

Reading in Zion: Book Cultures of Mormon Youth, 1869–1890

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the feelings of generational anxiety in the Mormon community from 1869 to 1890 and how those feelings intersected with ideas about reading. During this time, older members of the Mormon community in Utah Territory feared how changes in and threats to Mormon society might negatively affect young people's beliefs, abilities, knowledge, and adherence to their parents' religion. Older Mormons recognized a potential ally and enemy in books, newspapers, and other reading materials, which they believed could dramatically shape young people for good or for ill depending on the quality of the material. This thesis argues these older Mormons borrowed many elements from other US literary cultures and repurposed them for distinctly Mormon ends, including achieving theosis (chapter 1), navigating changing dynamics in Mormon families (chapter 2), and building their utopic society, Zion (chapter 3). This research adds to the work of those scholars who have combined the history of Mormonism with book history. It incorporates the voices of everyday Mormons to bring into focus the entire ecosystem of reading for young Mormons by focusing not only on fiction but also on biography, scripture, "Church works," history, and other genres. It examines not only discourse but also institutionalized programs and actions, such as the 1888 MIA Course of Reading (chapter 4), that shaped Mormons' world of reading. Such an examination begins to sharpen our understanding of the relationship of print and religion in America and what reading meant to Mormons.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The years from 1869 to 1890 constituted a time of change and worry for the Mormon community in Utah Territory. The completion of the transcontinental railroad and the federal government's increasingly vehement attacks on Mormon polygamy, among other factors, led to worries among older Mormons about the future of their community. They particularly worried about the commitment of the upcoming generation of Mormons, who had not converted to the faith but had just been born into it. This thesis examines how those feelings of worry intersected with ideas about reading. Older Mormons recognized a potential ally in reading materials that could help young people become believing, productive members who would help ensure the future of their community. This thesis argues these older Mormons borrowed many elements from other US literary cultures and repurposed them for distinctly Mormon ends, including achieving theosis (chapter 1), navigating changing dynamics in Mormon families (chapter 2), and building their utopic society, Zion (chapter 3). It examines not only the rhetoric surrounding "good" or "bad" reading but also the institutionalized programs and actions, such as the 1888 MIA Course of Reading (chapter 4), that shaped Mormons' world of reading. Such an examination begins to sharpen our understanding of the relationship of print and religion in America and what reading meant to Mormons.

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Introduction

“With the near approach of the steam horse in the year 1869,” said Susa Young Gates, a prominent leader, writer, and editor in Utah, “came the forerunners of its presence. Books multiplied, but so also did saloons.”¹ Books and saloons. Such a statement encapsulates the hopes and fears that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (popularly known as Mormons) held regarding the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Her words begin to tell a story about an older generation’s fear and hope for a younger generation—the generation that represented the future of the community.

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, a time of flux, a time that seemed threatening, older members of the Mormon community in Utah feared how changes and threats might negatively affect young people: their beliefs, their use of time, their abilities, their knowledge, and their adherence to their parents’ religion. Older Mormons recognized a potential ally and enemy in books, newspapers, and other reading materials,² which could dramatically shape young people for good or for ill depending on the quality of the material. Through words, actions, and programs these older Mormons sought to prescribe and proscribe reading that would effect positive changes in the community’s young people. It is within this context that Mormons, young and old, sought to navigate the issues of the day, such as ideas about gender, family, marriage, womanhood, and manhood. They also hashed out ideas regarding self-improvement and discussed what the future of Zion—that is, Mormons’ utopic religious community—should look like.

¹ Susa Young Gates, *History of the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from November 1869 to June 1910* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1911), 3.

² Throughout this thesis, I use the word *books* to refer to other kinds of reading materials, such as papers. I do so to avoid the tedious repetition of saying *books, newspapers, and other reading materials* too frequently. In cases in which the specific form of reading material is pertinent, I have tried to be more specific in describing it.

This thesis will explore how reading intersected with these issues from 1869 (when the transcontinental railroad was completed) to 1890 (when the church discontinued the practice of polygamy). Each chapter will examine the individual, familial, and communal roles that young Mormon people were expected to fill. Because of the patriarchal nature of Mormon society, gender is an important component of the analysis. Gender designated the roles available to young men and young women, and gender norms shaped how they tried to fill them as women, men, wives, husbands, and parents.

The story this thesis relates reflects a larger cultural fear: that the future of Mormon families, of Zion as a community, was hanging in the balance due to external influences and even internal change. They particularly feared for the next generation, a generation that had been born in Utah. Unlike their parents, they had not had to examine the church as potential converts, read the Book of Mormon, and leave behind family and friends (and oftentimes their native countries) to join the Saints (how members of the church referred to themselves) in Zion, making sacrifices along the way. They simply had been born into the faith, so how could one gauge their spiritual dedication? In the midst of all of these significant changes, Utah Mormons were deeply anguished about what the future might hold and voiced the real and perceived threats they faced. Would they hold fast to the faith of their fathers and mothers? How could older generations prepare this newest generation to face these challenges? Would Zion cease to exist as they currently knew it, or would it exist at all? What would be the future of Mormon families?³

In examining these changes and challenges, this thesis will add to the work of those scholars who have combined the history of Mormonism with the history of the book. Other

³ Discussions about proper literature and reading sought to provide some answers to some of the questions related to marriage for Mormons, as Lisa Olsen Tait so magnificently addresses in her article “The 1890s Mormon Culture of Letters and the Post-Manifesto Marriage Crisis: A New Approach to Home Literature,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2013): 98–124.

scholars have largely been interested in the discourse of church leaders or prominent editors regarding fiction in the nineteenth century. This thesis tries to incorporate more voices of everyday Mormons, such as those who wrote letters to the *Woman's Exponent* or composed articles for their local manuscript newspaper. It attempts to bring into focus the entire ecosystem of reading for young Mormons by focusing not only on fiction but also on biography, scripture, "Church works," history, and other important genres discussed during this time period. It seeks to uncover the "interpretive community" that young Mormons inhabited—that is, the symbols, values, and meanings that Mormons used to teach readers how they were supposed to read.⁴ It also examines not only discourse but also institutionalized programs and actions that shaped Mormons' world of reading. Such an examination begins to sharpen our understanding of what reading meant to Mormons.

I argue that such an examination demonstrates that from 1869 to 1890 Mormons in Utah felt the future of Zion, their religious community, was existentially threatened. Not only did they face these external threats but they also worried about the youngest members of their community and their ability to become the kind of people necessary to sustain, protect, and grow Zion; in response, Mormons developed a culture of letters to help their youth navigate these changes and perceived crises. While many elements of this culture paralleled those of print cultures in the wider United States, Mormons repurposed these American elements for their own unique needs, needs that included distinctly Mormon theological, familial, and communal goals. They believed this culture could help individuals achieve theosis, navigate a family life influenced by polygamy, and build Zion. This Mormon culture of letters included researching and reading about science, history, foreign cultures, polygamy, the roles of men and women, and religion;

⁴ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

writing about what the author learned; and then submitting it to a manuscript newspaper or reading it aloud in Mutual Improvement Association meetings. This culture of letters included a significant amount of discourse surrounding reading habits and choices as well as institutional support through reading programs, manuscript newspapers, libraries, and so on. In short, Mormon leaders held a deep “faith in reading”⁵ and also feared reading—particularly in its ability to transform young people, hopefully into good wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, missionaries, leaders, and members of Zion. I believe this historical period shows that we need to start thinking about Mormons as a people of the books, all kinds of books, not only scripture or books about explicitly religious topics but also books about seemingly secular subjects that could serve a religious purpose. They became a people with faith and fear in all kinds of books and their power to transform people for good or ill.

Historical Context

A Time of Tension and Change

In 1847 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were pushed out again from their community, this time from Nauvoo, Illinois. They would leave the United States, settling in the Salt Lake Valley, which for a few short months was still part of Mexico. Over the next several decades, Mormons would live in relative isolation from the rest the US, establishing a self-sufficient economy, a government structure that blended civic and religious life, and the open practice of polygamy. But toward the latter half of the nineteenth century, these hallmarks of Mormon life came under increasing fire.

⁵ I draw the phrase “faith in reading” from David Paul Nord’s book *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Nord’s book focuses on religious publishers who believed in the power of reading to transform readers; his book inspired me to look for a similar belief in Mormonism. I discuss how my work fits with Nord’s book later in this introduction.

The completion of the transcontinental railroad was one factor that began to refashion Mormon life. As Gates's comment indicates, all manner of goods and people could now more easily enter Utah. Even Gates's positive spin about more books spilling into Utah was not necessarily a good thing according to some Mormons, for the influx of books made it even easier for books and papers of questionable character to come into the territory. The railroad also made it easier for non-Mormons to travel to Utah, find work there in mining or other industries, and ultimately settle down among the Mormons. In fact, Mormons had made up 98.8 percent of Utah's population in 1870 but constituted just 65.2 percent by 1884.⁶ As historian Leonard Arrington has written, "The Mormons wanted the railroad and the facilities it provided, but they recognized the threat it posed to their supremacy and were determined that it should not destroy the essential character of their society."⁷ The railroad was not the only threat to this supremacy. In the late 1860s and 1870s the Godbeite dissension movement and the rise of the critical Salt Lake Tribune also added to this challenge.⁸ The Godbeites began with William S. Godbe and Elias L. T. Harrison's opposition to Brigham Young's ideas about economic isolation and resistance to mining but soon became a wider movement of "liberals and intellectually inclined individuals who were also increasingly impatient with the church's ultraconservatism."⁹ This group would then found the Salt Lake Tribune, a paper that regularly challenged the church's views and positions. The Godbeites' "initial success suggested a hunger for more cultural diversity and openness" in Utah.¹⁰

⁶ Richard D. Poll et al., *Utah's History*, 692–93, quoted in Carol Cornwall Madsen, *Emmeline B. Wells: An Intimate History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017), 128n8.

⁷ Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 240.

⁸ Ronald W. Walker, "Growing Up in Early Utah: The Wasatch Literary Association, 1874–1878," *Brigham Young University Studies* 43, no. 1 (2004): 62.

⁹ Terry L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 94.

¹⁰ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 94.

It was also during the time period under examination, 1869–1890, that the federal government increasingly ramped up pressure against the most prominent and despised Mormon practice—polygamy. Polygamy, openly practiced since 1852 by Mormons, had become an important part of Mormon religious belief and Mormons’ identity as a “peculiar people.” Beginning in the 1850s, non-Mormon anti-polygamy novelists by the dozens began taking up the pen to use fiction as a weapon against the perceived horrors of polygamy.¹¹ But the pushback against polygamy was not just cultural but political. The Republican Party’s platform in 1856 condemned not only slavery but also polygamy as a relic of barbarism.¹² Throughout the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, Congress tried to pass increasingly aggressive legislation to put an end to the “Mormon problem.” These laws would lead to jailing over 1,300 members; taking away the rights of individuals practicing polygamy to vote, hold public office, and serve on a jury; disincorporating the church; seizing church properties not directly used for worship; and barring women from voting, a right Utah women had held since 1870. These laws truly threatened the political and economic power of the church, no doubt causing some apprehension among Mormons about the future of their marital system.¹³ Polygamy was eventually renounced in 1890.

This was also a period in which science and religion seemed at odds throughout America. The publication of books such as *Principles of Geology* and *Origin of Species* would reverberate throughout the country. The geologic age of the earth and evolution challenged literal biblical interpretations regarding the creation story of the earth of humankind. The church and its

¹¹ Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 29–30.

¹² “Republican Party Platform of 1856,” June 18, 1856, The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/republican-party-platform-1856>.

¹³ Ray Jay Davis, “Antipolygamy Legislation,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 1, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 52.

members also had to struggle with the implications of such discoveries. They mixed “both fundamentalism and radicalism, orthodox opinions and unexpected openness” as they explored these issues.¹⁴ These discoveries—and their proliferation in all kinds of printed material, making it easier for readers to encounter these ideas—likely caused some believers to wonder about the merits of revealed religion as a source of all truth.

Leonard Arrington attached the label “The Kingdom Threatened” to this general time period in Mormon history.¹⁵ It is within this unique historical context of change and upheaval that Mormons would continue to develop what Richard Brodhead would call their own “culture of letters.” A culture of letters is “a group with a distinct social character and historical situation” that provides literary material that “spoke to its cultural identity and social needs” and could help “[regulate] its social life.”¹⁶ This Mormon culture of letters had its root in the establishment of the church.

The Book in Mormon Culture

From Mormonism’s beginnings, books played a central role in its culture. One of the most important pieces of Mormonism’s founding was the publication of a new book of scripture, the Book of Mormon. The stories surrounding the book’s provenance included a young man named Joseph Smith receiving angelic visitations, discovering golden plates that had been hidden for centuries in a hill near his home in upstate New York, and translating the words written on the plates by the power of God. The result was a 588-page book, printed in 1830 in an initial print run of five thousand copies.¹⁷ The book’s internal message stressed the importance of books in

¹⁴ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 198, 197–200.

¹⁵ Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 233.

¹⁶ Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 5, 6.

