



# Glen Nelson

INTERVIEW BY **RANDY ASTLE** | PHOTOS BY **ZACK TAYLOR**

WEB: **MORMONARTISTSGROUP.COM**

*Glen Nelson is a ghostwriter with several New York Times nonfiction bestsellers to his credit. He is also director of Mormon Artists Group which creates original works with LDS painters, composers, writers, photographers, designers, architects, choreographers, filmmakers, etc. MAG is currently celebrating its tenth anniversary.*

## **What do you do for a living?**

According to the IRS, I'm a writer. Recently, I've been doing a bit of ghostwriting, which is writing other people's books for them. I also play the role of manuscript doctor. I've been lucky in that I've had a couple of *New York Times* bestsellers in the last few years. A new book I've worked on comes out this week, and I just finished a manuscript in January for which the New York publishers have high hopes.

## **What about your own writing?**

I've worn a lot of hats. My training is in literature. I'm a James Joyce scholar, but I opted out of the academic life after I graduated from NYU about twenty-five years ago. Most of the things I've written were in collaboration: I've written three operas, several song cycles, and individual art songs. But I've also had poetry, essays, a few articles, and some scholarship published. Those are things with my name on them.

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**How much of those are Church work, and how much are on James Joyce and other things like that?**

At one point I was the world authority on a certain page of *Ulysses* . . . for about fifteen minutes. Since then, I haven't done any really literary scholarship work.

**Is much of the rest of it is about the Church?**

I've written a few articles for the Church publications, but I didn't really write anything overtly LDS, aside from those publications, until I was forty. For a long time, I didn't think that I had anything to add to the dialogue of the Church. In 2005, BYU commissioned an opera from me — I'm the librettist, which means that I'm in charge of the plot and the dialogue — about Joseph Smith for the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration.

That was a challenge because I didn't want to put words into Joseph's mouth, and to be honest, I couldn't really figure out what would be going on in his head, either. But I had an epiphany one day as my daughter lay in the hospital after brain surgery. I didn't understand the prophet in Nauvoo, but I did have insight into the struggling young father a decade earlier with sick and dying children, a farmer and man in love, a man trying to get a book published. So I scrapped the idea of the opera taking place in Nauvoo and instead concentrated on the period of him trying to get the Book of Mormon published.

**Tell us about your collaboration with Murray Boren on that opera, *The Book of Gold*.**

The music was written by Murray, who in my mind is one of the best composers ever to come from the Church. I was really happy with my contribution to the opera. It seemed to me well-researched and not just the facts.

What I mean is we decided to keep all of the action factual, so

everything that happens on stage could be documented in the historical record. Also, the language itself was researched. I studied speech patterns of nineteenth-century literature; I guess my NYU days came back to help me there. Not just serious literature, but also pop literature, newspapers, and so forth, from the 1820s through the 1860s. I wanted to be sure that the characters used the vocabulary and cadence of Joseph's time.

One thing that often bothers me with projects that are historical in nature is when they use language that is phony. The surprise for me was how the literature of the time gave me insight into how the characters should express themselves and also how they think. In the opera, Joseph sounds like Emerson: stately and probing. Oliver sounds like Hawthorne: more susceptible to outside pressure, romantic. Martin Harris sounds like Poe: with a manic, dangerous energy. And so forth.

The opera characters sound like them because I used their sentence structure as a template and peppered their speech with words that were in usage then. Whether or not anyone in the audience made those connections, it didn't matter much to me. But since the librettist is essentially creating rhythms for the composer in the way that words come together, I felt I was pushing the opera to sound authentic without caving in to a pastiche sound. The project was satisfying for me in every way. And it certainly didn't hurt that the lead singers were from the Met Opera, either.

**You had worked with Murray before. Did you work with him on all three of your previous operas and song cycles?**

Yes, the first opera was performed here in New York when I was still a Joyce scholar-type. It was an opera

of “The Dead,” a short story, which was the ideal vehicle for me at the time. It was a little chamber opera.

