



Angela Hallstrom

Angela Hallstrom is a writer whose first novel, Bound on Earth, was published in February. She is also the editor of Irreantum and teaches at BYU. Interviewed Sept. 24, 2008. Website: angelahallstrom.com

How did you get started with writing?

I wrote off and on throughout my childhood and adolescence, but my first love was always reading. I didn't seriously consider trying to write fiction until my early adulthood. I'd written a few short stories and started experimenting with a couple of since-discarded novels when I moved to Minnesota in 1998. While there, I enrolled in the liberal studies program at Hamline University, where I pursued an MFA in fiction. I owe a lot to my experience at Hamline and feel that's where I really found my voice.

Although some will argue that you can't "teach" writing—and to a certain extent I understand that sentiment—my experience as a student of writing is what pushed me from dabbling in writing as a hobby to committing myself more seriously to the craft. It's when I

decided to try to be a "writer" instead of a "person who sometimes writes."

Describe your writing process. Where do you write? When? For how long?

I wish I could say that I'm a disciplined writer who sits down at her computer at the same time every day, but I'm a lot more likely to write in fits and starts. When I'm in the middle of a project that's humming along, I can't wait to sit down and write, write, write. But I also find myself stuck pretty regularly—grinding away in the wrong gear—and to be honest, those days it's hard to face the blinking cursor. Juggling motherhood and teaching and writing continues to be a challenge, but it's a challenge I'm committed to taking up because writing has become such an important part of my life.

How do you balance writing and motherhood?

It's tricky. I have four kids and my oldest three are all school age, but my youngest is nineteen months old,

so writing while a toddler is trucking around in roam-and-destroy mode can be challenging. It's difficult for me to write fiction unless things are quiet and I have limited distractions, so I try to write while my youngest naps or at night after the kids have gone to bed. Right now my job as a mom is the most important and demanding part of my day, so I have to fit writing into the nooks and crannies. I am hopeful (very hopeful!) that once my youngest is a little older, I'll have a bit more quiet time.

How did *Bound on Earth* come to be? What was it like writing it?

Bound on Earth began as a short story, "Trying," about a college student named Marnie. When I wrote that story, I started asking questions about the other members of Marnie's family: her mother, father, sisters. I wondered what made them tick. When I wrote another short story called "Thanksgiving," the Palmer family really came alive. I found I couldn't leave them alone.

Writing *Bound on Earth* was a lot of fun. A lot of work, but a lot of fun. It was the first time I'd ever attempted writing an extended work of fiction, and I enjoyed walking around with the Palmers in the back of my mind, nudging me along, whispering their secrets.

How long did it take?

In total, the novel took about five years to write. And yes, I'm hoping that my next one won't take quite that long.

What has the reception been like so far?

So far, *Bound on Earth's* reception has been quite positive. My book's sales have been relatively small when compared with sales numbers for mainstream fiction, or even mainstream LDS fiction (meaning novels published by the two or three larger LDS publishing companies). But given the expectations for the book's market, I think that my publishing company, Parables, has been pleased. Sales numbers aside, I've loved interacting with individual readers, and I've particularly enjoyed attending local book clubs and talking about the book in person.

How many drafts? Do you rewrite as you go along or after each draft?

I'm a writer who *must* revise in order to figure out what I'm trying to say. Sometimes this takes two or

three drafts (when I'm lucky); sometimes it takes seven or eight or more. I rarely begin projects with outlines or clearly-defined plot trajectories. I've tried it, but it almost always hems me in. Instead, I have a character, or a situation, or just the glimmer of an idea, and it takes a lot of writing and a number of wrong turns before I figure out what the piece wants to be.

Bound on Earth began during my MFA program, and I did a lot of revising: some stories started out as class assignments, then were revised for my thesis, then were revised again for individual publication, then were revised again for inclusion in the book.

How did you get feedback over those five years?

I had a lot of excellent feedback in school, of course, but I also got feedback from my husband and friends and editors of journals like *Irreantum* and *Dialogue*, and even Utah Arts Council judges. Although I didn't end up taking each individual suggestion, all the feedback I received was helpful in its own way.

Do you belong to a writer's group?

Since moving back to Utah in January of 2006, I've belonged to an excellent writers group with the poet and fiction writer Darlene Young; the memoirist and editor of *Segullah*, Kathy Soper; and the poet, fiction and children's book writer Sharlee Glenn. All three of these women are insightful, experienced writers and editors—and are also kind and wonderful people—and I'm blessed to have them in my life. Now that *Bound on Earth* is behind me and I'm trying to start some new projects, I'm so glad to have them around to alternately kick me in the behind and pat me on the head.

Tell us about publishing with Parables—what led you to them in the first place? What has the experience been like?

I was looking for a publishing company brave enough to publish LDS literary fiction. There aren't many of those companies around, and those that do crop up have a tough time staying in business. *Bound on Earth* had a particularly bumpy path to publication: a couple of small LDS publishers had expressed interest but then had to back out (one went out of business and the other's immediate needs changed), so I was thrilled when Parables decided to take a chance on the book.

Since this is my first novel, I don't have anything with which to compare my experience, but I feel very

lucky to have had Beth Bentley as my editor. She has a fantastic eye. I also know that I enjoyed a lot of one-on-one attention that I wouldn't have received with a larger publisher. Of course, small publishers like Parables don't have a lot of money for publicity, and distribution can be difficult. It's particularly hard to get LDS fiction into LDS bookstores if it doesn't come from one of the big three publishers. (Strangely—or perhaps not-so-strangely—it was much easier to get the book into Barnes and Noble.) The BYU Bookstore has been great to work with, though, and the novel has been picked up by Granite Distribution, so I'm hopeful that we'll see Bound on Earth in more LDS bookstores soon.

