Fullmer, she caught my hand and pressed something into it: the



Imprints

NUNES



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velvet box with the necklace. "Keep it for a little while. Maybe there's something more."

I shook my head. "There's never anything more. I'm sorry." The last words felt ripped from me, not because I didn't mean them, but because I knew they wouldn't help her suffering.

She made no move to take back the box. "Please."

I nodded, sighing inside where she couldn't see. It was a false hope, and I didn't want to give her that, but I wasn't strong enough to refuse.

She smiled. "Thank you for the vase." She turned and joined her husband.

I didn't feel guilty about the vase because they could obviously afford it, but I did feel bad that she might think buying it could help me see something more.

"That was nice of her," Jake said.

"Nice?"

"Buying the vase. I told her when she called that you didn't accept money, but I did suggest that she might want an antique for her house. This way you earn something for your trouble. That's important, especially if it makes it so you can't work the rest of the day." As he spoke, he was pushing me onto the tall stool I kept at the counter. Then he disappeared into the back room and returned with a small book of poetry that my parents had written for each other for their wedding. I took it willingly, grateful for the positive emotions that

flowed into me. Touching it, I could see them as they held the book in turn and exchanged their flower-child vows in the forest, Summer with a ring of flowers on her head and Winter with his prematurely white hair in a long braid down his back. Though this session hadn't been all that draining, I felt full of life as I witnessed their silent, love-filled exchange. I hoped these feelings would never fade from the pages. Almost, it was like having them with me again.

I kept the book at the store because not all imprints were as relatively easy to stomach as Victoria Fullmer's. Last month I'd been asked to touch the bicycle of a ten-year-old girl named Alice, who had vanished while riding her birthday gift. At first there had been only elation at her new toy—until the dark-haired man had stood in her path and torn her from the bicycle. I'd fainted with her fear. Later my description of the man had allowed the police to make an arrest and had eventually led them to little Alice. Too late. The memory still haunted me sometimes when I was alone. I'd had to sleep with my parents' book for a week—and the picture of Summer as well. I tried not to do that often, afraid my parents' imprints would be overwritten by my own.

Jangling bells told us someone had entered the Herb Shoppe. Jake looked at me. "You sure you're okay?"



“I’m fine. Go ahead.”

He walked around the counter and sprinted to the double doors that joined the two stores. My father had put in those doors back when Jake had worked for both of us. Jake and I still helped each other out, using a networked computer program to keep track of sales so we could ring people up at either counter. We also shared two part-time employees, Thera Brinker, who worked early afternoons and Saturdays, and Jake’s sister, Randa, who came after school and during special weekend sales events. Thera mostly worked for me and Randa for Jake, but they crossed over when either store had a rush of customers. It worked for all of us.

“Jake,” I called. Too late, I thought. He had disappeared, but his dark head popped back in. “I’m going for a walk, okay?”

“No problem. I’ll keep an eye on things until Thera gets in.”

I knew he would, but to make it easier for him, I locked my outside door on the way out, flipping over the sign that told people to use the Herb Shoppe entrance. That way Jake would be aware of any customers coming to browse my antiques, and they’d have to pass by him to leave. Only a few pieces in my inventory were really expensive, but all together, they added up to my entire future.

The cement felt warm against my bare feet, and I relished the sensation. I couldn’t believe the outrageous shoes women put up with these days. In my late teens, when I’d gone through a shoe phase, my back had ached constantly, and once I’d spent a month in traction because of the pain, so it didn’t make sense to continue wearing shoes. But then, I didn’t understand why people would willingly take preservatives into their bodies, either. Or ruin perfectly good food in a microwave. I liked to feel the earth under me—or as close as I could get with all the cement. There was a better connection with nature that way, even in the city. Thankfully, not wearing shoes wasn’t against the law, not even while driving, though many people, including police officers, believed it was, and there were no health ordinances against bare feet. I could even enter the post office. Frankly, I was more worried about what germs my hands picked up on doorknobs than anything my feet might encounter, and I never had to deal with sweaty, stinky feet.

I didn’t mind being different. I’d been raised that way. Other children learned their letters and mathematics. I’d learned about herbs and human nature. I’d called my adoptive parents by their first names, Winter and Summer, and the only reason I’d gone to school at all was because I’d wanted to, even though every October the principal would threaten to call child services until I took shoes to school and kept them under my

desk. Summer would have been happier teaching me at home, and I was always glad that I had stayed with her that last year, when I was eleven, the year she’d died of breast cancer.

My hand grazed the box in my pants pocket. I felt not the velvet but a flash of emotion. Victoria had loved this necklace, and she’d loved her family. Yet she’d chosen to leave them. A well of bitterness came to my heart. I’d give anything to have Summer and Winter alive and in my life. I could no more easily have left them than I could have cut off my own arm.

What had possessed her? Was there more to her family than I’d seen? Had her father’s anger driven her to seek people who might love her unconditionally?

It’s none of my business, I thought. My part was over. They knew she’d gone of her own will, and they knew where to begin looking. I’d even been compensated for my trouble. In a few days, I’d mail Mrs. Fullmer the necklace so she could eventually give it to her other daughter.

Slowly, I became aware of my surroundings. I’d walked long and far, or what most people would consider far in these days of cars and motorbikes, and my bare feet had taken a path I hadn’t anticipated. I’d ended up near the Willamette River, downstream from the Hawthorne Bridge, where the bombing had taken place and where Winter had died. We’d been on the bridge in my car when the explosion collapsed the structure. I had come up from the cold, heavy depths, and he hadn’t. Thirty others had also lost their lives in the bombing. Those responsible had been punished, but the holes in the lives of those left by the dead weren’t easily filled.

I hadn’t been this close to the river since Winter had been found a week after the bombing, and it was strange to see the rebuilding in reality instead of on TV. The construction area was fenced off, so I couldn’t go all the way to the riverbank, but I could see the bridge had come a long way in the past six months. The promise to have the bridge ready for traffic in less than three years would probably be met. Not that I’d ever had any doubts. My brother-in-law, Bret, was the director of the project, and he was conservative in his estimates. He was conservative in almost everything. That’s part of what my sister loved in him.

My tumbling thoughts halted abruptly as I caught sight of a man wearing coarse brown pants and a white, old-fashioned, button-down shirt that looked all too familiar. He stood in front of the high chain-link fence surrounding the construction site, handing out flyers with his companions—young people of all sizes and shapes, carrying baskets and wearing royal blue T-shirts with white lettering that proclaimed Love Is the Only Thing That Matters. ■





James Gunter

# Patricia Karamesines

INTERVIEW BY **LINDA MORRIS** | PHOTOS COURTESY **PATRICIA KARAMESINES**

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*Patricia Karamesines roams and writes in southeastern Utah. She has won several literary awards for her poetry, essays, and fiction, including from Brigham Young University, the University of Arizona, the Utah Arts Council, and the Utah Wilderness Association. A poet, essayist, and novelist, she has published in literary journals and popular magazines locally and nationally. Her novel The Pictograph Murders (2004 Signature Books) won the 2004 AML Award for the Novel. She writes for the blog A Motley Vision ([www.motleyvision.org](http://www.motleyvision.org)) and runs AMV's companion blog Wilderness Interface Zone ([wilderness.motleyvision.org](http://wilderness.motleyvision.org)), a blog focused on nature writing.*

## **Nature and language use are common themes throughout your writing. What about your early life influenced those themes?**

I came with standard issue kid-interest in critters. I just never grew out of it. When I was about four, I snuck into the alley behind our house in Hopewell, Virginia. The alley was a gold mine of rotting cardboard hosting hundreds

of pillbugs, sow bugs, and black beetles. I carried a chunk into the yard and shook it over a metal bowl. Insects rained down. Then a sinuous ribbon-creature slid out of the cardboard and plopped into the bowl. I'd caught my first snake. That moment of seeing such a beautiful, strange, rippling being hit so powerfully that I think I imprinted on snakes.



Valentina Karamesines

*Before I learned to read books, I was reading nature, which has a compelling story to tell.*

Later, we moved to a rural environment. Lots and lots of snakes. I used to catch mole snakes and stuff them in my shirt against my skin until they got hip to the niceties of body contact with a warm-blooded creature. Then I let them wrap around my wrists and neck and took them for bike rides. They stayed there like living bracelets and necklaces while I pedaled. When the ride was over, I put them back where I found them. I enjoyed their companionship immensely. I discovered turtles when we lived on that property. They made an even deeper impression.

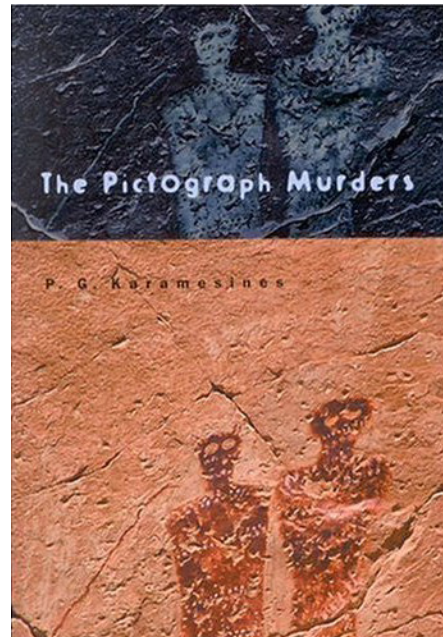
Hunting for these creatures, handling them, and learning to read their body language all created a feast for the senses and gave me an eye for detail. Before I learned to read books, I was reading nature, which has a compelling story to tell. How did this give rise to my desire to write, particularly nature stories? Maybe just as I imagined then that snakes would

only ever know what it was like to ride bicycles if I carried them, I imagine now that many people will only experience snippets of nature's unfolding narrative if I pedal them forth.

#### **How did your desire to write develop?**

I used to write adventure stories that included childhood friends and then read them to the other kids. It was a different way of playing from shooting hoops or playing 500 in the field next door but still seemed satisfying to everybody involved. In my teen years, writing and finding my way in language became a means of developing identity and exercising self-expression: "There's a star up there, somewhere, for me / And perhaps it's one of the hard ones to see..." kinds of stuff. In my early twenties, I started writing artsier poetry but stuck to my self-expression guns, trying to make that interesting—until I joined a BYU





archaeological dig and lived in the desert for three months with the same people, four summers in a row. We became each other's safety nets as well as risk factors, each other's work support as well as challenges, each other's muscle as well as each other's weakness when difficulties arose. Just as importantly, we were each other's source of entertainment. Living so closely with people who coalesced into an extra-domestic family, I started to develop a more not-me-focused sense for community and audience. That helped snap me out of my self-expression rut.

#### **How did your conversion to the Church affect your writing?**

It gave my writing just about everything. It set me on a trajectory for attending BYU, where my mind took off and where I found companionship with thinkers and writers, specifically with professors who were able to guide me. At BYU, I learned to give careful

reading to scripture. Gaining that skill affected my thinking in subtle ways as well as flamboyant ones. Often I'd explore scriptural stories and other sacred language through my poetry and prose. Still do.