So there was that opera and there was another one called *The Singer’s Romance*, which was a sort of mashup of several Willa Cather stories that I was very fond of. Together we have done a series of song cycles for concert performance, some just for piano accompaniment or for full orchestra. We’ve done five of those, and then I’ve worked with some other composers as well, either just editing texts that they wanted to set or creating original texts for them.

### **Do you approach adapting something like *Dubliners* differently from something like the history of Joseph Smith? Or did you use largely the same process?**

Actually, it’s an identical process. I was really happy with that first experience of adapting Joyce, with scholars coming to check out every detail for authenticity, but my anxiety about being correct was replayed when I did the BYU gig. I was quite nervous about going to BYU and having somebody yell at me because something wasn’t historically right. I think that’s what led me toward an authentic plot. For example, the historical record says that Joseph translated the plates by looking into a hat with a seer stone in the base. So in the libretto I had material like that.

Yet I was nervous about how that would be received. The producers never said a word to me about that. They staged it exactly like the libretto said. It did get a lot of questions in institute, apparently. Students would go to their teachers and ask, “What’s this thing that I just saw?” and the teachers would say, “Well, actually, that was the real deal,” and they would open up the history books and so forth. So it opened up a dialogue to turn some of our folk

stories down a more authentic path, which I think is completely healthy. During that time, Richard Bushman was writing his biography of Joseph Smith, and he lived in New York near me. He was kind enough to look at the libretto before Murray started setting it.

### **Where did Mormon Artists Group come from? What are its origins?**

We started Mormon Artists Group ten years ago. Initially it was sort of a social thing, and then that shifted over time to commerce. The initial impetus was that there were all these artists here, and by artists, I mean creative artists, rather than performing artists. They were all doing cool and professional things, but I didn’t know that. I knew that this guy was my bishop and that that woman was my Relief Society president, but I didn’t know that he was a photographer and she was a painter. And to be honest, it bothered me that we weren’t open about what we really cared about artistically, either in our professional lives or off hours.

So I wanted to bring everybody together and do things that would showcase what it is that we really are about and what we care about. So we started doing things like exhibitions. We put together a little portfolio of stuff we were doing. There were painters, photographers, sculptors, poets, historians, playwrights, filmmakers, choreographers, and architects — it was open to everybody. What we found over time was that our social needs changed, and people, at an elite level especially, didn’t care about getting together once a month or year or decade. What they wanted was advocacy. They wanted to learn more about people who were also aspiring to be really good because they would sometimes feel aesthetically isolated.

So we started doing publications, not just of books but also

limited edition artworks. And we started commissioning projects. Some of them were really ambitious, actually, particularly with having people collaborate on different art forms together, which I thought was really fun to do. Over the track of this ten-year period we incorporated, so we are now a corporation in the state of New York. We essentially do limited edition artworks in lots of different kinds of media and sometimes we’ll do commercial editions of those. A book might end up becoming a paperback, for example.

### **This recently happened with Richard Bushman’s new book.**

Richard was the historian I mentioned a moment ago. *Rough Stone Rolling* was his biography of Joseph Smith, and when it was about a year away from publication, I was in his house and said, “You know, it might be fun for you to keep a journal of what it’s like for you to finish a project and put it out there and see how people respond.” And he hemmed and hawed a little bit about it. But he came back to me and said, “I think this might work, but I’m not sure. I’ll write and then we’ll see what we get.”

A year later the history book came out. Knopf published it. Then after three months or so, he showed me the manuscript that Mormon Artists Group eventually published. It came to be called *On the Road With Joseph Smith*. It was about Richard’s journey, both his physical one — traipsing around the country speaking at academic conferences, Church groups, and giving lectures and radio and TV interviews — and it was also about the emotional journey of expectation and the question of what it’s going to be like to receive criticism.

