Mormon Artist

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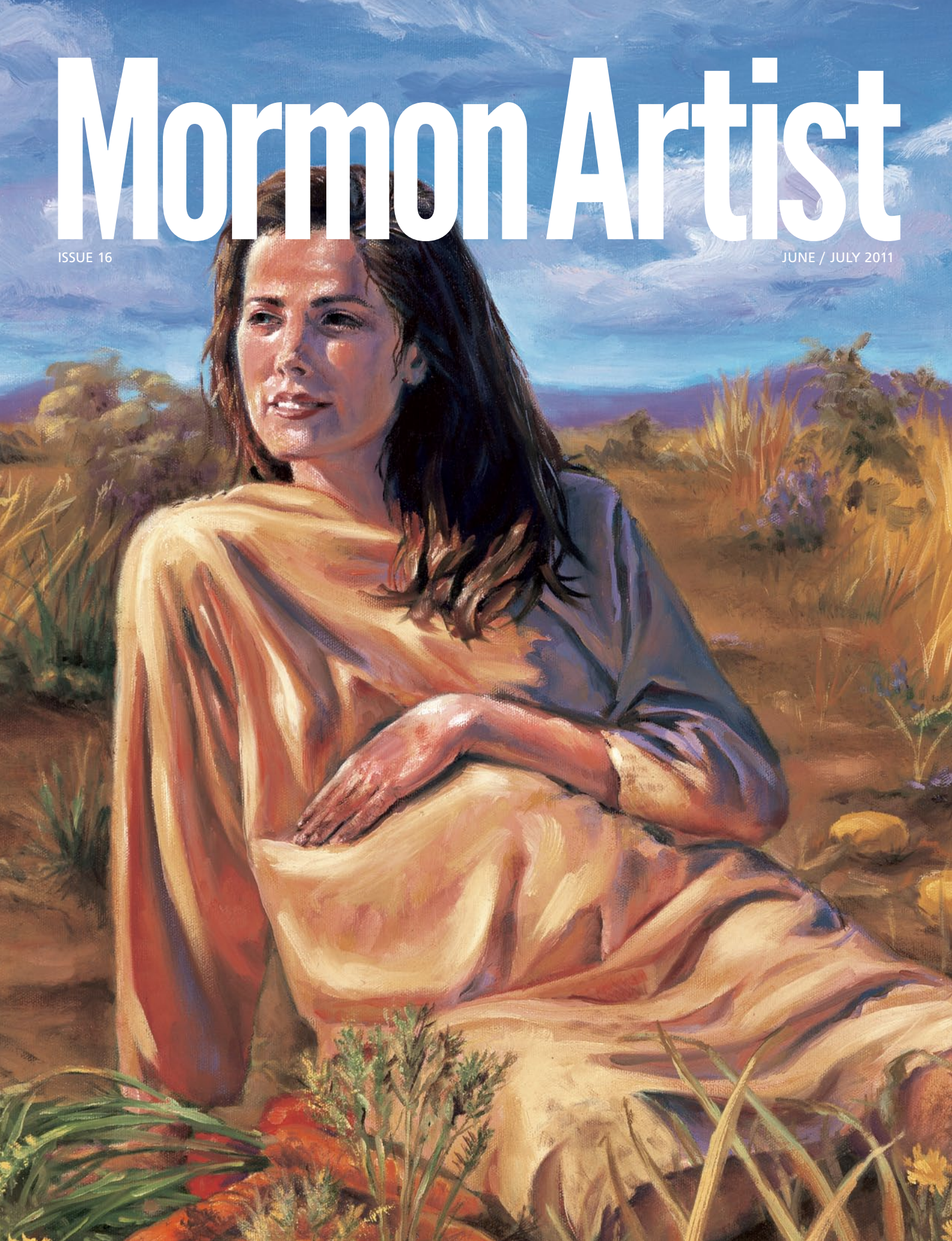

Mormon Artist

COVERING THE LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS WORLD

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Outgoing Editor's Note

As you can no doubt tell by the fact that this article's heading reads "Outgoing," my time at *Mormon Artist* has come to an end. It's been a wonderful, amazing three years and I've loved sharing all of these artists with you. But life goes on, and it's time for me to move on to other projects. It'll also be good for Mormon Artist to get some fresh new leadership. (This won't be the end of my involvement in Mormon arts, however.)

Effective immediately, Katherine Morris is the new editor-in-chief and publisher of *Mormon Artist*. You can read more about her plans in her editor's note. I have full confidence in Katherine and wish her the best in this new phase of *Mormon Artist*—I'm excited to see what she comes up with.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, to everyone who's been involved with the magazine in any way. I'm still blown away by what we've managed to accomplish with an ever-changing group of volunteers and no budget. Thanks to all those who've volunteered their time and talents to the magazine, helping interview, write, photograph, transcribe, edit, proof, illustrate, or even just spread the word. Special thanks to the artists for letting us interview them and for being so nice. And thank you, our readers, for making the whole thing worthwhile. I hope you've enjoyed these issues. More importantly, I hope the Lord has been pleased with what we've done here.

Ben Crowder

Incoming Editor's Note

In September 2008, Ben Crowder sent me an email telling me that he was going to start a Mormon arts magazine. Eventually, he asked me if I would like to be involved. I was a proofreader for that first issue, and shortly thereafter, I became the literature editor and then the managing editor. I've counted *Mormon Artist* as one of the most rewarding projects I've dedicated my time to over the past three years.

Ben has been an excellent editor-in-chief. He's capably carried the magazine through eighteen issues. He's burdened the lion's share of responsibility for the magazine through a full-time job, his courtship and marriage, and through the birth of his first child earlier this year. He's kept his vision clear, he's been steadfast, and he's built something that I am continually pleased to be a part of. I'm tremendously grateful to Ben for having the vision and fortitude to keep *Mormon Artist* rolling forward. I am also grateful to all of the generous volunteers and interviewees who caught the vision and have dedicated their time and talents to build the *Mormon Artist* community.

After this current issue, Ben will be moving on and handing *Mormon Artist* over to my care. My vision is the same as Ben's. I remain committed to illuminating and nurturing the world of Mormon arts. There will be some changes in the future. The magazine and the website will be looking a little different. My plan is to transfer a lot of the Q&A content to audio and then to focus on more occasional special themed issues (like the International Issue or the Science Fiction and Fantasy issue) for our print content. We have been fortunate enough to gain many faithful readers over the years. I hope you will stay with us during this transition process and be as excited about these forthcoming changes as I am. The field is yet white.

Sincerely,
Katherine Morris

Photo by Valen Hunter

Tessa Meyer Santiago

INTERVIEW BY **KATHERINE MORRIS**
WEB: **TMS-GIRAFFESMAKEMELAUGH.BLOGSPOT.COM**

Tessa Meyer Santiago, a native of South Africa, received an MA in English and a JD from Brigham Young University, where she taught creative writing and legal writing. She currently works as an attorney, practicing law with Lincoln Law Litigation. Her personal essays have appeared in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, BYU Studies, *and* Segullah.

How did you first become interested in writing and how did you start writing personal essays?

I went to a South African high school, which was very caught on the British system. Not much creative writing happened, but we did a lot of analytical writing, because we had to take exams every three months and national exams to graduate from high school. I spent a year in Australia, and I came off this Crocodile Dundee experience to BYU. I started in the spring term of 1985. And then in fall, I'd heard about the Honors Program, and I signed up for English 312 Honors, which was taught by Bruce Jorgensen.

He gave us an assignment to write a—I don't actually know what the assignment really was, but it was to write something personal—I think the prompt that we read was Eudora Welty's "The Little Store," one of her autobiographical essays. We were to write something that had the same tone or feel. I went back to the dorms and sat down with a pencil. (We didn't really have computers then, so I remember it was a pencil.) I just sat and wrote, and it was kind of like a memoir of growing

up in Cape Town in South Africa. That was really the first personal essay that I wrote. It was called "Guavas."

How has your experience of growing up in South Africa influenced your writing?

I grew up white in a predominantly black culture, Mormon (very, very small minority, in a polyglot of religions: Dutch Reformed, Anglican, Methodists Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus). I also was a woman in a very patriarchal society, so I've always felt slightly on the outside of any kind of group—a looking in kind of thing, and I think it's made me somewhat of an observer. Trying to figure out how the larger group operates, I also spoke English and then Afrikaans, and the Afrikaans people were in the government and determined all the policies. I was liberal in a very conservative political environment.

There was always a kind of belonging to the underclass, undervalued, portion of society. And I think as a result, I have this inherent distrust of anything organized. Any kind of hierarchy or structure. I don't get it, which is really an anomaly because I'm a Mormon, one of the most chauvinist organizations structurally, in terms of power, that you could find, you know? Who occupies all the positions of importance, and who makes the decisions, and where does information come from and who holds the information and who has it? If you had to look at this on an organizational behavior flowchart, holy cow.

So, growing up that way has created this tendency to kind of cock my head and look and go, "Really? Huh, okay. Well, why?" That's my natural orientation to the world. There's never a given, a "this is how it should be; this is just how it is." That doesn't work for me. Never has.

What is your writing process like, then? You don't approach it really critically or analytically.

I think the success of a personal essay is there's no rubric to it. It's a shifting set of components, and at the center of it is a question that you don't have the answer for. I think that's the most important part that changes a piece from a sermon to an essay. The writer doesn't actually know what the answer is. They just have the questions. So, when you start with the question, then you can actually go and explore. And then the essay becomes the exploration.

Nothing is really out of bounds. Because for me, all truth is circumscribed into one great whole, and any kind of idea or theory or person or life or experience is a prism through which you can look to help understand questions about, for example, God in the polyester white robe. I ask, "What is he actually, or she, or them, or they?" Part of having just a question is that you don't actually believe that there's anything that's out of bounds. Not afraid of finding an answer—not afraid, thinking, "Oh, no, now I'm going out of bounds." I really believe that things are unfolded and truth becomes known as you're willing to explore and write and think and question and doubt and hold two competing ideas at the same time and know that they're somehow related. Saying, "I cannot figure out how, and so I'm going to try to write out the connection." Work it through.

What keeps you writing personal essays?

The need to have things better than they are. I really always think there's a better way to understand something, to have gone about something, to experience something. Underlying our religious culture is this set of ideas and doctrines that is so fundamentally sound and so woven into everything that I've experienced. The actual principles, the formulas of the gospel are just brilliant, and I just think, "Knowing what we know, is that the best we can do?" That's always my question. "Knowing what we know, really? That's it? That's all we can come up with? There's got to be something else." And so that, I think, is what keeps me writing. There are ideas that just come.

Gideon Burton said that he felt like the personal essay genre fits particularly well within Mormon culture because we have this long tradition of writing personal histories and bearing testimony and expressing ourselves that way.

I think the essay format allows you to be less dogmatic and less sure, and even the structure of a personal essay is a sort of a wandering around a central point—a coming at it, like spokes on a wheel. And a refusal. I think there needs to be some kind of refusal on the author's part to tie it up really cleanly. You just come to a resting point or a stopping point. Sort of like, "As for now, as for me and my house, this is what we know." Rather than, "Thus you know."

I think sometimes Mormon writers, particularly zealous Mormon writers, have a certain kind of commitment, that things are just very clear. And there are certain minds that work that way. And I don't think they're very good essay writers because that commitment, that conviction, comes through, and it can override the reader's agency. I think an essay needs to be an invitation, like a Section 50. Two people come together, face to face, they reason with each other. There's a give and take and light or good that comes out of it, and it's in a way that you have to respect the reader's agency. You cannot come to a firm conclusion for the whole world. It can only be for yourself, and then the reader responds to that invitation.

So what brings you back to engaging with these ideas in your writing and for a Mormon audience?

I actually don't think of my audience as Mormon. That is, I try to keep the language kind of neutral, so that if you were any sort of mind that likes to think about spiritual concepts, you could read it and not be alienated because you don't understand the vocabulary.

Who are some of the writers who have influenced you?

Photo by Valen Hunter

I think what Mormon writers can contribute is an unflinchingly honest look.

Somebody I really like right now is Anne Lamott. I enjoyed her very frank exploration of her faith in *Grace (Eventually)*. Eudora Welty. I love her voice, as well as Willa Cather. I enjoy their fiction, but it's mostly the voice that I'm attracted to, rather than really what they're saying. I like how they say it. I like people that make me think differently and so it's kind of a random assortment.

What made you decide to start a blog? Are you enjoying blogging?

I started my blog because I didn't have anywhere to publish my writing—it just didn't fit. It does fit in *BYU Studies*, it does fit in *Dialogue*, but that audience is so small. I'm not saying a blog is huge, either, but it's a very select kind of audience that subscribes to *BYU Studies*, and it's the same kind of people.

Blogging? It's interesting, I don't know if it's a blog in maybe the traditional sense, because it's not like an everyday "this is what I did with my life," but it is a place to put writing, and having people comment is informing. It doesn't force me to write, but it makes me feel like I need to post something, so while I work and do attorney stuff, it keeps me thinking about other things and gives me an opportunity and an outlet to create a finished piece, rather than a few paragraphs of unfinished prose. The hard part is the finished piece. That takes so much time, and thought process and energy, so that's a good skill to keep at.

