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- Abstract** Grant Hardy responds to the six essays written about *Understanding the Book of Mormon*. He pairs up the authors and imagines conversations between them, as in a book club exchange. He acknowledges their comments and expresses interest in ongoing dialogues fostered by the ideas in his book.
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# The Book of Mormon Book Club

*Grant Hardy*

I CONFESS THAT WHEN I FIRST HEARD the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* was planning a series of six-year-anniversary essays on *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, I was a little uneasy. I don't enjoy being the center of attention, and that's especially true in critical contexts. So I try to avoid listening to podcasts that I've made or watching videos of my teaching, and I generally read reviews of my books only once, as quickly as possible. I'm well aware that my work can be improved with criticism (I love copyeditors!), but it's nicer to receive feedback *before* one's ideas are sent into the world in their final form. Six years after the fact, both praise and criticism make me uncomfortable. Nevertheless, it is gratifying to think that one's work still matters even after the initial rush of readers and reviews. Heather does most of the cooking at our house, and her rule is that the family has to stay at the table for at least as long as it took to prepare the meal. Since *Understanding* was six years in the making, it seemed only polite to be taking another look at this point.

And then I saw the essays, which were uniformly kind and gracious, and I began to think of this exercise as more like a book club. Two of the authors are longtime friends, two are friends that I've met since *Understanding* was published, and two I've never met—though the quickest road to friendship is hearing someone say nice things about your children, or your book. In addition, three of the authors are Latter-day Saints (including one who first came to the LDS Church and the Book

of Mormon as an adult), and three are non-Mormons (including one from our sister denomination, the Community of Christ). The notion of a book club appeals to me because one of my goals in writing was to encourage more conversation about the Book of Mormon, which I think is a remarkable text regardless of whether people view it as literature, as fiction, as history, or as scripture. These are not mutually exclusive categories, and none of them is foreign to academic discourse, so I was hoping to find common ground that might help bridge the gap between devotional readers and secular scholars. Somewhat analogously, I'm Mormon rather than Confucian, yet I've spent a fair amount of time trying to spread the good news about the Confucian Classics and Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian*, which are also marvelous texts that can be approached as literature, fiction, history, and scripture. Hence, I have every reason to think that outsiders can read culturally significant books closely, enthusiastically, and sympathetically.

It was interesting for me to watch the authors grapple with the expansive yet limiting categories of history and fiction, coming as they do from different backgrounds, and I appreciated those who shared personal experiences. Readers tend to have lifetime relationships with at least a few books, and a disproportionate number of those books are probably scriptural. Almost by definition, this will be true of the believers among the six authors—as I noted in *Understanding*, the Book of Mormon is more often reread than read—yet because my own book is about another book, it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle one's feelings about the two. That is to say, it's possible that I wrote a deficient monograph, but the Book of Mormon is nevertheless awe-inspiring; or my work may have been a brilliant study of sacred text that is simply not that compelling to outsiders.<sup>1</sup> If this set of six responses had been offered in the context of an actual book club, I would have enjoyed listening to further conversations

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1. The latter judgment was expressed by Alan Wolfe in an early online review for *Slate*, which began memorably with the observation, "To a nonbeliever, all religions perplex, but Mormonism perplexes absolutely." Even though Wolfe was, in the end, not persuaded by my arguments for the Book of Mormon's literary worth, I was delighted that he was willing to give the book another chance and reread it. [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2010/05/chloroform\\_in\\_print.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2010/05/chloroform_in_print.html).

among the participants, not just with me. So for fun, I'm going to pair them up and imagine how discussions might have gone.

Jana Riess came to my book from her perspective as an editor. As she read my attempts to differentiate the primary narrators of the Book of Mormon, she saw them as fellow spirits, working from behind the scenes to shape the narrative while keeping in mind their ultimate readers. A writer herself, she has a way with words (describing Captain Moroni as “quick to anger and slow to pray” is a lovely adaptation of a Book of Mormon expression), and her account of coming to see Nephi in a new, more sympathetic light—“his failures, rather than his many successes, won my heart”—mirrors my own experience. In many ways, Jana is my ideal reader, to use a technical narratological term. She gets what I'm doing. That is to say, she understands the game that I'm playing, and she is willing to play along, echoing some of my insights and adding her own.

I am fully aware that my approach is something of a game: it's an experiment in reading, an attempt to discover a new way of making sense of this peculiar text, an approach that takes into account its unique structure in a manner that I hope might engage both believers and outsiders. Indeed, there's a sort of playfulness in my imagining the inner lives of Book of Mormon characters, yet that doesn't mean that there are no rules for what I'm doing—I try to pay attention to clues in the text, and the narrators themselves tell us a great deal about their intentions and motivations. And it doesn't mean that I'm not taking the book seriously. The one place where Jana goes wrong is when she suggests that I've actually achieved “Alter's standard of holistic interpretation.” I will never be the sort of reader and scholar that Robert Alter is (though a guy can always dream, I suppose), yet I have been inspired by his interpretation of biblical writers as being engaged in “the most serious playfulness.”<sup>2</sup> The combination of piety and playfulness with regard to scripture is one of the things I most admire about Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 46; cited in *Understanding* at p. 267.

3. I first encountered the idea that piety and playfulness could go hand in hand in a very different context, Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*

Like Jana, Chris Thomas is also willing to play. Even though he is not Mormon himself, Chris has spent a lot of time reading the Book of Mormon closely, and he's willing to take it on its own terms, at least provisionally, in an effort to understand it from literary or theological perspectives. As I suspect may be true for many outsiders, he acknowledges that while the question of whether the book is historically true or false is "certainly an important issue," it's one that he personally has little interest in. (This has been my experience as well in studying the sacred texts of other religious communities.) I was a bit chastened by his difficulty in categorizing my methodology. Perhaps I could have used different terms or explained them more carefully, because although I have borrowed from biblical scholarship, the Book of Mormon is not exactly like the Bible. I felt that "narrative analysis" might be a reasonable compromise between the genres of fiction and history, but he points out, as an accomplished biblical exegete himself, that the technique of narrative criticism generally restricts its focus to what is actually in the text, whereas I was practicing something more akin to redaction criticism. In that approach, interpreters attempt to discern the motivations of authors who are making use of previous sources, as when New Testament scholars try to reconstruct how the author of Luke selected and adapted from both Mark and the hypothetical sayings-gospel Q.