#### **How were you influenced by Leslie Norris and other writers?**

Many teachers at BYU affected me deeply, but Clinton Larson, Leslie Norris, and Arthur King not only taught special reading and writing skills but also kept close and watchful company as I went through many spiritual and intellectual growth spurts. Clinton schooled me in poetic form and literary tradition. Leslie Norris taught me literary common sense and encouraged my growing interest in audience (not, by the way, one of Clinton's strong points). Arthur—what can I say about him? I spent so much lovely time with him that I still feel his presence. He gave wonderful advice without imposing himself and always handled

my writing with tender care. His classes in rhetorical analysis with emphasis on Shakespeare's plays opened my eyes to scripture and to the power and effects of *logos*. My life wouldn't be nearly as much fun as it is now if I hadn't kept company with Arthur.

#### **In a comment posted on the *Times and Seasons* blog in response to Rosalynde Welch's review of *The Pictograph Murders*, you said, "I tried to write as many levels as possible into the book." How do you develop and keep track of the different levels?**

For *Pictograph Murders*, I turned to folklore and myth to find language that a wide audience could approach, wove that into a more traditional narrative stance, and sprinkled throughout the kind of prose people expect to find in literary fiction, but not too much, because that kind of language can write some readers out of the audience. The Coyote trickster

tradition the story taps into is a very old, very popular Native American narrative tradition that is by nature multi-layered. Sometimes I retold a difficult segment of the story in a folktale version to provide another way into the ideas. I related the murder as a folktale-like segment of the story to help out those who, like me, have problems with portrayed violence, reaching into the archetypal realm to examine the question of why people kill. As I edited, I threaded in metaphors, which for some readers open up multiple levels of meaning and for others makes the language pretty. Probably, I applied other touches I'm not completely aware of.

Even though the story is a serious one, involving murder and conflict, I reached a point where I tried not to take the story or myself writing it too seriously. That helped me avoid limiting the take-away factor for readers.

**In the same comment you said, "I hope that anybody approaching this work will find material they can have fun with." Several other commenters used the word "fun" in connection with their reading of the book. Could you expand a little on what you think the role of fun is in writing?**

At times, *Pictograph Murders* gets intense. Readers have reported feeling frightful strain during some scenes, especially ones involving the antagonist, whose behavior affects some people strongly. A book that's all strain and no fun can hammer readers, many of whom already experience a lot of strain in their lives (me included) and don't need to be relentlessly pummeled with more.

So I varied the narrative approach to give readers' minds something new to do from time to time. I showed them something of field camp life, I concocted the

faux folktales, I played with the desert's beauties, I sent the slovenly camp cook to the deerfly-infested creek, I gave the dog (who, by the way, was based closely on a husky named Ruby who actually had some of the adventures that Kit does) a starring role, etc. Fun equals play: wordplay, plot twists, trusting and enjoying the ride the story took me on as I wrote it. I played with the story every way I possibly could. That made it fun for me. At that point in my life, I needed fun.

**You've written that Joseph Smith went to the woods because "he wished to live deliberately" and that "through Joseph Smith's First Vision, Mormonism stakes claim in the grand tradition of finding God in the wilderness." How does the wilderness inspire your writing?**

Joseph Smith's reasons for going to the woods bear important similarities to Thoreau's stated reasons for retreating to Walden Pond.

To my eye, both men account for their actions in language comparably spiritual in nature. At other times, Joseph encountered God or God's delegates within the four walls of buildings. His spirituality appears not to have been bounded by traditional hot zones for sacred encounter—chapels, temples, other dedicated enclosures. Spirituality is a quality of character, not of place, though there are certainly places—temples, church buildings, wherever two or three gather together to talk of truth, charged natural settings—where events that light spiritual fires happen more easily.

On the spirituality scale, for me, many encounters with nature are not different in degree from encounters with the sacred in any of the hot spots I mention above and are only slightly different in kind. I can't distinguish between the spirituality buzz I get from experiences in nature, ones I get from

wondrous encounters with people, and experiences with prayer or related communication with God.

Let me just say this: I will never write about nature just for the sake of writing about nature. Always, in the foreground or background of the nature writing, lurks my affection for people and invested interest in the human condition. Of course, concern for the human condition lies at the heart of the best scriptural writings, as well. So I'm not certain that wilderness per se inspires my writing.

I do think it wouldn't hurt Mormonism as a culture to develop a closer relationship with wild species and spaces and not fret so much about making the desert blossom with Kentucky blue grass. If even just a few Latter-day Saints who are inclined to do so integrate experience with nature more deeply into their concepts of spirituality, that will make us a sexier people overall.

**What do you hope to achieve through your blog, *Wilderness Interface Zone*?**

I believe that many Mormons bear strong affection for nature and may even have had powerful spiritual experiences in natural environments (why should Joseph Smith have had all the fun?) but don't know what to do with them.

I hope WIZ's message that it's all right to explore and share such moments through nature literature will help open up the nature-human story for Mormon audiences as well as for non-Mormon audiences and for aspiring LDS nature writers. WIZ tries to take a different approach to nature writing, more of a campfire ring stance than a fully academic or political one. A friend—a seasoned desert rat—once told me, "A campfire melts the molecules between people." I've certainly been at campfires where everyone present felt



free to tell his or her story without trouble. Trying for this approach gives WIZ, I think, more of the feel of an open forum.

Other than that, I don't know what's going to happen at WIZ. I'm perfectly happy to let nature take its course.

### What is the local awareness of, and what has been the local reaction to your writing?

They're beginning to find out about it and are interested for many reasons. The story mentions landmarks they know and plays off events which some find familiar. The history between archaeologists, activists, Native Americans, federal interests in the area and the local residents is a charged-up and long-running drama in the Four Corners region, with some very hard and tragic chapters only recently being written.

The locals, many of them multi-generation Mormons, are always interested to see how they've been portrayed. From what I've heard so far, local readers really like the book, saying they could hardly put it down. Nobody has walked up and tried to shove it down my throat.

### What projects are you working on? Is there another novel in the works?

Yeah, I'm wondering that too. Here's my wish list: I'd like to get a volume of poetry done in a year or so. I'd like to finish *Loon Woman*, the sequel to *The Pictograph Murders*. I'd like to build up Wilderness Interface Zone. I hope to break into nature writing in a more forthright way, engaging the conversation at large. People have expressed here and there a wish for some of my online essays to be compiled into a book or some other collected format.

Over the years of motherhood and of being primary caregiver to an at-risk special needs child, I've had to adopt the "wait and see"

model for planning. That's all I can say at this point—let's see what I manage to get done.

### Do you have any encouraging advice for aspiring Mormon nature writers?

Along with honing your language skills, take science classes or get involved in environmental science programs. Read nature writing to get a sense for the tradition, even though sometimes it will infuriate you (it should). Don't mistake the nature writing genre for "people is stupid" writing that tends to exert squeaky wheel influence in every genre. People are absolutely essential to the nature story.

Look for ways in writing to make it possible for readers to care about what you care about—open the view where you can, expand possibilities. Don't fall into the trap of trying to motivate through anger, fear, guilt, or shame.

Anger is needful at times—like fear, it can get you out of trouble, fast. Where nature writing is concerned, anger-suffused language affects the environment. Same with fear—using it as a common rhetorical device has unfortunate effects upon nature and man. The effluvia of anger and fear trickle down into natural environs quite easily through unimagined channels. To my thinking, that makes the quality of human language an environmental concern.

Guilt and shame cast wide nets, like the long nets fishermen use to harvest tuna but which also entangle other species. Many, many people carry guilt or shame from trouble not their fault and are terribly sensitive to such language. It will hurt them or restrict their freedom of movement in your language, maybe even turn them out from your audience. Most of all, get out there—not only into natural wildlands but human ones too in acts of engaged relationship. ■

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*I do think it wouldn't hurt Mormonism as a culture to develop a closer relationship with wild species and spaces.*

# *The Pictograph Murders*

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE FROM THE NOVEL BY **PATRICIA KARAMESINES**

FROM *THE PICTOGRAPH MURDERS* (SIGNATURE BOOKS, 2004).

Why is Coyote, also called First Angry, so smart? How is it he lives, even thrives, when other animals have a bad time of it, except, maybe, Rabbit? I will tell you.

After the spirits created the world and its creatures, they argued. Some said the animals ought to choose what powers they wanted. Others said no, each animal should take only what was given. The spirits that favored giving animals choice said that if animals chose for themselves they would have nobody but themselves to blame should things turn out badly. Those who said animals should take only what was given argued that choice was a power with two faces, one good and one evil. They thought giving choice to earth's creatures might come back on the gods in a bad way.

They could not settle the matter, so they gambled. The spirits who thought the animals ought to be given choice won.

"It is decided," said those spirits. "But to satisfy you others and balance things, we will shape the powers so that each comes with a weakness equal to its strength. That way, getting choice will not make the animals too dangerous, to each other or to us. Now, bring all the animals."

Everyone was brought and seated at the fire. The powers with matching weaknesses were laid out in little pouches.

The spirits taught the animals that each one, after choosing its sacred pouch, should show the contents to no one. They said this would be for the animal's own good. Then the animals chose.

Hawk chose a bundle with the power of flight, though such a power made her clumsy on the ground. Deer chose a bundle with the power to leap, although leaping revealed him to hunters. Badger chose the bundle with the power of digging, though if he were caught out from his hole, he would be in danger. Mouse chose the pouch containing the power to creep through the grass without stirring a blade, though it made her smaller than everyone else, except for Ant and Honeybee. Rattlesnake chose the power of having poison in his bite. This power came with a loud rattle that Rattlesnake had to wear on his tail at all times. So on and so forth.

Coyote hung back during this time of choosing. When the gods asked him which pouch he wanted, he said, "I cannot decide," but in his heart he wanted all powers.

Finally there was just one power left—the power of guile. The other animals did not want it because it smelled bad.

The spirits said, “Coyote, you waited too long. Now there is only this one left. You must take it.”

“If you insist,” said Coyote. He took the pouch with guile in it and put it around his neck. The other animals moved away.

“Hmm,” said the spirits. “We wonder if this has worked out for the best.” Then they went on to other things.

That night the animals held a feast. Everyone ate except Coyote.

“Coyote, why do you not eat?” the other animals asked.

“Oh, my belly aches,” said Coyote.

Next, each animal danced, giving in the dance a glimpse of its sacred power. Only Coyote did not dance.

“Coyote, why do you not dance?” asked the others.

“Oh, I have a cactus spine stuck in my foot,”

Coyote said.

After the celebration, all of the animals felt sleepy. They made beds by the fire and lay down. Only Coyote did not lie down.

“Coyote, why do you not sleep?” the animals asked.

