

Ally Condie. *Matched. Crossed. Reached.*
The Matched Trilogy.

New York: Dutton Books, 2010–12.

Reviewed by William Morris

Ally Condie, a Latter-day Saint and graduate of Brigham Young University, is best known as the author of the Matched trilogy. These three books contain all the ingredients for a successful YA (young adult fiction) series: a plucky heroine, a love triangle, a dystopian setting. And a success it is: each volume has spent numerous weeks on various best-seller lists,¹ Disney has optioned the film rights to the trilogy, and numerous fan sites and social media groups are active online. If it were just those ingredients alone, the trilogy would not be worth noting amid the outpouring of YA novels (and YA novels by LDS authors) that has occurred in the past decade. What sets Condie's trilogy apart are its lyrical prose and the complex way it dramatizes the key YA themes of courtship, rebellion, and control, and, above all, the way it explores agency.

As *Matched* begins, a young woman named Cassia is on a train to City Hall to attend her Match Banquet, one of the few elaborate ceremonies allowed by the Society. Being matched in a couple is an honor, an entry into adulthood. The Match is decided by the Society, which “sorts” individuals based on their compatibility.

Formed in the wake of something known simply as the Warming, the Society decided that out-of-control technology and information overload led to the mistakes that caused the breakdown of the previous society, and so not only do they control spousal pairings, education and careers, and all the details of everyday life, they also have created a hypercorrelated, overly curated culture. As Cassia explains, “They

1. Christine Rappleye, “Utah Author Ally Condie’s ‘Reached’ on USA Today’s Best-sellers List,” *Deseret News*, November 29, 2012, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865567783/Utah-author-Ally-Condie-s-Reached-on-USA-Todays-best-sellers-list.html?pg=all>.

created commissions to choose the hundred best of everything: Hundred Songs, Hundred Paintings, Hundred Stories, Hundred Poems. The rest were eliminated. Gone forever. *For the best*, the Society said, and everyone believed because it made sense. *How can we appreciate anything fully when overwhelmed with too much?* (*Matched*, 29, emphasis in original).

Something rare happens the night of the Match Banquet. Cassia's Match turns out to be Xander, one of her best friends while growing up. She receives his "microcard," an electronic dossier that is prepared by the Society so that matched couples can get to know each other before they meet in person. Cassia waits to view it (because, after all, she already knows Xander so well). When she does, something strange happens: an image of Xander pops up, and he is confirmed as her Match, but then the process reboots, and her Match is re-presented to her. This time it is Ky, another local boy, but this one an orphan who was brought in from the Outer Provinces to live with his aunt and uncle. An official from the Society quickly arrives on the scene to correct the error and reassure Cassia that she is still matched with Xander. The official also reveals that Ky will never be matched because he is an "Aberration," a nondangerous anomaly in the system.

It is an elegant, obvious way to set up a prototypical YA love triangle, of course—the stiff, accessible, known Society boy and the passionate, forbidden, mysterious rebel. But more than that, the error cracks open the shell formed around Cassia (one that is brilliantly represented on the covers of the three novels) to reveal the unthinkable yet alluring notion that the Society may be wrong. Perhaps there is not a match, but a choice. If there is a choice about with whom one pairs, perhaps other choices should be available as well.

Cracks form throughout the first book and then on into *Crossed* and *Reached* as an attempted revolution comes to the world of the Society and, in its wake, an even greater danger that threatens revolutionaries and reactionaries alike. Cassia, Ky, and Xander are caught up in these events, and Condie weaves both the unfolding of their love triangle and their roles in the larger action with skill—each impacts the other. What is more, all of the themes and plot threads converge on, and, in the end, are embodied by Cassia, Ky, and Xander.

Whether it is the preexistent promised couples in *Added Upon* and *Saturday's Warrior* or *Twilight's* pheromonally fated Edward and Bella, Mormon drama and literature have often portrayed the inevitable couple. By contrast, as the *Matched* trilogy progresses, it becomes clear that both

Xander and Ky are worthy potential mates who genuinely love Cassia. Cassia's choice, then, is a true exercise of agency. It distills from her personality, feelings, desired future, and personal history rather than from the Society. And in order to make that choice, she needs to be attuned to art, nature, family, friends, and society (without the definite article).

In particular, attunement to art is a key element in the trilogy. Cassia inherits from her grandfather a noncorrelated poem: "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas. At first, simply the thrill of a forbidden work of art infects her life, but the poem takes on more and more meaning as the story progresses, and Cassia learns how to use the power of poetry and expression to change herself and the world around her.

The importance of poetry is reinforced by Condie's writing style. At one point some of the characters are navigating through a red rock slot canyon. One of the characters describes the sensation: "It's as though suddenly you are down close looking at the workings of your own body, watching your own blood run and listening to the sound of your heart beating it through" (*Crossed*, 119). The same could be said of the prose that, although simple in its sentence structure, flows more gracefully and beats more steadily than YA fiction often does and deploys more and richer imagery. The lyrical prose is sometimes in tension with the demands of descriptive world building that science fiction and fantasy readers have come to expect—Condie's attempt at technical detail ends up too abstract. However, the poetics is generally strong enough that the metaphor (and all science fiction and fantasy is ultimately metaphor) holds.

The Matched trilogy does not break major ground in its basic plot arcs and setting. It meets the expectations of its target audience. On the other hand, unlike other works in the genre, the dystopian setting has the aura of sociopolitical believability, even with the lack of pyrotechnic world building that likely hurts it with a portion of its readership. However, even if the basic framework may ring familiar, the strong characterization, lyrical prose, and sophisticated layering of theme and imagery combine to make this one of the stronger examples of its kind.

The success of the trilogy also highlights the fact that the sci-fi/fantasy genre is still an effective avenue for Mormon writers in interfacing with the world at large. The existential and philosophical underpinnings of Mormonism and those found in science fiction often mesh—constraint versus freedom, order versus agency, isolation versus community, family versus society. Such themes find a robust representation in Condie's series. While these motifs are not peculiar to Mormons alone,

Mormon perspectives on them often are, and this trilogy effectively clothes a distinctive Mormon worldview in an extended metaphor that can be universally understood.

That said, the delights of Condie's trilogy are, perhaps, even greater for the LDS reader in terms of theme and setting—which feel familiar throughout but also build to the conclusion of the third book, in which there is a moment that resonates not only back through the story but also deep into Mormon cultural memory.

William Morris is the founder of the Mormon literature and culture blog *A Motley Vision* (www.motleyvision.org) and the co-editor of the anthology *Monsters & Mormons*. His creative work has appeared in *Irreatum* and *Dialogue*.