¹⁷ David J. Whittaker, “‘That Most Important of All Books’: A Printing History of the Book of Mormon,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 105.

the “creation and survival” of religious communities,¹⁸ but more importantly, it served as an important sign to potential converts of God’s continued presence and revelations.¹⁹ Any potential convert needed to read the Book of Mormon and decide if it was of God before deciding to unite with the church. Terryl Givens has written that for potential Mormon converts, “in any assessment of Joseph’s prophetic stature, the first and greatest evidence in his favor was the Book of Mormon he so miraculously obtained and translated. His role and authority as prophet and seer rested firmly on the validity of those claims.”²⁰ Janiece Johnson has also convincingly argued the importance of the Book of Mormon in the conversion process for early Mormon converts.²¹ Thus, the pathway into the church, and acceptance of Smith’s role in leading that church, led through the pages of a book.

The Book of Mormon was not the only new scripture that Mormons believed in. They also believed in the many revelations Joseph Smith said he received from God, which were often first printed in church periodicals but eventually became canonized in a book of scripture called the Doctrine and Covenants. Several of these revelations also stressed the importance of books, reading, and learning. They included commands to “seek ye out of the best books, words of wisdom, seek Learning even by study, and also, by faith” and statements such as “The glory of God is intelligence.”²² Over his lifetime, Joseph Smith inaugurated the School of the Prophets (a

¹⁸ David J. Whittaker, “The Web of Print: Toward a History of the Book in Early Mormon Culture,” *Journal of Mormon History* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 10.

¹⁹ Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 64–65.

²⁰ Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 84.

²¹ Janiece Johnson, “Becoming a People of the Books: Toward an Understanding of Early Mormon Converts and the New Word of the Lord,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 27 (2018): 1–43.

²² “Revelation, 27–28 December 1832 [D&C 88:1–126],” p. 45, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 19, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-27-28-december-1832-dc-881-126/13>;

“Revelation Book 1,” p. 179, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 19, 2020,

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/167>; I have not tried to edit or standardize grammar, spelling, punctuation, or capitalization in the primary sources consulted for this thesis. In some cases I have made bracketed insertions for the sake of clarity or ease of reading. I have also deleted repeated words or other obvious typos or mistakes brought about through transcribing.

school largely for men, though some women did participate, to study scripture and theology), the church established a press, and he established a university in Nauvoo, Illinois.²³ Later, after church members fled to Utah, Brigham Young authorized one individual to spend \$5,000 from Congress to establish a territorial library.²⁴ Mormons thus had a long, foundational tradition that stressed the importance of books and learning. From 1869 to 1890 Mormon leaders would draw on this tradition in order to shape the future of the next generation and of “Zion,” that is, a community of one heart, mind, and purpose.

The Mormon Culture of Letters

This thesis will investigate how Mormon leaders and cultural arbiters harnessed this tradition of a culture of letters—with its emphasis on self-improvement, education, reading, and books as objects of conversion—during a time of flux to shape young people, the rising generation, into faithful, contributing members of Zion. These older Mormons felt it their duty to serve as cultural arbiters to young people, guiding them to the best books in a world exploding with print. Not every book was created equal, so care was needed in selecting which ones to read. Discussions about proper literary habits abounded in church-sponsored newspapers, manuscript newspapers, public speeches, and religious discourses from the pulpit.²⁵ Examining this world of reading for young Mormons during the territorial era of Utah furthers our understanding of the mental and intellectual world that young Mormons navigated. They read and wrote in a time when the subject of reading often appeared in the public discourse of church leaders or periodical editors. Debates about reading—about its dangers, about its benefits, and about who should be

²³ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 73–89.

²⁴ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 91.

²⁵ See Richard H. Cracroft, “‘Cows to Milk Instead of Novels to Read’: Brigham Young, Novel Reading, and Kingdom Building,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2001): 103–31.

able to do it, how they should do it, and what they should even read—often surface in societies during a time of flux. These debates reflect the anxieties or hopes people feel during a time of transition and demonstrate their thoughts about young people and the future of their community.²⁶ This thesis will specifically ask this question: What does the extensive discourse and the concrete actions related to instilling appropriate literary habits tell us about hopes, fears, and anxieties many Mormons experienced during this time period, and how they hoped to address them?

Mormon discourse about literary habits in Territorial Utah reflected broader cultural values, as well as fears of and hopes for the future. For instance, faced with the demands and rigors of trying to establish his group of followers—refugees who had been forced out of Illinois—in the arid landscape of Utah, Brigham Young decried novel reading because of its perceived ability to addict and distract readers. He feared that instead of helping to build up the Saints’ utopic vision of Zion, readers would while away hours reading novels instead.²⁷ The prescriptions and proscriptions made by Mormon leaders and cultural arbiters from 1869 to 1890 also occurred during a time when church members’ relative cultural independence from the rest of the country became increasingly threatened. In such an environment, stories like one from the *Juvenile Instructor*, in which one young man’s novel-reading habits led him to commit the “murder of two human beings” (one being his father), demonstrated a fear that outside cultural influences will bring “so much trouble to many a happy home” in an already unstable time.²⁸

²⁶ Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 128.

²⁷ Cracroft, “Cows to Milk,” 103, 121.

²⁸ Jakusee, “Novel Reading,” *Juvenile Instructor*, January 1, 1882, 7.

Individual, Familial, and Communal Roles

The organization of this thesis centers around the individual, familial, and communal roles that young Mormons were expected to fill. Mormons possessed a deep-held belief in the power of a book to transform people. They hoped that correct reading would fashion the next generation to become standard-bearers for their parents' faith and community. But young people's ability to do so required them to improve themselves, to become faithful spouses and parents, and to prepare to fill the roles of church leader, missionary, and other capacities as members of a Zion community. I acknowledge that organizing the thesis around these future and hopefully successful identities creates somewhat arbitrary distinctions between these roles. Mormons would have seen one's individual self-progression as intimately connected to their ability to become a good parent or spouse. Likewise, strong families and marriages were seen as integral for the well-being and success of the community. In short, the reader should keep in mind that these roles cannot be divorced so easily as I have done in my organization. Nevertheless, it will serve as a helpful way to conceptualize the hopes and fears attached to books, reading, and writing for Mormon young people.

Chapter 1 examines the Mormon quest for individual self-improvement through reading. Although self-improvement was a popular topic in nineteenth-century America, Mormons put their own spin on self-improvement. This distinction came from Mormon theology. In Mormon belief, humans embarked on a slow, gradual process of progression until, at some point far away in the cosmological future, they could become like God. Because Mormons connected books, learning, and studying with such progression, pages and printer's ink became the building blocks of godhood. Reading and study were not just mundane daily acts; instead, they could take on enormous personal, spiritual significance. Conversely, if good reading, such as scriptural or

biographical, could lead someone on such a path of self-improvement, bad reading, such as “trashy” novels, could halt growth or even lead to degeneration.

Chapter 2 discusses the connections between reading and fears and hopes regarding courtship, marriage, and parenthood. During the time period under examination, ideas about reading and marriage were both in flux, partly due to larger cultural shifts in the United States and also due to federal opposition to polygamy. As Mormons debated about reading, they were also discussing ideas about romantic love, gender, education, polygamy, and what it meant to be a good Mormon wife, husband, mother, and father. Reading served as a tool for Mormons to navigate these topics as they shifted.

Chapter 3 focuses on the variety of communal roles that young Mormons would be expected to fill in the not-too-distant future: missionaries, church leaders, community leaders, and members of Zion who would defend and build up the kingdom of God. To do such important work, young people would need to read, study, and prepare. Church leaders felt they needed to help young people do so. Through instruments such as Mutual Improvement Associations, they encouraged the creation of manuscript newspapers, instituted scripture-reading programs, and sought to regulate what books were available to young people in the association libraries. This chapter demonstrates that—although many modern-day individuals may think of reading as a personal and private activity—reading was a deeply communal action. As such, Mormons felt the consequences of bad or good reading would be felt by all of Zion. Zion’s future, in part, rested on reading. The stakes were high.

Chapter 4 is a more detailed case study of perhaps the most institutionalized effort to shape reading habits and tastes among young Mormons. It tells the story of the MIA Course of Reading that began in the winter of 1888. The course selected five books to be read by all the

young men and women of Zion and included supplemental reading material, discussions of the books in association meetings, and a final written examination to test how well the young people had learned the material. Around three thousand sets of the books were printed and distributed to readers. The case study exemplifies the themes of self-improvement, self-fashioning, gender (particularly power imbalances), and preparation for future roles as members of Zion. All these chapters ultimately contribute to our understanding of Mormons as a people of the books, as people with a faith in the power of reading to transform individuals and help them navigate the challenges their community faced.

More Voices, More Books

This thesis blends the history of Mormonism with the history of the book. By blending these fields, scholars can gain new insights about each. When one examines a history of reading among Utah Mormons, one also has to confront issues of power, gender, family, generational struggle, and race. The history of the book (and more specifically in this case the history of reading) can provide perspectives on these topics in Mormon history.

Of the scholarship written on the intersection of book history and the history of religion, David Paul Nord's work particularly has influenced this thesis. Nord coined the phrase "faith in reading" in his book of the same title. This phrase provides a framework for understanding how individuals tried to use books and reading to solve the problems they perceived in their society, particularly challenges related to religion. His book, as does this thesis, focuses on a group of religiously devoted people who worried about irreligiosity in the West. But as Nord writes, "Yet amid the worry and warning lay a millennial optimism, a steady faith in the power of the printed word and a clear-eyed confidence in the ability of benevolent men and women to bring that word

to those who needed it.”²⁹ This faith in the power of reading to bring about such change led these individuals to try to put Bibles as well as other religious tracts and books in the hands of every individual in the country.³⁰

There are many parallels between the history Nord narrates and the history of Mormons in Utah Territory. Both Mormons and the evangelicals Nord discusses worried about the explosion of printed material in the nineteenth century. The characters in Nord’s book “had no doubt that reading alone could save lives and souls,” but they also believed that “bad” reading could “destroy them.”³¹ They printed stories of young people who, apparently influenced by romantic novels and biographies of criminals, committed suicide or murder; they also worried about secular books that could lead believers to experience a crisis of faith.³² But they recognized that printing and reading might be harnessed for the more worthy goals of conversion and edification and therefore counter those who used the press to print what they deemed harmful.³³ Mormons had similar fears and solutions. So both Mormons and evangelicals dispatched door-to-door book peddlers to distribute books into the hands of as many readers as possible.³⁴ Both groups also accepted that for books to truly affect readers, they needed to be read correctly: “slowly and thoughtfully,” not cursorily. Therefore, they sought to teach readers how to read “properly.”³⁵ Their faith in reading led to significant actions.

Because nineteenth-century Mormons held similar ideas regarding the power of reading, I have taken up Nord’s framework for “faith in reading” in this thesis. I have done so to uncover

²⁹ Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 4.

³⁰ Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 5.

³¹ Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 114.

³² Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 113–18.

³³ Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 118–29.

³⁴ Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 97–111; see the discussion in chapter 4 about the MIA Course of Reading and its distribution.

³⁵ Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 124, 123–24.

what problems Mormons were trying to solve in the later years of the century and why and how they believed books and reading could help them navigate those same problems.

Within the realm of Mormon book history, scholars have mostly written about the publication history of important Mormon publications, such as the Book of Mormon, Mormon pamphlets, and a variety of Mormon periodicals, or about Mormon literary groups or other similar organizations.³⁶ Under the umbrella of book history falls the history of reading. There is relatively little written about the history of reading and writing in Territorial Utah, but those who have written on the topic (or a topic closely related to reading) have created insightful work. Many of them have written about Mormons' complicated (but often adversarial) relationship to fiction. Perhaps their interest stems from the glaring disparity between modern society's general acceptance of the virtues of fiction (among members of the church as well) and the contradictory attitude of many nineteenth-century church leaders.³⁷ These histories often analyze the discourse of individuals such as Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, George Q. Cannon, and other church leaders or newspaper editors, particularly the way these individuals sought to discourage the

³⁶ For examples of work done on important Mormon publications, see Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); David J. Whittaker, "'That Most Important of All Books': A Printing History of the Book of Mormon," *Mormon Historical Studies* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 101–34; David J. Whittaker, "Early Mormon Pamphleteering," *Journal of Mormon History* 4 (1977): 35–49; Lisa Olsen Tait, "'Young Woman's Journal': Gender and Generations in a Mormon Women's Magazine," *American Periodicals* 22, no. 1 (2012): 51–71; Sherilyn C. Bennion, "Sisters under the Skin: Utah's Mormon and Non-Mormon Women and Their Publications," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1993): 111–29; and Sherilyn Cox Bennion, "The *Woman's Exponent*: Forty-Two Years of Speaking for Women," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 222–39. For examples of articles on Mormon literary groups or similar organizations, see Ronald W. Walker, "Growing Up in Early Utah: The Wasatch Literary Association, 1874–1878," *BYU Studies* 43, no. 1 (2004): 61–79; and Suzanne M. Stauffer, "A Good Social Work: Women's Clubs, Libraries, and the Construction of a Secular Society in Utah, 1890–1920," *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 46, no. 2 (2011): 135–55. For a list of many more articles, dissertations, and theses about Mormon book history, see the appendix to David J. Whittaker's presidential address to the Mormon History Association: "The Web of Print: Toward a History of the Book in Early Mormon Culture," *Journal of Mormon History* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 1–41. *Women's Exponent*, and Whittaker's bibliography at back of presidential speech.