“Oh, the pain in my foot and in my belly keep me awake,” Coyote said.

Soon everyone was asleep except for Coyote. He lay waiting for the fire to die. When all the animals were asleep, he crept to the one lying next to him, who happened to be Fox, and looked in his sacred pouch. He saw Fox’s power and Fox’s weakness. He took a pinch of the bag’s contents and put it in his own.

Next he came to Mouse. He opened up Mouse’s pouch and looked in. He saw Mouse’s power and Mouse’s weakness. He took a pinch of the contents of Mouse’s pouch and put it in his own. Next he came to Frog. Then Owl. Then Fish. He crept all the way around the circle, stealing a tiny bit from each animal’s sacred pouch. Then, he came to Rabbit.

Now Rabbit, pretending to be asleep, had kept an eye open watching Coyote.

“This is witchcraft,” she thought. “I must do something, but what? I am only a Rabbit.”

Rabbit got an idea. Some say the spirits whispered it to her. Others say Rabbit got the idea because of the power in her sacred pouch, which was quickness in the brain. When Coyote came to her, she pretended sleep. Then when he leaned over and stole from her pouch, she slipped her hand into his pouch and stole from him. Coyote knew then that Rabbit was awake, but it was too late.

Rabbit sprang up. “Wake up!” she cried. “Coyote has

stolen from our sacred pouches and knows our weaknesses as well as our strengths! There is danger in this!”

All the animals woke and ran, flew, leaped, slithered, or swam away. Coyote was left standing alone with his great hunger.

Coyote sat down and licked his lips in anger. Things had not gone as he had planned, but he knew that as long as he had the bundle around his neck, containing a little of each animal’s strength and weakness, he would always have the upper hand. When the world changed, as he knew it would, he would survive because he had a pinch of the best qualities of each animal and knowledge of their worst.

There was just one problem. As Coyote shared the qualities of other animals with them, Rabbit now shared his with him.

“I will get that Rabbit,” he said. “I must get back what she stole from me.”

Meanwhile, Rabbit opened her pouch and looked in. There was her power and her weakness—just a bit of it gone—and next to it, the pinch of Coyote’s power.

Rabbit said, “This is guile. Now I see why Coyote did as he did. But what is his weakness?” Though it repulsed her to touch it she turned the guile over, and there, on the other side, she saw Coyote’s weakness. His weakness was that he would always think of himself as being better than he was, and that would at times cause him to fail in the hunt.

The gods appeared to Rabbit.

“What have you done?” they asked.

Rabbit said, “I saw what Coyote was doing and I did the same. In so doing, I saved others’ lives.”

The spirits said, “Like Coyote, you have gained greater power and understanding than you ought to have. As long as you use it for good, you may keep it. We need someone who can stand up to Coyote, someone who knows how he is. The other animals—some are too rigid, others are innocent. Many have no imagination.”

Rabbit felt ashamed.

“Now go your way,” the spirits said.

As soon as Rabbit had gone, the spirits said, “That Coyote, he will give them all something to think about, and that Rabbit, she will show Coyote for what he really is.” They felt pleased.

“Funny how things work out,” they said.

Perhaps you are wondering, “What weakness was it that Rabbit carried in her sacred pouch?” Such wonder is what made Coyote what he is. Few people want to say, “I am like Coyote,” but it is no big thing nowadays for one person to try to get a glimpse of another’s weakness. It is no big thing for one person to use another’s weakness to gain the upper hand. ■



# Sam Nielson

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INTERVIEW BY **JON OGDEN** | PHOTOS BY **SCOTT MORRIS**

WEB: **ARTSAMMICH.BLOGSPOT.COM**

*Sam Nielson received a BFA from BYU's animation program and now works full-time as a concept artist for Disney Interactive Studios: Avalanche Software in downtown Salt Lake City. He also works as a part-time teacher for BYU's animation program and occasionally does freelance illustration for various publishers. Sam lives in South Jordan, Utah, with his wife Marilyn and their four children.*



*I've learned through hard experience that I'd be fine without my art, but I wouldn't be fine without my family.*

### How did you land your job at Avalanche Software/Disney Interactive Studios?

When I was young, my older brother John was obsessed with the idea of making his own video games. He was a much better artist than me, but he had no one to write the code to make the game work, so he taught himself how to program. Because he had to dedicate so much time toward engineering his games, I fell into the backup artist role, picking up whatever scrap pieces he didn't want to do himself. Back then we drew assets pixel-by-pixel using primitive (and sometimes self-made) software.

When I turned sixteen, my mom, searching for anything she could do with her sons' computer nerd skills, found a classified ad by a company looking for a computer artist. I was excited to discover that the company made video games, so as a portfolio, I turned in the only game my brother and I had actually finished.

I found out later that they were underwhelmed by my art skills, but they gave me a chance because they were impressed we actually went through the process of making a game by ourselves.

That job (which I started at age sixteen) gave me the confidence I needed and surrounded me with some very good artists who influenced how my skills developed.

My job at Avalanche came because of the experience and connections I gained over years in the industry.

### What is a typical work day like?

My workday is split between meetings, brainstorming (writing down ideas, doodling on whiteboards, and bouncing ideas off other artists), sketching favorite ideas from the brainstorms, developing ideas further (usually through painting), eating lunch or searching the break

room cupboards for snacks, and corresponding with the development team.

### What led you to pursue art full-time?

Going to college. Because I'd gotten a job so young and had been working in the industry for years, I'd never really considered whether I should do something else. But when my wife urged me to go back to school (so my kids would take me seriously when I urged them to do the same), I had to do some hard thinking about whether I should pursue another subject, even just for the sake of a backup job. I found that I was good at a lot of subjects, and with some effort I could have made the jump to something else.

Then I found the animation program at BYU, and I realized that I really did enjoy entertaining people more than the other things I'd been studying. So in the end I picked what I enjoyed the most.

The moral dilemma you go through at times like these is always, "Am I really bringing value to the world?" and of course you always compare your job against teachers, firemen, or some other "morally superior" profession. Entertainment is always going to fall short in those comparisons, especially as a Mormon, where our culture and beliefs place so much emphasis on adding good to the world.

I've had to learn to stop worrying about the fact that all I do is give people a world to escape to, even if it's a family-friendly alternative to what people might be playing instead. I've grown to appreciate that what I'm good at makes someone find a moment or two of enjoyment.

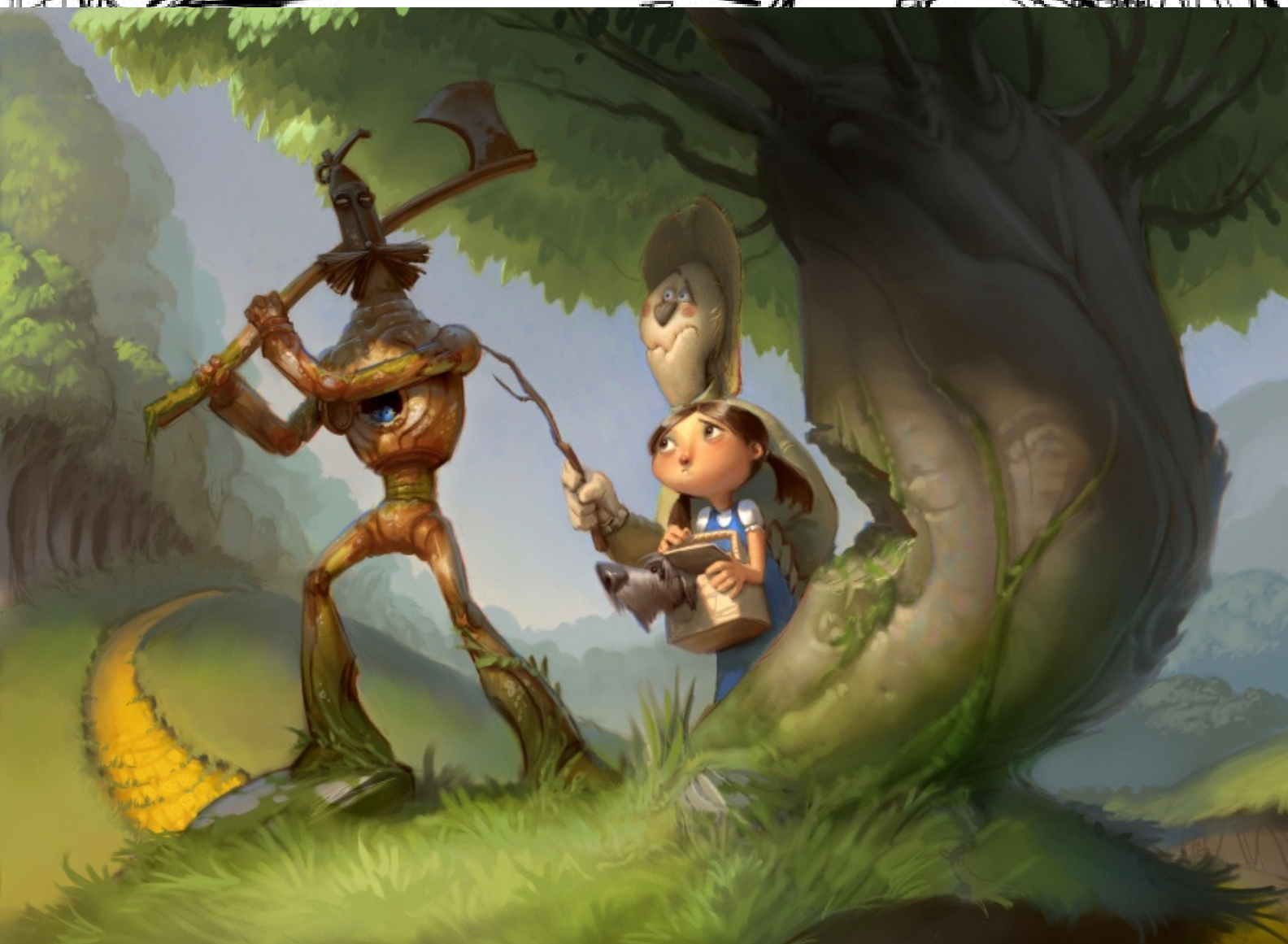
At the end of the day, I feed my family and I do it with a job I really enjoy, and if that's all there is, I can be happy with doing that for the rest of my life.























### Who have been some of your biggest influences?

My biggest influences have been coworkers and also the diverse subjects I've studied in school or through personal research. Surprisingly, there is a lot to learn about art and design from other disciplines. I'm interested in many different things—geology, astronomy, light and physics, architecture—and I feel like all those interests enhance my art and design both directly and indirectly.

Blogs have also been a great thing for artists like me, because now I can follow a plethora of great artists very easily and study what they do well.

