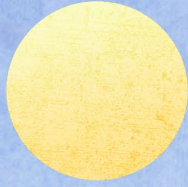


# THE ART OF FRIENDS, NOT RIVALS: SHANNON HALE & STEPHENIE MEYER



BY MAHONRI STEWART



A little over a year ago, my lovely wife, Anne, and I had the privilege to go to a retreat hosted by the Mormon Arts Foundation. Founded by James Christensen (rightfully famous for his art of fantasy and his fantastic art) and Doug Stewart (playwright of the groundbreaking *Saturday's Warrior*), it's always one of the chief highlights of the year for my wife and me. An uplifting experience, not because of the number of recognizable names on the roster (which was a little intimidating at first, until their relaxed manner and cheerful camaraderie told me that they were only human and weren't looking down on my comparatively pitiful contribution to Mormon arts), but because of the focus it brought to the spiritual aspect of our art, and the complicated ways our religion informs and doesn't inform our art. It was a true inspiration to see all of these gifted Mormons from the visual arts, literature, film, drama, and music band together for a weekend of reminding each other why they're artists and why they're Mormons, and what a wonderfully strange and beautiful mixture that is.

The last time we attended, however, something stood out to me that I believe will remain with me for the rest of my life. This epiphany centered on Shannon Hale (author of young adult fantasy novels such as *Goose Girl*, *Enna Burning*, *River Secrets*, and the Newbery award-winning novel, *Princess Academy* — not to mention my wife's favorite writer) and Stephenie Meyer (bestselling author of the wildly popular *Twilight* series and also the sci-fi thriller/romance *The Host*). It seemed as if there was a spotlight on them during the entire

conference. I was intrigued, not only by the two women themselves, but by what was happening between them. They were attached at the hip, eating together, constantly chatting up a storm, and even breaking the rules a bit by attending all of the same group discussions with each other (people were supposed to be assigned to different groups in each session so it wouldn't be cliquey and so we would get to know a wider, interdisciplinary range of people). They were like two junior high BFFs (Best Friends Forever, for those who haven't kept up on pre-teen lingo). And this almost claustrophobic closeness was, in my mind, absolutely, remarkably *refreshing*. To see these two accomplished writers — both established and famous in their respective fields and markets — cling to each other was like what it would have been to see the scriptural David and Jonathan choosing friendship over rivalry.

To give you a better picture of what I was seeing, I think it's important to learn how both women conducted themselves in this setting:

Shannon Hale was exuberant, an absolute ray of sunshine. Warm, talkative, opinionated (I mean that in the most positive of terms), confident, animated, intelligent, beautiful, and really, really *funny*. I mean, she was absolutely *hilarious*. She never hesitated to throw in her opinion on a subject or to give someone a good-natured ribbing. She was the kind of person who looks you straight in the eye — she was not afraid you were superior to her, but neither was she looking down on you. You felt like you were on equal ground with her, if not in talent, then as a human being. I was surprised that after one of

the chats, she took a good deal of time to talk to my wife and me, relative nobodies compared to others in the room. She never talked down to us, never seemed impatient to get away — just a lovely and charming woman, which made my wife’s day as well as my own.

If Shannon Hale was the sun, then Stephenie Meyer was the moon. Quiet, polite, slightly hesitant in her speech, kind, shy, with a gentle beauty. Quite the opposite of what one would expect from the woman who knocked J.K. Rowling off the New York Times bestseller list. She was not only one of the humblest *writers* I have ever met, but one of the humblest *people* I have ever met. After talking with her privately for a few minutes, I discovered she prefers to talk one-on-one, which is when she opened up. Away from the stares of the public, I found her to be what I had only assumed her to be before: a wonderful, goodhearted, insightful individual. I asked her about the then-upcoming film version of *Twilight*, and she was very open with me, talking about the initial fears she had, especially with the first draft of the script (which, I later found out, had butchered the story and wasn’t a faithful adaptation at all), but how a different script saved the day and how she’s quite pleased with the outcome.

It could have been my imagination, but what struck me as ironic is that Stephenie Meyer seemed almost intimidated to be among this group of Mormon artists. Perhaps it was because she felt she was among “Artists,” with a capital A. What I mean by that is that certain artistic personalities can look down on anything that they perceive as popular, populist, or — excuse the term — for the “unwashed masses.” That’s an exaggeration, of course, a stereotype, but that’s the sense I got. She seemed to be afraid that she was at a conference full of people who were critical of her work, despite its overwhelming popularity and unabashed fans. Again, I could be projecting this on her, but whatever the case was, she certainly wasn’t broadcasting her fame, nor using her bragging rights, nor even holding her chin up high. Instead, at the beginning of the conference she seemed almost embarrassed, as if she didn’t know what to do with herself. Of course, I don’t believe this particular group thought any less of Stephenie Meyer. If anything, they were feeling the same thing — intimidated by this very famous person in their midst. I certainly know that’s how I felt at first.

And then came Shannon Hale. She literally took Stephenie Meyer by the arm and was instantly her bosom buddy. Not that their friendship hadn’t been created before this moment, mind you. How Shannon Hale told it, if I remember correctly, is that she saw the success that Mrs. Meyer was having and said to herself, “She’s going to need a friend.” So she e-mailed her and they became instant friends. I think Shannon Hale was very perceptive in this. Sure, it’s obvious that fame can be heady and thrilling and tantalizing. However, it also must be awfully lonely, for as soon as Stephenie Meyer made a name for herself, jealous individuals tried to take her name, tear it down, and humble her beneath their cruel heels.

This is one of the reasons I was so impressed with Shannon Hale. Here she was, a Newbery winner, an established, prolific author, and a darn fine writer, whose sparse but poetic (almost elemental) prose and well-realized characters seem to spurt fire and wind and water and life from the page. And then came Stephenie Meyer, a first-time writer who admitted to *Time* magazine, “I don’t think I’m a writer; I think I’m a storyteller. The words aren’t always perfect.” She was an obscure Mormon housewife from Arizona who catapulted into fame and fortune simply because she had a vivid dream about a vampire romance and decided to write it down. It would have been tempting to any writer to say, “Oh, I’ve struggled for my reputation as a writer, worked hard to perfect my craft, and here comes a freshman author who woos the world on her first try. Does she really deserve it? Is it really *literature*? Is she *deserving*?” Not so with Shannon Hale. Instead of being a jealous-hearted spoilsport who can’t identify with any work that falls out of her narrow definition of “art,” she looked at this other vulnerable woman who had been thrust into a whole new world and said, “She’s going to need a friend.”

This, I think, is something that deserves attention, quiet and intimate as it may be. Artists can be a contentious, avarice-eyed lot if they feed their insecurities and egos too much. However, at this Mormon Arts retreat, I found that the vast majority of this group of Mormon artists had something else entirely in their hearts — they had truly let their religion seep into not only their art but into their relationships as artists. And there were no better examples of this kind of love that weekend than Shannon Hale and Stephenie Meyer. ■