



literature

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# *Michael O. Tunnell*



Michael O. Tunnell has written many award-winning children's books, including *Mailing May*, *Wishing Moon*, and *Moon Without Magic*. He also teaches children's literature at Brigham Young University. His latest book, *The Candy Bomber: The Story of the Berlin Airlift's Chocolate Pilot*, will be published in 2010. Website: [michaelotunnell.com](http://michaelotunnell.com)

### How did you decide to become a writer?

I don't know that I could name a particular instant when that happened. I think it's just more a part of who you are. I read a lot as a kid, and I think there was always a latent desire to tell my own stories that surfaced as I got older. I actually decided to "do it" when I started teaching school. I taught mostly fifth and sixth grade, and then did a masters degree in instructional media. I spent a few years in a junior high as a media specialist. I was involved with children's books a lot, and working with kids and literature ignited the memory of how wonderful reading was, and brought that desire to tell my own stories to the surface.

I began writing early in my teaching career, and even wrote my first unsuccessful children's novel. I submitted it thirty or forty times to different publishers. Then I went back to graduate school again and did a doctorate in children's literature. That sort of put a stop to creative writing for a while, till my dissertation was done, but then I came back to it. Early in my career as a professor, while I was at Northern Illinois University, I was trying to get tenure and was busy doing professional writing. I thought, "Well, I don't know if I have time for novels right now," so I began working on picture book manuscripts. My first manuscript was accepted on the third submission. My editor got in touch with me. She didn't accept it; she said, "Cut this by a third and we'll talk about it." The manuscript was ten pages long, which is pretty long for a picture book nowadays, and to cut a third out of ten pages is quite a bit. It was difficult, but I did cut it by a third, and that's when she accepted it. The name of that book is *Chinook*. It's based on tall tales about the Chinook winds that I experienced as a kid in western Canada.

### Is writing for children different from writing for adults?

Actually, it essentially isn't any different. There are some things that you have to take into consideration, depending on your target audience. Sometimes when you have an idea and begin to write, you may think you have a target age in mind, but the story takes on a life of

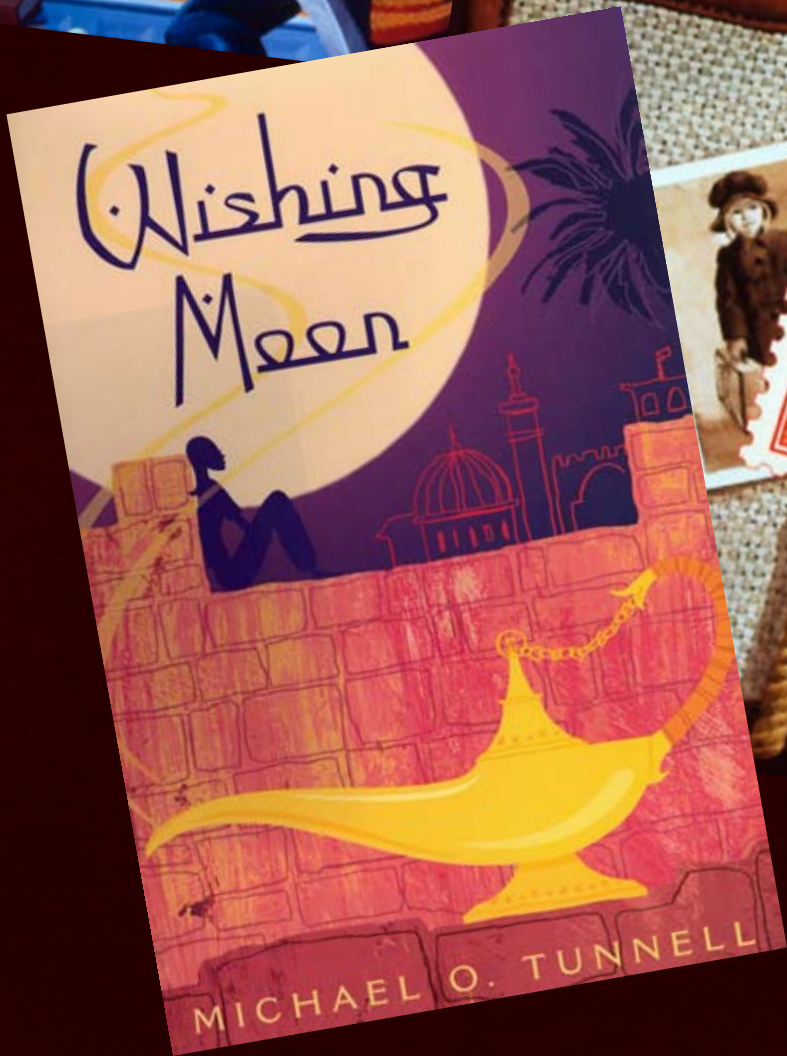
itself, and it ends up being for older readers or younger readers, and then you have to decide if you want to go with it, in that direction. When you're doing picture book manuscripts, generally you have a younger audience in mind.