The Book of Mormon, with its constant references to sources in various plates and records, might seem like a prime candidate for redaction criticism, but the problem is that everything is internal to the text itself, so the historical-critical method, which includes redaction criticism, doesn't quite work. On the other hand, the Nephite narrators are much more present and talkative than any narrators in the Bible—indeed they are themselves major characters—so that it is much easier to imagine their minds (and I think this is true regardless of whether they were actual historical figures or whether they are literary constructs that originated with Joseph Smith). The author of Luke-Acts speaks in his own voice in the prologue at Luke 1:1-4, and there are some cryptic uses

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(New York: Knopf, 1963), 27-33, and I was immediately intrigued since that sensibility is uncommon in Mormonism. And yes, Hofstadter came from a Jewish background.

of the pronoun *we* in passages from Acts 16–28, but this is nothing like the Book of Mormon. The books would be more comparable if the New Testament presented itself as edited and narrated by Paul, who regularly interrupted his account to explain why he chose some incidents, gospels, and letters over others. So if “narrative criticism” and “redaction criticism” aren’t quite right, perhaps I should have gone with “rhetorical criticism.” In any case, Chris’s comments are a useful reminder that the tools of biblical scholarship, while tremendously useful, cannot be naively applied to the Book of Mormon.

What I most appreciate about Chris’s essay, however, is that once he identifies a potential problem, he offers a solution. Instead of my focus on the narrators as characters, he proposes an approach he feels would be aligned with “a more traditional narrative analysis perspective.” He suggests a relatively restricted attention to the structure of the narrative, especially as outlined by phrasal markers such the three iterations of “And thus it is. Amen.” So rather than beginning with a clear sense of the narrators and then working through the text, as I do in *Understanding*, he recommends a mode of sequential reading that allows the narrators to gradually reveal themselves, with readers taking the editorial interruptions as they come and allowing their perceptions to be shaped as the narrative unfolds. In short, Chris wants to change the rules of my game, or at least suggest a different sequence of moves. I’m interested, especially since Chris demonstrates some of the insights that might come as “the reader develops a relationship with Mormon” (“albeit a literary one,” he hastens to add). Of course, this sort of approach is much easier with my *Reader’s Edition*, which includes headings that identify the major structural components of the text as well as passages where the narrators jump in to address readers directly, and I’m not sure that “And thus it is. Amen” can bear quite so much interpretive weight. It might be better to work with the structure provided by the original chapter breaks, which have the added advantage of continuing into 2 Nephi.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it’s easy for me to imagine Chris and Jana and I continuing these sorts of

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4. I disagree, however, with his suggestion that the two sets of plates mentioned in 1 Nephi 19 consisted of “prophecies of Christ” and “prophecies from Isaiah 48–49.”

conversations, and I think we would all agree with his enthusiasm for pluralism: “the literary and theological analysis of the Book of Mormon seems to be in its relative infancy in many ways and . . . much interpretive fruit can be borne by a variety of differing literary explorations.”

By contrast, Dan Peterson and Adam Stokes want to play a different, though not unrelated, game. Ironically, they do not end up on the same team. Both authors found my arguments for the distinct styles and personalities of the three major narrators persuasive, but rather than taking those points as evidence for my own thesis, “that the Book of Mormon is a much more interesting text—rewarding sustained critical attention—than has generally been acknowledged by either Mormons or non-Mormons,” they want to employ my observations in a different debate, one that concerns the authenticity of the text and the trustworthiness of Joseph Smith. Adam writes, “I came away even more convinced that the Book of Mormon is an actual translation of an ancient document and not a ‘tall tale’ invented by Joseph Smith.” Dan concludes, “In *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Hardy has also written one of the very best books of Mormon apologetics ever published.” Along the way, both make some valuable points. Dan’s suggestion that the Jaredite Chronicler might be a fourth narrative voice is interesting, though it’s hard to know how much of the book of Ether is Moroni’s paraphrase as opposed to direct quotations from his Jaredite sources. And Adam’s observation that scriptural interpretation takes place within religious communities is worth following up, especially if accompanied by a more careful analysis of the sometimes complicated relationships between the genres of literature and scripture (there are significant differences between the LDS Church and the Community of Christ on this matter, as well as differences among members of both denominations).

I’m happy that Adam’s and Dan’s faith was strengthened by my literary analysis. It matters to me that believers recognize the Book of Mormon that I’m describing as a text worthy of their faith and devotion. But at the same time, a book club is not a testimony meeting, and I’m wary

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It seems much more likely that Nephi was referring to the large and small plates foreshadowed in 1 Nephi 9.

that such talk might exclude outsiders. I want to hear what Chris and Liz have to say, and I'm happy for them to remain among the unconverted. In fact, I want to help them better understand the text in ways that make sense from non-Mormon or naturalistic perspectives. There's a reason that I included parallels from both historians and novelists in *Understanding*, and I quite consciously ended with Nabokov and the *Adi Granth* rather than Thucydides. Dan quotes some of the passages where I point out interpretations that support traditional LDS beliefs (and he adds a great many more statements from Joseph Smith and his associates concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon), but there are also times when I bring up points that may challenge such beliefs, as in the quotation he relegated to footnote 32. I would hesitate, for a number of reasons, to describe my approach as "fair and balanced," as Dan does—I'm pretty obviously a believer—but it's important to me to leave space for naturalistic explanations. It is reasonable to believe the Book of Mormon is a revealed translation of an ancient record, and it is also reasonable to see it as a product of the nineteenth century. Intelligent, good people are on both sides of those arguments.

There is even a case to be made that these binary alternatives may not be the best way to make sense of the text. Dan quoted a sentence from *Understanding* where I expanded the possibility to three: miraculously translated historical document, conscious fraud (perhaps pious in nature), or delusion (perhaps sincerely believed). He missed the footnote (*Understanding*, p. 279) where I raised yet another possibility—that the Book of Mormon may be fiction written by God and revealed to Joseph Smith—and I probably should have added "work of religious genius (perhaps inspired) akin to the Qur'an or hard-to-explain achievements by child prodigies in music or mathematics" and "pseudepigraphical writing adopted by God and made authoritative through divinely mandated canonization (as many Jews and Christians regard the books of Deuteronomy, Esther, Job, the Pastoral Epistles, and 2 Peter)." Although I am firmly in the "translation" camp myself, I sometimes wonder if we have any idea just what a translation done "by the power and gift of God" really entails; it may bear very little resemblance to ordinary, academic translations.

