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A Writer Looks at the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: This article is a testimony of the Book of Mormon from the point of view of a successful and professional writer, Helen Hinckley Jones. In order to write an excellent book, it takes tremendous research, painstaking effort to build distinct characters, a complex form, a unique style of writing, and an appropriate theme, followed by laborious retracing, redoing, and revising. Joseph Smith had neither the talent nor the time to author the Book of Mormon. Jones concludes that Joseph Smith “was reading the Book of Mormon, not writing it.”



When I sit in fast meeting and listen to people bear their testimonies, I often wonder just how they came by their soul-supporting convictions. I wonder this because I know how I came by mine—particularly my testimony of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. I am a writer, and the more I write the more I realize that the most competent writer would fail at writing a book like that.

Shortly after my first book was published a woman called on me and asked me to write a book about her son's experiences during World War II. The son would lend me his diary and cut me in on the profits. The offer was ridiculous, but what made me really furious was her statement: "I'd write the book myself if only I had time to sit down."

She thought that all there was to writing a book was to insert a sheet of paper in the typewriter and run it through—much as a housewife might run clothes through an old-fashioned wringer. I have since regretted my sharp response because I have found out—several books later—that most people do not understand the writing process.

Perhaps you will gain an added appreciation for the Book of Mormon if you are acquainted with that process. Perhaps you would like to watch a writer "deliver" a much less complex book.

Preparation for a writing career

When I registered at Brigham Young University as an undergraduate student, I had already done some writing for publication. The late beloved Harrison R. Merrill listened while I explained my career dreams. He advised me to write continuously, always trying to improve my style and increase my facility. Then he gave me a bit of advice I've passed on to hundreds of other would-be-writers. "What most writers need is something to write about and the perception to recognize story material when they find it." He suggested that I major in a social science, hence I selected history.

I had grown up steeped in the history of our people. My father was the youngest son in a large family which had helped to make Utah history. His older sister, my Aunt Minerva Ray, was a wonderful storyteller, and the incidents she related were of her childhood and early womanhood. Frequently my father's mother spent a month or two with us and we children begged, "Tell us about the olden days, Grandma." She would tell us about early days in Michigan, about crossing the plains, about Coalville, Cove Fort, and Fillmore in pioneer days.

When I took my M.Sc. at the "Y" my special interest was Great Basin history. It was some time later that I wrote my first Mormon novel.

A writer Looks at the Book of Mormon

BY HELEN HINCKLEY JONES



It might seem that my early absorption of pioneer stories, plus my study at the "Y" would be adequate preparation for writing a book. This is not true, however. People's memories, while they give special color to events, are not always accurate. Even the best college courses cannot give the definitive detail necessary for the support of a historical novel.

Research

Research, which means exactly what it says: re-search, is the basis for all worthwhile historical writing, both fiction and non-fiction.

There are several steps in researching a subject. First the writer reads encyclopedias and history books. He may read biographies and fiction, too. These books give him the "feel" of the times and general information. Next he tries to find original sources, which for the study of pioneer Utah are plentiful.

These are found in special libraries and archives or borrowed from people who have treasured precious family documents.

As the writer reads he takes complete notes, organizing them according to some system of his own, but always making sure that he knows the book, the page, and the library, so he can find the material again.

How careful one must be in doing research can be illustrated by one of my own errors. Desiring to give Ogden some real similarity to the actual pioneer town, I put actual people in minor roles in my novel *The Mountains Are Mine*. I was told by one man that he couldn't trust anything in the book because his grandfather had just one eye, and I had given him two!

Research continues as long as the book is in progress. The author will be looking for facts to fill in certain "soft" spots until the typescript is delivered to the publisher.

No matter what historical field I have chosen I have had to undertake a huge amount of research. I have written on the Children's Crusade, on Columbus, on medieval Germany, and on Persia. In the two books about Persia I supplemented historical research with interviews with the central character of the story. Talking with Najmeh did not release me from reading every book, every report, every article that was available.

Now consider for a minute what research facilities were available to Joseph Smith. In order to research the Book of Mormon he would need to study the geography, the flora and fauna of two continents; to chart the ocean currents and know the nature of the winds, and in addition to study a civilization which has only recently been partially uncovered by archaeologists.

It would have been impossible for Joseph Smith to discover all of the varied materials of the Book of Mormon if he had had years for study and the best facilities—if he had been forced to discover them in the way I find my facts.

Characterization

When my research is well under way, I begin to build my characters. This is a complex problem. The Greeks said that everybody has at least one "tragic flaw." Achilles' heel is an allegory that explains this theory. Characters are not puppets for the author.

