mormonartist

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mormonartist

covering the Latter-day Saint arts world

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editor's**note**

One of the first things you'll notice about this issue is that it's almost twice as long as our last issue, featuring ten interviews instead of six (along with an essay and two reviews to boot). Because our list of people to interview hasn't stopped growing since day one and is already quite long, we've wanted to feature as many artists as we possibly can in each issue.

Well, bigger doesn't always mean better. As we've worked to put this issue together, we've realized that we bit off a little more than we could chew. In future issues we'll be slimming back down to a more manageable five or six interviews an issue.

Why? As some of you already know, we just finished running our first contest (the results are in this issue). We're going to do more of these. Lots more, hopefully. We're also going to be publishing the winning submissions in special issues (probably in between regular issues) so that we can get more Mormon art out there. Since we're effectively doubling our publication rate, our regular issues will need to be small enough that we can manage both.

We're up to seventy volunteers now, but there's still plenty of room. We particularly need editors, and especially those with experience. If you're interested (in editing or in anything else), check out our new volunteer info page:

http://mormonartist.net/volunteer

The events area on our site has remained woefully empty to date, but we're going to start adding content regularly so you'll know what Mormon arts events are going on.

With all of the small changes and shifts with the magazine, we hope to keep getting closer to achieving our goals: getting the word out about what's happening in the Mormon arts world, helping newer artists get launched in their careers, and showing that faith and art can work together in harmony, without compromising either.

—Benjamin Crowder

Letters to the editor may be sent to editor@mormonartist.net

submissionguidelines

Types of work we're looking for:

- *Personal essays*
- *Poetry*
- *Short stories*
- *Short plays*
- *Paintings*
- *Illustrations*
- *Photographs*

(This list will grow, and the submission guidelines will get more refined over time, but we want to keep it simple for now while we work everything out.)

Work in any genre is fine as long as it's appropriate for an LDS audience. It also goes without saying that anything you submit must be your own original work. (Simultaneous submissions and previously published work are both fine. If your submission has been published before, let us know where so we can get permission from the publisher.)

All submissions should be sent via email to editor@mormonartist.net. One submission per email, please.

Literary submissions: in the body of the email, put your name, the title of the piece, the genre, and a short one-paragraph synopsis. Attach your submission as a Word or PDF file.

Visual arts submissions: in the body of the email, put your name, the title of the piece, and the medium. Attach your submission as a JPEG file.

contest**results**

We're pleased to announce the winners of our first Mormon Artist contest (literature from writers thirty or under):

FIRST PLACE ($100):	Davey Morrison's play "Adam and Eve"
SECOND PLACE ($60):	Eliza Campbell's personal essay "Faith"
THIRD PLACE ($40):	Sarah Page's poem "Coring the Apple"
HONORABLE MENTION:	Tyler Chadwick's poem "For the Man in the Red Jacket"
HONORABLE MENTION:	Davey Morrison's poem "Blind Man"

These will be published in May in a special issue including interviews with the writers and essays about their pieces.

Also, we'll be announcing the details of our next Mormon Artist contest soon. (If you want to make sure you hear about it, subscribe to our blog, follow us on Twitter, or join our Facebook group.) And don't worry, the next contest will be open to everyone, regardless of age.

What does a Latter-day Saint renaissance look like?

by Robert Hall

Robert Hall is the founder and executive director of Arx Poetica. Website: **arxpoetica.com**

Is it a Mormon renaissance or just a renaissance?

As a writer, poet, musician, and designer, I am an ardent participant and observer of the arts. Over the years, I've thought over what the arts have and will mean for the Church, for saints, and for nations. I'm no stranger to the speculation among our members for "what's in store," both pertaining directly to the arts, and what the arts can do for the Church. I'm familiar with the vision laid out by prophets, scholars, patriots, and poets alike, for the hope of a future renaissance, the likes of which the world has never seen. This has always been my fascination, and I seem to hear echoes of the same sentiment scattered throughout the Church—especially among us artists. The collective voice speaks to a great and noble calling to become watchers on the towers, proclaiming to the world the good news of the gospel through the technology and medium of the arts.

I am a believer.

But why have we not yet been successful, at least in part, in bringing about a successful renaissance? I've thought of some solutions to the two fundamental errors I see with artistic endeavors among Church members, but first, I think it's important to assert that God alone is the veritable source of all good things and that nothing so lofty or grand as a renaissance could be achieved without bringing God directly to the forefront.

Still, why such elevated language as "renaissance" and the like?

We've heard the quotes before. But let's reflect upon a little concentrated collection.

Perhaps the most oft-cited talk is Spencer W. Kimball's First Presidency Message in the July 1977 issue of the *Ensign,* titled "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," adapted from a speech given at BYU about ten years prior. President Kimball said, "For long years I have had a vision of members of the Church greatly increasing their already strong positions of excellence till the eyes of all the world will be upon us." This is riveting enough, but then he goes on to an even bolder declaration from years past:

President John Taylor so prophesied, as he emphasized his words with this directive: "You mark my words, and write them down and see if they do not come to pass. You will see the day that Zion will be far ahead of the outside world in everything pertaining to learning of every kind as we are today

in regard to religious matters. God expects Zion to become the praise and glory of the whole earth, so that kings hearing of her fame will come and gaze upon her glory."

This is an interesting promise, and, admittedly, has become a mantra for my own and others' efforts in the Church and the arts. For added perspective, here are words from the hand of U.S. President John Adams, who viewed the blessed landscape of a future America:

> *I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain. (Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 12 May 1780.)*

We get the sense that even America's founders had some inclination toward a prosperous future, blessed by the arts. This perspective deepens when we couple the blessings of American promise with the blessings of a Restoration. Richard Bushman offers:

> *In Joseph [Smith's] own day, the Hudson River painters were men of acknowledged belief who struggled to capture divinity in their paintings. They pointed toward God, for example, not by bringing the perspective lines together in their landscapes but by focusing on a bright point that leads through the picture into infinite space beyond. The sincerity of this art is surely a recommendation for art in the service of religion… For Joseph Smith, the key word was… "glory." ("Would Joseph Smith attend the New York Stake Arts Festival?",* Silent Notes Taken: Personal Essays.)

(Now get ready; I'm running multiple scriptures together here, chaining them together for effect.)

> *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace… that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing (Isaiah 52:7–8)… For Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness (D&C 82:14)… If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things (Articles of Faith 13)… For they shall be as the stones of a crown, lifted up as an ensign upon his land (Zechariah 9:16)… And righteousness will I send down out of heaven; and truth will I send forth out of the earth, to bear testimony of mine Only Begotten; his resurrection from the dead… and righteousness and truth will I cause to sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out mine elect from the four quarters of the earth, unto a place which I shall prepare…and it shall be called Zion (Moses 7:62)… And from thence shall the gospel roll forth… as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth (D&C 65:2)… Out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners (D&C 109:73)… Zion shall flourish, and the glory of the Lord shall be upon her; And she shall be an ensign unto the people (D&C 64:41–42).*

Any one of these scriptures evokes a grand panorama, but taken together, there is an even greater sense of the truly awe-inspiring. We stand at the gate as a Restoration and, essentially, a renaissance rolls forth. As has been iterated in our own time by prophets:

> *Today we have a modern equivalent of the printing press in the Internet and all that it means. The Internet allows everyone to be a publisher, to have their voice heard, and it is revolutionizing society. (Elder Ballard, in a speech given at BYU–Hawaii on December 15, 2007.)*

> *We call upon all members, those in the arts and those seeking to appreciate the message of good art, to expand their vision of what can be done. If we are going to fill the world with goodness and truth, then we must be worthy to receive inspiration so we can bless the lives of our Heavenly Father's children. (Elder Ballard, "Filling the World with*

Goodness and Truth," Ensign, *Jul 1996.)*

> *The desire to create is one of the deepest yearnings of the human soul.… We each have an inherent wish to create something that did not exist before.… Everyone can create.… Nearly a century and a half ago, President Brigham Young spoke to the Saints of his day. "There is a great work for the Saints to do," he said. "Progress, and improve upon and make beautiful everything around you." (President Uchtdorf, "Happiness, Your Heritage," General Relief Society Meeting, October 2008.)*

> *We've barely scratched the surface. (President Hinckley, First Presidency Message, "There Must Be Messengers,"* Ensign, *October 1987.)*

Finally, I remember hearing President Faust say during a stake conference on my mission: "When the arts in the Church mature, people will flock to the Church." Whether or not I heard it correctly or just heard what I wanted to hear, I think it drives home the point succinctly. Why should those who want to fill the earth with filth and waste not be challenged? Do we want a renaissance of pollution and degradation? Can we survive as a people with continued moral decay in all the world about us? As Joseph Smith said,

> *That we should waste and wear out our lives in bringing to light all the hidden things of darkness, wherein we know them; and they are truly manifest from heaven—these should then be attended to with great earnestness. (D&C 123:13–14)*

Great earnestness. We, of necessity, must mature in the arts. It's incumbent upon us precisely because God would beautify the Earth and save his children. He would have us protect all good things. In fact, He would have us survive through a great renaissance, reborn.

How does a renaissance happen? Our first error

Our first problem lies in what I call a bit of narcissism. We've been handed a noble mandate, but often we're not careful. Our efforts become less effective. Our artistic efforts become so concentrated on a "Mormon" endeavor, that something gets lost in the shuffle. It is imperative to realize that an endeavor that is branded "Mormon" is, by its very nature, exclusive. Even with important exceptions, such as the New York-based Mormon Artists Group and this magazine (which I view as a necessary appendage of increased artistic endeavor), people who are not LDS will not necessarily feel inclined to participate or keep a finger on the pulse.

It's like the difference between saying "I am Mormon," and just behaving like one. We traditionally endeavor to lead by example. So why declare so forthrightly, "This is my Mormon artistic endeavor"?

Don't get me wrong. I think there's a fundamental need and place for identity. We are Mormon, and that's important. We don't want to forget who we are.

But we also have a proclivity toward too much self-awareness, and, at times, self-aggrandizement. After all, it's what we're taught. Our missionary endeavors are exclusively about proclaiming, boldly, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are accustomed to going into the world and proclaiming, "I am Mormon; hear me roar!" I mean, for heaven's sake, we've been doing it at the world's doors for decade upon decade. And I imagine we will continue in this fashion for important reasons.

However, it can and probably should be important to distinguish between the Church's role and our individual roles as artists and members. Perhaps there is greater need to recognize all the blessings of humanity. We are not alone. My identity, your identity, our identity as Mormons, is perhaps less critical than recognizing God's identity, your neighbor's identity, our identity as sons and daughters of the Most High. And overtly conscious "Mormon art" undermines our efforts.

Our artistic endeavors need face

Too often, we don't know how to present ourselves to the world. After all, isn't it about promoting stories of the Restoration, of stories in the Book of Mormon, and of uniquely Mormon topics? Yes, absolutely, but that excludes the essence of what an artistic movement looks like. As Walter Pater said in his studies on the great Renaissance,

> *The basis of all artistic genius lies in the power of conceiving humanity in a new and striking way, of putting a happy world of its own creation in place of the meaner world of our common days. (*The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry.)

If I were to sit down and say, "Okay, I'm going to write the great Mormon novel about Joseph Smith," it's likely that I'm already failing in my attempt. If, on the other hand, I have a strong interest in just telling a good story, and I happen to be fascinated by some aspect of Joseph's humanity, I might have something going for me.

I could be struck with how to paint some scene from Lehi's life and I might go about that with some success. This is quite different from starting out with "How can I create the best Mormon representation of Lehi?"

If we could sometimes just forget the "Mormon" strain, and just tell good tales, paint good paintings, sculpt good sculptures, and compose good compositions, everything else would fall into place. If I write a screenplay from an idea that I find so compelling, and it just happens to have some Mormon character in it, well, that's terrific! But shoving a Mormon character in my film just for the sake of promoting Mormon arts?

Without getting too far into a conversation about what defines great art (O, the endless dialogue!), I still think it's important to draw this single point. If you want to communicate to many people, your job is to understand how not to isolate them.

There is a flip side to all this awkward introspection: Our second error

In my days spent as an artist on the east and west coast, I have known people who take the reverse tack. They are embarrassed or ashamed, for one reason or another, to be counted as a Mormon artist. Sometimes there are legitimate concerns involved, especially when political or professional reputations are at stake.

I have found that many suffer from a delusional notion that a Mormon artistic effort will never succeed, and some aren't willing to put forth an arm to help a movement along. Some are successful Mormons in professional artistic endeavors who, for one reason or another, aren't willing to give back. Some are too proud to work with other Mormons. Some are scared. Some are lazy. And some are, rightly so, disillusioned by the lack of a successful Mormon renaissance, seeing too much of the error described above.

I don't fault these individuals—I find it a waste of time and effort. I'm interested in working with people who want to work with me, not people who have a problem. Still, I think it's an important difficulty to recognize. It is part of the reason we haven't seen a successful Mormon artistic movement—at least, not yet.

There is actually a third common error, which is a combination of one and two. Some of us become so wrapped up in the Mormon artistic endeavors that we lose sight of what is good and look beyond the mark. We become not only too proud to work with others, but we believe that we alone understand what a Mormon renaissance looks like and label everyone else's Mormon efforts as wrong. We could probably think of some examples where artists just think they "know better" than the rest of us, the Church, their Mormon peers, or just the cultural ideology itself. Some are so embittered that they leave the Church with a noisy fuss in the wake. They become laws unto themselves.

Still, I truly believe there is not only a happy middle ground, but a potentially thriving and alive middle ground for us all. Returning to Pater:

> *The history of art has suffered as much as any history by trenchant and absolute divisions. Pagan and Christian art are sometimes harshly opposed, and the Renaissance is represented as a fashion which set in at a definite period. That is the superficial view: the deeper view is that which preserves the identity of European culture. The two are really continuous; and there is a sense in which it may be said that the Renaissance was an uninterrupted effort of the middle age, that it was ever taking place. When the actual relics of the antique were restored to the world, in the view of the Christian ascetic it was as if*

> *an ancient plague-pit had been opened. All the world took the contagion of the life of nature and of the senses. And now it was seen that the medieval spirit too had done something for the new fortunes of the antique. By hastening the decline of art, by withdrawing interest from it and yet keeping unbroken the thread of its traditions, it had suffered the human mind to repose itself, that when day came it might awake, with eyes refreshed, to those ancient, ideal forms.*

Pater's words speak for themselves, but we can glean a corollary: "that which preserves the identity of… culture." If there really is to be a renaissance, "a marvelous work and a wonder," if Zion must arise in all her glory, then really all that has gone before—that "fashion… set in at a definite period" as "an uninterrupted effort"—is only a predecessor to the greatest era of culture and art ever.

Can this really be true?

It's such a fantastical notion. But it seems we're at the threshold. As the founder of this magazine, Ben Crowder, recently said, "The LDS arts world has been laying a solid foundation for decades now, and it looks like it's just about reached critical mass for an explosion of talent. The future is very, very bright." The annual LDS Film Festival just finished its eighth year. Mormon artist communities are growing in critical cities, such as New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Movements are afoot in various forms, and technological tools are becoming increasingly available to this end. Conrad Nebeker, for one, has been successfully reinforcing an active effort to support the arts in Provo (land of one million creative Mormon students) with a Facebook group titled "People in Provo who care for the arts" and a foundation to boot, the Sego Arts Foundation.

Slowly we're starting to meet in the middle and overcome the two obstacles posed above. I think technology will be there for us as we go about doing it right. Technology is at an interesting crossroads. I've recently taken interest in something called the DiSo Project, which will likely effect another shift in the Internet, somewhat like the seismic changes we saw with so-called Web 2.0 technologies. In the next few years, we might see a corner turned in collaborative and creative online resources in ways difficult to perceive. We've seen a hint of this power in social networking tools such as Facebook, but a ubiquitous train's a-coming. And, while I haven't entirely figured out how to articulate it, social networking will help us forget ourselves and collaborate more freely. Contrary to the breeding ground of narcissism that places like Facebook and MySpace can be, when social networking becomes coupled with creativity and the arts, a gargantuan window will open—not only for Mormon artists, but for all artists with good intent.

We must work together, Mormon and non-Mormon alike. This is key. When the Savior asked us to take the gospel to all the world, he wasn't saying "take your Mormon identity to all the world." He was asking us to make peace with mankind. Fight necessary battles. Embrace all truth. Share with men and women all the good things we can. Raise an ensign to the nations. Embrace everyone possible in the process. Live righteous lives. Share with people the love that is in your heart. Find refreshing and creative ways to build bridges. Foster an atmosphere of respite from the storm.

This is the measure of a renaissance.

As an artist and web designer, I'm inclined to catch that train early. With a couple of like-minded LDS artists, I have started an organization for people interested in good art, both Mormons and non-Mormons. Arx Poetica is beginning as a "good art" resource spanning the disciplines of artistry: music and sound, studio art, writing and literature, film, theatre, and new media. As we grow, we will become a collaborative den of artists, eventually financially supporting the efforts of true artists in each of these fields. It is not a "Mormon Renaissance" because we call it such. Rather, it will be a renaissance by the very nature of how we nurture it. For "Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom" (D&C 105:5). And certainly, Zion cannot be built alone. We need to join forces.

Like President Faust, I feel that when the arts in the Church mature, people will flock to the Church, perhaps in numbers we never imagined possible. People long for beauty and truth. Many don't know where to find it.

To echo President Kimball, "I believe that the Lord is anxious to put into our hands inventions of which we laymen have hardly a glimpse" ("When the World Will Be Converted," *Ensign,* October 1974).

Zion will be a respite from the storm, and Zion will be beautiful. ▪

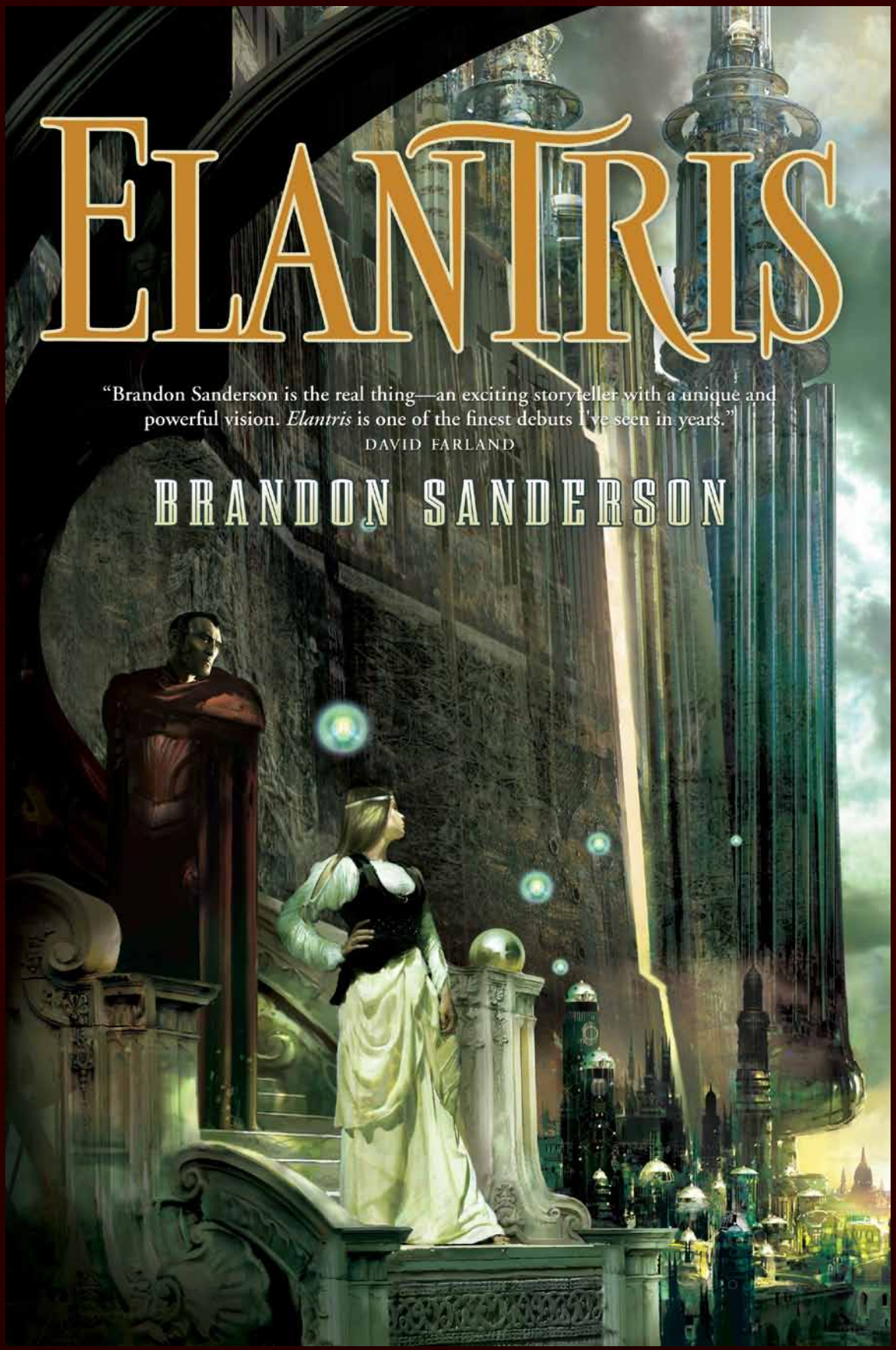
Brandon Sanderson

interviewed by Nathan Morris

Brandon Sanderson has written several fantasy novels, including Elantris *and the Mistborn trilogy. He is writing the twelfth book in Robert Jordan's* Wheel of Time *series. Website:* **brandonsanderson.com**

How did you become interested in being a writer?

My start as a writer can be traced back to when I was fourteen years old. I was not a very distinguished student, so to speak: Bs and Cs in all my classes. I really didn't have any direction, either; there was nothing I really loved to do. I was also what they call a "reluctant reader." My reading skills were not fantastic, so when I tried reading *Lord of the Rings* for the first time, it was just completely over my head, and I assumed that all fantasy novels were boring. It was a teacher who handed me the very first fantasy novel I ever really finished reading.


ELANTRIS
"Brandon Sanderson is the real thing—an exciting storyteller with a unique and powerful vision. *Elantris* is one of the finest debuts I've seen in years."
DAVID FARLAND
BRANDON SANDERSON

The book was called *Dragonsbane* by Barbara Hambly, and it had this gorgeous Michael Whelan cover on it which immediately caught my eye. I read the book and absolutely fell in love with it. I became an avid reader, mostly of fantasy novels, over the next couple of years. Soon I began to think, "You know, somebody out there is making a living at this, and it seems like it's something that I would really enjoy doing." That's when I found some purpose and direction.

There were certain influences in my life, my mother primarily, who convinced me that being a writer was hard to do, and she was right. It's one of these jobs where not everybody who tries it actually makes it. She convinced me to go into chemistry during college because I had done well in the sciences all throughout high school, thinking I could write in my spare time and have a real, solid job. It wasn't terrible advice; I'm just not sure it was the right advice for me at that time. I served a mission and during that time I was very, very pleased to be on another continent, away from chemistry. I really missed writing, though, because I'd been doing it for fun all through that freshman year before I left. I actually started my first novel when I was fifteen, but it didn't go anywhere. It was rather derivative and all those things that you expect from the majority of novels written by guys in high school. Knowing I could actually produce something, though, gave me some encouragement. Of course I didn't show it to anybody. I hid it behind the painting in my room because I didn't want anyone to see the pages I'd printed out and make fun of me.

When I got back from my mission, I thought, "You know what? I'm going to give it a try." It sounds kind of stupid, but like I said, there are people that get to do this for a living, and I decided that I was never going to be happy unless I gave it a shot. So I changed my major to English because I assumed that's what you did if you wanted to be a writer. I've since learned that that's not the only way to go about it, but it did work for me. It gave me a much better grounding in the classics. I was able to take some creative writing classes too, as a part of my required credits. I got a job working the graveyard shift at a hotel, which was great for my writing because I was there most weeknights from 11 PM until 7 AM, and the only requirements that they put me to were, "Just don't fall asleep. Do whatever you want, just don't fall asleep. We need you awake in case there's an emergency or if anyone comes in." I ended up spending a lot of my time working on novels during those early morning hours, and that's how I was able to pay for school, attend it full-time, and still have time for writing. I did that for about five years until I eventually decided that I would go back for a master's degree. It was sort of a way to delay having to make the inevitable decision of what I was really going to do with my life. My backup career then became working as an English professor, partially because I do enjoy teaching, and I enjoy scholarship on the academic level. My parents were worried about me, though. They were afraid that I was going to end up begging for beans on the side of the road, or whatever it is that starving artists do. At least being able to tell them that I was getting a master's degree was helpful. It was also nice to be part of a community of writers and to be able to see what other people were creating.