The greatest influences in my philosophy of art and design are Ryan Woodward, Todd Harris, and Mark Kennedy. Ryan's character design class at BYU opened my eyes to some things I'd never considered before, and that started me down the path of concept art. Mark Kennedy is a Disney artist who runs a blog where he talks about art principles, and these mixed together with some of Todd's ideas give me a very principle-based viewpoint on art and design.

### What do you think are the most important qualities student artists need? What qualities have led your students to succeed?

I haven't been teaching art for that long, but I suspect the qualities students most need are similar to the qualities I see in even the best professional artists: a combination of resilience and humility. I've seen talented and persistent artists who get caught up in their own greatness and stop growing, and that persistence turns into stubbornness. Even when they work hard to learn, they can't, because without that openness there's no room for the new learning.

I've also seen very humble artists who stop growing because they





give up entirely or stop believing they're capable of what they're trying to learn.

Somewhere in between there's a magic combination of the two attributes, where artists are constantly aware of their weakness but won't let failure get in the way of their attempts to reach their potential.

#### **What do you hope your audience experiences when they see your art?**

Mostly, I like to make people laugh or smile, but at the very least I want people to enjoy the picture and feel some sense of familiarity with the character or scene.

#### **How has Mormonism affected your career decisions?**

For one thing, I don't think I would have had a decision if I hadn't gone on a mission. Before my mission I wasn't especially skilled, and I wouldn't be surprised if I didn't make it in the industry as an artist because I had such a terrible work ethic.

After my mission, I was focused and driven, and within a few months of getting home, my skills passed the point where think I would have progressed if I had stayed home and worked as an artist the whole time instead.

Whether it was a change in drive, work ethic, or just a blessing from God for the sacrifices I made, I'm glad I went. I've also had various leadership and teaching roles at times in my work where I've drawn upon things I've learned in church service over the years.

#### **What career advice would you give college students in the arts?**

If you now have or will someday have a family, make them a first priority, even if it means sacrificing some of your opportunities and development. I find myself always wanting to spend more time with my work and developing my skills, but I've learned to accept that dissatisfaction as a fact of life. I have four kids, so I seldom work on my

own projects at home anymore. I do miss it.

I avoid working overtime whenever possible, and it may be that it gives my managers a worse opinion of my value. I accept that.

Because of this, I attempt to make the time where I'm at work much more effective, and I've learned to be very efficient so that I can always get things done on time. I think a lot of my ability to work fast has actually come *because of* the constraints on my time that I've set for myself (and maybe I've been blessed for trying to make my family a priority).

In spite of all that, I don't regret any of the time I've given up for my family (although I occasionally regret squandering some of the time I've carefully carved out for my family by playing Angry Birds on my iPhone instead).

I've learned through hard experience that I'd be fine without my art, but I wouldn't be fine without my family. ■







# Dan McDonald

INTERVIEW BY **MICHAEL PICKETT** | PHOTOS COURTESY **DAN MCDONALD, LAURA ARTHUR, & VERN OSBORNE**

WEB: [AFONLINE.ARTISTSPACE.ORG/VIEW\\_ARTIST.PHP?AID=7411](http://AFONLINE.ARTISTSPACE.ORG/VIEW_ARTIST.PHP?AID=7411)

*Originally from Boise, Idaho, Dan McDonald grew up playing music and studying the humanities. In 2003, he graduated from BYU with a BA in French and BFA in Sculpture, and in 2006 he finished an MFA in Fine Arts at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina. Basing many of his pieces on themes surrounding his religious and cultural upbringing, Dan works in bronze, steel, plastics, video, and any other material or media necessary to create narratives that display the complexities of paradox and the irresponsibility of manipulation. Dan is presently an assistant professor over sculpture and 3D design at Ashland University in Ohio.*

## Why do you do installation art instead of commercial artwork?

I guess the reality is that I have no problem selling my work if people want to buy my work, but most of it is much too large to be practical in a home. If it was going to go in a yard somewhere, that would make some sense, but most of what I make is interior work. When I think of making a piece, it usually starts with some ideas just in the back of my mind. But when I'm offered a space to put a piece into, I make the piece to fit into that space, and those spaces are generally empty, so I fill those spaces. It's not very practical for most people [consumers].

There are some of my undergraduate pieces that found their way to some of the buildings in Downtown Provo and I'm happy they still have a life—that they are available to be viewed by the public—but they were not commercial ventures. Their being where they are is a result of grassroots efforts to add artworks to the downtown

area and a desire to be a part of that.

Occasionally I make pieces that go outside. They have to be weatherproof, they've got hold up to different elements. And those pieces occasionally I've sold—there's one on a campus in South Dakota that was made that way. But generally I don't like worrying about those kinds of things—how much wind is going to hit it, what the rain is going to do to it, those sorts of things—and because I don't include that as a challenge in each piece, most of my pieces are meant to go into a gallery space, and those gallery spaces generally function as a place to showcase artwork rather than as a commercial venture. This hasn't always been the case; however, most of the pieces I make now are just a little too big.

## So when you make a piece, does a gallery contact you and give you a space to work in?

It depends on what the situation is. I have a significant show

coming up in Cleveland this next year and it's all based on an application process. There will be a call for artists and I send in my work—a small portfolio, an artist statement, those sorts of things—and then they are reviewed by either a panel of jurists or just one juror. From the many applications, they then pick the artists they want to have exhibit their work. The show in Cleveland will be up for about two months and I've been given a space to work with. I don't have to use any of the work that I presented to them, I just need to now fill the space. They saw my work, thought it was of high enough quality, and now they want to see what I can do with the space. That's one way it's done. That's the ideal way, for me.

But that's not usually how it works. Generally there will be some show at a local gallery or a national gallery or museum. They'll put out a call for entries and I will just send in a piece I think might fit in the space that they have and





either they pick it or they don't. But the big difference for me is that this isn't how I make my money, so I don't have to worry about whether or not people will buy it. I just have to worry about whether they like it. That's a positive side to having a position as a professor. But then again, I hardly have any time to make work. So it's frustrating in that regard.

#### **How did your interest in art develop as you were growing up?**

I entered little drawing contests when I was younger and I assumed it was something I could do. I won a drawing contest in Idaho, won a hundred bucks, thought I was king of the world, that sort of thing. And I took classes in junior high

school and later in high school. With summer school I finished most of the necessary classes early, allowing me to just take art classes and music classes for my last semester. But I was still one of those seemingly practical people who bought into the idea that art wasn't a career and I needed to find something I could do to make money, and so I figured I'd go into architecture.

I took three or four university courses in architecture before going on my mission and while I was on my mission I always told people that I studied architecture. It sounded cool in French. So I rode that for a little while, but when I got back to school I was thinking I should check out as many classes

as possible—foolishly I averaged 30 credit hours a semester my first year back, just testing out of classes and then getting the bill for it. So I took all these history classes and music classes and music ed classes and of course I tested out of all my French classes and I felt I should take some more because I'd worked hard at trying to speak well and figured I should keep it up. I realized I really enjoyed it. Helping teach French in the high schools, I thought that maybe teaching French would be my calling and I started studying French full-time. That was my new-chosen path and I realized the college I was at didn't have enough courses to take so that I could graduate in a timely manner, so I looked to transfer to BYU.















*As part of a  
cathartic process,  
I make pieces.*

I did that; I went there and almost finished, met my wife to be, got married, and had an opportunity to work in France for about a year. And that was the moment when BYU decided to give me a scholarship for having decent grades. I had six credits left for my French degree and BYU said I'd have to take twelve credits to get the scholarship. I filled up the other six credits with art classes, something I hadn't really studied since '96, and here it was, almost ten years later. I took those classes and realized teaching French was quite possibly not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I finished the French degree and stuck around for another year and got the art degree. I loved it, learned as much as I could, graduated, and then found I was stuck in the same position I would have been in with the French degree. I hadn't been to grad school, I didn't have a teaching certificate, and I had few job opportunities in the field, so I decided to go to grad school. I completed my grad work at Clemson University, in South Carolina, and then was able to get the position I have now right out of school.

I don't know if that really explains why I do what I do, but I've kind of been a bit of everything and that's why I probably couldn't be a painter, why I'd have a really hard time being a print maker. I've been a mechanic and a construction worker. I've been all these things that lean towards different materials—assembling things, dealing with space, all that kind of business. A lot of it's just really enjoying the creative process, but also wanting to get my hands dirty while I do it, and not having limitations on what I get to work with. That's not saying a painter really has limitations, but they often put them on themselves—sticking with one medium, sticking with a flat surface. I love the possibility that I

can paint my sculptures all I want. I don't know many who feel free to sculpt their paintings. Being a sculptor allows me to be the jack-of-all-trades that I enjoy being.

#### **How does your art relate to or enhance your faith and vice versa?**

I do make work that's really just stuff I enjoy making, and it's much more aesthetically based than it is content based, but if I were to look at most of my work as a body of work, it would fall into one general category: most of my work is based on the little meaty debate I have in my head between my culture and my religion and how I fit with any of it.

I grew up in Boise, Idaho, where a quarter of the population is Mormon, and I went to school in Utah and was there for about seven years, where everybody on my street was Mormon. Now, here I am in Ashland, Ohio, a little isolated place with a teeny little branch. Everybody seems to have an assignment that puts him or her on the branch council. Going through this, I realized—and this is nothing new, obviously—that there's an assumed culture, and there's a certain tradition that comes with it.

There's doctrine and then there's the religion. And parts and pieces go into each little area. In my work, I kind of play off those, but I also deal a lot with manipulation and stereotyping. And so sometimes the stereotypes bleed into the religion; sometimes it's just general stereotyping. My thesis as a grad student was based on the idea that I would get hung up on these little mental arguments, and they would stick with me—as they still do, it's just the way I am, I'm a critical person, I suppose even kind of a jerk—and so I wrestled with a lot of these things. There's a positive aspect to how we function as a religion: we don't get to

pick and choose where we go to church, we show up in a community, and where our congregation's boundaries tell us we're supposed to go, we go. I don't know if there's anybody in the branch here that I would have met or hung out with if it weren't for the fact that I'm going to the same church as they are. And I think that's a positive thing. I think that's how we actually build charity, how we get over ourselves a little bit. So that's a positive feel.

But on the flipside, there's generally this expectation that my views are going to conform to jive with the general views of the folks around me. This can be on anything, be it political, be it social, be it religious. And so as I kind of wrestle with what accompanies those assumptions, wondering how much of an argument I might want to have about this or that point of doctrine, about how many times Glenn Beck need to be brought up in Priesthood Executive Committee—do I try to put an end to such discussions, or do I just let it happen? Those sorts of things. But what generally takes place is I let it happen, I bottle it up, and I get mad. Then I think, this is silly, why do I have to feel this? So as part of a cathartic process, I make pieces. When I bring religion into it, it almost always deals with that sort of a situation.

### **What do you feel is your greatest accomplishment as an artist so far?**

Strictly speaking as an artist, getting into the show in Cleveland is probably the greatest thing. But that's purely as an artist.