All this is to say that the historical-critical method has significant limitations when it comes to interpreting and understanding scripture, as has become more and more evident to biblical scholars over the last few decades. This doesn't mean that we can reject it out of hand and retreat to fideism—I love the Enlightenment and think that the world would be a better place if people paid much more attention to science, rational arguments, and empirical evidence—yet I'm not convinced that positivism is the measure of all things. At least this is what comes to mind when I contemplate how Dan and Adam share a belief in the divine origins of the Book of Mormon and nevertheless belong to different churches. The question of whether or not the book is true from a historical perspective may not ultimately be the most important thing we can take away from its study. It would be fascinating to listen to Dan and Adam talk through their differences as well as their agreements.

Where Adam and Dan share a deep concern with historicity, Amy Easton-Flake and Liz Fenton bring to my book a keen interest in literature. Most of Amy's essay touches on *Understanding* only lightly as she identifies narratological features of the Book of Mormon that she believes warrant more nuanced, sophisticated investigation. I think that I actually addressed a number of the topics she raises, and I'm a bit wary of her heavy reliance on Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*—not because it's a bad book, but because Book of Mormon narrative operates quite differently from the Gospel of John—but we are in complete agreement that *Understanding* is not “the definitive narrative analysis of the Book of Mormon.” Like Amy, I was hoping that my book would be a conversation starter, and I deliberately avoided technical, jargon-laden narratological analysis, in part because I wanted my work to be accessible to a broader audience, but also since I don't really feel qualified to take on such a task. Yet there is most certainly room for more formal studies of the Book of Mormon narratology that match, for example, those of Irene de Jong's on the Homeric epics.<sup>5</sup> One of

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5. Irene J. F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *Narrators and Focalizers: The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad*, 2nd ed. (London: Bristol Classics Press, 2004).

the most striking characteristics of the Book of Mormon, at least for me, is how its sophisticated narrative techniques seem at odds with the awkwardness of the diction.

Liz's literary expertise is evident in both her cogent analysis and her graceful writing. I've saved her essay for last since I found it to be the most rewarding and also the most challenging. She is interested in the Book of Mormon as an example of nineteenth-century American fiction, and it's an admirable thing to enter into a foreign world of belief far enough to have a scholarly conversation; religious texts can often be opaque or frustrating to those who are not looking for salvation therein. Yet in this case, to adopt her metaphor, she has come through the threshold bearing interpretive insights. Her essay was the one most thoroughly engaged with my book, and as she reviewed some of my ideas about narrators, chronological disjunctions, internal intertextuality, and biblical allusions, she was able to suggest alternatives or push my analysis further in useful ways. Her question about the relationship between familial histories and national histories opens up a promising line of inquiry, and I wish that I had written these sentences: "Nephi struggles with the problem of knowing how a story will end before it begins, and Mormon tries to make the past present in order to prophesy a coming future. Moroni's own reluctant narrative attempts to remedy one past with another, all while living in a destroyed present."

Liz is willing to travel with me quite a ways in my explorations of the Book of Mormon, but there's a limit; eventually she reaches a threshold that seems impassable: "While Hardy's approach allows him to generate important observations about the structure of the text, it also creates rhetorical space in which, for all his disavowals, he can talk about Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni as if they are historical figures. In the context of narrative theory, narrators are devices designed to achieve particular effects just like other narrative elements (perspective, narratee, author function, etc.)." Perhaps I can urge her to take just a couple more steps.

It seems to me that the narrators in the Book of Mormon are not quite like the other narrative elements she lists; rather, they are fully rounded, self-disclosing characters. She asserts that "narrators do not

have realizations,” but characters do, and readers trying to understand plots are often called upon to imagine characters “as thinking subjects driven by goals and motives.” The Book of Mormon is at times explicit about mental realizations; Sariah says “Now I know of a surety that the Lord has commanded my husband” (1 Nephi 5:8), and Amulek catches himself midthought for a correction: “I never have known much of the ways of the Lord, and his mysteries and marvelous power. I said I never had known much of these things; but behold, I mistake, for I have seen much of his mysteries and his marvelous power; yea, even in the preservation of the lives of this people” (Alma 10:5). The narrators similarly tell us directly about their inner lives, yet—as with other characters from throughout fiction—their intentions and understandings are also revealed through their actions, and within the framework of the Book of Mormon narrative, those actions include their writing and editorial endeavors.

To use an example from another idiosyncratic work, published one hundred years after Joseph Smith’s, I remember first picking up Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*—because I had heard that it was a classic—and being entirely mystified by its opening pages. Even though I was in college and a reasonably good reader, I had no idea what was going on. Only later, after I learned that the first chapter is narrated in a nonlinear, stream-of-consciousness style by the mentally disabled character Benjy, was I able to return to the novel and appreciate its remarkable strengths. I’m suggesting that the Book of Mormon, like *The Sound and the Fury*, can’t be fully understood without entering deeply into the minds of its narrator-characters, who not only tell stories, but are represented as being the authors of the account that we are reading. I hope that such an approach is not impossible for those who regard the book as a novel; at the same time, I think that believers can benefit from careful readings that pay much more attention to the nineteenth-century context of the Book of Mormon than I did in *Understanding*. I look forward to additional studies from historians and scholars of literature that start from the assumption that the book is religious fiction.

There was only one point where I felt that Liz had entirely missed the mark, and that is when she suggested that “his conflation of narrator and author functions actually allows Hardy to treat the book as a Mesoamerican artifact.” I have followed the geographical debates of Book of Mormon historicists from a distance, and while I believe the arguments for a Central American setting are probably stronger, I don’t primarily think of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni as Mesoamerican figures. There is very little in the Book of Mormon that correlates directly with locations, culture, or lifestyles from southern Mexico and Guatemala of two thousand years ago, and I tended to ignore all of that in *Understanding*; I was mostly interested in the world created by the text.