³⁷ Cracroft, "Cows to Milk," 103–4, 126.

reading of fiction or other material deemed inappropriate.³⁸ They have also looked at some of the prominent Utah male writers, like Nephi Anderson or B. H. Roberts, who began to write homegrown literature for a Mormon audience, literature that could be counted on to reflect Mormon values.³⁹ More recently, scholars have begun to examine the influential women who participated in this culture of writing and reading, such as Susa Young Gates, Hannah Tapfield King, and other prominent authors.⁴⁰

Other scholars have focused not only on this discourse about fiction by church leaders but also on the wider intellectual and artistic world of Mormon culture. One example is Terry L. Givens's comprehensive history of Mormon culture, *People of Paradox*. The major actors in Givens's history are generally prominent church leaders, writers, artists, and theologians. While Carol Cornwall Madsen's biography on Emmeline B. Wells also focuses on a prominent individual in the Mormon community, it provides a more internal view of Mormon intellectual life. While the biography does not exclusively focus on Wells's reading habits, using Wells's extensive diary collection, it does provide fascinating insights into what one Mormon woman read and how she made sense of it.⁴¹ Another important area scholars have focused on is Mormons' reception or reading experiences with sacred texts.⁴² Their research on the reading

³⁸ See Cracroft, "Cows to Milk Instead of Novels to Read," 103–31; Matthew Durrant and Neal E. Lambert, "From Foe to Friend: The Mormon Embrace of Fiction," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1982): 325–39.

³⁹ Richard H. Cracroft, "Nephi, Seer of Modern Times: The Home Literature Novels of Nephi Anderson," *Brigham Young University Studies* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 3–15.

⁴⁰ Tait, "The 1890s Mormon Culture of Letters," 98–124; Leonard Reed, "'As a Bird Sings': Hannah Tapfield King, Poetess and Pioneer," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2012): 101–18; and Susanna Morrill, *White Roses on the Floor of Heaven: Mormon Women's Popular Theology, 1880–1920* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴¹ Carol Cornwall Madsen, *Emmeline B. Wells: An Intimate History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017).

⁴² Grant Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 35–74; Noel B. Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 6–47; Janiece Johnson, "Becoming a People of the Books: Toward an Understanding of Early Mormon Converts and the New Word of the Lord," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 27 (2018): 1–43; and Susanna Morrill, "Women and the Book of Mormon: The Creation and Negotiation of a Latter-day Saint Tradition," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 82–105.

and use of scripture is crucial in understanding everyday believers' relationship to the books they esteemed most sacred, the best of the "best books."

One of the goals of this thesis is to understand what reading and books meant in Mormon culture. In summarizing the work of one scholar, book historian Janice Radway has succinctly described how scholars can uncover this meaning. She writes, "Readers are themselves trained by other readers, that is, by people with historically and culturally specific assumptions about what a text is, what it is useful for, about the nature of reading itself, and about the interpretive practices and procedures that constitute it."⁴³ This thesis seeks to develop more fully how that training—through discourse and through actions—took place among a specific generation of young Mormons. Building on the work of the scholars mentioned above, it will seek to understand what cultural assumptions Mormons had about texts, what they felt they were useful for, and what were the practices and procedures of reading they tried to instill in a new generation.

This thesis hopes to add to the historiography in a few ways. First, I want to expand our view of who participated in this discussion about reading's role in Zion. Many individuals talked about it, not just cultural arbiters, intellectual elites, high-ranking ecclesiastical leaders, or other prominent members of the community. Those who discussed reading included literary club attendees, local MIA leaders, local Sunday School teachers, anxious mothers who wrote letters to the editor of the *Woman's Exponent*, and those who composed articles for their local manuscript newspapers, and so on. Many people were interested in discussing the role of reading and books, and this more wide-spread discourse provides new insights about Mormons' relationships to books.

⁴³ Janice Radway, "Beyond Mary Bailey and Old Maid Librarians: Reimagining Readers and Rethinking Reading," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 35, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 292.

Second, I focus on more than just the rhetoric surrounding reading. This thesis, while also examining rhetoric, seeks to analyze the many actions of church leaders, parents, and young people that molded Zion's culture of reading. It seeks to explain the decisions to create manuscript newspapers, carefully cultivate MIA libraries, print thousands of books for a reading course, develop programs for scripture reading, and to choose or not choose to participate in all or any of these activities. These actions often sought to put the rhetoric into practice and show how actual events, not just words, shaped the reading world of young Mormons.

Third, the emphasis by scholars on exclusively fiction or scripture can skew our understanding of what Mormons' relationships to books were. The scholarship paints a picture of Mormons as only a scripture-reading people who, eventually and unevenly, began to accept certain kinds of fictional writing. But Mormon reading was not just a dichotomy between fiction and scripture. History, biography, science, and "Church works" (which included all kinds of religious books besides scripture) formed crucial parts of the reading ecosystem in nineteenth-century Utah. By examining all different kinds of books, we see more clearly how Mormons interacted with the world of books available to them and how they used them to navigate the changes they were undergoing.

The time period under examination, 1869 to 1890, can further clarify Mormons relationship to the book. I echo, with a slight twist, what Janiece Johnson has argued: we need to begin thinking of Mormons as a people of the books. There is a long history of identifying certain religious peoples as a "people of the book," that is, people who relied heavily upon a certain religious book. Protestants in the New World had long been known as a people of the book (the Bible), and therefore, Mormon converts already possessed an identity as people of the

book before they joined this new faith.⁴⁴ Johnson argues that early Mormon converts developed meaningful personal relationships with the Book of Mormon in tandem with the Bible, thus transitioning from “‘a people of the Book’ [solely the Bible] to a people of the Books [the Bible and the Book of Mormon].”⁴⁵ In the larger context of America, Paul C. Gutjahr demonstrates that from 1830 to 1880 religious publishing exploded as it fragmented along sectarian lines, causing Protestants who had once identified as a people of the book to become “a people of books upon books upon books.”⁴⁶ This was due to their belief in print’s power to “turn the unfaithful multitudes toward Christ.” Something similar was happening among Utah Mormons from 1869 to 1890, though with some important differences. Unlike the distinctly religious character of the publications Gutjahr discusses, Mormons believed in the power (for good or ill) of all kinds of books—including those that may seem secular—to help build up Zion. This thesis will not focus on the kinds of materials Mormons published as missionary tools for use outside of Utah; instead, it will focus on the effect of books in reading on the next generation of young Utah Mormons.

In short, this time period demonstrates that we should extend our thinking of Mormons as a people of the books. As Johnson argued, early Mormon converts were indeed a people of the books, reverencing the Bible and the Book of Mormon. But by 1890 they had most definitely become a people of the books in a more expanded sense. They not only looked to the Bible and Book of Mormon (or Doctrine and Covenants or any other canonized scripture) to help them navigate personal, familial, and community challenges; they also sought guidance from and

⁴⁴ Johnson, “Becoming a People of the Books,” 4.

⁴⁵ Johnson, “Becoming a People of the Books,” 5.

⁴⁶ Paul C. Gutjahr, “Diversification in American Religious Publishing,” in *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880*, vol. 3, *A History of the Book in America*, ed. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 203, 194–95.

placed their hope in books of all stripes. Some were religious and distinctly Mormon, but others were historical, biographical, scientific, or general literature. They placed just as much faith in these books to help young people as they did in scriptural texts.

It is important to understand Mormons' relationships to books and reading precisely because Mormonism is a uniquely American religion—one with an American book of scripture and American prophets—born during an era of print. This religious group's relationship to print culture, especially during the moment when its first generation sought to bequeath its values to the next generation, thus can provide greater insight into the connection between print and religion in nineteenth-century America.

Even more broadly, this story helps us understand how communities and individuals use books and reading to navigate times of change, particularly how cultural arbiters focus their efforts on young people. It also demonstrates how groups thought to be apart from “mainstream” culture repurpose elements from that culture for their own ends.

Sources

Because this thesis focuses so much on reading's role among young people, the next generation of Mormons, many of my sources relate in some way to the Mutual Improvement Associations (MIAs) that sought to shape the lives of Utah's youth. The story of these MIAs begins with the railroad in 1869. Worried about the young women of Utah and their dress, Brigham Young organized a retrenchment society to encourage them to reject the frivolities and extravagances of the world and instead to focus on plainness of dress and spiritual and intellectual improvement. Eventually, these organizations shifted their focus away from retrenchment and more to self-improvement.⁴⁷ In 1875 a similar organization was created for young men. There now existed a

⁴⁷ Gates, *History of the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association*, 3–4.

Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA) and a Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association (YLMIA). Although the level of central organization for the associations varied over time, the majority of work and decisions were made at the local level, known as wards.⁴⁸ These wards were ecclesiastic units akin to a parish and made it easy to create MIAs for each unit. There seems to have been no hard-and-fast rules regarding age limits for who could participate in association meetings, but generally members seemed to have been teenagers and young people in their twenties. Local officers were then drawn from this membership: a president and several counselors. These leaders directed the weekly association meetings. These meetings included songs, recitations, speeches, and reading aloud of manuscript newspapers.

Newspapers serve as some of the most valuable resources for this project. Some of the most important for this project are the *Woman’s Exponent* (1872–1914), the *Contributor* (1879–1896), and the *Young Women’s Journal* (1889–1929). The first was a periodical written by and for Mormon women; the second, a paper apparently targeted to both the young men and women of the MIAs (though it definitely focused more on the young men); and the third, a paper specifically for young women. These papers demonstrate the gendered nature of reading in Mormon culture. All of them also provide important information about the activities of YMMIAs and YLMIAs: minutes from their meetings, records of speeches and addresses, statistics about certain reading programs, and many other useful materials. In a similar vein, another paper is the *Juvenile Instructor*, begun in 1866 by a prominent leader in the church. As a didactic periodical for young people, this paper exemplifies the kind of reading in which church leaders hoped young people would participate. The newspaper’s writers at times explicitly suggested what and how

⁴⁸ Mark E. Hurst and Charles E. Mitchener, “Young Men,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel Ludlow, updated March 28, 2008, https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Young_Men.

young people should read. All of these papers also printed some degree of historical narratives or didactic fiction that sought to inculcate good reading habits.

Contemporary books also serve as an important source. First, thanks to a tradition of authors addressing their imagined audience in the preface, the prefaces to some of the books discussed in this thesis provide insight into what message the author intended to communicate and to whom. Second, books as objects can reveal much to scholars. By examining the binding, design, and other physical characteristics of certain books, we learn more about the significance of books as a cultural object for Mormons. Such an examination will be particularly important in the discussion in chapter 4 about the MIA Course of Reading.

Another important source will be manuscript newspapers. Manuscript newspapers—that is, handwritten newspapers—were ubiquitous in Territorial Utah. They usually flourished in conjunction with local YMMIAs and YLMIAs, as MIA leaders often encouraged local MIAs to begin their own.⁴⁹ They provided young people an opportunity to read, research, write, and publicly present about a given topic. These writers touched on all kinds of subjects: proper reading habits, women’s suffrage, race, relations with Native peoples, polygamy, history, biography, and religion. In 1890 the YMMIA reported 837 manuscript papers in operation; the YLMIA, 240.⁵⁰ However, only a couple dozen are still extant. When names of individual writers can be determined from papers, census data provides information about age, occupation, sex, and family status.

⁴⁹ “Prospectus of the Contributor, a Monthly Magazine; Representing the Young Men’s and Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Associations of the Latter-day Saints,” *Contributor*, October 1879, back cover.

⁵⁰ “Statistical Report of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Associations for the Year Ending May 31st, 1890,” *Contributor*, August 1890, 400; “Condensed Report of Y. L. M. I. A. for the 1/2 Year, Ending April, 1890,” *Young Woman’s Journal*, May 1890, 270.

Manuscript newspapers are an important source for two reasons. First, their very existence, and the fact that they were so ubiquitous, tells us much about Utah Mormons' culture of reading and writing. These papers served as a specific training ground for young Mormons about what constituted proper reading. These papers could direct their reading and studies. Writing about a given topic, say, about Joan of Arc, required careful study, the antithesis of the "light reading" or "cursory reading" that so many Mormon cultural arbiters deplored. Such an outlet shaped their reading habits while also developing skills in writing. In short, for many Mormons, correct reading meant dedicated study with the purpose of sharing the information gleaned through writing or public speaking. Mormon leaders felt these skills would be important for young Mormons when they one day filled leadership capacities in Zion. For example, as Jennifer Reeder has written, in their own manuscript newspapers young women mimicked the kinds of things their mothers wrote about in the *Woman's Exponent*.⁵¹ Second, they provide the words of young people themselves as they wrestle with these expectations and changes. Reeder has pointed out how these papers "render valuable information about technology, community identity, and female agency," as well as, specifically, young Mormon women's experience "in the newly developing transitional period of adolescence."⁵² While these papers do show young people exercising their agency—such as by counseling other young people, exploring their own ideas, and finding a place to express their voice—this agency is still limited. That these papers were read aloud during MIA meetings perhaps made it difficult for some writers to express their true feelings on a given topic, even if they could submit their contribution under a pen name. It can therefore be difficult to discern when authors are expressing their true feelings or are trying

⁵¹ Jennifer Reeder, "Making an (In)Delible Mark: Nineteenth-Century Mormon Girls and Their Manuscript Newspapers," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (2017): 274.

