
Mormon Artist
ISSUE 13
DECEMBER 2010 / JANUARY 2011
Special Issue
Science Fiction
& Fantasy

Mormon Artist

COVERING THE LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS WORLD

Mormon Artist is a bimonthly magazine
published online at MORMONARTIST.NET

ISSN 1946-1232.

Front cover photograph courtesy NASA.
Back cover photograph courtesy Derryl Yeager.

Design by Ben Crowder.

CONTACT US
WEB **MORMONARTIST.NET**
EMAIL **EDITOR@MORMONARTIST.NET**

THIS ISSUE

WRITERS
Joe Vasicek
Katherine Morris
Kathleen Dalton-Woodbury

INTERVIEWERS
Ann Morris
Dave Doering
Elsie Boyer
Emily Huey
Eric Jepson
Joseph Olson
Katherine Morris
Kristina Chambers
Meagan Brady
Michael Young

TRANSCRIBERS
Amelia Chesley
David Hulet
Miranda Giles

PHOTOGRAPHERS
Lizzy Bean
Spencer Hall

Want to help out?
http://mormonartist.net/volunteer

Editor's Note

This is our biggest and hopefully our best issue yet. While we've interviewed a number of science fiction and fantasy people already—Brandon Sanderson, Jessica Day George, Howard Tayler, Brandon Dorman, and Julie Wright, just to name a few—there were still many, many others we wanted to feature.

And here we are. We've got a lot of goodies for you in this issue, as you can see from the table of contents, including a special episode of Writing Excuses that Brandon Sanderson, Dan Wells, and Howard Tayler have recorded just for our readers. (See below for the link.)

The number of *New York Times* bestselling authors in this issue is awe-inspiring, and yet there are plenty more who we weren't able to include, not to mention all the other Mormons doing science fiction and fantasy work of one kind or another. Look for them in future issues of *Mormon Artist*. It may take us until the Millennium to interview them all, though, and that's a wonderful thing.

Special thanks to Dave Doering for the initial idea of doing a science fiction and fantasy issue and for helping coordinate several of the interviews.

Ben Crowder
Editor-in-Chief

LINKS

Special Writing Excuses podcast
By Brandon Sanderson, Dan Wells, and Howard Tayler
http://mormonartist.net/issue-13/writing-excuses

Life, the Universe & Everything
BYU's science fiction & fantasy symposium
February 17–19, 2011
http://ltue.org

Table of Contents

"Is It Something in the Water?" iv
Why Mormons Write Science Fiction and Fantasy
Article by Katherine Morris & Kathleen Dalton-Woodbury

"The Class That Wouldn't Die" vi
Article by Joe Vasicek

LITERATURE


Orson Scott Card 1
Interview by Eric W. Jepson


Ally Condie 6
Interview by Emily Huey


Dave Wolverton 10
Interview by Joe Vasicek


Aprilynne Pike 16
Interview by Katherine Morris


Tracy Hickman 22
Interview by Michael Young


Mette Ivie Harrison 26
Interview by Ann Morris


Brandon Mull 34
Interview by Elsie Boyer

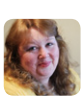
VISUAL & APPLIED ARTS


James Christensen 40
Interview by Joseph Olson

MUSIC & DANCE


Derryl Yeager 56
Interview by Dave Doering

FILM & THEATRE


Keri Doering 66
Interview by Meagan Brady & Kristina Chambers

"Is It Something in the Water?"

Why Mormons Write Science Fiction and Fantasy

ARTICLE BY **KATHERINE MORRIS & KATHLEEN DALTON-WOODBURY**

In a 2009 article published in the *Boston Globe*, Mormon author Carol Lynch Williams explains how book publishers these days have a tendency to look at the proliferation of authors in Utah and wonder, "What the heck is in the water here?" They're not the only ones who have taken notice. From book publishers to bloggers to scholars of Mormon culture, a number of people have noted the success of Mormon authors, particularly in the genre of science fiction and fantasy, and have speculated as to why Mormons seem to be unusually well-represented in this field.

The most well-known Mormon writer of science fiction and fantasy is, of course, Orson Scott Card. With the publication of his first science fiction story, "Ender's Game," in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* magazine in 1977 and his receiving the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer from the World Science Fiction Convention in 1978, Orson Scott Card was the first Mormon science fiction and fantasy author to achieve notable success in this field. He won both the Hugo and Nebula awards two years in succession for *Ender's Game* (1986) and *Speaker for the Dead* (1987), something no author had done previously nor has done since.

A number of other Mormons have followed Orson Scott Card's break into the science fiction and fantasy scene. Dave Wolverton, M. Shayne Bell, Susan Kroupa, James Jordan, and Virginia Baker, inspired by Orson Scott Card's success, have all been winners in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contest, the highest-paying contest for amateur writers of science fiction and fantasy—one that is said to draw thousands of participants each year.

In just the past few years, there has been quite a bit of high-profile activity from Mormon authors in the national science fiction and fantasy market. Brandon Sanderson, who writes epic fantasy novels, is a *New York Times* bestselling author who was recently given the distinction of being asked by Robert Jordan's widow to finish the *Wheel of Time*, a popular fantasy book series that has sold over 44 million copies worldwide. Shannon Hale won a 2006 Newbery Honor award for her bestselling middle-grade fantasy novel *Princess Academy*. Stephenie Meyer followed up her wildly successful vampire paranormal romance series *Twilight* in 2008 with a science fiction novel, *The Host*, which stayed on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for over a year. Internationally known crime fiction author Anne Perry has recently taken her own plunge into the market with the publication of two fantasy novels, *Tathea* and *Come Armageddon*. Brandon Mull, Aprilynne Pike, and other Mormon children's authors have consistently shown up on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for their middle grade and YA fantasy series.

Along with the success and awards, there is also the strange trivia of Mormon involvement in science fiction and fantasy. According to Scott and Marny Parkin, who maintain the online Bibliography of Mormon Speculative Fiction (mormonsf.org), Zenna Henderson, another Hugo Award winner, was raised Mormon. Glen Larson, producer of the science fiction television show *Battlestar Galactica*, is famously credited with having included aspects of Mormon theology and culture (a planet of origin called "Kobol," a Council of the Twelve, marriage for "all the eternities," etc.) in the series. Screenwriter David Howard cowrote the screenplay for the successful Star Trek spoof, *Galaxy Quest*, which won the 2000 Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation. Gary Kurtz was the executive producer of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and a fantasy film directed by Jim Henson called *The Dark Crystal*.

There's even an unlikely connection between Mormonism and Ray Bradbury, one of the most honored and influential writers of science fiction and fantasy in the 20th and 21st centuries. According to BYU professor Linda Hunter Adams, Ray Bradbury once told her in a phone interview that he was good friends with Reid Nibley (Hugh Nibley's brother) when he was a boy, that he sometimes attended MIA activities with Reid, and that they even wrote Mormon roadshows together—Ray writing the scripts and Reid composing the music.

Several people have speculated about why Mormons seem to be unusually represented in the science fiction and fantasy genre. Mormon scholar Terryl Givens points to Mormon theology as a possible source for the "affinity" Mormons have with science fiction in particular and speculative fiction (defined as "imaginative" or "non-literary" fiction) in general.

Says Givens in his book *People of Paradox*, "Science fiction (or the

more-encompassing 'speculative fiction'), though still struggling for respect as serious art, is the literary form best suited to the exposition and exploration of ideas at the margins of conventional thinking, whether in technology, ethics, politics, or religion. And indeed, some Mormon doctrine is so unsettling in its transgression of established ways of conceiving reality that it may be more at home in the imagined universes of Card than in journals of theology."

Two examples of Mormon doctrine that Givens sees influencing Mormon science fiction and fantasy writers' work are (1) the theme of apotheosis—that men and women can progress to the point of becoming divine beings, and (2) that God has created other worlds and other peoples. Givens points to examples of Orson Scott Card stories that include these themes. Stories that include other worlds and peoples definitionally fall into the category of science fiction and fantasy. Recent examples of apotheosis, however, can be seen in some works by Mormon authors, such as John Brown's *Servant of a Dark God* series and Brandon Sanderson's novel *Warbreaker*.

Scott Parkin identifies the same theological and cultural explanations that Givens mentions and also adds another explanation: the idea that Mormons tend to be comfortable with rational explanations of things, including our very relationship with God. Since Mormons are comfortable integrating their religious faith with rational explanations, science is something they tend to embrace rather than avoid.

Says Parkin in an interview on the Morehead's Musings blog, "The idea that there are rational explanations and that it's okay to explore those explanations is one of the reasons why the rigors of science fiction appeals to so many Mormons. For example, Mormons have a view that science is an explanation of the way God gets things done. Religion answers the question 'Why?' and science answers the question 'How?' and they are complementary disciplines. So that sense of rationalism within the LDS theological construct brings the religious and speculative science together."

Shannon Hale seems to agree with Parkin and Givens about why Mormons, unlike some other religious denominations, are not afraid of science fiction and fantasy—that it comes from our theology. From the 2009 *Boston Globe* article: "Mormons believe a lot of things that are pretty fantastic—we believe in miracles and angels and ancient prophets and rediscovered Scripture—so maybe it is almost natural for us to dive into these other stories."

In an interview on *A Motley Vision*, John Brown offers a less theological and more practical explanation for why Mormons have done well in the science fiction and fantasy genres. "Do we even know if Mormons are over-represented in the SF/Fantasy field?" he questions. His theory is that the inroads Mormons have made into speculative fiction, particularly science fiction, is more regional than it is religious and has more to do with several people having broken into the field (Orson Scott Card, Dave Wolverton, and Tracy Hickman) and then making efforts to teach their craft to young writers, which, because these authors lived in Utah and were affiliated with the tight-knit Mormon community, means they ended up teaching their craft to young Mormons.

While Brown's idea that Mormon involvement in science fiction and fantasy is more of a regional than it is a theological or cultural phenomenon does seem to be a good explanation for why Mormons have been successful in the field, it doesn't take into account why Mormons might originally have been drawn to the field—and that the Mormon tradition of speculative fiction is much older than Orson Scott Card. Mormon scholar Gideon Burton has pointed to a short story by Parley P. Pratt as perhaps the first example of Mormon speculative fiction. The story, called "Dream of the Future," which was read "In a Council of the Church, in the presence of the Prophet Joseph Smith," is a fantastical tale about a young man who is given a vision by an angel—a vision of an idealized theocratic society that flowers in the Western prairies after the existing American government collapses. Says Burton in his introduction to an online version of the story, "Pratt's 'dream of the future' recounted in 'The Angel of the Prairies' demonstrates an early and ongoing affinity between Mormon theology and speculative fiction."

Another early piece of Mormon literature that represents an early foray into speculative fiction is Nephi Anderson's *Added Upon*, a novel that tells the story of several spirit children who progress through premortal life, mortality, and the spirit world. *Added Upon* was originally published in 1898 and remained in print until 2005 and is credited with having influenced later Mormon works such as *Saturday's Warrior* and *My Turn on Earth*.

Mormons from the very beginning, it seems, have been interested in exploring their beliefs and imaginations through fiction, and science fiction and fantasy seem to be a natural fit for that exploration. The jury is still out on whether Mormons are actually over-represented in science fiction and fantasy, and Scott Parkin acknowledges that Mormons may seem to be particularly involved in the genre not because there are actually more Mormons writing science fiction and fantasy (proportionally to other religious and minority groups), but because Mormons "are more aggressive in identifying themselves as Mormon in connection with their work."

Theology, regional tight-knit communities, a history of speculative fiction, and strong self-identification all seem likely explanations for what has been a highly fruitful relationship between Mormons and science fiction and fantasy. Whatever the cause, the relationship seems to be rapidly growing in depth and scope, as this issue of *Mormon Artist* illustrates.

And who knows, maybe there really is something in the water. ❧

"The Class That Wouldn't Die"

ARTICLE BY **JOE VASICEK**

In December 2009, on the popular publishing blog *Editorial Anonymous*, a reader noted the surprising number of Mormon authors in science fiction and fantasy and the seeming existence of a "'Mormon Mafia' of BYU alumni." The reader then posed the question, "Will my odds of getting published improve if I move to Provo, convert, and squeeze out another kid?" While the ensuing discussion was more than a little tongue in cheek, no fewer than fifteen Mormons commented on the post.

Though the existence of a "Mormon Mafia" within the publishing world is almost certainly a myth, it is nonetheless surprising how many authors within science fiction and fantasy are LDS. From Stephenie Meyer to Shannon Hale, from Orson Scott Card and Tracy Hickman to Brandon Sanderson and Dan Wells, a rich and vibrant community of LDS writers has been flourishing for several decades. "It may be the culture," says an article for redOrbit. "It may be religion or the landscape. Maybe it's something in the water. Whatever the reason, Utah has some of the nation's most prolific producers and ravenous readers of science fiction and fantasy." As Terryl L. Givens notes in his book *People of Paradox*, "[There is a] demonstrable affinity between the genre and the faith . . . it is proving to be such a fruitful alliance." While speculation abounds as to why science fiction and fantasy resonate so well with the Latter-day Saint audience, the roots of the LDS writing community can be traced to a series of events at Brigham Young University in the late '70s and early '80s, and a group of extraordinary people who collectively became known as "the class that wouldn't die."

Before 1979, there existed a general interest in science fiction at BYU but very few resources for serious

writers. Perhaps the most ardent voice for science fiction and fantasy literature was BYU librarian Betty Pope, who in 1964 convinced the administration to establish a special collection within the Harold B. Lee Library for science fiction and fantasy titles. Instead of being spread across the entire fifth floor by author, the science fiction and fantasy collection was given a special catalog designation and gathered together in one place, which remains the case today. With more than 8,000 titles, the collection was at the time of its inception the third largest repository of science fiction in the country. Other student-based efforts, largely inspired by an interest in Star Trek and Star Wars, led to the formation of the Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy. However, the Association was more of a fan club for science fiction and fantasy media, not an organization for fostering writing. Though interest in the genres was definitely present, a science fiction and fantasy writing community did not yet exist.

That began to change in the fall of 1979, when Carolyn Nicita, then a student, attended a meeting of the Association and recognized the need for more resources for writers. "That club meeting was okay," she wrote at the time in her journal, "but not what I had hoped for. I was hoping that there would be a couple of writers there, but there were only squirrels—nice ones, but squirrels all the same." At the time, she was taking a communications class on persuasion, and she decided to start a club for one of the assignments. "I didn't care whether they were reputable or not," she says, "but I cared whether they were serious." A bumper sticker from a local store supplied the name: "Beware the quantum duck that goes Quark Quark!" The first club meeting consisted of Carolyn Nicita, her fiancé, a guy who came only to see if Carolyn had stolen his Darth Vader costume, and Dave Doering.

"When you do an RPG (role playing game) party," says Carolyn, "you want people with different abilities. Dave was like the herald/puller."

A young Mormon convert from New York City, Dave was a longtime fan of science fiction since even before he came to BYU. "Since the earliest days of science fiction," Dave says, "I thought that we had an infinite potential, that there was so much we could do in our lives… When I discovered [Mormonism], I thought, 'Here's a gospel—a description of life—that allows for infinite possibilities.'" After Carolyn married in 1980 and took a job working graveyard, Dave took over leadership of Quark.

That semester—winter of 1980—Orson Scott Card came to the Lee Library at BYU and gave a lecture entitled "How a Mormon Deals with the Problem of Evil in Fiction." Dave was electrified. "I actually saw somebody who understood some of the questions I had, and I said, I've got to meet this man. I've got to spend time with him, because he's speaking my language." Dave saw that Card was scheduled to give a lecture to Eugene England's honors class later that night. "So I showed up, knocked on the door, and Eugene England opened up. He looked at me and realized, 'I don't know this man from Adam,' but I just smiled and said 'Hi! Sorry I'm late!' and walked right past him." The discussion at Professor England's house proved just as creatively stimulating as the lecture at the library, but afterward, Dave felt that some of Card's comments about BYU were a little deprecating. "I thought: I can prove him wrong," said Dave, "and that gave me the impetus to want to do stuff."

At this point, Quark was far too small to facilitate Dave and Carolyn's ambitions. Fortunately, events would soon transpire to build the critical mass that they needed. In the fall of 1980, BYU's English department offered a 218R class on writing science fiction and fantasy, with Orson Scott Card initially slated to teach it. Very quickly, the class filled up with student writers. "These were not people who had gone to Quark," said Dave. "These were not people who had gone to the Association. These were much more serious writers." Due to scheduling conflicts, however, Card was unable to come to BYU that semester. "The day the class started," Shayne Bell described, "[the person] who we assumed was the teacher came in… advanced to the front of the class, picked up a piece of chalk, wrote on the chalkboard 'I am not Scott Card,' and proceeded to introduce himself as Marion Smith." At first, student reactions were mixed: "There was some disappointment, naturally," said Dave Doering, "not knowing who Doc Smith was—what kind of a teacher he was—but it was a science fiction writing class, so we decided, 'Well, we're here, let's just do this and see how it turns out.'" Shayne continues, "He proceeded to teach a marvelous class. He proceeded to teach throughout that semester such a fine course, not just on writing, but on life and how to live it well. He was a very fine professor, who changed my life for good forever, and I believe I'm correct in saying he did that for the other members of that class as well."

Professor Marion K. Smith proved to be exactly the teacher the students needed. "He was a master of literature writing and could speak authoritatively on any topic," says Shayne. For science fiction, he possessed "an undoubted enthusiasm for the field; a belief in its power and ability to do good and to change lives—not just individual lives but the entire world… he had read the literature, and he knew the truth about it, that it was as good as any other." Says Dave, "Doc was a laissez-faire kind of guy. He listened to the Spirit and felt comfortable having us run things. He sensed that we had good judgment running activities, and I think that over the years, we've earned that, time and again." While he took a very hands-off approach to teaching and advising, he was very adept at working with the bureaucracy of the BYU administration, which helped out later as his students began to start initiatives on their own. "He was not hands-on at all, except under certain circumstances," said Jonathan Langford, author of *No Going Back* from

We continued meeting for thirteen years… all of us with similar dreams to write professionally, and our goal in the meetings being to help each other along the way.

Zarahemla Books, who took several of Marion Smith's classes after the class that wouldn't die in 1980. "If something got really big, we'd bring him in, he would run interference for us, help us to get grants, etc." Throughout the years, Smith sacrificed a great deal for his students, including in 1984 driving a van packed with twelve people down to the World Science Fiction convention in Los Angeles. Still, though an excellent teacher, Marion Smith was not himself a writer or an author. "Doc was just the right balance of good information and good encouragement," Dave says, "but he left you hungry…to do more."

After the class ended, the students went home for Christmas and came back the next semester with a yearning for the experience to continue. "When it came time for that class to end," says Shayne, "none of us wanted it to. It had been that kind of fine experience. We regretted that it was ending." One day, while walking down the sidewalk, Shayne and Dave happened to run into each other. "I asked him what he'd been doing," Shayne says, "if he'd been writing. I had been, over the Christmas break, and so had he." Dave recalls, "We said, 'Why don't we get together and form a writing group?' We met in one of the Heritage Halls with the girls from the class and started Xenobia, and it was with Xenobia that we kept the class alive." Xenobia, roughly translated as "love of the strange," soon caught on as the name of the new writing group. "By the next week," says Shayne, "we had found most of the rest of the class, and they had all agreed to come. We continued meeting for thirteen years…all of us with similar dreams to write professionally, and our goal in the meetings being to help each other along the way."

Among the students, Shayne Bell was one of the key figures who pulled the people together and made things happen. "Shayne was very integral to all of this," says Carolyn. "He was like the white mage—the one who does the magic." A young Idaho farm boy who came to BYU to become a writer, Shayne was first introduced to science fiction by his mother, who bought him a premier copy of *Magnus, Robot Fighter* when he was four years old. "I grew up in a house where my parents both read a lot," says Shayne. "They read everything, among them the works of science fiction and fantasy." When he came to BYU, however, his initial goal was to write mainstream fiction. "I signed up for the class that Orson Scott Card was going to teach simply because he was a published writer, and none of the faculty at the time at BYU were." On the stairwell after the first day of class, Shayne asked Marion Smith if he could write mainstream fiction in the class even though the subject matter was science fiction. The resulting conversation changed his life. "I decided on the spot, though I didn't tell him then," says Shayne, "that I would take the course and write science fiction simply to study with this good man who had already taught such a remarkable class." Soon after Xenobia started, Shayne went out of his way to find and bring in several other student writers, such as Cara O'Sullivan, who had not been a part of the initial class that wouldn't die. "Everyone has a Shayne story," says Cara, who went on to help organize *Leading Edge* and the Life, The Universe, & Everything symposium. "Shayne was a really critical figure in those early days," says Jonathan Langford, another major organizing figure in the student initiatives that would follow. "Dave Doering was the 'sure we can do this' person, and Shayne was the one who made it happen and made it a class act."

With Shayne Bell and Dave Doering providing the impetus and drawing in new members, Xenobia quickly grew into a tight-knit writing community. "The fact that there was going to be a class taught by Orson Scott Card brought together some people who were serious and talented all at one place at one time," says Jonathan Langford, "and then they had the critical mass." Shayne compares it to Tolkien, Lewis, and the Inklings: "Our hope from the start [was] that we would be

that type of support group for each other, that we would offer each other the best critiques and help each other prepare for publication."

"There were a lot of keen editorial minds," says Diane Read, who later published a fantasy trilogy with Tor, the largest science fiction and fantasy publishing company in New York. "They encouraged me to drop the fanzine stuff and get serious.... Xenobia was a major player in my success." One of the major factors that forged Xenobia into such a tight-knit literary community was the opposition that the students faced almost from the start. "Because of the opposition," Carolyn says, "we had someone to fight against. And for a campaign, you need an impossible quest—something that you can brag about." In the early 80s, science fiction was often viewed by mainstream popular culture as a fringe thing, especially in Utah. "In the old days," says Loreena Goertz, "if you were into science fiction and fantasy, you were just weird." The opposition was not limited to the students' peers but extended through much of the English department as well. When Shayne Bell drafted a prospectus for a science fiction and fantasy themed master's thesis, his proposal was rejected twice before it was accepted, delaying his graduation for over a year. At one point, the secretary allowed him to read some of the professor's comments, one of which read, "science fiction is dangerous for children and should therefore neither be written nor read." His third attempt passed by one vote, but every professor refused to be his thesis chair, until Sally Taylor stepped up to the position. Even then, he had to include professors from the math department just to form a complete panel. But the opposition was not just limited to BYU. In the wider field of science fiction and fantasy, as well as New York and the publishing world, Utah had a "stigma of ignorance—that we're religious, closed-minded people," according to Dave Doering. "In 1982, you're in a non-Internet era, non-cable television era, non-satellite era, so your contact with major publications, writers, editors, and so on was limited unless you went out of state—but very few people in 1980 had been out of state for one of those events."