Since Parables doesn't have a lot of money for publicity, what have you done to advertise the book? How has that been?

I've been pretty proactive as far as marketing the book is concerned. The most beneficial way for me to publicize has been through the Internet—the Blogger-nacle, specifically. Parables provided a number of review copies of the novel, and I was lucky enough to have some good online reviews on blogs and other Web sites that served my target audience. Even though I had some interviews and reviews in mainstream publications (like the *Salt Lake Tribune* and *In Utah This Week*), the reviews that translated into sales were from blogs, especially from popular individual bloggers like Provo-based Courtney Kendrick, who blogs at “C Jane Enjoy It!”

I've also had some success in offering to attend book clubs along the Wasatch Front. I know that word of mouth can be the best (and cheapest!) marketing around, and women in book clubs are always looking for new novels to read. It's been a lot of fun to attend these book clubs and discuss my writing process, and the Palmer family, and the ways that readers' real lives intersect with the fictional lives in the novel.

Overall, the novel hasn't had huge sales—nothing on par with what you'd expect from a Deseret Book or Covenant bestseller—but given the novel's niche audience and lack of marketing money, both Parables and I have been very pleased with how well things have gone thus far. But I never wrote the book expecting to earn money. I was interested in telling this family's story, and I still feel incredibly lucky that the book is out there in the world, and that people are reading it.

You teach writing at Salt Lake Community College, right? How has that affected you as a writer?



I've been a student or teacher of English and writing most of my adult life. I taught high school English for five years, then took five more years to earn my MFA, then started teaching part-time at local colleges as soon as I graduated. I love school—everything about it. The “Back to School” displays at Target get my blood pumping every year, no fail. I'll buy myself a pack of new sharpened pencils even if I don't need them, mainly for the smell.

I just started teaching creative writing for BYU (hooray!). This is my first opportunity to teach creative writing, rather than composition or literature, and I'm enjoying it very much. This semester, and next, I'll be at the BYU Salt Lake Center, but I look forward to teaching at the Provo campus too, once my youngest gets a little older.

ANGELA HALLSTROM



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My experiences as both a student and as a teacher have had a profound effect on my writing. I learn best when I'm surrounded by others—particularly others who are smarter and more imaginative than I am—so school serves an important creative function for me. It inspires me, spurs me on, helps me be better and more interesting than I would otherwise be. And this happens when I'm functioning as a teacher just as often as when I'm functioning as a student.

Who are your influences, both in literature and in other media?

Whenever I read Marilynne Robinson (*Housekeeping*, *Gilead*), it makes me grateful that such amazing talent is thriving in this world, and a little jealous that I will never be as good as she is. I also love Michael Cunningham, Alice Munro, Raymond Carver, Toni Morrison, Barbara Kingsolver, Richard Ford, Lorrie Moore. Oh, and Anne Tyler. I grew up stealing my mom's Anne Tyler books, and I think my early exposure to her work affects me still. I read a lot of my dad's Stephen King as a teenager too and often wonder if (and how) his influence is expressing itself. Although *Bound on Earth* is not a good example of this, I've always been interested in the supernatural, and I'm delving into some of those themes in my next novel.

I'm a little ashamed to say I like television, only because so many of my artistically-inclined friends have absolutely no interest in TV whatsoever, so it probably speaks to my less-refined nature. But I love "Lost" and "30 Rock" and "The Office," and I'll admit to watching the occasional "Project Runway" or "So You Think You Can Dance." None of these shows has had much of an effect on me artistically, I must admit—unless you count staying up late and watching them when I should be writing instead!

And next to reading, which will always be my first love, going to the movies with my husband is one of my favorite things to do. I suppose I just love a good story, no matter the medium.

What are you working on now?

I think I will continue writing for or about Mormons in one capacity or another, but my next novel is for a general audience and doesn't have any Mormon characters. At least not for now. I am in the very early stages and I'm still not sure if I have my footing. I do

have an idea for a short story with Mormon characters and themes that I'm itching to try, and probably will here soon, since my novel is giving me fits. I've also been writing a little creative nonfiction here and there. I've enjoyed it, but I'm more convinced than ever that fiction is my genre of choice.

When you get stuck, what do you do to get unstuck? How do you rekindle the fire?

First, I mope and moan and feel sorry for myself. Next, I wonder if I will ever be able to write another sentence worth publishing ever, ever again. Then I tell myself to get over it and to stop being a bad example to my writing students. Then I take a deep breath and just keep plugging away. This happens, oh, every three days or so. (Kidding. Kind of.)

As far as inspiration goes, I find that when I'm reading something really, really good it makes me want to write. Every year I buy *Best American Short Stories*, and there's always a story or two in there that gets me itching to try to do something new. I've also learned—and I've just recently learned this—that certain ideas take time. They have to simmer a while before they're fully cooked, so I have to be patient with myself. Even though some writers may disagree with me, I don't always have to be in front of the computer to be "writing." Some of my best writing ideas occur when I'm driving to the grocery store and I allow my mind to wander.

How has the gospel influenced you as a writer? Why did you choose to write about Mormons?

The gospel has influenced me in all sorts of ways, simply because my experiences as a Mormon and my personal testimony are so bound up with who I am. These influences will probably show up in my work in one way or another, even if the work isn't explicitly Mormon.

I chose to write *Bound on Earth* for a Mormon audience because as I was writing it, I felt like I was having a conversation with other Mormons like me. The concept of the eternal family, and the implications of that concept, drove me from the beginning. Although non-Mormons can (and have) read the book and relate to it, I felt a particular compulsion to share this story with those who have an intrinsic understanding of certain LDS beliefs and have experienced certain facets of our culture. ■