⁵² Reeder, "Making an (In)Delible Mark," 277.

to parrot what they have heard adults (parents or church leaders) say. However, even if young people were merely parroting, manuscript papers provide important insights into the kinds of messages that young Mormons were encouraged to internalize.

Several other sources provide important details. Select diaries, letters, and other personal writings provide the thought processes of Mormons as they navigated this world of reading and the reactions they had to what they did read. One of the limitations, however, is how dispersed these references are. Casting a wide enough net to find all of these instances of private reading is infeasible for this project. I have searched out letters and diaries from people I thought likely to have recorded their thoughts about reading and writing, but these sources are limited in comparison to the host of other sources at my disposal. Other sources such as the minutes of literary societies, library catalogs, and MIA circulars will also shed light on the world of reading young Mormons navigated.

Access to Education and Reading Materials

Education and Literacy Levels

In Utah Territory, Mormons held a relatively progressive attitude toward education for men and women (even if that attitude largely stressed more “useful” or “pragmatic” knowledge). For example, “in 1870, Utah children attended school at a higher rate than those in New York, Pennsylvania, or Massachusetts.”⁵³ Brigham Young also instituted about two dozen Mormon academies throughout the Intermountain West to educate high school–age students. Such a dedication to education meant that, in 1880, the literacy rate in Utah reached 95 percent (the rest of the country came in at 87 percent), which landed Utah’s rate “ahead of thirty-four states and

⁵³ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 99.

territories.”⁵⁴ As for women’s education, in 1868, 50 percent of the students at the University of Deseret (in Utah Territory) were women. Brigham Young also encouraged women to go to schools in the eastern states to earn medical degrees, and by the end of the century “more female American medical students hailed from Utah than from any other state in the union.”⁵⁵ When compared to the rest of the country, Utah was relatively progressive regarding ideas about education and had a fairly educated and highly literate population.

Libraries

First, it is important to provide some information on how Mormons accessed reading materials during this time period. There were several different ways that they could do so. In 1852 Mormons established a Territorial Library. In 1869 the Legislature of Utah Territory asked for more money to increase the size of the library. Part of the reason they felt they needed more books was that “many of the best volumes, through constant reference, are in a dilapidated condition or worn out, and during the 18 years which have elapsed since said appropriation was expended, many standard works on almost every branch of knowledge have been published, which are necessary for reference, and the want of which is greatly felt.”⁵⁶ Here was an admission that Utahans had read prodigiously, wanted to read more, and lacked the necessary books to aid in their continued progression. Other kinds of libraries existed as well, such as the Manti Library Association, a subscription library that listed about 160 books in its catalog.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 99.

⁵⁵ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 99, 98–99.

⁵⁶ Territorial Library, Memorial of the Legislature of Utah Territory Asking for an Appropriation to Increase the Territorial Library, Washington, DC, GPO, 1969, AC 901 .A1 no. 3317, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT (hereafter cited as LTPSC).

⁵⁷ Manti Library Association Record Book, MSS 2325, box 1, folder 6, LTPSC.

MIA Libraries

Mutual Improvement Association libraries were an important way for young people to access books. Sometimes these libraries would be shared by both the local YLMIA and the YMMIA, especially in smaller towns, like Rockville, Utah, where the young women “united with the young men in donating for a library, consisting of about thirty volumes suited generally to our wants.”⁵⁸ But each local YLMIA or YMMIA might have its own library as well, especially in more populous areas. As one example, the catalog for a YMMIA library in Kaysville listed around ninety-five books.⁵⁹ In 1889 the Contributor reported that YMMIA (perhaps there was some overlap with YLMIA) libraries numbered 181, which included 9,747 books valued at around \$11,470.61, no small sum.⁶⁰ The Young Woman’s Journal reported in 1890 that YLMIA libraries held a total of 3,141 books.⁶¹ Special deals might even be offered to help stock an MIA library. The Contributor offered premiums to YMMIAs on library sets, providing three different options: option one offered fifty books for \$72.50, including The Story of the Nations series, Stories for Boys, and Life of Columbus; option two, thirty books for \$47.00, including Story of the Uncivilized Races; and option three, twenty volumes for \$30.00, which just included The Story of the Nations. The Contributor encouraged associations to canvas subscriptions not only from association members but also from other ward members, who presumably could use the books themselves or who just wanted to support young people reading.⁶² People also could have accessed books through Sunday School libraries or institute libraries.⁶³

⁵⁸ Henrietta Stout, “Y. L. M. I. A. Report,” *Woman’s Exponent*, December 15, 1878, 106.

⁵⁹ YMMIA library catalogue, Kaysville, microfilm, Pq M201 K23c 1, Church History Library, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as CHL).

⁶⁰ “Statistical Report of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Associations for the Year Ending May 31st, 1889,” *Contributor*, August 1889, 400.

⁶¹ “Condensed Report of Y. L. M. I. A. for the 1/2 Year, Ending April 1890,” *Young Woman’s Journal*, May 1890, 270.

⁶² “The Contributor Premiums,” *Contributor*, November 1888, 42.

⁶³ Salt Lake City 20th Ward Young Men’s Institute Minutes Book, p. 53, 1873–1883, box 1, folder 2, VMSS 789, LTPSC; Farmington Institute record, November 5, 1878, November 1878–March 1880, LR 2816 27, CHL.

Bookstores

There were several bookstores throughout the Territory where people could buy books. In 1899 Salt Lake City bookstore Callahan's "Old Book" Store sold standard Mormon books, such as Parley P. Pratt's *Voice of Warning*, but also had a whole section of books devoted to "Old Mormon and Anti-Mormon Publications," as well as Catholic books and books on miscellaneous topics.⁶⁴ The Deseret News Office, also based in Salt Lake, sold church books as well and would mail them to any part of the United States. People could buy affordable church books such as *Key to the Science of Technology* for just fifty cents, any book from the *Juvenile Instructor's* faith-promoting series for a quarter, and *The Heroines of Mormondom and Why We Practice Plural Marriage* for twenty-five and twenty cents respectively.⁶⁵ George Q. Cannon, a prominent church leader and editor of the *Juvenile Instructor*, also sold similar books and for a similar price.⁶⁶ Other stores sold the newest issues of popular Eastern periodicals like Harper's, Scribner's, the *North American Review*, and *Popular Science*.⁶⁷ In 1869 the Salt Lake City directory listed five booksellers and publishers and five newspapers, periodicals, etc.⁶⁸ By 1890–91 the directory listed six daily papers, ten semiweekly, seven semimonthly, and seven monthly. It also listed eight booksellers and twenty-two book and job printers.⁶⁹ Salt Lake thus served as a hub of book-related business in Utah Territory; books could perhaps more easily circulate from Salt Lake to the rest of the territory. But people could also directly buy from other Eastern

⁶⁴ *A Catalogue of New and Second Hand Books* (Salt Lake City: Callahan's "Old Book" Store, 1899), Callahan's Old Book Store, P M201 C156c, microfilm, CHL.

⁶⁵ *Catalog of Publications of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Office, 1884), P M201 D4512c 1884, CHL.

⁶⁶ *Catalogue of Books and Stationery for Sale at the Juvenile Instructor Office* (Salt Lake City: Geo. Q. Cannon & Sons, 1895), P M201 G348c 1895, CHL.

⁶⁷ "Publications Received," *Contributor*, March 1880, 144.

⁶⁸ E. L. Sloan, comp., *The Salt Lake City Directory and Business Guide for 1869* (Salt Lake City: E. L. Sloan, 1869), SLC directory E 154.5 .C57x reel 1, microfilm, Harold B. Lee Library, Provo, UT (hereafter cited as HBLL).

⁶⁹ *R. L. Polk and Co.'s Salt Lake City Directory 1891–2* (Salt Lake City: R. L. Polk & Co., Publishers, 1891), SLC directory E 151.5 .C57x reel 4, microfilm, HBLL.

booksellers thanks to an increasingly national book distribution system.⁷⁰ With limited funds for the purchase of reading material, families and individuals sometimes had to decide between Eastern- and Utah-based books and papers, and some chose the former, much to the horror of others.⁷¹

Lending

Mormons, just as other Americans, often lent books and periodicals to family or friends. Doing so could keep down costs for many readers. It also lent a social aspect to reading, creating networks of individuals who recommend and lent books to one another. Returning books or periodicals to the owner could also provide an opportunity to discuss the work. Annie Wells Canon, born in 1859 in Utah, would later reminisce how Hannah T. King (1808–1888), a prominent Mormon poet, lent her prized copies of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and *Last Days of a Condemned Man*, including a letter she had received from Victor Hugo, when Canon was in her youth.⁷²

Finally, I must address my own positionality within this story. As a Mormon who loves books and believes in their importance, I have biases that no doubt shaped this narrative (something that affects all historical narratives). In some ways, this research has been an attempt for me to also understand my religious culture’s and my own relationship with printed words. To try to remain as objective as possible, I have tried to keep in mind these words about readers: “Readers are themselves trained by other readers, that is, by people with historically and culturally specific

⁷⁰ Michael Winship, “Distribution and the Trade,” in *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880*, vol. 3, *A History of the Book in America*, ed. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 117–130.

⁷¹ Ida, “An Incident,” *Woman’s Exponent*, December 15, 1898, 74.

⁷² Annie Wells Cannon, “Books as I know Them,” [1940?] MSS 2307, box 2, p. 3, LTPSC.

assumptions about what a text is, what it is useful for, about the nature of reading itself, and about the interpretive practices and procedures that constitute it.”⁷³ My own modern ideas about books and reading were not necessarily reflected by these people who lived over a century ago, so I have tried, in examining many sources, to let these residents of the nineteenth century “train” me about what reading and books meant to them. I have also sought to be balanced in my conclusions. Despite my belief in the value of reading, this story is not about the Whiggish progress and ever-uplifting power of reading and literacy. While this thesis does seek to show why nineteenth-century Mormons thought making more young Mormons into the right kind of readers was crucial, it also hopes to reveal the complexity of the Mormon culture of letters and its complicated relationship with institutional power, particularly the gendered ways in which that institutional power operated. Despite the personal circumstances that motivated this inquiry, I believe that this narrative can reveal much to an audience beyond myself. It has much to teach us about how institutionally supported reading shapes (or does not shape) culture, how people use books to navigate change, how religion interacts with print in America, how smaller groups take elements from a dominant culture and repurpose them for their own ends, and how people seek to create their vision of their future by reading.

⁷³ Janice Radway, “Beyond Mary Bailey and Old Maid Librarians: Reimagining Readers and Rethinking Reading,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 35, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 292.

Chapter 1: “We May Improve Ourselves . . . and Gain Many Steps towards Everlasting Life”: Becoming Exalted Beings

Much of this thesis focuses on the social role of reading in Mormon culture from 1869 to 1890. It examines how books and reading interacted with larger societal questions about marriage and gender, about expectations for young people, and about the future of the Mormon Zion. But before examining the social role of reading, we need to understand more about an individual’s relationship to reading and books because, ultimately, individuals composed the Mormon community. Therefore, this chapter will explore Mormon ideas about individual self-improvement and progression. It will investigate how Mormons defined “self-improvement” and what was particularly “Mormon” about their approach to self-improvement. It will also help explain why Mormons placed such an emphasis on self-improvement. Ultimately, ideas about individual reading laid a foundation for the relationship between reading and Mormon society as a whole.

In this chapter I argue that Mormons espoused theological ideas that humankind could become like God and, therefore, developed a literary culture steeped in ideas about self-improvement. This culture particularly emphasized scriptural and biographical reading, encouraged youth to write about what they read, remained deeply ambivalent regarding fiction, and taught young people how to best take advantage of what little time they had for reading. Only by following these prescriptions could individual believers reach their fullest potential.

Becoming Like God

An important part of Mormon literary tradition was self-improvement, and reading and writing were crucial components of self-improvement in the wider nineteenth-century United States. The Mormon culture of self-improvement shared many characteristics with other cultures throughout

the United States. Mormons and other Americans believed in the power of books as instruments of self-improvement.⁷⁴ They both felt that books cultivated character;⁷⁵ therefore, books and self-improvement were crucial in helping people “lead useful and socially meaningful lives” and to contribute to “the betterment of the society as a whole,” which led to a preference for books they deemed as “useful.”⁷⁶ They also felt books might better society by providing a constructive alternative for young men, who might be tempted by saloons, brothels, or any other morally questionable activity.⁷⁷ Also, like many other Christian groups, Mormons believed that one of the ends of reading should be “conversion and a life of Christian practice.”⁷⁸ Mormons and other Americans alike also believed that for these positive effects to be realized, reading needed to be carried out in a certain way. Mormon and American cultural arbiters encouraged actively engaged, methodically planned reading, emphasizing reflection and meditation on whatever the reader engaged with. These arbiters condemned readers who quickly swallowed a book whole or flitted from one piece of reading material to another without pausing to ponder.⁷⁹

If many Americans and Mormons held a belief in the power of books and education to do good, they also worried about the problems that wrong reading (whether in matter or manner) or a lack of reading could create, such as poor taste, criminality, and other socially condemned behavior.⁸⁰ In fact, many people often associated incorrect reading with the negative

⁷⁴ Frank Felsenstein and James J. Connolly, *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 95; Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 135; Barbara Sicherman, “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,” in *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880*, vol. 3, *History of the Book in America*, ed. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 283.