You know, you live with a character like Joseph for at least a decade to write a book like that, and then what happens when a critic



comes around and either loves it or hates it? In Richard's case, both things happened. So this book that we came out with was for me just an ideal project: it was personal, it had a Mormon component, but it wasn't about Mormonism, really. It was about someone who was a part of the culture and had something to say of his own experience.

Initially we released a limited edition. It was quite spectacular as an object. It was a handmade cherry wood slipcase with loose

unbound sheets slid inside. It reminded me of Joseph Smith building the cherry wood box to hold the plates while he was translating them. It was really quite a beautiful volume, and it sold out in like a minute and a half. It's a collectible now. Then we were approached to do a paperback by a publisher. I had told Richard all along that I didn't want that, because when you are writing a book that you know a hundred people are going to see, it's different than if you are writing

a book that a thousand people are going to see. You self-edit.

But the comments that he received from the publication of the book were intensely favorable. And he thought, "Well, I think that a paperback might be useful to other people," and that came out and is still in print.

**Can you give us examples of one or two other Mormon Artists Group projects that you have been most pleased with?**

We have done eighteen projects with eighty-six LDS artists. That fact is cool to me because when people try to start a publication or they form some group based on a common ideology, those usually don't last long. They tend to have a utopian feeling to them, but they aren't sustainable, or they need outside support to prop them up. So I am quite proud of our longevity and independence.

The other thing that really strikes me is the range of our projects. We did fine photographs when the Manhattan Temple came out. We've done film animation, poetry, etchings, songwriting, and personal essays. We've had artists from across the United States and abroad. This year we did a book, *On Sunday*, that simply had people all around the world who went to church and described everything that happened one day — from Kuwait, Singapore, Brazil, Harlem, Seattle, Chicago, Mesa, Provo, Australia, etc.

We did a beautiful sketchbook by a young artist who is making a lot of name for himself, Casey Jex Smith. I met this young guy, and I found out that he takes a little sketchbook to church with him every Sunday and he draws things he sees or imagines. So I felt, like with Richard's book, that it was a very intimate thing. It was a believing Mormon artist who was making stuff that expressed his own values. The title of it is *Church Drawings*. It wasn't propaganda, it wasn't commissioned to help the Church in any way; it was just a personal response, and I thought that it was quite beautiful.

One of our complex projects was called *Mormoniana*. I invited sixteen Mormon classical composers to take an LDS painting and write a piano piece based on it, like "Pictures at an Exhibition" by Mussorgsky. That was a very fun project because it showed that the

compositional styles of fine Mormon composers were all over the map. Still, they had so much to say to each other. That was a successful book for us.

**You have a monthly e-newsletter called *Glimpses* that contains some fascinating stuff. For instance, the most recent one was about an artist from Africa, and the one before that was about modern art by Mormons. Do you see your role to be an educator as much as a producer and promoter for these artists?**

We came to the online party kind of late. Recently it struck me that a big segment of Mormon culture, people who would be predisposed to like contemporary work by other people in their culture, were underexposed to it. I use *Glimpses* as a communication tool. It comes out monthly. In addition to announcing our new projects, I've turned an eye to scholarship and also informal communication. It seems to me that scholarship, particularly on early modern Mormon work of the twentieth century and forward, is less known than it should be.

Also, sometimes people will write to me and say, "You should research so-and-so." That's the case of this last artist — he is a young painter named Hildebrando de Melo from Angola. He had a beautiful gallery show here in Chelsea of abstract painting; he's LDS and joined the Church in Portugal. So in that case, someone contacts me and I'll do an interview.

At other times, I'll ask people who are experts in a field or into something that I don't know much about if they would like to write an article for *Glimpses*. Sometimes I'll get with artists who want to explain what they do. I do this because with contemporary work, and I'm thinking mostly of music and visual art, artists often throw the stuff at the viewer or the

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listener and hope that something sticks. There's really not any kind of place where they can learn about it. So we did one really cool newsletter that was simply a contemporary music recording with audio voiceover commentary by the composer on what was happening in the music.