How did you get your start as a published author?

By this time, I had already written about twelve or thirteen novels, which I was trying to market for publishing. I was still working the graveyard shift at the hotel, and eventually one of the manuscripts that I'd sent somewhere got me a callback from an editor who had finally looked at my manuscript and wanted to buy it. I actually got the phone call as a voicemail. It was from an editor that I'd sent a book to eighteen months before. By that time I had pretty much given up on it; eighteen months is a lot longer than you expect for them to ever get back to you. You figure, "Okay, it's either lost or they didn't like it and just rejected it but forgot to send you a letter." It's a funny story, though. The one who gave it to the person who finally contacted me was actually an agent I had met and talked to at a convention. He said to me then, "Oh, you seem so nice," and later told me that it was because I was such a nice guy that he didn't want to just reject the book without looking at it. I guess that got me lots of points, because he sat on it for all those eighteen months before he eventually looked at it. But by then all my contact info was wrong, because during the time that I had sent the book out, I had moved and had AOL get rid of my e-mail address because I stopped paying for the service. I had also purchased a cell phone, so my phone number was no longer accurate. So this person, who would later become my editor, had to google me. He found my contact information on my BYU grad student page,

which fortunately I had kept up-to-date, and when he called me, the voicemail said, "Hi, I don't know if this is the right Brandon Sanderson, but if it is, you sent me a manuscript about eighteen months ago, and I finally started looking at it last night. I got a few hundred pages into it, and I knew I had to call you and make sure it's still available, because I think I want to buy it."

I called him back, and then I called the agent that I had met, because it seemed like his editorial style matched mine. He handled the contract negotiations, and I became an author. I quit my graveyard shift job, taught freshman English composition in between to keep me going while we were waiting for the books to actually come out, and fortunately I've never had to go and get another real job. I've always worried I would have to.

You have many blog posts and podcasts about the writing process and getting published. Could you touch on a few of the core things would-be authors should do?

I would say that the first and most important thing for an author is to learn to write consistently. It's just so important. A lot of people say they want to be writers but don't actually write, or they just write here and there. You can't expect to be a master at something when you first try it. Even if you're pretty good at it, you're still not a master. So just write something. Write a book, edit it, start sending it off, and then immediately start writing something else. Give yourself time to learn to love the process and learn to become a professional, because if you really want this, then you need to act like one. The way you do that is you learn to make yourself write. You need to learn how to deal with writer's block too. It happens to all of us and we all deal with it in different ways, but you have to find what works for you and how to get yourself to produce.

You don't need to be writing as fast as I did. I just absolutely love the process, and one of my big hang-ups early on was that I wouldn't edit my books. That's part of what took me so long. When I'd get done with a book, I'd say, "Yeah, I learned a lot from that; let me see what I can do now," then I was always excited about the next new idea. I always thought, "Oh the next one's going to be really good." But because of that mentality, I never gave the books that I *did* finish the credit or polish work that they deserved. It wasn't until I learned to start editing and revising that I got published. The first book I sold, *Elantris*, was actually the one that went through the largest number of revisions. Learn what works for you.

Another big thing I want to mention is that you shouldn't try to write just toward the market—write toward yourself. Write something that you would love to read. It's good to be aware of what's happening in the market and what types of stories are out there and who else is writing books like that so that you can better explain what you're writing. What you don't want to do is say to yourself, "Teenage girl vampire romances are selling really well—I'm going to write one of those," unless you happen to really love writing teenage girl vampire romances. If you write a good book, someone out there will want to read it, and someone will want to buy it and produce it for those people. Not all genres are as viable marketwise as others. But again, you can't just say, "This sells well, so I'm going to write it," unless you happen to really like what happens to sell well.

How does your website fit into your work as a writer?

I want to do the things for my readers that I wish I had had as a reader, and the Internet gives us this wonderful opportunity to do them. We really couldn't connect with readers in the same way before. The other thing is that fantasy is a small-selling genre compared to some others. That may surprise people because it's so popular, but it's only popular among readers. It's not as popular among non-readers. Most people who buy books are buying either romance novels (most often because they buy only those kinds of books or they're grabbing something as they move through the airport) or they are buying a non-fiction book because it was suggested to them, and it tends to be the only book they buy that year. Because of all this, we fantasy authors depend on loyal readers who buy all of our books. We may have a smaller fan base, but our fans are much more dedicated, much more loyal. If fantasy readers really like an author, they will search out books by that author and read everything that they've produced. They will support you. They'll even buy the books in hardcover if they really like them. Because of things like this, I think it's appropriate to do a lot of outreach to readers—to give them a lot for their money. I mean, if someone buys one of my books in hardcover, that's almost thirty bucks they're spending,

and I feel like I should do whatever I can to make that book the best experience for them possible.

My number one goal is always to write a really fantastic book. But I can give some added value by saying, "Here are chapter-by-chapter annotations," which are kind of like a director's commentary on a DVD; or if you're an aspiring writer yourself, "Here are some drafts so you can see how this book progressed and how I came up with the plot." All of these are things that I want to do to reward the people who are willing support me and actually go out and find my books. In a lot of ways, I think about it like this: in the past, for an artist to survive, they would have to have a wealthy patron. The patron would financially provide their living so that the artist could create this great art. We do a lot of the same things now, except the patron is the buying public. All the people that read my books are my patrons. It's because of them that I get to do what I love for a living. I feel indebted to them, and I want to make sure I give them everything to enhance their reading experience.

Your books don't have overtly Mormon characters in them, but they do contain many recognizable Mormon elements—especially in book three of the Mistborn trilogy, *The Hero of Ages*. How do you feel that your faith has influenced your writing?

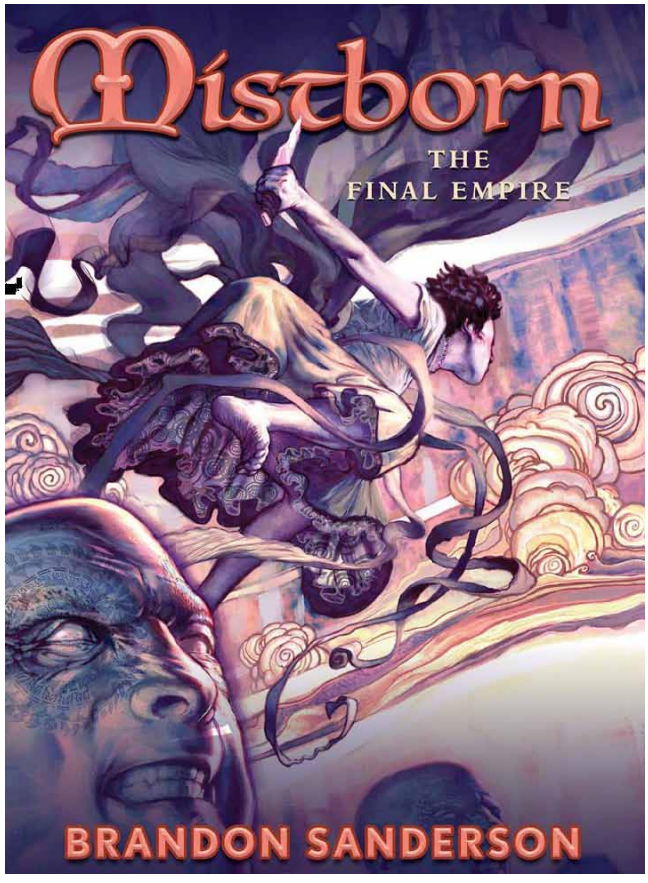
Being an author, the story is what is most important to me. Theme and message are really secondary. I don't go into a book saying, "I'm going to write a book about this." In other words, I don't want to preach with my books. What I want to do is have compelling, realistic characters who care about different things. Some care about religion, others don't. By writing compelling characters who care about issues, I realize that what the characters care about tends to be influenced by what I care about. As for my faith, it is what primarily influences me because it makes me interested in certain topics. For instance, religion does tend to be a theme in my books. Yet if you read *Elantris*, my first published work, the religious figure was the primary antagonist. People have asked me, "Brandon, you're religious—why are you painting religion so poorly in this book?" And my answer for them is that I'm not painting religion poorly. The misuse of religion is one of the things that scares me the most in life. Someone who is taking faith and twisting it and manipulating it is doing one of the most purely evil things that someone can do, in my opinion.

With the Mistborn books, I wasn't ever trying to be overtly LDS. Yet my values shape who I am and what I determine to be important. I then end up having characters who deal with these same things, and I think there are a lot of LDS things going on. But of course I think there are a lot of Buddhist things going on as well. I served my mission in Korea and have a lot of respect for the Buddhist religion. Because of that, I think some elements of Buddhism show up in my writing. Not because I set out to say, "Okay, I'm going to use Buddhism here," but because it seems to happen when I'm developing a character who cares about something. That's one of the tricks about being a writer.

One of my main goals is that any time I put a character in whose beliefs are different from mine, I want to make sure that I'm making them

realistic, that I'm painting their ideas and philosophies as accurately as possible. I think it's important for all authors to make their characters actually feel real and not just portray them as talking heads who are there to learn a lesson. Another author, Robert Jordan, once said that he loved it when his books made people ask questions, but that he didn't want to give them the answers—he believed that they should come up with their own. That's what I try to do, too.

You mentioned that one of your most popular series is the Mistborn trilogy. How did those books come about?



The evolution of a novel is such a complicated, complex, and strange creative process that it's hard to step people through it. I don't think even I can fully comprehend it. But by the time I was writing the Mistborn books, I was in a different situation with my career. I'd sold *Elantris* by that point and the publisher was saying, "We want something else from you." Rather than taking one of the thirteen books that I'd written before, I wanted to write something new. I wanted to give people my newest and best work. At that point I had time to sit down and ask myself, "What do I want to be the hallmark of my career? What am I going to add to the genre?" I want to write fantasy that takes steps forward and lets me take the genre in some interesting direction. At first I wanted to play with some of the stereotypes of the genre. That's a dangerous thing, though, because, as any deconstructionalist will tell you, when you start playing with stereotypes, you start relying on something that you want to undermine, and that puts you on shaky ground. I was in danger of just becoming another cliché. A lot of times when people want to twist something in a new way, they don't twist it enough and end up becoming part of the cliché that they were trying to redefine. But I really did want to try this and went forward with it anyway.

A lot of fantasy relies heavily on the Campbellian Monomyth. This is the idea focusing on the hero's journey. Since the early days of fantasy, it's been a big part of the storytelling, and in my opinion it's become a little bit overused. The hero's journey is important as a description of what works in our minds as people—why we tell the stories we do. But when you take the hero's journey and say, "I'm going to make this a checklist of things I need to do to write a great fantasy novel," your story goes stale. You start to mimic rather than create. Because I'd seen a lot of that, I felt that one of the things I really wanted to do was to try to turn the hero's journey on its head. I had been looking at the *Lord of the Rings* movies and the *Lord of the Rings* books and the *Harry Potter* books, and I felt that because of their popularity and success, a lot of people were going to be using this paradigm even more—the unknown protagonist with a heart of gold and some noble heritage who goes on a quest to defeat the dark lord. So I thought to myself, "What if the dark lord won? What if Frodo got to the end in *Lord of the Rings* and Sauron said, 'Thanks for bringing my ring back. I really was looking for it,' and then killed him and took over the world? What if book seven of *Harry Potter* was Voldemort defeating Harry and winning?" I didn't feel that this story had ever really been approached in the way I was imagining it, and it became one idea that bounced around in my head for quite a while.

Another idea I had revolved around my love of

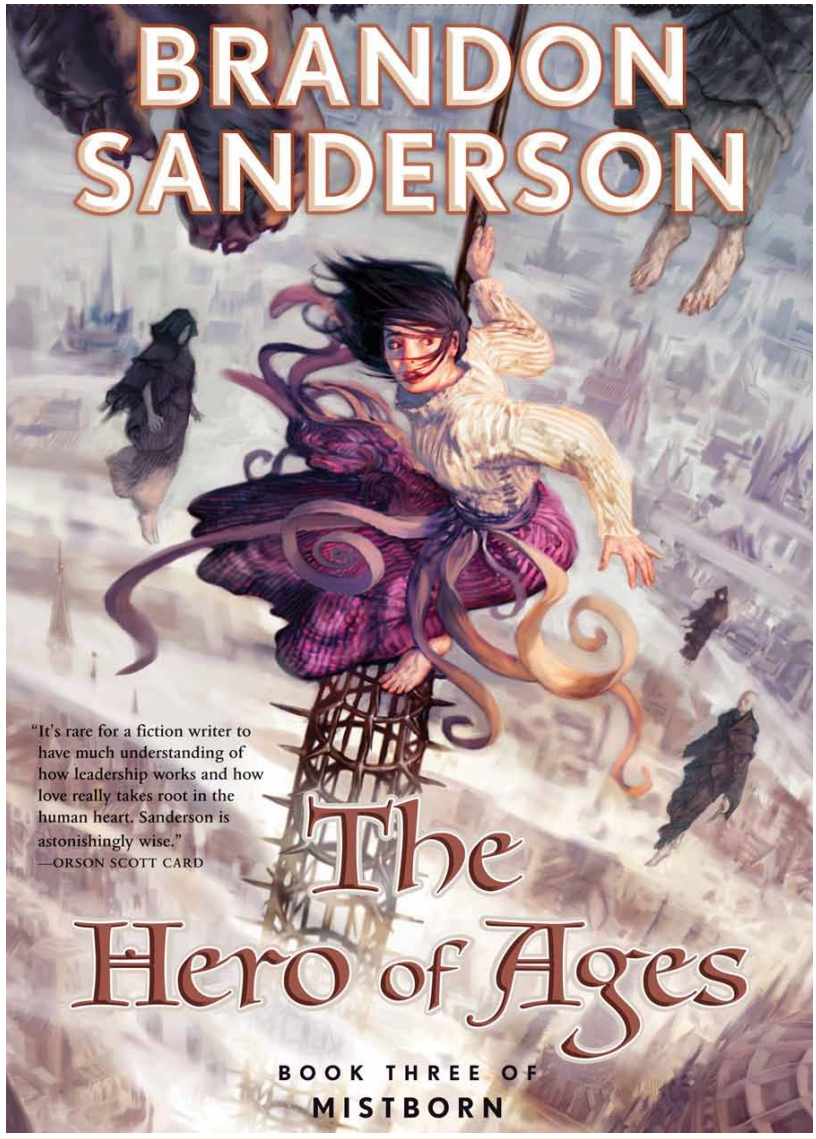
the classic heist genre. Whether it's Michael Crichton's *The Great Train Robbery* or the movies *Ocean's Eleven* and *The Italian Job*, there are these great stories that deal with a gang of specialists who are trying to pull off the ultimate heist. This is the kind of feat which requires them to all work together and use their talents. I hadn't ever read a fantasy book that dealt with that idea in a way that satisfied me or that really felt like it got it down. So that bounced in my head for a while as well.

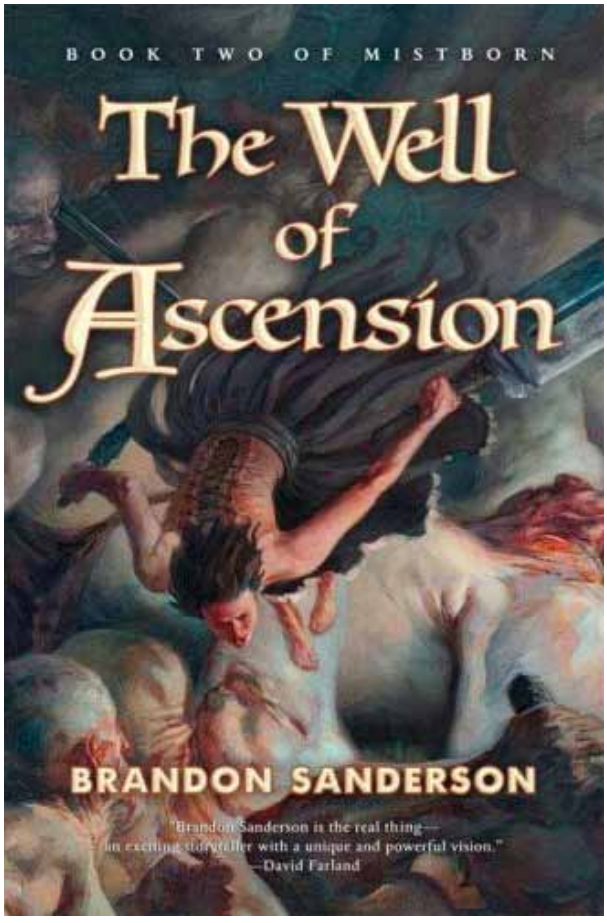
One more of the ideas for the Mistborn series happened when I was driving home to see my mom. She lives in Idaho Falls, and after passing Tremonton on the I-15, I just went through this fog bank driving at seventy miles an hour. Even though my car was actually driving into the fog, it looked like the mist was moving around me instead of me moving through it. It was just this great image that I wrote down in my notebook years before I ended up writing *Mistborn*.

After a while, all these different ideas, like atoms, were bouncing around in my head and eventually started to run together to form molecules (the molecules being the story). Keep in mind, a good book is more than just one good idea. A good book is twelve or thirteen or fourteen great ideas that all play off of each other in ways that create even better ideas. There were my two original ideas—a gang of thieves in a fantasy world, and a story where the dark lord won—that ended up coming together and becoming the same story. Suddenly I had a world where the prophecies were wrong, the hero had failed, and a thousand years later a gang of thieves says, "Well, let's try this our way. Let's rob the dark lord silly and drive his armies away from him. Let's try to overthrow the empire." These are all the seeds of things that make bigger ideas.

After I outlined the book, it turned out to be quite bit longer than I expected, and I then began working through those parts that weren't fully developed yet, changing some things. I ended up downplaying the heist story in the final version of the book, despite the fact that it was a heist novel in one of my original concepts. But as I was writing it, I felt that if I was going to make it into a trilogy, I needed the story to have more of an epic scope. The heist was still there, and still the important part of the book, but it kind of became the setting for other, bigger things in the story, such as the epic coming-of-age of one of the characters, the interactions between the characters, and dealing with the rise and fall of the empire. But that happens in the process of writing. Sometimes the things that inspire you to begin a story in the first place eventually end up being the ones that are holding it back. Alomancy, the magic system in the book, was a separate idea that came about through these revisions.

I wrote the books in the trilogy straight through. I had the third one rough drafted by the time the first one had to be in its final form so that I could





keep everything consistent and working together the way I wanted it to. I didn't want it to feel like I was just making it up as I went along, which I feel is one of the strengths of the series. I don't know if I'll ever be able to have that opportunity again in a series, but it certainly worked well for the Mistborn books.

Do you plan on writing any other books that feature alomancy?

It's possible. When I write a series, I imagine it in my head as a certain length, and I generally keep to it. But that doesn't mean that I won't revisit the world for new stories. The story of the characters in the Mistborn books is done; the trilogy is finished. If I were going to write more in this world, I would either go forward in time or backward in time, which unfortunately makes it so I'm not as likely to write one. Not that I would be opposed to approaching the Mistborn world in a new way and telling a series of new stories—there were still some holes in alomancy by the end of the books which were intentionally left there in case I did want to revisit it. So, it's definitely possible. But with *The Wheel of Time* on my plate, I can't promise when or if it will ever happen.

Could you tell us a little bit about *The Wheel of Time?*

Sure. *The Wheel of Time* is a very important series to me as well as to a lot of my generation of fantasy readers. The first book was published in 1990, and it's called *The Eye of the World*. It was one of those books that, in my opinion, took the genre in new directions. It built on what had been done before, but it did new and important things with the storytelling. It became the preeminent epic of my time. When I was a student in high school, *The Wheel of Time* became the best-selling fantasy series and one of my personal favorites, if not my number one favorite. While he was working on the final book of the series, which tall of us had been waiting for, for almost twenty years, the author, Robert Jordan, passed away in 2007 from a very rare blood disease. It was one of those tragedies that you can't even describe, and a lot of us didn't know how to react. We knew that he was sick. He'd talked about it. He even mentioned it on his blog, but he always spoke so optimistically about it that we were all sure he was going to beat it. So when he passed away, it was a shock. Like every other fan, one of my first thoughts, besides my concern for his family, was, "Boy, I hope that whoever they give the last book to doesn't screw it up." It was probably a little selfish of us to think this, but we'd been following the series for so long. Lo and behold, about a month later, I woke up one morning and found that I had a voicemail. I listened to it, and it said, "Hello, Brandon Sanderson, this is Harriet McDougal, Robert Jordan's widow. I'd like you to call me back. I've got something I want to talk to you about." It was one of those moments where you are absolutely certain at first that someone is playing a prank on you and then you start to shake nervously at the thought that it might not be a prank.

When I got a hold of her, I found out that she was looking at me as one of the candidates to finish *The Wheel of Time*. I hadn't applied for this or anything like that. These books are a really, really big deal. They are the biggest books that the publisher has, and I was absolutely stunned. It turns out that a number of people had recommended me to her, but

she wanted to make sure I was interested first. She then went and read *Mistborn* before calling me back and asking me if I would do it. This isn't the sort of opportunity that you pass up; you just don't.

I considered Robert Jordan in many ways to be a mentor. I had read a lot of his books when I was trying to decide how to write myself, and he strongly influenced what I produced. I'd never met him, so I didn't know him personally, and that's what dumbfounded me when I got the phone call. After I accepted the offer, Harriet, Robert's two assistants Alan and Maria (who have all been involved with *The Wheel of Time* for a very long time), and I started working on compiling the book. As to be expected, we found big holes in the writing that are now my job to fill—hundreds of thousands of words' worth of things that still need to be written. We've got notes. We've got materials. We've got dictations. We've got all sorts of things. But it's a big, big project.

Are there any other projects that you're currently working on?

Right now I'm working on a children's series. It's a middle-grade series, a genre targeted at ten- to thirteen-year-olds. Even though it's marketed for that age group, I wrote it for anyone to read. It's a more humorous fantasy series about a kid named Alcatraz who discovers that librarians secretly rule the world. He's part of this family whose members all have really silly magical powers that they use to fight the librarians. For example, his grandpa's superpower is the ability to arrive late to appointments. They use these powers in fun and interesting ways to resist the librarians' control of the world. They are very fun books and have actually been optioned by DreamWorks for a movie. We're hoping that it ends up getting made. The website for the series is evillibrarians.com, and it should be going live in just a short period of time. It will feature a blog written by the evil librarians griping about Alcatraz and his family.

I also have a standalone book that will be released this summer called *Warbreaker*. I've posted all of the drafts for it on my website. That way people can download and read it, and then if they like it, they can go out and buy it when it's available. It's coming out in June in hardcover. After that, I'll be working on the final book for the *Wheel of Time* series, and from there I'll be starting a new multi-volume series called *The Way of Kings*.

Do you ever plan to write any works dealing with Mormon characters?

I've considered it. The thing, though, is that since I tend to write high fantasy, which entails other worlds that are completely unrelated to this one, there haven't been many opportunities to create one. I've been tempted a couple of times, and if I do end up doing it, it would probably be in a science fiction setting or more of an urban fantasy setting. Nothing is ruled out, though, except that I'm pretty soundly involved in the high fantasy epic genre right now. I haven't done it, but who knows if I will?

How do your fans react to your being a member of the Church?