You taught writing for ten years at BYU. Do you think teaching writing influenced or affected your writing in any way?

Yes, because you have to figure out what the process is. You have to be able to clarify it in your own mind because you have to be able to explain it to somebody. And for me, I didn't like having to revert to grading a paper on spelling and punctuation and sentence structure, because I thought that was the easiest way to grade. It didn't require my students to think very much, it only required them to be good proofreaders.

In my courses there was never a finished product. If my students wanted, they could rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, but it had to be a substantial revision. In other words, the ideas had to be more developed and the sources had to be changed and the analysis had to be deeper. But if they wanted to, the students could actually wrestle with an assignment the whole semester if they were so inclined.

I love teaching. I love the engagement of ideas. I love looking at somebody and going, "You know, that might have been good enough, but it's not good enough now. We can get you to where it's good enough, if you're just willing to invest yourself." My main concept was "anybody can be a competent writer." Because it's a methodology, it's a set of skills and equations—and you can break it down and actually be very competent. You can write good, well-crafted, very competent prose.

You went to law school, yes?

Law school was very important in teaching me to think clearly. It was also very instrumental in helping me to clarify my thoughts and how to think about ideas and constructs and connections and proofs. I'm equally competent drafting a brief, which is just one theorem after another, as in a personal essay—and they couldn't be more structurally different in the kind of writing that's required. But it's equally as challenging to actually get that right as well. You know, the rhythm and the pace and the placement of the idea and the pulling out of the pertinent quotes. It is challenging and just as interesting for me to be able to craft that kind of language.

How do you think your legal training has affected your creative writing?

I think it gives me a deeper basis from which to write. It's a wider, more expansive set of ideas and ways to look at the world. The legal training and practicing as an attorney gives me

another context out of which to analyze experiences. That's helpful, because the law is also quite dispassionate. There's this certain objectivity that you bring to it. It's not actually about right or wrong, it's about what can be supported by the laws that have been put in place, by the legislature. Becoming an attorney and practicing forces you to live with that somewhat duplicitous stance. I know you probably were injured and wronged, but according to the law, you haven't been, or we don't have enough proof and we don't know how to find it. You have to work within those confines and that's an interesting intellectual exercise. It is how you have to operate as an attorney. It's the tools that you have.

Sometimes I think in the Church and in any religious community, you can think, "Oh, we just shouldn't have these rules or this particular procedure or this way of doing things" or "Why was this decided?" And you rail against it, thinking that it's of absolute importance that we have this approach. Being an attorney makes you realize, "You know what? These rules, these laws, these approaches, these mechanisms—they're arbitrary, but they're what have been decided thus far. It's the best that society has come up with. And this is what we have to work with." I think that's an interesting, a useful place to be, because it takes the mystery out of a lot of things.

Your essay "Take, Eat" won the *BYU Studies* Personal Essay Contest in 1997. What was your process like writing that essay?

I noticed that there was an essay contest, and I wanted to write something. I had just had Seth, who was my third. Between Seth and Christian is almost five years, and I'd had a miscarriage before that, so I was sort of marveling. Because the first two were ready to come down, you know? I mean, we got pregnant on our honeymoon, and I'm not even sure we did it right, like properly, all the way, and yeah…

Seth was about six months old, and I was contemplating what experiences I'd had lately that caused me to think in new ways about particular issues. After two and a half years of no birth control and then the miscarriage and then suddenly here is this child who just showed up? There's this exaltation for this little child who decided to stay. We named him Seth because that means "God has granted me another son." And so I was pulling together all of those different experiences, about the fear of those C-sections that I have to have—they freak me out. I was just trying to resolve issues, so excited with this child and then this C-section, and then this body and what it does for you and what it looks like—you know it's like a cartoon by the end. And you're not really in control.

I always tend to go to a place where there's a yin and a yang: "I know this should be wonderful and divine, but my gosh, I actually want to throw this kid through the window." When I'm in possession of these conflicting emotions—the pleasure and pain, that kind of experience—that's a good place for me to start. And that's what I was trying to sort through.

What do you see Mormon authors contributing to Mormon culture?

I'm always reminded of the quote by President Kimball, who said that we need the Mormon Miltons and Shakespeares and writers to step up, and for me I don't think that means to tell a particularly Mormon contextual story. I would hope it means to tell a human story with the light of true principles underpinning. And I think what Mormon writers can contribute is an unflinchingly honest look.

I'll say it this way: at the center of our experience is an atonement which allows us to look at ourselves and to correct and to acknowledge flaws and weaknesses and to always know that there is another opportunity to create something of worth and to build a new world or a new creature. The Book of Mormon says to become a new creature in Christ.

Another uniquely Mormon idea is tied to revelation—that it is possible and necessary to ask questions and seek for answers. We write and create and we examine, either in fiction or in personal essays, those principles of correction and of creating anew, not being afraid to look down deep and acknowledge, "Yes, this is me and this is what I have done, and this is what we do as humans—this is what we do as women and as husbands and as wives and as mothers and parents. This is our behavior. But because we are grounded in these principles, it doesn't have to be our behavior."

And so we seek and we create worlds and ideas that suggest more and better. I don't believe that because we are already Mormon that the place we already are is where we should be. I just believe we have greater access to clearer principles that allow us to move forward.

Hopefully a Mormon artist's work would not end in annihilation. To me that is so contrary to the very core of what the whole plan is.

I don't think it's really a setting or a context but an actual orientation towards how you write a conclusion—what resting points you rest at in your work, towards what you portray. I don't think there's any R-rated stuff; I don't believe in an R rating. I think that's a tool that's made up.

There should be an examination of what is true and what has happened. Like Mountain Meadows Massacre. I don't think we should push that under the rug. Pull it all out! Pull it out. Pull Joseph out there and see what a phenomenal creature he actually was. And ask yourself, "Could I have done any better?" Pull it out and look at it and show it to our children and talk about it and give them tools and all those kinds of things.

That to me is a really Mormon viewpoint because it's not afraid of anything. Because we know answers are available, if we work and think and look and ask—they're there, they're available. And that to me is what a Mormon artist or writer does. That would be the contribution I would expect to make. ❧

Photo by Valen Hunter

Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

INTERVIEW BY **TYLER CHADWICK**

Marilyn Bushman-Carlton is the author of three poetry anthologies: on keeping things small, Cheat Grass, *and* Her Side of It. *She was the Utah State Poetry Society Poet of the Year in 1995 and received the 2010 Award for Poetry from the Association of Mormon Letters. She has contributed to several anthologies, including* Discoveries: Two Centuries of Poems by Mormon Women *and* To Rejoice As Women: Talks from the 1994 Women's Conference. *Her work has been featured in* BYU Studies, Comstock Review, Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought, Earth's Daughters, Ellipsis, Exponent II, Iris, *and the* Wasatch Journal.

How did you begin writing?

I was not encouraged to get a university education after high school, although I'd been a good and interested student. I'd especially loved English, both grammar and literature. I remember learning about Poe and memorizing "Annabel Lee." After marriage and my first baby, I knew I had missed out by not having had further schooling, and I was determined to get my degree as soon as I could. I had five children in seven years and finally enrolled at the University of Utah the same fall my youngest child began kindergarten. There, I took my first creative writing class. I hadn't really written, per se, until that time, but I ended up graduating in English with an emphasis in creative writing. I felt that writing was what I had been waiting for. I'd always been quiet and shy and felt that writing would be a good outlet for saying what I had to say. I knew I had plenty of opinions!

When did you begin writing poetry?

I'd written verse now and then, and that came easily, but I had never written free verse, probably because I felt that I needed to learn the proper way to do it. It was President David O. McKay who first introduced me to poetry. I remember from a very young age hearing his conference talks and looking forward to hearing him quote great and—I realize now—some not-so-great poets. My parents had only LDS books in their fairly large library; but when I asked for poetry for Christmas, they gave me some anthologies that had poems by Wordsworth, Burns, and Shakespeare, for example, which I recognized from President McKay. Still, I didn't try to write at that time. I wrote my first real poems in creative writing classes at the University of Utah.

Why did you choose poetry?

As mentioned, poetry had always impressed me in a way that no other writing had, and I'd always been a reader. I learned in literature courses that I loved dissecting and analyzing great poems—that was probably my first clue that I would move toward writing them myself. I took an introduction to creative writing class and found that, even though I'd always thought I'd enjoy writing fiction, I didn't. It seemed more like drudgery; I was interested in writing what seemed to me *the truth*. Writing my first poems in that class seemed to fill that need, and I was hooked from the time I wrote the first one.

When did you begin calling yourself a poet?

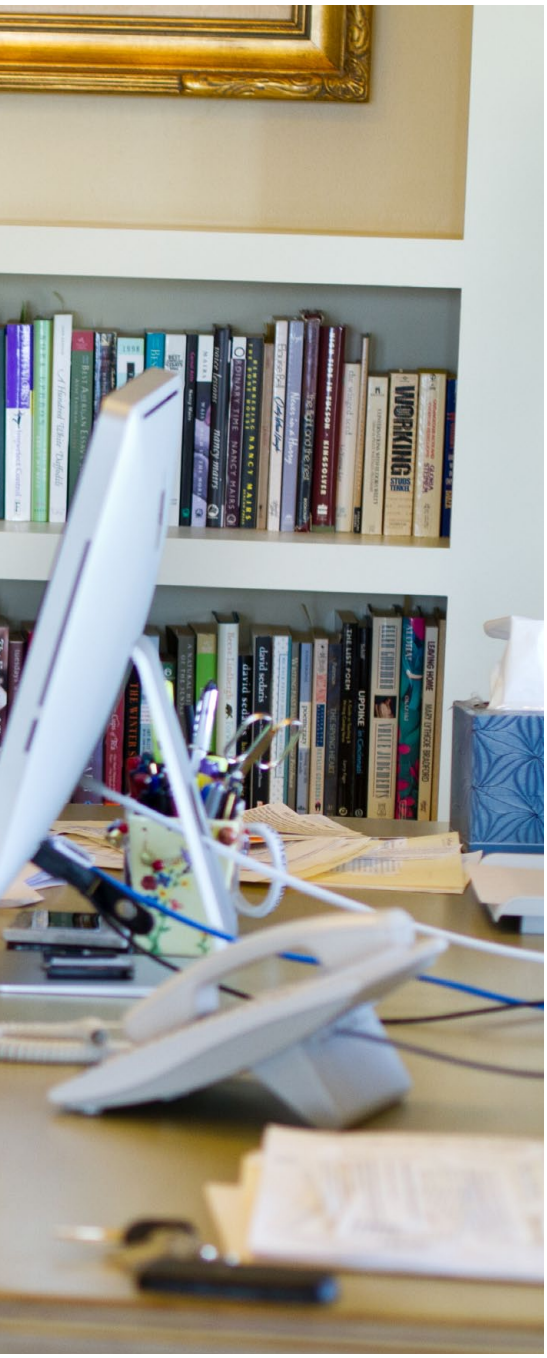
That is a difficult question to answer! I graduated from the U in 1989, having taken just a few classes in poetry and with a small portfolio of poems, most of which, regrettably, I didn't keep. But I got involved in a small writing group, which gave me encouragement and required that I write poems regularly. I compiled a manuscript of poems I wrote during the next few years, enough for a manuscript that was accepted—sheer luck, I thought—by Signature Books, and published as *on keeping things small* in 1995. I was awarded a research grant for my second book, *Cheat Grass*, from the Utah Arts Council (UAC), and then an award from the UAC for a series of ten poems from that manuscript. This book—which contains poems about my maternal grandparents, who had lived through the Great Depression and through my grandfather's jealousy, among other troubles—won the Pearle

Photo by Valen Hunter

M. Olsen Award from the Utah State Poetry Society and made me their Utah Poet of the Year for 1999. It took until 2010 for *Her Side of It* to be published; and during that drought period, I questioned myself continually. Even though I'd received awards and good reviews for both books, I can't say I yet felt that I could call myself a poet. Being a writer is feeling that you are good sometimes, but other times thinking you are an imposter, most often the latter. Winning the 2010 Poetry Award from the Association for Mormon Letters (AML) for *Her Side of It* made me think that, perhaps, I really can claim the title of poet. Ironically, I am currently working on a biography—a whole new genre for me, but one that also demands truth—and this process adds to my conviction that I am, indeed, a poet and a writer.

Tell us a little about your writing process—from a poem's conception to its publication.

I see potential poems everywhere and have never experienced "writer's block." It's just finding the time to sit down and write out my thoughts. I have three or four books of ideas and quotes that are waiting for me to use or refer to in my writing. It seems that one certain idea will start to push itself



out from the rest and become insistent in my thoughts, and that is the idea to which I feel I need to give precedence. I begin by writing out paragraphs and/or pages, trying to discover exactly what it is about this nugget I need to learn. I then find in all the free writing certain lines or thoughts that seem to be the truth and try to construct the poem to that truth. This is the most difficult thing for me, along with my biggest problem: trying to keep myself from editing as I go—I have to be careful about editing too soon. Sending poems out is not enjoyable, but I do send a few out once or twice a year and am usually fortunate to have few published.