⁷⁵ Sicherman, “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,” 286.

⁷⁶ Felsenstein and Connolly, *What Middletown Read*, 96; Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 135, 140.

⁷⁷ Felsenstein and Connolly, *What Middletown Read*, 60.

⁷⁸ Sicherman, “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,” 284.

⁷⁹ Christine Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late-Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 62; Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 132.

⁸⁰ Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border*, 35–36; Sicherman, “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,” 283, 84–85.

consequences of drinking.⁸¹ Also, both Americans and Mormons viewed self-improvement in gendered terms. They characterized serious study and character-building reading as manly, while passive reading was feminine.⁸²

Champions of self-improvement in antebellum America advocated (as did many Mormon cultural arbiters) for acquiring an “almost encyclopedic sense of useful knowledge” and were ambivalent about fiction’s ability to improve individuals’ characters.⁸³ Ronald J. Zboray has written about this self-culture movement and particularly how it related to reading. He writes: “The very notion of self-culture suggested that the end result of whatever activity an individual engaged in had to be knowledge, i.e., useful information about the quickly changing world of antebellum America.”⁸⁴ Self-culture was a way for Americans to build up an eclectic array of knowledge and skills that might allow them to cope with the economic changes occurring in America, perhaps providing them jobs in heretofore-unthought-of opportunities. Similarly, for Mormons, although one impetus to self-improvement related to becoming like God, it was also about how to become useful in building up the kingdom of God. (This will be further addressed in chapter 3.) Not only was America undergoing change at this time but so was Mormon Utah, and it was not clear what information, knowledge, or skills youth would need to continue to build Zion in the coming years.

Ultimately, Mormon views of self-improvement were largely the same as those of the rest of the country, despite Mormons often casting the rest of the country as representing the “world” (that is, a society that fundamentally opposed God’s commandments and people). They could not

⁸¹ Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 137; David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 116.

⁸² Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 139.

⁸³ Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 129–131.

⁸⁴ Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 131.

so easily divorce their ideas about self-improvement from the culture that so many of them had grown up in. Their culture of self-improvement did differ in some ways, however. For example, historian Isabelle Lehuu cites the example of Charles Finney, a contemporary of Joseph Smith, to demonstrate how, for many evangelical Christians, “evangelical piety thus rejected intellect and book reading,” while many other Christians were ambivalent about the value of reading books.⁸⁵ In contrast, Mormon scripture included the following injunction and principle: “Seek ye out of the best books, words of wisdom, seek Learning even by study, and also, by faith” and “The glory of God is intelligence.”⁸⁶ Knowledge, wisdom, and intelligence were intertwined with religiosity for Mormons, and these virtues came by diligent self-improvement, not solely by the grace of God.⁸⁷ So while Mormons debated about what kinds of books were “the best books,” which books should be read and which should not, they never sought to argue against intelligence’s relationship to worship.

While Mormons’ ideas about self-improvement largely paralleled common American attitudes, Mormons’ hoped-for results of self-improvement had a distinctly Mormon spin. This spin had its roots in 1844, when Joseph Smith delivered a discourse now known as the King Follett Sermon. In it, Smith declared that God’s children had unlimited potential and that they could become like God, an idea that many would find to be a “blatant sacrilege.”⁸⁸ According to one report of his sermon, Smith said, “God himself, who sits enthroned in yonder heavens, is a

⁸⁵ Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 137–38.

⁸⁶ “Revelation, 27–28 December 1832 [D&C 88:1–126],” p. 45, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 19, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-27-28-december-1832-dc-881-126/13>; “Revelation Book 1,” p. 179, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 19, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/167>.

⁸⁷ Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 138.

⁸⁸ Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 44.

man like unto one of yourselves, that is the great secret.”⁸⁹ He continued, “You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves; to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done; by going from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you are able to sit in glory as doth those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.”⁹⁰ This was to be a slow progression: “When you climb a ladder, you must begin at the bottom and go on until you learn the last principle; it will be a great while before you have learned the last. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it is a great thing to learn salvation beyond the grave.”⁹¹

What did this theosis look like for Mormons? Terry Givens has succinctly described how Joseph Smith laid out ideas regarding theosis or, as Mormons called it, “exaltation.” First, God not only approves of humans achieving such a high status but also intentionally seeks to guide humankind to a godlike state. Second, exaltation would include the following: individuals would “inherit thrones[,] Kingdoms[,] principalities [principalities,] and powers[,] dominions,” and “when they are out of the world and they Shall pass by the angels and the Gods which are Set there to their exaltation and Glory in all things as hath been Sealed upon their heads[,] [their] glory Shall be a fullness and a Continuation of the[ir] Seeds for ever and ever.”⁹² In other words, exaltation “is the power to create life endlessly within the context of an eternal family.”⁹³ Third, theosis is not bestowed like a gift on individuals; instead, it is the natural result of “self-conformity with laws that are intrinsically transformative.”⁹⁴ This third element meant that

⁸⁹ “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Times and Seasons,” p. 613, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 2, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/2>.

⁹⁰ “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Times and Seasons,” p. 614.

⁹¹ “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Times and Seasons,” p. 614.

⁹² “Revelation, 12 July 1843 [D&C 132],” p. [3], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-12-july-1843-dc-132/3>.

⁹³ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 39.

⁹⁴ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 39.

Mormon belief emphasized “the acquisition of spiritual knowledge as a determinative factor in spiritual progress, which is ongoing. Salvation becomes a project and a process, not an event.”⁹⁵

These ideas about humankind’s potential for growth did have other nineteenth-century parallels. As Carol Cornwall Madsen has noted, Mormon doctrine had strong parallels with ideas from romanticism. Both “affirmed the basic goodness of individuals and their common destiny to grow and develop to their highest potential.” Mormon beliefs about potential godhood “carried overtones of the transcendental focus on the preeminence of the individual soul, its divine emanation, its susceptibility to an intuitive path to truth, and its worthiness to progress naturally and freely with a concomitant moral accountability.”⁹⁶ Although Mormonism did contain these same overtones as romanticism, Mormonism’s literalness about humans’ ability to become like God still set it apart from other belief systems. It gave Mormons a tangible goal to progress toward in their own process of self-improvement.

For Mormons, self-improvement held deep religious significance. Men and women could embark on a slow process of improvement (both in terms of intelligence as well as character) that would eventually, long down the road, lead to enjoying the kind of life God lived. Self-improvement was a project of salvation. The highest form of reward in Mormon theology was to become like God, but there was an obvious and immense gulf between the current state of mortal men and women and that of an all-knowing, perfect Heavenly Parent. Nothing could change mortals in the twinkle of an eye to such a divine state. Godliness could only be achieved with God’s help through slow, painstaking self-improvement, through reading, learning, and applying knowledge.

⁹⁵ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 30.

⁹⁶ Carol Cornwall Madsen, *Emmeline B. Wells: An Intimate History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017), 178.

In this project of salvation and exaltation and progress, books could provide ready allies. As early as 1833 Joseph Smith had received a revelation that commanded members to “seek ye out of the best books, words of wisdom: Seek learning by study, and also by faith.”⁹⁷ Several years later, Smith would teach: “Whatever principal of intelligence we obtain in this life will rise with us in the resurrection: and if a person gains more knowledge in this life through his diligence & obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.”⁹⁸ How was this knowledge to be gained? Terryl Givens has argued that for Joseph Smith, “Knowledge is primarily to be painstakingly acquired the old-fashioned way: slogging through textbooks, learning languages, attending lectures, and culling the best of modern science.”⁹⁹ Believers were to read and study the best books, teach one another, and acquire wisdom and knowledge on a cosmic timeline that never ended.

Books and reading functioned as important tools in bringing these goals about. All kinds of books would be used, not just “spiritual” books. To some degree, no such category existed, for Mormon scripture taught: “All things unto [God] are Spiritual.”¹⁰⁰ In theory, this inclusivity meant there existed within Mormonism “a thoroughgoing interpenetration of sacred and secular truth.”¹⁰¹ All books could potentially provide truth that would aid a reader on her or his quest for progression. Despite this, however, Mormons would refer to a certain genre for these perhaps more overtly spiritual books—“Church books” they called them—indicating that despite this

⁹⁷ “Revelations Printed in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, June 1832–June 1833,” p. [5], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 4, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelations-printed-in-the-evening-and-the-morning-star-june-1832-june-1833/15>.

⁹⁸ “Instruction, 2 April 1843, as Reported by William Clayton,” p. 70, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 4, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/instruction-2-april-1843-as-reported-by-william-clayton/5>; Givens, *People of Paradox*, 30.

⁹⁹ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 71.

¹⁰⁰ “Revelation, September 1830–A [D&C 29],” p. 39, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 16, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-september-1830-a-dc-29/4>.

¹⁰¹ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 71.

inclusive worldview of reading material, some were to be elevated above others as perhaps more directly transmitting truth.¹⁰²

Mormon ideas about self-improvement held much in common with those of many white middle- and upper-class Protestant Americans, but Mormons hoped to engage in self-improvement for ends that reflected Mormon beliefs. They believed in a literal process of theosis, which study and reading would help them achieve. They also hoped to harness the power of books to build and defend their utopic community, Zion. In short, Mormons took already established ideas about self-improvement from various US cultures and appropriated them for distinctly Mormon purposes.

Useful Reading

Mormon cultural arbiters tried to distinguish between useful reading (that is, reading that would bring knowledge that would help people become like God) and useless or harmful reading, which might stunt or retard progress.

Scripture Reading

As one might expect, reading scripture was highly recommended by church leaders and others as a way to progress and improve. Frequently at meetings, church leaders encouraged members of their flock to read the scriptures. At a quarterly Relief Society meeting in Centerville, Utah, Zina D. H. Young (a prominent Mormon leader) encouraged the women to “read good books; search for knowledge, and resist all evil influences.”¹⁰³ A Sister Grant “advised the sisters to read the Book of Mormon and all good books. ‘Let us search after true knowledge, for we cannot be

¹⁰² For examples of Mormons referring to “church books,” see the following: Louvina, letter to the Exponent, *Woman’s Exponent*, March 15, 1876, 155; “R. S. Reports,” *Woman’s Exponent*, September 1, 1873, 50; Annie Wells Cannon, “Books as I know Them,” MSS 2307, box 2, LTPSC.

¹⁰³ “R. S., Y. L. M. I. A. & P. A. Reports,” *Woman’s Exponent*, February 1, 1888, 134.

saved in ignorance.”¹⁰⁴ These statements indicate the belief that reading could protect individuals from evil influence and help them in their eternal quest for knowledge.

One prominent Mormon poet, Hannah T. King, a convert and immigrant from England, was one person who consistently advocated for scripture reading. For her, the scriptures went beyond any other book: “There is ever an inspiration in the Scriptures that I feel in no other book; yet others charm, delight, instruct, and have made for me often a sunshine in the shade.”¹⁰⁵ Several reasons exist for her feelings toward the scriptures, and some of them deal with self-improvement. She felt the mere reading of scriptural books imbued immense power within the reader. “I have ever observed that a Bible—a Scripture reader, one who desired and prayed for the inspiration of the spirit of God as they read and studied these sublime records, I note that they spring at once to a higher degree of intelligence, a larger heart, a more expanded brain, a more comprehensive judgment; and in consequence a more extended charity and a greater appreciation of the sublime, the beautiful and the glorious; because the soul has been awakened and cultivated by the Book of inspiration of the Spirit of God.”¹⁰⁶ In short, the special, mystical spirit embedded in scriptural books made someone a better person (more like God) as well as a more intelligent person. Another reason for scriptures’ importance is that they provided role models for people to follow. “Both men and women of the Scriptures are models to copy from; there is no false gloss thrown over them, they are brought out in bold relief, the head as well as the foot is told; no flattery is seen in those pages; no tinselled drapery, ‘no stars or garters’ to dazzle the eyes, and hoodwink the judgment; no titles of honor, ‘Their epitaph is their name alone.’”¹⁰⁷ If trying to become like God seemed too daunting, then perhaps men and women could adopt more earthly

¹⁰⁴ “R. S., Y. L. M. I. A. & P. A. Reports,” 135.

¹⁰⁵ Hannah T. King, “The Holy Scripture,” *Woman’s Exponent*, June 15, 1878, 11.

¹⁰⁶ King, “The Holy Scripture,” 11.

¹⁰⁷ King, “The Holy Scripture,” 11.

role models. The men and women of the scriptures might provide still lofty but perhaps more reachable steppingstones as they sought to improve.

Junius F. Wells, one of the most active cultural arbiters among Mormon youth, wrote in his periodical the *Contributor* about the benefits of scripture reading. “Make fact the basis of our reading—there is none more profitable than scriptural—and we will find that the written words of inspired or studious men will afford us intelligence and useful knowledge that will be of benefit to us all our days. While if we only indulge our appetites for fiction, the best portion of our lives will flit away, leaving us no farther advanced than at first, and indeed worse off; for we will have lost memory, and even the every day objects and incidents of life will have passed from our recollection. There is no more common result of the novel reading habit than the destruction of memory.”¹⁰⁸ Fact and truth spurred improvement, and what books on earth could be more truthful than those containing God’s messages to his children? The limited space of the mind should treasure up these words, not waste storage space on light fiction.

