



Orson Scott Card

INTERVIEW BY ERIC W. JEPSON

WEB: HATRACK.COM

A student of mine whom I'd recently introduced to *Ender's Shadow* came to back-to-school night with his parents. He had finished it quickly, then his mom had picked up the book and they both loved it. Then my student said that a friend had called you a Something Propagandist and the Ender books Something Propaganda. After a bit of puzzling, his mother guessed the missing word was "Mormon" and yes! That was it! at which we all rolled our eyes and I, who had just been offered this interview a few hours before, had my first question: Mr. Card, you've been accused of being a Mormon propagandist. How do you plead? (And, while you're at it, how do you respond to the other side of the aisle, constantly speculating about your pending apostasy?)

Thanks for recognizing that I get accused of both things. Of course I never use my fiction to propagandize for Mormonism—religion is too serious a matter for me to subject it to fictional treatment. I have sometimes used stories from Mormon history and scripture as the basis of the plotlines of some of my fiction, but so could any atheist—and many have done so with biblical or other religious stories. Is a writer who bases a story on the Odyssey or Iliad propagandizing for Athena or Zeus?

At the same time it is impossible to write fiction without including the way you view the world, and to the degree that my worldview coincides with Mormonism, aspects of it are going to be in my work. But since Mormon values mostly overlap with Christian

values, and most of those with simple human values, the overwhelming majority of the moral worldview in my fiction is simply *civilized*.

The charge that my work is "Mormon propaganda" has never been demonstrated in any way from the text of my fiction. It's merely the bigotry of people who hate all things Mormon and wish to punish other people for their faith. These people range from devout Baptists to the fanatically politically correct, who, instead of engaging in public debate in a civilized manner, by offering their own arguments, use name-calling and personal attacks to try to silence or punish their opponents. Shame on them.

Those Mormons who condemn my work, on the other hand, usually do so because my work is not decorous

enough for them. While they don't mind a bit when non-Mormon writers give their characters a sex life or have them use rough language or talk rudely to people, they expect that I will somehow do the impossible: Write powerful, truthful fiction about human beings without ever showing anybody doing anything that Mormons regard as bad.

Thus if a character in a book of mine gets drunk, commits adultery, or speaks disdainfully of religion or Republicans, some Mormons assume that this means I'm *advocating* such reprehensible things. They forget that fiction, like life, can only make moral sense if there is "opposition in all things." To them I say, not "shame," but "lighten up and get some perspective." My consolation is that such people find Shakespeare filthy.

When I want to push my religious or political ideas, I write essays. I've done that prolifically. But when I create a fictional character, I give his or her views a full and fair airing—even when they disagree completely with my own. The mistake that many readers make is thinking that because an idea is said within my fiction, I'm advocating it. On the contrary, I am merely *airing* it in order to show what the character is thinking and what motivates him (or at least what rationalization he uses).

As I've moved deeper into the Mormon arts, I keep running into Mormon artists paranoid that truth-telling will land them in ecclesiastical straits. I mostly, and uncharitably, want to strangle these people. Undoubtedly you've dealt with this question before. What advice do you have for those suffering from this paranoia?

They're not paranoid. My stake president was plagued for many years by communications from a vague Church committee, which provided them with xeroxes of a page from a work of mine, highlighted at the offending passage, which they were supposed to "inquire about." The intention was to cast doubt on my loyalty to the Church—to

get my local leaders in a dither about my faithfulness so they would nag at me until I succumbed to the coercion (cf. "Unrighteous dominion") and stopped writing honestly, which would also mean that I would stop writing effectively or well.

When I investigated, however, I found that these letters—which were often very deceptive, removing the absolutely faithful and loyal context from statements that could only be taken as disloyal by malicious people determined to find fault—were being generated by a single bureaucrat who conceived of himself as the J. Edgar Hoover of the Mormon Church. When I talked to actual Apostles about the situation, I found that the official Church position is that as long as I don't interfere with the work of the Church, my membership is not in question because of anything I write. In fact, my work has been vetted by Brethren before I was hired to write for the Church, as I have done on two occasions: The Hill Cumorah Pageant and the sesquicentennial musical *Barefoot to Zion*. If they had had any doubt about my loyalty to the Church, I would not have been engaged to write either.

And it's all moot, anyway. These letters would come to my stake president and he would toss them in the garbage—indeed, that has been the policy of several stake presidents over the years—because he knew me and my wife, had seen our loyalty and faith in action year after year, and knew that my writings were loved by many faithful Latter-day Saints. They knew how to recognize meaningless malice, and how to ignore it.