From the variety of writers you quote or mention in your newest collection, *Her Side of It*—to name several, T. S. Eliot, Yann Martel, Betty Friedan, Stephen Dunn, Gloria Steinem, Michael Cunningham, Walt Whitman, Nilakanta Sri Ram, Khalil Gibran, and Czesław Miłosz—you seem to have read widely and fairly indiscriminately. Who have been your greatest poetic influences?

First, a disclaimer: I haven't read every one of those writers I've quoted; however, I have read many of them, and I do read widely. I like that I've come up with quotes from my reading that are "original," such as the lines from Yann Martel and Michael Cunningham, just short phrases in the text that, for me, seemed to be starting points for poems. I read late at night, from several books at a time, a ritual that includes poetry, nonfiction, memoir and biography, essays, religion; probably everything but science fiction and self-help books, which I don't enjoy as much, though there are exceptions there, too. This reading from a broad spectrum is very important to my poetry because of the ideas it generates and because I pay attention to writing styles, vocabulary, ideas.

The poets who have influenced and do influence me are always changing, but to name a few: C. K. Williams, Lisel Mueller, Linda Pastan, Sylvia Plath, Donald Hall, Jane Kenyon, Louise Glück, Billy Collins. There are many more.

This list includes two prominent American feminists: Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminist Mystique* (1963), a watershed text that laid the groundwork for the modern feminist movement, and Gloria Steinem, prominent leader and spokeswoman for the women's liberation movement during the late 1960s and '70s. How have the principles of feminism informed your understanding of your role as a woman, especially as a wife and a mother?

The woman's movement has been invaluable in my life. The second wave was gaining momentum at the beginning of my marriage in 1969. I read Steinem, Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and many other feminists, and I knew exactly what they were talking about: my life. The beginning poem in the first section of *Her Side of It* refers to the different views held by my mother and me: she had an empty nest and was offended that anyone could think she hadn't done enough as a woman, but I was just beginning my motherhood and wanted more. I wanted a voice, to be recognized for something specifically for myself; I pictured, along with Virginia Woolf, a room of my own.

Ironically to some, I thought the ideas of feminism, such as developing one's individual talents, being the best one could be, etc., coincided wonderfully with what I'd been taught growing up in the Church. This despite the fact that I took my two young daughters with me on the march *for* the ERA that, incidentally, took place before the Church spoke out against it. But by that time, I was as equally feminist as Mormon. My minor at the university, by the way, was Feminist Studies.

How have these principles informed your relationship with Mormonism?

I have completed the research for a study of the men and women President McKay quoted in his conference talks; and, in addition to this emphasis, I was happy to learn from reading his talks that my memories were correct: he did not speak down to women, he truly respected and admired them, and he knew how important it was for them to develop their talents and intellects. Of course, he believed that woman's highest calling is motherhood. I don't disagree with that, but men have always been able to have

I thought the ideas of feminism…coincided wonderfully with what I'd been taught growing up in the Church.

both (meaning fatherhood and a career), and certainly women should not be treated differently. I also grew up believing in an allegiance to truth; and although I've had my years of doubt and anger, I have always stayed active in the Church. I do feel that I have freedom of thought (also from President McKay) and that it is absolutely permissible to have honest doubts and questions as long as one continues to search and pray for answers. I am definitely still involved in this process—and I might add that my husband and I are on the same wavelength in our thinking here, which helps.

How have these principles informed your work as a poet? For instance, I see both *on keeping things small*, your first collection, and *Her Side of It* as reflections on womanhood's intimate spaces: the space between an infant and its mother's breast, a mother's mediation between father and son, the teenage girl's developing body, the intimacies of women's language. And I see these reflections as meaningful critiques of how womanhood's intimate spaces are often swallowed up in favor of more masculine ways of being—the episodic "gushes" of anger that can spill out with "great force" into the world, as you illustrate in "When the Rhythm Gets Red." Did you conceive these collections as part of a broader feminist engagement? Or do you see them as undertaking something more than that?

Yes, I am a feminist and, although I have not set out to write feminist poems, who I am is certain to show up in them. I am a woman first and foremost, and I see relationships first and foremost: I listen to conversations, observe others, especially those closest to me, and see the world in terms of human interactions. I am acutely aware of the differences, so-called and real, between the sexes and notice them whether I'm trying to or not. They are not black and white—I know that from observing my own five children and now my fifteen grandchildren—but I like to try to figure out what's innate and what's social, what's praiseworthy and not, as I write about women, men, girls, boys, and their relationships. I hope my writings show that I am not ashamed of any of the aspects of being a girl or woman; and I want to be a voice for women, for their unique positions, experiences, conflicts, fears, etc.

You were included in *Discoveries: Two Centuries of Poems by Mormon Women* (2004), edited by Susan Howe and Sheree Maxwell Bench, and in the list of "75 Significant Mormon Poets" compiled by Gideon Burton and Sarah Jenkins; you will be included in *Fire in the Pasture: 21st Century Mormon Poets*, forthcoming from Peculiar Pages Press; and you recently won an award from the Association for Mormon Letters for *Her Side of It*. How comfortable are you being labeled a woman poet?

I've always loved being a woman, even a girl, from as early as I can remember. From my point of view, being a woman poet is great; however, if there are men or others who think that label is a put-down, I think that's too bad. I guess I think it's their problem, not mine, and that they somehow need to bolster their own egos if they think women poets are somehow less than male poets. Of course, it solves the problem if both sexes are simply referred to as poets.

A Mormon poet?

No problem. I am who I am, and that is certainly a product of Mormonism. I read many poets of other faiths who naturally include references to their beliefs in their work. I don't think much about my Mormonism when I write but just try to write my own personal experiences, and those have to include my faith. My father once asked me if I'd considered writing "religious" poetry; at the time I didn't know how to answer him. But in the write-up for my recent award from the AML, it points out that "without pinning its Mormon-ness to its sleeve with doctrinal tags, *Her Side of It* embodies

and enacts a pervading and perduring Mormon sensibility tuned attentively to 'all these things' that 'shall give [us] experience.'"

I love that and realize I need to show it to my father! That's what I'm trying to do: explore these experiences.

As a poet, how do you view your relationship with and responsibility to your audience, including those readers who are also members of the Mormon community?

I haven't worried much about it. Most of my readers, to my knowledge, are active members who are enthusiastic about my poems even though many of the poems have a feminist bent. I read an article by a BYU professor some years ago, and I'm sorry I don't remember the author, but she said that about everyone now is in agreement with the ideals and goals of the early—meaning second-wave—feminist movement.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't see too much to be offended by in my poems. Well, maybe "The Pulpit" in *on keeping things small*, but I've never heard anything negative about even that one. Hearkening back to President McKay's ideas on free choice, I think we need to be able to think; well, not just be able to think, but I believe it is necessary that we *do* think. If I can make someone think about some things they believe are already cut and dried, I feel that my poems are doing what they should be doing.

How do you view your relationship with and responsibility to language?

As mentioned, I've always been aware of language. I love music, but it's the words I hear first and foremost. It's no doubt the most important way we engage as people in relationships and in the broader world. I am aware of the words I use, trying to use the best possible ones to convey my purposes. That's perhaps the part of writing I like best: the editing after I think a poem is close to being finished. Sometimes I kick myself when reading one of my poems that is already out there, thinking I should have used a better word or group of words or more closely attended to the rhythm. But language is all the poet has: we need to improve our relationship with it as part of the writing growth process.

How has your Mormonism informed your vocation as a poet—and vice versa?

As I mentioned in another poem in *Her Side of It*, titled "The Other Women," no matter what vocation anyone, but especially women, choose, you do have to choose or at least have priorities. I don't know if I'd feel equally conflicted about what comes first, my family or my writing, if I were not LDS; but as an LDS woman, I inevitably allow family to come first.

At this point in my life when my children are adults with families of their own, I wish I could get over that and allow my writing to sneak a little past family sometimes. I'd like to feel that I have permission to put my writing first. If I can't do this, I know I will run out of time before I can finish the projects I hope to finish.

How do you view the present state of Mormon poetry?

I think it's in a pretty good place because I feel that most of the Mormon poets I know are trying to write honestly about their experiences—not to preach, but just to let their religion show, as it will. There are many venues in which to be published, and it seems that more and more LDS are open to poetry, at least as many as non-LDS.

Recently, I had the honor of reading a selection of poems from *Her Side of It* and of talking about them at a ward Relief Society Birthday celebration; a similar opportunity is coming up in another ward. These are some of my favorite groups with whom to share my poetry: they are bright, receptive, knowledgeable women, and I believe they are the audience to whom I write.

The epigraph to *Her Side of It* is from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." As I read them, these lines address a process that Eliot pursues (among other things) in his sprawling poem: the human quest for redemption by seeking to understand the past and its relationship to identity, to the present, and to the future. He pursues this quest through various channels; chief among them, I think, are the workings of language, religion, and memory. I also see you engage these workings in your own poetry, though you also take up the idea that the visual arts and music can be powerful ways to commune with others, including God, and to extend mercy to those burdened by a strained sense of justice (as many Mormon women, for instance). Do you view art, including your own poetry, as potentially redemptive? If so, how does this potential inform your approach to reading and writing? And how do you think it should inform the work of Mormon artists and critics?

Yes, I definitely see poetry, my own and others'—with exceptions of course—as redemptive. We always need further knowledge and understanding—isn't that our purpose for being here in mortality?—if we are to progress. We need to understand and love ourselves, and that is not an easy process; but only as we come to understand and love ourselves can we understand and love others. We need to ask questions of ourselves, and many of the answers to these questions can be found in exploring our pasts. I think we become more the children we were, the pure children we were, as we age, making the past a fertile place for exploration.

Both my reading and writing provide me with an abundance of "Ah ha" moments, and I hope that my poems provide others with those same nuggets of understanding and, even more, with the desire to look beyond the poems and into their own lives in order to better understand and know themselves. ❧

Megan Rieker

INTERVIEW BY **ELSIE BOYER**
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Megan Rieker is a painter. She graduated with her bachelor's in General Fine Arts and then received a master's in Teaching Art from the Maryland Institute College of Art, one of the nation's top five art schools. She currently lives in Europe with her husband and three boys.

Photo courtesy Annie Olson

How did you get started in painting and art?

I started off in my younger years rushing through assignments in school because if you finished before everyone else, you could get blank paper and draw. By middle school I was in art club but was pretty bad—I loved art so much, though, so I kept at it. After my freshman year at high school I was pretty depressed and had low self-esteem. I would spend hours drawing something, crumple it up in a fit of anger when it didn't turn out right, and throw it in the trash. Later, I'd usually sneak back and get my paper out, until the one time Mom poured some hot oil in the trash, ruining the drawing for good. I learned a lesson that time!

My wonderful mother took it upon herself to help me find a way out of my self-pity rut and found an audition for a brand new magnet school of the arts an hour away in Suitland, Maryland. I brought in my Dungeons & Dragons type of drawings and my most recent paintings, which I had done—of all things—ala Bob Ross. It's probably a good thing the man that interviewed me wasn't an artist himself—they were that bad—with "happy little trees" and lots of fan brushwork.

But I was accepted and from then on everything changed. I was around people who understood me, my grades skyrocketed, and I felt like I was someone special. Coming from a family of eight, college was a little uncertain, but because of that high school, I was blessed to get scholarships to Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. Through all those years my parents were so supportive! My dad, who is very creative himself, especially worked and sacrificed much in finding ways for me to stay at school every semester.

How did you find Elizabeth Horrocks Jackson's story?

I love to read! Gerald N. Lund's book *The Fire of the Covenant* was written so well that I could visualize the characters in the Martin and Willie handcart companies. I had already been on the lookout for the next woman to portray in my "Women of Inspiration" painting series, and when I read about Elizabeth Jackson I wanted to learn even more about her. I found her memoirs and was even more impressed with her story of faith during extreme circumstances. I was moved to portray her the night before the rescue company came—when she had almost given up hope but prayed to Heavenly Father, "He who had promised to be a husband to the widow and a father to the fatherless. I appealed to him and he came to my aid."

Image courtesy Megan Rieker

In "Born for Such a Time as This," what made you choose to portray the young Esther?

Every time I start searching for the next woman to portray, I pray and read my scriptures, listen to more talks, and stay alert for the inspiration to come. It's often through my scripture study or the words of a visiting teacher or friend that I get my answer. Something kind of "clicks" deep within me and I know whom to paint.

For the Esther painting there were many things that endeared her to me. First of all, my sweet Grandmother Fulcher was named Esther, and my middle name is also Esther. Like so many of us, she was put in a certain place and time and position to help her brothers and sisters. In researching Esther, I found that she would have been a fairly young teenager, yet she showed bravery and faith and leadership as she strengthened herself for this trial by fasting, praying, and consulting her elders. I love to see women like Esther who are ready to be used as a vessel for the Lord.