It's hard to say because I do a lot of different things as an artist, but that's the one that will sit highest on my resume right now, so that's a positive thing. Coupled with that, I really enjoy teaching, and I think trying to instill in people an understanding of why I do what I do, and how it might

benefit them or how it might benefit society, I'm very proud of those sorts of things.

On the side, as a professor, I work really hard to make connections here in the community. So here I am in this little, depressed community where jobs have gone away, not a whole lot going on, but there's one particular business that seems to be doing well. They design water park features, and they do it all out of fiberglass. A few years ago, they were looking for someone who could design these features so they could be easily cast. Before, they were working with pipes and corners and things like that, but they wanted to start making actual shells that looked like things, such as animals and airplanes, and I knew how to do that—almost everything they make is stuff that I've designed. It's not stuff that I would put on my artist resume. I'd put that I work with them, but I don't put images of my crocodile shooting water out of its mouth on my resume.

Granted, those are the challenges that I feel are most difficult for artists to face and feel successful about because of being told what to make. They have to work in a style that may not be their own and yet still make it and feel comfortable laying claim to it. I would have no problem putting my name to probably about half of the projects I've worked on. Some of them get changed in post-production, and I'm not as happy with those, but some of the others, you know, I'm happy enough telling people that

I designed and built that. But in doing so, I've also been able to take students with me, so the students go and they get paid to do it and they get to work in a field that can provide funds for something they could do in the future. It allows them to continue with the creative process, in something that's just a little bit more commercial. Hopefully it keeps them active in making work and in the creative process.

So it's hard for me to really judge. Obviously, for me as an artist, the Cleveland show is important. There were plenty of people who applied and only five of us who got in. That's a big deal for me, but I probably spend more time thinking about the other things.

Considering how many times as artists we get rejected, it's so much worse than sales. When salesmen are selling something, they're selling somebody else's product, but when we go and try to peddle our work, this is us, something we've invested in, something we've come up with, and we get rejected—all the time. And then we're forced to turn around and re-apply somewhere else the very next minute, constantly believing that our work is good enough for whatever opportunities are out there. And I think that's one of the most admirable qualities of most artists. I think it's also why we're all mildly chronically depressed, but through that we recognize that we wouldn't be doing it if we didn't love it, and we also wouldn't be doing it if we didn't think we had something essential to offer. ■





# Rob Cox

INTERVIEW BY **AMELIA CHESLEY & ELSIE BOYER** | PHOTOS COURTESY **ROB COX**

WEB: **ROBCOXMUSIC.COM**

*Rob Cox is a singer/songwriter currently living in California. His largely self-taught musical talent has given him opportunities to perform all over for various crowd sizes, and thousands of people have enjoyed his music.*

## **Tell us about your background.**

I grew up in California. I started playing when I was twelve—just guitar and trying to sing along, but mostly it was just me in my bedroom. When I was eighteen, I started writing music. I wrote maybe five or six songs right before I went on my mission that were, I guess, more religious—“I love you, Mom and Dad” kind of songs.

Once I got back, I started actively performing at school and trying out for different things. I tried out for a little band that was just me and a couple of my roommates, and we just did cover songs and everything. I was still a little nervous about playing stuff that I had written, but I played something for somebody one time that I really felt connected to, and they liked it, and I felt like maybe I could write more stuff like that.

In a nutshell, that’s really where it went from. If I felt connected, if I felt that it was a solid song, I started trusting myself a little bit more to perform songs that I had written.

## **What was it like the first time you performed one of your own songs?**

When I was on my mission, I wrote a song for this guy named Edward who had Lou Gehrig’s disease. I got really close to him and his family, so I wrote a song for his family.

I’d never done that before, and then when I got home I used it to try out for a show. It wasn’t accepted, and I didn’t try out for anything else for another year after that, but I kept playing, just for a few people around me. That audition was the first time I had actually not known the people I was playing for, and I’m glad I didn’t stop with that







whole situation. That song was more for just Edward and his family, anyway.

### What has changed the most since you first started?

I think me. I've probably changed the most. Believe it or not, I was a shy guy, especially when I first started playing, because I was so unsure of what other people would think of my music. I couldn't even classify it in a genre, you know. I would just put music to my thoughts and hope that it rhymed.

I've changed a lot, and when I listen to stuff that I wrote ten years ago and then I listen to the music that I put down now, there's a big jump in the songwriting and how I put together a thought and everything. The thing that I guess has stayed the same is that when I finish a song, regardless of how "good" it might be as far as social

standards go, if I feel comfortable with it, if it really communicates what I wanted to say, then regardless of whether or not anybody else likes it or not, I feel pretty solid about it. That feeling has kind of stayed the same.

### Melody or lyrics first?

It depends. Sometimes I'll be either driving down the road or I'll just wake up from a nap and one line will come into my head, and I can almost tell when it's coming. I'll get in a mood or have this feeling like, "Oh, I'm going to write a song soon." It's like trying to predict an earthquake or something. But I just have a feeling. Usually the best songs take about seven to ten minutes to write.

### Is your composition process usually that short?

Not always, but for the songs I feel I connect best with, it usually is.

It usually is a song that will come out in one session; maybe it'll take longer than ten minutes, but it will be something I can write from beginning to end while sitting down once, instead of having to revisit it a lot of times. Some of the songs you'll never hear, though. It's about being able to communicate what I feel; whether or not I think it's a good song to play in front of people, I just feel good and I'm glad that I wrote it.

### What pivotal moments in your life have affected your music and contributed to the work that you do?

Probably ninety percent of music out there is inspired by the opposite sex, so I think that's a pretty solid answer.

But I'm the kind of guy that almost needs a muse to write something, or at least to come up with anything good, whether it's something I can extensively create



in the moment, or if it's something that's actually happened.

**You said that when you started off, you were doing slightly more religious music because you were about to go on your mission. Have you gone back to that?**

Different feelings and situations in my life provoke me to write different things. As far as having the religious songs, I'm really very personal when it comes to that kind of stuff. It's a sacred thing for me. It's not that I don't appreciate the music that other artists do, because sometimes they'll write something that will really affect me and deepen my understanding about God and my appreciation for the Church and everything, but I guess I just haven't been able to break that barrier of taking sacred experiences and transcribing them into lyrics.

**Who are your musical influences?**

I really respect Dave Matthews, even though I'm not into everything he does. I remember the time that really pushed me over—I was hanging out with a bunch of friends and they had the Dave Matthews and Tim Reynolds *Live at Luther College* CD, and he did a little riff and I thought, "Oh my gosh. That is amazing." When I heard the song "Satellite," I realized that playing guitar doesn't have to be all strumming, but it can actually be a little bit more staccato instead of full chords.

So, as far as guitar playing goes, I really respect Dave Matthews for that. Even though I'm not completely into all of his stuff now, I would definitely have to call him one of my influences.

**What musical training have you had?**

I was in choir in high school, but that's the only kind of musical training I've had. I took piano for like twenty minutes. My parents

always had a piano in the house. When I took piano lessons, my mind could never work fast enough for my hands to do what the music was saying on the page.

One time my teacher was sitting next to me getting frustrated, and she said, "No, play it like this," and she went through the song. I just watched her hands.

"Okay," I said, and I did exactly what she did.

"There you go! Good job! You're getting it," she said.

And I'm like, "No, I'm not! But I'm just going to copy you."

That's as formal as it got. As far as guitar goes, I just got a John Denver book from my aunt and it had these little chord symbols and I learned how to read those and took it from there.

**What was your experience putting out your CD, *Waiting for Monday*?**

That was a learning experience, for sure. At the time I was playing music with another guy. He did a lot of backup vocals and supporting guitar parts, and he was helping write the lyrics also, so it was a good experience. I feel like I'm more connected to the music I've written now. Before, I felt like I had to cater it to other people, but now when I play a song, I know exactly from beginning to end it's me.

Working with him added a lot as far as bouncing ideas and stuff off of each other. But there were a couple of times that we butted heads in the whole recording process and there was something that I really wanted and he didn't want at all, or something that he really wanted but I didn't want at all—just different tastes in music.

I also got to stand behind the recording engineer and look over his shoulder and see how he was putting all the music together—the production side of it.

Since working on that CD, I've really been able to say, "Well,

*I think there's a fine line between being a good representative of the gospel and not, because it's so easy to slip.*



*If you ever see me perform and I kind of giggle a little bit, that's because I've either already messed up the lyrics or I'm going to.*

I know you can do that so let's try that," or "I may have messed up on that a little bit, but I know I took a billion takes of it so let's just use something somewhere else." It was a great learning experience and of course I feel very connected with those songs, too, but everything evolves a little bit. You grow. Lots happened in between that CD and now, as far as my life goes.

#### **Are you going to make another CD?**

I am. It's already coming in production. I have a number of songs recorded for it, so it's just a matter of time. I don't feel too rushed on getting it out there, because I want it to be right. I feel pretty good about where a lot of the stuff I have now is going, and I'm okay with waiting to have that feeling with all the songs rather than just sticking it out there now.

#### **What are some of your favorite songs that you've written?**

The new songs that are coming out on the next CD, I suppose.

I like the song "Army." It's not that I think it's the best song in the world, like it needs to be put up on a pedestal above everything else I've written, but I feel good about that song.

There's another song called "McKinley" that communicated how I was feeling at that time, and so I enjoy playing that one.

Those are the two favorites that I've played. It's weird—I can't really put them in numerical order, but it's more like a pie chart. It's like, "I like this one, I may like this one a little bit more than that," but it changes from time to time.

#### **Which one of your songs were you most impressed with yourself for writing?**

Probably "Army," and the reason why is that it's very different from anything else I've ever written. The finger picking in it is almost like a

lullaby. I've been playing variations of that finger picking for years, but I never thought I'd be able to stick it into a song. So, I like the way that came together.

Also, the song communicates—and this is very revealing for me—how I feel sometimes. When you think of an army advancing, it's something that's almost unstoppable, and you have very little control over it, because there are so many different moving parts to it. It's like you have situation built upon situation built upon situation, and you almost feel like it's an army advancing. Unless you make a valiant effort to wage war against yourself then that's what it's going to do. I suppose that's the battle that we're all in, right? It's a back and forth sort of thing.

#### **You do lots of live performances. What's that like?**

I've played multiple times in front of crowds of like five thousand people, and to be honest with you, I thought it would be a lot more exhilarating than it actually was. Not because it was disappointing by any means, because it was kind of cool to check that off the bucket list, but as far as what I like the most, it's probably something in between playing for a few people and playing in small theaters. I feel like you can joke around a little bit more and be a more intimate with your audience.

While I'm really apprehensive sometimes about saying, "This is about *that* girl right there," or, "This is about this situation," for the most part I think that in those environments you gain a connection with who you're playing for, at least in your mind.

