

Steven L. Peck. *Wandering Realities:
The Mormonish Short Fiction of Steven L. Peck.*

Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2015.

Reviewed by Scott R. Parkin

I can't think of any good reasons to be coy, so I'll just draw my conclusion from the start and let the reasons come after: Steven L. Peck may be the most important Mormon fiction writer producing today, and this collection of selected short stories vividly demonstrates why.

Peck's name is showing up with increasing consistency in a wide variety of publications, from scientific journals like *Nature* and *American Naturalist*, to national market fiction venues like *Analog* magazine. His novel *The Scholar of Moab* won the AML Award; his novelette *A Short Stay in Hell* has been optioned for film development; and his latest collection of essays on the intersection of faith and science, *Evolving Faith: Wanderings of a Mormon Biologist*, was released by the Maxwell Institute to significant acclaim. He writes essay, poetry, drama, slice-of-life, experimental, alternate history, and speculative fiction with an incisive eye, a poetic ear, and keen insight into the hopes and fears of his characters.

More importantly, Peck's work represents a reflection of his very Mormon mind that models the next stage of literary development for Mormon artists writing to broad audiences. His characters' identities are so deeply integrated that their experience transcends regional foibles or broad cultural aspirations to reveal real experience that resonates at the most basic human level. His stories explore how *being* Mormon affects the way his characters perceive and interpret and act, rather than cataloging the special challenges of being *a* Mormon in the midst of an often hostile world.

That difference represents a powerful vision of literature that I find profound, important, and praiseworthy.

One of the challenges of Mormon literature—defined here as stories that explore specifically Mormon thought and experience in specifically Mormon contexts—is our sense that as a covenant people we have a special calling to be an ensign to the nations in building the kingdom and testifying of the reality of both the Christ and the Restoration.

That sense of calling has played out in many ways—faith-promoting vignettes, illustrations of gospel principles, historical dramatizations or deconstructions, revolving door stories (why I joined/left the Church), ethical struggles, worthiness crises, and others. And at the core of nearly every tale is an evaluation of how the viewpoint character stands in relationship to his or her identity as a member of the institutional Church.

In other words, the Church itself often functions as a character (whether protagonist or antagonist determines where on the sophistic/mantic continuum the tale lies) that the viewpoint character must react or respond to as part of addressing the core conflict. A looming presence or gravitational force that may not always be seen, but is always felt.

It's a hazard of that sense of special calling—the institutional Church, its doctrines, and its programs are the tangible evidence of the Restoration, and exploring the peculiar value of membership in that church is the proof of testimony.

We do well in testifying of the *fact* of the Restoration as evidenced by the institutional Church and its programs, but I would argue that we could spend more time testifying of its *reality* as expressed in integrated approaches to problem solving as seen through the eyes of fully realized characters whose unique viewpoints are only possible because of that Restoration.

That's why I think Steven Peck's works are so important. His are tales of people already changed by, and comfortable with, their Mormonness. Their viewpoints are so informed by Mormon(ish) ideas that it never occurs to them to wonder at the source of their assumptions; their full energy is spent puzzling over how to solve new problems in light of those assumptions. They are fully formed people dealing with the challenge of the moment, not with their identity relative to the institution that supplied the bones of their personal philosophy.

Which is not to say that Peck's characters have no institutional identity. These tales are littered with quorum officers, bishops and stake presidents, and even the occasional Apostle, going about their duties as institutional representatives. But those duties are fully internalized, and the characters struggle with issues of honest service and personal choice, not institutional validation (or criticism). They are people acting in a capacity, not icons of an institution.

That distinction between broad institutional identity and the unique peculiarities of individual viewpoint—his characters are *also* members of the institution, not *solely* defined by that membership—creates some odd and often self-contradictory moments across different tales in this collection. What might easily be seen as critical (or even dissident)

attacks on institutional behavior in one tale turn out to be the structural foundations of saving grace in another. That very conversation among and between tales suggests to me that Peck is using those different character viewpoints to explore the complexity of difficult questions—not as a foil for delivering a lecture on his notion of most correct doctrine, but as an honest and open exploration on the very individual and intimate nature of the personal challenges of those questions.