It's hard to say because I think most of my fans don't care one way or the other. The vocal ones send me e-mails, though. Occasionally, I get messages from people who say, "Hey, I'm not a member of your faith, but it's cool that you have one, and thanks for writing, and I appreciate your books." I've also received more than several e-mails from LDS people who are very pleased with the books and happy to see an LDS writer who produces works they can enjoy. Sometimes I have received e-mails from people who are not proponents of the LDS faith who challenge me on my beliefs. I'm a debater, but not an arguer, though, and I think the difference is that as a debater, if I feel that my side has been presented adequately, I'm not going to feel bad if people disagree with me. So when I respond to e-mails like that, I say something along the lines of, "Hey, here's why I believe what I do. Here's what the basis of my faith is. Here's why I believe in this doctrine that you are challenging. You don't have to believe in it. Believe what you want. But this is my reasoning." I think I usually have pretty good logic and every time someone has responded to one of my reply e-mails, it's been positive. Most of the time, the person will send something back that says, "You know what, thanks for not actually getting into an argument. I was kind of in a bad mood when I sent that and thank you for being respectful." I think being respectful will get you much further than getting into arguments will. I have had universally good experiences with people reacting to my LDS faith, even on such charged topics. ▪

Susan Howe

interviewed by Katherine Morris

Susan Howe is a poet and playwright. She currently teaches English at Brigham Young University. Website: **humanities.byu.edu/faculty/sh36**

How did you get started writing?

I suppose I started writing by reading, which has always been a great pleasure to me. I had such a great appreciation for how novels both expanded my world and helped explain me to myself that I felt them to be of extraordinary value. I wanted to see if I could write anything as worthwhile as I found *Jane Eyre* or *Huckleberry Finn*. But I was a late beginner, taking no classes until after I graduated from college. Then I thought, rats! I should have majored in English and minored in drama, not Spanish and French.

When did you first start writing poetry?

The first poem I remember writing was a part of my high school graduation speech. It was something didactic about how our graduating class should act to bring about the changes we wanted to see in the world—not very poetic except that it rhymed. I wrote a notebook of poems the summer after my freshman year of college. But I only became serious about writing poetry when I began my master's program in creative writing at the University of Utah.

How do you get ideas for poems?

The majority of my poems come from observation. I have never done very well with poems about my emotional life, but I am often intrigued by a brief article in a newspaper. For example, I've written a poem about a rhinoceros at the Hogle Zoo that tripped, got wedged under a rock ledge, and smothered, and another about a woman whose pet python wrapped itself around her and started to squeeze—both poems originating with newspaper articles. I often write about the natural world, particularly Utah's redrock canyons and the rural day-by-day life of Sanpete County, where I live.

What's your writing process like?

I require absolute silence and solitude to write, and I prefer a desk near a window, sometimes at home when no one else is there, more often in a library. I begin by reading the poems of someone whose work I admire, because that moves me into a creative space where I am aware of and sensitive to language. Then I compose a new poem (or at least the beginnings of a new poem), and finally move on to revising poems that are in one stage or another, usually working on about five poems in one writing session.

One of my teachers said in class once, "Anything doing is worth doing poorly," which has always been a great comfort to me as I begin a poem. I have to lower the stakes to give myself permission to write, because the first images and language that come are usually clichéd. But it's only by writing what comes first without censoring it that I am able to get through to my own vision and language. Another teacher taught me that a poet should ask herself what language seems necessary to present or to interrogate her subject, and that's what I focus on—what language is necessary for this subject? I don't write in lines or sentences, but phrases and images. I write all over the page, in no order. Once I have amassed one or two pages of language, I pull it together into the shape of a poem.

As for completing a poem, that seems harder and harder the more I write. I've learned that a poem must give the reader an emotional pay-off, which is difficult to bring off without sentimentality. Emotion has to be earned, and the poem has to get the reader to invest in the situation, so that the reader can feel with the poem. If there's no risk for the writer, there will be no response in the reader. Once in a while a poem seems to shape itself easily, but often it takes me a long time to create the necessary movement in the poem that will create the emotion. After I've worked on a poem for several weeks, I'm too close to tell what the actual language is doing; I read my intentions rather than what's actually on the page. Then I have to put the poem away for a while so that I can come back to it as a reader and feel whether it is working or not. It does no good to refine the language and line breaks if I'm going to have to slash and burn large sections and fill in with new content.

How did you get your first poem published?

My poems were first published in LDS periodicals—*Exponent II* and *Sunstone*. I had a poem accepted by the *Ensign*, but they asked me to change what I thought was the central and necessary image, so I withdrew the poem. As for national publication, in my PhD program I had a great friend, George Bilgere, who was a superb poet. I brought my whole sheaf of poems to breakfast with him one day, and he read them, grouped them, and told me where to send them. He suggested journals that published a lot of poetry, because there is a higher possibility of acceptance if the journal publishes twenty or thirty poems an issue rather than five or six. I sent the poems out exactly as he had suggested, and *Kansas Quarterly* accepted two.

How do you know when a poem is ready to be seen by a publisher?

The journals themselves tell you to read a few issues and get a sense of what they publish. I try to send poems to journals in which I have found many poems that I admire, because it is more likely that my work will appeal to editors who publish work that I like. Usually, a journal submission is four or five

poems, and I try to send poems of varying lengths and subject matter, a range of work, so that one or two might fit the needs of the journal if the rest don't.

How does writing poetry influence your other writing?

That's an interesting question. Writing poetry involves caring immensely about individual words, about how language works, about what pressures can be exerted on language to make it surprise as it communicates. Such attention ought to improve any writing. I'd also say that the tightness of poetry has taught me to edit so that I say exactly what I mean and don't repeat myself.

What classes do you teach? How has teaching influenced your writing?

I teach a variety of classes, both literature and writing. They all give me the opportunity to read some of the best novels, stories, and poems. I learn something about how to write every time I re-read a text, so in that sense, teaching has been a great benefit to me. It is also very rewarding to work with young poets in writing classes because they value poetry as much as I do, and there's nothing like having a community. Poets are sort of the monk seals of contemporary culture; we spend a great deal of time wandering the boundaries alone. It's affirming to find others of one's kind in the world.

How do you balance writing with teaching and family responsibilities?

Not very well. I always wish there were three of me, so that I could meet all the responsibilities I need to meet. I struggle like everyone else in this culture, fragmented and stressed too much of the time. At BYU, I work most nights until ten, so that when I go home to Ephraim on the weekends, I can spend the little time I have there with my family. I can get in the occasional hour of writing by staying up late or by making an appointment with myself to write. But for the past couple of years, I've done most of my writing during the summer months when I'm not teaching and can actually make choices about how to spend my time.

How do you feel about reading your poems aloud?

I like to read my poems aloud and practice

reading so that I will communicate effectively with the audience. It is useful to explain the genesis of a poem and any obscure references it makes. The last time I read at BYU, I included several poems about life in rural Sanpete County, and I felt I had communicated when several audience members who had lived in similar rural communities came up to say they recognized the turkeys, the sheep, and the magpies in my poems.

Have you found any common themes cropping up in your work?

I mostly write in a woman's voice about women's experiences. I have many poems that make use of a persona who is not me, all of them women in various circumstances. Another strand of my work is about the natural world. I am in awe of the Utah landscape and hope to contribute to poetic representations of that landscape worthy of its strength and endurance, as well as representations of what it is like to live here and how this land has become home for us and our faith.

How do you see poetry building the kingdom?

I think that humans come to understand principles by experiencing actual, physical situations. We learn about the importance of being dependable, for example, when we disappoint someone who is counting on us. As life is greater than individuals, we also learn by imagining what we have not personally experienced. Another example: how do we learn what Christ is like and what it must be to talk with Him? We imagine ourselves doing it, and that act of attention makes it possible for the Spirit to enter our hearts and let us feel Christ's love. Or how do we forgive someone who has wounded us and isn't the least bit sorry—the most difficult individual to forgive, but not excluded from Christ's injunction—unless we are able to imagine the world from the perspective of that offender, to feel the lack and need and fear that caused him or her to strike out? Imagination, as I have experienced it, can be part of and lead to spiritual growth, and imagination is the natural province of the poet. A poet's range is something of a gift, and a poet has to work within that range, but each poet can express something of the complexity and depth and eternal value of human experience.

What other writers have influenced your work?

I could go on and on, but let me just say Elizabeth Bishop, and especially the poems "Seascape," "At the Fishhouses," and "The Moose." In each of these poems, there is a transformation of an ordinary moment of observation into an imaginative perception of spiritual truth. I have read these poems again and again, and I'm still not sure how Bishop achieves such a leap, but she does. She has accomplished in these poems the very task I would like to achieve.

Do you have any favorite Mormon poets?

Many. I have immense respect for the poets at BYU: Lance Larsen, Kimberly Johnson, John Talbot, Scott Hatch, Michael Hicks, and Steven Graves. The *Discoveries* project created in me a sense of sisterhood with a group of very fine LDS women poets, including Emma Lou Thayne, Dixie Partridge, Marilyn Bushman-Carlton, Elaine Christensen, Mary Lythgoe Bradford, and so many other women. There seems to be a real flourishing of Mormon poetry and poets in the last few years. I've also taught several students who will be far better than I am, young poets with both the talent and work ethic to make significant contributions to American poetry and to Mormon poetry.

How does being Mormon affect you as a poet?

I agree with Flannery O'Connor's advice on the subject of the influence of religion on a writer. She says, "Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing." I hope that my beliefs are the lens through which I see the world and that my way of seeing informs how I address my subjects, but I have to look directly at the subjects. I'm not trying to preach the gospel, as that isn't the work of poetry.

Tell us about *Discoveries.*

Discoveries: Two Centuries of Poems by Mormon Women was a project suggested by Jill Mulvay Derr as part of the celebration of the 200th birthday of Eliza R. Snow. Jill invited Sheree Bench and me to create a reader's theater of poems by Mormon women from both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We decided to choose poems that represented the entire

arc of a woman's life, from pre-mortal existence to birth and finally ending with death and entrance into eternity. The reader's theater grew into a full production with original music by Harriet Petherick Bushman, a wonderful LDS composer from England. Because we found more really excellent poems than could be included in the dramatic program, we published the book as well. Then the production was transformed into a DVD, and now a second edition of the book is being printed by BYU Studies, this one hardcover with four-color illustrations.

Discoveries was the most gratifying project I have ever worked on. All sixty-five women involved (poets, singers, actors, production team, editors, etc.) felt very committed to its success and used their talents to the fullest. And I felt there was a spiritual truth to what we created, a look at the whole arc of a woman's life, including struggle and sorrow as well as humor and joy.

How was publishing your book *Stone Spirits* a different experience from your previous experiences getting work published?

The attempt to publish a collection comes after a poet has placed about half the poems of the collection in literary journals. Once I had the poems and the publications, I read about a hundred collections, talked to other poets, and learned that the way the poems are arranged can either make or break a book. My book came into being when I went with a dear friend, Sue Booth-Forbes, to a New Hampshire retreat on a lake. One afternoon we sat by a stream and together read my poems one by one and found sequences of poems that were relevant to each other. We created the essential shape of the collection that day. Once it was in place, several poet-friends read the manuscript and made suggestions about what to drop and what to rearrange, and the manuscript finally became something I was happy with and willing to send out to publishers.

Many of your poems in *Stone Spirits* are clearly based on personal experiences you've had, others less so. What inspired you to write poems like "Tiger Eating a European" and "The Stolen Television Set"?

"Tiger Eating a European" is about a carved and lacquered wooden sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, a real artifact commissioned for himself by an Indian maharajah during the British colonial period. I thought it expressed eloquently how the Indians really felt about the presence of the British. "The Stolen Television Set" came from a story on the evening news about someone taking the television set from a local home for the elderly. A few of the residents who were interviewed seemed so desperate that I began thinking about our culture's addiction to television as a way to distract and entertain us, and to even create meaning in our lives.

What was it like writing "Mary Keeps All These Things"?

You know, I don't remember the process of actually writing the poem, but I clearly recall the impetus. It occurred to me that in my whole life I had never heard the story of the birth of Christ from the perspective of his mother, who was so centrally involved. Why couldn't she speak? Where was her voice? My poem is my attempt to imagine what it was like for her to travel with Joseph, to realize that she was about to deliver, to seek shelter anywhere before her baby was born. For Mary's sake, it is one of the poems I am happy to have written.

Do you have plans for other books and collaborative projects?

As a matter of fact, Harriet Bushman is writing a song cycle for "Mary Keeps All These Things," and since I think she is amazingly talented, I am very excited about that project. I also have a collection of poems entitled *Salt* that I am currently circulating in search of a publisher. I am interested in writing a sequence of poems about the life of my mother, who has Alzheimer's and has to stay in a care facility. I also have a couple of plays in mind, should I ever get the time to write them. ▪

Poems by Susan Howe

Mary Keeps All These Things

I stir the innkeeper's sympathy
only when my water breaks and runs
down my leg, soaking my blue
robe, and I have to lean
against his shabby door;
he looks at me through splintered eyes.

I have come down from the donkey
in the great bell of my body,
the weight of the child and him kicking
inside, so the next guardian of those gates
that open only to money, much
more money than Joseph can pay,

will have to see me, my travail.
My accident is not a cheat but the urgency
of birth, and I am not ashamed. He considers,
refusing my eyes. Beard stained with mutton
grease, he finally says, "Stables. In the back,"
and jerks his head to shunt us to one side.

The cave of the animals is dark
and warm, smelling of straw, urine,
dung. Our rushes give off
only a smoky light. As we walk
between the pens, our donkey follows
under his pack, then another brays;

disturbed, the sheep baa.
Joseph worries for me as he cleans
a stall, spreads fresh straw
and a blanket where I can lie.
I am big and awkward as a camel sinking
down. What relief, to give myself

to pain, guessing the hours these knots
will come and go. Between them
I feel straw prickling my hair
and ears, scratching the back of my neck.
Then my body clenches, legs
and back and belly tight.

Each cramp I feel the pain can grow
no more, O Lord, no more. And yet
I have given my word and will
to bring this child. My body
opens and opens its passage between
my womb's constraint and the chaotic

clash of life. I will, in my extremity,
remember I have a name. Mary is
my name. I will split open, part
the shadow that keeps this child
from light. He must come, is coming,
comes. At last, his brash infant cry.

I watch Joseph clean him, bring him
to my arms. I am seized
by his perfection—tiny hands, clear
unblinking eyes. This dove, this calf,
this young and wondrous lamb squeals
as I take him to my breast.

Tiny gums grip my nipple; he sucks
and sucks, butting me with his insistent
head. When the liquid comes
into his hungry mouth, we are joined
in ache and pleasure—circle and dance;
I give him comfort and he gives it back.

Our small animal noises belong here
in the shelter of the poor and dumb
who break their bodies to sustain
life. I have saved clean wool
from the underbellies of the lambs,
carded it, and spun the softest

cloth to keep him warm. Tonight
he will sleep above us, in a manger
of sweet hay, and we will lie down,
our faces low upon the ground, hands
joined, sheltered in the shadow
of this small and brilliant life.

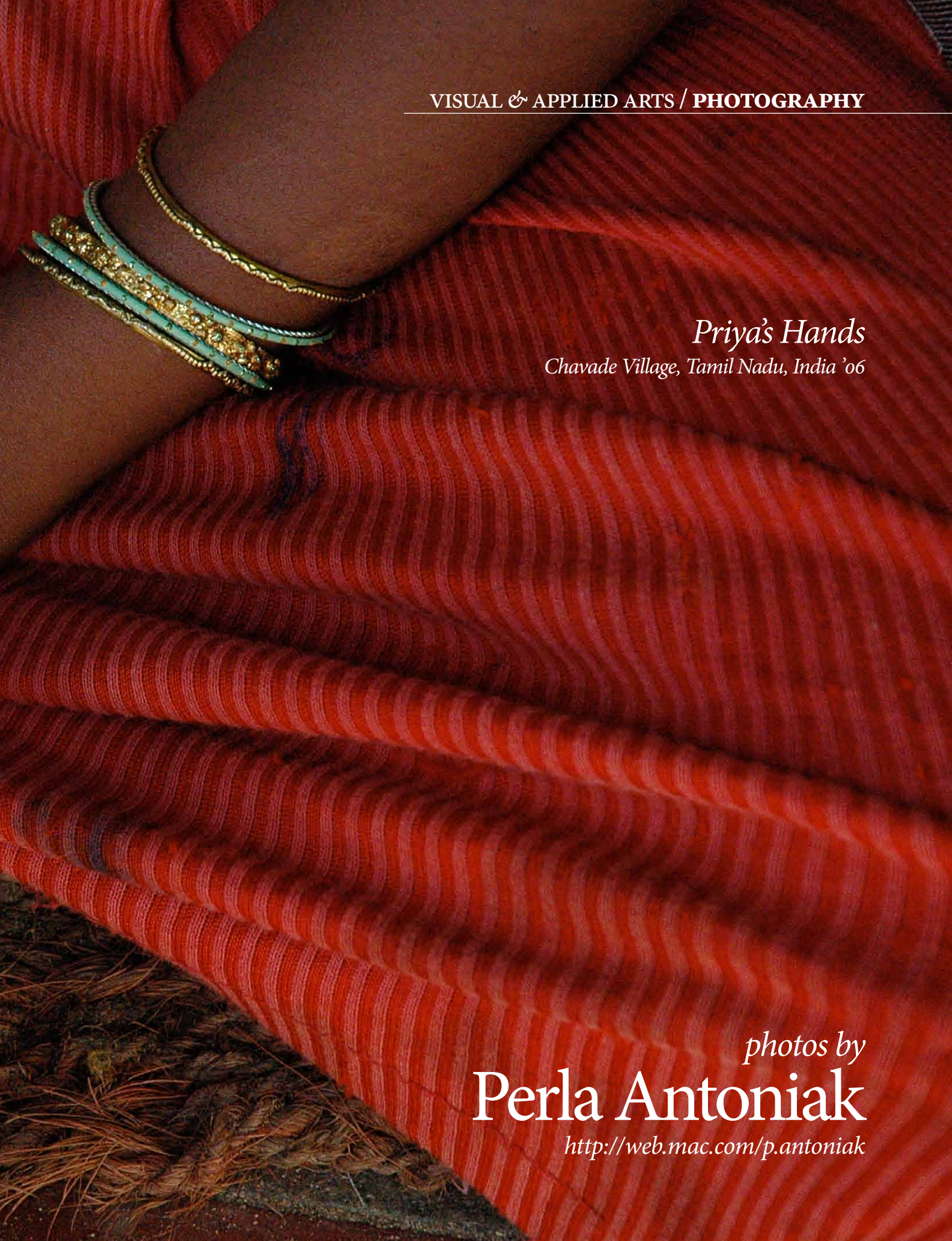
Blessing the Baby

We are low church—a plain chapel, unadorned pews and pulpit,
dahlias on the organ the only image of God. Come today
to give my brother's infant daughter a name and a blessing.
"The purpose of life," says the bishop, "is to gain
a tabernacle of flesh and bone," and I wonder
what my granddaughter imagines, having visited
the great hall on Temple Square but not
the house of metaphor. "He's explaining
our bodies," I tell her. "Why we love them."
But it *is* a tabernacle, a tabernacle of men
held by the priesthood as planets are held by the sun
who take this infant in their arms. Too many to form
a circle around the child, they make an ellipse. *In the name
of Jesus Christ,* says my brother, and gives his baby
his great grandmother's name, *Julia Brooke Howe*.
She sleeps through her blessing, a white bow honeyed
to the crown of her head, the clouds of her dress floating
over the arms of the men who hold her. The congregation,
though happy for the parents, swirl in their personal orbits.
A boy lifts his throbbing hand in its cast. A neighbor reads
a novel hidden in his Bible. A grandmother can't remember
where she is or why she's come. Two teens thumb wrestle,
eyes closed. They are all of the earth, earthy. Julia, awake now,
is given from the arms of her father to the arms of her mother,
her eyes ocean-blue, just as she dirties her diaper.
She, too, belongs to this soiled Earth
that is sometimes washed, renewed, sweet-scented.

Extremity

Martin Handcart Company,
October 1856, east of Devil's
Gate, Wyoming

We walk into the maw of winter,
its jaws clamping over us. In deep
unbroken snow, we lunge and fall,
crack the ice crust, plunge on, bruise
our legs, scrape skin. The welts
sting, red and purple as the sky,
sun like an open sore oozing down.
Last night's camp so close, the dead
would see us if they stood upon
their mounds of snow. No food
and so many minds slipping
out into this bleak plain:
one brother on his knees
eats clumps of snow he tastes
as stew; a ravaged sister
chews her hair, stares into her mind's
crevasse, a gap she cannot cross.
Nightfall, and we are losing
each other, lips ice-glazed,
brows and beards hoarfrost, night
burning toes and fingers black. Black
blood congeals in our veins, cold
as some indifferent glacier
that has flowed down, grinding us
into the desolation beneath it
seared, immense, mute.



Priya's Hands
Chavade Village, Tamil Nadu, India '06

photos by
Perla Antoniak
http://web.mac.com/p.antoniak

Desert Silhouette

Saqqara, Cairo, Egypt '07

Achinna

Chavade Village, Tamil Nadu, India '06

Ganges Boatman

Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India '06

Ric & Seth Estrada

interviewed by Josh Wagner

Ric Estrada is a comic book illustrator, originally from Cuba. Seth is filming a documentary about his father's life. Website: **ricestradamovie.info**

Ric Estrada

You've illustrated books and comic books. What else have you done?

I've done books, comic books, and television commercials. I've done advertising, illustrations, and storyboards for film and for TV commercials. And I've also directed and co-produced in animation. I have written as well. The last thing I did for Feature Films for Families was a TV series that consisted of twenty-four half-hour episodes which I wrote and storyboarded, called *The Princess and the Pea Chronicles*. They were never produced, though. The show was based on a feature that was being directed, but the feature didn't go too far, so they said, "Why should we have a sequel with a TV series?" and they canceled it. When you do any kind of work, you pretty much depend on your editors and directors—all the people at the top.

When you worked for Hanna-Barbera, did you storyboard or animate?

I did not animate—I'm not an animator. They used hand animation, and I storyboarded and did character design as well. There's a full-length feature they did about *The Jetsons* that I storyboarded and co-art directed with another person.

What characters did you design that we all would recognize?

Well, I didn't necessarily design these characters, but I was assigned to make a comic book about them for DC Comics. You would recognize Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, the Legion of Superheros, and there was one that not many people seem to know, outside of the collectors: *Gallery of War.* Those were war stories about the heroics, the miseries, and the horrors of war. They were six-page stories with really interesting plots written by Robert Kanigher, who was one of the top writers at DC Comics and was actually one of the editors of *Wonder Woman* for years. He could write anything. He would go to a convention and say "Throw me a theme" to the audience, and the audience would say, "What about this and that?", to which he would reply, "Okay, let me tell you a story." He would then tell a story based on some idea that a person threw him. He was very good.

Which specific wars were the *Gallery of War* comics about?

Oh, all wars—World War I, World War II, etc. I had one on the Boer War in South Africa, and at one time my editors said, "We have a six-page opening, but we don't have a script or anything. Write us a war story and illustrate it." I asked, "Can it be any kind of war?" and he told me it could be any kind of historical war, anything I wanted. So I said, "I'll give you a story from the Book of Mormon," and I wrote a story called "Peace with Honor," which was about the book of Ether and the two parties that exterminate each other, and it was published.

This all then led to a phone call I received about a year later from Elder Hugh Pinnock, one of the members of the Seventy, who said, "One of the local missionaries picked up this comic book and showed it to me, and we have the whole "Old Testament for Children" that needs to be illustrated. I have looked at your background; you are a member of the Church in good standing, and we would like you to illustrate it." He came from Salt Lake on his way to New York to interview me. We talked about it, he gave me a script, and I began to illustrate it. You may have seen that book. It's not the current edition, though; it's the first edition.

Did you do anything else commissioned by the Church, or was that your only project?

That was the one project, and it took six months. My real delight in it, though, was not only the subject, which was wonderful, but what happened because of it. At first when they offered me a certain amount of money and I counted the number of pictures that went into the book, I thought, "There's no way I spend six months of my life doing this for that amount of money." So I wrote a little note and proposed that we count the pictures together and work it out. There were three different sizes, and I offered various prices for them before we took a look at the bottom line. Lo and behold, it ended up being twice as much as what they were offering. They thought about it for a few days and they accepted it. Later the art director of the Church telephoned me and said, "Thank you, Ric, because the Church, not knowing the worth of art, has been underpaying its artists miserably, and you have pushed the envelope to a very decent level." That was my greatest victory.