One of the things that really stands out happened about a year ago. I played this charity thing with Corbin Allred. That whole show was really cool because it was in a smaller theater, at the Covey



Center in Provo. It was an awesome theater—they have a cool balcony up above and the sound was great. I was able to hear myself well.

They said, “What are you going to need? Are you going to need another guitar? Are you going to need a piano?”

And I said, “Sure. I’m going to go out on a limb here and play a song.” It was the very first time that I played or performed a song that I’d written on the piano in front of any kind of an audience, and so it was fun to play that.

Also for that show, when Corbin was doing the sound check, I was standing on the side of the stage listening to him, and he played this one song that I really liked. I also play the harmonica, and I was like, “I know what key that’s in,” so I ran into the green room and grabbed my harmonica and ran back onto the stage. He was coming off and I said, “Hey, play that song again that you just ended with.” He thought that I wanted to learn how to play it, and so he said, “Oh, play this…” and I

said, “No, just play.” So he played it, and I was lucky enough to actually have the right key, and he said, “That sounds really good. Why don’t you come out and play that song with me later on?”

So in the middle of the song, he invited me out on the stage, and I got to back him up with a little harmonica. That show was very memorable for me because I’d only been playing the harmonica for six months before that, and I’d never performed a song I’d written on the pian. To date that’s probably the best show I’ve ever played. There were around eight or nine hundred people there.

### **Have you ever had shows when you just got stage fright and you couldn’t play or you weren’t in the mood or something?**

I’m usually pretty consistent. I get excited about shows and I love shows and I love performing.

I’ve only ever canceled one show ever in my life, and it was when I just wasn’t feeling it. It’s

not like I’m fickle or anything—it was a combination of a few things, but I really couldn’t play right at the time. I called and canceled the show that day, which was terrible on my part. Horrible PR.

There will be times when I still get a little nervous when I sing a wrong lyric, because that happens sometimes. I’ll start playing something, and then in the middle I’ll be like, “I don’t know how this starts.” Then I’ll double the intro and people will probably be sitting there thinking, “Is he ever going to sing?” Here’s a little inside thing, too. If you ever see me perform and I kind of giggle a little bit, that’s because I’ve either already messed up the lyrics or I’m going to. That’s typically how that works.

### **Where do you see your career taking you?**

My expectations for music have already been met. It satisfies my need all the time.

The fact that I get to perform in front of people or the fact that I





sometimes get money for it is completely ancillary to what it really does for me.

If it happens, great—that’s awesome. The music industry itself is very risky and very shaky, so I wouldn’t make any decisions that would put me—or if I had a family at the time, them—in jeopardy of relying on my “making it” to have a good living.

What I would really love to do is to write music for movies or for TV. I think that’s where the money is, as far as that goes. You can sell a song to a major TV show that we all love and then get royalties for the next ten years.

Continuing music on the side is fulfilling that part of my life. I’ve said before that music, at least for me, is very therapeutic. It’s

my meditation, whether it’s the process of writing the lyrics or playing the music or putting them together.

**Are there any challenges with being an LDS performer? Have you run into any crazy situations?**

Absolutely. Every performer, whether they’re LDS or whether they just decide to have morals, is going to be going against the grain in the music industry or the entertainment industry, period.

Fame and success in the entertainment industry aren’t all they’re cracked up to be. I’ve seen a lot of very good people go south and sacrifice their morals or their beliefs. The sad thing is it would appear that instead of adjusting their lives to fit the beliefs they’ve had their

whole life, they adjust their beliefs to fit their lives. I don’t want to make exceptions like that. That’s why the lifestyle is just not appealing to me: I do not want to make those exceptions.

Everybody has to make decisions for themselves about what they feel good about. You have to decide, “Am I going to play in a venue where people generally are representing things that are contrary to the beliefs of the gospel?” The thing is—and this the fear that I have—the more you subject yourself to those things, the more you become desensitized to the Spirit. It’s really important on any performer’s side to make sure that you have a good foundation and that you’re constantly replenishing it. What’s worked in the past or what’s been good enough



in the past won't be good enough tomorrow. I think those are probably the big challenges: subjecting yourself to those venues.

**How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?**

I think there's a fine line between being a good representative of the gospel and not, because it's so easy to slip. Being able to maintain those standards and the morals that you have is vital to that.

With any success that you have, people are going to know that you're a member of the Church, because it will be an odd thing that you don't drink and don't swear and don't engage in a lot of other different things. That is not normal, and it will come up. I've already had the opportunity to

explain that to a number of people I've worked with, whether they're booking shows for me or I'm playing with them or they're other performers. One way to build the Church is by being able to connect to other people and then bring it back to the gospel, which is so organized and which a lot of the world would see as strict. I think that it's becoming more acceptable.

Just being a good example is the same for anybody, whether you're playing the guitar on the stage, or whether you're standing in front of a classroom, or whether you're a secretary in an office—whatever the situation is, you're an example to the people you're around. I think it's about always being ready to give a nice little short statement. I think that

everybody should have a short answer to why you live the way you live. I guess I'm always developing that.

**Is any part of that answer about why you live the way you live in your music?**

That's a good question. Maybe not as much as it should be.

There are songs and things that I will avoid. They may have the appearance of something that's not accurate or that's not in correspondence with gospel teachings, just because of a double meaning—even though the situation itself wasn't that way, it has the implication that it could have been. I'll avoid those because it's not worth it to me to have people question that. So I guess maybe a little bit. ■







# James Arrington

INTERVIEW BY **MAHONRI STEWART** | PHOTOS BY **GREG DEAKINS**

*James Arrington has been a fixture in Mormon drama since the late 1970s, drawing audiences for decades with his popular one-man shows such as The Farley Family Reunion, The Farley Family Christmas, Here's Brother Brigham, and J. Golden, among a host of other shows. Having been professionally trained at the Actor's Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, Arrington has made his career as a playwright, director and actor for film and screen. He's currently department chair for Utah Valley University's Theatre Arts Department.*



**Tell us about your beginnings as an actor, a director, and a playwright.**

Performer: Apparently others saw talent before I ever did. I was cast as Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel* in sixth grade (and was asked to put my arm around the prettiest girl in school, which I declined, dangit.) But when I was fourteen I went to a National Boy Scout Jamboree in Pennsylvania. In those days I was urgently trying to find a way to be “cool” and had discovered that I could do an English accent, hence my nickname “Crumpets” or “Crumps” for short. On the way out I was using the accent to chat with my fellow Scouts and another Scout chimed in with his English accent. We commenced a little game of it and a strange little comedy team was born: “The Adventures of Irving and Seymour.” We entertained on the bus, at campfires, and with other troops, and we were finally nominated to represent our troop at our area talent show. We won first place. My mother said I went away one little boy and came back another.

That very fall my church put on *You Can't Take It With You* and I was asked to read for Kolenkhov, the Russian ballet teacher. I did so on a dare. I carefully explained I knew nothing of a Russian accent. The woman in charge just said, “Follow me,” and began reading the lines in her Russian accent. Within 30 seconds I was reading with a Russian accent too. I was thunderstruck! And then, on opening night, Kolenkhov comes on-stage in the first two acts very loud and funny, while in the third act he simply creeps in. When I crept in, the audience started to laugh just because of my presence. Boom! I was hooked. Power over an audience was the greatest feeling I'd ever had. I think that's still true.

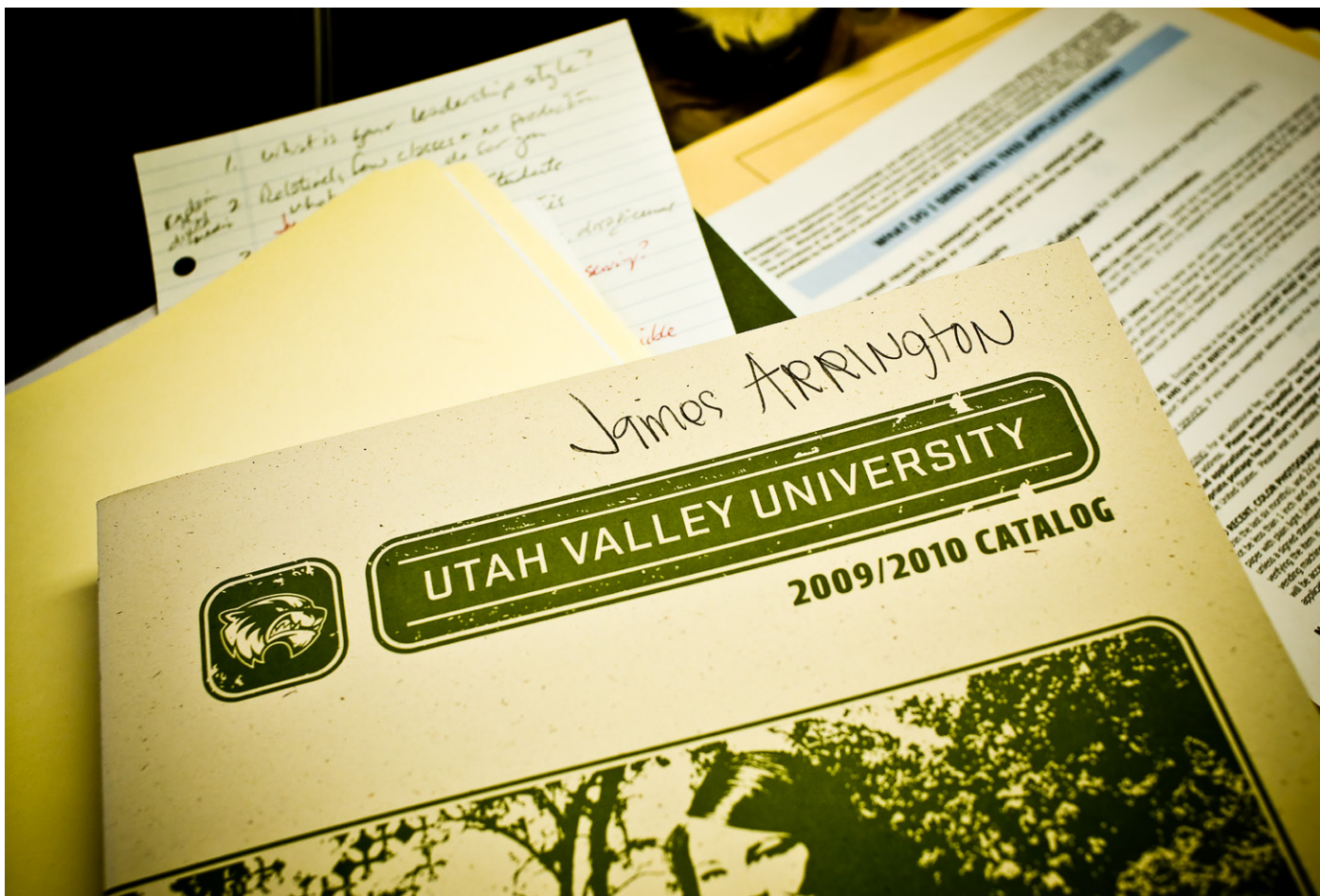
Director: I had made a vow to be in every play my high school produced. In my senior year the

chosen musical was Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* and I had been cast in the wonderful role of Ko-Ko. Because of some early issues with casting, the director (a music teacher) had decided to drop the play. In a fit of emotion I went to her office and insisted—no, demanded—that the play be presented. I assured her that if she didn't want to direct it, I would. I wound up directing probably eighty percent of the finished product... and received no credit, but the play did go on and was very well received.

