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# **Building Bridges**

**How A Minority Culture Speaks To Itself And Others  
Through Historical Fiction.**

**Pamela June Reid**

**2006**



# Massey University

## Research Supervision Statement

Date: 23/2/06

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to state that the research carried out for the masters thesis/research report entitled

was completed by *Building Bridges: Analysing how a minority culture speaks to itself + others through historic fiction*  
in the School of *Social + Cultural Studies*.

Massey University, New Zealand, under my direct supervision. This thesis material has not been used for any other degree. I played the following part in the preparation of the thesis:

*I have overseen the research + development of this thesis.*

Thesis Supervisor: *Mary Paul*

This is to state that the research carried out for the abovenamed Masters thesis/research report is my own work and has not been used for any other degree.

Student: *Paula J. Reid*

# **Building Bridges**

How a minority culture speaks to itself and others through historical fiction.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in English  
at Massey University, Albany Campus,  
Auckland, New Zealand

**Pamela June Reid**

**2006**

## **Abstract**

This thesis analyses the role of historical fiction in the development of a minority culture with particular reference to how this genre enables the culture to speak to its own members and also to the wider community. Key issues which have created separatism are addressed and also how the sociality of the culture is portrayed. It studies how historical fiction writing, in combining historical data with fictional characters, presents a wealth of perspectives on significant events in the history of minority cultures.

An examination of four works of historical fiction, written by contemporary Latter-day Saint authors will evaluate their effectiveness in: cohering a minority social group, presenting key issues which have induced separatism, explaining a shared value system and spirituality, presenting current problems in a coded form and enhancing general community awareness of historical detail and appreciation of doctrinal and spiritual themes.

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## Introduction

### Why Historical Fiction?

Several years ago I read a series of historical novels entitled 'The Work and the Glory' written by Gerald Lund. The total of nine volumes depicted the story of the restoration of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as seen through the eyes of a fictional family – the Benjamin Steed family – from the early 1820's to the late 1840's.

Although I had always been interested in the factual history of the Latter-day Saint Church, this fictional series opened my eyes to the variety of individual struggles that a relatively misunderstood religious minority group had experienced. The author was able to present historical facts that I was already acquainted with, within the family and community context of the time, so that I could better visualise the personal torments and triumphs that could possibly have taken place.

I began to conduct more personal research into some of the events described within the novels and marvelled at how Lund had incorporated so many authentic details into a fictional story. I also found others who had read all or part of the series of *The Work and the Glory*, and their reactions were consistent with mine. All expressed that they had learned so much more historical detail, not only from the fictional text but also from the extensive footnotes that Lund provided to differentiate historical fact and fictional embellishment.

As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I then became enthused about researching and writing the history of the Latter-day Saint church in New Zealand. As



I had already successfully written and published several contemporary novels for both children and adults, I decided that this history should be presented as a series of historical fiction novels. I believed that such a series would be more palatable to the younger generation, reinforce the faith and belief of the older generations and provide an easier and more informative read for those in the broader community who were not Latter-day Saints.

My interest also led me into academic enquiry. I decided to research, as a possible thesis topic, the presence of and modes of portrayal of Latter-day Saint characterisation and beliefs within New Zealand fictional literature since the church was first established in 1850. I believed this would give me a better indication as to how to focus my own work. However, this initial research revealed that although there is a wealth of personal journal records and some thesis literature on the factual history of the church, there is a scarcity of fictional literature, particularly by Latter-day Saint authors. In fact, I was the only LDS writer to have attempted fiction!

I also, at this stage, felt it was important to contrast the depiction of the Latter-day Saints with other religious groups. I looked at some examples from Jewish, Catholic and Anglican writers and from minority groups including the Seventh Day Adventist and Brethren churches. In the process I found myself drawn to understanding how the minority groups expressed themselves within their own culture. For the most part, any literature within the culture was based on biographical accounts of spiritual experiences and expression of doctrine. Little emphasis was placed on fiction. An exception seemed to be the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which has internally produced published works of fiction relating to the culture since the late nineteenth century. There has also been a marked increase in the publication of fictional literature in the last twenty years. These have been

largely books written by Latter-day Saints for Latter-day Saints although an increasing number of Latter-day Saint authors have published in the general market, particularly in science fiction.