On the other hand, I fear that another of her observations was uncomfortably apt. She complained that my “voicing of nonbelievers’ potential explanations for the text’s various features often reads like parody.” Ouch. I can see why she might feel that way, but it was not my intention (though admittedly, I have spent less time trying to see the book through the eyes of outsiders than from a believing point of view). So in retrospect, I can see the glibness in my suggestion that Moroni’s portion of the book might be the result of “Joseph Smith’s literary exuberance and delight in creating new characters [leading] him to continue the story just a little longer.” I probably should have given that possibility more sustained consideration. I still think that there is a literary verve to the Book of Mormon that is difficult to contain, yet there is also a theological energy that can be attributed to Smith, and the book of Ether allowed him space to work out a few more ideas. Liz notes the repair of the fall implicit in the brother of Jared’s story, and I could have said more about the way the Jaredite account universalizes the Nephite experience as it replicates its major contours. Liz and I are never going to be in the same place religiously—as she observes, some thresholds cannot be crossed—but to the extent that we’re both interested in the Book of Mormon as literature, she can help me better understand how outside scholars, coming to the task as adult readers with professional skills, can make sense of a book that I have been reading my entire life.

I appreciate the opportunity for conversation extended by the editors of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. It's pleasant to think of *Understanding* as a book that offers common ground for dialogue among people whose opinions and backgrounds are different enough to make those discussions interesting, profitable, and a little unsettling for everyone involved. It used to be that the only people who wanted to talk about the Book of Mormon were Mormons and anti-Mormons. Now it appears that the conversation can be broadened to include scholars from secular academia. There is, however, another group of new, enthusiastic readers who might have been invited to the Book of Mormon Book Club, and even though I'm a little discomfited by the way their playfulness far exceeds their piety, they nevertheless have some engaging things to say. I'm thinking of professional authors like Jane Barnes and Avi Steinberg who see Joseph Smith as a kindred spirit and bring a writerly sensibility to his work.<sup>6</sup> (I hope they won't mind if I use their first names.)

Jane tells us that she had long been fascinated by Joseph Smith but was never able to make much headway with the Book of Mormon until she recognized its obsession with texts and realized that "the three different narrators—Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni—are also characters in the drama; though they live at different times and each is very individual, they agree on the prophetic essentials of Christ's coming." I would like to imagine that at some point she came across *Understanding*, but perhaps she is just a very gifted reader on her own. In any case, she is able to make observations that never would have occurred to me: "It's as if Thomas Pynchon had fabulated a work about the direction of modern religious literature by writing in the style of Milton's *Paradise Lost*." And at some length:

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6. Jane Barnes, *Falling in Love with Joseph Smith: My Search for the Real Prophet* (New York: Penguin, 2012), esp. 107–20; Avi Steinberg, *The Lost Book of Mormon: A Journey through the Mythic Lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Kansas City, Missouri* (New York: Doubleday, 2014). For what it's worth, Doubleday also published a Church-approved edition of the Book of Mormon itself in 2004.

The whole Book of Mormon is surprisingly the Declaration of Independence for scripture. Not only does it break Christ out of the Bible, a scary and liberating act for the living God, but it also understands the consequences. If the Bible needs to be supported by further scripture, then all sorts of prophets, all sorts of individuals will claim their scripture is the holy one. Joseph's scripture sees to the bottom of this crisis. Christ must be made anew in a world where his reign will be decided by the battle of the books.

Yet when she conjures up a scene where Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer meet Joseph Smith and help him with the plates, I start to better understand how Liz must feel when she is reading my book.<sup>7</sup>

For a while, Jane considered converting to Mormonism before deciding in the end that it wasn't for her. Avi, also a nonmember, was so enamored of the Book of Mormon that he devoted a year and a half to retracing its steps, from Jerusalem to Central America to the Hill Cumorah in upstate New York. Like Jane, he never mentions me explicitly, though some of his descriptions appear to echo themes from my book, as in his lovely evocation of Moroni's labors:

The only thing worse than writing his sad tale, it seems, would be finishing it. Maybe all those decades passed because Moroni just couldn't bring himself to complete the project. With his people gone, his sole purpose in life became finishing the book. But doing so would also mean acknowledging that the Nephites' story—his story—was truly over. In burying the plates, he was burying more than just the plates.<sup>8</sup>

Avi's profoundly interactive approach to the Book of Mormon, as fiction, allows him to see things in provocative ways that are new to me. So when he contemplates Joseph Smith's relationship with the Bible—"To read a single book that closely, and in this kind of enraptured way, is a radical way to read and, as a result, opens up radical

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7. Barnes, *Falling in Love with Joseph Smith*, 113, 118–19, 50–58.

8. Steinberg, *Lost Book of Mormon*, 173–74.

literary possibilities”—I think of Nephi reading the brass plates, and indeed reading himself into them. He continues:

Joseph appealed to me most because he seemed like a writer anyone could identify with but whose literary ambitions were fantastically peculiar. Unlike me, or anyone I knew, Joseph had set a fairly imposing goal for his first book: to have it stand next to the Bible. . . . Was it possible that Joseph simply carried the literary impulse to its logical extreme? . . . Did he lose himself in it? Did Joseph Smith’s life represent what happens if you’re really dedicated to literature, like, *really* dedicated? Did Joseph do this so we don’t have to?

It’s a fresh, charming way to envision Joseph Smith, even if I can’t adopt it wholeheartedly myself. At the same time, there are other observations that I have found directly useful, as when he points out that “Nephi and his descendants in the New World were farther from home than anyone in the Bible.” The theme of exile is a powerful driver of the Book of Mormon narrative, and one that I would like to investigate more thoroughly in future studies.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Avi’s conception of a book that draws its readers into its world, so much that their lives are transformed by it, is not that far from my next project. *Understanding* focused on the text as literature (or as literary history), but much more could be said about what it means to read the Book of Mormon *as scripture*. There are two sentences from the essays that keep coming back to me, and pushing me forward. The first is Dan’s assertion that “analyzing [the Book of Mormon’s] historiography doesn’t reach its doctrinal or hortatory core, let alone its significance as a witness of Christ.” That seems right to me; there is still much to be done in exploring the book’s theological implications. And a comment from Jana points toward the radical, destabilizing potential of the Book of Mormon, even if her exact words are a little off-center: “By making a close study of the complexity of the Book of Mormon (and, by extension, its creators), [Hardy] is also teaching us new ways to imagine God.” But I

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9. Steinberg, *Lost Book of Mormon*, 79–80, 168.

don't think that it's me; that's what the Book of Mormon itself does, if we as believers have ears to hear, or as outsiders, eyes to observe critically and empathetically.