In response to this opposition, both from the BYU literary community and the continual rejection from New York, the members of Xenobia decided to organize their own literary magazine: *Leading Edge*. "The official literary publication of the university [*Inscape*] refused to accept science fiction and fantasy," said Shayne, "so we decided to print our own journal."

"We felt that we needed something as a leg-up," says Dave. "The writers needed something to encourage them, and the magazine was a way to do that—to help them move forward in their careers." Dave Doering was also motivated by his experience with Orson Scott Card at Eugene England's house. "A magazine would show that we're a real school." The first issue was typed and collated by hand, with red and blue covers. A $20 contest was offered to attract submissions, and several members of Xenobia responded by sending in their stories. Though difficulties plagued the magazine from the very start, once it was off the ground, people started coming forward to help make it possible. "When the first issue came out, it wasn't selling like we'd hoped," says Shayne, "but we ran into some other great mentors and helpful souls along the way." One of these was Linda Brummet, manager at the BYU Bookstore, who bought 100 copies of the first issue for a dollar each, making the publication of the second issue possible. As the publication gained steam and started receiving submissions from around the country, other people began to volunteer with it. "Now that there was a magazine," says Dave Doering, "there were a lot of people who wanted to help out with the magazine."

Throughout its nearly thirty years of publication, *Leading Edge* has had a tremendous impact on both the personal and professional development

For a campaign, you need an impossible quest—something that you can brag about.

Leading Edge *and the symposium gave encouragement to this audience—to feel that not only were they capable, but they weren't alone.*

of hundreds of students. Several LDS editors broke their teeth at *Leading Edge*, including Anne Sowards at Ace and Stacy Whitman at Tu, an imprint of Lee & Low Books.

"By volunteering at *Leading Edge*, I discovered that I really wanted to be an editor, not a writer," said Peter Ahlstrom, who went on to edit for Tokyopop and currently works as Brandon Sanderson's personal assistant. "*Leading Edge* showed me that I was good at it."

"If you want to prepare yourself to be a publisher," says Dave Wolverton, "*Leading Edge* is a great place to go.... It's a real life experience." For the writers as well, the experience at *Leading Edge* has consistently proven invaluable. "When you participate from the editor's perspective, you get to see why you might be getting rejected," says Carolyn. One of the things that has always set *Leading Edge* apart is the practice of giving every author detailed feedback on their stories. Where other publications typically send form rejections for unsolicited submissions, *Leading Edge* has at least two staff members read every story cover to cover and write up a comment sheet for each one. Naturally, this teaches the student staff a great deal about writing.

"It showed me what worked and what didn't," says Dan Wells, author of the *I Am Not a Serial Killer* books. "I had always wanted to be a writer, but it was that experience [filling out comment sheets] that got me into the mindset of what works and why."

Leading Edge has not only helped to launch the careers of several best-selling authors, it has also helped to boost illustrators and visual artists as well. In 2002, under Peter Ahlstrom's leadership, *Leading Edge* won the Chelsey Award for best cover art. "It tells artists that here's an avenue that we can get into," says Dave Doering.

Of all the accomplishments of the class that wouldn't die, however, the annual Life, the Universe, & Everything symposium (LTUE) has had perhaps the greatest impact on laying the groundwork for a flourishing of the arts in the LDS science fiction and fantasy community. Like so many other things, the symposium began almost by serendipity. In February 1982, the BYU administration brought in Ben Bova, a prolific writer and one of science fiction's most accomplished editors, to speak at a university forum. "We got a call one day from Doc Smith saying that the university was going to host the editor of *OMNI* magazine," says Dave. "The administration called up Doc Smith and said, 'We've got him for the day—is there anything else we can do with him?'" Dave Doering put together a program on short notice, and the rest of Xenobia immediately rallied behind it. "After the session," says Dave, "we took Ben and his wife to Betty Pope's house, which wasn't too far from campus, and had a reception up there with everybody." The success of the reception left an impact not only on the Bovas but on the students as well. "That really gelled in our minds that we should do a continuous symposium of our own." The following year, the students invited Orson Scott Card, and the year after, Frederik Pohl and C. J. Cherryh. Word quickly spread about the hospitality and enthusiasm of the students at BYU. "Science fiction writers will talk," says Carolyn, "and Shayne led the way in being the ultimate host." As the next generation of science fiction and fantasy writers at BYU began to take over from the original Xenobians, the symposium quickly grew into a major event, drawing in several big names from the field such as Alan Dean Foster, Michael Whelan, Algis Budrys, Lois McMaster Bujold, Tracy Hickman, L. E. Modesitt, Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, David Brin, and many others.

An academic gathering of science fiction and fantasy enthusiasts across numerous fields of study, the LTUE symposium has contributed immensely to the creativity and personal growth of readers and writers in both the BYU and wider Utah communities. One of the things that makes LTUE so unique is the broad academic quality of the event. "BYU brings

in a higher caliber of person," says Jonathan Langford, one of the early organizers of the symposium. "In a lot of places, fandom is composed of people who have nothing better to do with their lives, whereas at BYU people who have plenty to do with their lives found that what was going on in the science fiction and fantasy community was so interesting, and the people so talented, that they chose to spend their time there." Unlike other literary gatherings, LTUE has always brought in professors and experts from numerous fields of study—a useful approach for both readers and writers of science fiction. "One of the things I loved about the symposium was that it wasn't just a literary thing," says Cara O'Sullivan. "Literary conferences are more one-dimensional, geared towards literature and literary criticism—which is wonderful, but science fiction involves so many other things." Says Jonathan Langford, "At LTUE, panels on worldbuilding are taught by actual professors of the sciences—people whom science fiction and fantasy authors should be taking notes from." Among science fiction and fantasy gatherings, LTUE was one of the first in the world to approach the genres from a serious academic perspective. "The symposium became a venue that allowed us to bring in scholars from across the world," says Shayne Bell. "We actually considered this genre from the scholarly point of view. It wasn't a flippant, comical treatment at all, but a very serious treatment, of not just life but how to live it well." At the same time, by attracting renowned writers and editors from the wider science fiction and fantasy community, LTUE has helped to break down the stigma of Utah as a cultural and literary backwater. "We were, early on, among the very first to consider science fiction from a scholarly point of view," says Shayne, "and it did help us to bring actual working editors from profit-making magazines to the university to hear them speak." LTUE has also provided excellent career resources and networking opportunities for writers. "LTUE helped many of us to get our foot in the door," says Diane Read. "It gave us insight into publishing.... Personally, there is no way I would have succeeded without the networking I had through LTUE."

Perhaps most importantly, however, the uniquely religious setting at BYU has allowed LDS readers and writers to infuse science fiction and fantasy literature with a unique gospel perspective. "We are endowed from our creator with a desire to be like him and to create," says Dave Doering. "There is much in this world that discourages creation, and I thought it would be nice if we provided a fertile garden, to make this come together and to flourish." In numerous ways, science fiction and the restored gospel have proven surprisingly compatible, especially in "the exposition and exploration of ideas at the margins of conventional thinking," as Terryl Givens notes in *People of Paradox*. "Universal curiosity about everything is an aspect of divinity," says Jonathan Langford. "Mormons think cosmologically and therefore have a natural affinity to science fiction and fantasy." Many science fiction themes resonate with LDS theology and experience in ways that they do not with other religions, and at LTUE, readers and writers have an opportunity to discuss and explore this resonance in a way that can't be done in any other setting. "It's wonderful," says Jonathan Langford, "because you get a chance to see it in a startlingly new context that makes it real and allows us as listeners to broaden our minds and to think and to learn."

Since the passing of the class that wouldn't die, the writing community that they helped to form has grown and flourished, laying the foundation for LDS writers to make a significant cultural impact on the world. "I can't help but think that we were laying the foundation for a burgeoning in the arts," says Dave Doering. "*Leading Edge* and the symposium gave encouragement to this audience—to feel that not only were they capable, but they weren't alone." The inclusive, volunteer-driven spirit found within the Church has played a large part in the growth and success of the LDS science fiction and fantasy writing community. "We are from a community of people who are trained to help each other and give service," says Dave Wolverton. "We don't see it as competition." This same spirit of service not only connects other LDS writers with each other, but it also allows them to reach out to the world at large and share, through the unique genres of science fiction and fantasy, that which is "virtuous, lovely, and of good report." "We wanted to change the world for the good—we wanted to make it better," says Shayne. "We're part of this wider, larger movement of science fiction and fantasy. One of its goals is to change the world—to make it better." "Mormon writers have a storytelling ability that they've been waiting for and been anxious to hear from," says Dave Doering. "We've got that writing, because there's a belief we have about life that [the rest of the world] can't imitate, because they've lost it. We've got it." In laying the foundation for all of this, the members of the class that wouldn't die often referred back to President Spencer W. Kimball's call for Mormon artists to make a name for the LDS people in all the arts. "I remember reading that issue of the *Ensign*," says Shayne. "I put it down and said to myself, 'I will answer this prophet's call.' And others did the same. That was a driving force for us.... It's why we kept fighting: we wanted to answer the prophet's call."

In science fiction and fantasy more than perhaps any other genre, Latter-day Saints have made and continue to make a name for themselves, largely because of the contributions of that class. From Dave Wolverton, Dan Wells, and Brandon Sanderson—all past editors of *Leading Edge*—to the many aspiring writers and published LDS authors who attend LTUE, the Latter-day Saint science fiction and fantasy community is answering the prophet's call. ❧

Photo courtesy Bob Henderson, Henderson Photography, Inc.

Orson Scott Card

INTERVIEW BY **ERIC W. JEPSON**
WEB: **HATRACK.COM**

A student of mine whom I'd recently introduced to *Ender's Shadow* came to back-to-school night with his parents. He had finished it quickly, then his mom had picked up the book and they both loved it. Then my student said that a friend had called you a Something Propagandist and the Ender books Something Propaganda. After a bit of puzzling, his mother guessed the missing word was "Mormon" and yes! That was it! at which we all rolled our eyes and I, who had just been offered this interview a few hours before, had my first question: Mr. Card, you've been accused of being a Mormon propagandist. How do you plead? (And, while you're at it, how do you respond to the other side of the aisle, constantly speculating about your pending apostasy?)

Thanks for recognizing that I get accused of both things. Of course I never use my fiction to propagandize for Mormonism—religion is too serious a matter for me to subject it to fictional treatment. I have sometimes used stories from Mormon history and scripture as the basis of the plotlines of some of my fiction, but so could any atheist—and many have done so with biblical or other religious stories. Is a writer who bases a story on the Odyssey or Iliad propagandizing for Athena or Zeus?

At the same time it is impossible to write fiction without including the way you view the world, and to the degree that my worldview coincides with Mormonism, aspects of it are going to be in my work. But since Mormon values mostly overlap with Christian values, and most of those with simple human values, the overwhelming majority of the moral worldview in my fiction is simply *civilized*.

The charge that my work is "Mormon propaganda" has never been demonstrated in any way from the text of my fiction. It's merely the bigotry of people who hate all things Mormon and wish to punish other people for their faith. These people range from devout Baptists to the fanatically politically correct, who, instead of engaging in public debate in a civilized manner, by offering their own arguments, use name-calling and personal attacks to try to silence or punish their opponents. Shame on them.

Those Mormons who condemn my work, on the other hand, usually do so because my work is not decorous

enough for them. While they don't mind a bit when non-Mormon writers give their characters a sex life or have them use rough language or talk rudely to people, they expect that I will somehow do the impossible: Write powerful, truthful fiction about human beings without ever showing anybody doing anything that Mormons regard as bad.

Thus if a character in a book of mine gets drunk, commits adultery, or speaks disdainfully of religion or Republicans, some Mormons assume that this means I'm *advocating* such reprehensible things. They forget that fiction, like life, can only make moral sense if there is "opposition in all things." To them I say, not "shame," but "lighten up and get some perspective." My consolation is that such people find Shakespeare filthy.

When I want to push my religious or political ideas, I write essays. I've done that prolifically. But when I create a fictional character, I give his or her views a full and fair airing—even when they disagree completely with my own. The mistake that many readers make is thinking that because an idea is said within my fiction, I'm advocating it. On the contrary, I am merely *airing* it in order to show what the character is thinking and what motivates him (or at least what rationalization he uses).

As I've moved deeper into the Mormon arts, I keep running into Mormon artists paranoid that truthtelling will land them in ecclesiastical straits. I mostly, and uncharitably, want to strangle these people. Undoubtedly you've dealt with this question before. What advice do you have for those suffering from this paranoia?

They're not paranoid. My stake president was plagued for many years by communications from a vague Church committee, which provided them with xeroxes of a page from a work of mine, highlighted at the offending passage, which they were supposed to "inquire about." The intention was to cast doubt on my loyalty to the Church—to get my local leaders in a dither about my faithfulness so they would nag at me until I succumbed to the coercion (cf. "Unrighteous dominion") and stopped writing honestly, which would also mean that I would stop writing effectively or well.

When I investigated, however, I found that these letters—which were often very deceptive, removing the absolutely faithful and loyal context from statements that could only be taken as disloyal by malicious people determined to find fault—were being generated by a single bureaucrat who conceived of himself as the J. Edgar Hoover of the Mormon Church. When I talked to actual Apostles about the situation, I found that the official Church position is that as long as I don't interfere with the work of the Church, my membership is not in question because of anything I write. In fact, my work has been vetted by Brethren before I was hired to write for the Church, as I have done on two occasions: The Hill Cumorah Pageant and the sesquicentennial musical *Barefoot to Zion*. If they had had any doubt about my loyalty to the Church, I would not have been engaged to write either.

And it's all moot, anyway. These letters would come to my stake president and he would toss them in the garbage—indeed, that has been the policy of several stake presidents over the years—because he knew me and my wife, had seen our loyalty and faith in action year after year, and knew that my writings were loved by many faithful Latter-day Saints. They knew how to recognize meaningless malice, and how to ignore it.

Long before I knew of these letters (for they were never sent directly to *me*), however, I policed myself. I once thought of an absolutely marvelous story based on an experience on my mission. But it made no sense except in the LDS missionary context, and as I started writing it, I realized that I was writing about things that might cause investigators to look askance at missionaries who showed up at their door, or might cause prospective missionaries to hesitate to serve. I could not, in a work of fiction, make the context clear enough to ameliorate such potential damage to the work of the Church, and so I dropped the project.

There is no moment in my career when I would knowingly write anything that would interfere with the work of the Church. At the same time, there is no moment when I will let someone else's foolish ideas of decorum influence writing that must come from my own conscience.

Part of your public persona is Uncle Orson—the avuncular mentor—and your *Intergalactic Medicine Show* offers real payment for young authors still working in short stories, something you have said that science fiction (and perhaps all fiction) needs in order to build great writers. Also, even though you've spilled many words knocking university-level writing programs, Uncle Orson now teaches fiction writing at Southern Virginia University and elsewhere. And so I guess what I want to know is, how do you see your role in raising the next generation of writers, and what are you doing to make that happen?

I have had help along the way. What I've learned, I offer to others, in case they find it helpful. What I don't know, I'm still trying to figure out—when I do, I'll teach that too. The single most important thing I advocate, though, is for writers to remove any barriers between themselves and the widest possible audience for their honest work. That's my beef with academic writing programs and with the way literature is taught in most schools today. Instead of valuing clarity, they value most the fiction that requires professorial mediation to be understood. That is death to literature. Good writing requires no mediation whatsoever, and no training beyond knowledge of the language and the ability to read—and not even that, for audiobooks. So my role as a writing teacher is to help writers learn to speak clearly and effectively to their natural audience (i.e.,

people who believe in and care about the same stories they believe in and care about). That is the opposite of what most academic creative writing programs do. So I'm not just "helping young writers" (they're not all young, anyway!)—I'm also engaged in a war against those who would silence these young writers by making their work inaccessible to their natural audience.

Not so avuncular, am I?

What are you reading now? Any engagement with Mormon authors?

I don't read authors for their Mormonness. There are some writers I enjoy who are Mormons, and some writers I have no patience for who are Mormons—and the same is true of my attitude toward books by non-Mormons. I have enormous respect for the talent of David Farland and the two Brandons—Sanderson and Mull, along with many other Mormon writers at various stages of their career. I wish nothing but good for even the writers whose work I can't enjoy as much, because I'm not in its natural audience.

But you have to understand: I'm not a joiner. I don't "hang out" with anybody. My closest friends are not writers, or not career writers, anyway. I find that writers who hang out with other writers start to create fiction that is about writers or people who talk and think like writers, or people who talk and think the way writers would like to believe writers talk and think. It's a dead end. Writers whose social life is built around other writers are killing their own work. Your characters are supposed to be real people in the real world, not people who hide in basements and attics to type lies they can charge money for.

It's one of the great side benefits of being Mormon. Outside of Utah and Idaho, where zoning laws seriously deform Mormon wards, we Latter-day Saints are brought together on Sundays with people from every income level and every walk of life. If we choose our friends from among those people, not gravitating toward literary or arty people, but instead seeking

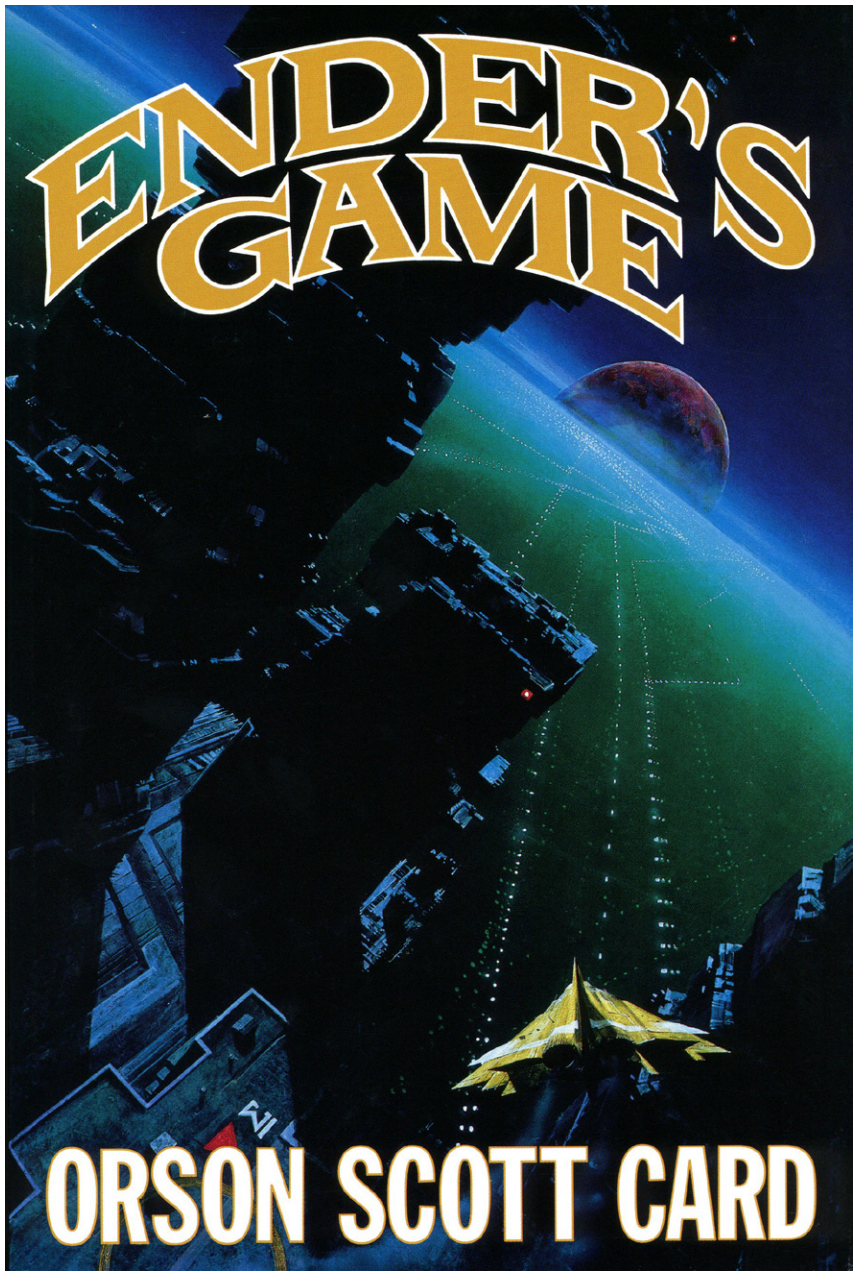


Photo courtesy Orson Scott Card

good people from every group, it will enrich our fiction and allow us to keep in contact with the widest possible audience, because they will know that we *know* them and their friends. Too much fiction today reveals the fact that the writer has lost all touch with non-academic or non-literary people. This is especially true of academic-literary fiction, which is one of the reasons why most of such fiction has little or no audience.

But you asked what I'm reading now. Let me just read you the titles of the books stacked up for me to review them in my weekly column: Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life.* Robert A. Burton, *On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not*. Geoffrey Perret, *Lincoln's War*. Susan Wise Bauer, *The History of the Medieval World*. Neil Shusterman, *Bruiser*. Dan Ariely, *The Upside of Irrationality: The Unexpected Benefits of Defying Logic at Work and at Home*. Pope Brock, *Charlatan*. Donald Stoker, *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War*. Patrick Lencioni, *Death*

by Meeting. Sol Steinmetz, *There's a Word for It*. Russell A. Olsen, *The Complete Route 66: Lost and Found*. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap*. Marek Oziewicz, *One Earth, One People: The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle, and Orson Scott Card*.

And, not quite stacked up, here are the audiobooks I have listened to in the past months—since I download them from Audible, there's nothing to stack up: Kristin Chenoweth, *A Little Bit Wicked*. Randy O. Frost and Gail Stekeete, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*. Kwei Quartey, *Wife of the Gods*. Helen Simonson, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*. Lisa Gardner, *The Neighbor*. Paul Bloom, *How Pleasure Works*. Maurice Gee, *In My Father's Den*. Ben Mezrich, *The Accidental Billionaires*. Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*. John McWhorter, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*. Larry Niven, *Ringworld*. Anthony Everitt, *Augustus*. Daniel Ehrenhaft, *Friend Is Not a Verb*. Jonathan Kellerman, *Deception*. Robert Graves, *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and America*. Ken Scholes, *Canticle*.

I also recently reread (but will not review) *Lord of the Rings* and *Fountainhead*. I'm still waiting to review *Vanity Fair* and *Barchester Towers*, though I listened to the audiobooks almost a year ago—I love them, but haven't pushed them to the top of the stack, mostly because they don't really need my review to boost their careers <grin>. Right now I'm listening to *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* while I exercise. For other recent readings, you only have to look back at my review columns.