Long before I knew of these letters (for they were never sent directly to me), however, I policed myself. I once thought of an absolutely marvelous story based on an experience on my mission. But it made no sense except in the LDS missionary context, and as I started writing it, I realized that I was writing about things that might cause investigators to look askance at missionaries who showed up at their door,

or might cause prospective missionaries to hesitate to serve. I could not, in a work of fiction, make the context clear enough to ameliorate such potential damage to the work of the Church, and so I dropped the project.

There is no moment in my career when I would knowingly write anything that would interfere with the work of the Church. At the same time, there is no moment when I will let someone else's foolish ideas of decorum influence writing that must come from my own conscience.

Part of your public persona is Uncle Orson—the avuncular mentor—and your *Intergalactic Medicine Show* offers real payment for young authors still working in short stories, something you have said that science fiction (and perhaps all fiction) needs in order to build great writers. Also, even though you've spilled many words knocking university-level writing programs, Uncle Orson now teaches fiction writing at Southern Virginia University and elsewhere. And so I guess what I want to know is, how do you see your role in raising the next generation of writers, and what are you doing to make that happen?

I have had help along the way. What I've learned, I offer to others, in case they find it helpful. What I don't know, I'm still trying to figure out—when I do, I'll teach that too. The single most important thing I advocate, though, is for writers to remove any barriers between themselves and the widest possible audience for their honest work. That's my beef with academic writing programs and with the way literature is taught in most schools today. Instead of valuing clarity, they value most the fiction that requires professorial mediation to be understood. That is death to literature. Good writing requires no mediation whatsoever, and no training beyond knowledge of the language and the ability to read—and not even that, for audiobooks. So my role as a writing teacher is to help writers learn to speak clearly and effectively to their natural audience (i.e.,

people who believe in and care about the same stories they believe in and care about). That is the opposite of what most academic creative writing programs do. So I'm not just "helping young writers" (they're not all young, anyway!)—I'm also engaged in a war against those who would silence these young writers by making their work inaccessible to their natural audience.

Not so avuncular, am I?

What are you reading now? Any engagement with Mormon authors?

I don't read authors for their Mormonness. There are some writers I enjoy who are Mormons, and some writers I have no patience for who are Mormons—and the same is true of my attitude toward books by non-Mormons. I have enormous respect for the talent of David Farland and the two Brandons—Sanderson and Mull, along with many other Mormon writers at various stages of their career. I wish nothing but good for even the writers whose work I can't enjoy as much, because I'm not in its natural audience.

But you have to understand: I'm not a joiner. I don't "hang out" with anybody. My closest friends are not writers, or not career writers, anyway. I find that writers who hang out with other writers start to create fiction that is about writers or people who talk and think like writers, or people who talk and think the way writers would like to believe writers talk and think. It's a dead end. Writers whose social life is built around other writers are killing their own work. Your characters are supposed to be real people in the real world, not people who hide in basements and attics to type lies they can charge money for.

It's one of the great side benefits of being Mormon. Outside of Utah and Idaho, where zoning laws seriously deform Mormon wards, we Latter-day Saints are brought together on Sundays with people from every income level and every walk of life. If we choose our friends from among those people, not gravitating toward literary or arty people, but instead seeking