However, scripture reading did provide a conundrum for Mormon women. Mormons believe that just as there is a Heavenly Father, there is a Heavenly Mother. However, very little is known about her, as there have been very few pronouncements from ecclesiastical leaders about her nature. There is also nothing in any of Mormonism’s canonized books of scripture about her.¹⁰⁹ Her absence from any sort of reading material was problematic. As one writer from the Bee-Hive manuscript newspaper wrote, “We will without arguement accept the Bible, the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine & Covenants as the truth, and shall from these books bring forth

¹⁰⁸ Junius F. Wells, “Choice of Books,” *Contributor*, December 1879, 60.

¹⁰⁹ Linda P. Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 64, 67.

proof of who God is and what he is like.”¹¹⁰ Books of scripture were one of the most important sources for understanding who God is and what he is like and therefore what each believing Mormon man was supposed to be like. But for Mormon women, who lived in a society in which gender norms significantly shaped their roles, how were they to understand what the culmination of divine womanhood looked like? How could they become like Heavenly Mother if they did not know more about her attributes and character?¹¹¹

Perhaps one of the ways women tried to fill this gap was by writing about the women of the scriptures. King wrote a series of short biographies for the *Women’s Exponent* titled “Women of the Scriptures,” which would later be published in pamphlet form.¹¹² Dedicated to the young women of the church, the biographies allowed King to create “role models that spoke to her own needs.”¹¹³ For instance, King’s sketch on Eve held her up “as a symbol of women’s earthly and divine potential; she exalts the role of motherhood and offers a promise of who women may become.”¹¹⁴ Susanna Morrill has also written about how Mormon women engaged in creative reading practices to place women at the center of their stories. For example, one woman in the *Woman’s Exponent* wrote: “It is somewhat noticable how little prominence is given to womankind in the historical narrative of the Book of Mormon, and unfortunately when

¹¹⁰ Rustic, “Faith in God,” *Bee-Hive* (manuscript newspaper, St. George, UT) 2, no. 3 [December 1886?], p. 5, MSS A 1053, USHS.

¹¹¹ These questions are more well-represented in modern Mormon feminism; however, because of the emphasis on self-improvement during the nineteenth century, it seems likely that nineteenth-century Mormon women sought out earthly female role models to emulate because the attributes and character of Heavenly Mother had received little official theological development. For modern expressions of these concerns, see Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright, eds., *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” 71.

¹¹² Hannah T. King, “Women of the Scriptures,” *Women’s Exponent*, March 1, 1878, 147.

¹¹³ Amy Easton-Flake, “Merging Mormon Women and Women of Genesis: Hannah Tapfield King’s *Women of the Scriptures*,” *Women’s History Review* 27, no. 7 (2018): 1106, 1116.

¹¹⁴ Easton-Flake, “Merging Mormon Women,” 1115.

mention is made of her it too frequently grows out of man's sins and her misfortunes."¹¹⁵ In Mormon scripture, women did not appear very often, and when they did, they provided no one to emulate. Morrill traces the ways that Mormon female writers interpreted and adapted the few women in the Book of Mormon "to make the scripture effective and meaningful for their own lives and priorities," such as prioritizing motherhood and critiquing patriarchy.¹¹⁶ In another work, Morrill has explored how women writers created their own flower-themed popular theology that celebrated and centered femaleness. Reading the work of these women allowed Mormon women to stake "their claim in the theological plot of their faith."¹¹⁷ All of these examples allowed women to read and find examples of womanhood that they could aspire to.

But perhaps another way they sought to fill this scriptural hole was by reading faithful or great women's biographies. (The importance of biographies will be further described below.) Books such as the *Women of Mormondom* provided stirring stories of influential Mormon women; it was a book that women could enjoy reading together during their meetings.¹¹⁸ When Emmeline B. Wells became the editor of the *Woman's Exponent* in 1877, Brigham Young charged her to write and publish the stories of some of the most important Mormon women. The *Exponent* would end up publishing about eight hundred obituaries and two hundred biographical sketches of Mormon women.¹¹⁹ Young women in YLMIA often studied the life of a famous woman and then wrote about her in their manuscript newspaper, such as the serialized biographical sketch in the *Bee-Hive* of Joan of Arc or a long poem written about Mary Queen of

¹¹⁵ G., "Woman Amongst the Nephites," *Woman's Exponent*, June 1, 1880, 7; Susanna Morrill, "Women and the Book of Mormon: The Creation and Negotiation of a Latter-day Saint Tradition," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 94n7.

¹¹⁶ Morrill, "Women and the Book of Mormon," 87, 82–105.

¹¹⁷ Susanna Morrill, *White Roses on the Floor of Heaven: Mormon Women's Popular Theology, 1880–1920* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 183.

¹¹⁸ "Correspondence," *Woman's Exponent*, November 1, 1877, 86.

¹¹⁹ Madsen, *Emmeline B. Wells*, 165–66.

Scots.¹²⁰ Both of these pieces in the *Bee-Hive* were written by Cactus, probably the penname for Julia A. Macdonald, who in a few short years would later write under the same pseudonym for the *Young Woman's Journal* about her experience as a medical student at the University of Michigan.¹²¹ Whether the women whom Mormons read about were members of their own faith tradition or not, they needed to look outside of scriptural canon to find female role-models.

Besides lacking concrete scriptural examples to emulate, Mormon women also faced other difficulties in their quest for self-improvement. Helen Mar Whitney acknowledged that women of the upcoming generations were different than those of the past.

As we are living in the last days when great and mighty revolutions are taking place, and understanding somewhat of the purposes of God, we would think it very strange if some of Eve's daughters did not possess more lofty ideas and a higher ambition than have those of former generations, and it is high time that they should begin to think and read and act for themselves; and 'inquire whence they came, whither going, and who they belong to,' instead of remaining in the same old ruts in which they have been trained, and wherein the human family have been gravitating downwards for the past generations.¹²²

For Whitney, an important part of women knowing who they were and where they were going seemed to include being able to think, read, and act for themselves.

Despite the importance of women thinking, reading, acting for themselves, and possessing "higher ambitions," one writer worried that the "the idol of to-day"—fashion—would distract women from loftier aspirations. Ruby Lamont, writing to the *Woman's Exponent* from Glenwood, Utah, worried about how women strove simply to look beautiful in fashionable garb for the pleasure of men: "Why should we depend upon the admiration of the other sex, or even

¹²⁰ Cactus, "Joan of Arc," *Bee-Hive* 2, no. 4, January 4, 1887, pp. 4–8; Cactus, "Mary Queen of Scots," *Bee-Hive* 2, no. 4, December 20, 1887, pp. 9–11. (Though these issues have the same volume and number issue, they are in fact different issues.)

¹²¹ Lisa Olsen Tait, "'The Young Woman's Journal': Gender and Generations in a Mormon Women's Magazine," *American Periodicals* 22, no. 1 (2012): 65–66.

¹²² Helen Mar Whitney, "Answer to Woman and Sin: In the Cincinnati Enquirer," *Woman's Exponent*, March 1, 1884, 145.

that of our own, for our soul's happiness?" she asked.¹²³ Beauty was not what women should or were created to pursue. But Lamont felt a double standard regarding self-improvement for men and women: "Are there not as noble aims and as high paths for us to tread? Are there not as great things as thorough knowledge required of us for eternal exaltation as of our brethren?"¹²⁴ Why did women not pursue self-improvement? For Lamont, it came down to "awful ignorance!"¹²⁵ She wondered, "Do women sincerely believe that their minds were created merely to remain as infants in knowledge, while men march on ahead of them in a constant progression?"¹²⁶ For Lamont, some women did not seem to understand their quest for further knowledge. Although she seems to acknowledge that some women do read, they read the wrong stuff: "Even the reading of a newspaper or literary magazine does not constitute much mental food. How very, very few know anything at all about where the paths of Intellect really lead!"¹²⁷ Lamont remains silent on what women should be reading, but clearly she felt they were not reading that which would profoundly shape their intellect, and she disdained their claim that "they have no time to learn!"¹²⁸ Yet they all seemed to understand what their end goal was: "And yet speak to them upon our future destiny and they are all wending their way, as fast as their sands of time will take them, to that holy city, whose light and glory is the glory of intelligence."¹²⁹ While they might have understood their final cosmological destination, they did not seem to know or place importance on how to get there or what would be valued once they did arrive. For Lamont, the vanities of the world had gotten in the way.

¹²³ Ruby Lamont, "The Idol of To-Day," *Woman's Exponent*, July 1, 1887, 17.

¹²⁴ Lamont, "The Idol of To-Day," 17.

¹²⁵ Lamont, "The Idol of To-Day," 17.

¹²⁶ Lamont, "The Idol of To-Day," 17.

¹²⁷ Lamont, "The Idol of To-Day," 17.

¹²⁸ Lamont, "The Idol of To-Day," 17.

¹²⁹ Lamont, "The Idol of To-Day," 17.

Despite the importance placed on scripture, motivating young people to read the scriptures could be a challenge. A reason for this was explained by a writer (whether she was a young person herself or an adult is not clear) in a YLMIA manuscript newspaper. She writes, “Many of young people think that the Church Works are very dry and prosy.”¹³⁰ They might read the scriptures, but “to be able to say ‘I have read the Book of Mormon, D. & C. &c’ seems to be the only aim in perusing those valuable books, by some of our young people. Such, are not paid for the time they spend.”¹³¹ The reason they found the scriptures drab was not because of anything innately wrong with the scriptures. For the author, the problem was the readers. If they would only read scriptures correctly, young people would see the benefit of them and grow as a result:

They [young people] say they are benefited much more by reading some useful history. If this is true, it is because they have taken up the history with an earnest desire to understand & remember what they read; which was quite the contrary in the other case. And it is not merely read but studied. And therefor, proves more interesting. . . . But should we read one of the Church Works earnestly and carefully, and with a determination to throughly understand it I think we will gain considerable knowledge, and feel that our time has been well spent.¹³²

For the author, these young ladies needed to read these books themselves. “We read these books in our meetings it is true,” she writes, “but girls, we do not get half the good of it, as you will find, if each one will read the Book of Mormon herself carefully. Which I trust we all will.”¹³³ Communal reading was not enough. Personal, private, and careful reading was needed. What would be the result for young people if they read in this manner? “The more we learn of the ways of God, and His dealings with His people in all ages, the more our faith is increased and the

¹³⁰ Leah, “Our Church Works,” *Young Ladies’ Diadem* (manuscript newspaper, St. George, Utah) 1, no. 8, January 30, 1878, p. 9, MSS A 1051, USHS.

¹³¹ Leah, “Our Church Works,” 9.

¹³² Leah, “Our Church Works,” 9.

¹³³ Leah, “Our Church Works,” 11.

greater our desire to keep the Law, that we may have claim upon the blessings that are promised those who faithfully keep the same.”¹³⁴ Reading the scriptures instilled faith in the reader to keep on the path of constant progression, giving them a hope that they might achieve the blessings promised them.

Although reading the scriptures was good for young people, exclusively reading the scriptures could actually become counterproductive. The Contributor published several statements from Brigham Young a decade after his death that discussed the dangers of forcing youth to read scriptures excessively. “‘Shall I sit down and read the Bible and Book of Mormon and the book of Doctrine and Covenants all the time?’ says one. Yes, if you please, and when you have done, you may be nothing but a sectarian after all. It is your duty to study to know every thing upon the face of the earth, in addition to reading those books. We should not only study good and its effects upon our race, but also evil and its consequences.”¹³⁵ The scriptures, while important, could lead to bigotry and a narrow worldview if overly indulged. Widespread knowledge was needed to truly progress. Another Brigham Young quote printed in the Contributor reads as follows:

Now understand it, when parents whip their children for reading novels, and never let them go to the theatre, or to any place of recreation and amusement, but bind them to the moral law, until duty becomes loathsome to them; when they are forced by age from the vigorous training of their parents, they are more fit for companions to devils, than to be the children of such religious parents. If I do not learn what is in the world, from first to last, somebody will be wiser than I am. I intend to know the whole of it, both good and bad. Shall I practice evil? No; neither have I told you to practice it, but to learn by the light of truth every principle there is in existence in the world.¹³⁶

Forcing young people to read the scriptures instead of novels would actually stunt their growth, making them shun the gospel. Instead, parents should understand that their children would need

¹³⁴ Leah, “Our Church Works,” 9–11.

¹³⁵ “Recreations and Amusements,” *Contributor*, January 1889, 82–83.

¹³⁶ “Recreations and Amusements,” 83.

to understand the world and life in its various forms in order to progress in wisdom and knowledge.

Biography

Due to the emphasis on self-improvement and progression in Mormon belief, it is no surprise that biography became one of the lauded genres by Mormon cultural arbiters. If young people were to become more like God, in the meantime they needed more down-to-earth examples, the great men and women of the world who could show readers traits to develop or modes of behavior. As one woman wrote for the *Women's Exponent* in 1879: "By reading we learn to know ourselves more thoroughly, which is one of the most important attainments; we can judge of our ideas, our capacities and our actions, by comparing them with those of others whose lives are portrayed to us by the writer; we can become acquainted (almost familiarly so) with the character and lives of the great men and women of the past ages."¹³⁷ Reading became a moment of self-measurement. How well did one stack up to the great men and women of the past? What did one lack and therefore need to improve upon?