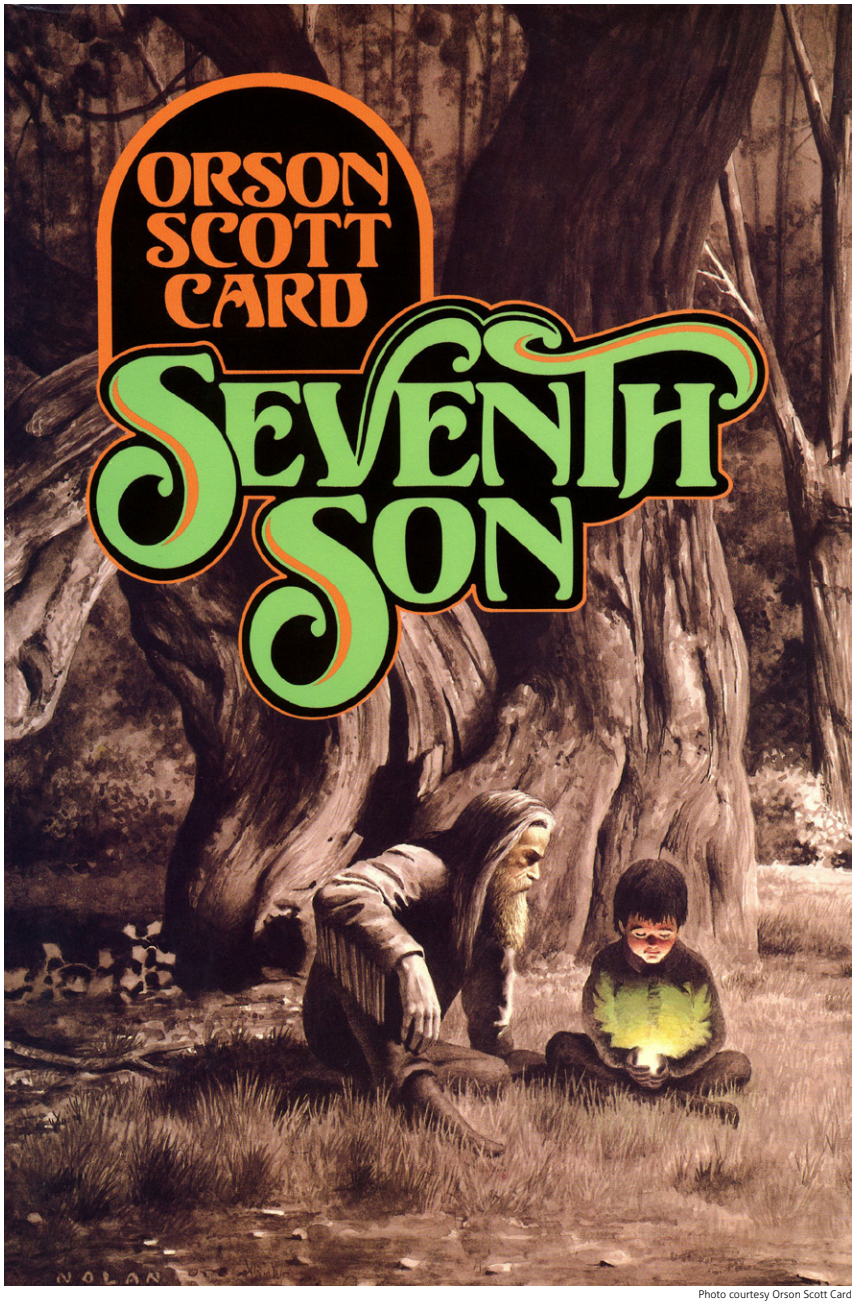


Photo courtesy Orson Scott Card

With you juggling so many series, how do you prioritize your projects? I've heard you say that it's entirely based on what keeps your sales reputation high, but that would suggest nothing but Ender books for the rest of your life. What other factors matter and how do you balance them against each other?

I write what I care about and believe in; or what is most urgently due, as long as it also falls under the former category. And sometimes I just write something because I really want to—though that's almost always a novella or short story rather than a book.

I can't force myself to write something that isn't ripe, but I do know how to enhance a story to fast-ripen it. Even then, my stories often go off into weird directions, and I've learned to follow them there and drag the original outline along with me, so the book remains coherent but is also richly flavored with whatever my unconscious is pumping up at that moment.

Is there room in the national market for Mormon writers to tell stories explicitly Mormon—and recognizable as such from the outside?

No. Because either it will be drivel like Krakauer's anti-Mormon treatment of Mormonism (informed by the deceptions of former historian, now

propagandist Michael Quinn) and other sensationalized nonsense that gets Mormon culture completely wrong, or it will be insider fiction that the audience suspects will be propaganda.

What Mormons forget is that we are not particularly interesting. That is, as long as you tell the truth about us. Few are the stories that require a Mormon setting in order to be told.

Having said that, I'll point to my book *The Folk of the Fringe*, a collection of linked stories set in a future Mormon culture (post-nuclear war). I'm very proud of the book, but by no stretch of the imagination has it "sold well." I'll also point to *Lost Boys*, one of my best novels, which has absolutely Mormon characters and was marketed Outside. It has sold decently, but set no records. And then there was *Saints*.

In short, I've done it as well as it has ever been done—and the resistance in the marketplace is enormous. Put "Mormon" anywhere on the cover, and you cut sales in half or worse.

But as long as you don't care about sales, and have established your career well enough that it can't be hurt by the sales dip that affects Mormon books, and you can find a publisher willing to indulge you, go for it.

If you want to write a Mormon novel so you can proselytize for the Church, on the other hand, I urge you to think again. Fiction is entertainment; it is, by admission, lies. Don't try to teach the gospel in the midst of entertaining lies. It's too serious to put in fiction. My "Mormon novels" have not required or even invited my readers to decide whether they think Mormonism is true or even good. They are set within Mormon culture, so that readers can take an anthropological interest in it if they wish, but it is not about convincing them of the truthfulness of our doctrine. Indeed, I wonder if any of my books even brings up doctrine in any meaningful way. I doubt it.

The gospel is true. So if you want to teach it, speak it as unadulterated, undisguised truth. We do no good if we try to sneak gospel messages into something else—it just makes us look sneaky and deceptive.

Besides, Mormons as characters don't make for good fiction because Church life is so time-consuming. I suppose it might be amusing to have the hero constantly going to meetings or preparing to teach lessons, in a comic novel, but since most of us live lives that are absolutely focused on the village of our ward, it puts up enormous barriers for non-Mormons to even make sense of our lives. And when we're NOT in our villages, we're perfectly ordinary citizens of whatever country we live in. So why not write about perfectly ordinary citizens who are NOT Mormons?

Back when you were publishing LDS fiction as Hatrack River Publications, the ease of small-publisher printing and marketing had yet to undergo its current revolution. Have you considered getting back into the business now that we have POD and Twitter? And if not, what lessons can you offer those following in your footsteps?

I've seen no evidence that Twitter sells books, or that POD is even viable. We stopped publishing solely because our excellent distributor went out of business, and all the distributors we tried after that did absolutely nothing. We have a new distributor now, and we're planning to relaunch by publishing a collection of my essays, a book of hymns (with texts by me), a series of sharp poems by LDS poets, and—we hope—a novel or two. I'll let you know how that goes.

Meanwhile, Hatrack River worked very well—we made a profit on all but two of our books, and we know exactly why those failed—because we found a niche that was not served: That is, humorous-yet-sentimental novels about the lives of Mormons who are completely committed to the Church. That niche is still there, waiting for more books, and nobody else seems to be filling it.

You are the master of the moral dilemma and your best fiction is often fueled by such dilemmas. I've heard this called one of your most Mormon attributes as a writer. What about moral dilemmas is particularly Mormon?

Nothing. It's what *I* do, not what *Mormons* do.

Your novel *Lost Boys* throws a typical Mormon family into weird supernatural situations. It and *Treasure Box* have been called horror novels by many people, as have some of your shorter works. On the other hand, you have an avowed hatred for horror movies and have expressed skepticism over the odds that an LDS horror can function whatsoever. As far as I can tell, you've made statements on Mormons and horror and Mormon horror in small bite-size pieces, but I can't really tell how your thoughts on the subject fit together. So, how do they all fit together?

Genres suck books into them whether they belong there or not. If by Horror you mean Clive Barker, then I have never written horror and never will. But if a novel of mine gets pushed into that genre by those marketing the book, I don't mind. It doesn't change a word of what I wrote.

My understanding is that you have been called a number of times to write for the Church. My impression is that it would be less likely for, say, an LDS contractor being called to fix the roof of the Hill Cumorah's visitors' center.

Being asked to write for a Church project doesn't mean that all the rest of your work has been certified as Good by the Brethren—it just means that they aren't embarrassed to admit you're Mormon, and they believe you won't start attacking the Church afterward. It also means they think you can do the job well. I hope they were satisfied with my work on the Pageant and on *Barefoot to Zion*. I have never written anything for the Church at a local level, unless you count road shows, or one-acts I wrote entirely on my own initiative. Local Church leaders don't give writing assignments, and they couldn't afford me even if they did. ❧

Photo courtesy Brook Andreoli

Ally Condie

INTERVIEW BY **EMILY HUEY**
WEB: **ALLYCONDIE.COM**

At what point do you think you "became a writer"?

I've been writing since I was small (I used to dictate stories to my babysitter when I was little), but I think I really became a writer about eight years ago when I decided to put in the time regularly—when I started writing three to four hours daily. I knew it was going to take a lot of work for me to become a good writer and I knew I needed to get serious about it.

How did you come to write for teens (rather than adults)?

I started writing right after I stopped teaching high school. For me, it was a really natural thing to want to write for young adults—I loved working with them and missed it, and I also love reading young adult literature.

Does your experience as a teacher affect the way you write?

Not in any concrete way, but I'm sure it does in that I had a lot of experiences while teaching that shaped me as a person, and therefore as a writer. I do feel that I want to write something worth reading—something I would have been able to hand a student and say, "I think you're going to like this!"

How do you get into the mindset of your teenage audience? Is it ever hard?

For a long time, I either taught high school or lived as the house mom in a sorority back East, so I was always surrounded by teenagers (the girls who lived in the sorority were mostly nineteen). I loved it, and I think that helped, to be continually in those environments. However, I don't really find it hard to be in that mindset—it's almost like it's my default to feel eighteen or nineteen—which is probably why I was drawn to teaching high school and writing YA. I think a lot of us writing YA feel that way.

When you were a teen, what kinds of books did you read? What kinds of books do you read now?

When I was a teen, I read a lot of Agatha Christie, Anne Tyler, Wallace Stegner, and Barbara Kingsolver. I still love those authors and read them often, but I also count Marilynne Robinson, Elizabeth Strout, and Ann Patchett among my favorites as well. I did (and do) read a lot of adult fiction, but of course I adore young adult fiction too. Some of my favorite authors in that genre right now are Ann Dee

Photo courtesy Ally Condie

Ellis, Grace Lin, Carol Lynch Williams, Shannon Hale, and many, many more.

You've mentioned some of my favorite Utah-based writers. Do you feel like there's a writing community here? How much does living in Utah affect your writing?

There is definitely a writing community here. The first five years I was writing/publishing, I lived in upstate New York, and so I felt very isolated—since not many people in upstate New York were writing LDS young adult fiction, which is what I was writing at the time! It is kind of ironic that I wrote LDS YA while I lived away from Utah and now that I'm back, I write national market fiction.

Living in Utah affects my writing in a lot of ways, but perhaps mostly geographically. I don't know how you could grow up in such a beautiful place and not feel inspired. I grew up in Southern Utah and that geography always resonates with me.

Besides being a writer, you are the mother of three sons. How do you balance the demands of these two roles?

Not very well! I always joke about how bad I am at multitasking. I can't write well when the kids are awake because I get too worried (my children are very small—the oldest is seven years old). What I usually do is write when they have gone to bed or during naptime. And this means that my house is kind of a disaster!

In the last five years, you have published four books for Latter-day Saint young adults (*Being Sixteen* and the *Yearbook* trilogy). How does having such a specific audience affect your writing?

For me, it affected my writing in that I could use phrases and situations that are unique to Mormon culture without explanation (like FHE, going on missions, etc.). It also meant that I could explore faith without having to defend it at the same time. The characters' religion could be an essential part of the story, but their being Mormon also didn't have to be *the* story.

That's a thought-provoking distinction. Will you ever write anything where "being Mormon" *is* the story?

Who knows! I never thought I'd be writing dystopian fiction and now I am.

Has writing about Mormon characters and settings led you to any insights about your faith and culture?

Absolutely. When you are writing, you try to be clear about how and what and why a character feels the way they do. It makes you examine your own faith and culture and say, "How does my character feel about this? Do I feel the same way? Why or why not?" Most of my family is not religious at all, and so I have always been very conscious of the intricacies of faith and culture and how they play out in families, communities, etc.

Matched, your newest book, is a different genre from your previous novels. Tell us about your experience writing in a whole new genre.

It felt great! I loved writing contemporary YA, but it was also very freeing to write something in a made-up world set in the future. It was fun to create not only new characters, but also a new setting and ideology.

In _Matched_, your main character, Cassia, lives in a dystopian world. Did your Latter-day Saint beliefs affect the world you built for Cassia?

Yes, in that the book focuses very heavily on the themes of free agency and choice and accountability. But there is no religion in Cassia's world, so there aren't any LDS characters, etc.

Tell us about your experience breaking into the national market. What was the process you went through?

I knew that *Matched* would not be a good fit for Deseret Book—they don't publish any dystopian fiction! I had to start over. I didn't have a literary agent, and I knew I would need one if I hoped to publish *Matched* nationally.

So I did a lot of research online and sent out queries to about twenty-five to thirty agents who represented young adult fiction. I had plenty of rejections, but there were also several offers of representation. I was over the moon!

We ended up at Penguin/Dutton with Julie Strauss-Gabel and it has been an absolutely wonderful experience working with Julie and with everyone else at Penguin Young Readers Group. I still have moments where I think, "Did this really happen?"

Are you working on a sequel to _Matched_? What other projects can we expect to see in the future?

Yes! There will be three books in the *Matched* series, so that's where my focus is right now. I have lots of ideas for what I might write next. I do seem to be leaning in a dystopian/sci-fi direction these days, but I have a few ideas for contemporary novels as well.

You say that you're leaning towards dystopian and science fiction. Why do you think that is?

I think it's very fun and very freeing to create your own world and your own rules. They have to ring true and make sense—which is the hard part—but it does feel very creative and exciting.

What advice can you give to aspiring writers, specifically those hoping to write for young adults?

Believe you can do it, and then put in the time. Write for several hours each day. Let yourself write a terrible first draft.

Pay attention to the genre—read what's out there for young adults!—and pay attention to teenagers. And give yourself time to grow as a writer. Don't put pressure on yourself to be amazing right from the start.

Photo courtesy Brook Andreoli

Photo courtesy Dave Wolverton

Dave Wolverton

INTERVIEW BY **JOE VASICEK**
WEB: **DAVIDFARLAND.NET**

How did you become a writer?

I got into writing when I was in high school. I was a big fantasy fan. I had read *Lord of the Rings* and had started looking for other books that were just as good and couldn't find any. I realized one day that there weren't any that were just as good, and so I started making up my own stories.

One day I was telling one of my stories to a coworker (I worked as a meat cutter at night with my parents' meat company), and he said, "You know, you should take all this stuff and put it in a book." I thought yeah, that's the way people do it. They go write books and then they make money. Maybe I can try that. I began writing, bought myself a used typewriter, and began typing away in secret and hiding my manuscripts so no one would be able to read them.

When I turned nineteen, I went to my first writers' conference at BYU and started getting a little bit more interested. I got into college and I was in pre-med—I always thought I might like to be a doctor who wrote on the side. I signed up for a writing class, and at that point I really got the writing bug and started writing frequently.

With one of my stories that I wrote for that class, my teacher said, "Why don't you put this in the Ann Doty Fiction Contest?" I put it in and won third place. I figured I spent about eight hours on that and won fifty bucks, so that's $6.25 an hour. That was better than minimum wage at the time, which was about $3.50. So I decided to try to win first place in a writing contest the next year.

I wrote several short stories, thinking that if I took a shotgun approach, maybe I'd actually win a contest. I wrote six short stories, and I ended up winning first place in all six contests that I entered. One of those was L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest, which is the world's largest science fiction and fantasy writing competition. I won grand prize for the year, which gave me about $6,000 in cash and prizes along with a trip to New York and a chance to study with Orson Scott Card, Algis Budrys, and Ted Powers.

We went there, and when I won the grand prize, I had several editors who approached me and asked if I was interested in writing novels. I just happened to have a novel outline ready, and that led to a three-novel contract with Bantam Books within a week or so, and that's how my career took off. It actually went pretty quickly.

People don't realize that I was working my tail off for about a year before I did all that, I was trying to cram fifteen years of writing education into a year if I could—that was my goal. I noticed that the average writer takes about seven years from the time they start writing to the time they get published. And I thought, well, that's because they're writing a little bit here and there on the weekends, and if they actually sat down and really studied it hard and put their hearts into it maybe they could do it faster. And so that's what I decided to do.

You studied all that in one year?

Maybe a year and a half. But I was working pretty much fourteen hours a day on my writing.

What was your first published work?

My first published work was a little story called "Charlie and the Wind." It was a story about emotional emasculation and what it leads to in children. Sort of an initiation story. That was published in *Inscape*, a little magazine on campus at BYU. I published a couple stories in there. Then I published something in the *Leading Edge*, and that's about the time when I started winning contests and broke into science fiction and fantasy.

How does your faith influence your writing and what you choose to write about?

When I first started writing, I was trained by my professors to try to create natural sounding voices (so if

people swear, then you should swear), and I started realizing that I was really not being true to myself. Just because people swear doesn't mean I need to do it in my writing. I decided after my first novel to sort of back off on that, and I've noticed that a lot of other fine bestselling authors do the same—they don't use any profanity at all.

I also realized that I had a belief in a life after this and in a spiritual side to human nature, and in a lot of mainstream markets you're not really allowed to talk about that. I realized I wanted to have that in my books. So even though I don't have anything recognizable as Mormonism in most of my books, there are still people who have a belief in life after this.

But more importantly than that, I find that whenever I'm writing, I start getting into moral dilemmas with my characters. They're wondering, what's the right thing to do? How should I handle this problem? And for me, I almost always come upon some insight or some scripture that I hadn't really thought of before that leads me to figure out how to handle the problem. And so all the sudden I'm finding that my faith is actually defining my stories in ways I hadn't anticipated. I suspect that most authors go through that but maybe aren't so conscious of the fact that hey, wow, I was in sacrament meeting and just came up with the end of my novel. That's the way it almost always works for me.

Can you tell us a little bit about your latest book, *In the Company of Angels*?

My wife's foster parents were mission presidents up at Sixth Crossing, taking people out on handcart treks. They kept saying "Oh, you should come up here." Her foster mother kept saying, "Dave, you should write a book about this," and I'm thinking, oh great, I don't want to write a book about handcarts. I mean, people have done that—it seems to me like the subject has been done to death.

But we went up and took the family and visited up there and took them on a handcart trek and got all exhausted. I went to bed and I had a dream in which a bunch of the handcart pioneers came to me and asked me to write this book.

Now, you need to understand that almost all of my books come in dreams. I believe that's the way my subconscious mind says, "Oh, you should do this, Dave." But in this case, it was just so vivid and so realistic. *On My Way to Paradise* has a battle scene that came straight from a dream. *The Runelords* came to me in a dream at the very first. That's just sort of my process. But in any case, I thought, okay, I'm going to take a close look at this and see if there is a book that I want to write in it.

I started doing a little bit of research, studying some of the characters and their stories and figuring out how I could put this in the form of a novel so I had a continuous action. Most of what we've gotten on the handcart pioneers has been little anecdotes—you know, my family did this, my great-great-grandmother did that. I really wanted to make it a continuous action, and as I started studying it that way, I realized nobody had done it before. Nobody had written that novel. And it was completely different from anything that I had imagined.

I came across a character I really liked, a woman named Eliza Gadd who was the only non-Mormon to ever pull a handcart across the prairies that I could see. She lost her husband, lost a couple of her sons, and ended up going snow-blind. Though she wasn't a member, after fourteen years of exposure to the Church—as soon as she got to Salt Lake—within a week, she got baptized. I started trying to find out what it was that changed her mind, and I think I finally got it.

She was a nurse before she went, and she went on to be a nurse and a midwife here in Utah—she has the Guinness record for the most live births ever given by a midwife. She was an extremely devoted, humble, wonderful person from all I can tell. I wanted to write about that change, her growth from starting out as this snooty woman crossing the prairies, wearing apparel that's inappropriate for a handcart trek because she wants to show her status, to showing how she's humbled by what happens and how it affects her life. That became the heart of the story. And I started looking at Captain Willie, and what a fantastic person he was. I started looking at ways to take two or three major characters and get the story of the crossing through those three points of view—and that's how I handle it.

It's about the handcart trek, and the setting is important, but it's more about the characters than anything else?

It's one of those stories where I think the theme really took over. The theme had to do with faith, and how faith grows and how you can lose it and how it changes you. This became a really thematically centered novel for me in a lot of ways. It just seemed to me that the characters' lives unfolded naturally in a way that really lent itself to this novel. I couldn't have imagined better subject material for a book. And of course it just won the Whitney award for best novel of the year, and I'm quite excited about that.

At the same time, it was a tough novel to write because I'd never written anything like that before. I'd written literary fiction, I'd written science fiction, I'd written fantasy. I'd never tried writing historical fiction, and there was so much research to be done. I drove up to Sixth Crossing to make sure that I got to go through a blizzard and see what that was like. I went along the trail and I read all of the material on the pioneers from their own biographies and autobiographies and company journals. I read several books by historians and went into army records and stuff like that to find out about some of the other things that were going on.

I finally got to the point where I realized I spent about two years doing research and it was time to write the book or I was going to go bankrupt—

I love doing research and I knew that I could spend twenty years doing it and would've gotten it a little bit better, but it's like the saying in Hollywood: "Great movies are never finished, they're only abandoned." There gets to be a time when you have to say, "Okay, I've done all I can, time to move on." And that's kind of where I had to go with this book.

One interesting thing about *In the Company of Angels* is that it was self-published, and it's actually doing very well. Can you speak a little bit about what you've learned through this self-publishing venture?

Self-publishing is a really dangerous path to take, and I have warned people about it in the past, just because to make money on a book, you have to get distribution. There are some ways where you can self-publish through sites where they do print-on-demand that aren't going to cost you an arm and a leg to get into it, but you run the risk of spending all of your time trying to promote your own work. As you start looking at that vast fortune in copies of books sitting in your garage, you keep saying, maybe I should go to this fair, maybe I should run an ad—you get to that diminishing returns area really quickly.

Publishers have a great network that they develop over the course of decades or even centuries, of book clubs that want to buy books from them, of bookstores that have accounts with them, of various reviewers and magazines that will help promote your work. That's what you're investing in when you get a publisher. You can't do that yourself, and everybody tries to fool themselves into thinking that they can—that they've got some angle that's going to make them a lot of money. And that's why there are a hundred thousand self-published books per year and none of them ever become *New York Times* bestsellers. That very, very rarely happens. One in ten thousand might be able to do that, but those are almost always self-help books. Not novels. It just isn't done. Now, things might change. With electronic publishing we might be able to get to the point where we can do that kind of thing, but right now I just don't see it.