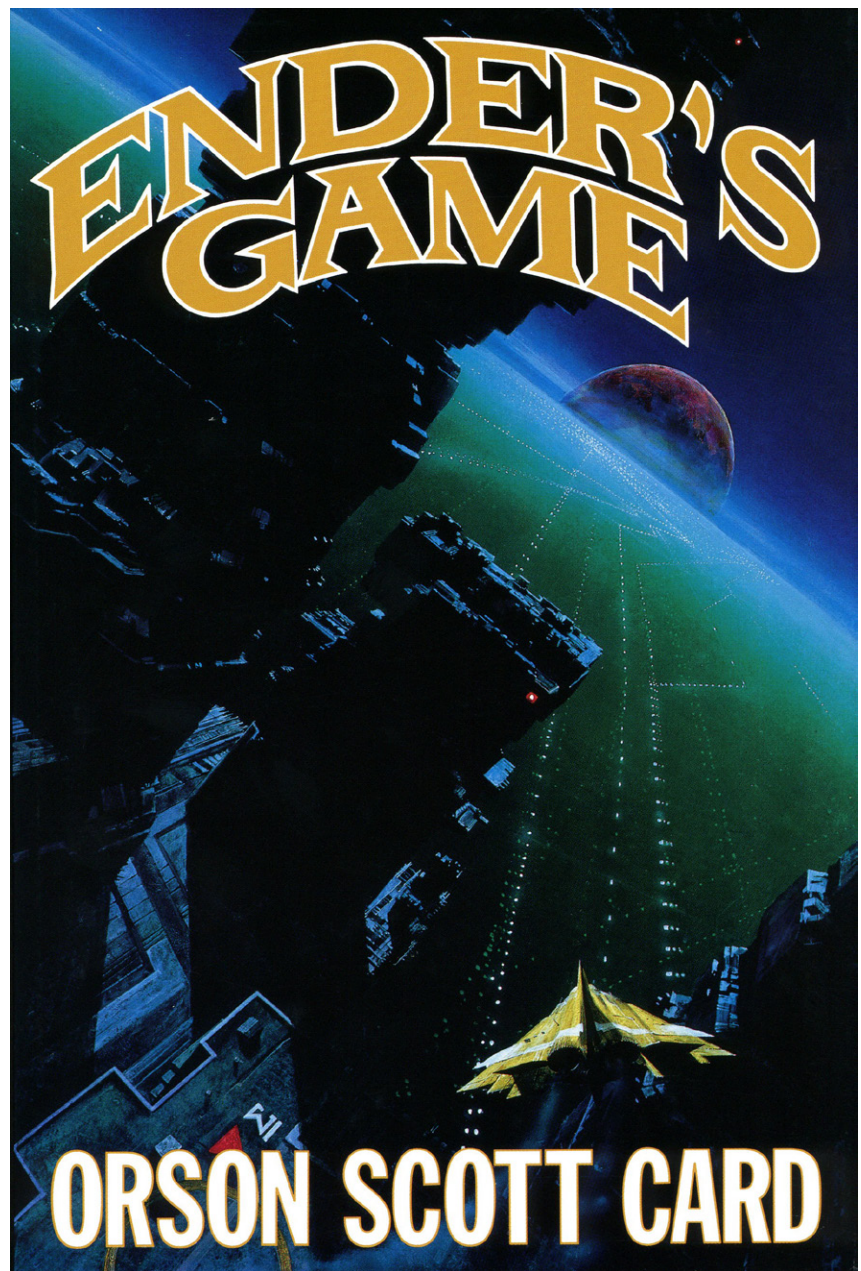


Photo courtesy Orson Scott Card

good people from every group, it will enrich our fiction and allow us to keep in contact with the widest possible audience, because they will know that we know them and their friends. Too much fiction today reveals the fact that the writer has lost all touch with non-academic or non-literary people. This is especially true of academic-literary fiction, which is one of the reasons why most of such fiction has little or no audience.

But you asked what I'm reading now. Let me just read you the titles of

the books stacked up for me to review them in my weekly column: Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life*. Robert A. Burton, *On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not*. Geoffrey Perret, *Lincoln's War*. Susan Wise Bauer, *The History of the Medieval World*. Neil Shusterman, *Bruiser*. Dan Ariely, *The Upside of Irrationality: The Unexpected Benefits of Defying Logic at Work and at Home*. Pope Brock, *Charlatan*. Donald Stoker, *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War*. Patrick Lencioni, *Death*

by Meeting. Sol Steinmetz, *There's a Word for It*. Russell A. Olsen, *The Complete Route 66: Lost and Found*. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap*. Marek Oziewicz, *One Earth, One People: The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin*, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle, and Orson Scott Card.

And, not quite stacked up, here are the audiobooks I have listened to in the past months—since I download them from Audible, there's nothing to stack up: Kristin Chenoweth, *A Little*

Bit Wicked. Randy O. Frost and Gail Stekeete, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*. Kwei Quartey, *Wife of the Gods*. Helen Simonson, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*. Lisa Gardner, *The Neighbor*. Paul Bloom, *How Pleasure Works*. Maurice Gee, *In My Father's Den*. Ben Mezrich, *The Accidental Billionaires*. Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*. John McWhorter, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*. Larry Niven, *Ringworld*. Anthony Everitt, *Augustus*.

Daniel Ehrenhaft, *Friend Is Not a Verb*. Jonathan Kellerman, *Deception*. Robert Graves, *I, Claudius and Claudius the God*. Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and America*. Ken Scholes, *Canticle*.

I also recently reread (but will not review) *Lord of the Rings* and *Fountainhead*. I'm still waiting to review *Vanity Fair* and *Barchester Towers*, though I listened to the audiobooks almost a year ago—I love them, but haven't pushed them to the top of the stack, mostly because they don't really need my review to boost their careers <grin>. Right now I'm listening to *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* while I exercise. For other recent readings, you only have to look back at my review columns.