# The Book of Mormon Book Club

*Grant Hardy*

I CONFESS THAT WHEN I FIRST HEARD the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* was planning a series of six-year-anniversary essays on *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, I was a little uneasy. I don't enjoy being the center of attention, and that's especially true in critical contexts. So I try to avoid listening to podcasts that I've made or watching videos of my teaching, and I generally read reviews of my books only once, as quickly as possible. I'm well aware that my work can be improved with criticism (I love copyeditors!), but it's nicer to receive feedback *before* one's ideas are sent into the world in their final form. Six years after the fact, both praise and criticism make me uncomfortable. Nevertheless, it is gratifying to think that one's work still matters even after the initial rush of readers and reviews. Heather does most of the cooking at our house, and her rule is that the family has to stay at the table for at least as long as it took to prepare the meal. Since *Understanding* was six years in the making, it seemed only polite to be taking another look at this point.

And then I saw the essays, which were uniformly kind and gracious, and I began to think of this exercise as more like a book club. Two of the authors are longtime friends, two are friends that I've met since *Understanding* was published, and two I've never met—though the quickest road to friendship is hearing someone say nice things about your children, or your book. In addition, three of the authors are Latter-day Saints (including one who first came to the LDS Church and the Book

of Mormon as an adult), and three are non-Mormons (including one from our sister denomination, the Community of Christ). The notion of a book club appeals to me because one of my goals in writing was to encourage more conversation about the Book of Mormon, which I think is a remarkable text regardless of whether people view it as literature, as fiction, as history, or as scripture. These are not mutually exclusive categories, and none of them is foreign to academic discourse, so I was hoping to find common ground that might help bridge the gap between devotional readers and secular scholars. Somewhat analogously, I'm Mormon rather than Confucian, yet I've spent a fair amount of time trying to spread the good news about the Confucian Classics and Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian*, which are also marvelous texts that can be approached as literature, fiction, history, and scripture. Hence, I have every reason to think that outsiders can read culturally significant books closely, enthusiastically, and sympathetically.

It was interesting for me to watch the authors grapple with the expansive yet limiting categories of history and fiction, coming as they do from different backgrounds, and I appreciated those who shared personal experiences. Readers tend to have lifetime relationships with at least a few books, and a disproportionate number of those books are probably scriptural. Almost by definition, this will be true of the believers among the six authors—as I noted in *Understanding*, the Book of Mormon is more often reread than read—yet because my own book is about another book, it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle one's feelings about the two. That is to say, it's possible that I wrote a deficient monograph, but the Book of Mormon is nevertheless awe-inspiring; or my work may have been a brilliant study of sacred text that is simply not that compelling to outsiders.<sup>1</sup> If this set of six responses had been offered in the context of an actual book club, I would have enjoyed listening to further conversations

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1. The latter judgment was expressed by Alan Wolfe in an early online review for *Slate*, which began memorably with the observation, "To a nonbeliever, all religions perplex, but Mormonism perplexes absolutely." Even though Wolfe was, in the end, not persuaded by my arguments for the Book of Mormon's literary worth, I was delighted that he was willing to give the book another chance and reread it. [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2010/05/chloroform\\_in\\_print.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2010/05/chloroform_in_print.html).

among the participants, not just with me. So for fun, I'm going to pair them up and imagine how discussions might have gone.

Jana Riess came to my book from her perspective as an editor. As she read my attempts to differentiate the primary narrators of the Book of Mormon, she saw them as fellow spirits, working from behind the scenes to shape the narrative while keeping in mind their ultimate readers. A writer herself, she has a way with words (describing Captain Moroni as “quick to anger and slow to pray” is a lovely adaptation of a Book of Mormon expression), and her account of coming to see Nephi in a new, more sympathetic light—“his failures, rather than his many successes, won my heart”—mirrors my own experience. In many ways, Jana is my ideal reader, to use a technical narratological term. She gets what I'm doing. That is to say, she understands the game that I'm playing, and she is willing to play along, echoing some of my insights and adding her own.

I am fully aware that my approach is something of a game: it's an experiment in reading, an attempt to discover a new way of making sense of this peculiar text, an approach that takes into account its unique structure in a manner that I hope might engage both believers and outsiders. Indeed, there's a sort of playfulness in my imagining the inner lives of Book of Mormon characters, yet that doesn't mean that there are no rules for what I'm doing—I try to pay attention to clues in the text, and the narrators themselves tell us a great deal about their intentions and motivations. And it doesn't mean that I'm not taking the book seriously. The one place where Jana goes wrong is when she suggests that I've actually achieved “Alter's standard of holistic interpretation.” I will never be the sort of reader and scholar that Robert Alter is (though a guy can always dream, I suppose), yet I have been inspired by his interpretation of biblical writers as being engaged in “the most serious playfulness.”<sup>2</sup> The combination of piety and playfulness with regard to scripture is one of the things I most admire about Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 46; cited in *Understanding* at p. 267.

3. I first encountered the idea that piety and playfulness could go hand in hand in a very different context, Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*

Like Jana, Chris Thomas is also willing to play. Even though he is not Mormon himself, Chris has spent a lot of time reading the Book of Mormon closely, and he's willing to take it on its own terms, at least provisionally, in an effort to understand it from literary or theological perspectives. As I suspect may be true for many outsiders, he acknowledges that while the question of whether the book is historically true or false is "certainly an important issue," it's one that he personally has little interest in. (This has been my experience as well in studying the sacred texts of other religious communities.) I was a bit chastened by his difficulty in categorizing my methodology. Perhaps I could have used different terms or explained them more carefully, because although I have borrowed from biblical scholarship, the Book of Mormon is not exactly like the Bible. I felt that "narrative analysis" might be a reasonable compromise between the genres of fiction and history, but he points out, as an accomplished biblical exegete himself, that the technique of narrative criticism generally restricts its focus to what is actually in the text, whereas I was practicing something more akin to redaction criticism. In that approach, interpreters attempt to discern the motivations of authors who are making use of previous sources, as when New Testament scholars try to reconstruct how the author of Luke selected and adapted from both Mark and the hypothetical sayings-gospel Q.