So what would you credit with the success of *In the Company of Angels*?

Before I went and self-published, I nailed down my distribution line and got it distributed through Deseret Book. So I had a distribution line open to me, and that was really all it came down to. I'd looked into doing it through a couple of other little distributors, but Deseret Book had so much penetration into the LDS market that they were really the best and only choice in my mind. So that helped. Good word of mouth after that. That's all it comes down to. I got a couple of great reviews online, and the *Deseret News* had a wonderful review—one of the best I've ever had. That helped, too, but I think mainly word of mouth is what has sold the book.

Would you have any advice for any writers who are considering self-publishing or e-publishing?

Don't do it. Even though I've done it, the difference is that I'm a *New York Times* bestseller. I've been an award winner. I've got fifty books out. I had something of an audience already. If I had been in the position where I didn't have an audience and I was a new author, I'd still say don't do it.

This wasn't a decision that was guided by any inner wisdom in this particular case. My mother had read the book. She would call up crying every day, saying, "Dave, what have you done to publish this book today?" And I said, "Mother, I just write them. I don't publish them." And then she passed away, and the day she passed away, my wife said, "Well, you know, you're going to get a little bit of money for your inheritance. I want you to take it and publish that book that your mother kept wanting you to publish." I said, "Okay, I'll do that, just so long as you realize that we may be throwing all that money down the drain because it's not a smart move." That's the way I felt about it then and it's the way I feel about it now. I did it, but I did it for sentimental reasons. I accepted that I might lose all of my money, and I was okay with that.

In your Daily Kick newsletters you've talked about how debut writers need to try to come in with a big bang at first. That's your philosophy.

Yes. And see, this is the anti-big-bang thing. This is the smallest bang you could possibly come in with. If you publish on Lulu, an editor will see that on your record and say, "You're a self-published author. That must mean that nobody likes you." They're going to look really skeptically at anything you write thereafter. And if you self-publish four or five novels, you've pretty much destroyed your career—at least under that name. If you want to go launch a career you have to go launch it under a different name.

How did your email advice column, the Daily Kick, get started, and what are some results you've seen from it?

I started the Daily Kick about three years ago. I was having a lot of people asking me questions—every day I might get four or five questions and I'd write the answers down. I thought, why am I doing all of this work? Half the time these are questions that I've already answered a hundred times over. Orson Scott Card doesn't do this. He has a bunch of articles that he just puts up. I wanted to be able to have a conversation but not have to be answering questions all day, so I said I'm going to just put out an article a day and I'll actually have to write less advice, and I'll get it done once. And eventually I'll take all of these daily kicks, filter them down, rewrite them, and turn it into my book on writing.

I had started a book on writing about ten years ago called *Storytelling as a Fine Art*. The idea being that most of the time when we take writing classes, we learn about style and tone and voice and all of these things that don't really sell books very well. If you

look at the very best technical writers, or technical authors in the field, they write beautiful stuff which doesn't sell.

What really does sell are stories by storytellers like John Grisham and Stephenie Meyer. So my thought was let's talk about the art of telling stories—of creating characters, of creating conflicts and settings that are really going to engross people. I had been writing a book on that topic and I thought these daily kicks would be a good way to flesh this all out and finish it off some day.

And now here I am, it's three years later, and I have over a couple thousand pages of daily kicks—more material than could possibly fit in any book on writing. I realized last winter that there were probably about four or five different books on writing or on storytelling in there.

I had someone from South Africa who wrote in and said, "Yeah, I've been getting your daily kicks for about three and a half months. I followed your advice on how to write my query letter, and I sent my book off and just got a contract for four hundred thousand dollars." I thought, wow, that's a good contract. That must be a good book. I've had several people who've done that. And in some quarters of the Writers of the Future Contest, I've had every single winner write to me and say, "Dave, I've been getting your kicks now for months, and I really want to thank you—I just won first, second, or third place in Writers of the Future." A lot of them have been publishing novels, so it's really been kind of gratifying—sort of fun to watch your kids go out and do good.

It's also become an interesting little advertising tool. I have my writing workshops, and I'd been teaching writing before at BYU. I taught writing with the Writers of the Future Contest, back when I was coordinating judge there, and I'd done a few writing workshops. And now I get people who are asking me to do writing workshops all the time. I was going to teach two writing workshops this year, and I've had so many people asking me to do them that I'll have seven that I've done this year, and all of them are full.

What makes your approach to workshopping different from other workshops?

Well, I looked at the material in writing workshops, and most workshops teach the same basic writing skills. They're the same writing skills that you can get while studying at the university level. You know, how you put together sentences that tell a story that do so grammatically correctly and are beautiful to look upon and a wonder to behold—and we don't talk very much about storytelling.

We don't study audience analysis very much. I worked for a little while in Hollywood as a movie producer. I was working with some people who ran a green-lighting boutique where they would look at movies and study them and tell potential investors how much money the movie would make, whether it was a good investment, and how much it was going to cost to make it, etc. I got to working with them a bit, and I began adding a lot of the audience analysis that they had been doing in movies to my own audience analysis in books. I realized this stuff is worth millions of dollars for a potential author. I really believe that—if you do it right.

I had an author call me up last summer and say, "Dave, I know you've given talks on how to make money in Hollywood. I don't have time to look for it right now, but I really need the information. I'll give you ten thousand dollars to talk to me for the next hour on how to make money in Hollywood." I said, "Well, I'll talk to you for an hour for free." Anyway, we got talking about this afterwards and realized that the difference between being a mid-list author and being a *New York Times* bestseller isn't really very big as far as writing skills—it's knowing how to target your audience that makes a difference.

For several years you taught English 318 at BYU and a lot of really amazing writers have come out of that (Stephenie Meyer, Brandon Sanderson, Dan Wells, etc.). How do you feel that this class in particular has helped to foster LDS writers in Utah and abroad?

First of all, the class has been very good. I went to the 318 class with Doc Smith years ago, and Shayne Bell did, and so a lot of published authors came out of there. None of them has made quite the money that my students are making, but like I said, I'm teaching a different approach. I think that without that class, Mormon writers would be nowhere in the mainstream field. There would be very few. Orson Scott Card didn't come from those classes, so you'd have Orson Scott Card and we'd all be wondering how he got there.

Why do you think that?

Look at the number and quality of the authors who all have come out of that. The writers that took that class ended up forming a science fiction club at BYU, they started the BYU symposium, they started Xenobia, a writing workshop group that's been going now for thirty years. And almost all of the success that has occurred here in the Utah Valley can be traced to that. That 318 class was really where it all started. It became the seedbed for all of the success that has come, and not just in the science fiction and fantasy field.

When I started studying writing thirty years ago, there were really no national writers in the area—very few national writers who you could look to as examples of success or who you could learn anything from. Now much of what I'm teaching in my classes and have been teaching in the last ten or fifteen years is common knowledge in this area, so that Dan Wells and Brandon Sanderson and Brandon Mull and Stephenie Meyer and people like this all have a pretty decent grounding in how to be a professional writer before they ever try to launch a career. And that's just so helpful.

If you went to Florida and were trying to look for national authors

in Florida so that you could get the same kind of experience, or if you go to Texas or if you go to Australia, you're not going to get that, anywhere. This is one of the best places in the country to learn to become a writer. You go to BYU symposiums, you go to Conduit—here in Utah Valley you can learn everything that you need to start a very successful professional career.

Looking back on your career, how do you see your books helping to build the kingdom?

That's an interesting question. I've talked with people about this a number of times. I was talking to a friend, and we were wondering why is it that it seems like God just wants science fiction readers to be exposed to us, or something. My friend said, "You know, I don't think it has anything to do with you. I don't think it has anything to do with science fiction readers. I think that maybe God wants everybody to be exposed to the Church." This is a little conduit by which science fiction readers get exposed to the Church. That made a lot of sense to me. We should have great LDS football players, we should have great LDS scientists—we need to have people in every field that others can look up to as examples of not only great scholars and creative thinkers, but also just as great people.

I think that a lot of what I do is really subtle. I don't really write LDS-centered literature. I write moral fiction. I write philosophical fiction. But even when I write that, so much of it is diluted by my own personal thoughts. Any person who's picking up my books and looking for LDS doctrine in my *Runelords* novels is going to be sorely disappointed. They're going to look at it and say, "This isn't LDS." And yet, you know, I get people all the time who recognize it as good moral literature.

I recently had a woman who was an Episcopalian priest write to me and say, "I don't know what religion you are, but I know that you're a profoundly moral person. I bought a copy of *The Runelords* for everyone in my congregation and gave it out last Sunday." And I thought, wow, what a compliment. So you get a lot of people like that. They're touched by the work, but you really don't know why.

I had a young man who I met at a book signing a few months back, and he brought out an old copy of a Star Wars book that I had written for young adults, *The Rising Force*. The cover was completely worn off, it had tape all over it—really, the cover was all tape. His mom said, "Yeah, he reads this every chance he gets. When he sits down at the bus stop, when we're driving…" I said, "Why do you do that? I've got other books you might want to try." He said, "My mom died when I was eight, and I was really sad, and after a couple of years I started reading this book. I've been reading it over and over for a couple of years, and I realized that when I read this book, I'm happy."

You just don't realize how profoundly you can affect people who read your work over and over again. I had one guy who had a question say, "You know, I've only read your books twenty-two times…" And I said, "Wait, you've read my entire series twenty-two times? I didn't even go through it that many times when I was writing it." Rather than building the kingdom by trying to preach the gospel, you try to be a good person—try to be a good writer and affect people that way. Sort of like being a good neighbor.

Photo courtesy Dave Wolverton

Photo courtesy
Georgia Cranston, Gypsy Rae Photography

Aprilynne Pike

INTERVIEW BY **KATHERINE MORRIS**
WEB: **APRILYNNEPIKE.COM**

How did you get started writing? What drew you to it initially, and what is it that keeps you writing?

I've been writing stories for as long as I can remember! I'm not sure what drew me to it… I've always liked imaginary worlds. When I was young, my family called me the "Queen of La-La Land" because I spent more time there than in the real world. I guess it's only fitting that I've made a career out of it!

In college, I started out pre-med but got some good advice from a professor and changed to creative writing. I mostly wrote short stories, but while my husband was working on his undergrad, I did some contract work for Covenant and was inspired to try my hand at a novel. I didn't stick with it at first! But it was something I came back to a few times and eventually I got it right.

The excitement of a new idea and a fresh first draft is one thing that keeps me writing…or at least keeps me motivated through many rounds of revisions. The fact that I'm writing for an audience, now, is also very motivating.

Why do you specifically write YA literature?

I sort of fell into YA literature, which is funny because in retrospect it was the obvious choice. Although I'm a fan of Mary Higgins Clark and Tess Gerritsen and others, for many years now my favorite book has been *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry.

The first manuscript I completed was a romance. Then I tried my hand at high fantasy. Twice! But when I started writing YA, it felt right. Natural. I read a lot of YA (some days I feel

like I read little else!). There's so much great stuff out there I could never hope to read it all.

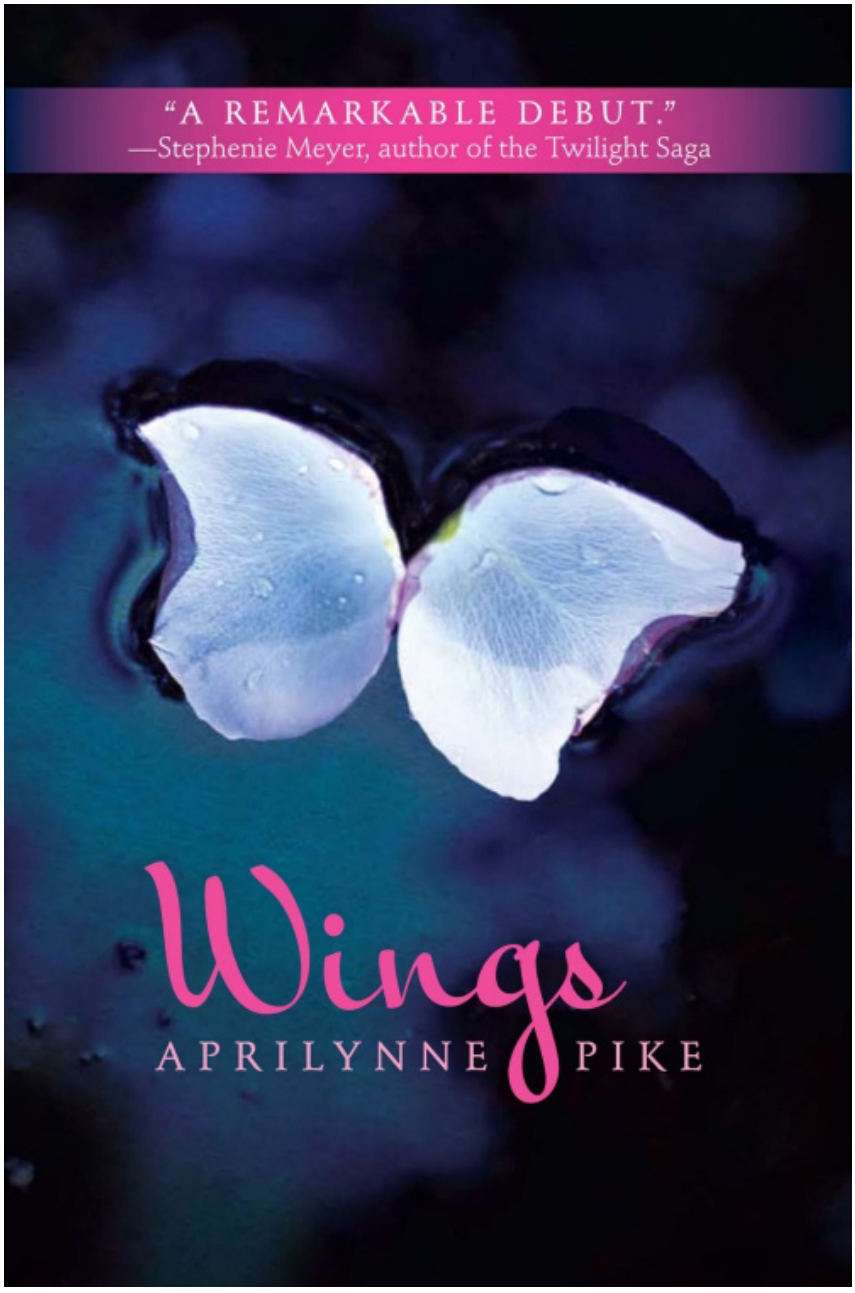
Tell us about the process of getting *Wings*, your first novel, published.

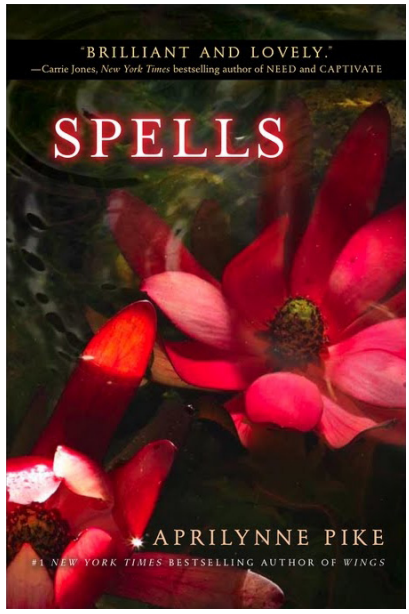
Wow, that's a very short question with an incredibly long answer! In fact, in May of 2006 I started a blog at apparentlyaprilynne.blogspot.com. I sold my first manuscript 150 blog entries later, and my first book appeared in stores about 120 entries after that. On average, I blog once a week, and the vast majority of those posts deal directly with my process.

The short version is that I wrote several books before I had one good enough to get an agent, then I wrote one more before I had something worth publishing. And then the real work began—I received a nine-page, single-spaced letter detailing what was wrong with my book and asking me to fix it. This was to be the first of several such letters! Each time my book got better. Sometimes I wish I'd had one or two more rounds of that before publication! But just like children, eventually you have to send your book-babies out into the world, and so it was with *Wings*.

What was your reaction when your debut novel hit number one on the *New York Times* Best Seller list?

Honestly? Disbelief, followed by terror. It was something I had never even hoped for, because it simply doesn't happen to debut authors, unless you're already famous. It's hard to even explain, because I went into an





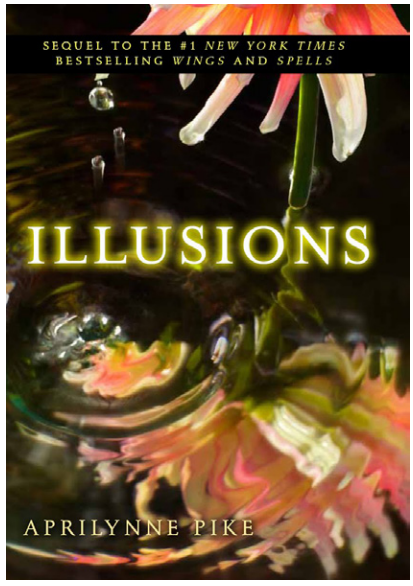


Photo courtesy Kenneth Pike

almost physical shock. I was afraid to tell anyone because I was sure it would turn out to be a mistake, or a joke, and everyone would laugh at me. It's the only time I've ever yelled while on the phone with my agent—and I yelled, "Are you kidding me?" Which of course made my husband come running. I then made him tell my mother, because I couldn't do it.

Sometimes I still have a hard time believing it happened. I love being a writer. I love having readers. I don't feel like a "bestselling author"—but I'm glad my readers enjoy my stories.

Your novel borrows from the fairy tale genre but has a few twists, such as the idea that faeries are related to plants. How did you come up with this idea, and what made you decide to write a fairy tale?

Well, while my high fantasy was out on submission, I tried my hand at a YA ghost story. I was a little ways into it when I saw on an agent's blog that faeries were projected as the next "trend" in YA. It was a real "duh!" moment for me—I love faeries! Why wasn't I writing about them?

Soon after, I woke one night with the idea to write about a goth faerie who lived with three old women and couldn't go out after midnight because there was no power from the sun. It seemed like a great idea at 4:00 AM, and did not seem so great at 8:00 AM. But the concept that faeries could get their power from the sun stuck with me, and I asked myself, "Why would that be?" And the most obvious answer was that they used photosynthesis. We've all seen flower faeries and nature faeries in art and sculpture—I just brought them into YA.

How has your experience been working with agents? Any advice?

Advice? Yes. Get one.

My agent is, and always has been, completely priceless. A good agent knows how to help you polish your work, the right house to send it to, the right editor within that house, and—after you're contracted—is there to

help guide your career and get you out of (and keep you out of) sticky business situations.

Yes, they take 15%. More, on subrights. But (to borrow from the title of a great article on a related topic), 15% of nothing is nothing. My agent has earned her cut many times over, and I would not be the author I am, or have the career I have, without her.

How has your faith influenced your work?

Probably in more ways than I consciously realize. On a superficial level, I try to make my books accessible to a wide audience while at the same time keeping them appropriate enough that I could hand them to a Mia Maid. On a deeper level, I use my stories to explore what it really means to be good. Sometimes that means portraying characters who are not necessarily doing good things. Fortunately, I am secure enough in my own faith that I feel comfortable exploring characters who aren't.

There seem to be quite a number of Latter-day Saints writing children's and YA literature. Why do you think that is?

For one, our church's focus on family seems to keep adults focused on the needs and interests of children longer than they might otherwise be. We also have a cultural affinity for education and literature. Another factor at work right now is the dominance of "paranormal" and "supernatural" YA literature, and Latter-day Saints have long been avid producers and consumers of fantasy for children and adults alike.

You've said that your books have been optioned for a movie. Any more news on that front? If you were to make some requests of or suggestions to the film studio adapting your novel, what would those be?

News? No. And if there is, there's a good chance you'll see it online before I hear about it! Hollywood is an interesting place and I'm very excited to see what Disney does with *Wings*, but so far we haven't moved past the "option" stage.

As for suggestions, I'm a big believer in letting the professionals run the show. Where movies are concerned, I'm the amateur, and I feel confident that the people who have signed on to develop *Wings* into a movie will do the best job they can.

One of the major plot points in your debut series is a love triangle. I'm guessing that as with all famous love triangles in stories, you've had readers take sides on who they want the heroine to end up with. What feedback have you gotten on that from readers, and who seems to be leading the polls right now?

Most of the feedback I've gotten from readers has been…emphatic. My readers are very passionate! And I admit I was kind of proud of myself when, after *Wings* came out, fans seemed evenly split over which "team" they were on. The split has shifted to about 70–30, but hey, it's only half-time…

That said, the fourth book is drafted and I know how the game ends, so I probably shouldn't say anything else about that.

You've mentioned that your husband has been a sounding board for a lot of your ideas. He also maintains your website. How has your writing affected your family? What are the benefits and what are the drawbacks?

The very best way that my writing has affected my family is that my children now have two stay-at-home parents. The obvious drawback is that I can't spend all of my time being a mother anymore—I have books to write! But between my husband, who is sometimes a better wife than I am, and my

Photo courtesy Kenneth Pike

commitment to each child getting some one-on-one time every day, I think my children still come out ahead.

How do you balance your writing with your family responsibilities and other interests?

My two oldest children are in school all day, so that's when I write (and leave the three-year-old in my husband's care). But once everyone gets home, it's children time—homework, piano practice, and cooking dinner together are daily activities. At night, each child is read to and gets some individual time with me. It's a busy schedule and not always easy to keep, but it's important to me. After the children are in bed, I spend time with my husband—often cleaning up the messes of the day, but we do enjoy European board games, British television, and artsy movies.

To this point, the baby is just attached. I have a sling. I wear her like a kangaroo.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers about developing their writing skills?

Read, read, read! Write, write, write! Revise, revise, revise!

Lather, rinse, repeat.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers about publishing?

I already mentioned my blog, but there is a lot to know about publishing. And sometimes it's a little scary how much of it even published authors don't know! There are skills you need to succeed in publishing that have nothing to do with writing books. First, you have to write good query letters. Later, you have to be an accountant, a contracts expert, a publicist, a marketer . . . and that's on top of writing a publishable novel. Being an author—even if you don't do it full-time—is a career. It will take time. You will need to learn, and you will probably spend many years failing. I did! And those years taught me how to succeed. It will probably take more than one book, and that's okay. Have patience with yourself, and always, always find ways to learn from people who are more experienced than you.

Photo courtesy Kenneth Pike

You have a background in the performing arts. How do you think that has influenced your writing?

A lot of people tell me that my books read like a movie. I tend to think of my stories as though they are playing out in front of me on a stage. Because of that, I tend to be heavy on dialogue and light on description, which requires fixing later. Nonetheless, I think it helps my plotting and my pacing.