Just four years earlier, the *Woman's Exponent* published a story on New Year's Day that sought to both instruct and entertain the young, showing the uneasy coexistence of biography and fiction in Mormon reading and highlighting first-generation Mormons' fears regarding young people's reading habits. This story also demonstrated how older Mormons at times tried to compete with enticing fiction.

Due to the holiday season, the author felt "impressed to greet our romance loving friends, as well as those possessed of more matter-of-fact natures, with something suitable to the occasion."¹³⁸ Indeed, the author was well aware of the reading tastes of the audience: "As this is

¹³⁷ "Reading," *Woman's Exponent*, November 15, 1879, 90.

¹³⁸ "Our New Year's Story," *Woman's Exponent*, January 1, 1875, 116.

unquestionably an age of immorality, when the world ‘loves darkness more than light,’ we are aware that the announcement of a highly colored fiction, the work of a highly imaginative brain, would ‘take’ a hundred per cent more readily than the assertion that a plain, simple, yet very interesting ‘true story’ was about to be told.” However, “at the risk of loosing many attentive readers,” the author puts forth that the story about to be told is “strictly true,” the story of a woman still living. The connection here between “darkness” and “highly colored fiction,” and “light” and a “true story” is explicit: proper reading took on the language of religion, of light and darkness.¹³⁹ Truth was connected with light, while darkness was connected with falsehood (which many thought fiction was). Truth would bring about progression, but falsehood would either distract or retard that growth.

Despite the story being true, it had many of the same elements of romantic fiction. It includes the story of a woman who falls madly in love with a man who dies, the kind of love one feels only once in life. When she simply wishes she could die with him, “one little pledge of love to bind her to the earth” keeps her from death, his child, whom she decides to care for and raise.¹⁴⁰ She does not give in to the heartbreak that often polishes off heroines of other nineteenth-century novels but resolutely pushes on to do her duty of self-sacrifice and service. Eventually, she was able to “out [live] all her great sorrows, or learned to live above them.”¹⁴¹ The story describes a woman who rejoices in living in the middle of the Saints and in having received the Gospel.

The author then addresses the “young ladies” who supposedly compose the targeted readership of this story, seeking to provide them the morals of the story. One lesson is that God

¹³⁹ “Our New Year’s Story,” 116.

¹⁴⁰ “Our New Year’s Story,” 116.

¹⁴¹ “Our New Year’s Story,” 117.

allows trials and sorrows to come upon his children for their own good. But even though the “dark shadows” of life might sometimes “intervene,” “life need not be dolorous.”¹⁴² The final moral of the story was for young people who indulged in reading “‘dime novels’ and trashy literature” and fell under their “bad influence.” The author gave the following advice to such readers:

Instead of seeking to satisfy the cravings of your young, ardent natures for something brighter, more lofty and soul stirring than you find in the dull routine of every day life, by stupidly conning over the vain imaginations of some profuse author, look about you and find heroes and heroines of your own. You will discover them in those around you, if you are bright; often the best and noblest in your dearest friends or nearest relatives. Remember too, that, without seeking for it, you have each a romance of your own to live, and prepare to live it well.¹⁴³

The author’s words indicate the older generation’s fear that young women might hope their lives to be filled with the romance, intrigue, and adventure of novels instead of the steadiness, work, and sometimes monotony that building up Zion required. It also perhaps indicates the transition to marriages based in romantic love, championed by the younger generation, to marriages based in economic or religious motivations, which had been the reality for many older Mormons (something discussed further in chapter 2). For this author, a solution called for replacing young women’s heroes, trading their heroines made of print for flesh-and-blood Mormon women. “Our Story” demonstrates some of the generational differences that frightened older members of the community. When the author invites young people to “look about” and “find heroes and heroines of your own,” she probably means that those heroes will likely be the older members of the community, first-generation converts who had sacrificed much for their faith—much like the woman in “Our Story.” By looking up to and imitating members of the older generation, young people could be counted upon to bear the faith of their mothers and fathers. Looking for invented

¹⁴² “Our New Year’s Story,” 117.

¹⁴³ “Our New Year’s Story,” 117.

heroes and heroines in fiction would only provide false role models. The author also tries to comfort the young women in telling them that they each will have their own romance; they need not go out “seeking for it,” a desire romantic novels might spur, but must “prepare to live it well”—something that the women around them could provide the best example for. In short, “Our Story” demonstrates the interwoven nature of reading, generational difference, and hopes for romantic love.

For Junius Wells, books could shape people just as much as friends and acquaintances could, and biographies were like friends you could pull out at any moment to learn from. “The companionship of a good book is almost as dear as that of a living friend; and not unfrequently of far more benefit, particularly to those who exercise better judgment in the selection of books than in the choice of friends. As a general thing, however, one who is careful about what he reads and how he reads, will manifest corresponding discretion in making friends.”¹⁴⁴ For Wells, there was no time to spare for self-improvement. “A few moments devoted to an acquaintance on the street corner in idle chat is considered nothing. But what untold advantage they might be to us if devoted to our friend, the History, or the Biography at home.”¹⁴⁵ At least fifteen minutes a day spent reading such books would help shape these young people’s lives. Wells hoped that MIAs would “exert a strong influence among the young ladies and gentlemen of the Territory, in regard to the kind of books that will do to read, and the reading habits of their members,” making it “fashionable to read good books.”¹⁴⁶

The virtues of biography were extolled not only in the print periodicals of the day but also in the manuscript newspapers. A faded and hard-to-read 1887 article from the Bee-Hive

¹⁴⁴ Junius F. Wells, “Choice of Books,” 60.

¹⁴⁵ Junius F. Wells, “Choice of Books,” 60–61.

¹⁴⁶ Junius F. Wells, “Choice of Books,” 61.

illustrates in greater depth perhaps why Mormons found biography to be so important. The author felt that imitation was a natural tendency in humans: “Is there one person present, who among all his acquaintances does not select, and hold up one as an example whom he can imitate with security & it then being our natures to follow leaders, how necessary that we select the truly great in our study after the wisdom of the past.”¹⁴⁷ To be clear, the author says that those “who have risen to power over the bodies of their fellow men are not great.”¹⁴⁸ These warmongers are examples of “sham greatness.”¹⁴⁹ For the author, the truly great are “sympathizers with God, and all the objects of his creation,” are “self-sacrificing,” have “sought reforms for the advancement of the human race.”¹⁵⁰ Does this just mean Mormons? No. “Are there many such men? Yes many. Where? Among all civilized nations, of all ages.”¹⁵¹ Through books, they could know them. “Their thoughts, habits, and customs, show themselves in their lives and it is from these we can learn the most methodical and consistent ways of life. The study of biography leads us to imitate the greatest models of the human race.”¹⁵² Again, the study of great individuals would lead to self-improvement, one that would eventually lead to godliness.

The author then proceeds to warn against the evils of “affectation.” The author writes: “Affectation, which is appearing to be what we are not, is a most besetting sin. To be affected with affectation is to be affected indeed. An affected person is littleness personified, every thing he does is little His thoughts are little as they are usually consentrated on a little subject, namely himself.”¹⁵³ Affectation was a word commonly used to describe what happened to readers of fiction. Instead of steadily imbibing the virtuous qualities of real-life people, fiction readers were

¹⁴⁷ “Biography,” *Bee-Hive* [7?], no. 2, January 15, 1887, 2.

¹⁴⁸ “Biography,” 2.

¹⁴⁹ “Biography,” 2.

¹⁵⁰ “Biography,” 2.

¹⁵¹ “Biography,” 2.

¹⁵² “Biography,” 2–3.

¹⁵³ “Biography,” 3.

apparently prone to flit from novel to novel, impersonating characters from novels instead of dedicating themselves to improving who they were. Orson F. Whitney summed up this fear well, which specifically targeted girls or women: “Poor, weak-headed creatures, who, having read a novel, assume the character of its heroine, until it passes from recollection, or is superseded by another heroine of a novel read subsequently.”¹⁵⁴ Perhaps affectation could be compared to an actor simply putting on a mask versus someone undergoing lasting, significant change, with affectation and fiction representing the former and biography and self-improvement the latter. The author presented biography as not only the polar opposite of fiction reading in its effect on character but also as the solution to those “suffering” from affectation: “The study of biography is a cure for this disease. In the presence of the great and wise, we feel our littleness by the comparison. We thus cease thinking of self, and become free and natural. Again the study of biography properly pursued, should increase our faith.”¹⁵⁵

For the author, biography would also maintain faith in humankind. The author worries that readers “see so much that is low, sensual, and devilish in our fellow beings of our own remote times,” which will make them “apt to loose faith in mankind and grow misanthropic.”¹⁵⁶ But apparently, in the biographies of great men (or more accurately hagiographies?) they would “see gifts of God manifest, and man in his highest estate, receiving light from above and reflecting it to us, lights up the path of our lives.”¹⁵⁷ A loss of faith in humankind meant a loss of faith in humans’ potential to become like God. But this author wanted to communicate to the young readers of the Bee-Hive that biographies would show godly characteristics in the best of

¹⁵⁴ O. F. Whitney, “The Way to Be Great,” *Contributor*, April 1880, 158–60.

¹⁵⁵ “Biography,” 3.

¹⁵⁶ “Biography,” 3.

¹⁵⁷ “Biography,” 3–4.

men and women, that they would demonstrate the tangible path to self-improvement. In short, biographies showed young readers what it was possible to become.

Now, certainly not all readers had these reactions to biography. Some most likely felt it impossible to become a “great man” or “great woman” in their lifetime, and felt overwhelmed at the challenge to become like the subject of a given book. Some might have merely found pleasure in reading about the great and the powerful, not spending much thought on how they could emulate them. But young Mormon readers were being encouraged and trained to read biography, as many cultural arbiters felt it a key part in their eternal progression.

Not only did cultural arbiters talk about the importance of biography, they tried to put biographies and other “useful” works into the hands of the young. For example, in 1873 the Deseret Sunday School Union provided a catalogue of books for Sunday School libraries. In it they provided a list of 1,500 volumes from Eastern booksellers that they felt were “suitable for Sunday School Libraries.” Aiming for books that were both entertaining and instructive, and “considering that useful knowledge was the first thing desired,” the union “selected but few story books,” and mostly selected “works on history, biography, travels, adventures, arts, sciences and the varied phenomena of nature.” Though not an exhaustive list, it was to serve as “an indication of the kind of books which we consider most suitable for the perusal of the young.”¹⁵⁸

One YMMIA library catalog from Kaysville, Utah, had the majority of its books dedicated to history and biography, such as *Washington and His Generals*, *Life of General Lafayette*, *Life and Teachings of Confucius*, *Brief Biographies*, *The Age of Ann*, all three volumes of *Life of Franklin*.¹⁵⁹ It is likely from these kinds of libraries that young people would

¹⁵⁸ *A Catalogue of Books, for Sunday School Libraries, Selected by the Committee Appointed by the Deseret Sunday School Union* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1873), p. 2, M201 D4515c, CHL.

¹⁵⁹ YMMIA library catalogue, Kaysville, microfilm, Pq M201 K23c 1, CHL.

check out biographies, read about a given individual, and then write an essay about that person for their manuscript newspaper. Writing about them perhaps could ensure that young people further internalized these great men and women and learned about their traits to imitate. Mormon periodicals such as the Contributor and Juvenile Instructor frequently carried serialized biographies for young people to read. Biographical sketches were commonly read out loud during literary society or mutual improvement meetings, such the Wasatch Literary Association reading about the “Character of Sir Walter Scott.”¹⁶⁰ In this way, cultural arbiters sought to train young readers about the importance of biography and its role in furthering self-improvement.

Fiction

If biographies exemplified useful reading for self-improvement, for some Mormon cultural arbiters, novel or fiction reading exemplified harmful or useless reading. When it comes to Mormon proscriptions and prescriptions around reading, fiction has drawn the most attention from scholars. These scholars have largely focused on what prominent church leaders, such as Brigham Young, said about fiction or on how Mormon writers would eventually compose didactic fiction to instruct and entertain Mormon audiences.¹⁶¹ This chapter also includes the voices of young people themselves via manuscript newspapers as well as sources from the Woman’s Exponent, a source which has not been combed with regards to this topic.

During a meeting of the Young Lady’s Retrenchment Society in Salt Lake City’s Fourth Ward in 1873, one of the society’s leaders, Cecilia Condie (likely nineteen years old at the

¹⁶⁰ Wasatch Literary Association minutebook, MS 2689, p. 21, CHL.