According to Sal Velluto, who is a good friend

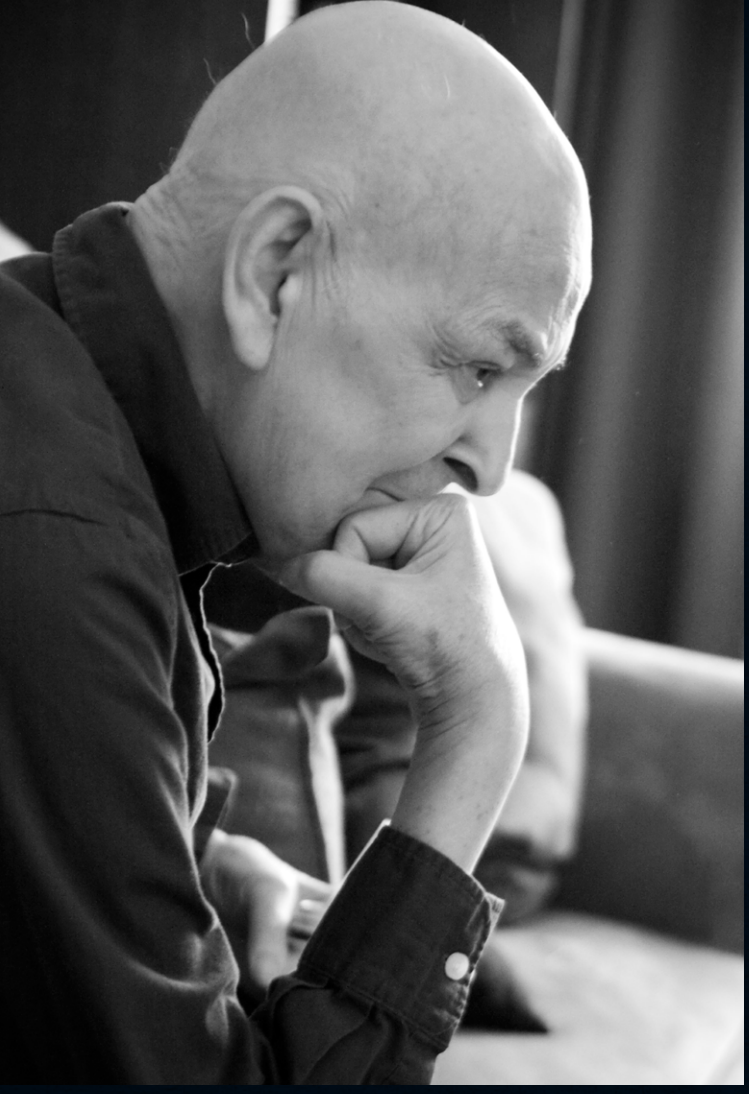
of mine and does a feature for the *Friend* magazine about the lives of the presidents of the Church, they pay very decently today. He said it was thanks to me, and that was nice.

Didn't you also work on a Bible project for Hanna-Barbera?

Yes. I did one for Hanna-Barbera, and my producer at the time was Kay Wright, who is a member of the Church. We considered doing something called *The Greatest Adventures*. We had thirteen episodes of the Old and the New Testament. We also had somebody writing the series who was a scriptwriter for *The Love Boat*, and he had never read the Bible. But he did read the Bible just for that project. We had a character named Mokee, who was kind of a funny character. He was one of the narrators of the story. The basis of it was that these two American kids, a boy and a girl, meet this character named Mokee, who is a Middle Eastern boy and a clown. Somehow they fall into a cave, and there is a door that they knock on which takes them into the past. In each episode they are in one part of the Old Testament or the New Testament. That was the story. But Mokee spends the whole time cracking jokes and saying totally crazy things. And we couldn't have that. So we did thirteen episodes. I was the co-producer of that show, and the storyboard man.

Were you specially picked out for that or did you ask to be on it?

I think because they picked us out for it because they knew that Kay, my co-producer, and I were religious. Besides, many of the storyboards at that time at Hanna-Barbera were given to me because I'd had more experience than any person on staff. I had vast experience. I learned to do storyboards in three years when I lived in West Berlin during the Cold War. I went there to write a movie with a friend, and we tried to sell it in England, but nobody bought it. Later in America, United Artists said, "We want it! We want it!" But then, as often happens in the



movie industry, for every movie you see on the screen, there are maybe fifty others that never got anywhere. It went up the rungs to the president of United Artists, and he ended up saying, "No, we're not going to do this." We both were full of hope, and I ended up being stranded in Berlin.

My good friend from Chicago, McKinley Olson, sent me to work for the newspapers there, and I stayed for three years. I was hired by one paper called the *Spandauer Volksblatt*, and I started doing political cartoons for them, which was my morning job. At the same time, I was working for a movie company, Deutschen Documentar, and it was a company that filmed mostly commercials. While I was there, I learned to do storyboards directly with movie directors and with writers. I was also taught the secrets of camerawork and angles—up, down, left, right, close-up, middle shots, long shots, etc. I learned a lot from their coaching.

When I came back to America, I worked in New York for many years at DC Comics. Then my wife and I moved to California and there I began to work for Hanna-Barbera, DreamWorks, Warner Brothers, and Universal. Essentially every studio except for Disney. For some reason Disney and I never clicked.

You sound almost proud of that.

Well, yes, because I had a friend that worked for Disney. There was a department there called Imagery and they were creating avant-garde ideas, and he said, "You belong there." I applied, but it's always a question of timing. And if that's not the right place or the right moment, they don't hire you.

But there was a time when I was between studios, for about three months, and I was called by a group who had some work on a two-part series called *Spawn*, a superhero type. They interviewed me and loved my work. When they told me that I was hired and that they wanted me to direct and storyboard the series, I said to them, "Well, tell me something about it, because I don't know anything about *Spawn*." They showed me something from it and said, "It's adult." I asked, "What do you mean, 'adult'? You know, I have a family, and I'm raising eight children." They said, "Well, it has a lot of sex." It became the first time in my life that I rejected something I was offered. The money was good, and it had a lot of prestige, but I told them, "While I raise my family, I couldn't face my children if I had to direct something full of a lot of sex and violence. So, sorry, thank you very much, and goodbye." One of the co-producers ended up saying to me, "You know something, this stuff is so strong that sometimes when I visit my mother, I feel very insecure telling her that I am co-producing this thing." And that's how I feel. About two weeks later Hanna-Barbera rehired me to do something called *Captain Planet*, which was a wonderful series and one of the most satisfying ones I ever did. I storyboarded it and designed some of the characters.

There's a funny story attached to that. We had a staff that got along so well together. They took us and put us into this trailer, our own little studio. We were like a little close-knit family. There was the producer/director, the storyboard man (myself), the character designer, the background designer, the sort of coordinator of everything, and the writer, who knew nothing about animation. He was an adventurer and a nice young man, and he wrote the plots. I don't know if you are familiar with *Captain Planet*, but it's about these four kids who

with a magic word become Captain Planet. They were a black girl, an Asian girl, and a white boy and girl, so it was kind of ethnically PC. I designed the main character, Captain Planet, but the writer never liked anything we designed. We gave him five or six or seven versions of Captain Planet, and he always said, "Oh, no, that's not it. No, that's not it." So one day I had the devilish idea to sit down and draw him. Later when we sat him down to look at it, he said, "That's it! I don't know why, but I like it! I like it!" He didn't even recognize himself. And that's the one we used.

How did you find your way to Utah?

I was not a member of the Church when I was in Germany. I had one of the darkest days of my life when I was working for the newspaper. I went to Africa to do a report on North Africa with cartoons and writing. I took an extra week there, but the editor-in-chief wanted to bring me back a week earlier. When I finally returned I said, "Look at all the material I wrote," and he just told me, "That's nice, but you're fired." And I said "Fired? But look at what I brought back." And he said, "We have to set an example. We live by the book here, and if you take an extra week off…" I interjected, "But it wasn't a vacation—I was working!" "Too bad," he told me. "You're fired. Here in Germany we have a tradition where whoever leaves a company caters a party for those who stay." So the next day I went out and bought a food-and-drink spread, and we all ate and got royally drunk. I was so bitter that I went up to the editor and slapped his face. I felt so bad about it that I went back to my room and, in tears, got on my knees and said, "Lord, I've become so lost. I'm a monster. I was raised to be a good person. How could I do a thing like that? I am lost, Lord. Find me." And you won't believe this, but the next day, two Mormon missionaries knocked on my door. He found me. And that was the beginning of my conversion.

I spent three years reading the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and whatever other literature I could find. I didn't believe I was

ready because I felt so stupid. When they set a baptismal date for me, I said, "I'm not ready." But when I came back to America, another miracle happened to me. One night I went to a used bookstore in New York, and I picked up this book called *The Devil Drives,* which is the story of Richard Burton, an English explorer who discovered the Blue Nile. I opened it to the page where he was in Salt Lake City, where he met Brigham Young and interviewed him. I saw it and thought, "This is it." I then went back to my room and telephoned the mission home. I said, "Three years ago I was taught by your missionaries in Berlin, and I spent the last three years reading all about the Church, and now I'm ready."

So the next day they sent the missionaries over, and three weeks later I was baptized into the Church in New York City. Two days after that I met my wife, Loretta. She was a convert too, of one year, and six months later we were married. We have been married now for thirty-eight years and have eight children—Seth is one of them—and that's the story of my conversion. It was like a new life for me. A new life completely.

Did your conversion change your art in any way?

Not really. My art was never rowdy or anything like that. About one-third of my books were illustrated before I joined the Church, and most of my comic books were illustrated after I joined the Church. It didn't really change my art, but it changed my thinking, and at that time I was trying to convert all of New York City. As a new convert I lost a lot of friends. I was insufferable, talking about the Church all the time. But you know, the friends that stayed with me were the good ones. They didn't join the Church, but at least they were my real friends.

My conversion did lead me to writing that story about the book of Ether, as well as my illustrations for the *New Testament Stories for Children.* It also led me to the thirteen episodes of *The Greatest Adventures Ever Told* at Hanna-Barbera. I don't think I could have done those before I joined the Church. I didn't have the insight that I gained from becoming a member. So in that sense it changed—if not my style, then my viewpoint. And that's a major change.

Seth Estrada

How did you first get the idea to make a documentary about your dad?

From Kelly Loosli. He's on the faculty at BYU and heads up the animation program there. He had worked with my father at DreamWorks and had, over the course of several months, gone over a lot of my dad's experiences and stories and really gotten to know him. He said to himself, "Wow, this guy is kind of unreal. He's almost like the Cuban Forrest Gump. He's been everywhere and done everything. This would make a really good documentary."

My brother Jeremy got into the animation program and introduced me to Kelly, and what most people don't know about Kelly is that, prior to going into animation, he got his degree in documentary filmmaking. So he told us that we should help him make a documentary about our dad. He also said that as faculty he might be able to qualify us for some good funding to get it made. Of course, at that time, Jeremy and I were both full speed ahead with our college careers, and we didn't get the proposal submitted on time, so we lost out on about twenty or twenty-four thousand dollars' worth of budget.

The seed was planted, though, and the following year, I thought, "You know what? I really do want to make this documentary about my dad." It wasn't what I was studying, and it wasn't ultimately what I really want to do, or what I wanted to do at the time (which was feature filmmaking), but I love my dad. His story is so important to me because it has really helped shape the culture of my family. The stories that I share with my siblings are highly informed by my father's story, and I want to pay respect to him by telling it.

As you've been putting this documentary together, what obstacles have you been facing?

Right now we're approaching year four of production on this documentary, and I think with any project of this nature, once you get past a certain point in production, which is usually after all the base footage from which you want to cut a documentary is collected, the issue of momentum comes up. Time, money, and inspiration also come up. With the time, you have to make it, and with the money, you have to find it. Inspiration tends to come as you look for the other two. We've had the logistical issues of having a core creative team disband, and then realizing, "Okay, I'm on my own right now, and that's okay. I'll just re-form that core creative team and then we'll move ahead." That's about where we are now.

You said you've had a little bit of budget. Where does that come from?

That came from a grant I applied for while I was a student at BYU. The conditions didn't require the project to be finished, though. We gave them status reports and let them know to what point we had finished. Since then we haven't received any more funds, but we've gotten a lot of momentum, certainly. It's been surprising how many doors have opened. We actually recently interviewed the president of DC Comics, Paul Levitz, which was a really great blessing.

In regards to making time, it sounds like there was a period where you couldn't. What changed?

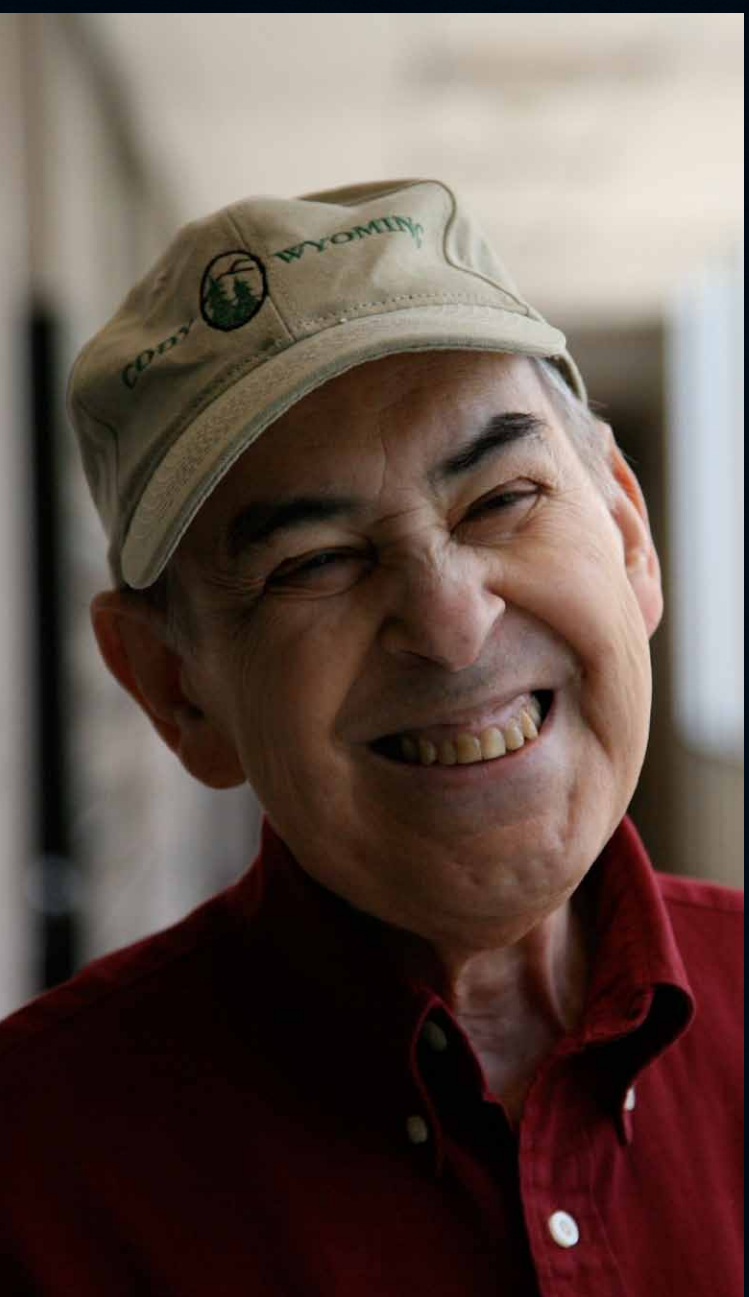
The thing that made it hard to continue with the documentary was being jobless for a couple months. Being out of work in Southern California with a wife and two kids to feed is no laughing matter. Obviously, those were dire circumstances that required immediate action. It was kind of a sucker punch, really, because we were set up with these expectations that we would be able to get a job, no problem. You finish up an internship at a major studio, and the anticipation is that—provided you haven't upset anyone who sits at a big desk—you'll have a job. And that didn't happen. We then went knocking on the doors of all the other studios, then all the smaller studios, then the even smaller studios, and after a couple of months it got a little worrisome. So, I found a day job, and that's fine.

Since you are making a documentary about someone you love, whose image and representation you care about deeply, does that ever make it hard to tell the story well?

Absolutely. Objectivity is lost. Objectivity is always in question whenever you are making any sort of art, because it's obviously a construct, and when you're close to the subject, you are subjective instead. Having that storytelling voice from the perspective of the son talking about his father, there's already a fine line, and even with a great deal of the

father's help, it's going to be painted with the son's brush strokes. I have great charity for my father, because I love him, and it's really hard to be objective and look at him as a character. But at the end of the day, viewing him as a character ultimately wins out.

I think that one of the things that I struggle with, as far as knowing how to represent my dad, is that he has a very unique sense of humor that was experienced by my siblings and myself when we were younger. We can't experience it the same way, though, because we aren't the same age anymore. But it was so real, and so tangible, and so thoroughly enjoyable. If I could share my story, that's one of the parts of it I would want to show. I ask myself quite frequently, "How do I show that? How do I share that? How does that become real for somebody else?" And then hopefully it leads to a moment of truth for them, where they think, "Oh wow, I feel something, and I see something in myself. That resonates with me." That's one of the biggest aspects of this project that I struggle with.



Has working on this piece affected your relationship with your father?

Having this time to spend with my father, and having a reason to spend this much time around him is certainly improving our relationship. It is giving us time together that we wouldn't otherwise have. Our relationship has always been healthy, though, and very loving. These are the fruits of it that are quite mature.

What keeps you going to work on this documentary?

It's the same thing that keeps me going to work every day: prayer, scripture study, and a rose-colored, titanium-built woman. My wife is awesome, and she is my "go-to gal" right now. She's the person that helps me get my head on straight, and when the world is bleak, gives me the big picture—she provides a little color correction, helping me see things as they are again. She winds me back up and sets me back in the right direction.

What are your most memorable experiences from working on this piece?

Because the production has been such a lengthy process, the most memorable experiences are the most recent ones. It's almost like the mission—it's the best two years of your life, until you get home and start living your life right, and then the next two years are the best years of your life, and so on and so forth. It should keep on building. The last interview, with Paul Levitz, president of DC Comics, was the most memorable interview before today. That was huge. But it pales in comparison, in my opinion, to this.

How do you hope this documentary will influence your career?

First and foremost, it has been a wonderful exercise in how to keep objectivity while working with a subject that is very, very close. Also, it's been

a great way to learn how to rebuild a team quickly. I've always been fairly quick on my feet when I'm on a small team, and moving with a large collaborative team has been more difficult. I am finding that to be a necessity. I absolutely have to interface frequently with a lot of people for this project to work. This one requires it a lot more than with other personal portrait documentaries because my dad has been around the block a couple of times: in comics and animation, and even just around the world. So this is going to be a little more than a one-man show. I'm hoping for growth there, and I'm also hoping for the opportunity to meet and collaborate with and have future dealings with like-minded individuals who don't ask me to compromise my morals in order to make good art. Ultimately I am hoping to find distribution that is fruitful and multiplies.

Do you see yourself making more documentaries in the future?

You know, I do. I really do. I started the documentary telling myself, "This is not at all what I want to do," but I have freedom in this medium to relate the story however I want—I mean, I'm bound by some formulas and generic expectations to some extent, because if no one wants to watch it, it's like it doesn't exist. But I'm not as bound as I would be with other kinds of films.

I think every artist aspires to make something that stands the test of at least some amount of time. So if I can enjoy this film five seconds longer than the last one that I made, that's a measure of success. If I can enjoy it for the rest of my life because I feel like there is some element in it that has watchability and the truth I strive for, then I've arrived. What more could I possibly want?

Do you want to be a one-man show for the rest of your life?

Certainly not. I enjoy video production. I've been involved with it for years now, on some level or another. Not just by myself, though. I have worked with other teams, and been a freelancer and a part of post-production. But so far, it's giving me a better idea of what side of production I want to end up on, and how much and what type of pre-production I really enjoy most.

Do you have a vision yet of what the finished film will look like?

There are a lot of components that have been percolating, that haven't yet all been laid out together. The psychology term is that I have been making tiny chunks. I am so used to the short form that short form components are there. I see the sequence, and I see the act, but I haven't seen the whole thing appear yet. But there are sequences, acts, and certainly several scenes that I have already visualized.

When this documentary is finished, do you think that you could call it "Mormon cinema"?

That's really the million-dollar question, isn't it? Going back to the purposes of art, and the purposes of filmmaking in general, can you push an agenda? Probably not. Can you reveal truth about yourself? Probably. I grew up Mormon. That's part of my filmmaking voice. It's always going to be a part of me, always.

Even if I wanted to create something that wasn't for a Mormon market, or something that violated the LDS aesthetic in every way along with the covenants that I have made as an LDS person, I was born and raised in the covenant. My storytelling voice will always reflect that. That's the blessing, you might say, the ties that bind us and pull us back, even as storytellers. So, yes, it's Mormon cinema in that respect. Is it for a Mormon audience? Not exclusively. After all, the message of the gospel isn't for an LDS audience exclusively. This is for open hearts and for good people everywhere.

How can our readers get involved in helping with the film?

One way is transcription. We have dozens of hours of interviews, and many hands make light work. It's something that anyone can do. You can check out our website and sign up right there.

There's a form that lists any number of other ways to help, whether it's donating materials or graphic design, or animation, or character design. This documentary, by the way, isn't just live action, but contains a considerable animated portion as well. If you have any skills there, we can use those skills. ▪

Dani Jones

interviewed by David Habben

Dani Jones is an illustrator based out of New Hampshire. Website: **danijones.com**

How did you get your start in illustration?

I graduated from BYU–Idaho in 2005. Immediately after that, I started looking for work. I spent the summer building my portfolio and sending out samples. I was also able to find an agent, Tugeau 2, who was willing to represent me.

In the fall of 2005, I took a visit to New York City and met with a couple of children's book publishers. I received my first book job as a result of this trip, a picture book called *Elfis*. It was a great project, and it helped give a little jumpstart to my career. I have been able to work fairly steadily ever since.

You've worked with both traditional and digital media. How have you adapted your skills?

It's just a matter of learning the tools. The computer intimidates a lot of people, but I enjoy all the technology and geek stuff, so digital painting was relatively easy for me to learn.

On the computer, you still have to deal with the same challenges, like color, drawing, and composition. Those are what I consider my true skills. The computer is just the medium I choose to express them. If I enjoyed oil painting more, I would be oil painting right now, but as it happens, I like Photoshop.

However, I'm grateful that I got my start in traditional media. It's hard to learn specific artistic techniques when you're distracted by all the fancy tools on the computer. Pixels just don't give you the same amount of texture and subtlety that is inherent in regular old paint. In Photoshop or Painter, you practically have to wrestle with it to get the same qualities. So, I recommend all artists develop their traditional skills before learning the digital ones.

Tell us about your recent "Three Little Pigs" project.

My foremost goal in my career is to illustrate children's books, so I'm always trying to create the appropriate artwork and market myself with that in mind.

The "Three Little Pigs" was a project I created for myself. Basically, I set a goal to illustrate the story, with the intention of sending it out to publishers as a promotional booklet.

I posted my process to one of my blogs as I was creating it. I got lots of feedback from fellow artists, and it was a really fun experiment.

I ended up sending out the printed versions of the booklet late last year. You can also view the final result on my website. The idea is that a children's book publisher can look at this and see that I have the ability to do the kind of work that they are looking for. As an illustrator, I'm constantly trying to think things up like this in order to help stay on top of my game and ahead of the competition. I'll probably do a similar project this year as well.

Looking back on your education and career thus far, what, if anything, would you do differently?

I'm still not very good at the business side of things. I was really fortunate to get a rep early on, because she deals with a lot of that stuff for the bulk of the work I get. But I'm still trying to be more independent in that area by being more consistent with my marketing and educating myself about the industry. I learned a little of this in school, but I wish I'd done more. I now have to learn a lot through trial and error and experience.

How has your family been a part of your career?

My parents are highly encouraging, which has been the best motivation ever. I think more importantly, though, is that they have never been the least bit discouraging, which I think is the harder task for a logical, work-for-a-living parent of an artist. But they never suggested I choose a different major or push it to the side; they just bought me more art supplies.

In one of your blog posts, you explain that your main goal is to draw every day. How has that benefited your work and your life?