The Book of Mormon, with its constant references to sources in various plates and records, might seem like a prime candidate for redaction criticism, but the problem is that everything is internal to the text itself, so the historical-critical method, which includes redaction criticism, doesn't quite work. On the other hand, the Nephite narrators are much more present and talkative than any narrators in the Bible—indeed they are themselves major characters—so that it is much easier to imagine their minds (and I think this is true regardless of whether they were actual historical figures or whether they are literary constructs that originated with Joseph Smith). The author of Luke-Acts speaks in his own voice in the prologue at Luke 1:1-4, and there are some cryptic uses

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(New York: Knopf, 1963), 27-33, and I was immediately intrigued since that sensibility is uncommon in Mormonism. And yes, Hofstadter came from a Jewish background.

of the pronoun *we* in passages from Acts 16–28, but this is nothing like the Book of Mormon. The books would be more comparable if the New Testament presented itself as edited and narrated by Paul, who regularly interrupted his account to explain why he chose some incidents, gospels, and letters over others. So if “narrative criticism” and “redaction criticism” aren’t quite right, perhaps I should have gone with “rhetorical criticism.” In any case, Chris’s comments are a useful reminder that the tools of biblical scholarship, while tremendously useful, cannot be naively applied to the Book of Mormon.

What I most appreciate about Chris’s essay, however, is that once he identifies a potential problem, he offers a solution. Instead of my focus on the narrators as characters, he proposes an approach he feels would be aligned with “a more traditional narrative analysis perspective.” He suggests a relatively restricted attention to the structure of the narrative, especially as outlined by phrasal markers such the three iterations of “And thus it is. Amen.” So rather than beginning with a clear sense of the narrators and then working through the text, as I do in *Understanding*, he recommends a mode of sequential reading that allows the narrators to gradually reveal themselves, with readers taking the editorial interruptions as they come and allowing their perceptions to be shaped as the narrative unfolds. In short, Chris wants to change the rules of my game, or at least suggest a different sequence of moves. I’m interested, especially since Chris demonstrates some of the insights that might come as “the reader develops a relationship with Mormon” (“albeit a literary one,” he hastens to add). Of course, this sort of approach is much easier with my *Reader’s Edition*, which includes headings that identify the major structural components of the text as well as passages where the narrators jump in to address readers directly, and I’m not sure that “And thus it is. Amen” can bear quite so much interpretive weight. It might be better to work with the structure provided by the original chapter breaks, which have the added advantage of continuing into 2 Nephi.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it’s easy for me to imagine Chris and Jana and I continuing these sorts of

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4. I disagree, however, with his suggestion that the two sets of plates mentioned in 1 Nephi 19 consisted of “prophecies of Christ” and “prophecies from Isaiah 48–49.”

conversations, and I think we would all agree with his enthusiasm for pluralism: “the literary and theological analysis of the Book of Mormon seems to be in its relative infancy in many ways and . . . much interpretive fruit can be borne by a variety of differing literary explorations.”

By contrast, Dan Peterson and Adam Stokes want to play a different, though not unrelated, game. Ironically, they do not end up on the same team. Both authors found my arguments for the distinct styles and personalities of the three major narrators persuasive, but rather than taking those points as evidence for my own thesis, “that the Book of Mormon is a much more interesting text—rewarding sustained critical attention—than has generally been acknowledged by either Mormons or non-Mormons,” they want to employ my observations in a different debate, one that concerns the authenticity of the text and the trustworthiness of Joseph Smith. Adam writes, “I came away even more convinced that the Book of Mormon is an actual translation of an ancient document and not a ‘tall tale’ invented by Joseph Smith.” Dan concludes, “In *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Hardy has also written one of the very best books of Mormon apologetics ever published.” Along the way, both make some valuable points. Dan’s suggestion that the Jaredite Chronicler might be a fourth narrative voice is interesting, though it’s hard to know how much of the book of Ether is Moroni’s paraphrase as opposed to direct quotations from his Jaredite sources. And Adam’s observation that scriptural interpretation takes place within religious communities is worth following up, especially if accompanied by a more careful analysis of the sometimes complicated relationships between the genres of literature and scripture (there are significant differences between the LDS Church and the Community of Christ on this matter, as well as differences among members of both denominations).

I’m happy that Adam’s and Dan’s faith was strengthened by my literary analysis. It matters to me that believers recognize the Book of Mormon that I’m describing as a text worthy of their faith and devotion. But at the same time, a book club is not a testimony meeting, and I’m wary

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It seems much more likely that Nephi was referring to the large and small plates foreshadowed in 1 Nephi 9.

that such talk might exclude outsiders. I want to hear what Chris and Liz have to say, and I'm happy for them to remain among the unconverted. In fact, I want to help them better understand the text in ways that make sense from non-Mormon or naturalistic perspectives. There's a reason that I included parallels from both historians and novelists in *Understanding*, and I quite consciously ended with Nabokov and the *Adi Granth* rather than Thucydides. Dan quotes some of the passages where I point out interpretations that support traditional LDS beliefs (and he adds a great many more statements from Joseph Smith and his associates concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon), but there are also times when I bring up points that may challenge such beliefs, as in the quotation he relegated to footnote 32. I would hesitate, for a number of reasons, to describe my approach as "fair and balanced," as Dan does—I'm pretty obviously a believer—but it's important to me to leave space for naturalistic explanations. It is reasonable to believe the Book of Mormon is a revealed translation of an ancient record, and it is also reasonable to see it as a product of the nineteenth century. Intelligent, good people are on both sides of those arguments.

There is even a case to be made that these binary alternatives may not be the best way to make sense of the text. Dan quoted a sentence from *Understanding* where I expanded the possibility to three: miraculously translated historical document, conscious fraud (perhaps pious in nature), or delusion (perhaps sincerely believed). He missed the footnote (*Understanding*, p. 279) where I raised yet another possibility—that the Book of Mormon may be fiction written by God and revealed to Joseph Smith—and I probably should have added "work of religious genius (perhaps inspired) akin to the Qur'an or hard-to-explain achievements by child prodigies in music or mathematics" and "pseudepigraphical writing adopted by God and made authoritative through divinely mandated canonization (as many Jews and Christians regard the books of Deuteronomy, Esther, Job, the Pastoral Epistles, and 2 Peter)." Although I am firmly in the "translation" camp myself, I sometimes wonder if we have any idea just what a translation done "by the power and gift of God" really entails; it may bear very little resemblance to ordinary, academic translations.