In conducting this research I also read a contemporary historical novel entitled 'Belief', published by Stephanie Johnson in 2000. Stephanie Johnson was writing fictionally but drawing on some personal and family history though she is not herself an LDS author. This novel chronicled a man's search for religious truth and details his involvement with the 'Mormon' church in New Zealand in the late nineteenth century. I was frustrated by numerous misrepresentations of basic Latter-day Saint beliefs and social practices. It occurred to me several times during the reading of the novel that if this was the only source of information for a reader then this would be their distorted perception of the culture. I once again determined to write my own books so that a more accurate representation would be available. In doing so, I realised that I was actually deciding to write these books as a form of response to a wider social issue - that of endeavouring to bridge gaps in cultural understanding.

I became even more convinced about the ability of historical fiction to fuel greater interest in history and also provide for increased understanding and respect between cultural groups and between generations. The course of my thesis began to take a different path. I decided to alter the field of my study to analyse works of historical fiction by a variety of contemporary Latter-day Saint authors, not only in New Zealand, in order to determine how effectively they presented their own culture to a relatively uninformed audience. I wanted to see if their work offered satisfactory explanations of basic beliefs and did it also serve to validate those people already within the culture. I also needed to determine how extensively they had

researched and how effectively they placed fictional characters within a believable historical context?

As I researched, I came to realise that in writing about the literary representations of the culture, an author needs to appreciate what factors have contributed most to the actual formation and evolution of the culture and how these elements can best be portrayed. This study led to the recognition of a series of factors that are common to many minority groups. Apart from obvious physical and racial similarities, the key unifying factors are usually based on faith in a common belief system, commitment to living the principles of the group, and the shared persecution and trauma that often results from this determination. Whereas I had been in danger of becoming too subjective about a personal religion, I now saw that the Latter-day Saint culture was actually highly representative of other minority cultures. Again the question arose as to how effectively these unifying elements of a minority culture were expressed through historical fiction.

I had also taught Creative Writing and Life History Writing for several years and had been made aware of the individual's need to record their personal trials and triumphs. Many were able to express these creatively and coherently but many, although they had the desire, were physically and emotionally unable to record them. In effect, the earlier traumas in their lives were what they most wanted to write about but were the very issues that prevented them writing. Originally, this realisation had prompted enrolment in postgraduate papers studying the expression of trauma in literature. I now began to see the relevance of these studies to my thesis topic, of how a minority can express this personal and collective trauma through literature.

In addition, I realised that in personal history writing, the historical accounts produced were still a very myopic representation of events. However, the more individuals I encountered who recorded their memoirs in my classes, the more I began to build a composite picture of similar periods of time from all their different perspectives. This created a greater appreciation within me for the 'bigger picture'. This further substantiated the theory that the successful contemporary historical novelist could weave a variety of historical accounts within the framework of a fictional community or family and thereby provide the reader with a potentially more readable and enlightening text than by reading (or not) numerous volumes of purely historical content.

Another element that I believe serves to heighten the reader-response to historical fiction is the inclusion of the 'romantic' element. This is not to suggest that classic historical fiction be grouped with bodice-bursting cliché novels. Rather, the intent is to recognise the basic elements of building and maintaining relationships within family and community. The author can then use the elements of love and romantic attraction as a catalyst to the weaving of the lives of individuals from different spheres. This process naturally provides the heightened conflict and opposition that is conducive to the literary success of a novel.