A freelance illustrator has to constantly come up with ideas and new work. When you add other tasks like paperwork, e-mails, marketing, etc., it becomes harder and harder to keep up with that. My goal is to make just one drawing per day, no matter what else might be going on. Sometimes it is just a little ten-minute doodle. As an artist, this helps

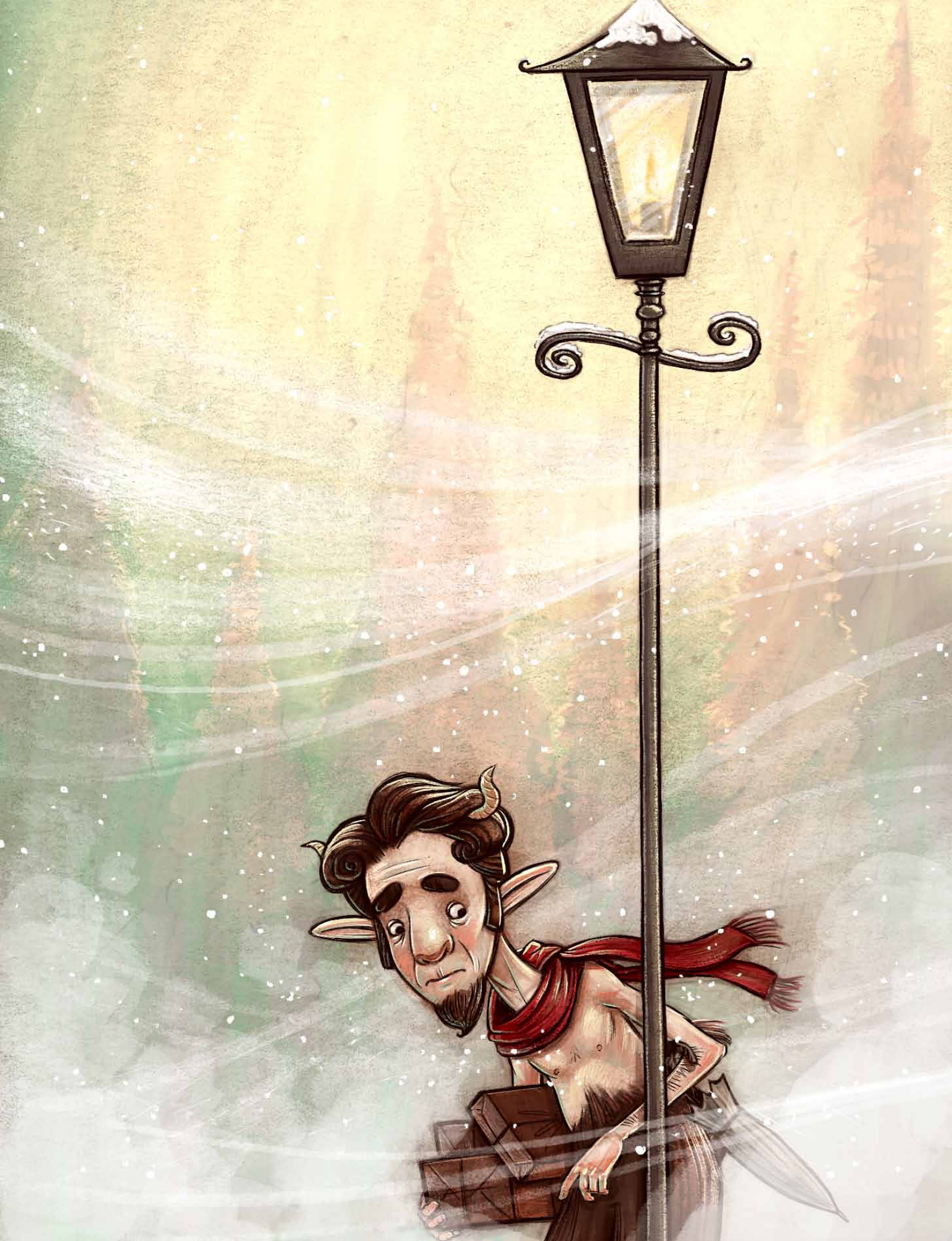
me tremendously because it keeps me creatively in tune, always thinking, and always producing.

Who has most influenced you as an artist and how?

Artistically, probably my professors at BYU–Idaho. The illustration staff included Dan Burr, Scott Franson, Wade Huntsman, and Jeff Carter, not to mention all of the other drawing and painting teachers that helped me out a lot when I was just starting out. They were really great teachers, had a passion for art and design, and really cared about the success of their students. I wouldn't be here without their help.

How do you see the gospel influencing your work?

Being an artist, and an illustrator in particular, is very hard. Creative freelancers deal with very specific problems, like self-motivation, discipline, and craft, which are more prevalent than in other careers. You have to keep coming up with new ideas



and creating better work, often without the support or push of coworkers and bosses.

The gospel teaches people to always strive to be better and to be positive, and in that respect it has greatly influenced how I go about my career and the type of work I choose to create. What I have learned in my daily life—setting goals and perfecting oneself—helps me in my working life, too. I'm contacted by other artists all the time who ask me how I stay creative and motivated; in an industry like this, you simply have to stay optimistic and always move forward, because there is a lot of criticism and rejection that comes with it. I simply don't know how far I would have gotten in this career without the gospel principles I've been taught all my life.

Has there been a time where your faith has been tested by your profession?

I work in a pretty rosy profession. There aren't too many issues to deal with in children's illustration. However, there are many beautiful books and images being made that may convey a message I don't particularly agree with. Living in the arts, I also have to learn to not be affected by certain trends and a modern society that may not mesh with my own goals or direction, when it might be easier to follow what's popular or cool.

What is the role of an artist—particularly an LDS artist—in our society today?

Artists have the ability to control our culture—they control what's in our books, movies, TV shows, and music. These kinds of things highly influence our culture and society; the better we reflect the world as artists, the better we will be at helping

the goals of the Church. LDS artists have a particular view of the world that is positive; we believe in a hopeful future and the good in people. However, it's probably cooler nowadays to be pessimistic and gritty, and LDS artists have to learn to compete with that.

I remember one particular incident in school where I made an illustration that depicted a family that was kind of dysfunctional. A professor noted that the image would be just as effective with a happy family, and to think what kind of message I wanted to convey. It made me think about my artwork differently.

Not that I think that all images should show a shiny, happy world, because problems do exist; but when you have the opportunity to be positive and not contribute to the downward spiral our culture tends to move in, take it.

Artists should constantly be bettering themselves and their craft, and concentrate on creating beautiful work that really touches people, and not fill them with junk.

I hope that by creating positive, beautiful artwork, I am able to inspire other artists to do the same. Also, I have been blessed to share a lot of my experiences through my blog, which has proven to be a great way to educate and inspire others. It makes me happy to know that my little bit of knowledge has been able to help other artists achieve their own goals and keep an optimistic attitude in this difficult profession. ▪

Carolee Coy

interviewed by Ashley Neves

Carolee Coy is a photographer who recently graduated from BYU–Idaho. Website: **caroleecoy.com**

How did you get into photography?

I was given my first camera on my thirteenth birthday. Ever since then, I've been hooked. But honestly, my first formal introduction was in high school. I took a photo class my senior year and couldn't get enough of the entire photographic process. Second semester of that same year, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to attend the King Career Center (a federally-funded charter/career school for high school students) in Anchorage. Most students there weren't as serious about their courses as I was about photography, but it was an incredible opportunity for me. My knowledge of photography really grew. I knew then, without a doubt, that it was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

What impact do your photos have on you, personally?

They really are an extension of myself. The "Americana" series, for example, was something that I sort of just fell into. After having returned home from a mission over in Eastern Europe, I was

fascinated by the mundane simplicity of the American West. And so, as I traveled throughout Utah and surrounding areas, the project began to create itself. My projects often help me to understand myself and define my perspective on life and my surroundings.

Can you tell us about the "Couples" series?

The couples series was actually my BFA thesis. Basically, I decided to focus on a very unique element of our own LDS subculture. Prior to this project, living, traveling, and exploring extensively in Europe and North America had been a primary source of inspiration. So, to mix things up a bit, I decided to approach the opportunity for a new body of work, looking no further than my own religious culture. I explored the undergraduate environment and society of Brigham Young University–Idaho. Attending BYU–Idaho provided me with an interesting perspective into young Mormon adults: the societal expectations placed upon them and their dedication to family life.

Combining my love of portraiture with the desire to explore this unique culture, I photographed young married, undergraduate students in their homes and apartments. Mormon students attending church-sponsored schools are four times more likely to be married before completing their undergraduate degrees than those at other universities in the United States. My unmarried status as an "old maid" nearing twenty-six made me to want to dig deep into the issues and realities of what I dealt with on a daily basis. As I stepped out of my comfort zone, knocked on doors, and approached strangers to request their participation in this project, I gained valuable experience in how to execute a project involving others.

Your "Paris" and "Holga" collections are not only rich and enthralling, but they each tell a story. What was your experience like doing these shoots?

Paris was a very special time for me. During the time that I lived there, my camera really was an extension of myself. It went everywhere with me. I joked about how it was a third appendage. Anyway, as I went around day to day, wandering through the streets of Paris, I was keenly aware of my surroundings, and so every photograph became an experience. I shot over 200 rolls of film and catalogued

each and every one. I didn't just capture each image, but each moment captured me. When I look back on the photos from the trip, I remember what each day felt like and, in a way, relive it.

When shooting a subject, like the neon cowboy or the storefront with the striped awning, how do you choose the exact shot you want to put in the collection?

Editing is a huge part of putting together a collection. It's a hard process to explain, but it's one that is very important. I have a very close, intimate circle of friends and family who understand my art and motivate me. I turn to them a great deal as I edit down a project. Each piece is selected for a specific purpose. Whether it's because of the successful execution of lighting and composition, or if there's something in the image that conveys a certain idea—all of these elements factor into my selection.

What techniques do you like to use?


Honey Nut
Cheerios


WHO'S YUR
PANTERS

I prefer to shoot with film, but because of cost, I've gone more digital as of late. I shoot 35mm as well as medium format and really enjoy the entire photographic process. Despite this move to digital, most of what I do happens in the initial stages of capturing the image. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't do a lot of heavy photoshopping. I like to get it right when capturing, and I use Photoshop mostly like I would a dark room.

How has your style evolved since you first started?

I laugh when I look at the photos that I took when I first started. My style has definitely improved. But that's to be hoped for and expected, right? Most noticeably, I have improved technically, but there have been vast improvements in all other areas as well. When I started to view myself as more of a potential professional photographer, I really envisioned that I'd be shooting high-end portraiture and fashion. I suppose that's one other way that my photography has changed. I don't see myself doing that kind of photography anymore. I see myself more as an artist and an educator. Photography, for me, is a way to express my views and to educate others on prevalent issues. I shoot in a more artistic and documentary style now than I ever did before.

How do your beliefs affect your work?

My spiritual beliefs totally affect my work, because I am what I believe. Art, to me, is an extension of myself and of the way that I view the world around me. The situations and circumstances that I've had in my life are directly connected to how I've been raised and what I believe.

How do you see your art contributing to building the kingdom?

I see my work contributing to the building of the kingdom through the first two parts of the Church's threefold mission—perfecting the Saints, proclaiming the gospel, and redeeming the dead. As an artist, I strive to edify and inspire those around me. In a way, I could say that through my art I am perfecting the Saints as well as striving for personal perfection. My photography has also been a great tool in proclaiming the gospel—because of the nature of my work, there are opportunities to discuss and share cultural habits as well as religious beliefs with those who know little to nothing about the Church. ▪


WE'RE
OPEN

Lili Hall

interviewed by Benjamin Crowder

Lili Hall is a bookbinder and conservator. Website: **lilbookbinder.wordpress.com**

How did you get started in book arts?

I was homeschooled from about fourth grade until high school. I credit some of my start to that—it gave me time to explore things that I might not have. I was always experimenting, making piñatas and teaching myself how to make paper and that kind of thing. My sister gets credit for the rest of my start. One day she made some simple books, and that just got me going.

Because I had time to explore my interests—since I wasn't going straight into university—I thought, "I'm just going to experiment and have fun." I taught myself. I checked out books at the library and started mass-producing simple little books.

Early on I would improvise—I would laminate cereal boxes together or cut the boards out of binders to make book boards. I liked it so much that I started to wonder if it was just a hobby or if it was something that people did for a living. I had no idea.

So, I started researching. That was ten years ago—there was a lot less on the Internet back then. I found a school in Colorado that taught bookbinding as an art form—what they called design binding. My mom encouraged me to apply, and I was accepted. The American Academy of Bookbinding runs in the summer, so I did one course before my mission. I loved it, and from then on, it was what I wanted to do.

A lot of people were very surprised that I was self-taught. One of my teachers said, "You're the only self-taught bookbinder I've ever met." I was registering for classes in vellum binding and I didn't even know what vellum was. It was intimidating because I was very young and most of the people there were much older than me—a lot of people fall into it later on in life or as a second career or hobby.

How long were you at the American Academy of Bookbinding?

I discovered that there aren't many formal training programs. You're required to study for five years or to do twenty bindings (ten at the school and ten on your own) that show advancement in skills. As you progress, your work is expected to reflect artistic growth. A research paper is also required of graduating students. When you're deemed worthy, you're given a diploma. I actually haven't graduated yet. I've done four years and it's been sort of a long-term thing—I've gone every second or third summer. I've decided that I'm not going back until I'm where I need to be for my fifth year, which is still a ways to go.

After my mission, I realized that since there's no formal training program, I could go to college and study anything I want. I knew I wanted to do binding, so I thought, "Okay, I'll study art." I did and wound up falling into printmaking, which focuses on the text and imagery of books. One of my goals through my undergraduate education was to integrate what I had been studying independently and at the American Academy of Bookbinding with my printmaking diploma. My final show was my first real successful culmination of that. I hope to do more of that in the future.

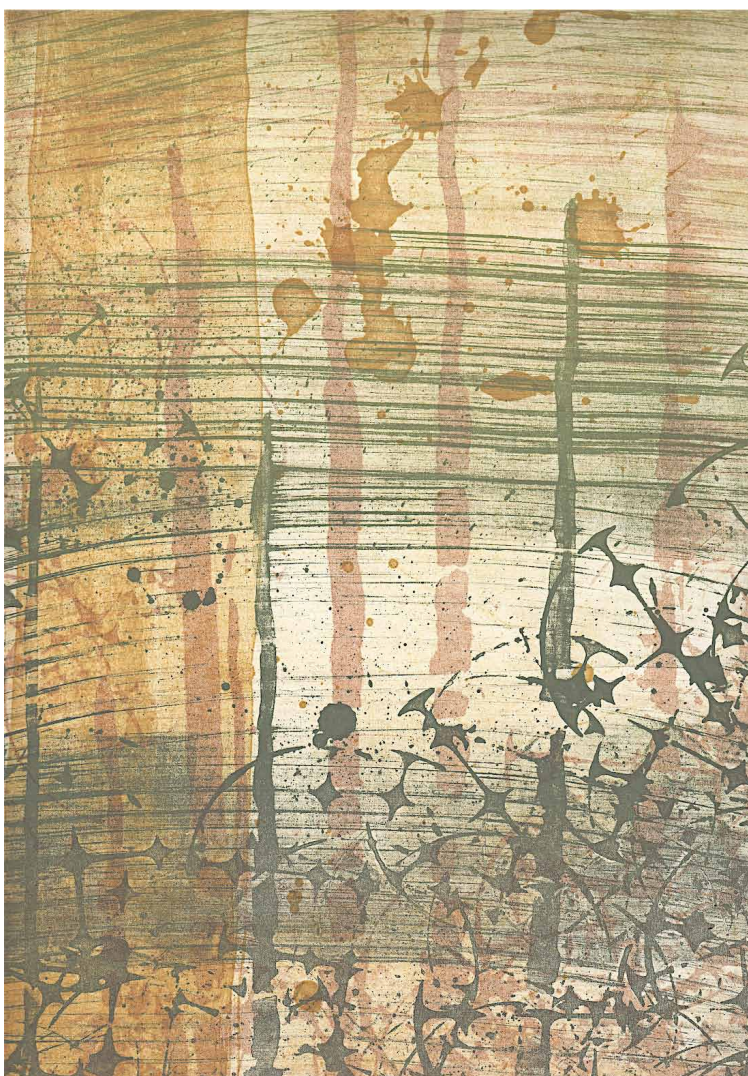
Where did the idea for your final show came from? What was it like putting it together?

I knew I wanted to produce a book, but that's kind of broad. I was doing a diploma in printmaking—in visual art—so I knew it needed to incorporate imagery. For me, the most intimidating thing was coming up with a text. I wanted to create my own original text, but I worried about coming off as pretentious. It's one thing creating images; it's a whole other thing to come up with original text with corresponding illustrations. It was fairly daunting, actually, so I considered borrowing from another text. And essentially, that's what I did. I went to the thrift store and started browsing through books, noticing that people had scribbled things in the margins.

My original idea was to collect what people had scribbled there and string them together and see if I could come up with anything that was somewhat cohesive. There just wasn't enough. In class, the idea came up of taking what people had underlined in self-help books. I went to the self-help section and discovered that those are very underlined books. I took a lot of pictures and transcribed what people had underlined. Then somewhat randomly, somewhat deliberately, I rearranged what they had written. It was an insight into a lot of people's struggles to become more motivated. This is a bit postmodern, but I was really interested in how people's minds work and letting them take the material and put it together.

I began to design the text. I decided to separate the phrases by inserting dingbats, little typographical embellishments. I borrowed from all kinds of fonts—traditional fonts that came from actual letterpressed broadsides, as well as some really common and almost cliché digital fonts that everyone uses, like Wingdings. The idea was for these tiny illustrations to interplay with the text and influence the way the reader interprets what was written. There was a phrase about parents, siblings, and children and there were little Star Wars dingbats inserted; suddenly your mind is assuming that the sentence was making reference to Darth Vader and Luke's parent-child relationship.

For the imagery, I wound up taking those



dingbats and changing their scale and using only the lines and shapes, kind of collaging them together. I was interested in aesthetics and arrangements, in creating new spaces and environments and seeing where that took me. It was really fun to hear people's feedback because this was a project that took me over a year. When it's all you're looking at, you become a bit too close to your project and you're not sure where it stands anymore or how it's going to be received. It's really fun to get feedback and watch people as they look at the show and see them making their own connections. Some people made connections between the illustrations and the text and were sure that I had done something deliberate. Sometimes I had, but usually I hadn't.

What about the letterpress part of the project?

Gutenberg books were printed by setting lead type, one piece at time. Today a lot of artists have adopted the letterpress as a printmaking medium, and some artists still collect type and set it by hand. There are also many artists who will do digital drawings or do their own hand-drawn artwork and scan it into a computer. From that they make a negative on a transparency, and from the transparency they make a photopolymer plate which has a raised surface, similar to the raised surface of type. That's then printed on the letterpress. It's using a traditional press with modern technologies.

I designed the text of my book on a Macintosh in Adobe InDesign. I had a steep learning curve for that, because I'm not a graphic designer. The artwork was hand-drawn, scanned, made into negatives, and then Rob Buchert made my photopolymer plates from the negatives. I then printed my book on a letterpress from the plates.

Originally, I considered a lot of mediums. I made a lot of woodblocks and lots of prototypes, and my professors at BYU said, "These would look really good letterpressed." That was my go-ahead. I finally settled on letterpress, and I was glad I did.

What was it like working in the BYU library conservation lab?

I knew I wanted to do bookbinding, and there is work in binding, but there's often a lot more security in conservation. There's not a degree in bookbinding at BYU, so I was very fortunate to meet Mark Pollei at a time when he had been working to make a student position. I was hired as a part-time conservation student and Mark became quite a mentor—he was really enthusiastic and showed me that there really are people who do this (though they're few and far between).

Bookbinders and conservators build models. I had the opportunity to make a lot of models and study the history of bookbinding through that. I also contributed to the care of rare books. The conservation department takes care of everything in Special Collections, and so I started out making protective boxes. I got to build boxes for the original scores of *Gone with the Wind* and *Casablanca*. I also helped with library exhibitions. There are props that need to be made for books to rest on—book cradles and matting and framing and that kind of thing. I did paper repair and fixed old book posters and Japanese scrolls.

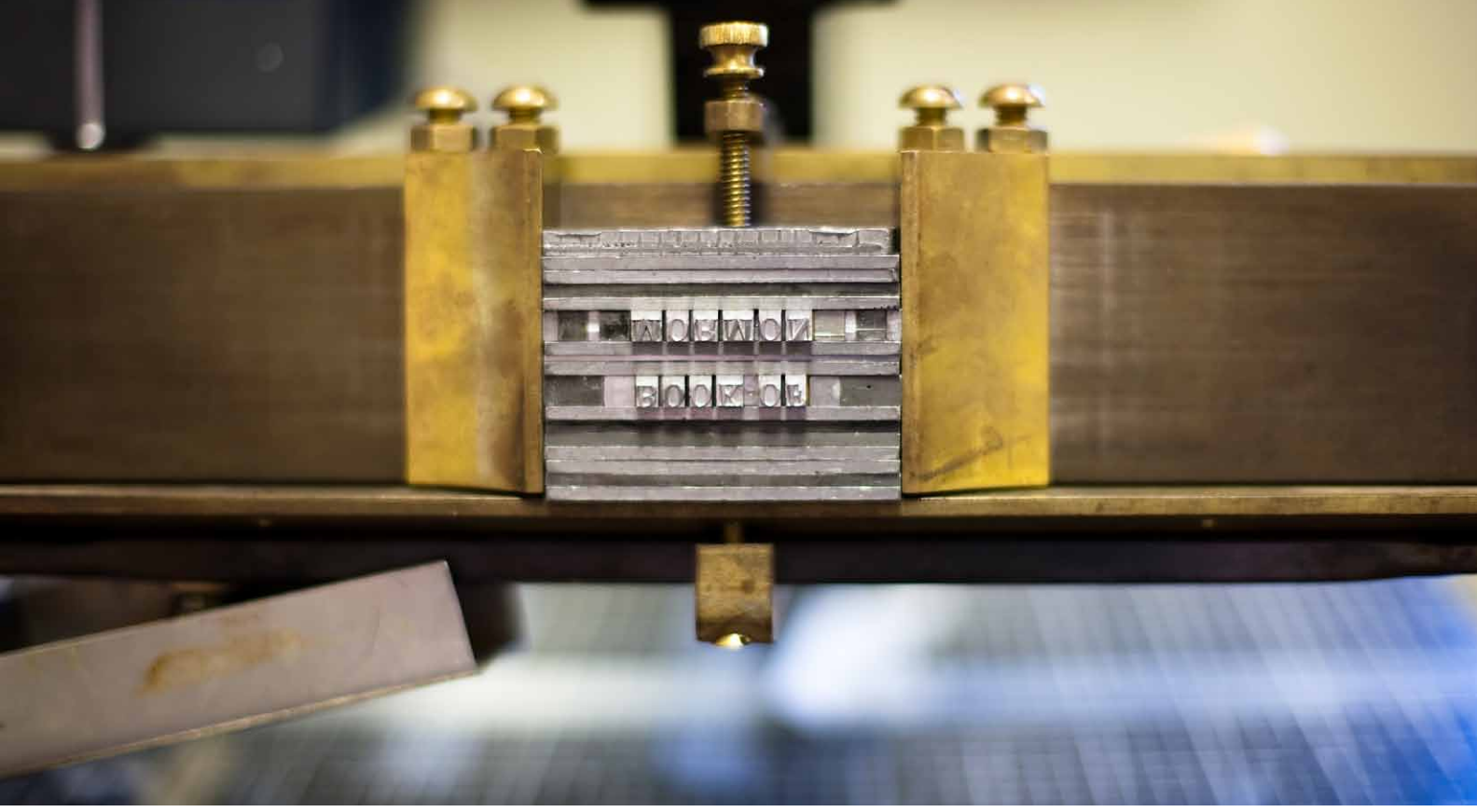
Probably the most exciting project I got to do was the conservation of a first-edition Hawaiian Book of Mormon. They're incredibly rare. Hawaiian was one of the first languages the Book of Mormon was translated into, in the 1850s. Back then, books were printed but not all bound at once. Only 200 of the original 3,000 copies printed were not destroyed in a fire, if I understand it right. It was a good learning opportunity for me because it was a book that required being taken apart and washed—lots of very fragile paper that had been eaten by mold, leaving gaps that had to be filled in.