All this is to say that the historical-critical method has significant limitations when it comes to interpreting and understanding scripture, as has become more and more evident to biblical scholars over the last few decades. This doesn't mean that we can reject it out of hand and retreat to fideism—I love the Enlightenment and think that the world would be a better place if people paid much more attention to science, rational arguments, and empirical evidence—yet I'm not convinced that positivism is the measure of all things. At least this is what comes to mind when I contemplate how Dan and Adam share a belief in the divine origins of the Book of Mormon and nevertheless belong to different churches. The question of whether or not the book is true from a historical perspective may not ultimately be the most important thing we can take away from its study. It would be fascinating to listen to Dan and Adam talk through their differences as well as their agreements.

Where Adam and Dan share a deep concern with historicity, Amy Easton-Flake and Liz Fenton bring to my book a keen interest in literature. Most of Amy's essay touches on *Understanding* only lightly as she identifies narratological features of the Book of Mormon that she believes warrant more nuanced, sophisticated investigation. I think that I actually addressed a number of the topics she raises, and I'm a bit wary of her heavy reliance on Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*—not because it's a bad book, but because Book of Mormon narrative operates quite differently from the Gospel of John—but we are in complete agreement that *Understanding* is not “the definitive narrative analysis of the Book of Mormon.” Like Amy, I was hoping that my book would be a conversation starter, and I deliberately avoided technical, jargon-laden narratological analysis, in part because I wanted my work to be accessible to a broader audience, but also since I don't really feel qualified to take on such a task. Yet there is most certainly room for more formal studies of the Book of Mormon narratology that match, for example, those of Irene de Jong's on the Homeric epics.<sup>5</sup> One of

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5. Irene J. F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *Narrators and Focalizers: The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad*, 2nd ed. (London: Bristol Classics Press, 2004).

the most striking characteristics of the Book of Mormon, at least for me, is how its sophisticated narrative techniques seem at odds with the awkwardness of the diction.

Liz's literary expertise is evident in both her cogent analysis and her graceful writing. I've saved her essay for last since I found it to be the most rewarding and also the most challenging. She is interested in the Book of Mormon as an example of nineteenth-century American fiction, and it's an admirable thing to enter into a foreign world of belief far enough to have a scholarly conversation; religious texts can often be opaque or frustrating to those who are not looking for salvation therein. Yet in this case, to adopt her metaphor, she has come through the threshold bearing interpretive insights. Her essay was the one most thoroughly engaged with my book, and as she reviewed some of my ideas about narrators, chronological disjunctions, internal intertextuality, and biblical allusions, she was able to suggest alternatives or push my analysis further in useful ways. Her question about the relationship between familial histories and national histories opens up a promising line of inquiry, and I wish that I had written these sentences: "Nephi struggles with the problem of knowing how a story will end before it begins, and Mormon tries to make the past present in order to prophesy a coming future. Moroni's own reluctant narrative attempts to remedy one past with another, all while living in a destroyed present."

Liz is willing to travel with me quite a ways in my explorations of the Book of Mormon, but there's a limit; eventually she reaches a threshold that seems impassable: "While Hardy's approach allows him to generate important observations about the structure of the text, it also creates rhetorical space in which, for all his disavowals, he can talk about Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni as if they are historical figures. In the context of narrative theory, narrators are devices designed to achieve particular effects just like other narrative elements (perspective, narratee, author function, etc.)." Perhaps I can urge her to take just a couple more steps.

It seems to me that the narrators in the Book of Mormon are not quite like the other narrative elements she lists; rather, they are fully rounded, self-disclosing characters. She asserts that "narrators do not

have realizations,” but characters do, and readers trying to understand plots are often called upon to imagine characters “as thinking subjects driven by goals and motives.” The Book of Mormon is at times explicit about mental realizations; Sariah says “Now I know of a surety that the Lord has commanded my husband” (1 Nephi 5:8), and Amulek catches himself midthought for a correction: “I never have known much of the ways of the Lord, and his mysteries and marvelous power. I said I never had known much of these things; but behold, I mistake, for I have seen much of his mysteries and his marvelous power; yea, even in the preservation of the lives of this people” (Alma 10:5). The narrators similarly tell us directly about their inner lives, yet—as with other characters from throughout fiction—their intentions and understandings are also revealed through their actions, and within the framework of the Book of Mormon narrative, those actions include their writing and editorial endeavors.

To use an example from another idiosyncratic work, published one hundred years after Joseph Smith’s, I remember first picking up Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*—because I had heard that it was a classic—and being entirely mystified by its opening pages. Even though I was in college and a reasonably good reader, I had no idea what was going on. Only later, after I learned that the first chapter is narrated in a nonlinear, stream-of-consciousness style by the mentally disabled character Benjy, was I able to return to the novel and appreciate its remarkable strengths. I’m suggesting that the Book of Mormon, like *The Sound and the Fury*, can’t be fully understood without entering deeply into the minds of its narrator-characters, who not only tell stories, but are represented as being the authors of the account that we are reading. I hope that such an approach is not impossible for those who regard the book as a novel; at the same time, I think that believers can benefit from careful readings that pay much more attention to the nineteenth-century context of the Book of Mormon than I did in *Understanding*. I look forward to additional studies from historians and scholars of literature that start from the assumption that the book is religious fiction.

There was only one point where I felt that Liz had entirely missed the mark, and that is when she suggested that “his conflation of narrator and author functions actually allows Hardy to treat the book as a Mesoamerican artifact.” I have followed the geographical debates of Book of Mormon historicists from a distance, and while I believe the arguments for a Central American setting are probably stronger, I don’t primarily think of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni as Mesoamerican figures. There is very little in the Book of Mormon that correlates directly with locations, culture, or lifestyles from southern Mexico and Guatemala of two thousand years ago, and I tended to ignore all of that in *Understanding*; I was mostly interested in the world created by the text.