With you juggling so many series, how do you prioritize your projects? I've heard you say that it's entirely based on what keeps your sales reputation high, but that would suggest nothing but Ender books for the rest of your life. What other factors matter and how do you balance them against each other?

I write what I care about and believe in; or what is most urgently due, as long as it also falls under the former category. And sometimes I just write something because I really want to—though that's almost always a novella or short story rather than a book.

I can't force myself to write something that isn't ripe, but I do know how to enhance a story to fast-ripen it. Even then, my stories often go off into weird directions, and I've learned to follow them there and drag the original outline along with me, so the book remains coherent but is also richly flavored with whatever my unconscious is pumping up at that moment.

Is there room in the national market for Mormon writers to tell stories explicitly Mormon—and recognizable as such from the outside?

No. Because either it will be drivel like Krakauer's anti-Mormon treatment of Mormonism (informed by the deceptions of former historian, now

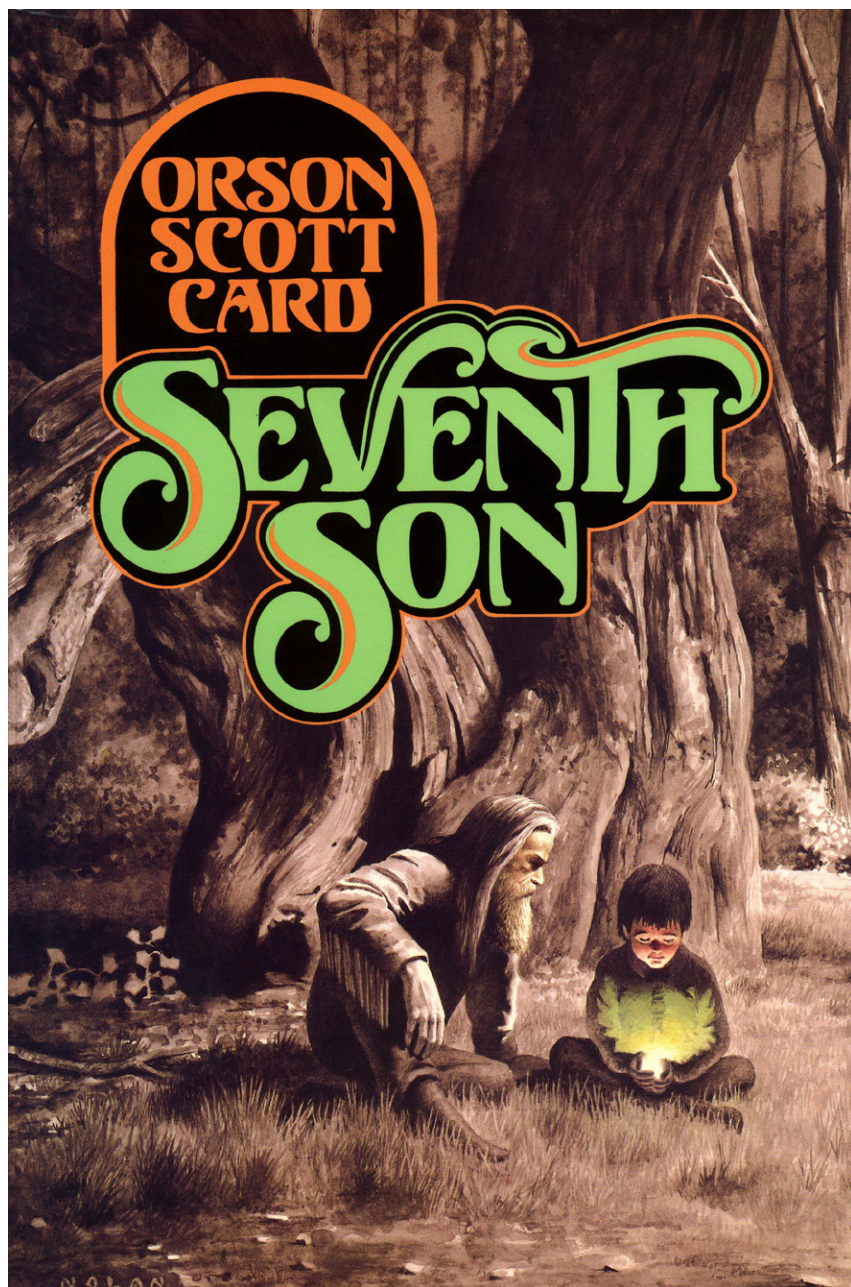


Photo courtesy Orson Scott Card

propagandist Michael Quinn) and other sensationalized nonsense that gets Mormon culture completely wrong, or it will be insider fiction that the audience suspects will be propaganda.