Tell us about woodblocks. How do you start a project from start to finish?

In my case, I wanted woodblocks that were type-high so that I could print them on a letterpress. One reason woodblocks are attractive to a lot of artists is that it's one of the few printmaking mediums where you don't need big equipment. Lithography and intaglio can be difficult if you don't have access to presses—it's hard for a lot of students who graduate to continue doing those kinds of things—but woodblocks are something you can still do.

Basically, I come up with a drawing and sometimes fill it in with ink to get an idea of what the black and white might look like, and then trace the line onto the block.

The best tools will make a huge difference, so I invested in some good carving tools. They're called gouges, and they come in different kinds of v-shapes and u-shapes. It's helpful to have a bracing board,



which is a wooden jig that hooks over the edge of a table and holds the woodblock steady while you carve.

If I'm working at home I typically use water-based inks, but I prefer the look of oil-based inks. You often get a smoother texture; the water-based ones are kind of chalky.

It's a reductive process. You start with a flat surface and you start to dig away. It's also called relief printing. You can test it as you go, inking it to see how it looks. You just carve until you're happy, basically. Some of it is planned out and some of it I kind of improvise as I go along.

What was it like working on your piece "Rooftops"?

"Rooftops" was actually a school assignment. It was the early roots for the imagery of my final show—I was beginning to experiment with how shapes overlapped. With "Rooftops" I just went out and found a house and drew it, and then I took some of the architectural shapes from the house and I put them together.

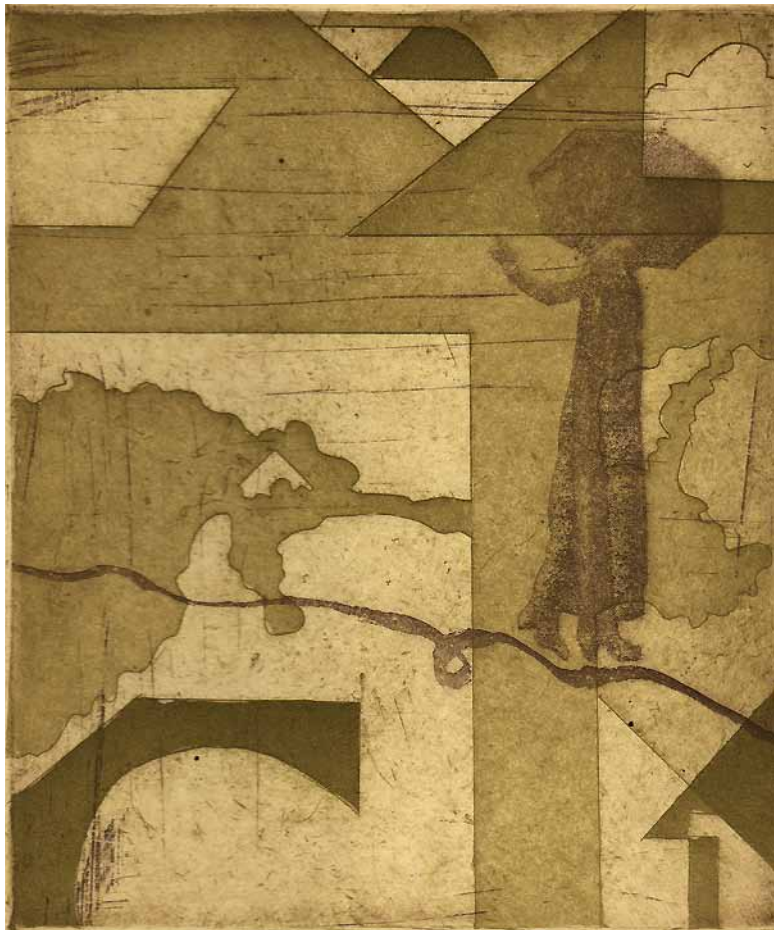
This image was an intaglio print with multiple registrations. You print one plate and then you take it away and you have another plate that you've etched with something different and you print it in the exact same place and the images begin to overlap. I had an idea of women walking on a tightrope in this kind of imaginary architectural space. I wound up taking a vintage photograph that I had found long ago—I'm sort of an image junkie—and ended up superimposing it over the first plate with the architectural shapes.

Tell us about your time at West Dean.

West Dean is a small arts school in the south of England. When I was there, there were about fifty full-time students. Its emphasis is traditional hand crafts. They have an arts school with painting and drawing, a tapestry-weaving program, an instrument making program, clock conservation and restoration, ceramics conservation, and book conservation. I first heard of West Dean because I had a friend I'd worked with at BYU who graduated from the program two years before me. There's nothing like it available in the United States. Jumping straight from doing an art degree to doing a conservation degree was quite the reversal. All of a sudden I was studying how books and art deteriorated. I remember visiting London in 2005 and looking at paintings and thinking about their aesthetic qualities. The next time I went, while I was at West Dean, I was thinking about how the light was destroying

the work. It was a completely different mindset. It's been an interesting process figuring out how and if these two degrees work together.

I was at West Dean for one year. It's typically a two-year program, but I started at the post-graduate level and was on an accelerated track. I worked on books from the sixteenth century. I wound up interning at the Bodleian Library in Oxford for six weeks, which was a fantastic opportunity. We studied what we called material science—mostly understanding, once again, how things break down and how materials will interact. We continued to make models and study bookbinding one day a week for a few hours. We did field trips to libraries and archives all over the south of England, and we did lots of research and writing which culminated in an independent project, which was our thesis.



I really struggled to come up with a thesis topic. I had a short amount of time to come up with it and here I was, jumping from art to conservation. I discovered that even though I'd worked at BYU, most of the materials I'd worked on were fairly modern compared to Europe. I still lacked a lot of knowledge, so I needed to work on something I already knew something about. While I was at BYU, I used to experiment with binding books in Tyvek, a modern material often used in construction. Suddenly I remembered hearing here and there of conservators using Tyvek, but essentially nothing was written about it. So, I wound up researching how it was being used by conservators. I discovered that one of the biggest problems with Tyvek was that conservators don't think it will stick. So I wound up testing a whole bunch of adhesives with Tyvek and seeing if it stuck. The short answer was yes, it does.

You now work at Scrub Oak Bindery. What's that like?

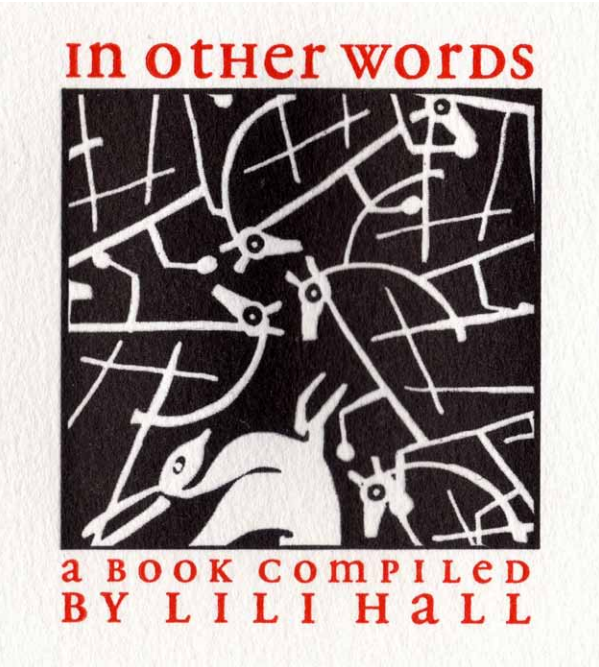
Scrub Oak Bindery was founded by Ethan Ensign, who is another independent bookbinder based in Salt Lake. He has a beautiful studio and mostly does conservation work. People bring in their rare books, which, this being Utah, is a lot of early Latter-day Saint books. He also does work for dealers, who sometimes have books in parts. If the dealer can get them put back together, they're much more likely to sell it. Ethan will also take bookbinding commissions—that's why he called me up. With the Christmas rush, he had more work than he could do.

It's been really educational working for a small businessman. Ultimately that's what I hope to do. I want my own studio where I can do design binding and conservation and host classes and have a space that other people can come and use. That's my vision. It's been good to be around someone who's kind of doing that.

Do you do any collaborative work?

I've done some collaborations with artists that have been really rewarding. One project was done


L.D.S.
STANDARD
WORKS



with twenty-five Utah artists who all happened to be female. All of the artists were printmakers, or, if they weren't, they had one of our printmakers convert their work to a printmaking medium. We printed thirty prints and then made thirty books containing one of each print. Then I bound them. Everyone got a book, and then one was framed in separate individual sheets and exhibited in Salt Lake and at BYU. It was a really fun collaboration; I really enjoy working with other artists, and this one was a lot less stressful than my final show because I didn't have to do the printing and I didn't have to do all of the art.

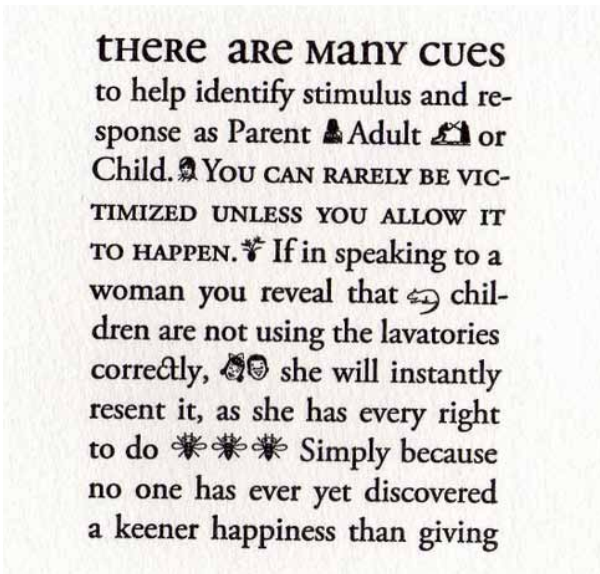
How do you see the gospel affecting your work as a book artist?

Having studied at BYU, I've seen it's almost too easy to integrate the gospel into your work to the point that it almost feels cliché. For that reason, I think students sometimes steer away from that. For me, I often found that I better appreciated the gospel's influence on my work when I would step away from the BYU setting.

One summer between semesters at BYU, I was in Colorado at my bookbinding school taking a design class. We were given a kind of an expressionism experiment where we were given words like "peace" and "disturbance" and had to create book designs based on that one word using only circles and lines (since those are common bookbinding tools). I found myself really struggling. How do you express "peace"? How do you express "disturbance"? Finally, I stepped back a little bit and thought, "Who am I? What do I believe?" That was the first time it really clicked for me how much the gospel is a part of what I create on a day-to-day basis. It was a fun experiment for me because it suddenly came easily and I was able to create my own symbolism for the word "peace." I knew no one else would know how I found order out of these lines and shapes, but it meant something to me. I've come to realize that artwork can be influenced by the gospel without necessarily being illustrative or literal.

Another thing that really clicked for me was when I was reading in the scriptures and the gospel library. Whatever you study or do for a career, you want to find validation in the broader scheme of things—you want to know how your knowledge will continue. It's fun to read about the books in heaven and think that maybe I'll have some part in that.

I remember arriving at an "Aha!" moment, realizing that whatever creative thing it is that we're doing—in my case it's bookbinding and printmaking—we are learning to create. I think that's part of our goal, if we're really going to become like our Heavenly Father and our Savior. That really brings a lot of satisfaction. When I feel I'm doing my best, improving, and aspiring to create beauty—that's really validating. ▪



Rob & Georgia Buchert

interviewed by Benjamin Crowder

Rob and Georgia Buchert run Tryst Press, a letterpress publishing studio in Provo, Utah. Website: **trystpress.com**

How did you get started in letterpress and book arts?

The whole fine press enterprise really started with a good marriage and a desire to work together. We were young newlywed students, looking for our own path. Rob studied journalism and worked at our college newspaper. He had experience in visual arts and put it to use doing design work as well as writing for the school weekly. His want of formal training prompted him to spend many hours at the library studying design. He discovered the art of typography and found his second love: letterforms.

We became familiar with a man named William Morris, a nineteenth-century artist, author, and interior designer who, near the end of his life, decided to set up a press and print beautiful editions of texts he believed were significant. His work was exquisite and his ideas inspired us. We shared his aesthetic and his passion for books, and eventually we decided to try our hands at making them as Morris did, the old-fashioned way.

We put school plans on hold and set our course for the unknown. We purchased a monstrously large orange work table at Deseret Industries for $8.00, and with a few linoleum-cutting tools and some space commandeered in the communal basement of our apartment building, we declared our independence and called our endeavor Tryst Press. Within a couple of years we found presses, type, and all the other things we needed to print books.

We got our start at the perfect time. Not long before, there had been a dramatic technological shift in the printing industry, and as a result all the equipment we were interested in was considered obsolete. It seemed we could have as much as we wanted, often for no more than the price of hauling it away.

Also providentially, Doug Himes, who taught printmaking at BYU, had taken an interest in letterpress and had acquired presses and type for use in the art department. He invited Rob to sit in on his class and learn the basics of presswork and typesetting. Rob now teaches his own class called "Type as Image" at BYU and uses that same equipment, almost twenty years later.

From there, how did it grow to where it was viable and you were making a living?

As we learned to use our new equipment and create with a new medium, Rob took a part-time job with a private college; he ran their Macintosh computer lab and did design work for the school. Once we gained some proficiency with letterpress we began soliciting job work—wedding announcements, business cards, letterhead, and such. We also kept our eyes open for new and exciting rice and bean recipes—in those early days we relied heavily on our food storage and the blessings of living the law of tithing.

We can't say it too strongly: the timing for this venture appeared to be heaven-sent. After the "death" of letterpress in the commercial market, there began to be an interest in the modern design community to resurrect this archaic craft. As far as

we knew, we were the only letterpress printers for something like 500 miles around who understood current graphic arts technology. That was a profitable arrangement for us at the time. After two years Tryst Press became our full-time employment. Job work provided bread-and-butter money as we learned about making and publishing books.

A big part of becoming successful is simply sticking with it. Bookmaking has more in common with architecture and symphonic composition than it does with painting or printmaking; so many varied elements must be orchestrated and built upon one another harmoniously. Each project can take months, sometimes years. You can't absolutely predict the outcome of a book, whether it will flop or do well; you find out how successful your creative efforts have been only after you've turned the final page, so to speak.

How did you learn your craft?

Soon after we started Tryst Press we made a list of the elements of fine press bookmaking that seemed important to master: book design, type design and manufacture, papermaking, illustration techniques, letterpress, bookbinding, and publishing. Generally, we took these on one (or two or so) at a time and researched, experimented, researched, and … researched.

Over time, keys were given to us that unlocked doors of understanding. We live in Provo, Utah—and while this seemed a hindrance in the sense that for hundreds, even thousands of miles, we could find no one to learn from who had the level of proficiency we were looking for—our location was also a blessing because of our proximity to the BYU library, which has exceptionally good collections on all of the subjects in which we were interested. We've already mentioned Doug Himes' kindness. Another friend, Chris McAfee, was an MFA student in Book Arts at UA and shared with us a new process which made it possible to print with a letterpress, artwork designed on computer. The Internet began to blossom soon after our journey began and that made it possible to connect with experts in distant places.

We're mostly self-taught … and in some cases maybe hyper-taught. Out of necessity we've made many of our own tools, which have required extra research and uncommon skills. A good example is papermaking: to make enough consistently high-quality paper in-house for printing an edition of books, we needed professional handpapermaking equipment. The making of those tools is itself a "lost" art … a long, painstaking process Rob lovingly learned because it was the only way to get precisely the result we were after. Here's another example—wood engraving was once a common technique for illustrating books and magazines, but the last professional wood engraving block manufacturers died or went out of business years ago, and the best woods for the process are extremely scarce and don't grow in North America. Rob worked hard to uncover sources and then researched and re-invented manufacturing techniques so he could produce the materials we needed. A little expertise goes a long way; for a while we ran a small side business called Wood Engraving Supply, and were actually the only wood engraving block makers in the world.

Can you walk us through the process of making *The Allegory of the Olive Tree?*

As publishers and artists we're always exploring ideas for new projects. We want to work with what interests and is important to us—what we love. We are both students of scripture and its rich symbolism, and so this gem of an allegory, Jacob 5, which is unlike any other passage in Restoration scripture, suggested itself as a wonderful project and a great opportunity to invest creatively in some Book of Mormon text that we love. The entire chapter is explicitly a metaphor, one that tells itself slowly. It's beautiful.

Author, editor, and BYU professor of Linguistics and English Language Royal Skousen is a friend of ours. When he found out what we were up to with the allegory, he volunteered the use of his critical text, which we accepted.

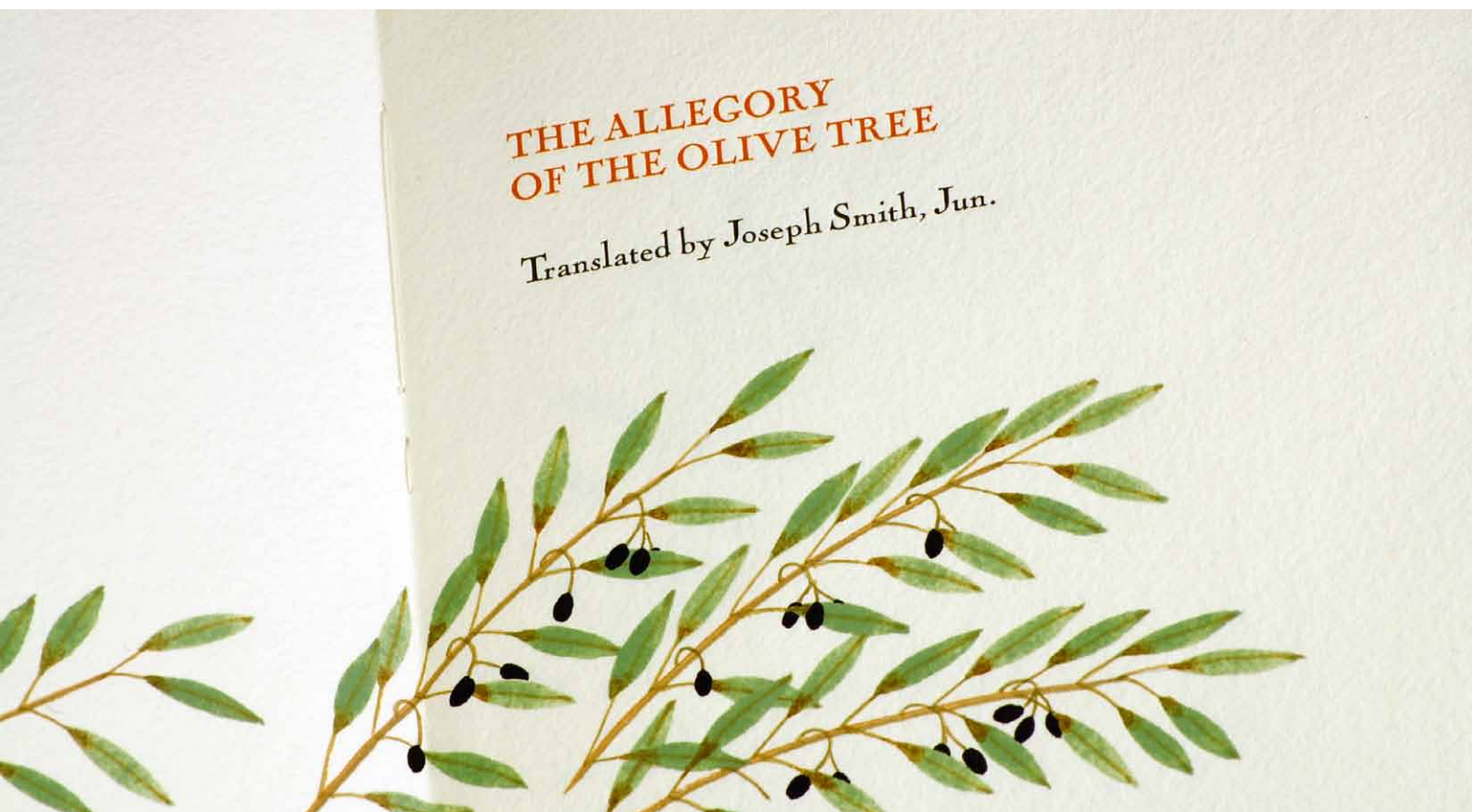
Deciding how to present that text was the next step. Everything about a book ought to revolve around the text. There are always considerations about the size of the book, the number of copies, placement of the text on the page, typefaces, embellishments, suitable papers, colors, textures, binding style, and so on. Designing a book is not a linear process. It often includes some happy accidents. Always it involves testing concepts and combinations, hammering them out, accepting, rejecting. For example, the question of embellishment—illustration

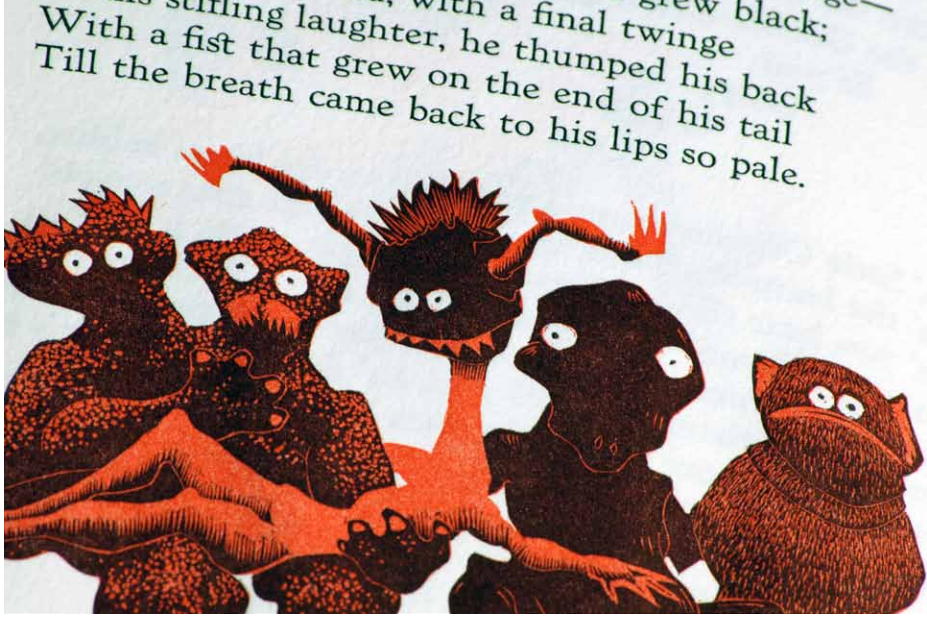
vs. decoration—part of the designer's job is to present the text as appealingly as possible. We embellish a text to add interest to a page. Illustration is a parallel telling of the story. Decoration, on the other hand, may reference the text but makes no overt attempt to visually interpret it. Illustrating scripture is difficult. Most scriptural illustration adds too much interpretation and can distract a reader from the personal revelation that might come by simply reading with the Spirit. For that reason, we decided on decorations only for this book.

After that decision came the question of how and where to decorate. The allegory beautifully describes two interwoven patterns—the natural cycle of the development of fruit, and the rhythm of careful, patient husbandry. The book's decorative motif became olive branches bearing fruit in various states of maturation. These clearly referenced the text but imposed no interpretation. Initially Rob planned to letterpress these decorations but realized that printing couldn't give the effect we wanted. Our intent was to mimic one of the most beautiful pictures in existence of an olive tree—from a 4000-year-old Cretan fresco. The only way to achieve that kind of look was to paint, by hand, every decoration in each of the books, in an edition of fifty. Ultimately this choice proved to be serendipitous; the hand technique echoed that used to create early biblical illuminations. Rob painted the images using pigments ground from rare earths and gemstones chosen because, like the sacred words they were used to embellish, they will not fade. A study of the text made placement of the decorations easy; there are four distinct sections in the allegory, and the spaces between were ideal for depicting the ripening of the olives.