As you have done this series, how has your increased knowledge and understanding of these women inspired you?

I think a commonality in all the women in this series is that they each had a store of faith in God that either sustained them or inspired them as they went through their trials. President Kimball said "faith precedes the miracle," and through the stories of these faithful and courageous women, we can see for ourselves how God blesses each of us, no matter how big or small the challenge may seem, if we have faith, his miracle will come—not ours, but *his*.

Doing this series—painting all these inspiring, faithful women—has also been teaching me about being a vessel for my Heavenly Father myself. I have noticed that when I live my life as I should, my brush is guided and

Image courtesy Megan Rieker

Image courtesy Megan Rieker

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Photo courtesy Megan Rieker

the decisions are easier. But when I am weak and make bad choices, my hand is not guided and painting becomes much harder. One of my favorite quotes is "Beware of what you consume and produce… It becomes a part of you." By surrounding myself with visual examples of the faith and testimony of these women, I am continually reminded of how small my problems are in relation, and how much is expected with what I've been given.

In "Waiting at the Seoul Temple" you say that you lived in South Korea for a year. What took you there?

That one is a simple answer! My husband is a pediatrician for the Air Force and so for the past nine years we have lived overseas in places such as Osan, South Korea; Ramstein, Germany; Aviano, Italy; and now we are finishing up our time in Spangdahlem, Germany. It's been wonderful to travel and see and paint beautiful places and also to make new friends around the world. And every time we venture into an LDS meetinghouse other than our own, there is always a feeling of having been there before and instant friendships. We miss the U.S. and our family, though, and look forward to coming back soon.

Also from that same piece: How did you get to know Sister Ho, who was the first living sister portrayed in your "Women of Inspiration" series?

As we grew to love the culture and history of Korea, I felt strongly about capturing the faith of the early saints (the church was celebrating its fiftieth year in South Korea while we were there) and their endurance. Our good friend and district president, John Madsen, and Brother Han Insang brought Sister Ho to my attention. At first I was unsure about painting a living sister as part of the series, but after meeting her and speaking through interpreters I saw how genuinely humble and faithful she is, and after learning of her story, I was convinced. Sister Ho is well known among the longtime LDS of Korea. She had survived much, including a bus accident in Seoul that crushed her legs. Some years before I met her she was having such difficulty with her legs that she prayed one night for them to be healed and promised that she would give of herself to the temple. The next day she awoke with no pain. Sister Ho spent the next few years attending session after session, day after day in the Seoul, Korea Temple. This sweet little woman who only comes up to my shoulder was able to do the work for 2,200 people! Sister Ho had the faith that is representative of many South Koreans I've been

Photo courtesy Annie Olson

Image courtesy Megan Rieker

Photo courtesy Megan Rieker

Image courtesy Megan Rieker

honored to meet. It was a pleasure to meet and portray such a wonderful daughter of God.

You mentioned that for "Our Mothers Knew It" painting, that you travelled to Mexico for research. Can you tell us more about that experience?

It was a really neat experience, and it was new for me not only to portray women from the Book of Mormon, but also to walk in those lands and see the ruins. It took over six months to do research, make sketches, and even sew the costumes with my sister.

Then my husband Mark and I took the kids to a sitter and flew from our home in Italy to Cancun, Mexico, where we met our guide, Helaman Petlacalco, who took us to a small village of Mayan descendants. As we drove on the dirt road, avoiding various animals and children, we saw that their houses were still made in a hut type of style—with grasses and palms for the roof and thin pieces of wood for the walls. Helaman said to us, "This is not too different from how many of the Book of Mormon people lived . . . well, except for the satellite dish." And sure enough, on top of one of the teeny huts was a satellite dish. We all laughed in surprise.

Because I had a limited window of time to take the pictures (so the lighting would match) I would pose one grouping at a time, showing them the sketches to give them an idea for each pose. The men and women were wonderful following the sketches and a bit on the giggly side, especially about the loincloths! Because these were not members, it was pretty unusual for them, but Helaman did a great job explaining. When we were finally done with the photos we played around for a while; the kids tried on the wigs and played with some cute yet irritating whistles I had brought for them (the parents may hate me for that!). After the painting was finished and prints were made, it was arranged for small prints to be delivered inside of copies of the Book of Mormon to the village. I still haven't heard anything about them, but hopefully a seed was also planted during that experience.

Also as part of your research for "Our Mothers Knew It," you mention the stone friezes that you use in the painting. What was it like seeing those carvings in person?

You know, I saw so many different carvings or Mayan hieroglyphs while I was there, but it wasn't until much later—towards the end of the painting—that I decided to add a message in the base of the house. But

being able to touch those stones and imagine someone chiseling them all those years ago was fascinating! The one piece I would have loved to see but didn't was the giant eight-foot carving of Lehi's dream, attributed to the time of Nephi. But I thought it was so wonderful that I have one of the mothers drawing it for the men in the forefront of the painting.

You also emphasize that you are inspired to create each of these paintings. Could you share one of those inspiration stories?

Perhaps I can explain my inspiration best by first telling you how the "Women of Inspiration" series was started.

I had already graduated with my master's degree in Teaching Art from MICA and had taught for a year in elementary schools in Maryland. While my husband Mark went to medical school and we started having kids, I painted portraits to help pay the bills. I did not think that I had the talent needed to do justice to anything religious.

Around Valentine's Day in 2000, we were visiting Mark's family in Mapleton, Utah, when I came down with a severe case of Bell's palsy. My father-in-law, who gives blessings as often as eating a meal, asked if he could give me a blessing after we returned from the hospital. In the blessing I was told that I needed to start using my art for the benefit of the Church. After that blessing I realized the mistake in my

Image courtesy Megan Rieker

attitude beforehand—that I was not good enough or spiritual enough or even worthy enough to do religious art. But Heavenly Father knew my potential, and could guide me and teach me to be his vessel. Every time I look in the mirror now and see the remnants of the palsy, I am reminded of what it took to get my attention, and what I am supposed to be doing.

So, back to a specific story. One of my recent paintings is of the widow of Zarephath. In this case, I was ready to begin my next project and, after much prayer, I felt that I needed a subject that would embody service. Many of my leaders, family, and friends helped me as I searched the scriptures. It was at a stake training meeting while going through handbooks that my husband quietly pointed out an article by

Image courtesy Megan Rieker

President Monson in the Basic Welfare pamphlet subtitled "Motivated by Faith," about the story of the widow giving her last cake of bread to Elijah. Once again I felt something inside me agree that this was my next subject. And in the next class I attended, I identified almost immediately the perfect sister to portray her. Inspiration may not always move so quickly as this example, but it's a blessing when it does!

Is there a particular piece that you consider your personal best? Why?

To me, my paintings are like my children—I've put much of my time, emotions, and effort into them and I could never choose one above the rest. The only difference is that my real children are masterpieces in progress …I hope.

How have you been able to balance being a wife, mother and artist?

Well, I did have to stop three times during this interview to do the laundry, for one thing. My feelings are that my children will only be young once, and Mark and I didn't choose to have children just to have other people raise them. It may be hard sometimes for me to see other artists blossom in their talent, spending every day in a big studio and producing tons of art every year compared to my measly few. But I find assurance that there is a time and a place for all things. My husband and boys are *terrific* at supporting me and scheduling our vacations around places that I can paint landscapes, or surviving off of granola bars for a week because "Mommy's downstairs painting," etc. But I feel like my "mom," "wife," and even "Sister Rieker" time I spend now is time in the bank for painting later. And if not, then perhaps that's just God's plan for me, and I'm still happy with the balance as it stands.

What is your artistic process?

Not counting photo or live sessions with models, here's my basic process:

1. Determine size of canvas through sketches then make a final (large) sketch on newsprint the same size as my canvas.
2. Prep canvas by mixing dry pigments with gesso (lately burnt sienna is my favorite) and sanding between layers.
3. Rub charcoal on back of my final sketch and trace onto the canvas. Or, if I'm painting a landscape outside, I just sketch in a medium tone color of oils.
4. Decide and make my color palette (limited, bright, warm, etc.) according to the mood I want to achieve.
5. With my biggest brushes, lay in the darkest colors first, working my way up to lighter colors and smaller brushes. Pure white and details are very last. And I never use black! It may sound simple, but this is the process that may take me a couple of months.
6. Look at it in a mirror to check balance, ask family and friends for critiques, then leave it alone for a week or two before deciding if it's done and signing it.

How has your faith and knowledge of the gospel influenced your work?

It permeates everything! My faith and beliefs are so much a part of me that I don't think I could separate them. Even while I take photos of landscapes in Tuscany or Switzerland, I'm thinking of how the gospel can relate to the beauties around me—from the thorny weeds to the majestic mountains. Knowledge of the gospel lets me know that the purpose for my work is to uplift others. There is too much in this world that brings us down. Why would we want to use our talents for anything other than to inspire each other to be more than what we are today?

What other artists or paintings have inspired you?

Being an art teacher, I have many art books weighing down my shelves, but the ones I go to for inspiration are Sargent (for his creamy use of paint), Michelangelo (for portraying the body in a simple yet carved manner), and Bouguereau (for portraits and softness). I also surround myself with our modern-day LDS painters, like Simon Dewey and Greg Olsen (for their mood and soft light) and James Christensen (for deeper meanings and whimsical subjects).

But I would have learned nothing about art if not for the teachers at my high school—Suitland Center for the Arts—especially Dr. Karol Thompson, who knew how to make me work, and teachers at MICA like Sharon Yates—a phenomenal painter who would get in my face and say, "Do you *really* want to learn how to paint? Then scrape off your whole painting and do it again three inches to the left." These teachers taught me that what ends up on the canvas is only the by-product of my learning and searching.

How have you been able to balance being LDS and being an artist?

Good question. When I was in college the thing that got everyone excited was "shock art"—which is to say, anything that would grab the viewer's attention for both positive or (more often) negative effect. The Young Women's motto about "standing as a witness at all times, in all things, and in all places" comes to mind. While other artists may be trying to out-shock each other or something similar, I find stability and comfort in my beliefs. The only being I wish to impress is my Heavenly Father. Anyone else is icing on the cake—it's nice, but not necessary.

How do you see your art helping build the kingdom?

I hope by inspiring others—especially women—to rise to the occasion. To use the things they have been blessed with to help others. Each of the women I've portrayed symbolizes a virtue that we all strive for: charity, leadership, humility, patience, etc. The stories that come out of the "Women of Inspiration" series show that these women only overcame adversity because they already had a store of faith to sustain them. If there is one main thought throughout these paintings that would be it. We can endure all things with faith.


Photo courtesy Yisel Guajardo

Image courtesy Elisabeth Bell

Elisabeth Bell

INTERVIEW BY **LIESL HANSEN** AND **MEAGAN BRADY**
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Elisabeth Bell is a children's illustrator. She received a BVA in Animation from Queensland College of Art in Australia. She creates art from her home art studio in Arizona, where she lives with her husband and their three children.

How did you get into illustration?

When it comes to being a creative, technically I am an animator. I received a bachelor's degree in traditional animation through the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, in Australia, back when Pixar was in its infancy. Becoming the illustrator I am today was a result of life happening.

After serving a full-time mission in Salt Lake City, Temple Square (and receiving this call all the way from Australia was a very big thing for me), I married the man of my dreams in the Mesa, Arizona Temple. My youthful aspirations to animate with Disney Animation Studios flew away, as I chose to become a full-time mother and nurture my growing little brood.

Now, almost twelve years later, with three beautiful young children in tow (ages ten, four, and three), I have followed what seems a natural course when it comes to my illustrations and have furthered my creative skills to a point that has allowed me to work from my home office and studio on my MacBook Pro and Wacom Intuos4 tablet (soon to be upgraded to the Wacom Cintiq 21UX).

Being able to work from home, around my family, doing what I love to do, is really a dream career for me.

First and foremost, I am a mother. And I feel very blessed that my Heavenly Father has given me the talent that I have to help provide an income on the side for my family, and to bless the lives of others, while I work from home, around my children, who are actually large inspirations behind many of my pieces. I plan on venturing further with my work and how I apply the digital medium to my illustrations. It's very exciting!

When did you decide to pursue illustration as a professional career?

Drawing is something I have always done since I was a kidlet. I pulled inspiration from Disney illustrations, Little Golden Books and countless other picture books. My most favorite place at school was the library. For endless hours I drew images that defined my fanciful world as child—and lots of princesses in big, floating dresses!

Since this time—and years have passed—I've enjoyed countless creative projects and opportunities, doing bits of animation here and there, doing wall murals, and providing art lessons to children ages 5–12. I created my art business just under five years ago, and in 2008, I was approached by a rubber stamp company in the U.K. This is where my licensing journey began, and I haven't looked back since.

What mediums do you prefer working with?