The biggest influence my performing arts background has on my career, though, has nothing to do with writing at all. When I tour, I spend a lot of time on a stage in front of crowds. Often those crowds are young adults, many of whom have never heard of me or my books and expect me to entertain them. Which, quite frankly, I'm happy to do! But I have met authors for whom public appearances are a great challenge. I'm grateful that's something I haven't had to overcome.

What are some of your personal writing goals?

At this point, I've met so many goals that my biggest goal is more of the same! I've learned that staying in the game, so to speak, can be as big a challenge as getting published to begin with.

I like to publish at least one book a year. I have never missed a deadline and I hope to keep it that way. I'm getting ready to embark on my second series, and planning an entire series in advance is a challenge all its own.

On a more day-to-day level, every book demands something different, so I don't set a lot of word-count or writing-hours goals the way many authors do. But when I'm in drafting mode, I do like to push myself to get 3000 words per day. It's often exhausting, but also tremendously satisfying to knock out that first draft.

What projects do you have planned for the future?

Laurel's story has two more installments: *Illusions* will be released in May of 2011, and the final volume should come out about a year later. In late 2011 or early 2012, I will be releasing my first standalone novel. It's about a kleptomaniac ghost and the boy who can see her.

I have one more book contracted after that, and I have lots of ideas about where to go from there, but it's too early to say for certain. ❧

Photo courtesy Tracy Hickman

Tracy Hickman

INTERVIEW BY **MICHAEL YOUNG**
WEB: **TRHICKMAN.COM**

How did you get into writing? Was there anyone who inspired you?

I think that writing begins with reading, so the most influential person in my writing would have to be my parents—they are the ones who got me into reading. I can still remember visiting the bookmobile in our neighborhood in Salt Lake City back in 1960. Growing up, I became a fan of science fiction and eventually became a big reader of all kinds of books. I always seemed to have a book in my hands. It got so bad that my parents complained of taking me on a trip to the Grand Canyon and I didn't see anything except the inside of my own book.

As for how I got into writing, I was always something of a writer—just not always a very good one! I nearly failed my creative writing course at BYU. I had to learn there was a difference between inspiration and craft. I had to learn the latter before the former could come into play.

In 1981, I was out of work in Logan, Utah, with my wife and two little children. Laura and I could not afford church shoes for our children. We had written a pair of *Dungeons and Dragons* adventures, which we were publishing on our own. In an effort to purchase shoes for our children, we sent those adventure modules to TSR, Inc. (then publishers of D&D), in the hope that they would pay us enough money for us to purchase shoes for our kids that winter. In the end they offered me a job as a game designer.

Tell us about *Dragonlance*. How did that get started? How did it take off from there?

As my wife, Laura, and I were traveling across country to take our new job at TSR, Inc. (becoming the first people in my family to cross the plains the *other* way), we spent our time discussing what we might bring to the company that would justify them hiring us. It was there during the long hours in the car crossing the American plains that we came up with *Dragonlance*.

TSR was still in its fledgling state back then, and had just completed a very expensive study by an independent research firm about their product. The results were: (1) *Dungeons and Dragons* is your core product; (2) you have lots of Dungeons; and, finally, (3) you need more Dragons.

With this in mind, I took the idea which Laura and I had during our trip eastward and created the basic concept of *Dragonlance*—a means of telling a fantasy story through a gaming experience. No one had done it before. We proposed the series to the company originally as something of a "stop-gap" measure: it was supposed to be a project to do until the next "big thing" came along. It turned out to *be* the next big thing.

Why fantasy?

I like fantasy because it is a moral medium. Fantasy is about ethical and moral choices—the questions of good and evil—and its structure is classic. Fantasy most closely follows the monomythic structure as defined by Joseph Campbell. I believe that this mythic structure goes right to the heart of the human experience and the very processes by which we think and perceive the world and universe around us. Joseph Campbell looks at the mythic

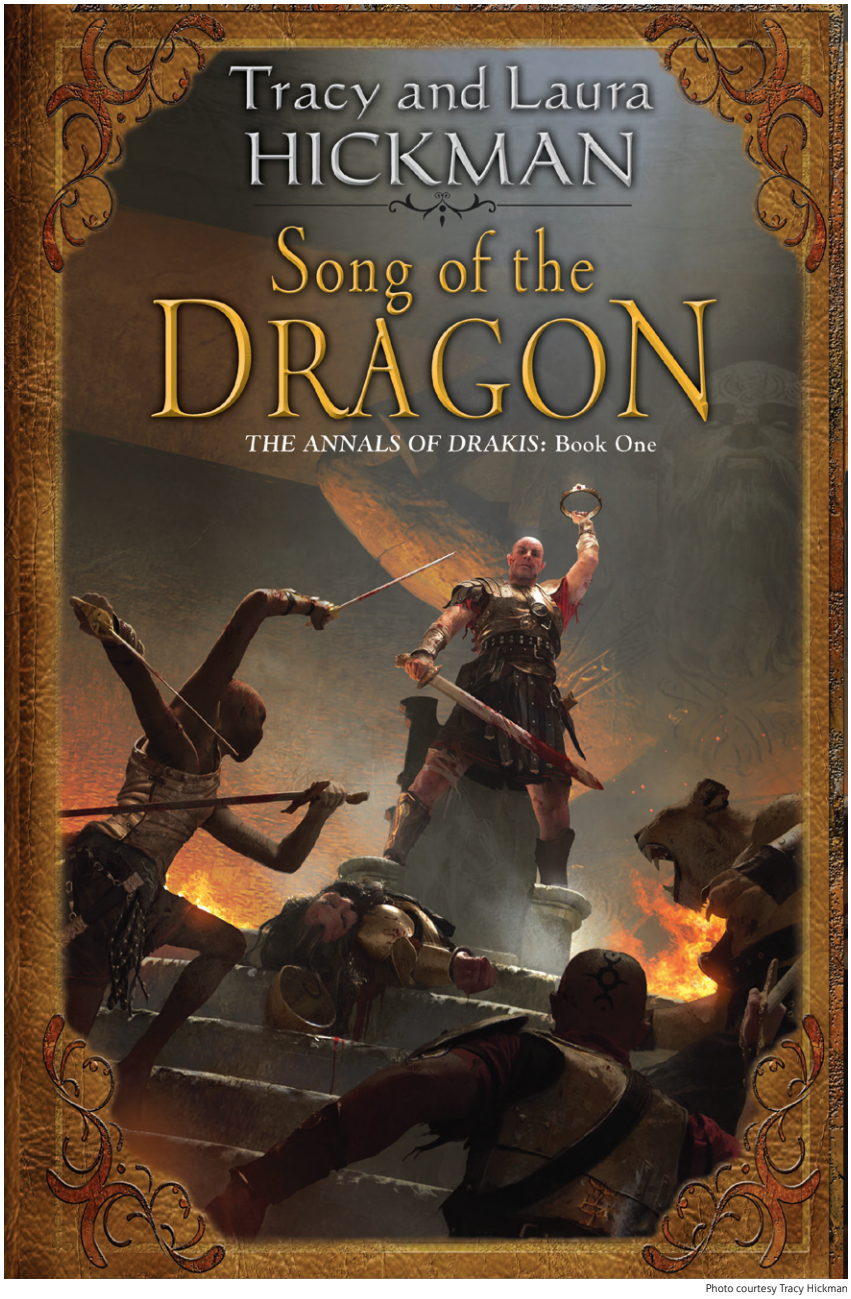


Photo courtesy Tracy Hickman

cycle and sees Jungian psychology; I look at the mythic cycle and see the Alpha Story—the story of us all on our journey through mortality and our seeking to return home to Christ.

Tell us about getting your first novel published.

Every author's process of getting published is unique. I once had an agent who said it takes ten years to become an overnight success. That's ten years of rejection slips, not quitting the day job, and learning the craft. Everyone pays these dues one way or another.

In my own case, I was fortunate to be paid to learn how to write: I wrote game adventure modules, which taught me organization of text and clarity, as well as basic grammar and structure. When we then proposed novels for the *Dragonlance* games my wife and I had originally envisioned, TSR decided that they needed to find a "real" author to write those books. They even went out and hired an author outside of the company to write the first book. As his chapters started coming in, it was obvious to Margaret Weis, who was the assigned editor for *Dragonlance* novels, and myself, who had created the story for the project, that this writer did not understand the story or the characters as well as Margaret and I. So one weekend, Margaret and I wrote the prologue and the first five chapters of what would become *Dragons of Autumn Twilight,* the first book in the series. We turned it in to the senior editor that following Monday and waited to hear what she said. An hour or so later she emerged from her office and said, "This is exactly what we need." The previous writer's contract was terminated (and they got to keep their advance), while Margaret and I were then contracted to do the books after that—which is how I got started in writing novels.

Out of all of the projects that you have worked on, what has been your favorite to write and why?

My favorite project has been, interestingly enough, the last one I did with my wife, *Eventide*. This is the first book in a series of novels we are publishing ourselves through subscriptions online. That means that we print a limited number of books tailored to the number of subscriptions we receive. Each subscriber then gets a signed, numbered book from our personal printing. It has allowed us more freedom in terms of what we want to write, which is uplifting, positive moral fantasy. You can learn more about this project at http://dragonsbard.com.

It appears that many of your books have co-authors. How does the creative process work when it is split between two people?

I personally prefer to write with someone else. I like the exchange of ideas and the new dimensions that it brings to the creative process. Whether her name has been on the cover or not, all of my books are the result of discussions with my wife, who has always been part of my work.

In terms of the books we write together, we laid down some ground

rules. The first is that the integrity of the book comes before our egos. The story, its message, and how it is told comes first and foremost.

Tell us about writing with your wife. How is it different from working on other projects?

Well, I have to be honest and say that in many ways I have always written with my wife. I have always run ideas past her in anything that I was doing creatively. We are a partnership and a team. I find it hard to recall any project that I have not involved her with in some way, and usually very extensively. We recently produced a Christmas board game for sale online (http://reindeergamer.com), which was a result of extensive collaboration between us over several years. We love doing everything together.

But we are also mindful that personal relationships and professional relationships do not always mix well. So, we are always very careful about how we treat one another in both capacities and have very specific rules about who does what in our business collaborations. For example, we always designate one person as the "wordsmith" in a project so that the voice of the text will be consistent. The other is designated as the "guardian" who oversees the integrity of the project and text. We also renegotiate our rules from time to time to make sure that we're both satisfied with the results.

As an author, how do you deal with criticism from those who read your books?

I believe there will always be people who are going to hate what you write no matter what you produce. That said, I believe that when a writer can no longer improve, then they are at the end. One of the most important things we try to teach people who are learning how to write is a sobering truth: "You have not yet written your best work." If you can accept that, you can accept criticism, determine if it is valid, learn from it, and grow with your next text.

How do you ensure that your ideas are unique in some way?

I am always looking for that core concept, that unique center that makes a story fun, exciting, and interesting. Once you find that core, everything else flows from it. Fantasy and epic tales have been told since mankind first told stories, and so to a certain extent one might say that there are no truly unique stories, but I try to find new ways to tell old stories. My *Drakis* series, for example, is in many ways a fantasy version of *Spartacus*—an old story with a new approach.

Describe your ideal writing environment.

My ideal writing environment can be anywhere where I am into the story with a keyboard under my fingers. I prefer to play music while I write, especially classical music or certain soundtracks, which tend to blend into the background of my thoughts. When I am into the story of the moment, my world becomes a box about two and a half feet on each side with nothing existing beyond my head, my fingers, my keyboard and the text on the screen. My wife will readily attest to that.

What is the nicest thing a fan has ever said to you?

There have been so many wonderful experiences with fans down through the years and all of them are bright in my memory. The one that stands out the most in my mind was our experience at Fort Lewis in Washington a few years ago with a young hero soldier in a wheelchair. It is a very personal story about how his memory of a scene from one of our books gave him the courage to save his entire squad in Afghanistan. That young hero took our words and turned them into actions of true heroism. I think about that soldier every day and feel a new responsibility for what I write and a reverence for our readers who are inspired to act on a higher plane.

How does the gospel affect you as an artist? What place does fantasy literature have in the gospel?

I once said at a BYU conference that the gospel seems to have some pretty fantastical elements! The plan of salvation—where we leave our heavenly home, pass the "portals of power" into mortality, journey through this mortal existence with trials and helpers as we try to obtain the prize of exaltation, must then endure to the end, pass back through the "portals of power" into immortality, and return again changed before our Father in Heaven—*all* of these elements are part of the basic Campbellian monomyth and every fantasy and classical story ever written. Fantasy, in this light and when properly executed, is a type and a shadow of the great story of us all, of our quest to return to our God as more perfect beings.

The gospel is my life; I write my life; ergo, my writing is a reflection of my faith.

What would you most like to achieve out of your career?

I aspire to Isaiah 52:7. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!" It is my hope that in all that I write I am publishing peace. ❧

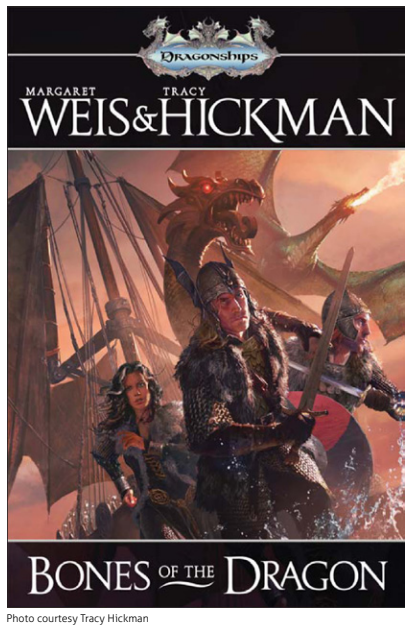


Photo courtesy Tracy Hickman

Photo courtesy Karie Rhodes

Mette Ivie Harrison

INTERVIEW BY **ANN MORRIS**
WEB: **METTEIVIEHARRISON.COM**

What motivates you and gets you excited to write?

I am one of those people who likes to write first drafts. It is terrifying to write them, because I never outline and I honestly have no idea a lot of the time where they are going to end up. But the thrill for me as a writer is the same as it is for a reader: discovering a book for the first time. I recognize that subsequent drafts are easier, and I enjoy that process, as well—the tinkering with the words and making everything perfect—but I remain addicted to that first draft. That is what motivates me to write, to discover what happens next and who my characters really are, in the worst of straits.

When my children were much younger, I would write during nap time. I was a nap time Nazi. No one grew out of naps until kindergarten. It wasn't allowed. I would wake the kids up really early and keep them up late, just to keep them on the same nap schedule. My whole life revolved around that because it mattered deeply to me. If I didn't get writing in one day, I just felt a little empty. My writing group used to tease me sometimes that I would go away and write a novel, have a baby, and be back the next week as though it was all the normal course of things.

You write mainly juvenile fiction. How did that come about? Have you always written specifically for children?

I submitted my first novel for publication when I was fourteen. It was called *Clarence, You're an Angel*, and

was about a Miracle Whip-loving angel who got into trouble and ended up sending a couple of kids back in time to the Book of Mormon period. I sent it in to Deseret Book and got a very nice rejection letter saying they didn't publish books that fictionalized heaven and angels. Well, that has changed, hasn't it?

I then spent about ten years finishing college, getting married, finishing a Ph.D. in German Literature from Princeton, and not having much time for anything else. I got a little tired of reading so closely for literary analysis, though, and went back to genre fiction for fun. After I quit teaching German at BYU, I spent about four years writing a new novel of one kind or another every three months on average. I wrote almost everything you can imagine and sort of waited to have something hit the fan telling me what I should focus on. Actually, that focusing part is still sometimes hard for me. I like writing like I like exercising. It makes me feel good and I do it every day as a habit. I feel strange if I go on vacation, which I don't do often.

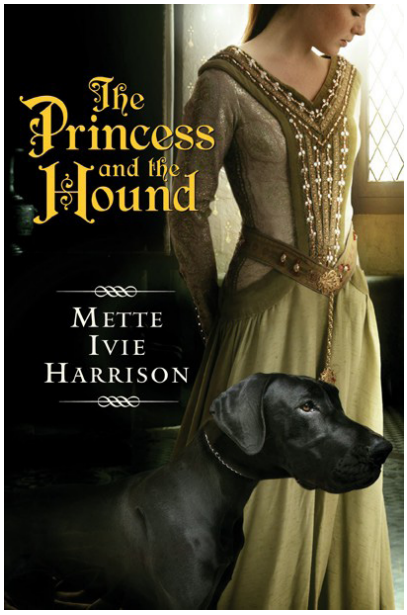
The Monster in Me, your first novel, was realistic fiction. Since then, you've mostly published fantasy. What has been your experience writing and publishing in each genre? Is the process similar?

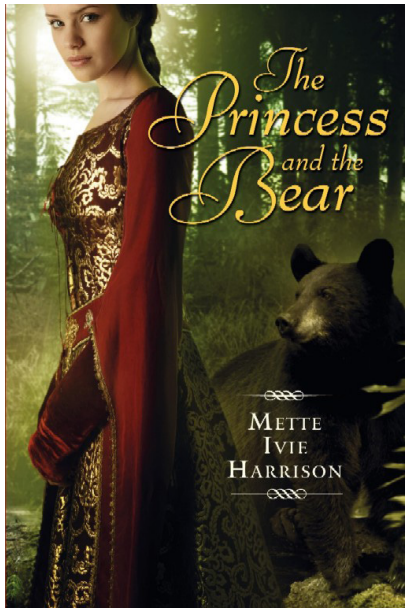
I think the scenes of the dream world in that novel show some signs of my interest in the fantastic. My training is in German literature, where the Romantic influence is very strong and there is not much sense of a distinction between genre and more literary fiction. I have written a good number of realistic novels, but it turns out that the publishing world right now is very interested in fantasy, so what you see is simply the novels that I have published. I have a novel I deeply care about called *Irongirl* about a teen girl who does an Ironman, obviously a topic close to my heart. I'm hoping that will get published at some point. The world needs more novels with teen girls who are strong and athletic.

I will say that when I wrote the first bit of my first YA fantasy, which was *The Stepmother's Story*, about Cinderella's stepmother when she was a teenager, I brought it to my critique group and they told me that it was the best thing I'd ever written. That encouraged me to go on and write *Mira, Mirror*, and it was that book that first landed me my agent, not *Monster*. So perhaps there is something about me

Photo courtesy zazoosh photography (joachim hailer)

Photo courtesy Mette Ivie Harrison





Photos courtesy Mette Ivie Harrison

that makes me a better fantasy writer. I don't know if I can see it myself. I love fantasy and science fiction. Not horror, though. I'm a bit squeamish (i.e., a *lot*).

I don't know how different the process is for fantasy and realistic fiction. I think you always have to worry about worldbuilding, but in fantasy, you have to figure out tricky ways to make sure some important elements come up early on. Sometimes you write a first chapter just for that reason, so the magic comes out in a gripping way. But in the end, I believe even my fantasy novels are really about people, not about magic. It's the question about "what if?" that interests me, in fantasy and science fiction. If only one thing changed in the world, how would people behave differently? If I write the way I want to write, it's the characters who will stay with my readers, not the magic.

You were on a panel discussion at the Provo Children's Book Festival a few years ago where you said after *The Princess and the Bear* came out that you wanted to call it something else, but your publisher wanted you to put "princess" in the title. What have been the biggest challenges and the best benefits of working with publishers? Has being LDS ever presented any unique challenges to getting your books published?

I thought the title of *The Princess and the Bear* should be *The Hound and the Bear*, since it is about, well, the hound from the first book, and the bear from the first book. But I tend to use rather literal titles. Technically, there is no princess in the book, but the hound was transformed for a time into a princess in the first book, so I guess it works. And boy, that first cover with the girl in a pretty dress sold a lot of copies. So why wouldn't I want to sell more books? I am a bit of a contrary person, though, so I sometimes will find myself signing the book, "There is no princess in this book."

I think the two big advantages to working with a publisher are first, the editor, who makes my book enormously better than it would have been alone; and second, the marketing department, including the cover art, which I have had tremendous luck with.

I have never had any problems being LDS. In fact, on a couple of occasions my editor has asked me to take out a few words I thought were fairly mild or scenes with some blood, just to make it super clean. People go around complaining about YA fiction being so edgy, or pushing boundaries on purpose, but I don't see that. I have friends whose books are being banned, but the books are actually very moral, if you read them. They have controversial topics, but it is because my friends (Jo Knowles and Lauren Myracle, for example) care about teens and want to make sure that if they are in difficult situations, they feel there are people out there who understand and can help. The reality is that YA runs far behind adult fiction in terms of edginess. Just pick up some of the new fantasy writers getting attention in adults (Scott Lynch, for instance, or Terry Goodkind). I think they are fine writers, but talk about edgy.

You're good friends with several other LDS writers. How did those friendships develop and how have they influenced your writing?

My sister married picture book writer Rick Walton when I was twelve, and he was beginning the path to publication in the children's world. I watched him closely because I had wanted to be a writer since kindergarten. When I finished college and moved back to Utah, he invited me to join a writer's group with Carol Lynch Williams and others. I wasn't sure I wanted to publish in children's at first. I was writing adult and children's and across different genres. Rick also helped show me how to write query letters, invited me to conferences where I got an idea

of what books were being published, and so on.

I think the first friendship that developed on my own was with Dave Wolverton, when he was the judge for Writers of the Future. I was a finalist one quarter and he really liked my story, though it wasn't picked for publication. When he realized that I lived in the area, he called me on the phone and invited me to join a new writing group he was creating. That helped link me into a few other writers in the local area.

Also, I had been a huge Orson Scott Card fan in college, sneaking into the library at Princeton and reading his books there because I didn't want to be caught checking them out. When I found out in 2002 that he was doing a workshop on the UVU campus, I decided to sign up. Who knew if he would ever do such a thing again? Even though I was pregnant and due the week of the workshop, I was determined to go. I remember the second night of the workshop, I was making some weird faces and Scott asked me what was wrong. I told him not to worry, I was just counting contractions. He stepped back and realized how pregnant I was, and asked when I was due. When I told him Friday, I'm pretty sure he thought I was crazy to be there. But it turned out that I wrote a story Wednesday (the first chapter of a novel, actually), had the baby Thursday morning, and went back on Friday with baby in tow. When he saw me walk into the room, he about collapsed in surprise. I think I impressed him with my fortitude, and hopefully with my writing. He has given me some great quotes for books and invited me out to teach with him at UVU.

Many of the other authors I know locally are through rockcanyonwriters, which is a listserv run by Rick Walton and it includes Brandon Sanderson, Brandon Mull, Dan Wells, Jessica Day George, Anne Bowen, Nathan Hale, and on and on. There must be sixty of us. I also send out a bimonthly newsletter for all of us to librarians and booksellers. If you want to be on the list contact me at: *mette@argonautfilms.com*

I also have gotten to know many authors through my agent, Barry Goldblatt. Shannon Hale shares the same agent.