People wrote me from all over saying, "I never would have listened to this music, but now I actually get it." So I think the newsletter can serve a purpose of education. But when you say "education," it sometimes has this sense that it's remedial or that I'm trying to push something on people who don't want it, and I don't think of it that way so much as exposure.

Relatives of mine, for example, live in places that are very, very far away from any museum that has any kind of contemporary work at all, so I think that a newsletter is a way that I can give them access to ideas that they wouldn't normally see. We keep all the back issues of *Glimpses* on our website.

**In that vein of thought, do you think that Mormon artists and Mormons as art consumers can benefit from finding out about these people and about new types of works that they wouldn't otherwise be exposed to?**

It's all about exposure, both for the artists themselves and for people trying to understand them.

At the turn of the twentieth century when the Mahonri Youngs and the Minerva Teicherts were coming to New York to study because they realized they couldn't get an education where they lived, the real education they got in New York was exposure. Not access to galleries that would sell their works, necessarily, but exposure to what was really happening with their peers on the East Coast and Europe. And it broadened their perception of what their art could be.

The other benefit is social. One of the things that I'm conscious of is that a lot of LDS artists live in congregations where they might be the only artist. I get this kind of e-mail frequently.

**Might it be fair then to say that Mormon Artists Group is something akin to the twenty-first century version of John Hafen going on a mission to Paris to learn about art? You are able to use technology to bring people together and educate them more about art, whereas at that time they had to travel to do it. Or would that be a bit of a stretch?**

The painter missionaries were such an interesting moment in our history. It's fascinating to me that those guys were set apart. They got down on a knee and the prophet said, "I bless you. You're a missionary. Go off and learn." Crawford Gates mentioned in an earlier issue of *Mormon Artist* that when he did the music for the Palmyra Pageant, he was set apart. That's very cool.

Today, any artist who has a discernible gift has ways of getting out and finding education and a community that can support him or her. I mean, color photography in magazines is a relatively recent invention. Before that, imagine being a painter wanting to discover art long-distance.

Mormon Artists Group is not an education for artists. They don't need us for that. What they need is patronage and to feel like their attempts to communicate through the arts are falling on open eyes and ears. So our goals try to align with those needs.

As consumers, there are a lot of people who would be very happy knowing that there are LDS artists at the highest level, people who would be willing to purchase their work or go to their concerts or buy their books or commission projects from them. So, in an Oprah sort of way, I've been able to connect

artists with people who can give them dough, both as collectors and also in their businesses. It's been a common thread of our projects that an artist will work with us and then use that product as a kind of extravagant calling card and get corporate commissions or other works based on it.

### **Have you gotten a different reception from the mainstream community than from the LDS community?**

Our works have been acquired by big institutions, and they have been very enthusiastic, both of the object that they have in front of them and of the communal aspect — that it's created by a group of like-believing people.

Some of our stuff is in the Museum of Modern Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, in Yale's library, and other major American libraries, and in collections of private collectors of importance who are and aren't LDS, both here and internationally. They have been super supportive of the concept of it.

It's not a new idea, a group of people gathering together. That's essentially how a school of work is created. It's not really your question, but I am starting to see a school of thought in contemporary Mormon art. There are commonalities that are very interesting, and I think the academic community will eventually connect the dots between genres and discover fascinating things.

### **Are you getting similar responses from Salt Lake and Provo and Mesa?**

It does vary, but I don't think I could characterize it very clearly. I'm always surprised to discover pockets of patrons in unexpected places. The Pacific Northwest, for example, is unusually attentive to our projects. I have no idea why, but I'm all for it.

### **Are there people here in New York who have been with you from day one? Who else has made a large contribution?**

There are, but in any genre, I get leery of going back to somebody too often because there are just so many. Even someone who follows Mormon art would be hard pressed, for example, to list five very accomplished composers, the kind of people who are getting big commissions, big awards, and who are being played by serious musicians around the country. But I can list fifty.

I try to maintain a mental database of LDS artists. Not just composers, but painters and writers and so forth.