Prismacolor color pencils hold a soft spot in my heart. These pencils glide onto most work surfaces with ease, are a dream to work with, and are soft with beautiful pigmentations. I love the raw texture that comes from the various applications of this medium. I also work with pen/ink, and would still consider myself an old school artist in the sense that I sketch all my work by hand first, before penning the finalized image in ink (my favorite pens to use are the Sakura, Pigma Micron pens, tip size 05) and scanning them into the computer to enhance digitally.

My most favorite medium right now is Adobe Photoshop. Love it. There's no mess, no cleanup. No graphite transfers onto the sides of your hands. You don't lose, drop or break materials (broken lead in pencils are a killer). Working with layers

Image courtesy Elisabeth Bell

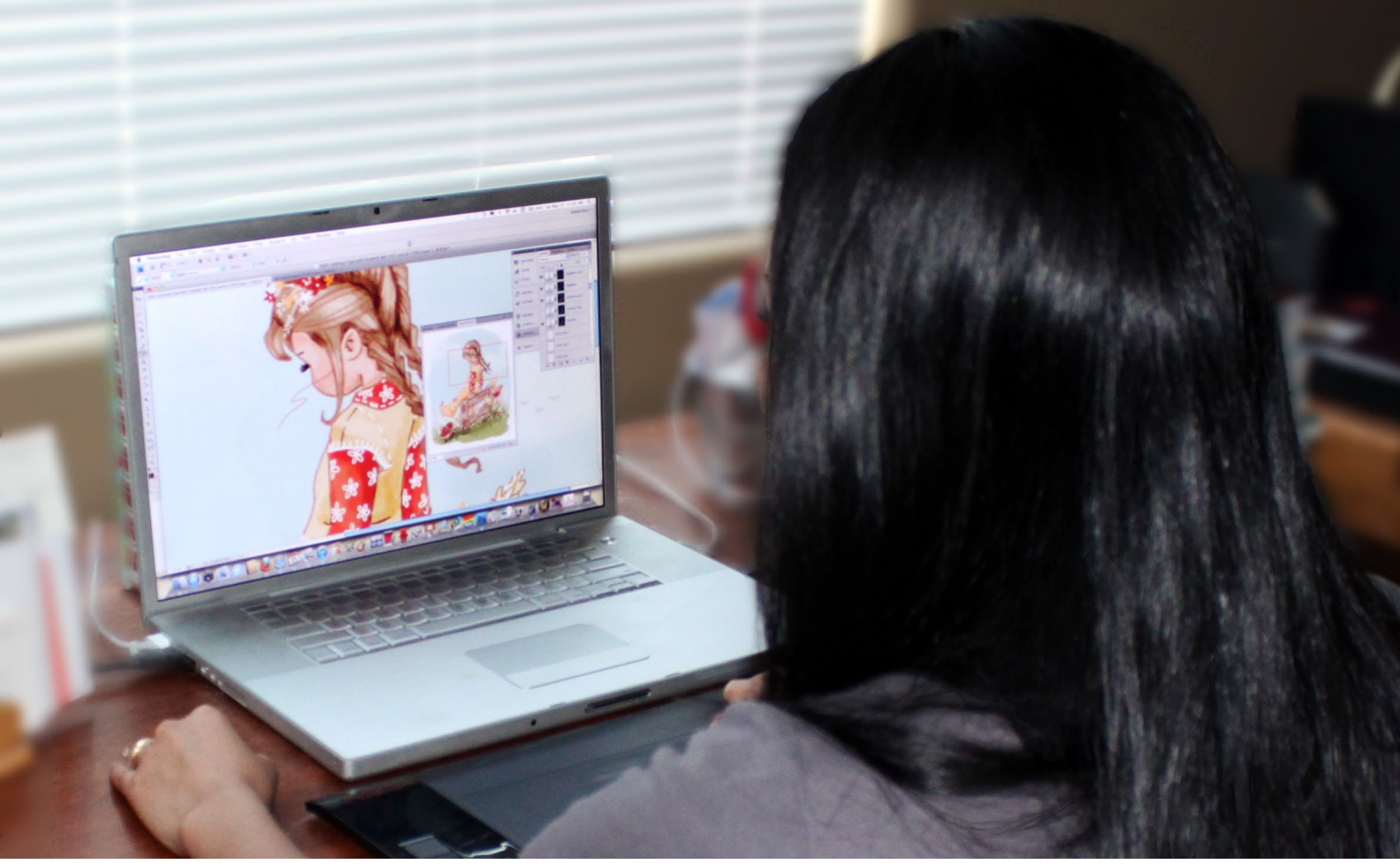


Photo courtesy Yisel Guajardo

provides a new and higher dimension of control, and I can never overstate the beauty of the undo shortcut (often I wish life had an undo shortcut!). Files are stored quickly and easily, and colors and brushes are documented in a wink. In my opinion, Photoshop makes life deliciously convenient as a creative.

How has the digital age changed the process of illustration for you personally and for the industry as a whole? What are some of the pros and cons?

The digital presence in creativity is inevitable—at least, it was for me. I'm glad I made the transition, and I see it as a positive move. I can do so much more with my images in a much shorter time, and still get great results versus doing everything strictly by hand. This perk with respect to time is not just a matter of convenience for my oftentimes hare-brained schedule as a mother, artist, teacher, and wife, but a necessity.

As far as how the digital age has affected the creative industry, I feel there are both sides of the spectrum to consider. Creative growth has increased exponentially due to the increased time an artist has on hand, including the increased ability to reach and work with individuals and companies not just locally, but in different countries. Most companies these days also gravitate towards art that are digitally enhanced to some degree, and in the art licensing industry, being able to create quality art quickly with a high rate of turnover in a short timeframe is a must.

The beauty of search engines is really something of a miracle. Online directories provide a great tool for acquiring correct information to help with researching ideas for illustrations. Having an instant library and volumes of encyclopedic resources at your fingertips in a wink is ideal. As an artist, search engines allow me to find the information I need to help solidify details that a client needs for their images. Truly, Google is my friend—I honestly don't know how I existed before it!

Largely, an impact that cannot be overlooked is the ability to more readily and easily work with companies across the ocean and the other side of the world—without even meeting them face to face—while in the comfort of your own home or office cubicle thousands of miles away. And with the remarkable convenience of email and Skype, communication is made prolific. Before the internet, this was practically unheard of. Nowadays, you can have a career and run a business from your own home (personally speaking), and, with the convenience and security of a trusted/secure internet payment method such as PayPal, get paid to do what you do, and be paid instantly. It's fabulous!

On the downside, the digital age also brings with it the increased capacity to more easily lift copyrighted designs off the web; illegally downloading images from cyberspace is all too easily made accessible, and even when away from the internet, stealing with various scanning devices abounds in today's world. Of all the many great

Image courtesy Elisabeth Bell

Image courtesy Elisabeth Bell

things the digital age brings with it, digital image theft would be one of my largest irks at the moment.

Still, this shouldn't deter the serious, professional artist from continuing to create good art. The scripture comes to mind, "It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so…, righteousness could not be brought to pass." One of my former institute teachers worded it well, too: "Without contraries is no progression."

Despite the setbacks the digital age may bring with it, the advanced means of technology that influences the creative world is indeed a blessing. Selling good art is no simple task, and without the means of digital advancement, many of us would still be hunting around locally for work.

Can you describe for us your process of creating an image from idea to completion?

Working with Photoshop for me is now second nature and a necessity. And though I utilize Wacom's Intuos4 tablet, I still hand draw the initial sketch and scan it into the computer for editing.

These are my basic steps:

1. Whether I create for myself or for a client, I always begin with a hand-drawn sketch on a sketchpad (or even multipurpose photocopy paper—I go through countless reams in less than a year, and when I say countless, I do mean a *lot*) before going near my computer. My sketches are very messy, and my line work raw and crazy. When studying animation, I was taught to never erase my lines as it shows where my thinking processes have come from. But even with the creative mess, it still looks aesthetically pleasing, surprisingly enough!

2. After the sketch is made, I then clean it up on a page of tracing paper. This works great because the paper is transparent, and I can quite easily select the lines on my original sketch I want to use and ignore the others. Back in the day of being a student, I used to have to use a light box to clean up my line work. When I discovered the ease of using tracing paper, it was a stroke of creative genius! (Like I say, when I finally acquire the Cintiq, this step and the next step will be made redundant.) And yes, I go through reams of tracing paper per year too. Once the image is re-traced in pencil and cleaned up, I scan it and save it to my MacBook Pro.

3. I then pull my image up in Photoshop and do a few edits to make it ready for client review.

4. Once the image is sent to the client, I wait for their thoughts. If changes are necessary, they usually let me know. Revisions are usually made directly in Photoshop.

5. After the revisions are approved and the image is ready for finalization, I print out the revised image and ink it up using a 0.5 point Sakura Pigma Micron pen.

6. Once the image is inked, I re-scan it into my computer. I then pull it back up in Photoshop. This is where the arduous work begins. Editing!

7. After I edit the image in Photoshop (this can take several hours, depending on the amount of detail and how accurately I managed to pen the sketch), if it is a simple black and white image, the final illustration is ready to be sent to the client.

8. If color is to be added, I work with layers and filters to reach the desired look I want. This can take hours, sometimes days. And even when I think I've finished, a day later I can look at the "final" color work and still want to make further changes.

Image courtesy Elisabeth Bell

How do you go about collaborating with a client to capture what it is they want in an image?

When a client wants a particular image created using their own ideas, we first collaborate together, usually via emails because we are just too busy to talk as often as we'd need to. Once I get their thoughts down, I sketch up an illustration based on their guidelines. I like to give my clients multiple revisions to be sure that we get things the way they want it. After all, they will be distributing the image and investing a good amount into it. It's important that the image I come up with not only reflect my own style (which is thankfully what they want in most cases) but also be something that they are

happy with. Furthermore, they know the industry and their audience better than anyone else, including what their customer base wants and likes. And I get to create designs that I enjoy (we stick to what I am good at drawing, it works for all of us) and use my own style. I find this is a win-win situation for us both, and it's a lot of fun working one on one with the people who invest so much time and interest in my work.

How has the gospel influenced your art?

Having an understanding of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ makes me happy. Striving to do what the Lord would have me do is a blessing and a challenge that I seek, both in action and within my heart. Having a testimony of truth allows myself to take heart in the daily challenges and life's imperfections I personally face as a mom, a wife and a creative. Knowing who I am—that I am a daughter of God—motivates me to create illustrations that bring joy to myself and to others. Having a testimony of my Heavenly Father's plan and of his love for me, and knowing who I am to him, along with my personal love for him, brings a desire and a deep responsibility to do good and to be watchful of the example I set, even through the type of art I create.

It has never been a mystery to me that my Heavenly Father has blessed me with a uniquely wonderful, creative gift. I remember my dear old dad telling me that I was a gold mine (of course, I also think he was partial). Because of my dad's belief in me, I am more of the creative I am today. I recall how he helped me through school and my extracurricular art classes so I could get into the lofty animation course at Griffith University, the only animation course that offers a bachelor's degree in the entire southern hemisphere.

People tell me my work is amazing, and though it's nice to hear their compliments, it's not me who is amazing—it is my Savior. He is the one who has blessed me with all that I have. Because of his blessings, I want to create images that invite that special feeling when the Holy Ghost is present, images that are good, lovely, and praiseworthy.

You may have noticed that many of my illustrations are based on the sweetness of childhood and the endearing innocence of this fleeting moment in life that disappears all too quickly in a hasty blink; this awe-inspiring moment in eternity exudes so many of our Savior's attributes, and I seek to personify what I can of him in my art.