On the other hand, I fear that another of her observations was uncomfortably apt. She complained that my “voicing of nonbelievers’ potential explanations for the text’s various features often reads like parody.” Ouch. I can see why she might feel that way, but it was not my intention (though admittedly, I have spent less time trying to see the book through the eyes of outsiders than from a believing point of view). So in retrospect, I can see the glibness in my suggestion that Moroni’s portion of the book might be the result of “Joseph Smith’s literary exuberance and delight in creating new characters [leading] him to continue the story just a little longer.” I probably should have given that possibility more sustained consideration. I still think that there is a literary verve to the Book of Mormon that is difficult to contain, yet there is also a theological energy that can be attributed to Smith, and the book of Ether allowed him space to work out a few more ideas. Liz notes the repair of the fall implicit in the brother of Jared’s story, and I could have said more about the way the Jaredite account universalizes the Nephite experience as it replicates its major contours. Liz and I are never going to be in the same place religiously—as she observes, some thresholds cannot be crossed—but to the extent that we’re both interested in the Book of Mormon as literature, she can help me better understand how outside scholars, coming to the task as adult readers with professional skills, can make sense of a book that I have been reading my entire life.

I appreciate the opportunity for conversation extended by the editors of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. It's pleasant to think of *Understanding* as a book that offers common ground for dialogue among people whose opinions and backgrounds are different enough to make those discussions interesting, profitable, and a little unsettling for everyone involved. It used to be that the only people who wanted to talk about the Book of Mormon were Mormons and anti-Mormons. Now it appears that the conversation can be broadened to include scholars from secular academia. There is, however, another group of new, enthusiastic readers who might have been invited to the Book of Mormon Book Club, and even though I'm a little discomfited by the way their playfulness far exceeds their piety, they nevertheless have some engaging things to say. I'm thinking of professional authors like Jane Barnes and Avi Steinberg who see Joseph Smith as a kindred spirit and bring a writerly sensibility to his work.<sup>6</sup> (I hope they won't mind if I use their first names.)

Jane tells us that she had long been fascinated by Joseph Smith but was never able to make much headway with the Book of Mormon until she recognized its obsession with texts and realized that "the three different narrators—Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni—are also characters in the drama; though they live at different times and each is very individual, they agree on the prophetic essentials of Christ's coming." I would like to imagine that at some point she came across *Understanding*, but perhaps she is just a very gifted reader on her own. In any case, she is able to make observations that never would have occurred to me: "It's as if Thomas Pynchon had fabulated a work about the direction of modern religious literature by writing in the style of Milton's *Paradise Lost*." And at some length:

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6. Jane Barnes, *Falling in Love with Joseph Smith: My Search for the Real Prophet* (New York: Penguin, 2012), esp. 107–20; Avi Steinberg, *The Lost Book of Mormon: A Journey through the Mythic Lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Kansas City, Missouri* (New York: Doubleday, 2014). For what it's worth, Doubleday also published a Church-approved edition of the Book of Mormon itself in 2004.

The whole Book of Mormon is surprisingly the Declaration of Independence for scripture. Not only does it break Christ out of the Bible, a scary and liberating act for the living God, but it also understands the consequences. If the Bible needs to be supported by further scripture, then all sorts of prophets, all sorts of individuals will claim their scripture is the holy one. Joseph's scripture sees to the bottom of this crisis. Christ must be made anew in a world where his reign will be decided by the battle of the books.

Yet when she conjures up a scene where Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer meet Joseph Smith and help him with the plates, I start to better understand how Liz must feel when she is reading my book.<sup>7</sup>

For a while, Jane considered converting to Mormonism before deciding in the end that it wasn't for her. Avi, also a nonmember, was so enamored of the Book of Mormon that he devoted a year and a half to retracing its steps, from Jerusalem to Central America to the Hill Cumorah in upstate New York. Like Jane, he never mentions me explicitly, though some of his descriptions appear to echo themes from my book, as in his lovely evocation of Moroni's labors:

The only thing worse than writing his sad tale, it seems, would be finishing it. Maybe all those decades passed because Moroni just couldn't bring himself to complete the project. With his people gone, his sole purpose in life became finishing the book. But doing so would also mean acknowledging that the Nephites' story—his story—was truly over. In burying the plates, he was burying more than just the plates.<sup>8</sup>

Avi's profoundly interactive approach to the Book of Mormon, as fiction, allows him to see things in provocative ways that are new to me. So when he contemplates Joseph Smith's relationship with the Bible—"To read a single book that closely, and in this kind of enraptured way, is a radical way to read and, as a result, opens up radical

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7. Barnes, *Falling in Love with Joseph Smith*, 113, 118–19, 50–58.

8. Steinberg, *Lost Book of Mormon*, 173–74.

literary possibilities”—I think of Nephi reading the brass plates, and indeed reading himself into them. He continues:

Joseph appealed to me most because he seemed like a writer anyone could identify with but whose literary ambitions were fantastically peculiar. Unlike me, or anyone I knew, Joseph had set a fairly imposing goal for his first book: to have it stand next to the Bible. . . . Was it possible that Joseph simply carried the literary impulse to its logical extreme? . . . Did he lose himself in it? Did Joseph Smith’s life represent what happens if you’re really dedicated to literature, like, *really* dedicated? Did Joseph do this so we don’t have to?

It’s a fresh, charming way to envision Joseph Smith, even if I can’t adopt it wholeheartedly myself. At the same time, there are other observations that I have found directly useful, as when he points out that “Nephi and his descendants in the New World were farther from home than anyone in the Bible.” The theme of exile is a powerful driver of the Book of Mormon narrative, and one that I would like to investigate more thoroughly in future studies.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Avi’s conception of a book that draws its readers into its world, so much that their lives are transformed by it, is not that far from my next project. *Understanding* focused on the text as literature (or as literary history), but much more could be said about what it means to read the Book of Mormon *as scripture*. There are two sentences from the essays that keep coming back to me, and pushing me forward. The first is Dan’s assertion that “analyzing [the Book of Mormon’s] historiography doesn’t reach its doctrinal or hortatory core, let alone its significance as a witness of Christ.” That seems right to me; there is still much to be done in exploring the book’s theological implications. And a comment from Jana points toward the radical, destabilizing potential of the Book of Mormon, even if her exact words are a little off-center: “By making a close study of the complexity of the Book of Mormon (and, by extension, its creators), [Hardy] is also teaching us new ways to imagine God.” But I

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9. Steinberg, *Lost Book of Mormon*, 79–80, 168.

don't think that it's me; that's what the Book of Mormon itself does, if we as believers have ears to hear, or as outsiders, eyes to observe critically and empathetically.