Writers are pretty well served by Mormon scholarship, but I would dare to say that the other disciplines of Mormon art are not as well covered. Film, yes, recently, but heaven help you if you are an LDS jazz composer or a choreographer. Nobody would know who you are. And yet these LDS artists exist. So I do feel that I have a little bit of a stage to connect people who wouldn't know otherwise that there are LDS artists of distinction.

One of our scholarly activities recently was to track down as many Mormon operas as we could — and we found over fifty. That's a number big enough to attract scholarship and notice.

A few years ago we did a research project of serious LDS music that is on the shelves in New York libraries — the New York Public Library, Juilliard, and university libraries. And we found hundreds — hundreds of symphonies, string quartets, piano music, tons of choral music, as you'd imagine, and art songs, ballets.

I would dare say that only a handful of people in the Church might be aware of the true depth of LDS art. Let's just say that Mormon studies (outside of our

history) is not a saturated field. For most of us, the problem is, how does somebody who is interested find these artists?

### **What are you doing to publicize that and get those names out there?**

How much can one person do? What I try to do is tackle it from two vantage points.

One is to be historically aware and come up with reference volumes and articles that can be published and just be out there.

The other thing is that I really believe in being part of the commissioning process. I want to expand the library of Mormon art, so to speak. It's all well and good that you are a Church composer, for example, but the Church isn't going to commission a symphony. How would that be useful to it? (Although as soon as I say that, I can think of a way.)

So what we have done is approach artists to commission new works. What I want from them is their best work. I don't want them to write for a specific audience. I don't want them to dumb it down or to dilute it or to try to be commercial with it. I want them to make something that others can be passionate about collecting and enjoying. I want them to do their best work given the parameters of the marketplace, as in *X* amount of time to create something will give them *X* return.

For instance, take our new project. Last year I approached six composers and commissioned each of them to write a complete song cycle to LDS texts. I think it's commonly known that we're experiencing something like a golden age of Mormon poets. You have people in *The Paris Review* and *The New Yorker* and award winners, "name poets," as it were. Maybe they aren't in the *Ensign*. It's not really the *Ensign's* goal to publish more cutting-edge work, and I don't have

a beef with that at all. But these poets are out there and they consider themselves to be very Mormon; their texts read as Mormon to me.

So I thought it would be quite cool to have composers do song cycles using their texts, and now the premieres of them are going to happen all over the country. We did a concert here in New York of four of the six cycles. Each is about fifteen to thirty minutes long, so they are significant, weighty works. The New York premieres were on March 20. Some of the premieres internationally were in public forums and others were salon settings in someone's house or in a community center.

This project has a couple of goals. One of them is to just give singers access to work. Let's say you're a serious singer. Right now at the Met, I think we have four or five LDS singers, and there are many professional concert artists out there. When they are asked sometimes to do recordings and recital work, they want to put something Mormon on their program because they want to convey what they are but they have no idea where they would find that.

One of the goals of this project is to have lots of singers performing these works. Usually when you have a performance of a premiere, and I sadly know this from my own experiences, it's "premiere then disappear." That's the way it works. You almost never have a second reading. So this is an extraordinary opportunity for composers to have their work performed by multiple people in multiple cities. I'm kind of excited about it. We are calling the project "Song/Cycles," and I have high hopes for it. I have a feeling a lot of people are going to be surprised by how emotionally connected they are to art songs.

**Do you have other things in the works that you'd like to talk about?**

We have three or four things every year that we are working on. We did a book about two months ago called *The Island of Bali Is Littered With Prayers*. It's by Jeremy Grimshaw, who is a musicologist, and it's about his experience in Bali.

**And it talks about his bringing a gamelan to BYU?**

That's a traditional Balinese percussion orchestra. Essentially, it's a culture clash book and an exploration of community, music, and spiritual values. It's also very smart and keenly poetic. I love it. That book was published in a limited edition, covered with imported batik fabric. It sold out in December, so it is going to be issued as a paperback in April.