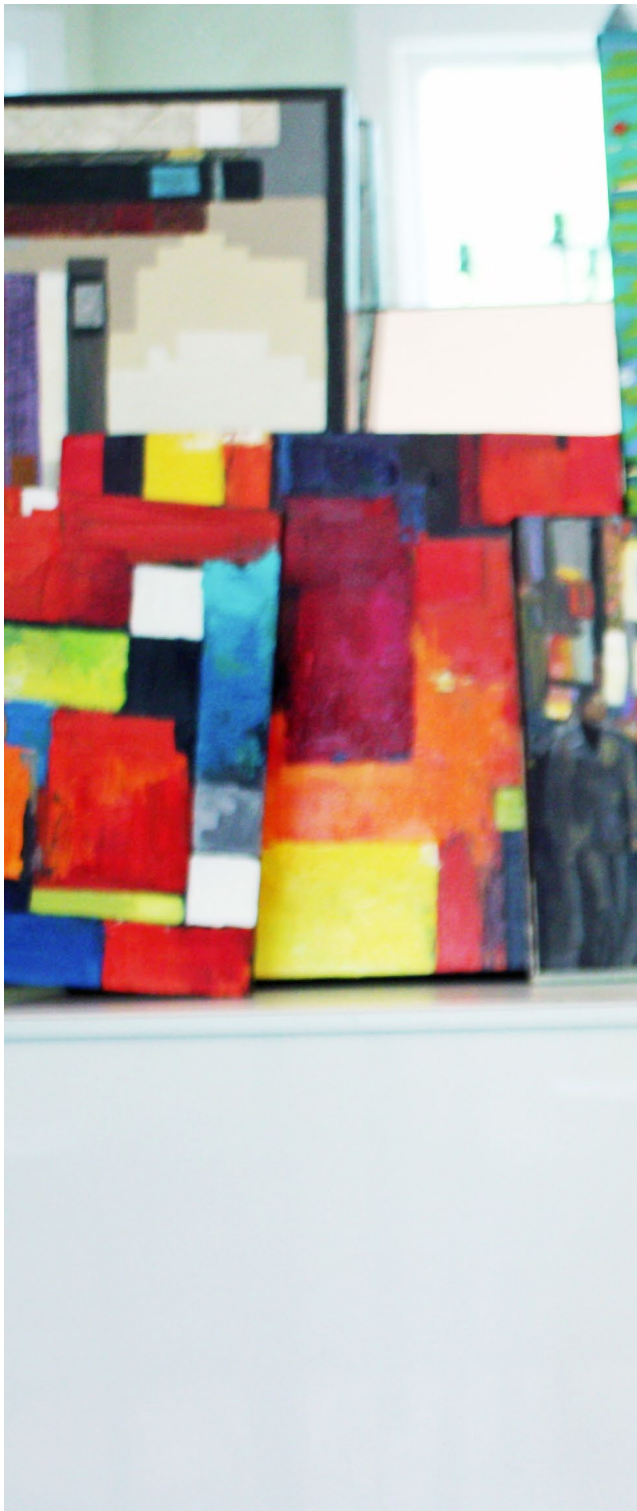
How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

As a missionary, my mantra was "simplicity is power." I found that my deepest experiences of joy and peace came from the very simple things. A smile. A considerate thought. A small note of appreciation. How I felt after a quick, sincere prayer. A hug. God works by small and simple means to bring about great results.

It is my hope that when someone views my art, as simple or as intricate as my pieces may come, they will feel the effects of such simplicity, a very special tugging inside their heart that makes them feel good all over, that helps them to realize that they're doing okay, that our world is still a beautiful place to be in, and that we have been blessed by a very loving God who loves each of us without negotiation, without limits, despite our own limitations. Whether or not the viewer realizes where these feelings come from during that moment, I hope my work inspires them to live life happily, to strive for what is good, and to do better bit by bit. Inspiration through the simple things is remarkably empowering, and God is the author of it.

As a creative, I hope that my art sparks the simplest glimmerings of good in the heart of each viewer that in the end helps to build the kingdom, and makes their own personal, individual worlds, in this big complicated world, a small slice of heaven.

Images courtesy Elisabeth Bell



Leslie Graff

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

Leslie Graff is a painter who works primarily in mixed media. She has a master's from Brigham Young University and has also worked in multiple places as a child life specialist. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and three sons.

Photo courtesy Leslie Graff

When did you begin to define yourself as an artist?

Creating has always been a big part of my life since childhood in one form or another. My parents were saintly patient and lived through many creative messes and exploits. I started taking museum and private lessons when I was in elementary school. I sort of walked away from it during my college years, pursuing other academic loves, but even then I chose fields that had strong creative components and that allowed me to integrate art into them. My art didn't like playing second fiddle and sort of pushed its way back to the forefront.

I did my first solo show eight years ago, but I'd say it's really been in the last five years that being an artist has sort of overshadowed the other things people knew me as. Growing up, I thought I was too normal to be an artist, and now I think I am certainly too crazy to not be one. I never go on vacation without a sketchbook and generally without a box of paints. Painting as work always kind of makes me laugh—while it takes a lot of effort, it's hard to classify it as work when it's something you want to do more than eat or sleep.

In your domestic series, why did you choose to paint the women without faces, in pencil skirts and in heels?

My decision to crop the figures was a very deliberate one I made early in the series. It's actually a self-portrait series, but I wanted to make the figures more universal. I wanted to use the irony of presenting an intimate setting, yet removing the most intimate, identifying feature of the figure. My intention was to focus on the work or the action and play with this concept of identity driven by the tasks and roles we do.

Also, the shots take the vantage point of my children. I dress the figures up to question the importance or significance we give to domestic tasks, juxtaposing the more elegant with the mundane, and also to blur the historical time period. I want to leave people questioning what decade the piece is set in and what it means.

Is there a particular piece that you consider your personal best? Why?

Well, I am kind of a flavor of the week girl, so my favorites are different on any given day. The art on my walls changes constantly. At present, my favorite in the domestic series is "Welcome Home." I like it from a technical standpoint, but it's also significant to me because of where I took the study shot, and the fact that the bus was from the district where I taught school fifteen years ago. It also came toward the end of the series when I finally felt I had sort of done what I set out to do with the series.

"Chain Garden II" and "Reaching Tree" are two in my organic collection that are favorites I have refused to sell. There is something about the first piece you do in a series that is different, something in that initial working out of an idea.

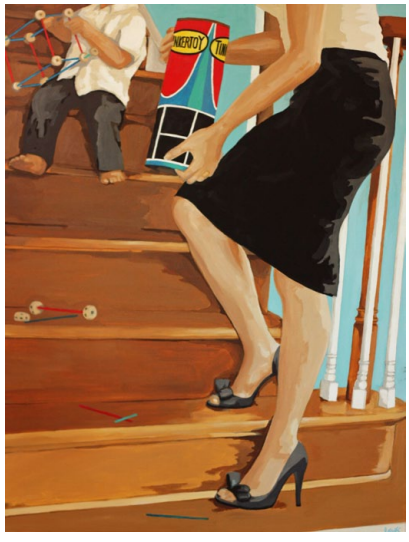
I am really excited about the new mixed media series I am working on. "Volumes On White" is a new piece and I would also consider it one of my best works. This piece explores the multiplicity of thoughts and ideas.

When someone looks at the paintings in your domestic series, what do you want them to convey?

I wanted them to be discussion pieces. To say I wanted to make a social statement wouldn't be accurate. I don't want everyone to take away one thing from the paintings. This is where art is essential—it interacts with the viewer's own experience to create some entirely unique feeling. I wanted a series that was broad enough such that everyone could have some connection with at least one piece in the series.

My aim was to ask social questions and to ask personal questions. I wanted people to dig deeper into their own conscious or subconscious thoughts about family life in a larger context as well as in a more personal sense.

Having an academic background in family studies, I've noticed that there have been a lot of cultural shifts in how we view family life. We outsource more and more of the



Images courtesy Leslie Graff

Photo courtesy Leslie Graff

Photo and image courtesy Leslie Graff

Image courtesy Leslie Graff

Image and photo courtesy Leslie Graff

things that used to be contained in our domestic spheres, but I don't think we often consciously explore what this means to the nature of families. Or where meaning in our relationships comes from. My intention was to create something thought-provoking and not sentimental.

I invite people to share their reactions to the pieces with me. It makes the series almost feel like a loose qualitative research project.

The pieces all use symbols to explore deeper themes, like "Easy As Pie," which is about how we divide up our resources, our time, our energy, all these finite commodities we trade in our family life daily. "Who's There" uses the analogy of a corded phone to beg questions about emotional and physical presence. "It's a Treat" explores attitudes toward value/enjoyment of family time in a more leisure-based, individualistic culture. The titles are all phrases and intended to be sort of ironic and loaded.

As a woman, I wanted to paint the entire series focused on women and I hadn't really seen domestic work featured prominently in art, so that was important.

On your website you mention that you have travelled to numerous countries doing humanitarian work as a child life specialist. What countries and what kind of work did you do?

My other great love is child development; I taught family studies at the college and university level before I had children and continue to stay active as a child life specialist, a clinical specialty providing psychological preparation and therapeutic play to children in hospital settings.

I work with the Vascular Birthmarks Foundation, providing psychosocial guidance to families around the world living with visible differences.

I am also able to do volunteer medical missions with Operation Smile, which provides free surgeries for children around the world, treating cleft lips/palates, burns, and other craniofacial issues. I have been to Kenya, Morocco, Siberia, Philippines, and Jordan, and a few of those places more than once.

I prepare all the children for surgery and maintain a hospital playroom. So you will always find me stockpiling toys from thrift shops for my next mission. It is one of the things I live for. I am a firm believer in using our time and talents to improve the lives and opportunities of others.

How have you been able to balance being a wife, mother, and artist?

My philosophy of life is generally to fill it all the way up with good things such that some are sloshing over the side. My weakness is that I tend to keep too many irons in the fire. My to-do list rarely has less than seven major things on it at a time. The key to working in a lot of things is to do it in shifts and seasons, never all at once. That being said, I am not afraid to let a ball drop here or there. I try not to be too hard on myself.

I think it works for me because I am a very flexible person by nature and not a perfectionist. I thrive and am most productive in an unstructured time environment, which lends itself very well into meshing those roles. Work and home being in the same place also allows me to maximize my productivity. I am constantly evaluating how much time and energy I allow myself to invest in my art, and when I say constantly, I mean literally on a daily basis.

As I have become much busier with my art, maintaining emotional presence is actually one of the hardest things. The creative process can be very consuming and it's very alluring to really want to jump in with both feet, but staying tethered to other priorities and responsibilities is a necessity for me. I constantly feel I have to swim carefully in strong currents.

If I'm not careful, I can sort of operate in autopilot, where my mind is kind of distracted working out various ideas and images in the back of my head and I'm not really connected to what I am doing through the day.

So, to minimize that, I generally paint at night, when my children are asleep. While I like them to see me paint, the truth is they need me during those waking hours, and I value and guard my time with them. I'm not willing to give up being the mom who has fresh cookies waiting at the bus stop or who's willing to drop it all to read books in the hammock.

I generally need at least a two-hour stretch to be productive at all. I probably tend to cheat sleep probably more than I should—it's tough when I can't start to paint until 8:30 p.m. and I have been up since 5:45 a.m.

Beyond the creating, the business aspects can be quite time consuming. I tend to do other business tasks—accounting, ordering, shipping, emails, calls, working with clients—when my youngest is down for a nap. Even that load is getting overwhelming and I have been trying to find ways to outsource more of those tasks.

I am very upfront with people that my family comes first. I make no apologies for having a loose timeline for commissions and shipping. I am a huge advocate for changing our work/family culture to be more family friendly and flexible. So this is something I don't compromise on. People respect that.

What is your artistic process?

I always keep a sketchbook around. Most ideas need time to percolate until they are ready to come out. I tend to always have things running in the back of my head all the time. I always have more ideas and plans than I have time to explore, especially right now. So I have to prioritize.

I have a good size studio in my home, but this tends to be as much where my supplies and paintings live as anything.

I work all over: inside, outside, and a lot of the time I sit on the floor and paint flat instead of using an easel which is kind of unusual but I like being able to move around the piece and it probably a throwback from working with children. It's not unusual to see

Image courtesy Leslie Graff

Image courtesy Leslie Graff

brushes and paints and temporary painting spots set up in just about any room of my house. I tend to move around in order to hang out with my husband while I work.

For the domestic series, I take photo studies that I paint from. It's a total trip getting the camera/tripod set up, getting the right corner of the house, incorporating the historical artifacts into the piece (like the vintage aprons my great grandmother embroidered or hand-me down mid-century furniture pieces), getting myself dressed (sometime my youngest son too) and posed in the perfect positions, and then taking the pictures via remote. Most of the thirty pieces are set at my home, a few at my parents' or best friend's, and two in other locations.

So there is actual more authenticity to the scenes than you'd expect. People who know me well can tell you they see those clothes, they've eaten at that table or climbed those steps in the paintings.

I think I am little different in that I adamantly refuse to paint only one style or subject matter. In this I am very much a nonconformist. I like to question our traditional expectations of artists. Again I think it's that unstructured part of me that needs this freedom—the one constant I need in life is change. It sounds crazy but it's almost an academic or technical mental challenge for me to switch gears in and out of various styles and see the breadth of work I can create. The challenge of working in different directions keeps me fresher. I am not really willing to be one type of painter—it goes against the nature of creativity to me.

Image courtesy Leslie Graff

Why do you work primarily in acrylics?

I have used acrylics for a few decades. I first started acrylics when I was twelve and instantly fell in love. I knew even in high school that I preferred painting to drawing and acrylics in particular. I actually think you can often tell a lot about someone's larger personality or creative style by the mediums they use. I think you tend to settle into the medium that sort of fits the way you think.

I always say I am not deliberate enough or enough of a planner to be good at watercolors or patient enough for oils. I tend to layer a lot by nature so the fact that they dry fast is important to me. Acrylics have a lot of flexibility and are known for having bright colors, which fits well with my style. I have painted through pregnancies and always in a house with small children, so acrylics are a pretty safe medium, not as toxic as other things. It's nice that my children can use them right alongside me; my boys have all been painting with acrylics since they were a year old.

How has your faith and knowledge of the gospel influenced your work?

My faith is so ingrained in the nature of who I am and what I do. I was raised with the belief that values creation as an eternal principle and I grew up in a family where we were taught to be useful and productive. I know my faith influences the way I view the world and the things that are important to me, which I know shows in the themes of my work. I always explore relationships, connections, and meaning in my pieces, be they figurative, abstract, or organic. I see the opportunity to create and my inspirations to paint as profound blessings.