Your upcoming novel *Tris and Izzie* is a retelling of the well-known story of Tristan and Isolde. You mention on your website that you love fairy tale retellings, and I can think of quite a few other LDS children's writers who have also revisited familiar legends and fairy tales in their works—Jessica Day George's *Sun and Moon, Ice and Snow* and Shannon Hale's *The Goose Girl* are just two that come to mind. What do you think it is about certain tales that impels you and other authors (both LDS and non-LDS) and readers to revisit them again and again?

In this particular case, *Tris and Izzie* is a chance for me to go back to my German Ph.D. roots. I had a bad experience and ended up leaving the field and sort of forsaking everything to do with German for a while. It's taken me more than ten years to go back and remember what it was I loved about that, separate from the bad experience. *Tristan und Isolde* was the very first piece of German literature I read in college, in an Introduction to German Literature class taught by Scott Abbott at BYU in 1988. The book is dedicated to him for that reason. I don't know how many people will appreciate the little touches in the book that are a tip of the hat to Wolfram von Eschenbach's version, but I worked in as many as I could. It's a reworking of my life and my vision of myself, as well as a retelling of a fairytale. That may be part of the reason that people are drawn to them—because they are a way to weave in the child who listened first to the story, and then all those other versions of ourselves we remember, hearing the story anew as we grew older.

Do you have a favorite story that you hope to retell in the future?

I am also working on *Zig and Hildy*, which is a retelling of the Nibelungenlied, also from German literary history. I may do something by Hartmann von Aue as well. And I have that novel *The Stepmother's Story* that I may get published some day.

Really, all novels are retellings. It's just a question of how explicit it is. I have an essay about how all writers are thieves, and it's true. We read a lot, mash up the stories in our heads, and then the bits come out in a different order. I think it's immensely relieving as a writer when you realize that you don't put in that much original stuff.

LDS writers are pretty well represented in the science fiction/fantasy mainstream. Do you think there's any correlation between the gospel and legends and fantasy stories?

I think about that periodically. The only correlation I can think of is that Mormons don't seem to think automatically of magic as being evil and witchcraft. We accept that it can be metaphorical. I think.

What do your five children think of their mom being a nationally recognized author? Do any of them write? If so, how do you encourage them in their writing?

Sometimes it turns out to be cool for them—mostly if their friends turn out to be fans of mine, and then they can offer them advance copies of upcoming books.

They also like the fact that I have an incredible library of new YA fiction in my house, and that I can recommend a book they will like at the drop of the hat, then go and get it for them downstairs.

Rick Walton told me once that he took his kids out to celebrate when he sold a book, so that they could realize that when they helped give him time to himself, they were working together with him. I've picked up that tradition and always take my kids out to celebrate when I get a new contract. And with as many teens as I have right now, they love to eat.

Photo courtesy Karie Rhodes

In addition to writing, you also enjoy competing in marathons and triathlons and have had several first place finishes. How did you get into competitive racing?

I met my husband on the swim team in high school, but I was never much good at it then. I swam five hours a day my senior year, but I never made state. So I sort of gave up the idea that I could be an athlete. I had a bad knee for years and couldn't run. I had trouble walking, actually, if I went for too long.

About seven years ago, I was having trouble cycling and I went to a doctor who told me that I should run, starting very slowly, to strengthen my knee. I thought he was insane and just to prove it to him, I started very, very slowly. I ran a tenth of a mile the first day on a treadmill, two tenths the next day. I increased by a tenth of a mile for a couple of months until I could run six miles. Then I thought the doctor was a genius.

And I decided that I would run a marathon because who knew how long this running thing would last? I literally signed up for the marathon on Monday and ran it Saturday, with no real running training at all. I finished in 4:40 or something fairly respectable. It was an incredible feeling. I had no idea that I could do something like that, and if you had asked me before, I would have said that marathoners were crazy people.

I had to let myself heal a bit from all that running, so I signed up for an Olympic distance triathlon a few months later. I hadn't been able to run more than a mile since the marathon, but I was able to run all of the 10k on the triathlon. I ended up finishing first place in my age group. I had never taken first place in a race in my life. It was the most amazing thing. It completely changed my view of myself and of the world. I stopped thinking about things in terms of being talented or not. I started believing in working hard a lot more. I love the rush of racing now. I love passing guys on bikes. What can I say? My competitive side has come out in full force and it's a bit feminist. I also like doing really, really hard things just to prove that I can. I ran a fifty-mile ultramarathon last week, the fourth year in a row. It hurts, but I also think it is a great micro version of life. Focusing on the next telephone pole, getting to it, and then reassessing whether you can keep going or not—that's the way life is a lot of the time.

You have an essay on your website about a particularly bad race and what you learned about failure. What failures have you experienced as a writer and what have you learned from them?

It wasn't a bad race. It was one of the most important experiences in my life. I had trained hard for months to run a sub 3:30 marathon and ended up just pushing too hard. So I had to walk the last six miles of the race as everyone I knew passed me. But I was there, still going forward. I didn't quit. And I didn't tell myself that I wasn't good enough. I have spent most of my life with insanely high goals for myself, getting a Ph.D. at twenty-four from Princeton, graduating from BYU in two years with a master's and bachelor's, raising five kids and having a career as a writer, and that race was this great chance for me to remember that *I* am not my accomplishments. *I* am me, no matter what I do or don't do. *I* have value intrinsically, and I don't have to prove myself to myself or to anyone else.

My failures as a writer? Well, those first four years of writing were pretty hard. I wrote twenty novels and they got rejected over and over and over again. I had succeeded in everything in my life without half trying, I think, and this was a big wall to come up against. Luckily, I had good friends in the business who reminded me it was perfectly normal. I also have a huge amount of energy and an endless love of fiction to keep me going. And maybe I'm a little bit crazy because what I like to do best in the world is to stay inside a dark little room in the basement and make up people and worlds to play with.

My first three books were all published by different publishers: Holiday House, then Viking, then Harper. For a while there it felt like I couldn't get a second book published with the same publisher. I wrote them and rewrote them, but somehow I wasn't seeing success. And it almost happened a fourth time. I sent in about four different novel manuscripts before I finally had an idea for a sequel to *The Princess and the Hound* and Harper sent me a contract to write it without a word seen. That was frightening, too—one of the hardest things in my life—to wake up every day, knowing that I might be writing the wrong book, and doing it anyway. And then my editor, Ruth Katcher, was let go just before *The Princess and the Bear* came out, and that was heart-wrenching. The business can be difficult sometimes.

Do you feel that writing helps you live your faith better? Does it give you opportunities to share your faith with others?

I guess I don't really think of it that way. My writing is my way of describing the truth in a metaphorical way. The truth as I know it includes many aspects of my life and those have to come through in my writing in order for it to work on any level. I can't stop that and I wouldn't want to. I don't see any need to preach about what I believe, though. Or to take it out, either. I think that is what I do as a parent, as a person, and as a member of the Church. I am trying to find the truth and to express it as best I can. I think I told someone once that the best missionary tool is people living the gospel conspicuously. I don't feel any need to hide what I believe. One example of this is that I never feel obliged to carry a glass of soda or other drink around when my friends are drinking. I don't drink. That's all. No apologies. No attempts to make others feel better about their drinking, or to feel bad about it. That's what I believe and that's what I live. ❧

Photo courtesy Brandon Mull

Brandon Mull

INTERVIEW BY **ELSIE BOYER**
WEB: **BRANDONMULL.COM**

You are a *New York Times* bestselling author. Do you have that listed on a plaque somewhere?

I do have some mementoes from my publisher commemorating the milestone. It has been exciting that all five of the *Fablehaven* books were *New York Times* bestsellers.

What is the most prestigious award you have received?

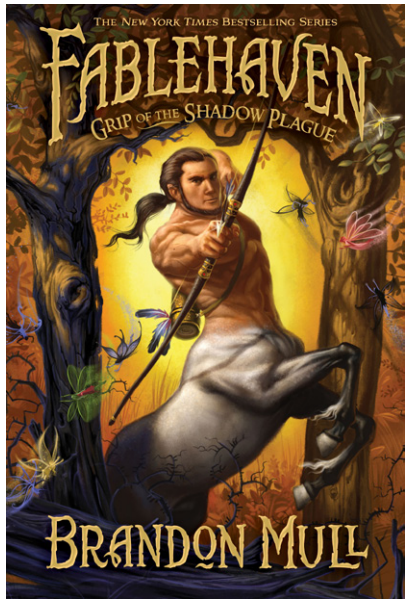
I'm very proud of winning Young Readers Choice Awards in Nevada, Utah, and Tennessee. These awards were given after kids read a bunch of books and voted. My biggest hope is that readers will have fun with my stories.

What can you tell us about your dramatic rise from relative obscurity to national fame?

It was a relief that the books found an audience. I write my novels alone, and I try hard to write something that will engage and entertain me, but I never know if the book will work for others until I share it. I'm so happy others have had fun with my crazy stories. Enough people have liked them and spread the word that so far my books have reached a wider audience with each passing year.

Have you had any fans approach you in the street?

Yes. Part of this is because I do lots of school visits, so plenty of teachers and students know what I look like.



Photos courtesy Brandon Mull

Sometimes people recognize me from having met me at book signings. The rarest is if people recognize me just from the photo in the back of the book.

It is always pleasant when people recognize me. They usually just want to share that they've enjoyed the books, which is nice to hear!

On your website, you refer to yourself as a geek or nerd quite often. What do you consider your "geekiest" trait?

I think of geeks or nerds as enthusiasts. Geeks are enthusiastic about something—could be books, computers, video games, movies, music, or even sports. I'm particularly geeky about books and movies. And the *Zelda* video game series.

What is your writing process like?

I've always been a massive daydreamer. I daydream about my stories until I see them like movies in my mind. The stories I've written so far cooked in my head for years before I attempted to write them. In general, the good stuff sticks and the weak stuff fades away.

Once I have a story that I like, I break it down into scenes and write those scenes in consecutive order. I often make new discoveries as I dramatize each scene and fill in the details.

How long does it take you to complete a novel?

It takes me an average of four months to write a novel. Then tack on an extra few months of back and forth with editors.

How long did it take you before you were able to publish your first novel?

I tried hard for about four years before I succeeded in getting anything published.

Who are your three favorite characters you have created up to this point?

This is a tricky question, because I like all of my characters for different reasons. I like Seth in *Fablehaven* because he is more daring than me and has a fun sense of humor. I enjoyed writing Patton Burgess in *Fablehaven* because it let me live out the fantasy of meeting one of my ancestors while they were in their prime. I enjoy John Dart in *The Candy Shop War* because he is a tough guy with an interesting problem—if he breaks your leg, his own leg breaks as well. If he kills you, he dies.

Are your characters based at all on people you know?

There are sometimes pieces of people I know in my characters. The character Seth in *Fablehaven* is recklessly curious in some of the ways my brother Bryson is recklessly curious. The character Summer in *The Candy Shop War* is named for my sister and shares some traits with her.

Have any of your novels been translated into other languages yet? What has that experience been like?

My *Fablehaven* series has been translated into twenty-seven languages. It is really cool to think that people I can't speak with can read my stories. I have little involvement with the actual translation, although occasionally I will get asked by translators for clarifications on what is meant by a particular phrase.

Up to this point you have published mostly teen fiction. Do you ever plan on writing more adult novels?

For now I'll be sticking with this category. One thing I like about this category is that adults read it almost as much as teens and kids. When I sign books, lots of adults come through without kids. I write these books for my 36-year-old self as well as my ten-year-old self.

Is there another author whom, should you have the chance to meet him or her, would cause you to act like a giddy, starstruck teenager?

J.K. Rowling. I'd love to meet her. Harry Potter is partly why I write the kind of books I write.

How was your experience writing *Pingo* with Brandon Dorman different from writing full-length novels?

I have to approach writing a picture book very differently from writing a novel. First, I have to use fewer words, so I need to tell the story very succinctly.

Also, I have to trust the illustrator to use the illustrations to help tell the story. Working with Brandon Dorman is always a pleasure. I give suggestions on what the images might be, and he always comes back with something better than I envisioned. The idea of a kid whose imaginary friend becomes his imaginary enemy has been floating around my imagination for years. I'm very pleased with how *Pingo* turned out. We'll soon be working on a prequel to *Pingo*.

As part of the publishing process have you had the opportunity to collaborate with other authors?

I haven't collaborated with other authors yet. It might be fun to try someday under the right circumstances.

You have a new book coming out in March 2011, *Beyonders: A World Without Heroes.* What can you tell us about that?

I'm excited about the *Beyonders* series. *A World Without Heroes* will be the first of three books. In the series, a couple of thirteen-year-olds will cross over from our world to a fantasy world—sort of a Narnia-type setup. In the fantasy world, an emperor is systematically trying to get rid of all the heroes, not by killing them, but by breaking them. He tries to buy them off and turn them into sellouts or otherwise leave them physically broken. Our cast of characters will largely be broken heroes who are trying to finally stand up to this emperor. I've written the first two books already, and am really excited about the story.

Is *Beyonders* similar to the *Fablehaven* series in any way?

Beyonders is in the same category as *Fablehaven*. Both stories have young main characters dealing with magical creatures and supernatural forces. One difference is that *Beyonders* takes our main characters beyond our world to a totally new place. I designed new races and rules for how magic works there. *Beyonders* will feel like a bigger story in some ways.

Within the *Fablehaven* novels you reference Greek, Celtic, and even Jewish mythologies and legends. Are these deliberate, researched incorporations?

Yes. The idea behind *Fablehaven* is that all the different myths or legends of different cultures have some truth

Photo courtesy Brandon Mull

Photo courtesy Brandon Mull

to them, so I wanted to bring to life magical creatures from a variety of traditions.

Will we be seeing a similar mix of tales in *Beyonders*?

No. Since we're going to a new world in *Beyonders*, I didn't want to rely too much on the myths of our world. Rather than use centaurs or fairies or dragons, I mostly designed my own races and creatures for *Beyonders*. I think the new races are a big strength of the book.

I know that you said in your epilogue in *Fablehaven* Book Five that you wouldn't be writing another *Fablehaven* novel, but what about a short story or two to follow up on some of the characters' stories?

At the end of Book Five I said I would not be writing a Book Six. But it is possible that I will write a new *Fablehaven* series someday. That is why I left a few issues dangling. At some point, one way or another, I'll tie up the issues you noted.

Will we be seeing other *Fablehaven* characters ever again?

Probably! I just don't have the details regarding when or how. I'm still in the planning stage.

How do you see your novels incorporating gospel values?

I think any time conscientious characters face difficult choices, moral themes will arise. I don't feel my books specifically promote any religion. But you can find a lot about light and darkness, right and wrong, good and evil, and choice and consequence, along with other issues that relate to morality or values.

How has the gospel affected your writing?

My religious beliefs influence who I am and how I view right and wrong. Who I am influences the kind of stories I tell and how I have characters deal with difficult choices.

How do you see your work building the kingdom?

I'm mostly trying to give people something clean and fun to read. I try to write books that families can enjoy together and discuss. There are discussion questions in the back of all of my books so far.

I try to have issues in my books that readers can relate to their own lives so that even though they are reading a crazy fantasy story, they might come away with some useful thoughts about courage, choices, friendship, heroism, etc. ❧

Photo courtesy Brandon Mull

James Christensen

INTERVIEW BY **JOSEPH OLSON**
WEB: **JAMESCHRISTENSEN.COM**

Photo courtesy Spencer Hall

How did you get started as an artist?

I actually didn't start as an artist. I think I came pre-wired that way. In my earliest memories I was drawing. And it was not as a passion, or a mission, it was just what I liked to do. I really liked to make stuff up and I liked to put things down on paper. I'd have to go to church as a little kid and sometimes my dad would be on the stand—my mother was ill a lot—and he'd say, "If you'll be quiet, you can draw," and he'd give me a little spiral notebook and his pen and I could draw in church. Those are my earliest memories of drawing: sitting on the end of the pew being rather nervous about being by myself while Dad was up there, but I could get lost in a drawing and then I was okay.

Do you still doodle at church?

I do draw in church. In fact, even after I became a bishop, it was sort of known that I wasn't tuning out, I was just drawing. And I take notes: in my sketchbooks and my notebooks, I have thoughts that occur to me, ideas for paintings, doodles, lists. I'm pushing sixty bound volumes of sketchbooks. I hang onto those. I get nice ones now and put them on a shelf.

Do you still have your early ones?

The little spiral ones? No. Those are when I was four. The stuff I have now I started probably close to forty years ago and they are as close as I come to a journal. It's just a very visual journal.

When did you come to a moment where you found the visual language that you stuck with?

Probably when I was thirty-five. That didn't happen when I was a kid. First of all, when you're a kid, you're not concerned about style or anything, you're just making stuff up and that's very cool. When you get into school, you're looking for a style, and I was doing this funky fantasy stuff in the background in my own sketchbooks and stuff, but not really painting it, because I didn't think anybody would be interested. And it wasn't until I was a grownup that some of my contemporaries said, "We want you to paint some of the things that you doodle in your books." And so I was in my mid-thirties before I started putting what you would call the fantasy work out there.

You don't call it fantasy art?

I would just call it my images. Every artist needs to have a label. The world says it's so much easier if we can put you in a box. So I accept that because my things aren't realistic, they're fantastical and whatever.

So we have this image of you alone on the sacrament pew drawing to cope. How does your art help you deal with challenges?

I use my art as therapy sometimes. I'll draw the little man burdened by way too much stuff or the fellow that nobody's paying any attention to. That becomes visual to me very quickly. My brain tends to make metaphorical, symbolic connections a lot. Even if it's not visual images, I can, when I'm teaching in Church, get talking about the iron rod and you know, Nephi and Lehi just brushed the surface. There is so much meaning and so much potential and so many layers in those few verses.

Explain the obvious illusion that we see in many of your paintings.

I painted a painting called "The Invisible Door" when I first started teaching and it was a very early kind of fantasy metaphorical painting, my first hunchback painting—it was me examining death. I'm seeing this beautiful Portuguese seaside, rocks, beach—which is my idea of heaven—and perhaps an invisible door and I'm questioning: "Do I see paradise or am I going to open the door and there's poop up to my chin and it was an illusion?" I don't know what's beyond the door. And then, ten years later—and the timing was purely accidental—I painted "The Last E-ticket Ride."

Every decade or so, I get thinking about that sort of thing. And I realized after the fact that I'd painted these

Angels of My Village © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

Photo courtesy Spencer Hall

paintings ten years apart. So I said, every decade I will look at death and figure out what it looks like and how I'm thinking about it. Ten years later, I painted "Opus 96." For me it's the least successful because it was kind of contrived. I was saying, "Okay, my decade's up, now what am I thinking about death? Where's my life? How are things different?" The painting works right, but to me it was much too self-conscious. The bright light is at the end of the passageway on the side and it's way down the hall, but the closer you get to that part you see the trees are nailed and propped up and it's a movie set; that was my response to the fact that as you get older, you start to see things as they really are. The experience of your life simply teaches you what's real and what's not.

I thought I was done. Then, kind of accidentally, about eight years later I did a fourth death painting called "Death and the Mirror." That was when I was diagnosed with cancer. We had a very scary year or so. That's the angel in black holding the mirror up to the lady in all of her finery and all it shows is the lady's face. When you're face to face with the real idea of death, which isn't scary—she was actually quite an attractive woman—nothing counts anymore but what you really are, what your own face is, what your own spirit is like.

How did your faith grow because of your battle with cancer?

Of course my illness changed my perspective a little bit and there's a happy ending to it—we did treatments and everything's fine. I believe that it's one of the things I was supposed to experience because it changed my perspective and made me think more about my own mortality and what I was doing that counted—not just busy work, but whether I was using the time that I had. Was I using it well? Wisely? So, yes, it had an effect. Did it turn me morbid? No. Does it affect my work a lot on a day-to-day basis? I don't think so.

What advice do you have for following one's dreams?

I think that if part of why we're here is to find happiness, then I think it's pretty important to find that which will make us happy and gives us a sense of accomplishment. I'm a big proponent of following your dreams, of doing that which fulfills you, that which gives you satisfaction and which you love.

I spent too much of my own life in what I call my "anything-for-a-buck years," and because of my upbringing in a post-WWII economy by parents who'd been through the Depression, work had a meaning and that meaning wasn't fun. I did a lot of artwork that I didn't enjoy doing but that usually made me money. I was into my thirties before I figured out that if I follow my bliss, that which I create or I get good at is what's going to be the most valuable. So now I try with my children and with students that I've had at the university, to say, you've got to find what makes you happy. Don't be in a hurry to do that. You've got to experiment. I don't want you to narrow down too fast, but then do what'll make you happy. And do what you need to do.

See, when a parent comes with a kid who is out of high school and

Photo courtesy Spencer Hall

they're coming to BYU to be an artist, and they ask, should my son be an artist? My response to that is to look at the kid and say, kid, what else do you like to do? "Well, you know, I like rocket science and I like crocheting and I love life insurance business, you know, but I also like art." I say, then pick one of the other three. Be a rocket science or an insurance salesman, don't be an artist. If the kid says, "Eh, I don't know. Art. I love to draw, I love to paint, I love to sculpt—that's all I want to do," then I say, be an art major. No, parent, you're not necessarily going to see him make any money at it, that's not why he's doing it. But if he has to do it, then he has to do it. I believe in that.

Having said that, though, I also believe in balance. It's very important to have a balanced life and a balanced education. I tend not to advise kids to go to art schools because I think a liberal arts education is tremendously important just to make you culturally literate.

I think that's evident in my work because I'm putting in little references all over—a botany reference, a mythological reference. I've had people say, "I'm not smart enough to understand your paintings." Well, you can enjoy them on a level, but the more you know, the more you're going to see things going on.

But, back to the topic, to say, "I want to be an artist. I want to be an artist so bad I'm going to live in a cardboard box under the freeway and I'm going to paint and I'm never going to take on the responsibilities of a family or service or anything because I need to be an artist," is baloney and it's wrong.

You have to build your life so that if you're going to have a family—and you probably should—then you have to accommodate making a living and taking care of your family. That's a really important thing.

Now, if it gets to the point where you get paid a lot of money to do your passion, then you've hit the jackpot. That's the best. And the best way to get there is to get really good at what you do—and if you're the best, then you're going to find a way to make a living at it.

Sometimes the Spirit Touches Us Through Our Weaknesses © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

Tell us about painting fantasy versus reality.

One of the advantages of being labeled "the fantasy guy" is that you're not bound, you're not the landscape guy, you're not the naturalist fish guy, you are the "fantasy-poofy-dwarf guy" and you can do whatever the heck you want.

I like that there's a broad spectrum there. I can do something that is quite realistic and believable, but without missing a beat I can move into something where perspective is tilted up, where things are very flat. I don't have any trouble moving back and forth.

I don't like being hobbled by the rules of atmospheric perspective or linear perspective or "Is that the proper depth of field?" or "Is that floor on exactly the right angle?"