Playwright: I didn't know I could write plays. It never occurred to me till I was serving my mission in Brazil. It came to me in my first area that I could wrest control from my senior companion (who didn't seem to want to work) and help the branch youth unify as well as earn some money for their youth conference if we put on a play. I had no knowledge of Brazilian dramatic literature, but it didn't even enter my mind to do a Brazilian play. I wrote a little kind of fractured fairy tale called *The Most Complicated Christmas* and had it translated into Portuguese by someone in the branch. I directed it (in my very poor Portuguese) and put it on to whoever showed up with the \$2 ticket price. It was a huge success. A triple win. The mission president—who, when he found out what we were doing, nearly squelched the whole thing (it didn't occur to me to ask if we could)—called after our two-night run and asked if we could put it on in another branch!

What inspired me to go ahead and pursue these fields? I was just having so much fun. I enjoyed every aspect of the theatre, forged new relationships, and found a remarkable way of self-appreciation, and I couldn't really find the “edge” of my newfound talents. Since I found that I could, I went out and did. It seemed that I was destined

*I've always felt that my talent was given to me for a purpose, and purpose is what religion is all about.*



to do it because I continued to succeed and enjoy the experiences immensely. For the more part of my career, the audience applause did more for me than anything else. I worshipped it, lived for it, and, you psychiatrists out there, yes, I obsessed about it. But as the years rolled by it simply became necessary for me to direct more often and finally to write seriously. It was actually a matter of necessity for me. When asked, I felt I had no other choices at the time.

**You are famous for your many one-man shows, such as *The Farley Family Reunion* (and its various spin-offs), *Here's Brother Brigham*, and *J. Golden*. What circumstances led you to that particular genre of theatre? What are the practical and creative benefits of a one-man show? What are its drawbacks?**

What circumstances? For the most part necessity. I couldn't seem to get people to see me as the broad character actor I was. I was always looked at as a second-rate leading man. I wasn't physically distinctive for an obvious character actor—not skinny, not tall, not stout (I've taken care of that one now), no big adam's apple or nose. I was also alertly looking for some way to make my way in the theatre, an opportunity that was unique to me.

When I was about twenty-three, I went to see (kicking and screaming, actually) my first one-man show, *Will Roger's USA* with James Whitmore, and I was again thunderstruck. I realized that here was an actor onstage alone (low overhead) who had the audience completely in his control (power) and *he* determined the action, pace, rhythm (art) *and* didn't have

to share his paycheck with anyone else (a living)! Wow. The combination was irresistible.

The question was who to pick. I had been wondering more and more about writing and had done little of it. A one-man show was daunting, *but* (and that's a big but) if I was doing a character of the past, I could rely on their own words to write the play. It didn't take long for me to center on Mormon history, and of the characters in Mormon history perhaps none has been as carefully documented as Brigham Young. So there was plenty of material—in fact, way too much, I found out later. I also was very lucky in choosing a character that had some controversy surrounding him, plenty of documented speeches about all kinds of things, and an audience base that would be quite interested, possibly





even enough to get over the idea of watching one guy for two hours.

Drawbacks: At a certain point the audience disappears or moves on. Life on the road can become grueling, and having the same haircut for thirty years has been annoying. Not too many drawbacks, but the original challenge is to find the right person and then capitalize on him. Again, I think I was lucky to come along when I did. One-man shows were not around in Mormonism in those days, so I was an anomaly. I managed to hit the timing of it just right for my audience.

Benefits of a one-man show: all contained in the word “one.” An actor can single out a character, write about them, perform, even direct it, produce it, and start a career. That’s more or less what I did. Since there was no one else to help, it was literally all on me. Eventually the show was able to travel easily and over the years I stripped it down to its very most elemental parts so it could be done around campfires, at luncheons, and special events.

As a bearded resident Brigham Young I have appeared to accept a sculpture at the capitol building, awakened teenagers on the old Mormon trail, appeared on radio, television, and in film, led the 24<sup>th</sup> of July parade, and addressed countless congregations. I have done versions of the play in Hawaii, Alaska, Canada, England, the “Fringe” festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, the Hasty Pudding Club of Boston, Massachusetts, and on horseback and buggies all over the West. It’s been a great ride for Brigham, and I’m still occasionally doing “gigs.”

**The Farleys are your most recognizable creation. Can you tell us who the Farleys are, how they came into being, and how they have been received?**

After the major success of *Here's Brother Brigham*, I was still not seen as doing my greatest love, character acting. Although Brigham could certainly be seen as a character, and was, I just wasn't fulfilling my ambition to do broader characters. For years at parties I would arrive with my instrument (the actor's body is his instrument) on my back, so to speak, and would be asked to improvise characters and situations. Though I enjoyed those opportunities I always had this nagging feeling that there was something more substantial in it for me.

Some of these improvisations began to recur, much like my early Scouting experience, and I began to look for ways to use them in a more artistic effort. It wasn't till I read Don Marshall's wonderful little character book *The Rummage Sale* that I realized all these characters were in a family, and, literally, I was the patriarch. Drawing from that, my improvisations, my real family, and my observations of Mormon culture over thirty years, I sat down and tapped out what was originally presented as a two-person show. Necessity again entered when I couldn't find enough work to hire an actress to work with me and I took it over, making it into the one-man show that is so recognizable today. I still think the earlier two-man show is a funnier script and concept, but a one-man show sure travels easier and pays the bills.

The Farleys have been received by countless audiences just how I meant them to: as a warm satire. However, I have learned that some people just aren't born with a satire gene and those individuals have a very rough time with the Farleys, thinking they are entirely too simplistic (caricatured, cartoon-like) or that they are a mean-spirited judgment on Mormon society and should be avoided. I've had

people in the audience stand up and demand their money back. What they don't realize is that the moment they leave, I have the last say. "Them's there cousins from (whatever miniscule town leaps to mind), they're never satisfied, but now we can all speak frankly!" And we go on. *The Farley Family Reunion* isn't meant as a final judgment on my society, more of a mirror.

**Many of your one-man shows and plays deal specifically with subjects in Church history. You've covered a lot of ground ranging from Brigham Young to Wilford Woodruff to J. Golden Kimball. Your father, Leonard Arrington, also happened to be one of the Church's most famous historians. Is there a story behind this shared connection that you and your dad have with Church history, or is it simply coincidental that you ended up telling many of the same stories, just with different mediums? What else draws you to these great figures in our religion's past?**

I tried to get my father to help me with my first major effort in writing Brigham Young. Who better than my father? What I didn't see at that point and have come to understand since is that he couldn't help me—I was completely ignorant. He'd forgotten more than I knew and he remembered almost everything. He knew too much.

So when I went down to his office to ask for help he simply selected about twelve (big, heavy, dusty, thick, small type, no pictures) books from his library and asked me to go ahead and read them. I was devastated. I'd never really been hot on books (except science fiction) and now I had to read history? I kept them at arm's length in my BYU apartment until I was compelled by guilt and timeframe to start. I started with the thinnest one, with photos and larger type. But as I continued to

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*Artistic endeavors civilize us, teach us, and give us formulas and thoughts to live by.*



read, I started making connections and soon became quite conversant with Brigham, his life, mission, family, and the overview of his destiny and viewpoints. Then and only then, could I talk with my father intelligently about Brigham's world.

I found that getting my father's help only required me to be very specific in my questions: "Dad, in about June of 1856, Brigham had a meeting with the Indians in Southern Utah. Some say this was the start of the Utah War..." and without even a blink, a correction: "Well, James, it was May 20<sup>th</sup> at 4:30 in the afternoon of..." and then he'd give the date and what was spoken about and who was there and why it didn't matter as much as some people thought, etc. It was like asking for a drink of water and getting a waterfall. That isn't to say I didn't enjoy it, but I had to get to a certain capacity to understand first.

After that, I learned that he was an extremely valuable resource when I was lost, upset, and concerned, but he always allowed me to make my own way. Later on, my mother once said to him, "Leonard, have you noticed how many new books and articles there are about Brigham Young? (Including my father's seminal *American Moses*.) "Why, yes," he replied offhandedly, "what do you think the effects of James' play were?" A greater compliment was never paid me.

The fact is that in Mormon society, at least to this point, we've really only allowed ourselves to go two places for our drama: history is more or less safe, and missions are more or less safe. I say "more or less" because these areas have also been problematic as well, but less than other parts of Mormon society. We are only now beginning to open up and look a little more intimately. I believe this is because our culture has been rather insular, and looking too closely appears

to be judgmental, prejudiced, or, at worst, anti-Mormon. We're not fond of "disgruntled" members.

Secondly, our missionary status and zeal as a church has not allowed us to really look hard at the difficulties and dramatic internal struggles of our people except in melodramatic terms: good vs. bad, righteous vs. unrighteous, followers vs. upstarts and ne'er-do-wells. In our culture we like to "put our best foot forward." There is a second foot there, of course, but bringing it "forward" and analyzing it is difficult and rather untidy.

For instance, some of the brethren and others have called for artists in the Church to write a *Fiddler on the Roof* type show about Mormonism. We simply can't. Look what *Fiddler* is about: A man whose three sweet daughters who he deeply loves, stray ever further from his beloved traditions. It creates the drama and a unique and real sympathy for his character. Now imagine that dynamic in Mormonism: A man whose children stray further and further from the truth of the gospel? Hmm. Can't do it.

Oh, yes, it happens all the time, but as a missionary church we don't want to air our dirty laundry—we just don't want to show that our society is subject to less than perfection. Criticism and realism is best kept to oneself. Paraphrasing Cyrano de Bergerac, "I can say these things lightly enough about myself, but I allow no one else to do so," and then out comes the sword. The Farleys are in there somewhere...

**Here's Brother Brigham is one of your Church history plays that has made the most impact. What drew you to Brigham Young specifically? What connections have you felt to him while performing?**

Aside from what I have said above, I have to say that among the

luminaries of Mormon history, the two choices were Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. I wasn't sure there was enough original material I could find about what Joseph said to make a thorough play, and I also thought it would be akin to writing new words for the character of Jesus, which no one would be serious about. Joseph's revelatory nature you wouldn't want to goof around with. Also, I didn't look at all like Joseph Smith, so Brigham it was.