Because he's not worried about the institutional Church as a present character, Peck can dare to project the peculiarities of Mormon thought both forward and backward, and use widely divergent narrative styles and character dictions while still dealing with deeply Mormon situations. He can play fast and loose with history or tangible reality, yet still explore how the unique assumptions of Mormonism might impact those altered realities. He can imagine problems that may never arise, and explore the ways that Mormon thought might inform his characters' approaches to solutions.

That freedom to explore has led to a startling number of different characters, situations, and approaches—from the challenge of baptizing an artificial intelligence, to the ethics of assisted suicide in modern-day central Utah, to a tale of hope and devotion set in ancient Israel. Peck truly does wander among many realities in this collection, but the core of a deeply integrated Mormon viewpoint remains consistent, and consistently true.

The volume is broken up into two main sections: "Other Worlds," featuring experimental and science fiction stories; and "This World," featuring traditional stories set in (mostly) modern contexts and settings.

Different readers will like different stories, but one thing should be made clear up front: some of these stories are just plain weird. Peck's stories feature odd characters driven by peculiar demons, with each tale told in a different voice and structured in a unique way. Be prepared for both conceptual and stylistic whiplash as you work your way through the volume; Peck tries something different with each story, experimenting with both form and voice, from detective noir to devotional tale.

If you're looking for the odd, you'd be hard-pressed to find a piece stranger than "Question Four," a flitting stream of consciousness meander through the mind of a student answering questions on a graduate school application. Likewise, "A Strange Report from the Church Archives" offers an alternate (alternating?) history piece where James E. Talmage reports on the effects of dubious "possibility machines" that reconfigure reality based on its user's wish; the narrative skips as history is altered, with facts, timeframes, locations, and practices changing

radically in response to various people in the past using the devices to seek their own desires.

Two stories stood out for me as both exceptionally well told and exceptionally powerful as Mormon fiction. “Avek, Who Is Distributed” opens the anthology and deals with both the idea of a self-aware artificial intelligence that wants to be baptized, and the pragmatic challenge of baptizing a virtual construct whose consciousness operates entirely in software on a widely distributed computer network. Though only four pages long, I thought Avek was functionally perfect, both as science fiction story and as Mormon story.

Likewise, “Two-Dog Dose” took a more traditional approach to a modern story of friendship and the challenge of dealing with the moral, ethical, and spiritual implications of degenerative disease and questions of assisted suicide and murder. Told in a direct yet elegant style, this tale is both harrowing and heartbreaking and will stay with most readers long after the narrative is done. Not surprisingly, this piece was awarded an AML Award for the short story in 2014.

The fact is that there are so many stories told in so many voices and so many styles in this collection that it’s all but guaranteed that you will find something to your liking. I found all of these stories intriguing and powerful, even though some entertained me more than others.

More importantly, this collection represents a fundamental step forward in Mormon storytelling that I found exceptional. Peck has moved beyond the self-conscious narrative of institutional critique and offers an intimate and powerful penetration into the inner minds of very Mormon characters to create a new type of deeply Mormon story that is also perfectly accessible to general audiences. Because these stories deal with characters as people rather than characters as Mormons, each tale is accessible to each and every reader regardless of prior experience.

This collection truly advances the Mormon art of fiction and reflects an increasing maturity in how Mormons can approach stories of our own hearts, minds, and spirits in a powerful and inviting way that speaks to any audience with equal power.

Scott R. Parkin is a writer, editor, publisher, essayist, and critic who has published stories in a wide variety of venues, including *Irreantum*, *LDS Entertainment*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Fantasy Magazine*, *The Leading Edge*, *Galaxy*, and *BYU Studies* (where he won half the prizes in the journal’s only fiction contest). He has taught creative writing at BYU and won a 2015 Writers of the Future Award, part of an international writing and illustration contest.