I'm speaking only for myself. I'm pretty sure every writer approaches this differently. There's just a million different ways to do this; it's not formulaic. For me, though, I generally have a basic idea. I'm working on this novel, and I have a feeling it's for ten- to fourteen-year-olds. I have been surprised from time to time, that the reviewing public sees it differently. For instance, with *Children of Topaz*, I aimed at a middle grade audience—fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh grade. I was thinking upper elementary grades, but some of the awards it won were secondary school awards. It won a Carter G. Woodson Honor Book Award, given by the National Council for the Social Studies, in the secondary category. It surprised me. Sometimes people out there see it differently than you do.

### Is there a genre that you prefer over others?

I used to think there was. When I used to dream about being a published author in the trade book field, I always thought it would be fantasy—Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain Chronicles*-type fantasy, in the mold of Tolkien. And yet, when I look at what I have written for young readers, it surprises me that most of it has been historical. I began to discover that history and fantasy were my two favorite genres, both to read and to write. There is, though people wouldn't think it, some similarity in that readers are removed in time and place in both of those. In history, it's our world, but it's not now. For younger readers, a hundred or two hundred years ago is almost as foreign as Middle Earth or *Prydain*.

*School Spirits*, which was my first novel, is a ghost story that's set in the 1950s. Some people who reviewed the book said, "Why did he set it in the 1950s?" I set it there because I like the time period. It's the time period of my younger childhood. So even though this is a fantasy of sorts, I did a great deal of research about the 1950s. I was born in 1950, so I was reasonably young through that decade. I couldn't remember a lot. For instance, I had a scene in that book where the kids were eating Oreos with milk. I suddenly thought, "I can't remember eating Oreos when I was a kid. Were they around?" I ended up calling Nabisco, and they had someone who would answer questions, and I found out that Oreos were introduced in 1912. So indeed, they were around in the 1950s, but I couldn't remember. That's just one small





detail. I had to look at what music was popular, what movies played in 1958. *Wishing Moon* and *Moon Without Magic* are of course fantasies, but the amount of historical research was massive, because I really did set it in the ancient, ninth-century Arab world, which I knew very little about. It became as much a historical endeavor as it was a fantasy endeavor.

**Sometimes, especially in Christian groups, fantasy can get a bad rap. Why do you think fantasy is important to read and write?**

For the most part, LDS members are less likely to get bent out of shape about fantasy literature. We do have people around here who won't let their kids read Harry Potter, but I think they're the exception to the rule. There's a lot more resistance to it in the born-again Christian, Bible Belt area. In any case, fantasy is the seed of creative thought. I could quote you any number of well-known scientists who have said in one way or another, "We wouldn't have landed on the moon if it hadn't been for fantasy literature." Fantasy made kids growing up believe in things that would have seemed like impossibilities to earlier generations. John Tyndall was one of the most famous British physicists around the turn of the twentieth century. He said that fantasy was what allowed us to make connections. Otherwise

science would be little more than categorizing knowledge that we observe. This sort of ability to see around corners, to imagine connections, is a quality of fantasy that allowed science as we know it to move forward with new discoveries.