They do the things they do because of what they are and because they are motivated by certain basic urges. The wrong that a man does, the failures that come to him are due to his weaknesses; his successes are due to his strengths. When a writer conceives a character, he creates a man or woman who will react inevitably in a way that will illustrate the author's philosophy. The writer cannot use just any man. Hyrum Lucas in *The Mountains Are Mine*, loved the feeling of power. He welcomed responsibility and danger because these fed his need. He was exactly the man to become a captain on the journey across the plains. He was exactly the man who would find it impossible to settle down as a carpenter in a quiet little community.

Most writers build fewer than a dozen three-dimensional characters for a book. Notable exceptions are Dickens and Tolstoi. It is hard work to build even a small cast of characters. I build my people a little at a time and really live with them. I think day and night about what my hero, Branch Berkov, would do in a given situation, how my heroine, Essie, would react to the different disciplines of her life.

Consider the characters in the Book of Mormon. Perhaps you can name almost a hundred. If you open the book anywhere, you will discover that the men seem real and alive. There are more three-dimensional characters in the Book of Mormon than most writers can create in a long writing career. There are few women in the book; none of note. Had Joseph Smith written the book on the pattern of the Bible as some think, surely there would have been Esthers and Jezebels and Mary Magdalenes.

Form

Perhaps the most technical thing about writing a book is planning the architecture of the whole thing. A short story has what writers call "outside limits." Most short story writers know when they conceive a story what pattern they will follow in its development. Novels, histories, long biographies, chronicles, all have more complex structure. Komroff's novel *Coronet* is thought by many students to be one of the most perfectly organized novels of our time.

You might read it and compare it with the Book of Mormon from the standpoint of complexity. *Coronet* takes a coronet and a whip from the Middle Ages,

when the Italian cities were independent states, down to the twentieth century. The Book of Mormon covers a longer period and includes the history of three peoples. A modern scholar writing the Book of Mormon would not arrange it as it is arranged. The history of the book accounts for the arrangement, and Joseph Smith at twenty-three years could hardly have carried this complex pattern in his head.

The actual writing

For a long time every author goes around half in this world, half out, while the characters take shape in his mind, while the imaginary settings grow into real places, while the deeper meaning of the story becomes clothed in incident, while the architecture of the book is being planned. At last he is ready to write.

This may seem like a long process. It is. Erle Stanley Gardner can turn out a Perry Mason story in a week end because all of the preliminary work had been done at the beginning of the series. These are books, too, which depend upon a "gimmick" and should not be confused with the so-called "literary" book.

Every writer has his own way of going about his work. Thomas Wolfe, who was a very large man, liked to write standing up, his pencil pad on the top of a refrigerator. Thomas Mann set down five hundred perfect words a day. My method is to write directly on the typewriter as fast as my fingers can tap out the words, counting on numerous revisions to bring the work to some degree of literary excellence.

In *Reveille for a Persian Village* I planned to cover the happenings of a month in each chapter. I thought that to show the passing of time I would begin each chapter with a descriptive paragraph. These opening paragraphs are deceptively simple. One of them was rewritten twenty-seven times before it said just what I wanted it to say in a correctly cadenced way.

Each day when I start my writing, I retype a little of the work I did the day before in order to make the style continuous, otherwise there would be a definite break between the work of different days. Sometimes typing a paragraph or a page is not enough to set me going, and I have to read aloud to get the "swing" of what has been written before. Especially is this true when I pick up my work after a week's lapse of time. Called away from the typewriter for even a

minute I need to reread the last few sentences.

Most authors work back and forth in a book. I get halfway over in a book and discover that I need a bowery. I have to go back to chapter three and build it. Or I need a slightly different complex of characteristics in one of my characters, and I have to rewrite a section or several sections to make the necessary change. When I sold *The Mountains Are Mine*, it had a tragic ending. Milly had divorced Hyrum and faced the world alone. The editor wanted her to have some man to turn to. Abel was the man. I knew that. But I had already married Abel to Milly's sister, Ellen. I had to go back and unmarry Abel and Ellen and create another man for Ellen to marry. This took a rewriting of seven chapters. In *Reveille for a Persian Village* I married Najmeh to Abulhassan without any courtship. I had to rewrite all but the first chapter to provide the courtship. This going back and forth inside the book while the writing is in progress is absolutely essential to most writers.

But consider the Book of Mormon. The Prophet Joseph on his side of the curtain didn't say, "Will you read me the last paragraph you put down yesterday, Brother Cowdery?" He didn't say, "Turn back to Second Nephi; I need to add something."

The Prophet Joseph was *reading* the Book of Mormon, not writing it.

Style

Every writer has a style of writing just as he has his own fingerprints. Style differs from fingerprints, though, in that it grows, develops, changes. At the beginning of a writer's career his style may be partially borrowed from other writers. As he learns to know himself and have confidence in himself, his style becomes something that is really his own. As a young writer I admired a bold, terse style and tried to copy it. I had to come to realize that as a simple person, naive, unsophisticated, innocent, my writing style needs to mirror these characteristics.