What Mormons forget is that we are not particularly interesting. That is, as long as you tell the truth about us. Few are the stories that require a Mormon setting in order to be told.

Having said that, I'll point to my book *The Folk of the Fringe*, a collection of linked stories set in a future Mormon culture (post-nuclear war). I'm very proud of the book, but by no stretch of the imagination has it "sold well." I'll also point to *Lost Boys*, one of my best novels, which has absolutely Mormon characters and was marketed Outside. It has sold decently, but set no records. And then there was *Saints*.

In short, I've done it as well as it has ever been done—and the resistance in the marketplace is enormous. Put "Mormon" anywhere on the cover, and you cut sales in half or worse.

But as long as you don't care about sales, and have established your career well enough that it can't be hurt by the sales dip that affects Mormon books, and you can find a publisher willing to indulge you, go for it.

If you want to write a Mormon novel so you can proselytize for the Church, on the other hand, I urge you to think again. Fiction is entertainment; it is, by admission, lies. Don't try to teach the gospel in the midst of entertaining lies. It's too serious to put in fiction. My "Mormon novels" have not required or even invited my readers to decide whether they think Mormonism is true or even good. They are set within Mormon culture, so that readers can take an anthropological interest in it if they wish, but it is not about convincing them of the truthfulness of our doctrine. Indeed, I wonder if any of my books even brings up doctrine in any meaningful way. I doubt it.

The gospel is true. So if you want to teach it, speak it as unadulterated, undisguised truth. We do no good if we try to sneak gospel messages into

something else—it just makes us look sneaky and deceptive.

Besides, Mormons as characters don't make for good fiction because Church life is so time-consuming. I suppose it might be amusing to have the hero constantly going to meetings or preparing to teach lessons, in a comic novel, but since most of us live lives that are absolutely focused on the village of our ward, it puts up enormous barriers for non-Mormons to even make sense of our lives. And when we're NOT in our villages, we're perfectly ordinary citizens of whatever country we live in. So why not write about perfectly ordinary citizens who are NOT Mormons?

Back when you were publishing LDS fiction as Hatrack River Publications, the ease of small-publisher printing and marketing had yet to undergo its current revolution. Have you considered getting back into the business now that we have POD and Twitter? And if not, what lessons can you offer those following in your footsteps?

I've seen no evidence that Twitter sells books, or that POD is even viable. We stopped publishing solely because our excellent distributor went out of business, and all the distributors we tried after that did absolutely nothing. We have a new distributor now, and we're planning to relaunch by publishing a collection of my essays, a book of hymns (with texts by me), a series of sharp poems by LDS poets, and—we hope—a novel or two. I'll let you know how that goes.

Meanwhile, Hatrack River worked very well—we made a profit on all but two of our books, and we know exactly why those failed—because we found a niche that was not served: That is, humorous-yet-sentimental novels about the lives of Mormons who are completely committed to the Church. That niche is still there, waiting for more books, and nobody else seems to be filling it.

You are the master of the moral dilemma and your best fiction is often

fueled by such dilemmas. I've heard this called one of your most Mormon attributes as a writer. What about moral dilemmas is particularly Mormon?

Nothing. It's what *I* do, not what *Mormons* do.

Your novel *Lost Boys* throws a typical Mormon family into weird supernatural situations. It and *Treasure Box* have been called horror novels by many people, as have some of your shorter works. On the other hand, you have an avowed hatred for horror movies and have expressed skepticism over the odds that an LDS horror can function whatsoever. As far as I can tell, you've made statements on Mormons and horror and Mormon horror in small bite-size pieces, but I can't really tell how your thoughts on the subject fit together. So, how do they all fit together?

Genres suck books into them whether they belong there or not. If by Horror you mean Clive Barker, then I have never written horror and never will. But if a novel of mine gets pushed into that genre by those marketing the book, I don't mind. It doesn't change a word of what I wrote.

My understanding is that you have been called a number of times to write for the Church. My impression is that it would be less likely for, say, an LDS contractor being called to fix the roof of the Hill Cumorah's visitors' center.

Being asked to write for a Church project doesn't mean that all the rest of your work has been certified as Good by the Brethren—it just means that they aren't embarrassed to admit you're Mormon, and they believe you won't start attacking the Church afterward. It also means they think you can do the job well. I hope they were satisfied with my work on the Pageant and on *Barefoot to Zion*. I have never written anything for the Church at a local level, unless you count road shows, or one-acts I wrote entirely on my own initiative. Local Church leaders don't give writing assignments, and they couldn't afford me even if they did. 🙄