There's a well-known and true story of a woman who brought her young son to Einstein because he had a gift in mathematics. She wanted to ask him what she should do to ensure his greatness in the field of mathematics. Einstein thought but for a second, and he said to her, "Read him the great myths of the past. Stretch his imagination." This ability to imagine, that fantasy had engendered in his life, was one of the most valuable assets for his science and math.

I always appreciated that BYU had a course called Christian Fantasy. It was primarily a study of C.S. Lewis and Tolkien. But the very elements of

high fantasy—quest fantasy—really have so many allegories about Christian faith. C.S. Lewis made no bones about it; it's a little harder to pin Tolkien down, but the stuff is there. I just see it as an important part of expanding our horizons, making us believe in possibilities.

**How does your approach to nonfiction differ from your approach to fiction?**

In nonfiction, the research about the topic is paramount. But you can't let that academic approach—making sure you've got all your ducks in a row—ruin the fluidity of your writing. Milton Meltzer, one of our great authors of nonfiction for young readers, has been quoted over the years saying basically that he uses all the same techniques that fiction writers use, except inventing facts. He might not use them the same way, because you're not creating a character like you do in fiction, but he's breathing life into real human beings to make them as alive as he can for young readers, just as you want to make your fictional character as alive as you can for your readers. But expository text is different, so you're working within those parameters.

Typically, once you do a lot of your research for nonfiction, an order to the writing presents itself. It's usually chronological, because that's the way the historical events unfolded. In fiction, you can jump around a

bit—you can do flashbacks. Not that you can't do those with nonfiction, but nonfiction is a little more systematic. You have to know your stuff, and you have to know your stuff to start with. In fiction, you can just start writing. You can develop your characters, and you can lay it out, and you can do your research along the way.

### Do you outline your fiction?

I outline in one way or another, but it's never the same way. I still end up experimenting, but there is always in me a need to know where I'm going with it. I've known other writers who say, "I have this kernel of an idea, I have this character, and I just start, and where it takes me is where I go." I'd be too nervous about that, and yet I sort of admire somebody who can do that. I start with a yellow pad of paper, and I just write—three (or four or five or six) longhand pages—and scribble out, rethinking, until I have the basic run of the story. And of course it never ends up being like that in the end, because it does take on a life of itself as you move through, but at least you have some sense of where you're trying to go when you start.

### In *Brothers in Valor*, you write about Latter-day Saint youth in Nazi Germany. How do you approach writing about Mormons to a wider audience?

I didn't write that book for an LDS audience, so that was a real consideration. There are two reasons that was a hard book for me to write. The first thing is that it's so close to the truth of what happened, with Helmuth Hübener and his resistance group. I had read the biographies written by both the surviving boys, and I got to know the real people too well. When I fictionalized it, it was hard to breathe life into the fictional characters. I really worked on that, and I'm not sure I achieved it the way I wanted to. And the second thing is that you have pressures about how you're representing the Church to the larger audience when you're doing this, and that can be very hindering. "Do I use this word?"

"Do I do this?" I found it crippling sometimes. Maybe if I had been writing it for Deseret Book or something like that, my mindset would have been different. I enjoyed writing the book, but those things were a challenge for me.

I'd like to do something like this again, though. I've fiddled around and done lots of research on a historical novel set in Nauvoo. It keeps getting set by the wayside, and I can't find someone who wants to do it outside the Mormon market. But I'd like to try that again, because having been through the experience once, I might be a little better at being able to handle those difficulties that come with writing about Mormon culture.