The "connections" part of this question is very hard to explain. I have come to admire and respect Brigham Young in a wonderful and personal way. He was simply one of the greatest Americans we've ever had, and I go so far as to say one of the great men of the world. It's hard to argue with his insight, capable management, powerful personality, and astonishing wisdom and knowledge considering that he had only eleven days of formal schooling. He was an amazing guy. I've been thrilled with his life and accomplishments and it's been an honor to "stand in his shoes," so to speak, for modern audiences.

I will say that I've had moments when I felt like what I was saying went entirely off-script and I felt prompted to say things that were powerful at the time. In those moments I felt strongly that I was influenced into a certain way of thinking or a point of view that definitely wasn't what I'd expected. Occasionally I've had what I consider to be miraculous interventions. Where did it come from? Not certain, I can only say that I think it's from above. In such circumstances I go to my own personal beliefs, and they shall remain private.

**You had the chance to perform Brigham Young for President Hinckley or President Kimball (or was it both?), didn't you? Can you tell us about the circumstances of that**

### experience and what it was like to portray a prophet for a prophet?

Both. I performed for President Kimball in a post-conference dinner where I did a shortened version for all the brethren and their wives, a frightening and astounding experience. At the climax of that short show, the lines say, “Stand to your faith, straighten His paths, for the Lord’s coming is nigh!” This phrase is at high intensity and volume, and when I say it I point my finger into the audience. This night I looked down my randomly pointing finger and there I was pointing straight at President Kimball, whose widened eyes and intense concentration made him look completely convicted! I nearly fainted. I was grateful that he came up after the show and thanked me personally for the presentation.

I performed with President Hinckley in the group on several different occasions, both before he was president and afterwards. He was always congenial and appreciative, though it’s always a little nerve-wracking.

I have also managed to perform in several circumstances where members of the leading brethren were in attendance. Once, in St. George, one of the apostles was present and had to make a quick announcement at the pulpit before my talk. He sat with me and asked specifically that I not begin until he’d gotten back to his seat so he could “enjoy the whole thing.” As complimented as I was, here was such an irony: Me, the ersatz Brigham, was speechifying while one of the Lord’s actual prophets sat quietly watching. A strange juxtaposition for sure. He winked at me from the audience when he was settled and ready for me to begin.

I actually think that overall, the brethren are grateful for my Brigham Young. He can approach topics and say things quite powerfully that they would feel restrained from discussing. Odd, huh?

### What other unique experiences have you had performing your one-man shows?

The war stories of touring and producing shows all over the world include what you might expect from such kinds of strange instances, everything from arriving at a show dressed and prepared for the wrong character, being picketed (*Here’s Brother Brigham* in Orange County), being shut down by a thunder and lightning storm, and having my costume and makeup (beard) not arrive on the plane with me for a show that night.

I think one of the most memorable experiences was performing the role of Matthew Cowley in the play *Tumuaki! Matthew Cowley of the Pacific*, which I wrote and presented on the hundred-year anniversary of BYU–Hawaii. Many people who attended knew Brother Cowley personally, and at one point, a group of about thirty Maori men invited themselves up on stage to perform the haka (their cultural war dance) with me. I’ve never had an experience quite like that... except in the second act, when a high priestess from their culture came up and presented me with a priceless antique

bird-feather cloak and tied it around my neck. I performed the rest of the show in that cloak. It was amazing—I still have it.

On occasion, I have been told fascinating stories by those who had specific and hidden information about some of the characters I’ve portrayed. For instance, everyone has a personal favorite J. Golden Kimball story and I hear a new one or at least a take of an old one every time the show is done. I have been adopted into the Brigham Young family and continue to receive their family e-mails, and *Wilford Woodruff: God’s Fisherman* has played at Oxford, England.

### What practical and creative advice would you give to those who want to make theatre their career?

Practical *and* creative? Wow. I guess I have learned that when you want to do something, you must continue to do it under any circumstances that allow you to do it. It means, especially in the early years of a career, you must do things for free and any time you can. It’s not easy to get productions together, but the best learning actually happens when there is a combination of rehearsal





and performance combined. This would include those not-so-perfect venues and opportunities that pop up. You can't afford to be picky at an early stage. You learn something from each performance opportunity about audiences, about your own abilities, about your approach, what works for you and what doesn't. It doesn't matter whether you get the role you want or not. I've learned that picky performers usually wind up not working very much. Those who'll take anything and approach it intelligently will learn something useful in every outing and will work often and find out if they have what it takes.

As a famous actor (Richard Chamberlain) once told me, "Work, work, work. Just work all the time. Work whenever you can." Excellent advice.

**You have been a professor at Utah Valley University for a number of years now. What have been the major differences between being a full-time professional actor and a full-time theatre educator?**

The major differences are: A) Steady paycheck *and* insurance! Thank the Lord. B) Working with the same folks, more or less, on each production. C) Running a season-type environment as opposed to running something worthwhile into the ground for cash. D) Loss of "fame," and by that I mean that when I backed away from promoting myself to promoting the school and department, I stopped being a celebrity, whatever that's worth. E) I have stopped looking for the next job and am looking at the next season. F) Working with students is exhilarating and inspiring, but it can be a little rough or elementary. I've stopped thinking about how far I can go personally and concentrate on how far I can get the students to go. G) I am now



much more a director/producer than either an actor or playwright. H) I think it keeps me young and young thinking, but it has all but halted my professional experience as a playwright. I just simply don't have time, and I am now bent on passing on what I know as opposed to practicing it.

Those are the major differences that occur to me at the moment.

**What's your preferred hat: actor, playwright, or director? Why?**

You know, it completely depends. It depends partly on the outcome and partly on the process and who's involved. Just last summer I was with the Utah Festival Opera in Logan playing both Merlyn and Pellinore in their wonderful version of *Camelot*. Hey ho, an actor again without having to manage the movement forward of the project! Well, it was splendid, but it wasn't entirely fulfilling—something vague in the back of my mind about doing someone else's work and only being the instrument, not the meaning. And at my age I've also discovered that I don't memorize as well as I used to. In fact, quite a lot worse! It's scary.

Frankly, I like to do the project I'm involved in at the moment

I'm asked. Right now I'm all about producing *Big River* at Sundance this summer. I bend all my effort to its success and feel confident in its eventual outcome. When projects are gone and finished I remember them fondly—like children.

I do get a kick out of saying, "I wrote that," but what a lot of work to get to production! I do like to say I directed that, but it's someone else's work. And I love to act, but I find my abilities fading a bit. So, looking at it from that direction, I guess I rather enjoy the fruits of playwriting the most. Notice I said "the fruits" and not the process. The process is prolonged and rather lonely and doesn't get very exciting until you have your first readthrough. Sometimes that's a long wait.

**You've often worked as a collaborator with other writers, actors, and musicians on your plays. What are the joys and challenges of the collaborative process?**

I'm like anyone else about collaboration. Some of my very best experiences were working with other artists in combined effort. *The Trail of Dreams* is still one of the greatest pieces I was ever involved in, working along with Steven

Kapp Perry and Marvin Payne—a wonderful memory and still one of my better works. I’m dying to remount it.

I loved working with my former student Mahonri Stewart on the blessed but under-produced *March of the Salt Soldiers* two years ago.

On the other hand, I have set out several times to work with people who somehow didn’t understand what I was saying or I didn’t get them. They refused to budge or discuss things that I thought were important, and opposed to the happy kind of collaboration that grows and stimulates from the friction of two different minds working along on the same project, the project simply died. Most of those have been in a very early stage, thankfully. One must trust one’s collaborator, both their taste and their work ethic. Either of those can be a killer.

### What’s on the horizon for you right now?

Unfortunately (or fortunately) I teach the writing classes, and as such, I must read all of my students’ scripts. In the case of our advanced writing class, each of them has to produce a full-length (90 pages or more) work. I read them all and critique them, which amounts to about 1,200 to 1,500 pages of original works and three to six pages of careful critique on each piece. It completely takes over my life and I’m hard-pressed to finish every time, so time is precious.

I have two particular projects I’d like to finish if I can ever come up with any time to do so. Both projects are in varying stages of research and draft. The first is called *Hell’s Beelz!* and is a one-man show that I’ve been trying to write for literally years. It’s the rantings and comic insights of a devil named Beelzebub who’s come to do a one-man show to get

some glory before it’s too late. I’ve enjoyed writing it, but it’s been interrupted numerous occasions. I already have a terrific actor picked for *Hell’s Beelz!* who is anxious for me to finish the draft. That’s good. Motivation is good.

The second is called *Behold!* and is an episodic and collected treatment of interactions between man and deity in the Old Testament. It’s meant to have a rather epic sensibility. I think they’re both wonderful pieces that I would dearly love to see on stage.

### What is your writing process?

Ha. Who knows? It seems to depend completely on the project and who’s involved. In some cases I have written by merely sitting down and trying out a new software application. In other events it has taken a great deal of research, hard work and careful organization. I have occasionally felt like my writing is like English playwright Tom Stoppard when he says something along the lines of, “First draw a finger and then a hand and then an arm and pretty soon you know what kind of an animal it is that you’ve drawn.”

I guess my process fits the situation I find myself in. Sometimes when I write and I’m very busy I have to be meticulous about planning a time to write and sticking to it. Sometimes a collaborator splits the work out with a date at which we’ll return with research or written parts, but my favorite process is when I just sit down and let the imagination fly. *The Farley Family Reunion* was something along that order, while *Here’s Brother Brigham* took months and months of research and careful cataloging to put it together.

### How do your faith and your art intersect?

I’m not sure I know how to answer this question satisfactorily. They

are so intertwined that I can’t have either of them without it leading to the other.

I know that must sound a little strange, but I’ve always felt blessed and felt the hand of the Lord, if nothing else, giving me a slight push forward. I’ve always felt that my talent was given to me for a purpose, and purpose is what religion is all about—thus, they are deeply intertwined and hardly separable.

Obviously, if I had to make a choice, I would know to separate the two and I’m clear about the answer: theatre is the temple of man, but it’s not a saving institution. I’m very clear about the difference.

### To you, why does theatre matter?

This should be Theatre with a capital “T”, meaning all theatrical endeavors from movies to pageants. Artistic endeavors civilize us, teach us, and give us formulas and thoughts to live by. I’d like to quote Brigham Young who said, “Upon the stage of a theater can be represented in character, evil and its consequences, good and its happy results and rewards, the weakness and the follies of man, the magnanimity of virtue and the greatness of truth. The stage can be made to aid the pulpit in impressing upon the minds of a community an enlightened sense of a virtuous life, also a proper horror of the enormity of sin and a just dread of its consequences. The path of sin with its thorns and pitfalls, its gins and snares can be revealed, and how to shun it.”

And, by the way, men who taught out of the wonderful priesthood manual about him discovered that they had to lead with the idea or thought, gather a little discussion and *then* finish with Brigham’s quote or there was nothing anyone could discuss, only everyone nodding in approval. When Brigham laid it, it stayed and it does here, too. ■





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