How do you balance being LDS and being an artist?

My art very much comes out of my identity and my beliefs cannot be separated from it. They seem to coexist relatively peacefully. I think the hardest thing as an artist is just staying grounded to reality in your relationships and commitments.

The church time demands are high, especially where we live here in Massachusetts, so in that sense I think I have limitations other artists don't have.

How do you see your art helping build the kingdom?

I think we should always be contributing with whatever knowledge and talents we have. Sharing the gospel is not always overt. It is much more about how we live our lives, what we stand for, and how we influence people around us. I hope my art reflects my sense of purpose and belief and desire to influence people for good.

I think a lot of art speaks in spiritual ways or contributes to our experience but that does not necessarily mean the subject matter will be overtly religious. People and relationships are the things that matter most to me. There is a lot of symbolism and meaning in my pieces which has more personal and religious significance to me.

I think that so much of emotion, testimony, and experience can't be translated simply into words or concrete images. I like the ambiguity of abstraction and symbolism because to me it values the individual, in letting them find a certain amount of their own meaning in the piece.

I see God in so many of the details of my life. In my organic and abstract work I use small things to composite into a whole; this reflects my belief that as individuals we have the ability to create powerful things and influence others with small actions. I hope to help people find beauty, meaning, and purpose in their experiences, both through my interactions with them and through my art. ❧

Image courtesy Leslie Graff

Sara Webb

INTERVIEW BY **ANNIE MANGELSON**

Sara Webb (Bardo) is a principal dancer for the Houston Ballet company. She has danced with Houston Ballet for fourteen years, and has also served as a guest principal dancer for The Australian Ballet and Ballet West. During her career, Webb has performed throughout the world. She is also the proud mother of two beautiful children.

Photo courtesy Amitava Sarkar

Why dance? Why ballet?

I grew up in Henderson, Nevada. When I was eight years old my parents took my sister and me to Nevada Dance Theater's production of *The Nutcracker*. I was mesmerized! I wanted to be Clara so badly. My mom enrolled both of us into ballet classes shortly after that. I quickly learned how hard ballet was, for me at least. I wasn't flexible at all and I was a bit uncoordinated. But I loved it! I was determined to be Clara someday. I spent the next few years dedicating myself to learning how to make my limbs move the way a ballerina should.

My first performance on stage was as a gingersnap in *The Nutcracker* (gingersnaps are the little ones that come out of the funny lady's skirt in the second act). Then I moved up to one of Clara's friends at the party in the first act. And finally, after being cast as Fritz's understudy (yes, Clara's brother), I was thankfully cast in the role of Clara. I had so much fun dancing the role and, while the process was a challenge for me, I knew that I wanted to keep going. I had set a new goal that night: to dance the Sugarplum Fairy. For that I knew a lot more work and training would be required. I was excited about the challenge, though, and I was hopeful that someday I would achieve my new goal.

On a side note, my older (by thirteen months) sister Andrea was a huge motivator for me in achieving my goal to become a ballerina. Unlike me, Andrea was a natural at ballet. It came very easily to her, and she moved up ballet class levels very quickly. I was very competitive with my sister, like most sisters are, and pushed myself even harder to try to catch up to her. She danced until she was about seventeen and then decided she didn't want to dance anymore. At that point, because I had followed her every move, I questioned whether or not I should continue dancing. Where would all of my motivation come from now? Did I still love ballet? At sixteen, I decided that this was what I really wanted to do, even if my sister didn't. I never imagined myself becoming a principal dancer. That was a goal I didn't dare set, because I never thought it would happen. I was so happy to be the Sugarplum Fairy while I was at Harid, and then again three years after joining the Houston Ballet. I am grateful for all of the other roles since, too.

Tell us about your history as a dancer.

I started my ballet training at the Nevada Dance Theater Ballet Academy when I was eight years old. At fourteen, I moved away from home and went to a special dance school, the Harid Conservatory in Boca Raton, Florida. I went there to receive better dance training as well as to receive my high school education.

While there, we attended a regular high school in the morning and then returned to our dorms and dance facility after lunch to take dance classes for the rest of the day. We also learned about art history, dance history, and music theory in the evening. When I was seventeen, I graduated from the Harid Conservatory and moved to Houston to train at the Houston Ballet Academy for one year. During this time, I finished my senior year of high school by correspondence. The following year, when I was eighteen, I was hired into the Houston Ballet Company as an apprentice. I was an apprentice for one year and then was promoted to the Corps de Ballet. After three years in the Corps, I was promoted to the rank of soloist. And after two and a half years as a soloist, I was promoted to the rank of principal dancer. I have been in the Houston Ballet for fourteen years now. I have also had the opportunity to guest as a principal dancer with the Australian Ballet in 2004 and with Ballet West for the last three seasons.

Which role has been your favorite?

That is definitely the hardest question people ask. I have so many favorites! I have always been fond of the classics—*Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *Cinderella*, *Giselle*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. I enjoy the stories and the purity of the dancing. I also enjoy some of the more contemporary ballets that allow me a chance to move in different ways without the restrictions of a tutu; *Ghost Dances*, *Falling Angels*, *Twilight*, and *Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude* are just a few. I really can't pick just one favorite.

Of the experiences you've had dancing, which one meant the most to you and why?

There is a ballet called *Voluntaries* that is very special to me. Sometimes you can love a ballet, but the rehearsal process can make it a great experience or a terrible one. This particular ballet was an inspiring experience for me. The ballet was created by Glen Tetley, a very well known choreographer. I had the amazing opportunity to be coached by him in preparation for opening night. We worked well together and he truly inspired me with his knowledge and interpretation of dance. Shortly after I worked with him, he passed away. I will forever be grateful for the time I had to work with Mr. Tetley.

Voluntaries was created in 1973 as a memorial by Glen Tetley for another famous choreographer, John Cranko, who had passed away suddenly. I had not known Mr. Cranko personally, so for me the ballet was a memorial for something else. My husband had served two year-long tours in Iraq. There were so many soldiers that my husband knew and I had heard about who had given their lives during that time. I danced for them, for their families, and for the selfless sacrifice they had given.

The other experience that I have to mention is more recent. My family is very important to me. When my son was about two years old, I had a strong impression that there was another little spirit ready to join our family. Having a child in my profession is not an easy thing to do, because you have to take so much time off from dancing. Your body goes through a lot of changes and there is always that possibility that your body will not allow you

Photo courtesy Amitava Sarkar

Photo courtesy Jim Caldwell

Photo courtesy Amitava Sarkar

Photo courtesy Jim Caldwell

Photo courtesy Amitava Sarkar

to return. They say for every week you take off from ballet it takes two to get back! Not that I took nine months off, but there was a period of time where taking ballet class was not possible. Before having my daughter, I made the decision to come back to work, and timed my pregnancy so I could make it back in time for *Sleeping Beauty*—one of my favorites!

Lily was born in October and I went back to work at the end of November. I wasn't sure if I would be ready to perform the role of Aurora in February. It seemed like such an uphill battle for me. *Sleeping Beauty* is one of the hardest classical ballets to take on. Also, when I was going back to work after having my son, my husband was still in school and had a lot more free time, allowing me the chance to go to the gym and get back in shape. This time, I had two little ones at home to tend to, and my husband was working full-time. Many times I thought I was crazy for setting what seemed like such an unachievable goal. However, I danced Aurora with Ballet West in February of this year, and then again in March with Houston Ballet. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done, but also one of the most gratifying. I will always remember what those performances felt like. I loved the freedom of being on stage again—the way the steps felt, the moments of expressing thoughts through an arm movement, receiving an encouraging glance from a partner. I remember the sound of the applause and the final bow. I remember when the curtain came down and the performance was over I became "Mommy" again—the best role of all.

Tell us about your experiences with Houston Ballet.

I have been fortunate to work with some amazing choreographers and people during the last fourteen years of my career at Houston Ballet. I have had ballets created on me—always an honor for a dancer because it is like leaving your mark on the ballet world. Three of my favorites are Wendy in

Trey McIntyre's *Peter Pan*, a special pas de deux called *Twilight* by Ben Stevenson, and the leading role in Stanton Welch's *La Bayadère*.

I have had the chance to work with two artistic directors of Houston Ballet. I worked for Ben Stevenson for the first six years of my career and then Stanton Welch for the last eight years. Each has given me wonderful opportunities to grow and has inspired me in different ways. I have travelled across the world and performed on many stages—in Hong Kong, London, Australia, Moscow, Spain, Canada, and the United States. I have made some wonderful friendships that continue to help me grow as a dancer and as a person.

What are your goals for the future?

People always ask me how long I plan to dance, and I don't know the answer to that question yet. I think I will wake up one day and know that I am done. I love ballet. It has been my life, or at least a big part of it, since I was eight years old. It defines a part of who I am. I think I worry that my bag of talents is limited to just dance, but I know I need to cultivate the determination that helped me become a professional ballerina and use it to look in that bag again. I look forward to having more children and being more of a full-time mom. I would like to go back to college and earn my degree in special education. A part of me contemplates teaching ballet and passing on my knowledge to the next generation of dancers. My husband and I love to take trips as a family. It would be nice to have more time to do that, someday.

What is your artistic and creative approach to dancing?

I try to make each step and each role my own. The beauty of ballet to me is that everyone is unique in their own special way because of their individual interpretations of movement. I like to use the music as a guide for the feeling of each piece being danced. If it is light and happy, one cannot help but exude happiness. If the music resonates somber notes, the soul bleeds a little more angst. I use my life experiences to help add a piece of myself to each ballet I dance.

What advice do you have for aspiring dancers?

Don't give up just because you are having a bad day, week, or year. Use your disappointments as motivation to work harder. Remember why you love to dance, because one day you will question why you are doing it. The ballet world has room for lots of beautiful dancers. There doesn't have to be one *best*. Gain perspective on life, because ballet isn't everything.

What has been the most challenging thing about getting to where you are today?

I think one of the most challenging things for me in this profession has been working with instructors and coaches who have told me that I can't. Unfortunately, I have made the mistake of believing a few of them, and so I have had to learn how to overcome my own self-doubts.

How have you balanced family time and your life as a dancer?

It is definitely a juggling act! I think sleep has been sacrificed the most, as most parents find. Being a principal dancer helps, because there is a little more flexibility in my schedule.

I maximize my time with my children and husband as best I can. I always have Mondays off from work, so that is always Mom's day with the kids. My husband has Saturdays off from work, so that is Dad's day with the kids. And, being the wonderful husband that he is, he usually brings the kids to work on my lunch break. Sundays, unless I have a performance, which isn't very often, we have the whole day as a family—my favorite day of the week! My husband and I try to have a date night once a week, even if it is just staying home and watching a favorite show on TV.

During late night rehearsals at the theater, I will sometimes bring one of my kids with me to have a "date," or the whole family will come and visit for a bit until I have to dance. Sometimes my husband and I will drive over an hour to spend only thirty minutes as a family. But those thirty minutes are always worth it.

How does the gospel affect you as an artist?

The gospel gives me perspective, brings balance into my life, and keeps me grounded. My profession is a very hypercritical profession. The focus is always on the things that need to be corrected—the mistakes you make. Having the gospel in my life reminds me that perfection is a process and allows me to look beyond the criticism and keep a positive mindset.

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

There are currently two other LDS dancers out of the fifty-four dancers in the Houston Ballet, and one of our pianists is also LDS (and frequently plays Primary songs and hymns in our daily warm-up class). However, there are not a lot of LDS people in the dance world. I have had many opportunities to be a missionary. I have been able to share my beliefs with many people who might otherwise never have been exposed to the Church. Some experiences have been memorable. Once I had a conversation about tithing with another dancer. He couldn't believe that on my little salary I paid ten percent to the Church. A few days later, I slipped and fell while practicing a step. That same friend commented that it was a good thing I paid my tithing, because, thankfully, I didn't get injured!

I have found that there are a lot of misunderstandings about what Mormons are like. I hope that I have helped in some way to show that we are a loving and accepting people. And normal! I also hope that, through my art form, I have been able to bring people joy and exemplify seeking after "anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy." ❧

Photo courtesy Gwen Nowrick

Marilyn McPhie

INTERVIEW BY **MEAGAN BRADY**

WEB: **MARILYNMCPHIE.COM**

Marilyn McPhie has been telling stories professionally since 1985 and has performed for groups from preschool to adult, from Massachusetts to California. She has told stories for assemblies, classes and festivals, has lectured for several colleges and universities and has performed for schools, libraries, museums, civic and church groups and corporate and private gatherings. She has directed a troupe of student storytellers and writes a review column for a national parenting publication. Marilyn has a degree in English and French literature and is a member of the Storytellers of San Diego and the National Storytelling Network. She lives in San Diego, California, in an area known as Penasquitos, which means "little bluffs" —an appropriate home for a storyteller.

Tell us how you became a storyteller.