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

A few years ago, I was invited to a conference of Mormon writers and artists. We were in a discussion group and somebody asked how much of our work was dedicated to the Lord. "Is it? Do you rely on inspiration to do it the way the Lord would want you to do it?" I remember thinking and even saying, about me in particular, there are some things that are just ingrained into us if we're faithful members of the Church that allow us to proceed in a way that sets certain boundaries for us. It will be different for every individual because we all see things differently. I couldn't quite go with this idea of,





“Lord, I am a vessel in your hand; write through me.” It just didn’t sit right with me. I saw it more like, “I’m going to give it my best shot,” and then be guided as much as possible by whatever is inside me—who I am and what I believe ought to be in there anyway.

People see this so differently within the Church. People outside the Church think we all see Mormonism the same, and of course we have basic beliefs that are the same, but even then we begin to look at how we live those doctrines differently. The Word of Wisdom, for instance: there’s a lot of variation, whether you drink cola drinks or not. I think there are as many ways to be a good Mormon as there are good Mormons. And it’s the same with writing about Mormonism. When I was working on that Nauvoo novel, the polygamy thing came up. You can’t avoid the issue if you’re writing about Nauvoo. In the end, it sort of brought the hammer down. And I thought, “How am I going to deal with this?” And all the time, whether you want to or not, you’re thinking about how your Church member friends and how BYU, for whom you work, is going to look at how you deal with

this, and it almost gets irritating at some point, because you realize you can’t free yourself from that. Maybe you shouldn’t entirely. But it’s still a struggle.

I did a lot of research about polygamy, and I found a lot of things that knocked me off center about that period of time, that we don’t know generally in the Church. At that point, I said, “I can’t write this book. I can’t do this.” I’m not going to rewrite history. In a way, members do have a selected history, and I can understand that when you’re talking to the world in general and to new converts to the Church. But to think that people aren’t people, especially in those tumultuous days of the early Church, is sort of ridiculous. If I’m going to write something, I’m not going to do what we did for kids often in the fifties, where we said, “Look this is the history we want them to know, so let’s just rework it.” We don’t do that anymore. Because of the pressures (both real and imagined) exerted by the LDS environment in which I live, I said, “Instead of facing this, I won’t write this book.” I got over that after a while, and figured there was a way to deal with it for younger readers without

having to go into the gory details—and without avoiding the issue. I haven't got it done. I never did get back to it because I got caught up in another project, but I think I will eventually.

The real answer is that it's a struggle, basically. You want to be true to yourself and true to the truth when you're writing about history. You don't want to do something that would affect testimonies negatively, and yet there are plenty of things that are absolute truth that will affect testimonies for some people. So in a way, it would be sort of easier just to write about the Church for Deseret Book, where you are focused on a narrower audience and therefore have a different mission.

### What do you think is the goal of writing?

My goal is to tell a good story. A lot of other things could get in the way of that if you're not careful. If it's a historical novel, and you've done tons of research, your research can actually get in the way of telling the good story, because there's this great temptation to show everybody everything you learned, and that will bog your story down.

Another thing is wanting to tell a lesson or preach a moral, which has always been a difficulty in religious fiction. In good writing, the messages are subtle. They are treasures to be discovered rather than sermons to be preached. They're more powerful that way because they're self-discovered. That's why I think it's taken Mormon fiction a long time to get to a higher level of quality. There's just that understandable part of us, when you're writing for a religious audience, that wants to moralize. And we're even more concerned that children get the message.

But the goal is really to tell a good story. If you're too worried about theme or about showing what you've learned, or too concerned about something other than telling the story, chances are you will weaken the story. Chances are if you do all your homework, you know what it is you want to say, and you let it unfold naturally through the process of telling the story and developing the characters, you're not only going to get a better piece of writing, you're going to more successfully communicate to your audience what you want them to know about history and what you want them to know about whatever your theme or moral is. ■