The writing that is least individual from a stylistic standpoint is the newspaper story or the encyclopedia report. Here brevity, clarity, and accuracy are sought after. I am sure that you have noticed that although much of the Book of Mormon is reportorial in nature there is still a variety in the style. King Benjamin does not speak like (Continued on page 834)



Gold Ribbon Winner gives you a recipe for Crumbly Light Dutch Hustle Cake

Here's a hurry-up way to make old fashioned apple kuchen," says Mrs. Dallas Kruse, winner of the Gold Ribbon for yeast baking at Colorado's Garfield County Fair. "You just mix and spoon—it rises in the pan.

And what a cake you'll bake . . . topped with tart juicy apple slices . . . rich with the flavor only yeast can give.

Be sure you use Fleischmann's Active Dry Yeast. It's so fast and easy . . . everything bakes up wonderful with Fleischmann's!"

DUTCH HUSTLE CAKE

- 1/3 cup milk
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup Blue Bonnet Margarine
- 1 package Fleischmann's Active Dry Yeast
- 1/4 cup warm, not hot, water
- 1 egg well beaten
- 1 1/3 cups sifted flour
- 1 1/2 cups canned or cooked apple slices, drained
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg

Scald milk. Stir in sugar, salt and half the margarine. Cool to lukewarm. In mixing bowl dissolve yeast in warm, not hot, water. Stir in lukewarm milk mixture.

Add egg and flour. Beat until smooth. Spread dough evenly in greased 9 x 9 x 2-inch pan. Arrange apple slices on top. Sprinkle with mixture of sugar, cinnamon and nutmeg. Dot with remaining margarine. Cover and let rise in warm place, free from draft, until doubled in bulk, about 40 minutes. Bake in hot oven at 400°F. for 25 minutes. Drizzle with confectioners' sugar icing.



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A Writer Looks at the Book of Mormon

(Continued from page 801)

Alma the Younger. This difference in style is somewhat obliterated by the translation.

Some people do not understand what translation really is. Even some adults who love the Book of Mormon think of each symbol on the plates as having an exact English equivalent. The fact is that each language has built up through usage fine shades of meaning that cannot be easily expressed in another language. Joseph Smith faced this problem when he translated the Book of Mormon. After he knew, through divine assistance, what every character meant, he had to struggle to put that meaning into articulate English. He had to use his own vocabulary—a vocabulary in use around him, enriched by his reading of his loved Bible. Still the sermons of the great Book of Mormon leaders transcend the vocabulary. Read several of these sermons, one after the other, and you will see what I mean.

Theme

We have not spoken of the most important component in any book—the philosophy that is inherent in it. Sometimes we call this the idea, the theme, the objective, the purpose. A book can be no greater than the mind that conceives it, no deeper than the heart of the writer. Have you ever read this book with the desire to search it for truth? Wipe away the wars and the travels, and you have a great human document that pushes back the boundaries of religious and social thinking along many fronts. Remember, for example, that a long peace was secured, not because either side built up a great show of strength but because of the *virtue* of the people. Remember that poverty is not a virtue, but that prosperity may come to man if he obeys the laws of God.

I like to think of the Prophet sitting behind his curtain reading, with divine help, to his scribe. Because I know what goes into a book—I know it from my experience as a writer and as a teacher of writers—I think of him dictating sentence after sentence, chapter after chapter, without the months of research that I put into a book, without

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I like to bring this whole concept into my mind and think about it, because then I know with my own brain and body that the Book of Mormon is a divine witness for Christ, that it came to us in the way that the Prophet Joseph said it came. Out of my own experience my testimony has grown, and this is as it should be.

Perhaps as you reread the Book of Mormon you will have an added appreciation for it. Perhaps my testimony will reinforce your own.

Conversions through the Book of Mormon

(Continued from page 815)

As I read, the Spirit of the Lord was upon me, and I knew and comprehended that the book was true, as plainly and manifestly as a man comprehends and knows that he exists. My joy was now full, as it were, and I rejoiced sufficiently more than to pay me for all the sorrows, sacrifices, and toils of my life. I soon determined to see the young man who had been the instrument of its discovery and translation. (*Life and Travels of Parley P. Pratt*, p. 36-37.)

SACRAMENT MEETING

BY HELEN KIMBALL ORGILL

Chapel doors are open wide,
Organ tones are softly pealing,
Voices entering subside,
Thoughts of reverence revealing;

Words from leaders, hymns of praise,
Youthful priests are kneeling, praying,
Blessings on the Sacrament—
God, our Father's word obeying.

Thoughts of him the crucified,
Jesus and his love imbuing,
Hearts with hope and faith and trust,
Sacred covenants renewing;

Sermons follow to inspire,
Words of truth, all edifying,
Food for thought in days to come—
Humble spirits fortifying.



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