I come from a family of word-lovers, so I came into storytelling naturally. My mother's mother majored in elocution and I often heard her recite poems and other pieces. My father's mother wrote poetry and many times was called upon to present her poems for special occasions. My mother taught English and drama. I was always surrounded by books and stories. In high school I was on the speech team and in college I majored in English, but I didn't really discover storytelling until I was an adult.

When my two oldest children were three and four, I signed them up for a parent participation preschool, and the school was very serious about the participation element. They handed me a three-page list of possible jobs. One job was cleaning the bathrooms every week. I didn't want to do that. Another job was sanding and repainting the playground equipment. I didn't want to do that. One of the jobs on the last page was, "Tell stories every week," and I thought, "I could do that." So I signed up to tell stories, and it was so easy and fun that I signed up for storytelling every semester after that. Then I began telling stories at the local library. After that people began to ask me to tell stories for schools and festivals and I began to feel like a real storyteller.

Where do your stories come from? How many do you create? How many are retellings?

I'm omnivorous about stories. I'm eager to pick up stories wherever I find them, so the stories I tell come from many different sources.

I love folktales; there's something about telling a traditional story that makes me feel that I'm a part of something ancient and important. All of the folktales I tell are my own retellings. Usually, I take several different versions of a story and shape them in the way that feels comfortable to me. I don't usually memorize, because learning a single version of a story word for word would require a lot of time and the end result would not be as suitable for telling. For one thing, written language is often quite different from spoken language; spoken language tends to have more short, declarative sentences, sentence fragments, and repetition. For another thing, there could be copyright issues if a storyteller just memorizes someone else's version of a story. Most importantly, retelling with my own words and in my own voice gives me the freedom to emphasize the things I like—to give the story my own twist.

I do tell some literary stories written by authors like Jane Yolen and Brock Cole. For these, I try to stick to the author's words. And I do get permission to tell them.

With the recent popularity of "This American Life," "StoryCorps," and "The Moth," personal stories have become more and more popular in performance. Of course, like most people, I have always used personal experiences in talks, lessons, and conversation, but lately I have started shaping some of them into stories that I tell on the stage. I've even participated in a couple of story slams.

And I do have a few stories that I have created entirely. I would say "written," but actually I develop the story orally before I ever write it down. This works well for me, since the story is meant to be told. Of course, I do write down the story eventually—mostly to help me remember it when I go back to it after a while. When I make up my own stories, it is usually because I looked for a story with a specific theme or setting and I could never find it. So I tell a story about a witch, inspired by my ancestors in Salem, Massachusetts. Another story, set in Aztec times, is about chocolate. And there's a story about a fish that I created for a performance at an aquarium.

Does telling stories ever spill over into other aspects of your life?

My casual conversations with both friends and strangers are often story-rich, but then I think most people tell stories. It's only a problem if the stories are too long, too detailed, or you just tell the same half-dozen stories over and over and over. (We all know people who do that!) My family and friends are usually pretty nice about my storytelling. They expect me to tell stories and they indulge me. A couple of times my brother and sister have heard me tell family stories and they have said, "I don't remember that," or "I don't remember that it happened that way." Since I'm the oldest, I can always reply, "Of course not. You were too little to remember."

Every summer I judge a stack of storytelling CDs for a national awards program, so whenever I'm going somewhere in the car, I usually have one of the entries in the CD player. Most, but by no means all, of them are really good. However, a few years ago, my son always made sure that when we were in the car, he had what he called his "story-cancelling headphones."

Everyone loves a good story. Why do you think stories are such an integral part of the human condition?

Storytelling is one of the things that makes us human. Many animals vocalize, but people tell stories. They link us to the past and connect us with each other in the present. They lift the spirit, acknowledge feelings, illuminate thinking, challenge, and inspire. They represent a culture's very identity.

It seems that storytelling is an integral part of Mormon worship. Primary sharing time, Sunday School lessons, and General Conference talks are just a few of the places where stories seem to abound. Why do you think that is?

Photo courtesy Kevin Walsh

Photo courtesy Marilyn McPhie

Because there's no better way to get an idea across than with a story. Stories stick. I've worked in Relief Society, Primary, Young Women, Sunday School, nursery—and in every case, I find that the best, most effective lessons have stories. When I was doing Primary sharing time regularly for several years, at first I tried to have what I considered the more typical presentations—with flannel board cut-outs and games, but I quickly realized that, for me at least, the most successful sharing times featured stories—told, not read. (Of course, the stories were from approved materials, like *The Friend* or scriptures. I've read the handbooks.) The same thing is true in adult classes and sacrament meetings. We like stories. At General Conference, the most touching, inspiring and memorable talks seem to be those with stories. President Monson and many of the other general authorities are great models for this. And of course, the scriptures show the power of the Savior's stories. "A certain man had two sons . . ." When you read the scriptures, a line like that is the equivalent of "Once upon a time."

From sightings of the Three Nephites to tales of the Mormon pioneers and other faith-promoting stories, it seems that storytelling extends to nearly all aspects of Mormon culture as well. Why do you think this phenomenon occurs?

As a people, we believe that our Heavenly Father hears our prayers, knows our hearts, and wants us to be happy. And so we are eager to believe and to pass on stories that illustrate that care and concern. As with most oral storytelling, the stories pass from one person to another, with each teller shaping and embellishing in a way that will enhance the telling and emphasize the point of the story. So the stories get bigger and grander and more miraculous as they pass from one storyteller to another. I love this aspect of Mormon storytelling; it's the oral tradition at work. Of course, sometimes the stories need to be reined in a little and anchored to facts. We can do that when necessary. I have noticed, for example, that lately the conference talks have footnotes and references, so that listeners and readers can refer to sources for themselves, and more and more primary-source materials are readily available for anyone to use.

How do you think an audience responds differently to a story being told to them rather than reading it for themselves?

Reading a story is a rather solitary activity. Listening to a story told is a

Photo courtesy Christopher Bush

shared experience. It's communication eye-to-eye and face-to-face and heart-to-heart. And the communication happens in real time. When an author writes and publishes a story, the author sends it out into the world to be read at some future time by an unseen and unknown audience. Reactions may come from readers and critics, but they are far removed in time from the creation of the story.

With live storytelling, the listeners are present and their response is instantaneous, and, in fact, can change the story even as it is being told. Another big difference between reading a story and hearing a story is that a storytelling is ephemeral. It happens, and then it's over.

Even if the same storyteller tells the same story to the same audience again, the story and the experience will be different; it's very fluid. If you read the same story over, the experience may differ somewhat, but the words and presentation are fixed and do not change.

So much of storytelling is in the visual experience of the audience in addition to the words of the teller. Besides recording performances, how are these stories preserved?

The best storytelling performance is the one you see and hear for yourself. That's the nature of storytelling. But it is still valuable to preserve stories in a more permanent form. It may not be as vivid as a live performance, but it can still be a good experience, and the potential audience is much, much larger than would fit under a festival tent or in a theater. Video recording, audio recording, and written transcripts are all useful ways to preserve oral stories.

A well-known storyteller who has preserved his stories in published books says that he wants to share the stories with people who would never have the opportunity to hear him in person. That's why he writes them down. His written stories do differ a bit from his oral telling. They are longer, wordier. He has learned that he needs to put in writing the things that at a performance would be conveyed by his tone of voice, a gesture, a posture.

What are the pros and cons of the fluidity of a verbal story? Do you think it is a good or bad thing that spoken stories change and evolve with each telling?

I know that in some cultures, storytellers are expected to memorize the important stories and tell them the same way each time. In this way, the traditional stories are heard in the same manner, or at least with the same words, as they were centuries ago. I see the reason for that. However, for my storytelling, I value the opportunity to adapt the stories to the audience, the occasion, even the time constraints. I have been known to take a long, traditional folktale that I usually tell to adult audiences and shorten it to five minutes, lighten the tone, simplify the language, and add a little audience-participation song. That allows me to share a good story with an audience of young children.

Conversely, a kid's story can be adapted for adults. Make the language more sophisticated; give it a new slant; emphasize the complex thematic subtleties that adults appreciate. I like the freedom and creativity in that. If a train goes by or a news story has just broken or it's someone's birthday or the lights suddenly go out or there's some other current or unexpected element, it's great to be able to respond to it and not just plow ahead with the memorized text.

Do you have any particularly memorable experiences when you were telling a story?

Once I was hired to tell stories to teenagers who had been expelled from regular schools. Most of them had been in trouble with the law. Many had issues of abuse and addiction. As they filed into the room, I could see that they were probably thinking, "A storyteller? Seriously? What could this gray-haired grandma have to say to me?" I told them, directly and unapologetically, the strongest stories I knew. Stories, some centuries old, of promises, struggles, self-image, family, relationships. I saw a change in their faces. They knew that these were not the stories I would tell to five-year-olds. They sat up and paid attention. When I was finished, I heard several exhale, almost as though they had been holding their breath the entire time. It was a good moment.

How has the gospel shaped your storytelling?

Often when I tell stories, people ask later, "Is that a true story?" Even when the story has talking animals or flying carpets, the question still comes. My answer is that I never tell stories that I don't believe—either factually, or metaphorically, or both. I tell stories that I believe—and my beliefs are shaped by the gospel. I like telling stories that reinforce gospel principles of love, forgiveness, peace, kindness, inclusiveness, faith, and giving. Even when I tell stories with tricks and traps, they inevitably serve the cause of justice and fairness. I try to keep my storytelling in the realm of things that are "beautiful, lovely and of good report and praiseworthy."

You belong to several storytelling organizations. How does collaborating with other storytellers improve your work?

As with almost any work—or, in fact, any human endeavor—collaboration and cooperation are very helpful. When I listen to other storytellers perform, I enjoy seeing what stories they choose, how they shape them, how they deliver them. It's inspiring and motivating. When storytellers gather for meetings and workshops, we can explore ideas, techniques, and resources. We can also share information and experiences in promotion, marketing, producing, and other "nuts-and-bolts" aspects of the storytelling business that storytellers, like other people in the arts, often avoid.

Working with others can be exhilarating. It could be simply putting together a program with several storytellers in a way that the stories work well together. Sometimes it's more complex than that. Last year I got a grant to work with an excellent classical pianist on a storytelling project. That was something completely different for me. I offered a selection of stories that I thought might work well with music. The pianist chose some pieces from her repertoire that she thought could partner with the stories. We picked out several possibilities and cut and adapted and rehearsed until we had a blend that satisfied both of us. It was hard work and a very different way of looking at storytelling for both of us. We loved it. This summer I'm going to start working on a collaboration with a dance company for a program of stories that promote peace. I'm looking forward to that as another stretching exercise.

You've mentioned that the Timpanogos Storytelling Festival (held in Utah) is one of the best-attended and most-recognizable storytelling events in the country. Why do you think that's the case and in your experience what reputation do Mormons and their stories have in the broader storytelling world?

The Timpanogos Storytelling Festival was started and is organized by good, dedicated, creative, smart, savvy people who love bringing great stories and great storytellers to Utah. In difficult economic times, when arts funding has been cut everywhere and when many storytelling festivals are having trouble selling tickets and raising enough money to put on a festival, I think Timpanogos is astonishing the national storytelling world. They have huge, very enthusiastic audiences. They have many, many generous private and corporate donors. They have hundreds of dedicated, hard-working, committed volunteers. Of course, not all of them are Mormons. The committees are quite eclectic and representative of the entire community. However, I do think that a big storytelling festival is a perfect fit for a Mormon community. Mormons have had a huge commitment to theatre and the arts since pioneer times. Ward buildings have stages and "cultural halls." Plays, productions, and even enormous pageants are familiar to us. We love a good show. In addition, Mormons are very committed to community service. We volunteer. We have wide experience in planning and carrying out big programs, and we are comfortable working within a very organized structure. We plan, we act, we report, we collaborate. Practically speaking, church experience is a great school for community work. The people at the Timpanogos Festival have both the hearts and the hands to make it successful.

In the larger storytelling world, Utah, Mormons, and Timpanogos are becoming more and more well known and highly regarded. At first no one could pronounce or spell Timpanogos. Utah? Really? But now, the best-known storytellers have performed at Timp, have been impressed by the organization, and have been delighted by the responsive audiences. Every storyteller I know is eager to be featured at the festival. Several years ago, some storytellers didn't know what to expect. Would all their stories need to be sugarcoated? Just how clean did the language need to be? Could they even get a cup of coffee in Utah? Are Mormons as weird as they'd heard? That uneasy feeling has disappeared as more and more storytellers see what great audiences Utah has—not just at Timpanogos, but in the entire area. Many other festivals have been inspired by and have learned from the Timpanogos Festival.

How do you see your work building the kingdom?

I think that much good can come from stories. They appeal to everyone on the most elemental level. They can build character, invite introspection, promote empathy, preserve culture, encourage community, and illustrate gospel principles—all things that build the kingdom. I love what I do. I think it's good and important work.

Any last thoughts or advice?

Often when we see professionals at work—from sword-swallowers to electricians—there is the warning: "Don't try this at home." There are some things that should be left to people with extensive training and certification. That is not the case with storytelling. *Do* try this at home. The world would be better if everyone shared stories. ❧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