I prefer the medieval manuscript painters, the early Gothic painters, who simply weren't worried about that. When perspective serves me, I use it; when it doesn't, I don't. And I don't find a problem with that because what is important is the painting and the idea and the presentation.

I'm not a *trompe-l'œil* painter. I'm not painting the illusion to get you to buy the idea. I'm painting what works for the painting.

Courtship © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

Royal Processional © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

Photo courtesy Spencer Hall

Wordplay in your painting has been very important to you. What do you read?

I read voraciously. However, I don't look at printed words a lot. I listen to books while I'm painting. So, if I told you I'd read fifty or sixty books last year, I've listened to fifty or sixty books. I probably read four.

I have very broad tastes in what I enjoy. I love history, I like historical fiction, I like a good whodunnit or a pageturner, occasionally some fantasy. I like vivid imagery in fantasy reading. I'm just finishing up *Fablehaven*, which was Brandon Mull's work, and my granddaughters got me reading that. I told Brandon, "The thing I like is that you make me see pictures in my head of what you're doing—you describe it well." That's super for me.

Tell us about raising your kids with your love of whimsy and imagination.

As they were growing up, I didn't think of it as being different or odd or magical. Art was my job and so I was fairly matter-of-fact. In retrospect now, yes, we had adventures and did goofy stuff and played *Dungeons & Dragons* and made a few home movies and did those deliberately creative things, but a lot of the time I was in my studio and the sign on the door said, "Unless you are on fire, do not open the door because I'm working." I had my studio at home. I liked being around.

Two of my kids are practicing painters and the third one is an art history/ceramics person and very involved in the arts. I did not tutor them to become artists. I believe that art is a very hard thing to do as a business, or a career. You don't do it for those reasons; you do it because you have a fire in the belly. You're an artist because you can't not be. And so I provided stuff for my kids and I answered questions if they needed questions answered, but I was as surprised as anybody when three of them said, "I think I'm going to be an art major," and that was totally their decision. I think it has to be that way.

How does your being an artist facilitate your understanding and testimony of the gospel?

I think that my art helps because the investigations I make into the things I want to paint and talk about and discuss, inform my religious self to some extent. Also, the decisions I've made through my religious life have affected what I choose to paint. I choose to paint generally positive and uplifting things. Even if I'm critical, I try to be critical in a whimsical way where you laugh because this guy has no clue about anything and yet we are sort of chuckling at him as we go. So I try not to paint the dark side very much.

I was talking to Elder Packer once and he said, "It would be wonderful if art could be about what might be, or ought to be, rather than what is." We were talking about how a lot of contemporary art illustrates the dark side—the depraved or unhappy or violent or angst-driven part of life. I can watch the news if I want angst. What I want to contribute is something short

Photo courtesy Spencer Hall

of Pollyanna-ism that offers a positive outlook, that offers beauty, that offers uplifting thoughts rather than a "life is poopy and then you die" sort of thing.

So how do you compartmentalize your church service and your artistic service?

I think that it is dangerous to compartmentalize, at least for me. I started out that way. I started out with my art here, my church here, my family here, and I kept everything in tidy little boxes and not very connected together and that was the way I operated, unconsciously. I was a fairly young artist when I had a few spiritual experiences and opportunities that made me aware right off that I should not compartmentalize.

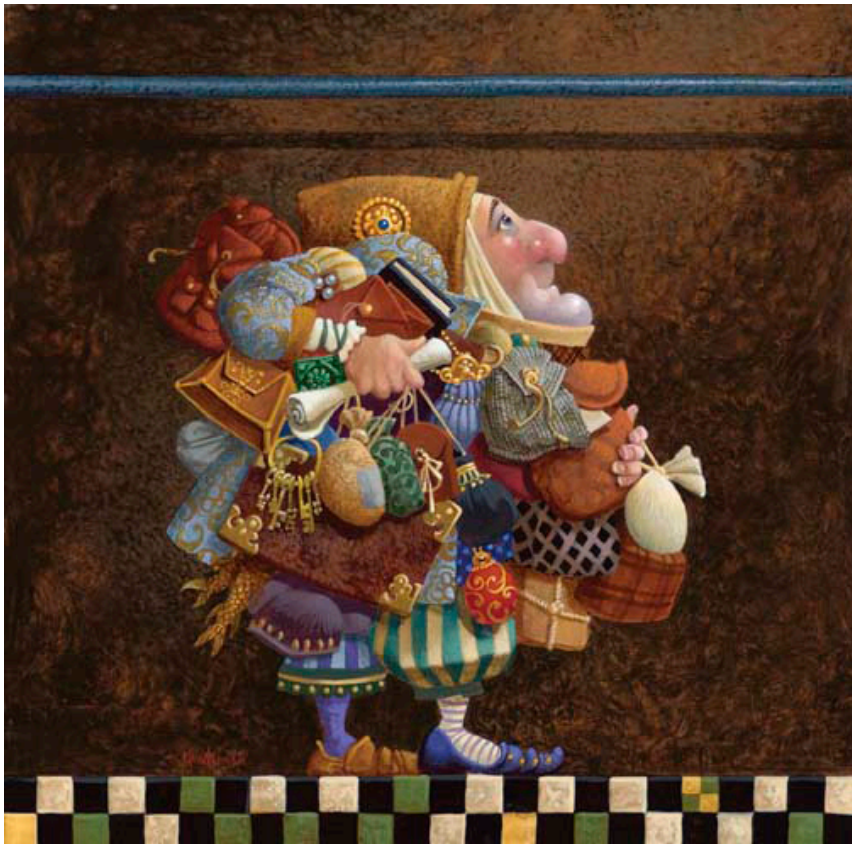
Now, does that mean I just paint Bible stories? No, not at all. That's not where my art has taken me. But when people say to me, "You're a Mormon and you don't do Jesus paintings and Mormon stuff and you haven't done Joseph Smith very much—what's your deal?" I say there's a spiritual aspect, too. Most of what I do isn't necessarily a narrative of either a spiritual event or a scriptural setting, but my values—what's important and what is of worth—absolutely spill over from my family and my religious life into my artwork.

How has having a testimony of the gospel helped you be more successful?

When I was a young artist working at the *New Era*, I was invited into Elder Packer's office. He was preparing a talk for BYU called "Arts and the Spirit of the Lord" and he wanted to hear from artists and see what we dealt with and struggled with, and so he wanted to interview me. I said my biggest problem with being a young artist who is trying to get good and make a living at it is that I'm limited in time because I have committed myself to church service. I do my home teaching and I have my family, which is a huge part of the gospel plan, and I do my church work and I attend all my meetings and it just cuts down the time in the

St. Brendan the Navigator © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

Photo courtesy Spencer Hall



Hold to the Rod, the Iron Rod © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

Once Upon a Time © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

studio and I feel like I'm never going to catch Joe Gentile down the street who doesn't go to church, doesn't have a family, doesn't pay attention, and he paints all the time, and he's going to paint one hundred paintings in a year and I'm going to be lucky if I get forty or fifty because I just don't have time to do more. That's a frustration. Having said that, I still am going to seek the kingdom first—I made that decision a while back.

He gave me that "silly mortal look" that they can do and he said, "Did it never occur to you while you pray and go to church and do your home teaching and study your scriptures, why you are doing that? What you are doing that for? You're doing it so you can have the Spirit. And that Spirit can help you in everything you do."

It's taken me a long to time to really internalize that, but that was the beginning of it, and he said, "You can accomplish more with the Spirit in twenty paintings than Joe Gentile down the street can without the Spirit in one hundred paintings. So, you're doing things for the right reason. You're just not paying attention to why you're doing them."

That became important in my life. I feel like I've been blessed that way. I mean, opportunities have come when I needed an opportunity to come, and there are a few things I've missed out on, but at the end of the day, I feel like there were reasons why I missed them.

I got a call from Pixar saying, "We're doing this thing and we like your artwork and we want you to come brainstorm." I was working on a Church project so I said I just can't get away. "Well, we'll call you again." A couple of years later they called me and said, "We really want you to come out and brainstorm with us. We're doing a new movie—we can't talk about it until you sign the non-disclosure agreements and all that—but we can tell you it's a fish movie, and you're the fish guy. We want you to fly out to San Francisco." At the time I was painting a Church mural and I just couldn't do it. Turned out it was *Finding Nemo.* I really liked that movie and would have loved to have been part of that experience, but my wife is convinced that there is a Church project every time I get invited to Hollywood so I can't get out, because I could be seduced by that pretty easily. It's interesting and exciting to do movies, but I could also get lost in it. I don't worry about those things that went by.

Kids ask, "What was your game plan?" When I say I didn't have a plan, it wasn't that I sat around watching TV until somebody famous called me.

Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book called *Outliers* which is a really interesting study of successful people. They have several things in common, and one of them is that you don't get good at something until you've done it for 10,000 hours. I tried to get good, to get prepared, to do the best at my craft that I could, and to stay busy—I worked all the time. And so, when an opportunity came—"Would you like to work on this?" "Would you like to paint a temple mural?" "Would you like to do prints with Greenwich?"—I was prepared and ready so when the opportunity was there I could take advantage of it.

What it is like working on a temple mural?

Oh, that was a great experience. There were six of us who were called to do murals for the Nauvoo temple. That was one of those tender mercies, opportunities that come. When I was a kid I went to the open house of the L.A. Temple and saw these magnificent huge paintings. The rooms are huge. In my twelve-year-old head, I thought, "No artist could do anything greater than paint a mural in a temple," and then they quit doing it. L.A. was the last temple that had them, for a lot of years, and that boat had sailed.

Time soldiered on, and then I got a phone call from one of my teachers, Frank Magleby, who said, "How would you like to paint a temple mural?" I said, "Well, sure." I didn't take it really seriously. I didn't know quite what he had in mind. He said, "They're rebuilding the Nauvoo temple, and they want to do three rooms of teaching murals. They've asked me to put a team together to do it, and I would love to have you on that team."

We spent about a year working, on and off. We painted them in the movie studio at BYU. They built the walls to scale. We each did half a room. I thought, "I really want to paint the garden. I am intrigued with that whole concept. But I might have to fight for it." As it turned out, two of the artists said, "We want to paint the world room," and another artist and I wanted to paint the garden, and the other two said, "Great, because we wanted to paint creation." And the styles of the pairings were close enough that for the uninitiated it's probably hard to tell that there were separate artists.

So, your moth looks like the other guy's?

You've seen the moth? I did put a moth sort of camouflaged in a tree. But the highlight really was that when we finished painting in the studio, they let them dry and rolled them up and then shipped them in a truck back to Nauvoo. And then we got to go back for a week and touch up and paint and fiddle with edges and make corners blend. So we did get to spend a week in the temple shortly before it was completed and that was a really great experience.

In interviews and captions you regularly refer to your wife as solid and sensible, the anchor to your flights of fancy. How has her influence affected your work?

Because of my nature—artist, head in the clouds, struggling to keep balanced, to keep grounded—I can get carried away. I don't know, maybe we could call it the artistic spirit and maybe we could call it a little ADD affliction.

My wife is my partner. We actually work quite well together. She is the business end of the pair of us. I do think of it as a true partnership. If you were to film her, she would say, "I do everything else, so that James can paint."' She doesn't always say that in the nicest way. But she does carry a lot of the day-to-day stuff on her shoulders because simply to get the work done you've got to have your head in the work. I really appreciate the relationship we have had.

In fact, I did a painting called "Poofy Guy on a Short Leash" which directly is about our relationship. I would just float up into the air and pop somewhere if I didn't have her holding on to the other end.

Fiona © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

St. Nicholas of Myra © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

Virtue © James C. Christensen, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc.

Tell us how "whimsy is a serious subject" with you.

Well, with my family, we do crazy things, and people on the outside will go, "Oh my gosh, your family is so off the wall!" Some of it is just the way we are. But whimsy is important and imagination is important. I do a lot of work that isn't gospel-oriented, scriptural, or even profound; it's fun, whimsical, light. A person will come up to me and say, "Don't get mad at me, but I hung this piece in a bathroom and every day your goofy piece of art makes me smile." That is wonderful compliment for me, and its making someone smile every day justifies its existence.

I think we need to lighten ourselves up. And I believe that my imaginative art becomes a catalyst or a trigger so that when people see my work, they'll think up stories about what it means or who the characters are. Then they've exercised their imagination and become a contributor to the work and to the process.

I sometimes get classes where the teacher puts up one of the fairy tale pieces or nursery rhyme pieces and the students pick a character and write about them. That gives me warm fuzzies all over and gets me into the next painting. Once in a while some energetic teacher will send a big FedEx box with twenty or thirty of these wacky little stories. They are pretty fun.

Tell us the meaning of your magic fish.

The fish symbol is a pretty ubiquitous theme in my work, though not in every painting. I've had people come up to me and say, "I've spent four hours staring at 'Gethsemane' and I can't find the fish!" and I say, "It's Gethsemane! There are no floating fish in Gethsemane!" "But you have a floating fish in all your work!" No, I don't, actually. That's another myth.

But they are in some. They float around and they aren't affected by gravity, so you can put them in wherever you want on that picture plane, real or imagined. They came to me, to begin with, to mean "This painting isn't here." Fish don't float around "here," so you are immediately transported to somewhere else.

Then I started reading and doing research into symbols. The fish is a symbol of hidden knowledge and a symbol of a path to a higher plane. People who aren't LDS think, "Oh, we know why you put a fish in your painting—it's because you're a Christian." And there's the symbol of the Greek letters that spell "Christ" in the Greek language, and yes, it was used very early on and all that. But that has never been a primary mover in why I've done it. I've done it because it seemed whimsical and magical and it transports us and reminds us that this is another place.

I don't really have a problem separating the Spirit from magic. Once in a while I get in trouble in some kind of Church thing—"Magic, that's druids and Satanic." I even got in trouble because I was playing a kind of *Dungeons & Dragons* game with my kids and a couple of the neighbors weren't allowed to come over because we had wizards and witches and that kind of "Satanic stuff" in it. We were always able to leave that kind of stuff in the realm that it's in. I never struggled with Bambi because Bambi was allowed to talk—that was the world that was created for that character, and I do the same thing. I have very strong feelings about the Spirit and the way that it operates in my life and about the inspiration I receive when I'm doing what's right, where I know I am being watched over constantly and protected and cared for—and nudged. I don't really have any problem confusing that with the higher forces of the seventh level of necromancy.

Do you have fun being Mormon?

I am Jim Christensen and I'm a Mormon. [laughter] And I have fun.

Of course. I have joy, which is more important. I love the people I work with and associate with. I love the congeniality of like-minded people. And I love service. I mean, my work currently as a bishop in a student ward is very rewarding to me.

Are there tough moments? Yes. Are there things that I wish I didn't have to deal with? Of course there are.

But at the same time, you see the lights go on and you see people regain their birthright, and it's a wonderful, wonderful experience.

And we laugh a lot. I had my Relief Society president tell me a couple of weeks ago, "We are having expanded ward council, and I have to say, I can hardly wait. We laugh so hard in ward council. It's fun." And I think it should be fun. So, yes, I have a lot of fun being a Mormon.

What's next?

I don't know how long I will be able to keep doing this. I don't envision retirement in my life. My gut feeling is that they will pry the brush from my cold dead hands. My artist friends and I are all getting a little older, but we're trying to stay in shape, because we all want to keep working.

I was afraid when I first quit my day job at BYU that I was going to run out of ideas. At the time the best comparison I could make was with a woman's ovaries—you're born with x number of ideas. You know, you've got eggs and they keep coming down the chute, but at some point in time, you are going to hit artistic menopause. The last idea has bumped its way down my artistic fallopian tubes. And that's it. I'm through. I can never think of it again.

What I found when I quit my day job and I was working and using up ideas at a quicker rate was that I generated more ideas. That's where I am now. I've gotten over that fear of menopause. I simply think that the more we think, the more we imagine, the more we read, the more we travel, the more we ponder, the more we mature and look at the same stories from a different point of view, the more ideas happen.

If there's a negative idea about being a sixty-eight year old painter, it's that a lot of the ideas have already been done

Photo courtesy Spencer Hall

and you've got to keep pushing yourself to get out on the edge of some new territory. But that's the game and that's the fascination of the whole process.

I don't work as hard as I used to. I don't paint as many hours as I used to in the studio because I just hurt in places. I'm just getting old. I spend more time with my grandkids and that kind of stuff.

But as far as I'm concerned, I am working on two big pieces now. I have a book planned for next spring that I am going to dive in and do fifteen or twenty illustrations for. Plus, I have a lot of paintings that I want to do. I see myself just going on with the work as long as I can. ❧

Photo courtesy Derryl Yeager

Derryl Yeager

INTERVIEW BY **DAVE DOERING**
WEB: **ODYSSEYDANCE.COM**

When was the first time you began to think of dance as a career?

I started when I was in high school (sixteen years old) in Amarillo, Texas. I got into a musical, *Camelot*, and did not win the part I wanted, but during that musical I wound up doing a lot of dance numbers. The director of the show, Neil Hess, had his own dance studio, and he told me that it seemed I had an aptitude for movement. I remember thinking "Hey, I can do that." That's where I discovered my ability to move.

After that, Hess invited me to his studio, the Neil Hess School of Dance in Amarillo. I walked in there and I saw twenty-eight girls and not one guy. I thought, "Man! These are good odds! I like this." I started taking classes and found it was one of the most difficult things I've ever tried. I had been in all kinds of sports. I did hockey, baseball, football—I played lots of sports in my younger years through junior high and I excelled in each of those. But there was something about dance that struck me as hard and difficult. Not just hard and difficult from a physical point of view, but from a performance point of view.

It was the challenge of it that attracted me—not only of doing something very physical, but also of doing something in a performance: expressing yourself through movement as in an abstract ballet or by portraying a character. I found the physical and artistic challenge was very, very appealing to me. So I just started taking classes there at Neil's studio.

Because I had done a lot of sports and things like that, I was used to picking things up fairly quickly. Within a year of taking dance classes there I got a scholarship to the San Francisco School of Ballet. I went there for a summer session.

On my way to San Francisco, we stopped in Salt Lake City. I had a friend, Matt, who was also involved in dance, and who introduced me to the Church. I was a Southern Baptist at the time, but I was investigating the Church. So when he and I stopped in Salt Lake, we watched some rehearsals of Ballet West. I realized while I was there that I didn't want to go to San Francisco. There were some great dancers there, but there was just something different about Ballet West.

One of the things that was really different about it was that all of the guys in the Ballet West company were straight (which was really unusual then and still unusual now). But that was something that really appealed to me, that there were a bunch of guys in this dance company and it was okay to be a dancer. I met Bill Christensen, the co-founder and first artistic director of Ballet West. I decided then I would go back to the University of Utah, get in the program there, and then one day, hopefully, start working with Ballet West.

So I came back that fall. Back in those days if there was a guy who was willing to put on tights and dance (it was pretty lean pickings at that time), Ballet West said, "Come on over!" So I was in their *Nutcracker* production immediately. I just played some of the simple characters, but I got to work with the company.

Very soon after that, I began to work with the company as an apprentice. I started with Ballet West as an apprentice, and in the six years that I was there I worked my way up to be a core member, a soloist, and then eventually a principal dancer in the company. I got to work with Bill Christensen; Bene Arnold, the Ballet Mistress there at that time; and Bruce Marks.

What was your family's reaction to your decision to become a Mormon?

My father passed away just before I was sixteen, which kind of led me on my spiritual search at that time. Something was missing. I was a very religious kid all those years; I went to church all the time and I enjoyed the fellowship of the kids there, but something was very different and wrong at that time. That's when I ran into my friend Matt, a fellow dancer, who had gone through the missionary discussions with the Church. (Neil Hess was LDS, too.) Matt wanted to join the Church but couldn't because his parents wouldn't let him. During this time, he and I would just sit and talk. He would tell me stuff about what the Church believed, and it all made *sense*. All the things he said were practical and made sense to me. I wondered, "Why haven't I heard about this before?"

When I asked if I could be baptized, my mom said yes, which was kind of unusual—for that situation, especially, down in the Bible Belt. So I actually got to join the Church before Matt did.

From Ballet West, how did your career expand to include stage, screen, and television?

After six years at Ballet West and as the principal dancer, I realized that I had achieved my goal. I got to the highest level that I could get to, so I asked, "What's next?"

I started doing choreography when I was at the University of Utah, and Ballet West gave me a couple of opportunities while I was there. I also completed my bachelor's and master's degrees in Performing Arts and Choreography while at Ballet West, giving me something to fall back on if I didn't make it as a dancer.

I actually taught at BYU for a year and a half. I was a faculty member there even though I was still in my early twenties. I realized that was not what I really wanted to do. The show *A Chorus Line* had come here to the Capitol Theatre in Salt Lake City. I knew it was coming. I also knew they always had auditions when they came. Since I had started out in musicals, I thought about moving into that area. I worked really hard at developing my tap, because I knew tap was involved. I worked on jazz and took jazz classes. I worked on my voice to get my voice back in shape because I hadn't sung for quite a few years. I worked on my acting. I did all these different things to get myself ready for a possible career in musical theater.

There was an audition that was going to happen there at Salt Lake City.

Photo courtesy Derryl Yeager

Photo courtesy Derryl Yeager

I thought the audition was going to be on Thursday, so I prepared myself for three or four months to get ready for this audition. On Wednesday night I was at home, watching the television. A news piece came on about the auditions that they had for *A Chorus Line* that day. I had missed the auditions. For some reason, I had the wrong day. The wrong information. I had missed the whole dang audition.

I was devastated and just beside myself. I got the casting director's phone number from a friend, and I just called him, out of the blue. I said, "Listen, my name's Derryl Yeager. I am here in Utah. I am a principal dancer with Ballet West. I am very interested in auditioning for your show. I am coming to New York Thanksgiving weekend. Are there any auditions happening then?"

He said, "Well, gee. Thanksgiving is bad. Everybody in New York leaves, so we're not having auditions. But when you get to the city, bring your picture and resume by the Shubert Theater and we'll see."

I went to New York that Thanksgiving weekend and had two successful auditions for two different things with some of the top people in my field. I came home from New York with a contract for the *A Chorus Line* International Company in my hand. The next morning, I gave my two weeks' notice to BYU. That was literally "The Weekend that Changed My Life" in terms of where my career would go. I joined that company and did the show for two years. The last time we did the show it was in the Wilshire Theater in Los Angeles. At that time, I decided I wanted to settle down in L.A. It was a little more of a family-oriented, Western lifestyle than it was in New York. I just didn't think that New York was where I wanted to take my family at that point in time. So I settled down in L.A. Michael Bennett, the guy who created *A Chorus Line,* asked me to do *Dreamgirls*, so I did that.