As we deliberated over what kind of paper to use, it seemed that as long as we were already investing so much extra energy into the book, we might as well keep going and make a special paper and include a unique watermark (again, an olive branch). Our friend Thom Hinckley gave us some lovely old mahogany which Rob cut and used to build papermaking equipment specifically for *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*. Soon afterward, Thom revealed that the wood had come from the salvaged beams of a villa constructed for one of Christopher Columbus' sailors. The Jacob 5 allegory symbolizes the scattering and gathering of Israel. Columbus's arrival in the Americas is considered by Latter-day Saints as a pivotal event leading up to the Restoration and, consequently, the gathering of Israel. Repurposing (inadvertently) the lumber from the home of a key player in that event to make paper for our book was a sweet bit of serendipity.

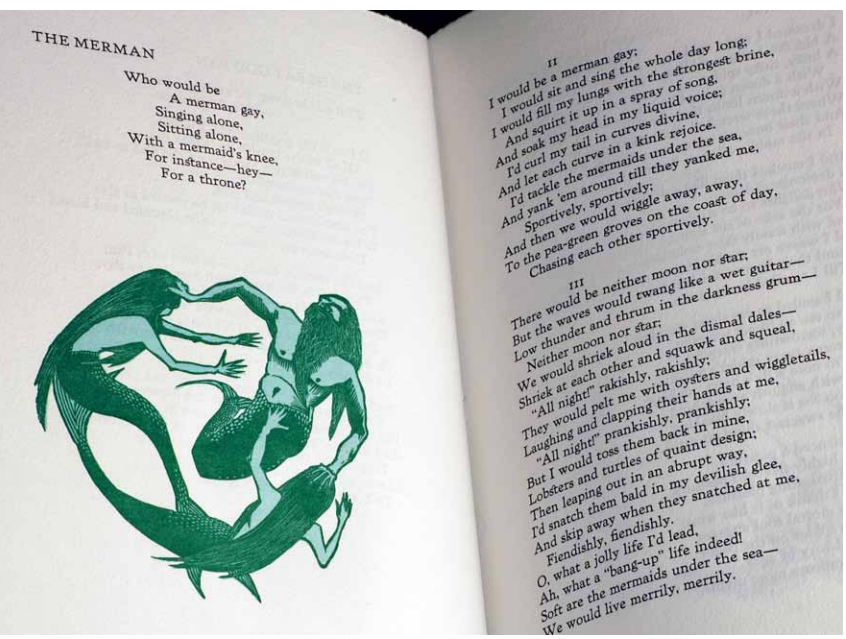
The typeface is an early twentieth-century design based on the intaglio inscriptions of a





seventeenth- or eighteenth-century French engraving master. A friend in West Virginia happened to have one of the two existing sets of matrices (the brass molds used to make metal type), and another friend in Maryland agreed to cast it for us as a trade for some custom papermaking equipment. The face looks arboreal, like branches and twigs—another reflection of the text. Rob set the type by hand, one letter at a time, then proofed it—made a trial print from the newly set type to be passed back and forth between us and checked for spelling mistakes, upside-down letters, correct spacing between words, and a generally pleasing shape of text block. We corrected, re-proofed and re-corrected it. After the typesetting passed its final inspection, Rob dampened the paper in preparation for printing because damp paper receives ink better than dry paper. Unfortunately, we only had enough type to print eight pages of the book at a time. After each set of eight was printed, the type was broken up and reset for the next eight, and again proofed, corrected, re-proofed, and so on, until all the pieces of the book were printed and the dampened paper allowed to dry. This process had to happen with some haste because damp paper left too long will begin to grow mold.

We would have loved binding the entire edition in olive wood, but after a year and a half of searching the country for boards of the right dimension for book covers we managed to find only enough for eight copies. We hired our friend Ethan Ensign, who runs Scrub Oak Bindery in Salt Lake City, to bind the olive wood copies. We bound the rest of the edition ourselves, with leather and gold silk covering book boards decorated with raised designs of olive branches. The gold silk was a reference to the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated.

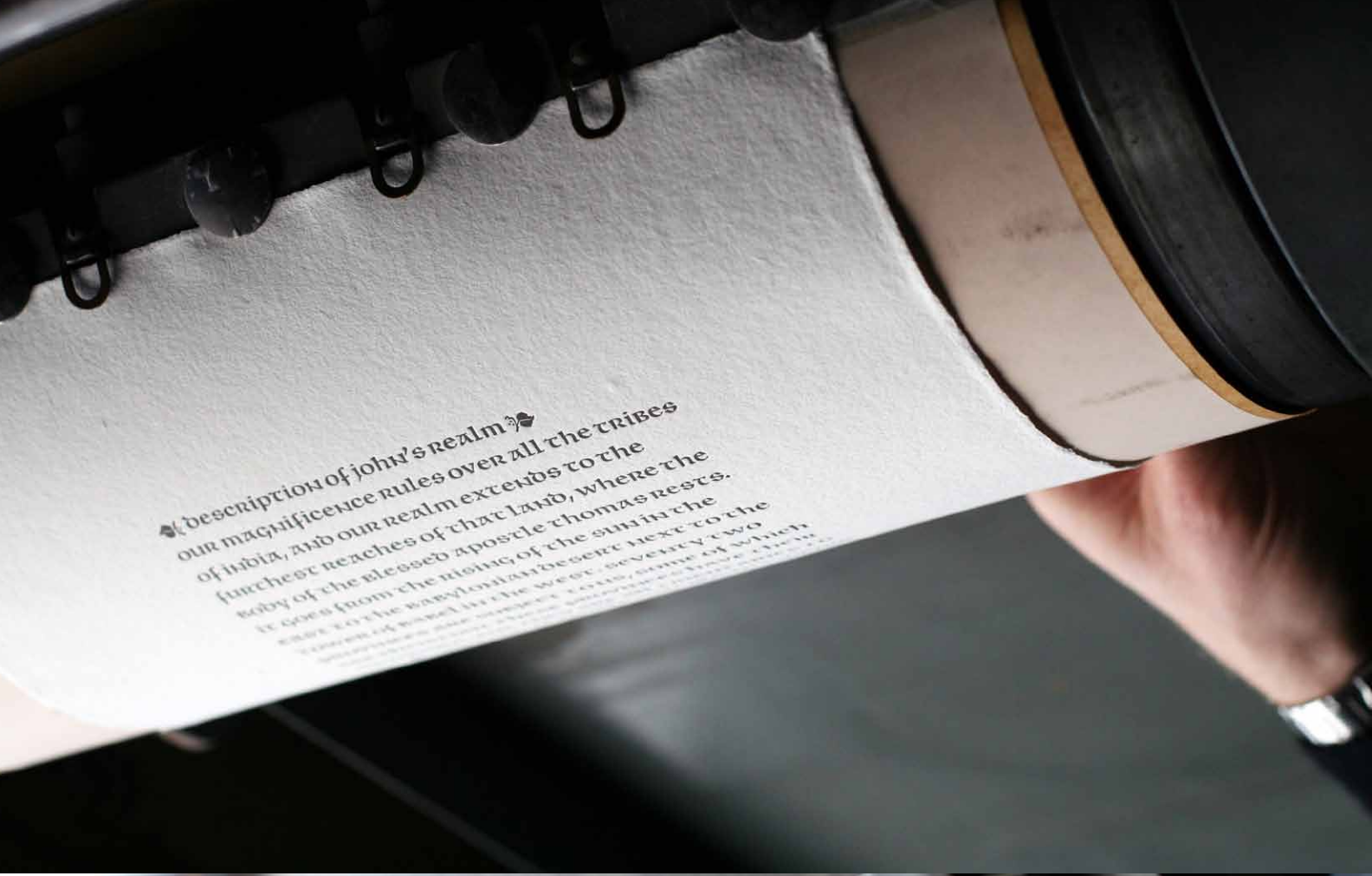


Is your work all your own projects or do you do commissions as well?

We don't take on many commissions. Generally speaking, that's not where our interests lie. By the time we've finished a commission we may have spent more time with the text than the author did. We're open to them, but we're picky. We're far more interested in producing our own projects and in collaborations.

What's the market like for the work that you do?

It depends on the book. Some projects we know from the outset will sell more easily than others. Obviously marketability must be a consideration for us, but it can't be the main one. We don't plan our books with a target audience (other than book or art lovers) in mind. One of the reasons why winning the Hertzog Award for *The Allegory of the Olive Tree* was so sweet was that the award is completely outside the context of the LDS community, which we guessed would be the natural market for this particular book. Every one of the judges and


description of johu's realm
our magnificence rules over all the tribes
of indıa, and our realm extends to the
furthest reaches of that land, where the
body of the blessed apostle thomas rests.

others besides asked questions about the text. It was very gratifying that the award opened up even little conversations about why the text is important to us.

Our work is in collections all over North America and Europe. Academic and public collections form the base of our market, but we have a growing number of private collectors purchasing our work.

What's your favorite part of the work?

Rob's favorite part hands-down is conceptualizing. That's the most dynamic, creative, and appealing part of the work. Everything else is production. Georgia agrees, but insists that there's also a great deal of satisfaction in being able to enjoy the finished project, share it with someone else, and then clear mental and physical space for the next round of creating.

What's your least favorite part?

Generally speaking, the repetitive aspects of production: i.e., feeding the press, feeding the press, feeding the press. And bookbinding. But there are times when these can be meditative and enjoyable.

How many projects do you have going at a time?

Probably too many. Right now we're actively working on three big projects: *The Book of Ruth*, with our friends Brian Kershisnik and Richard La-Ray; Robert Maxwell's new translation of the thirteenth-century *Prester John's Letter*; and the Book of Isaiah. We also have a number of other possibilities trying to find their way into reality.

How do you see the gospel affecting what you do?

How could the gospel not affect what we do? The work we do isn't inherently important. There's nothing important about an expensive limited-edition book. Not even an expensive edition of part of The Book of Mormon. Paradoxically, it's also extraordinarily important for us because this whole endeavor has been a vehicle for change and growth and learning, for the Lord to teach us some

important truths. It's been a way for us to share and have interactions with some great people. Another way to ask that question could be, "How does the work you do affect your relationship with the gospel?" Hopefully anyone's work can provide a fulfilling way to learn and improve; if it doesn't, then there's something wrong inside the person or there's something wrong with the work.

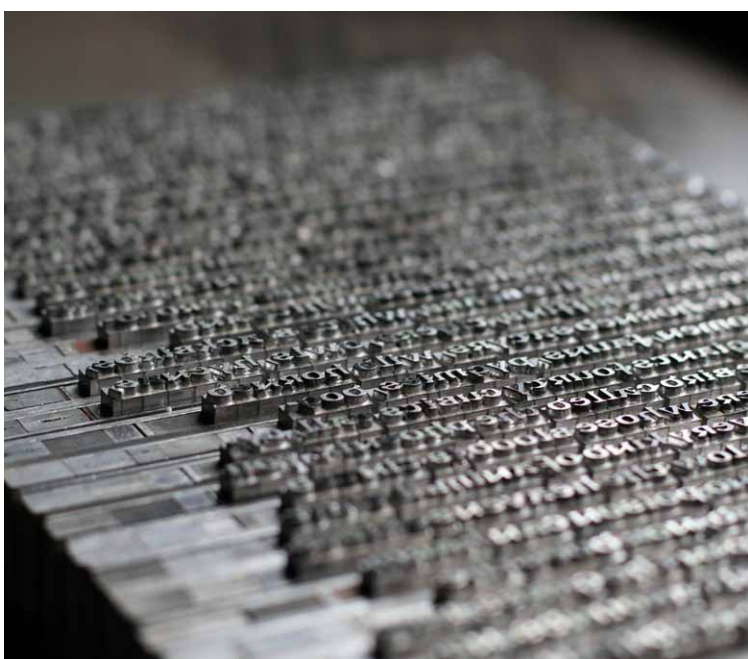
It's validating to do something creative for a living, and especially rewarding to get to do it together. We've both found it heartening to come to understand that our Father in Heaven takes pleasure in our efforts, and is actually excited for us to use our talents and exercise our dreams. We are all intended to be creators of one kind or another. Sadly, it's not everyone's blessing to have a job doing something he or she naturally loves, but so many more people could choose that path with a little direction, some courage, and a determination to make the necessary sacrifices.

Doing these creative things—finding ways that work for us to support our family, whether or not what we produce is considered important—has brought us and occasionally other people joy. Learning joy is central to everything. When we're joyful ourselves, we're of greater use to our world, we're better examples, and what we have to offer becomes more appealing to others.

Because we live in Utah County, the marriage capital, people regularly come to us with wedding announcement jobs, and sometimes they're a little unhappy about the cost of letterpress. Not that it's astronomical; they just don't come with a frame of reference. Any price we could name would likely be more than they would think it should be. In that situation either of us is likely to respond to our clients by saying, without irony: "This is a luxury. It doesn't matter. This stuff isn't important." This attitude has grown over time from of an understanding of the gospel and what life is about. It can be easy to view what you do as so big and so important—or if it's not big, to wish it was and then try to make it that way. The gospel helps us gain and maintain perspective on what our work really means. Here's paradox again—"I'm nothing, but I'm also everything." Seeing ourselves in the larger picture may leave us feeling small and foolish, yet there is an actual God who loves us, loves our gifts, and wants us contributing what only we can, because that will increase the light in our own lives and in the lives of those we touch. His gospel inspires us to strive for excellence in work and spirit so that we can achieve and influence happiness and be effective in His kingdom.

There's been prophetic and apostolic counsel given to LDS artists: we should be producing the very best work. What does it mean to become the best in the arts? Probably not what we think it does. As Latter-day Saints we can't and shouldn't compete in many of the arts of the world today, but we ought to challenge culture—our own culture as well as popular culture. The way we will become the best is by redefining what is best, not by allowing the world to dictate the standard, particularly a world declining in its morals, values, norms, and its designation of what is artistic.

There are many LDS artists who fall into the trap of attempting to play by the world's shifting rules and hoping to come out winners. As individuals and as a community we need to examine our orientation. We need to seriously ask, "What is the best? What are we willing to participate in?" We can never be the best of what the world currently asks for while staying true to our faith, because generally the world no longer calls for virtue, but we can become the best and make great contributions if we work within the paradigm of the gospel. "Is this morally sound? Does this uplift?" Are we examining the questions of humanity, within the context of the gospel? Are we inventing new art forms to house the answers? All of this is within our rights and our reach. We have to change our culture; that's the only way we're going to fulfill those prophetic admonitions. As artists we have the greatest opportunity of almost anyone to do that, because we invent culture. ▪




PIGNA
MUSICA
music book

Lorenzo Rossato

interviewed by Brittany Pacini

Lorenzo Rossato is a musician who has arranged a hymn for the Italian hymnal. Translated from the Italian by Ashley and Brittany Pacini.

Could you tell us about your background and how your upbringing has influenced your work?

My family was non-musical, but after I came along, that changed. I was born in a small province in Venice in northern Italy. My father owned a business that did well enough for us to be comfortable, but after five years it failed and our family was left with very little money. As a result, my younger brother and I (I'm the oldest of five brothers) had to attend a religious school run by Catholic priests. When I was nine, the priests noticed my musical abilities and my clear voice in the choir, and if it hadn't been for them, I wouldn't have discovered my musical talent.

How did you find out about the LDS Church?

A member gave a Book of Mormon to my friend, a nonmember, and if it weren't for that friend, I would never have converted. Even though I wanted to read the book and learn about it, however, my friend never gave it to me. But just seeing that copy sparked an interest in me and it didn't let me stop searching for the Church. I didn't know where to find it. I didn't even know the name of the Church. But finally, after three years of searching, I found it. The Spirit led me to it. As soon as I entered the building, I saw a table full of copies of the Book of Mormon, and I immediately asked for my own copy. Two weeks later, I was baptized.

What was your conversion experience like?

It wasn't the work of any one missionary. I can see now that there was a spirit of searching in me that led me to the Church—a spirit that had been within me for years. Heavenly Father taught me, preparing me to recognize the Church and to already believe in those principles I'd known for only a brief period of time.

Tell us a little bit about your family and their involvement with your music.

In the beginning, I had to overcome a lot of difficulties and opposition from my parents in order to pursue music after I finished high school. At that time it was unthinkable to follow that path, and the crisis my family was experiencing made it even

worse. I had to make many sacrifices with my studies and my work. At night I worked in a factory, so I studied the piano during the day in my garage so I wouldn't bother the neighbors. I had to support my family because we were poor and because my father suffered from depression and anorexia after his business failed.

I was the first pioneer in my family to enter the musical profession. Many of my cousins encouraged me to continue, and later on, one of my cousins' sons later became a well-known violinist. I also obviously had a great desire to pass my passion for music on to my daughters. Now both of them are involved in music—my oldest daughter, Zuleika, received a degree from the Santa Cecilia Conservatory in Rome as a pianist, and my younger daughter, Nauvoo, received a degree this year in lyric opera as a soprano. Also, my sister is a choirgirl in Milan and participates in choirs that specialize in classical music.

How did you first get started in music?

More than anything, I think I was always involved without ever really knowing that I was. All thanks, however, goes to the Holy Musical Choir at the Catholic Church. They let me attend their school and practice the piano and the organ because it was important for the Catholic ceremonies.

When you write a piece, do the words come first or does the music?

For many musicians, the words come first and the music follows, or vice versa. In my case, though, the words come along with the music, and they are both directly connected to each other, as if they're fused.

Tell us about the song "Mandate voci di gioia all'Eterno," which you arranged for the Italian hymnal.

It came about during my translation of the English hymnal into Italian. While I was translating the hymnal, I was asked to insert a piece written by Brother Tommaso Castro [who wrote the original text and music for the hymn]. The melody that I found was very beautiful, but the harmonizing needed to be sorted out. I made several different versions of it for Brother Castro, but unfortunately, none of them was ever used. The published version in the hymnal isn't the correct version, neither the text nor the music. Maybe it was a result of an error during printing, or maybe it was just modified by someone else. At this time, though, we're actually trying to insert the original version and correct the hymnal.

Besides this hymn, what other works have you completed?

For the past twenty years I've become more dedicated to a certain type of music, similar to classical music but not quite as similar to the much lighter or modern music. For example, I set to music some four or five of the Psalms, both for a soloist voice and for choir and orchestra. I also put to music the parable of the ten virgins. I base my works on texts and scriptures of the restored gospel. One example is a piece based on Alma 29, called "O That I Were an Angel."

For many years now I've been completely dedicated to the elaboration of a certain number of church hymns into polyphonies for choirs to use. I'm very inspired by the Protestant choral music of Bach, which I think would be great to do in church—even if we give it a more European style. The Spirit has really pushed me to do this kind of work, and I feel an urgency, as though it were really a necessity. Because of this, I dedicate a lot of my time to such projects.

What are some of the projects you'd like to work on?

After I finish my work on these hymns, I want to write music for the Church. I'm always receiving inspiration from the gospel. In the past number of years, I've dedicated my time to elaborating musical themes, but I feel that to really help defend the gospel, I should write music for the Church. I see this music as much more original and spontaneous.

Where do you get your inspiration for your music?

From the gospel. For example, when I wrote "The Ten Virgins," I was dedicated to this project for an entire year. Over that time, the inspiration came to me in random moments. This work has been a process led by continual revelation. I feel that the need to feel the Spirit in our daily lives is often a necessity to work in such a way.

What are the challenges you've run into as you've pursued a career in music?

I've written both sacred music and instrumental classical music for many years, both of which unfortunately are genres that don't interest the larger public. Because of that, it's hard to make this type of music known and appreciated—even though every time I write, I always feel pleased and appreciated. There isn't a huge general interest because it's not commercial and striking—it's much more intimate music.

What are your favorite and least favorite aspects about being a musician? Why?

The most beautiful part of being a musician is that you write music from what's felt within your heart. You constantly enjoy this experience with inspiration and with being creative, and that always brings you closer to the Lord. Every time I write, it hits me that the Lord is guiding me in what I write. In my case, though, the difficulty is that I can't ever live off of just writing music. But being guided by promptings from the Lord makes me feel that this is a way for me to develop this talent—a talent from Him. It's worth a lot to me.

Who is your audience?

Not just members of the Church—I've actually gotten more appreciation from my nonmember students who've felt something from my music. For my performances, I often use singers who aren't members, and they're always very enthusiastic about those roles. It's a way for me to do missionary work. I also hold annual concerts at the church for my students, and this way I'm able to make the Church environment an influence in their lives.

How does the gospel influence you, both as an individual and as an artist?

We have very little time in our lives, and the gospel has helped me understand that the most important thing we can do in the time we do have is to use the talents that we've been given to glorify the Lord and strengthen our testimonies.

Two prophecies have pushed me to create a new style of music within the Church, or at least to find a way to value what we already have. The first is a prophecy from 1888 that says one day the music of the Church will be studied and appreciated throughout all the world—as we now do with classical music.

The second prophecy was an article by an orchestra director who was baptized in France many years ago. In the article, he asked several times where the restoration of music was. We know that with the Reformation of the Protestants, classical music was elevated to a much higher level. We as a church must arrive at this type of music—a type that can be appreciated the same way classical music has been.

This can happen because we enjoy the privilege of searching for more revelation. We have access to the real priesthood, and we have the Spirit at our disposal. I've begun to do something along these lines with the hope and knowledge that others have done likewise in the past.

The thing I think is missing is a type of music that's definitively Mormon. It's just not there. There's Anglican music, Catholic music, Protestant music, etc., that anyone can recognize. But where's the Mormon music?

How do you see your work building the kingdom?

I see it as a type of mission instead of as a profession. Whatever I teach, I do it with the love of the gospel. That's part of everything we do in our lives. I often see people who listen to my music being touched by the Spirit—I see that they notice something. I always hope that the principles being taught through my music are continually illuminating truth. ▪


PIGNA
MUSICA
music book

Father in Israel A REVIEW

by Katherine Morris

Note: Father in Israel *will have a limited theatrical release sometime this year and will later be available on DVD. To keep updated, visit* **fatherinisrael.com**

In the question-and-answer sessions following both showings of *Father in Israel* at the LDS Film Festival last January, Christian Vuissa characterized his new film in a way that made people widen their eyes and laugh in surprise. He said that he thinks of *Father in Israel* as "a *Bourne Identity* for Mormons." He went on to explain that it's a story about an everyday hero—a man who dodges the bullets of everyday life to rescue the people around him. "A *Bourne Identity* for Mormons" is kind of a funny description of a film, but in this case, it's also a very apt one.

Father in Israel is the story of a man named Aaron Young who lives in Salt Lake with his wife and six children. He's a rather ordinary person with an ordinary job, but when we first meet him, his life has just become increasingly hectic. One of his sons is returning from a mission, another will soon be leaving for a mission, and another is getting ready to be baptized. His oldest daughter has just brought her boyfriend home from college to meet the family, and another of his daughters is about to get her driver's license. Did I mention that his parents are just about to leave on a mission, and that he and his wife are about to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary? This is a very busy man. Things at work are also busy—and stressful. As the HR manager for his company, Aaron is asked to lay off one-fifth of the company's employees—an action he finds unnecessary and very troubling. Feeling overwhelmed physically and spiritually, one Monday evening Aaron talks to his father in the garage. His father offers to give him a priesthood blessing, and that sacred ordinance takes place in a room crowded with power tools and boxes. A few days after the blessing from his father, Aaron's stake president calls him into his office and asks him to be the bishop of his ward.

The rest of the film is exactly how Vuissa describes it—an everyday man dodging the bullets of everyday life to rescue the people around him. As a father, he waits up late into the night for his curfew-breaking daughter Amanda to come home. He "grills" his daughter Laura's fiancé after they announce their engagement and takes on the difficult task of explaining to the parents of said fiancé why they as nonmembers can't attend their son's wedding. As a bishop, Aaron assists with priesthood ordinances, counsels troubled members of his ward, and visits an elderly widow who hasn't seen any family in over two years. As an HR manager, Aaron tries time and again to persuade his boss to not lay off so many employees. Aaron Young doesn't have super powers, ninja skills (as far as we know), or even a nifty electric-blue spandex bodysuit (which is probably just as well—who honestly looks good in those?). He's just a good man who, in the spirit of priesthood service, tries to live a good life by taking care of his family, serving the people in his ward, dealing with a stressful job, and struggling to figure out how to balance his responsibilities and to keep himself going when the energy is being sapped out of him daily. It's a simple

story told in a simple way, and I found it absolutely compelling.