The convergence of these various fields of literary interest – of fiction writing, historical writing, personal history or life writing, romance writing and writing for children, has resulted in the formulation of this thesis topic with areas of investigation involving minority cultural groups but especially relating to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

## Research Parameters

Benedict Anderson is well known for linking the emergence of the 'imagined political community' of the nation with the novel's emergence as a dominant literary form. (*Imagined Communities*, 6. He argues that 'fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity that is the hallmark of modern nations.' (*The Spectre of Comparisons*, 334) Using The Church of Jesus Christ as a case study, this thesis then explores the related question of what role historical fiction, as a literary medium, plays in cohering a minority social group. It examines the works of historical fiction by four LDS writers, investigating how they actively assist in remembering a shared past, presenting current problems in a coded form and explaining and enhancing a shared value system or spirituality. It will also evaluate how texts can locate the cultural system within the boundaries and frameworks of a wider society.

General texts and contemporary journal articles on fiction and historical writing and sociological theories have provided the basis for critical analysis of historical fiction works by the four contemporary Latter-day Saint Authors. In addition to Benedict Anderson's perception of the imagined community as a basis for the evaluation of the Latter-day Saints as a minority culture, the work of Antze and Lambek (1996) provides for an analysis of the unifying effect of trauma and memory on first a personal then a shared community level. Then building on the role of trauma as a unifying element, Judith Herman (1997) suggests that the process for recovery from trauma is also a platform for evaluating how a minority culture can generate healing and growth, while Dori Laub's (1992) work on bearing witness as a vehicle for enhancing learning and progression further substantiates the role of literature in cohering a culture.

While these authors provide the broader sociological framework for analysis of a minority culture, there is also response literature by academics which include Teryl Givens' (2004) work on the challenge to mainstream religions from minority religious groups, specifically the Latter-day Saints. Michael Austin (1994) also provides a critical perception of Latter-day Saint literature and academic discourse and its effectiveness in portraying the culture.

Using these main texts as a basis for evaluation, this thesis analyses *Praise to the Man* by Gerald Lund (1991-2000), *A Vow to Keep* by Susan Evans McCloud (1988), *Light and Truth* by Darryl Harris (2003), and *A Child Named Faith* by Margaret Yorgason (1999).

- Gerald Lund writes for the adult Latter-day Saint market with a heavy emphasis on historical and doctrinal accuracy.
- Susan Evans McCloud writes historical romance involving Latter-day Saints in America and England during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and World War Two, thus focusing on the universality of the growth of the church.
- Darryl Harris is a genealogist who has self-published his family history in the form of an historical novel in an attempt to make it more readable by a general audience.
- Margaret Yorgason has written sociological texts and children's books for the general public with a focus on Latter-day Saint values and principles.

I selected these four works based on their applicability and to see how successfully each author presented a similar historical time frame in the slightly different sub-genres.

### **Thesis Structure**

This thesis comprises six chapters:

Chapter One introduces the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons or Latter-day Saints) as a case study for exemplifying the differentiating characteristics of a minority culture. It analyses the history of the culture and how shared beliefs and experiences have assisted in cohering the group nationally and internationally.

Chapter Two studies the evolution of the Latter-day Saint publishing industry with reference to how print media has facilitated the growth of the culture and especially the resulting development of historical fiction.

Chapter three presents the sociological concept of a minority culture and how it remains unified through a shared belief system and experiences of a traumatic nature.

Chapter Four analyses the works of four contemporary Latter-day Saint historical fiction writers and studies how they have explained the concept of faith with respect to a cultural adherence to key doctrinal issues which differentiate the Latter-day Saint culture.

Chapter Five then analyses how these authors have portrayed the basic principles of the Latter-day church as outlined in a primary statement of belief, the Articles of Faith.

Chapter Six evaluates the authors' use of other literary methods, including characterisation and use of historical data, in their presentation of historical fiction

The Conclusion summarises the effectiveness of each of the four authors in meeting the criteria outlined in the thesis abstract, involving bridging gaps in understanding between cultures outside of the Latter-day Saint community and between generations within the culture.