Then Tom Reed, whom I had met in New York, called me about assisting with the auditioning and auditioning myself for the L.A. company for *Cats*. I went through three weeks of auditions. We saw three *thousand* people. The most difficult thing was to be an auditioner and then to be an auditionee. That was one of the most difficult auditions I had ever had. You get a familiarity with everyone behind the table and a camaraderie, but then you have to go in front of them. You know what goes on back there. Then I have to go in front of the table and be the dancer and the actor who is trying to get a job. I would never recommend that for anybody. It really puts you between a rock and a hard place. You have to really, really be good to get past that familiarity that they have with you. But I did wind up being in the show, so it was good.

I did *Cats* for two years in Los Angeles. While I was there I did lots of other things like *Staying Alive* and the television work filling in the cracks between shows.

What makes choreography different from performing?

Choreography is telling people what to do. It's actually having a vision of what movement you want to see with a particular piece of music. For me, it

Photo courtesy Derryl Yeager

Photo courtesy Derryl Yeager

Photo courtesy Derryl Yeager

starts with a particular piece of music. I envision dance to this piece of music much the same way that sculptors see a block of wood or marble and they envision what they are going to create out of that.

How did the Odyssey Dance Company start?

After doing some gigs in Los Angeles, I began to teach at Center Stage Studio in Orem, Utah. As I started teaching here, I saw a *huge* pool of talent in Utah—a huge number of dancers, but they didn't want to move to New York or L.A.

Having been through that experience myself, and knowing how hard and difficult it was for anybody to survive spiritually through that process, I felt it was important to create a company that would allow them to have a professional experience without having to move to New York or L.A. That's where the seeds of what became Odyssey Dance Company began.

Where did *Thriller* come from?

When I started the Odyssey Dance Company, I knew that I needed to have something that would be my *Nutcracker*—something that would provide the income we needed to do everything else we wanted to do.

Originally I looked at the possibilities and thought, "I don't want to do *Nutcracker* or something around Christmas, but nobody's doing anything around Halloween." I saw an opening there. I was originally thinking of doing a full-length *Dracula* or some such show, but at that time I didn't have any money, and there's no way I could produce a big show like that without any money. One of the board members suggested that we do some vignettes of different characters. I thought about it, and at first it didn't interest me very much, but as I continued to think about it, I realized there are a lot of horror characters, so maybe there was something to this idea.

The very first year, we threw together this show called *Thriller*. Now, the Michael Jackson music video "Thriller" was just the umbrella for this Halloween show. We used it as our opening number where we have a bunch of dancing zombies. But the rest of the show has nothing to do with "Thriller" or Michael Jackson; the show is just about Halloween.

So we put together the show. I had four performances set up at Kingsbury Hall at the University of Utah campus. We put out as much publicity as we could. We didn't have any money at the time. The guy who ran Kingsbury Hall called me about a week before we opened. He said, "You know what? You've only sold about fifty tickets to this show. Maybe you should cancel." I said, "Yeah, you are probably right from a pure business point of view. But I've been in the studio working with these dancers. We've got something that is different, something that might get some traction. Maybe if we do four shows, word of mouth will get going and people will come out. And if I am going to go down in flames, I am going to go down in flames. I think I need to give this show a shot."

So we did those first four performances. We ended up with decent houses. You know, in Kingsbury Hall, having six hundred people feels like there's nobody there. But for me, that was pretty good, for the first set of shows.

It grew from there. We now do over forty performances over the entire state with two companies. Two whole companies and over forty performances, and almost all of them are sold out. It does provide the income for the rest of the year!

Thriller is not your typical "artsy" performance. What is it about Derryl Yeager that would make you even dream up such a show?

The show has tons and tons of humor. The secret to the show is that it is very tongue-in-cheek. Almost every number has scary things in it, but it is the humor of the show that people really, really love. It is so fun to watch the audience laugh at these pieces that we've created. It is an amazing thing. People find a release in this show because they laugh so hard. I think that's what's kind of cool about it.

You asked, though, really about where this show came from. Well, I have this sick sense of humor. When I started choreographing, for some reason I was always able to inject some humor into what I was doing. It is a very unusual thing to be at a dance performance and be laughing. Most dancers are "artistes." They're working out their issues on stage. It's all pounding the chest, "Oh, woe is me!" and, "Oh, how bad our life is!" Contrastingly, this show is so lighthearted, fun, ridiculous, and truly absurd (in many cases), but very entertaining. That's what the basis of the show is and why people keep coming back to it year after year. It is so funny, so fun, and a great release. And a great way to celebrate Halloween!

What role does being a Latter-day Saint play in your creativity? Do you see yourself as a dancer who happens to be a Latter-day Saint or a Latter-day Saint who happens to be a dancer?

I've often seen myself as a dancer who sees himself as a Latter-day Saint. But, as I look back at it in retrospect…

I was in *A Chorus Line*, and there's a lot of foul language in that show; however, there are a lot of redeeming things in the show as well. For a lot of people out there in the "real" world, it really touches them in a very different and unique way. There are some who, from the LDS side, would say, "How could you ever be in that show?" with all the foul language, the gay themes, and this or that in the show.

I've never really thought of myself as someone who specifically does his art for Mormons. If I were doing my stuff just for Mormons, then the art would be skewed in some way. Now, we had lots of discussions about this at the Mormon Arts Festival some years ago. Such questions as, "What is the Place of Art in the World?" I really came to the conclusion that the Church is there to help us reach a certain specific goal: to receive exaltation and be able to become who we are destined to become after passing the tests in this life. Most really good art has the same goal: to really uplift a person, to get a person beyond himself and to see himself in a larger context—trying to better himself and trying to become a better human being. The goals of art and Mormonism are very similar, but they just take different paths to the same goal.

Where the world out there wouldn't accept the missionary discussions, they might accept a piece about *It's a Wonderful Life* that is filled with what I see as gospel principles—redeeming factors that help them become better people. I look at my art form as something that is really meant to help everyone. My LDS-ness does permeate everything I do (some may disagree!). I do have an "editor" within me that will not allow certain things to happen within the things I do as a choreographer and as a performer. But I look at the art piece as a whole and ask, "What is it doing for the audience?" "How does it transfer it to them?" "How is it transporting them to another level?" Basically, "How is it edifying them?"

I don't see myself as doing "Mormon" art. I feel I am just doing art—art that can be accepted in any context, art that still points people towards the good. As the scripture says, "anything of good report or praiseworthy" that leads you in the right direction is of God.

Even *Thriller*, which is a lot of sick humor based on evil characters. It does make fun of those characters, but it also edifies people because it makes them laugh. It helps them get beyond the foreclosures they are dealing with in life. It's very cathartic. Humor is something that is very hard to do. You

Photo courtesy Derryl Yeager

look at all the comedies that come out—how many are really funny? They are horrible. Most of the humor in movies is really horrible. Nobody knows how to do it anymore. I feel that in many ways I have a gift in that regard. I am proud to be using that talent to instill humor in everything I do. Now, not everything I do is humorous; I have my "artsy fartsy" pieces, too.

But I know for a fact that the real heart of *Thriller* is its humor. That's what people respond to. To sit with a whole house full of people and laugh out loud is a very cathartic and unique experience. It can only be experienced in a live audience. You can't just be sitting in front of the television and laugh. That's what the laugh track is for. A real audience laughing together is a wonderfully cathartic experience.

Doesn't this make dance and live theater more precious?

Yes, this is why I really try to teach my dancers to appreciate it. Dancers are very unique athletes. There is something about the movement of the physical body that captures you. It never ceases to amaze me that when you start to dance, people stop to watch you.

We worked for Coca-Cola during the Olympics in Salt Lake City. We put together a couple of little sets, a couple of fifteen-minute shows, at their pavilion in Park City. We would turn the music on and start dancing and do the numbers.

People would just stop. They can't not watch. The comment that means the most to me is when someone says, "You know, I don't like dance. But *that* was cool. I like that." So for some burly truck driver to stop and say that.... We've created a whole new market for dance. We've shared beyond the normal confines of the arts community.

I am the poster child of "Everything is Possible!"—that you can be a Latter-day Saint and a dancer.

Why do you think Utah is generating such a reputation in the creative arts?

I think the Spirit is moving. Several times I've looked at stuff coming out of Hollywood and I go, "They've officially run out of ideas." I think part of it is they don't have anything to say. Because they don't have anything to say, there is nothing that drives them. Therefore their creativity is just not there.

All the remakes being done right now, and horribly done compared to the originals, are very interesting. I go to New York and I see a lot of dance companies. Their work is just crap. I mean, just drivel. It's awful, compared to the stuff we are doing here. As a company, we are on the verge of exploding to a whole new level, a level that is really exciting but also very frightening at the same time. I sit back and say, "Lord, it is in your hands. Here we go." I am ready to do it. I am fully aware of all the pitfalls ahead, but if this is what he wants us to do and where he wants us to go, let's do it.

My patriarchal blessing is very interesting. It says that I will become a "torchbearer." I've wondered about

Photo courtesy Derryl Yeager

that phrase my whole life. Now I can kind of see where it can go. There are all these kids coming out of Utah, most of whom are LDS. When we go and perform in Europe, they love our company there. My agent over there says every time, "There is something *so* different about your group. I don't know what it is." About eighty percent of my company is from Utah, and about seventy percent are good LDS kids. It wasn't intended that way—I don't put them through a temple recommend interview when I bring people into the company. But it does have a lot to do with their goodness as people, as human beings. I've had a lot of really talented dancers who I didn't bring into the company just because they are not good people. I'm not interested in that—I am too old to deal with that.

A challenge we face as Mormon artists is how we see ourselves in the Lord's plan. I honestly believe that we, in many ways, are the front line of the gospel. We are the front line that paves the way for the missionaries to come in. We are the ones who can open the doors to spiritual thought and context that will further the Lord's work and that can lift others from their level to a higher plane.

You mentioned that remaining faithful was a challenge during your years in professional theatre and television. What did you do to remain spiritually strong?

Whenever you have a group of people, there will be events, parties, and get-togethers where things will get out of control. I could sense that moment approaching, and I would leave. For many events, I didn't even go. This was *very* difficult to do. Many of these people were fun to be around.

I thus became a hermit. I just went back to my room and read. I'd work on my craft or I'd be teaching. (You have to keep training. Otherwise, when the gig is over, you are no better off than when you started the show.) I always continue to develop my skills to be more capable.

Photo courtesy Derryl Yeager

Naturally, I would go to Church as I could and I'd study the scriptures. Most importantly, I was happily married to my faithful spouse, Cheryl.

What do you see as the challenge for the Mormon artist?

The Mormon artist is stuck between two worlds. You can't play to both of them, can you? The expectations Mormons have of their artists is very different from that of the mainstream. When I perform, I don't see myself playing to a Mormon audience. I mean, *Thriller* is the antithesis of "Mormon art." So is squeaky clean what needs to happen for it to be "Mormon" art?

I take my call from Elder M. Russell Ballard's talk at the Tuacahn Mormon Arts Festival in April of 1995 when he said, "Few earthly things bring joy more fully to the world than the arts…take that inspiration from heaven and…create dance and art…all of which would declare that…the fullness of the everlasting gospel is once again upon the Earth." ❧

Keri Doering

INTERVIEW BY **MEAGAN BRADY & KRISTINA CHAMBERS**

Photo courtesy Lizzy Bean

How did you get into costume design?

I was tricked into it.

No, actually, when I was between ten and twelve years old, I was taught by my mother to sew my own clothes, which I did all the way through high school. Later, when I was in college, I began to do quilts, and I continue to enjoy doing a couple of quilts a year.

When my husband and I got married, I knew that David was a big science fiction and fantasy fan. He would often travel to conventions as an aspiring writer and he invited me to go to one of them. It was in Orlando that he introduced me to the world of costume competitions—masquerades, as they call them. He also introduced me to some costumer friends of his—Joyce Best Saunders for one, and she really encouraged me with my quilting background to try to do some costumes.

I enjoyed the idea of creating, so it wasn't much of a stretch for me to try to create something for the following year's competition, held in San Francisco. Now, David didn't mention that you usually start out in this world performing at local events before trying out for an international one, so I had no idea I was trying out my skills on three to four thousand people in a vast auditorium in San Francisco. I had recreated costumes from Disney's *Aladdin*, and hearing the audience clap and cheer for us, then having the emcee say that "it's not right for you to make the emcee cry," and finally winning an award, got me hooked. It was thrilling.

As friends in Utah learned that I did costumes, I began to get commissions from local theater groups and the like. I even did a costume for Otto Bonn, the mascot for the Water Resources Division of the Utah State Department of Natural Resources.

We understand you were one of the founders of the Utah Costumers Guild. Can you discuss that?

After I had competed and won awards for my costumes in San Francisco and Seattle, I joined the International Costumers Guild—a society of professional and avocational costume designers. The Guild did not have a Utah chapter, and in 1994 some of the other costumers in Salt Lake began asking "why don't we start one?" I remember Chris Oversby gathering names in support of a chapter. We called a meeting in August of that year and I was honored to be elected their first president at that time.

Through the guild I have met some of the most talented and wonderful costumers in Utah, including Mary Ellen Smith, Cheryl Johnson, Ruth Roper, Susi Geertsen, Kevin Cook, and a host of others. The Guild provides us with both professional support and time to play "dress up." I am happy to say that our Guild chapter won the right to host the annual Costume-Con, an international-level competition and convention, in 2005. We definitely impressed everyone with our stage at the Egyptian Theater in Ogden. It was the finest venue that they had seen.

Photo courtesy Lizzy Bean

Where do you look for inspiration?

There's inspiration everywhere, just look for it. Sometimes it's an illustration in a book. Sometimes it's another costume. Sometimes it's just serendipity. I'll be shopping and see a piece of fabric, a brooch, or a hat that just gets me thinking. I like to think of themes that make me happy. Christmastime, for example, makes me happy, so I did a competition outfit based on Christmas. I also love the fall and the sound of leaves under my feet, so I designed an outfit called Lady Autumn that reflects the fall. I also hang around with other creative people—other costumers, authors, singers, and the like. It helps to have a person to bounce ideas off of to get inspiration. (And to tell you when it is just a bad idea!)

Are there certain genres or certain periods that you are particularly drawn to when designing costumes?

I am very fond of the Victorian era, both early and late. I love the classical lines. I love the feeling you get from seeing a person attired that way—there's a respect, a dignity, an elegant style that princesses wear, much more so than today's styles.

Can you describe the process of costume design from initial concept to finished product?

I think the process for creating a stage costume for an existing show such as *Dracula* or *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* is fairly straightforward. From reading the script to talking with the director and from setting the budget to doing measurements, there's a lot of pre-existing designs or concepts to work from.

For me, the most challenging process is to do what I call a "competition" outfit—one that I create to compete in an International Costumers Guild event. These are local, regional, and international competitions where designers like me go not only to show

Photo courtesy Lizzy Bean

off what we've created but also to compete for awards. These costumes don't have a predefined theme, so it is much harder to work through the process to create a winning entry. One example of a costume I made for a competition is called "The Gift," an ensemble that my husband David and I modeled. That costume actually won the most (and the highest) awards at a single event of any costume that I've competed with.

The idea for "The Gift" started at a ward activity, if you can believe it. A musician friend of ours, Mike Whitmore, was performing that night. He used a sort of mushroom light with diamond shapes during his show and the effects on the walls and ceiling were different, colorful, and intriguing. A while later I found some fabric with multicolored diamond shapes on it done in sequins and I knew I had to create something from this fabric.

From there it was a matter of deciding how to present this costume on stage. Part of the judging at international competitions involves the craftsmanship of the costume; the other part is the presentation. I decided to include my husband as part of the presentation, so we brainstormed to come up with a way to present the idea onstage. That's where David is great, as he has about a thousand ideas an hour—some of which are actually practical!

We knew there was this unwritten rule about performing for competitions: *Don't* do onstage changes of costumes. The reason is that stage time is not "real" time. What you think is just a minute onstage is hours to the audience—even thirty seconds is forever for the audience—so changing a costume onstage takes way too long for the audience. Any excitement you might generate from the costume change is lost because the audience is already bored with waiting for your presentation. However, we decided that we might want to bend this rule and try an onstage change by having costumes done first in black and white, and then in full color (including the brilliant sequined fabric). We just weren't sure how to do it. I finally came up with the solution to use Velcro along with a fold-over panel on my hoop skirt, a set of overpants for my husband, and false vests that converted to capes.

We tried out "The Gift" at a regional competition. We found that we could do the transformation in about ten to twelve seconds, but I wasn't happy with the way we tried to distract the audience. Watching the video, it felt long. So for the international competition, we included two young friends of ours to hold large plastic crayons, and have them enter from stage left and right while we ducked behind the crayon box backdrop. David and I both raced through our changes so fast that our cue music still hadn't hit yet; we had managed to change in something like six to seven seconds! The audience laughed and cheered as we reappeared almost magically transformed into what looked like quite different outfits.

Because we came up with such a remarkable solution, we were awarded

Photo courtesy Lizzy Bean

the very first award of the night—the award for originality, which is only given once a year.

Is the process for costume design any different from that for regular clothing?

Of course! Sure, fitting might be the same for a costume or for street clothing, but the goal of regular clothing is to flatter a person's figure and provide a comfortable outfit that they can wear in public. For costume design, practicality isn't the priority. In fact, I once did a costume with a hoop skirt that I could not sit in—I had to have a stool backstage to sit.

Your color palette for costuming is much broader than for contemporary clothing. You are consciously working to either focus the audience's eyes on a character or to move them into the background. You look for elements that reflect their role in the performance, rather than how a person might perform in their everyday life.

How do you go about breaking down a script in order to determine a character's personality, circumstance, environment, etc., in order to dress them?

For me it is a matter of reading through the script several times, then consulting with the director for his/her suggestions. When I did the musical *Prophet*, which was based on the life of Joseph Smith, I was given the freedom to look at non-contemporary colors and fabrics. The director wanted the audience to see the performance as more than just a historical drama, but something more universal. He wanted the characters to have a modern look with a historical feel, so I adapted modern patterns to have a more historical cast with a different cut and fabrics.

Photo courtesy Lizzy Bean

What happens when you find a character that you feel you can't connect with? How do you go about finding inspiration for them?

Actually, this hasn't happened to me yet. It isn't necessary that you have a deep connection with the character, but rather a sense of their purpose in the performance. Once I have a sense of the role from reading the script, talking with the director, and then meeting the actor, I feel I have enough of a connection to create a design for them.

It is essential that the actor transform into their character. As a result, it's quite common for actors to make costume suggestions or even add little touches themselves.

How much creative freedom do you give them with your designs? Do you ever draw the line?

Certainly I draw a line. As I mentioned though, having the actors' input is important to me. The actors I've worked with appreciated my discussing their suggestions with them. I haven't had any prima donnas get upset or insistent on changes. One time a lead complained about the stiffness of the fabric in one of her costumes, but after consulting with the director we made a change for the rest of the run. I understood her concern and found a way to continue to convey the onstage image with another fabric.

Where would you like to go with your career?

Two words: Edna Mode.

Okay, maybe I won't be like her character from the movie *The*

Incredibles, but I certainly appreciate her style! I'd love to continue to do costuming for fantasy films. I worked on pre-production for Dave Farland's *Runelords* movie and it was thrilling to see my designs come to life in the pre-production artwork.

I'd also like to design clothes for the "traditional build" woman. Too many clothes are designed today for the 8–14 sizes and not for larger women. I'd like to create classical looks that are flattering for these women.

What did you like most about working on the *Runelords* film?

As I mentioned, it was seeing the conceptual artist take my designs and creating whole scenes with them. It brought them to life! I also enjoyed finding swatches and materials for the outfits, just exploring the possibilities for a lead character's outfit or the trim on a minor character's sleeve.

I most enjoyed working with my partner, Mary Ellen Smith. Her years of working with theatrical costumes, eye for color and detail, and boundless energy made those long hours sheer fun. Mary Ellen sees things quite differently than I do, so working together we could get over the problems as we could play off each other.

For example, we were originally only going to do six costume designs, but after we got going, Mary Ellen and I crafted a total of seventeen different costumes for *Runelords*. It was great fun to bounce ideas off each other and get the synergy going. It got silly sometimes, but even that can be creative. I understand that collaborations can be trying, but I was fortunate to work with Mary Ellen.

Have you seen any areas in your career where your faith has had a positive impact on your work?

You get to know such great people through the gospel and the Church. I have felt encouragement from other members to do costume designs and pursue this career. I also had the rather unique opportunity to do the show *Prophet*, a musical about the life of Joseph Smith. I was able to combine both my beliefs and my skills to convey the right tone and feeling to the characters onstage so the audience felt all the emotion of the drama. It still brings tears to my eyes as I recall the scenes and music.

Does your religious or cultural background play into your designs? If so, how?

Since I am a lifelong member of the Church, I naturally see things and feel things from that perspective. It isn't that I consciously try to do LDS-themed costumes, it's just who I am. I enjoy celebrating with fabric and styles rather than being risqué. I don't feel I need to push any envelopes to achieve a great effect on stage.

Latter-day Saints are people persons. My husband David is outgoing—sometimes way outgoing—and I'm not. I don't like to talk like David does. However, in doing costumes, I have to be a people person. I am always thinking in terms of the impact a costume will have on the audience. I am kind of creating a visual conversation with the audience with my costumes.

Since I believe I am a daughter of God, talking to other children of God, I have an approach, a respect for the audience that comes out in my designs and the effect the costumes have on them.

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

I see the impact of my work in two ways: personally and professionally. I mentioned the professional part just now—I show the audience, the cast, and the crew that you can have fun, effective, or serious costumes without resorting to the risqué or tasteless. Again, it's important to me to change the mood of the audience when a character enters on stage—lighter or darker, funny or serious—to move them in some way and not to distract them with the vulgar.

Personally, and to me more importantly, I am one of the very few active LDS members in the International Costumers Guild. Many of these costumers had never met any Latter-day Saints until I came on stage. I feel blessed to have been given this talent, and I openly give credit to Heavenly Father for this. Sometimes mentioning my faith opens up paths to gospel discussions.

Additionally, because God gave me this talent, I have always been willing to teach people how to sew for free. So long as they have the interest, I will teach them. This has opened the door to my home for several people to learn a skill and to feel the Spirit in our home. For example, when my daughter Serena was baptized, many of my non-LDS costume friends came because of our friendship and the warmth they feel when we are together.

I know that many costumers are passionate about their art. As I said, they love to create this visual conversation between the audience and the characters on stage. But that language isn't one that many Latter-day Saints speak, so I feel blessed for the chance I have to work with many of these people and show them that I too speak their language and they in turn learn that I don't have horns and that I enjoy having a great relationship with my church as well as with the stage.

I think it is important for us as a people to learn to bridge the gap between us and those who've yet to learn about the gospel. We already take time to teach missionaries foreign languages so they can help investigators feel comfortable learning about the gospel.

In the same way, we need to learn to speak the other "languages" of different groups as well. That way they feel comfortable talking with us rather than us making the gospel seem distant and strange.

What has been your favorite design project so far?

The one I am working on right now—that's always the answer. I have a large outfit in the works on a mannequin in my studio right now and that's got me excited. ❧

MormonArtist.net