How is it that Vuissa manages to tell a compelling story without, as some Mormon films have done in the past, either satirizing Mormon culture or raising the dramatic stakes by throwing in some juicier material? In our last issue of *Mormon Artist*, Christian Vuissa said something about his goal as a Mormon filmmaker that I found illuminating: "Mormon cinema has lost its steam in recent years and we will have to see what happens. I think there were a number of extremes in the beginning, from the goofy comedy to the heavy drama. But in the end there will probably be a balance somewhere in the middle. I also think that there was a strong urge to tell Hollywood-type epic stories, which basically wasted millions of dollars that could have been used to build a more modest but consistent independent film movement. I believe that 'by small means the Lord can bring about great things.' I hope we can find a way to apply that principle to filmmaking. The opportunity we have right now is to establish a film form that is unique to our culture."

Christian Vuissa is doing something remarkable. He is, as he said, establishing a film form that is unique to Mormon culture. He's establishing a "modest" kind of Mormon filmmaking. Not only does he make good-quality films on a shoe-string budget, but when it comes to the actual storytelling, he's working with a "modest" Mormon aesthetic. *Father in Israel*, as well as Vuissa's other films—films such as *Errand of Angels* and *Roots and Wings*—are neither the "goofy comedy" brand of earlier independent Mormon cinema nor the "heavy drama." There is no high drama in *Father in Israel*. The film has a modest, if lilting, pace and there are a number of scenes where Aaron Young sits or stands somewhere—at a window, in front of a picture of Christ, in his car in the driveway—just pondering. In these moments, the only action on screen is the internal turmoil Aaron is experiencing. (It's a tribute to actor Tim Threlfall, who portrays Aaron, that these scenes are some of the most compelling in the film.) Yet, while I wouldn't vouch for every pair of eyes at the showings of *Father in Israel* I attended, I can say that mine were conspicuously spilling tears all through the second half, as were those of the people sitting around me. Why was that?

I think it's because most Mormons' experiences with their spirituality don't involve either a satire of their culture or high drama. We experience spirituality in the everyday. Terryl Givens, in his essay "There Is Room for Both" in the *BYU Studies* special "Mormons and Film" issue (vol. 46, no. 2, 2007), would call this "the disintegration of sacred distance," which he cites as one of the defining paradoxes of Mormon culture. "With God an exalted man, man a God in embryo, the family a prototype for heavenly sociality, and Zion a city with dimensions and blueprints," writes Givens, "Joseph [Smith] rewrote conventional dualism as thoroughgoing monism. The resulting paradox is manifest in the recurrent invasion of the *banal* into the realm of the *holy* and the infusion of the *sacred* into the realm of the *quotidian*" (emphasis added). As Mormons, we believe that men and women have divine natures—literally. Our spirits are literal offspring of God. Yet how do we spend our lives? Like Aaron Young, we spend our lives taking care of our banal responsibilities. But because we are divine beings and tackling each of these responsibilities is part of our spiritual progression and ultimately brings us closer to God—nothing is really banal. As Jeffrey R. Holland said in a CES fireside last year, "Every experience can become a redemptive experience if we remain bonded to our Father in heaven through that difficulty." "Every experience" means difficult experiences in whatever form they come, and most often that means the everyday kind of experience.

So it shouldn't surprise me that a good number of us who saw *Father in Israel* were dewy-eyed or weeping openly by the end of it. Vuissa said that several people have told him after seeing the film, "It helped me reconnect with my values." I would have to say that that was my experience as well. Seeing Aaron Young's everyday struggles reminded me of things I cherish and believe in as a Mormon; and seeing those struggles rendered with good acting, good cinematography, and a lovely musical score, reminded me of the things I cherish and believe in as an artist. To have those feelings blended together was a satisfying experience—one that I haven't always had when consuming Mormon art. Vuissa has said of his filmmaking, "I really hope that I can grow into a filmmaker who makes films that not only entertain but also edify. I really think that films have the potential to 'instruct in such a way as to improve, enlighten, or uplift morally, spiritually, or intellectually' by telling stories that resonate deeply within us and inspire us to reach our full potential." I would say that with *Father in Israel,* Christian Vuissa has done all of those things. ▪

The LDS Film Festival A REVIEW

by Davey Morrison

I was able to see ten of the twenty short films in competition at this year's LDS Film Festival. Having been a regular of the short film programs at both Sundance and the LDS Film Festival the past several years, I can say without hesitation that I think the level of production values and the substance of the majority of the shorts at Christian Vuissa's festival have been superior to that of the Park City competition. The shorts this year were a wonderfully eclectic group of very fine films from genuine LDS artists.

Some of the standouts of the festival were the pieces that broke from the conventional narrative structure of the average student short film mold. "Do or Die–08" was a South American import (the only international work that was screened among the shorts), and a visual and aural collage along the lines of "Baracka" or the "Qatsi" films (though with an even more experimental and modern aesthetic, blending narrative with documentary). Some of the audience laughed at the very serious twelve minutes of layered images, music, and sounds, some of the audience was baffled, and some riveted. It was hard for me to find any real thematic thread in director Ragnar Go'hjerta's film (listed in the program as a trailer for a feature-length work, which might explain that), but it was made with the confidence of a filmmaker with something to say, and many of the individual moments were electrifying—ultimately, a film like this succeeds when it allows its audience to slip into a state of hypnotic, meditative celluloid transcendence, and in this Go'hjerta was very successful. It was a work to be experienced, and, for me, perhaps the most spiritually moving of the shorts.

The first-place winner was the very, very deserving sixteen-minute "Mind the Gap" from director Kristal Williams-Rowley and writer Marcy Holland. It followed the emotional turmoil of a teenager (Sara, played by Teagan Rose) dealing with the death of a high school peer who threw herself in the way of the train Sara's father drives. The film follows Sara's emotional journey and makes great use of voice-over narration; as the very powerful premise was developed, the film never felt contrived or unfairly manipulative, and the journey towards hope, forgiveness, and redemption rang gloriously true (it's rare for a contemporary independent filmmaker to take a chance on optimism, and rarer still to see it pulled off so well). The low-budget cinematography and sound actually added rather than detracted from the film, giving it an honesty that might well have been lost in a glossier production. "Mind the Gap" is, quite simply, one of the best "Mormon movies" I've seen.

As in past festivals, there were a number of BYU student films showcased this year—"The Teller's Tale," "dirt," "Best Wishes! Love, Adele," and "Unhinged" were all final directing projects for a number of my film student colleagues. Of these, "Unhinged" was definitely the standout—a lovely story about the importance of authenticity and humanity in art, and about finding a healthy balance between personal creation and personal relationships. The acting was strong, the photography of the beautifully-designed sets was luminous, and director Nick Stentzel fused all these elements naturally and effectively. It was an exceptional little movie. Tim Hall's "dirt" was often beautifully photographed and well-acted, but some slow and rhythmless editing hurt the film and its story, and both "The Teller's Tale" and "Best Wishes! Love, Adele" suffered from a combination of poor performances and heart-on-sleeve moralizing, however sincere (and having seen "Teller's Tale" in an earlier cut, I can say that the score did nothing but hurt it). More than anything, however, all four of these pieces represented a technical polish lacking in most of the other shorts—BYU is producing some very fine craftsmen and women.

"Face to Face," written and directed by Spanky Ward, featured an admirable performance (or two) from David H. Stevens, and some very nice lighting in its very limited location and camerawork. Unfortunately, the concept was a bit clichéd—a man comes home and finds himself (or, more accurately, his black-leather-jacketed self) sitting at the kitchen table, and what follows is a sort of good-angel/bad-angel conversation with two parts of his damaged psyche. There were a few moments in the dialogue that were powerful for their brutal honesty, as the villainous alter ego mocked Stevens' meek protagonist for being a loser, not getting any dates,

etc., but there were probably even more moments of unintentional humor. The film was well executed but could definitely have used some rewriting—and would really have benefited from playing up the dark comedy inherent in the situation (the film was taken a little too seriously by itself to be taken seriously by its audience).

"The Skeleton Dance" (named and modeled after the classic Disney short of the same name) came from East Hollywood High School (a private school in Salt Lake City) and was one of my absolute favorite films of the set. I'm a sucker for any kind of stop-motion animation—there is a texture and a reality and an energy to handmade films that you just can't get with a computer—and "Skeleton Dance" was really just an excuse to make some cool clay creatures do some funky things (and I confess a delirious delight in seeing a crudely-rendered skeleton rip off a cat's head at the LDS Film Festival—there is nothing like the sheer joy of kids and movies and violence to lift the spirits). Sometimes as filmmakers we can get so caught up in trying to say something meaningful and trying to make something look professional that we lose sight of the absolute magic that is at the heart of the cinematic contraption, an art form built on optical illusion. "The Skeleton Dance" was a wonderful breath of fresh air.

My own film, "Medicine Man," also made for a BYU (documentary) class, was a profile of David Hamblin, a medicine man for the local Native American church, whose Mormon beliefs and background inform his practice as a spiritual healer. With the film, I tried to allow Hamblin to express his beliefs and experiences with as little a degree of overt commentary or censorship as possible—his understanding of certain aspects of The Book of Mormon and Mormon doctrine is certainly outside the world of mainstream Mormonism, but I feel there is a sincerity, a conviction, and a real beauty to his story that deserved to be seen by others. I hope I was successful in presenting it.

"The Edge of the World," by E. R. Nelson, followed the journey of an animated Everyman to fill the emptiness in his life. It was clever, funny, very engaging, and the animation (Flash?) was creative; it's very exciting to see the virtually one-man films that are being made. The view of God and theology, however, had a curiously a-Mormon flavor to it—neither a strength nor a weakness in the piece, but something that struck me as I watched it.

In fact, the breadth and variety of religious and spiritual voices represented in the festival was both exhilarating and a little troubling—where were the specifically Mormon stories? Certainly not every Mormon film need include explicitly Mormon-related content, but there is an infinite number of fascinating and engaging and honest stories to be told within our culture and within our own set of beliefs, and they are not being told. Every artist exists within a specific cultural context—what would Martin Scorsese or Woody Allen be without New York City, and why should Dostoevsky set *Crime and Punishment* in Paris when he has a perfectly marvelous grasp and understanding of St. Petersburg? Latter-day Saint filmmakers would do well to follow the old-as-dirt screenwriting-class maxim, "Write what you know." In between the proselytizing of the institutional Church films and the outsider perspectives of *Big Love* and *Latter Days*, we are missing an important and substantial body of honest and authentic stories not *about* Mormonism, but told from *within* Mormonism. The 2009 short films continued to demonstrate remarkable growth within the Mormon artistic community, even as it begged the question, "Why aren't we growing even faster, and even larger?" In the Doctrine and Covenants we are told to "meet together often," teaching one another, each member speaking and each member listening, that all may be instructed and edified together. In the lay ministry of Mormonism, the teacher becomes the pupil and the pupil becomes the teacher, and all voices are heard; our conversations may at times lack the presentational polish of a trained minister—but, as any Dylan fan knows, not every voice need be classically trained in order to be beautiful, to touch the heart, to engage the mind or move the soul or make history. In the age of YouTube democracy, anyone with access to a camera, a computer, and the Internet has the tools to make a masterpiece and broadcast it to the world. This is exciting! We should all be instructing and edifying one another, engaging in global cinematic conversation with those who share our beliefs and with those who don't—speaking to them and listening to them—building the kingdom of God by developing and sharing the pure love of Christ within ourselves even as we receive it from others. The power of the Spirit is gentleness, meekness, quiet persuasion, and love unfeigned—not propaganda, but the personal anecdote, the autobiography, the individual testimony. Let us bear our testimonies. Let us instruct and be instructed. Let us tell our stories. ▪

TAMILISA WOOD

interviewed by Ashley Pacini

Tamilisa Wood is an actress and a musician who recently played the part of Marjorie Hinckley in Gordon B. Hinckley: A Giant Among Men. *Website:* **i-am-tam.blogspot.com**

How did you get started in LDS arts?

My family has been pretty involved in the LDS artist world. We did plays together growing up, and it was actually my mom who got me started in acting. I was six when she got us into an agency, and that was the start of being serious about acting.

I've always loved making films as well—not just being in them, but being on the other side of the camera and being involved with the production. I remember when my interest in film developed. I've always observed the director on set, and when I would come home at night after being on set for a movie, for example, I would want to play director, so I'd get my friends and we'd make movies and I'd dress my animals up and make them do stuff. As I got older, my friends and I would incorporate a plot. We'd make up a little script in our minds and have a lot of fun with it. When we had sleepovers as girls,

we'd stay up all night doing music videos. We'd do a little backdrop and put in fades and choreograph it to the music. Everyone had their part. We made some good little productions

You went to college at BYU. Why did you decide on BYU and how did you choose your focus?

I was making church videos when I was nine and ten and I'd make them about Mormon ads. I'd make them with pictures of Christ, and I would use this old camera and go from picture to picture with the camera. I would have music playing in the background and topics would range from Book of Mormon to Jesus Christ to families can be forever—you know, those semi-sappy Church topics. But that's what I wanted to do and those spiritual things are what I went to BYU for.

When I got to BYU, I started my generals and then realized I had to pick a major pretty soon. I had a hard time choosing because I wanted to do so many things. One day freshman year, one of my roommates came home and said to the other six of us, "Guess what, everyone! I declared my major!" I didn't know what that was. "I went to the Family, Home, and Social Sciences Department," she said, "and told them that I wanted to do family sciences for my major." I said, "That's all you do? You just go and declare your major?" And she said, "Yup."

I thought and thought and thought, and I decided that because I was already well-networked in the film world, and since it was one of my passions, that it would be silly not to pursue film as a major. So I went into the film program up in the D-wing of the Harris Fine Arts Center. I walked up to the front desk and said, "Hi, I'm here to declare my major." The secretary there looked at me and said, "What?" And I said, "I'm here to declare my major. I'd like to do film." And she said, "Oh, no, sister. Go downstairs to the advisement center in D-445. There you'll find packets of all of the things you need to do to apply to get into our program. You'll find the various sheets that have the schedules and lists of which classes you need as prerequisites." I

was shocked. I went home and told my roommates that my major was going to take a lot more work to get into. I had to do a three-minute silent film that couldn't be edited digitally—it had to be on the linear system that they had back then at BYU. I had to watch and critique eleven films and write papers on each. I had to submit résumés, letters of recommendation, and a plan of what schedule I was going to follow as far as classes I was going to take to finish. It was a huge process. I think about forty-seven people applied and only thirteen got in. I worked really hard on that application. And I got in.

Is film acting different from stage acting?

Film acting is very different from stage acting. Not very many people can do both, which is why I haven't done stage for quite some time. I remember going to a film audition when I was in high school, and after I had delivered the lines at the audition, the casting director asked, "Are you in a play right now?" and I said, "Yeah." She said, "I can tell. You just can't do this stuff at the same time." I guess I was over-projecting and over-dramatizing it, because with stage you have to do that. The motions are big and sometimes you're loud and sometimes you're not, but you're a lot more so with stage than with film, so she could tell immediately that I was in a play.

Stage is probably more time-consuming than film or video acting. If you're just doing a small commercial, you'll go to an audition that maybe takes an hour or half hour and then film the commercial for a morning and it's done. You submit your invoice, you get paid, you're done with the whole process. But stage is a huge commitment because you're rehearsing for weeks and weeks every night. You're memorizing lines that you have to deliver on the spot.

Tell us about your full-time job with the Church.

As a film student, I had an end goal to work for the Church, because I've always felt that you should put your passion into helping others and helping people understand the gospel.

After I graduated with my film degree, I luckily came upon a job within a week. I worked for the Education in Zion exhibit, which is now up and running in the Joseph F. Smith Building at BYU. It's directed by Dr. Terry Warner. There was only one other person working for Dr. Warner at the time, Ben Unguren, and I knew that they were looking for some other media support to help make the videos that would go in the exhibit. So I pursued it, and I remember calling them over and over trying to make sure to get that job, and sure enough, they hired me on and it became the three of us.

We worked in a little room in B-44 on campus, kind of in the middle of nowhere, and it was just the three of us for a good six months. We had the mandate from the president of the university to build an exhibit and we had some direction, but we didn't know exactly what it was going to be about, and the space that we needed to fill was two-thirds of a football field—it was huge as far as square footage goes.

So, we had a lot to do, and that was a really good, challenging time for me, and I grew a lot. Ben Unguren taught me a lot about editing. I hadn't had editing classes—I basically knew how to edit going through film—but he taught me more specifically what to do. It isn't necessarily school that makes you who you are. School sets a foundation, but then

you've got to pursue it and become who you want to become. That's how I got behind the camera: by helping make those pieces for the exhibit.

I worked there for almost four years and then I was starting to feel like I needed to move on. I'd been thinking about getting another job where I could also work more heavily in filmmaking. One week I had an audition over at the motion picture studio. I ran into Ron Munns, and I'd only known him because he had come to consult with us on this exhibit project. He stopped me in the hallway and said, "Tamilisa, are you still working for the exhibit project?" I said yes, and he said, "Well, when you're done working there, I've got some things for you to do. You've been on my mind." I hardly knew him, but he told me that the few times that he'd come over to our little workplace, that somehow I'd impressed him because I had gotten documents ready fast, I knew where everything was stored, and every time during a meeting when they needed to refer back to a quote or something, I knew right where it was. That impressed him and he said he felt like I needed to be working more in film and needed to come over to the Church and help with that cause. I needed to let another company know the next day whether or not I was going to take a job from them. They had offered me a position, but my ultimate goal had always been to work for the Church, so I decided not to take the job. The next week the audiovisual department of the Church called me.

What's your job position?

I am a producer in the audiovisual department. I help clients in other departments conceptualize, develop, and produce media products that will then be distributed by various means throughout the world. I think I'm fortunate to be able to work in the audiovisual department of the Church, because there are people around me who understand the business so as far as acting is concerned. I have a boss who, if I tell him that I need to go to an audition for an hour, will let me make up that hour at work. In fact, when I was being hired, I worried that I would no longer be able to audition for Church films because that might be a conflict of interest. I asked up front before I was hired if that was going to be a problem, and my boss surprised me by saying, "No, we see that as something that you bring to the table." I felt very relieved and blessed because I can still participate in those things.

Tell us about your band.

We are called Miles to Go, which comes from one of the famous poems by Robert Frost. All the members of the band played separately at first, and almost all of us took classes at BYU and went through the folk ensemble program. Hilary Barlow, who plays fiddle and mandolin, got a couple people together and they started a group and then it grew from there. The core group has been playing together for about six years, minus a couple bassists who have come and gone. There are five of us now. Hilary, Trent McCausland, Cassie Singly, me, and Geoff Groberg. I play the mandolin and the fiddle, I'm learning the banjo currently, and I sing as well. We all sing. Cassie Singly is the lead singer. The band is known for its harmonies—we do a lot of three-part women harmonies.

Does it get hard sometimes to balance everything you have going on?

It works out really nice to have an environment where I can do what I love and not have it conflict but rather go hand in hand with what I do daily. At night I'm either at band practice, or sometimes I'm prepping résumés, updating them, prepping production reels. Right now I'm working on an acting reel that will go onto a website of the acting agency where I belong. So, in any spare time I'm trying to push things forward, and when I don't have things to prepare like that, I love to pursue making my own movies. Often in the evenings I'm capturing video, editing video, trying to put it up on YouTube, and getting little accounts started in various places where I can post them.

Auditions come up pretty last minute. Usually you'll have about a day's notice to memorize a script that the agency sends you, to get your clothes ready that you need for that audition. So sometimes at night I'm ironing, making sure I've got my shoes and socks and whatever else I need, and then I've got to bring that all to work with me in the morning. I go over to the conference center and change clothes in the bathroom there, get in my car, go to an audition, come back as fast as possible, go back to the conference center, change my clothes, come back to my normal job at the Church Office Building, and then maybe I'll leave for a gig—and I've got to go pick up my instruments and then get there on time. Some days can be really, really crazy.

Do you have anything to say about networking?

Anybody who's serious about acting should get an agent. An agent will not only help you know about the audition and send you all the information, but they'll also secure the job for you by figuring out the location, parking, how much you need to charge, who your contact person is, how long you're going to be there, etc. They set it all up, but even

further than that, if you're not being represented appropriately in some way—maybe they're not paying you enough—your agent will try to negotiate that.

I'm also on BYU's acting database. That's a good way to know about a lot of student films. Many universities around here are always doing student films, and you can keep in touch with those by checking their bulletin boards and their websites. There have been a couple jobs that I've known about because I already knew the director or I already knew the casting director and they asked me to make sure to come to the auditions.

Facebook is a big networking tool for me, and a lot of the actors and actresses from my agency are on Facebook, so I've been able to talk with them and keep updated on what projects they're involved in. Then when I have things that come up at work as a producer, I know these people and I can know who may best fit a certain role. Sometimes I'll recommend them to other producers, too. I continue to stay in touch with a lot of my film friends and buddies from college. Also, any time you are on a new film, it's good to network with the people—not just for networking's sake, but because you become friends. There's something about the film industry and the stage that binds you together as friends really fast, because they're such time-consuming pursuits.

As far as music and performing with the band, most of the gigs have come to us. We play at the Timpanogos Storytelling Festival each year and play a benefit concert for Habitat for Humanity each year. Once you play for someone, if you're good, and if your band is still together the next year, you're always an option to play for them again. We just played for the Intermountain Acoustic Music Association this weekend, and I'm hoping that they'll invite us back.

We got the opportunity to play for the Concert in the Park Series that is put on downtown in Salt Lake City at Brigham Young Park, and the in-

vitation was extended, I think, because somebody saw us play in Brigham Young Park for the Deseret First Lunch. And all five of us are networking with friends and family.

Tell us about playing Sister Hinckley in *Gordon B. Hinckley: A Giant Among Men.*

It was such a privilege to portray Sister Hinckley. To prepare, I looked at lots of pictures about her, checked out books about her and President Hinckley, and tried to learn about their life together. I didn't know she was so witty.

I also got to know her a little better by portraying her, and I got to know lots of things I didn't know about President Hinckley, too. It's such a neat opportunity to play somebody who is so well known and so well respected within and out of the LDS world and the Church. It was awesome.

How has the gospel influenced you as an artist, and how do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

The gospel influences everything I do and everything I am and everything I've become. My motivation is to help the gospel go forth through media products of any sort. I try to pick my personal projects on the basis of doing service for someone else—lots of people need help doing media, and I try to help them with what they need done. I also try to pick my projects based on whether or not they'll be influential in some way, because the gospel is spiritually influential. I hope that all my artistic endeavors will someday put me in a more influential position so I can share the gospel more readily.

Everyone can share the gospel in lots of creative ways—not just by knocking on doors. In the book *David O. McKay and the Rise in Modern Mormonism* by Gregory A. Prince, President McKay says, "Today it is a simple matter for us to teach all nations. The Lord has given us the means of whispering through space, of annihilating distance. We have the means at our hands of reaching millions in the world."

I also think a lot of prayer has helped me be where I am. Besides praying for parts, I always keep in my prayers that I can be successful and keep everything going and that I can always use these talents for good. I want to be the kind of person that whenever Heavenly Father needs me to be something for him, I can be it. I want to be an instrument in His hands.

Who do you see as your audience?

My audience is everyone—both members and non-members. And my justification for that is that truth is truth. Truth is good. If truth is going to be your message, it's a message for non-members and for members. You don't have to specify a certain age group or gender for your target audience. Everybody can be touched by the message of the gospel.

The teachers I had at BYU were incredible and really opened my eyes to religious filmmaking and what it means to teach a spiritual message without being manipulative. There's a fine line in sharing the gospel through film. It's hard not to be preachy.

Where do you see yourself in the future?

I plan on continuing pursuits in acting, filmmaking, and music, and in all other ways that I can be creative and make things, even if it needs to be on a smaller scale. I will always, always be making something, creating something, doing something to spread the gospel and get good media out there. I remember a teacher at BYU—I was in his office once, debating whether or not to do the film program anymore, and he just looked at me and said, "Please don't leave. We need good people in this business. We need good people who will make good media." He talked to me about how it's a war out there and how we need more soldiers. So, I kind of consider myself a soldier in the media war of life, and there need to be more of us. ▪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