We have more projects coming out. One that I can talk about is really ambitious. A painter is responding to the Book of Moses with a series of large paintings. I think there are nineteen altogether. They are incredible.

**In the fall 2006 issue of *Dialogue*, you wrote, "Sometimes I am asked by journalists about the state of Mormon arts and what I think it means to be a Mormon artist today. To be honest, I do not have a satisfying answer." Why can that be such a difficult question to answer? What is it about Mormon art that is so hard to pin down?**

This question points to many of my own insecurities. The bottom line is that I'm not a scholar. I'm not an original thinker. I have a hard time keeping track of people and of putting myself out there socially. Being honest here, I hate to play the role of an expert, because I know what that would really mean, and I'm not that. I'm not terribly entrepreneurial either. On the surface, that isn't a very promising picture.

And yet I kept waiting for somebody to come along and simply try to bring Mormon artists

together, to see the big picture. Eventually I decided that maybe I couldn't define Mormon arts or speak for the artists, but I might be valuable as somebody who wanted more from them and in exchange served as a liaison with people who expect their best.

**Do you think that Mormon artists' natural tendency is to cloister themselves, to put that part of their personality under a bushel, so to speak? Is there something cultural that makes us want to pull back?**

There is fear, both of failure and of the scrutiny within the Church that would occur if they were successful. We haven't been kind to believing LDS artists who've made it big. It's been sad to watch.

The second thing is that in a post-Proposition 8 world, there is a certain danger in the label of "Mormon artist." This probably isn't the place to go into it more than to say that there are artists who have been blackballed, who have lost work, who have been frightened that announced events would be cancelled if they were found out to be LDS. That's a very difficult position to be in for someone who is paying the rent as an artist, because in the couple of cases that I am thinking about these are fully participating, believing, Church members who are essentially being asked to choose. Those two realities are sad but undeniable.

**Perhaps there is something in the label of "Mormon art" that can still contribute to the establishment of the Church, either here in New York or in other cities. Do you think that the Mormon Artists Group is contributing to the building up of Zion or the growth of the Church? How is it adding to the reputation?**

I would like to have projects that make some money for the artists who need it. As far as influence or reputation goes, I am leery of

# *[New York] is a good place for believing Mormons to be, period.*

slipping into the trap of false importance. Personally, I've had some luck, but I don't think too highly of my own abilities.

Generally speaking about Mormon artists, I consider us to be like plumbers. We are good Mormon people who are plying our trade, and I don't think we have any kind of responsibility that's morally higher than a plumber's plumbing. It's just that the organization is there to help these artists and to also establish a basis for future scholarship, illustrating that at a certain point in Church history there were people who were trying to accomplish a certain thing and there were other people who were supportive of that.

**This is a special issue about New York City. Do you think that New York has influenced your work?**

**Could you have established something like Mormon Artists Group if you had lived somewhere like Salt Lake or San Francisco or elsewhere?**

Technology has really enabled boundary hopping, so I don't think there are limitations today. I grew up in a very small farm community, and I suppose someone there now could establish relationships with people if he or she really wanted to because of the Internet. So I don't think that it's a limiting factor any longer.

I do think that the city has affected me personally in profound ways. I like the idea of being a small fish in a big pond rather than a big fish in a small pond, as in where I grew up.

But the thing about New York and raising a family here — and of course considering it as a place where there's a strong artistic community — is that there is certain

energy here all the time, as far as inspiration. I am swimming in that all the time here. There is less of a detachment of culture from daily life. That surprises me as far as how that feeds into the things that I'm working on, to pay the mortgage as a writer and also stuff that I'm producing with Mormon Artists Group.

**Is this a good place for Mormon artists to come and live and try to build their careers?**

It's a good place for believing Mormons to be, period.

There is a critical mass. They can have influence in their communities here. They can really show why the Church and their belief system matter.

And I'm not talking about missionary work; I am talking about being a presence in a community. ■