¹⁶¹ Matthew Durrant and Neal E. Lambert, “From Foe to Friend: The Mormon Embrace of Fiction,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1982): 325–39; Richard H. Cracroft, “Seer of Modern Times: The Home Literature Novels of Nephi Anderson,” *BYU Studies* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 3–15; Richard H. Cracroft, “‘Cows to Milk Instead of Novels to Read’: Brigham Young, Novel Reading, and Kingdom Building,” *BYU Studies* 40, no. 2 (2001): 102–31; Lisa Olsen Tait, “‘The Young Woman’s Journal’: Gender and Generations in a Mormon Women’s Magazine,” *American Periodicals* 22, no. 1 (2012): 51–71.

time),¹⁶² stood up and talked about novel reading. It seems that the president of the association had recently died, for Condie said, “I often think of the instructions our late President gave us, which we should try to remember and profit by.” That instruction was “Let us not indulge in ‘novel’ reading but rather read our own Church books.” Condie seemed to feel guilty about her own track record of reading material: “I have neglected to read good works as I should have done, but with the help of the Lord I intend to reform.”¹⁶³ This death likely reminded all of these young women that time on the earth did not stretch on forever. Were they using their time effectively? Were they progressing with the time available to them, or were they squandering it? Condie felt that she had perhaps frittered away her time. Her reform of reading material was not just a matter of rededicating oneself to useful reading; for her, it was a spiritual endeavor that required the help of God.

One article in a manuscript newspaper, signed J. M. N. N., asserted that one reason MIA organizations were formed was to inculcate correct reading, perhaps indicating that young people had internalized (or at least knew how to parrot) ideas about what reading would be the most beneficial or harmful. For this author, the MIAs existed to “teach the young of the Latter-day Saints the ways of truth and righteousness.” Because of this, its members should “seek knowledge from good books to do away with light reading, which only fills our minds with nonsense and spoils the memory.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² “United States Census, 1880,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9YBG-9MN9?cc=1417683&wc=XC2W-K68%3A1589415070%2C1589415390%2C1589415389%2C1589394990> : 24 December 2015), Utah > Salt Lake > Salt Lake City > ED 45 > image 44 of 46; citing NARA microfilm publication T9, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., n.d.

¹⁶³ “R. S. Reports,” *Woman’s Exponent*, September 1, 1873, 50.

¹⁶⁴ J. M. N. N., “Leisure Moments,” *Youth Educator* (manuscript newspaper, Pinto, UT) 4, no. 4, April 1881, LR 6952 26, [p. 2], CHL.

One reason why Mormons found reading fiction objectionable was that, simply put, it was fiction. The events in the book did not actually happen; therefore, they were a lie. Someone in the Bee-Hive manuscript newspaper, signed “Observer,” applauded those who “read to gain knowledge, and to store [their] minds with those things that will be of value to [them] in future life.”¹⁶⁵ But the author contrasted those individuals with “those who thoughtlessly allow themselves to read the skum and trash that is in our midst. Novels!”¹⁶⁶ Novels were apparently as addicting and harmful as alcohol or any kind of drug: “At first, they read them out of curiosity, and that they believe there is any truth contained in them; but after they have continued in reading them for some time, they become so interesting that they think it impossible to give them up.”¹⁶⁷ The author then calls on any member of the MIA who indulges in such a “pernicious habit” to reform straight away. Why should they “shun it at once”? Because one should “never allow the intelligence God has endowed you with to be ruined in this way.”¹⁶⁸ In short, reading novels led to the opposite of self-improvement toward Godhead. Instead of developing divinely given attributes, novel readers destroyed and regressed their God-given natures. There was so much to learn to become better: “Love the truth, seek for it, there is plenty of it,” and young people needed to do so “without storing [their] minds with things that are not true.”¹⁶⁹ The author then uses this vivid imagery of the body to make their point: “We are like a vessel we can only contain so much. We may fill a [illegible] nearly full with oil, and then keep pouring water in it, it will run the oil all out. So it is with us, we may store our minds with many valuable truths. And then if we continue to practice reading falsehoods, we would be like the Gentiles, love falsehood

¹⁶⁵ Observer, “Reading,” *The Beehive* 2, no. 3, [December 1886?], p. 9.

¹⁶⁶ Observer, “Reading,” 10.

¹⁶⁷ Observer, “Reading,” 10.

¹⁶⁸ Observer, “Reading,” 10.

¹⁶⁹ Observer, “Reading,” 10.

better than truth.”¹⁷⁰ Consistent novel reading would lead to a head devoid of any kind of truth. The last sentence, about believing Mormons devolving into Gentiles is particularly telling. In this article, Observer indicates that books informed collective identity. So many of the previous generation of Mormons had read a book to convert to the faith—the Book of Mormon. They had to decide whether the book was inspired or a hoax before joining themselves to the church. If a book had the power to bring their grandparents or parents into the church, books could also serve as a catalyst in reverting the youth of the church into unbelieving Gentiles. For Observer, reading certain books distinguished you on either the wrong or right side of Zion.

Despite the wealth of proscriptive statements about fiction, there were some who sought to defend it. For instance, although we do not know what was said, H. L. A. Culmer in the Wasatch Literary Society wrote and read aloud an essay titled “How good may result from Novel Reading.”¹⁷¹ In the *Woman’s Exponent*, an author with the penname Simple Simon, wrote a cautious defense, understanding that “by common consent, light reading [novel reading] is generally denounced.”¹⁷² She cautiously writes, “While I do not wish to recommend novel reading, I do wish to say that it is not without its virtues; that however many evils some may discover in it—many of which are undeniably genuine—it has attractions that recommend it to the judicious, and that, despite the evil results attending ill-timed and excessive light reading, the benefits that accrue to those who exercise wisdom in it are manifold and lasting.”¹⁷³ For Simon, it has less to do with the reading material than the reader: “The evil is in the person, not in the thing,” a recognition of reader response, that the meaning derived from books depends more on

¹⁷⁰ Observer, “Reading,” 10.

¹⁷¹ Wasatch Literary Association minutebook, MS 2689, p. 117, CHL.

¹⁷² Simple Simon, “Light Reading,” *Woman’s Exponent*, October 1, 1881, 67.

¹⁷³ Simple Simon, “Light Reading,” 67.

the reader's life experience, preconceptions, intentions, and so on than the content of the book.¹⁷⁴

Therefore, the responsibility rests on the reader: "However light the reading may be, if the person that peruses it is moderately intelligent and ordinarily apt, something of profit can be found in it. In fact, one might go so far as to declare, with a reasonable satisfaction that the assertion is susceptible of proof, that there is no class of light reading—unless it be actually vile and vicious—but some good may be derived from it, if the person is capable of making it profitable."¹⁷⁵

One reason parents should not dismay when their children read novels is that "it keeps their offspring off the streets and away from the influences of evil and vicious habits."¹⁷⁶ It would also grease the wheels for young people's desire to further become educated: "In teaching a child anything, it is necessary to begin at the rudiments, and light reading is one of the rudiments to the habit of general reading."¹⁷⁷ Eventually, this habit of reading light literature would produce greater results. "Since it imparts knowledge even when unsought, so also does it develop intelligence, even when there is no active desire for intelligence; and this intelligence will manifest itself in the gradual and voluntary—though almost imperceptible—selection of a higher class of literature, providing the nature of the reader is progressive."¹⁷⁸ She is clear to again hedge her claims: "It is not claimed that light reading is preferable to solid reading, but that it is better than no reading at all."¹⁷⁹

Despite these arguments, many pushed back against the idea that anything good or productive could come from novel reading. Years later, they would still argue that fiction could

¹⁷⁴ Simple Simon, "Light Reading," 67.

¹⁷⁵ Simple Simon, "Light Reading," 67.

¹⁷⁶ Simple Simon, "Light Reading," 67.

¹⁷⁷ Simple Simon, "Light Reading," 67.

¹⁷⁸ Simple Simon, "Light Reading," 67.

¹⁷⁹ Simple Simon, "Light Reading," 67.

never provide what nonfiction could. In 1886 the *Juvenile Instructor* printed this piece of “Home-Made Philosophy”: “He who reads novels, as many say they do, to obtain knowledge of history and science would be insulted if asked to drink dishwater for the sake of getting a meal of roast beef and potatoes.”¹⁸⁰ An editor of a manuscript newspaper would copy this down for an issue three years later, demonstrating some young people’s at least public adherence to this stricture against fiction.¹⁸¹

How to Read

After ensuring that youth were reading the right kinds of books, cultural arbiters needed to make sure they read them correctly. They believed that just cracking open a book would not necessarily lead to self-improvement. They realized what Samuel Taylor Coleridge had expressed decades before, and which had been reprinted in the *Woman’s Exponent*: “Some readers are like the hour-glass (their reading is as the sand; it runs in and runs out but leaves not a vestige begin); some like a sponge, which imbibes everything, and returns it in the same state only a little dirtier; some like a jelly-bag which allows all that is good to pass away, and retains only the refuse and dregs. The fourth class may be compared to the slave of Golconda, who casting away all that is worthless, preserves only the pure gems.”¹⁸² Because of this diversity of reading experiences, readers had to be trained not only in what to read but how to read if reading were to be a transformative experience.

In the busyness of day-to-day life, Mormons did not often have much time for reading. As one writer for the *Youth Educator* manuscript paper, E. B. Thornton, wrote: “As a community

¹⁸⁰ Newaygo, “Home-Made Philosophies,” *Juvenile Instructor* (July 1, 1886): 208.

¹⁸¹ *Bee-Hive* 5, no. 12, March 12, 1889.

¹⁸² *Woman’s Exponent*, July 1, 1884, 19; other religious publishers also used this sentiment from Coleridge to teach about proper reading. See Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 123.

and as individuals, we have very little time to spend; we are generally blessed with plenty of work.”¹⁸³ The small amount of time that was available for reading needed to be taken advantage of to the fullest in order for it to become a time of self-improvement. For Thornton, a correct kind of reading needed to take place: “When we sit down to read, the whole mind should be upon the work before us; there should be no straggling thoughts wandering around here and there but all should be called in and concentrated upon the subject before us, in this way we will profit by what we read.”¹⁸⁴

Another important part of how to correctly read was that it should be paired with writing. This pairing is one reason manuscript newspapers became so important to Mormon youth’s self-improvement. An editorial in the *Advocate*, a YLMIA manuscript newspaper in Ogden City, provides insight into this connection. Frances Woodland and Lizzie Fellows, the editors of this issue of the paper, wrote the editorial, whether jointly or not is unclear. Not much is known about Woodland, but Fellows, in 1882, was a twenty-six-year-old school teacher.¹⁸⁵ The editors proclaimed, “The advantages of composition are obvious to all.”¹⁸⁶ Not only did writing provide an opportunity to transmit “the best thoughts of the greatest men and women” to later generations, it also was seen as “one of the best methods in which to express the nobler thoughts of the mind.”¹⁸⁷ It was one of the best methods because writing “is not, as in speaking, often

¹⁸³ E. B. Thornton, “Written for the Youth’s Educator: Reading,” *Youth Educator* 1, no. 5, April 17, 1878, 3.

¹⁸⁴ Thornton, “Reading,” 4–5; see also Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 114, 123–24, for parallel ideas in other parts of the United States about the proper way to read.

¹⁸⁵ “United States Census, 1880,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GYBK-9RB?cc=1417683&wc=XCMN-929%3A1589415070%2C1589415367%2C1589399475%2C1589395669> : 24 December 2015), Utah > Weber > Ogden > ED 96 > image 23 of 39; citing NARA microfilm publication T9, (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., n.d.); Elizabeth Frances Fellows Critchlow, “History of Elizabeth Frances Fellows Critchlow—Written by Herself,” in *A Schoolmarm All My Life: Personal Narratives from Frontier Utah*, ed. Joyce Kinkead (Salk Lake City: Signature Books, 1996).

¹⁸⁶ Frances Woodland and Lizzie Fellows, “Editorial,” *Advocate* (manuscript newspaper, Ogden, UT) 3, no. 9, March 4, 1882, p. 1, MSS SC 3321, HBLL.

¹⁸⁷ Woodland and Fellows, “Editorial,” 1.

without previous thought or reflection but is, or should be, the result of careful and deliberate study.”¹⁸⁸ This sentence provides insight into the connection between reading and writing. Especially in the context of MIA manuscript papers, young people were supposed to carefully and deliberately study some topic (as opposed to idle light reading) and then compose. The editors believed that doing so “exercises the reasoning faculties, enlarges and expands the mind, which is the great distinctive feature between man and the brute creation.” The editors valued traits such as “depth of reasoning” in young people, as it would allow them to convince readers of truth.¹⁸⁹ It was the hope of Woodland and Fellows that “such composition grace the pages of this paper and contribute its mite toward the enlightenment of our minds.”¹⁹⁰ The process that deliberate study and careful composition would bring about would be one of self-improvement.

Another manuscript paper writer, S. P. Richards, wrote about the importance of pairing reading with writing. For Richards, reading served an important role in education and self-improvement, but it could only take a person so far: “We may gain a great deal of knowledge, and acquaint ourselves with many useful things and ideas by reading books and papers; but that knowledge and those ideas are only the reflection of other’s thoughts upon our minds.”¹⁹¹ Reading needed to be paired with writing to provide further self-advancement: “We must write articles ourselves to bring out original ideas, and learn to clothe our thoughts in language of our own choice and construction.”¹⁹² For these young Mormon men, merely being able to parrot what others had written (or one’s interpretation of what others had written) was not enough. Writing provided an opportunity for these young people to begin to formulate their own ideas

¹⁸⁸ Woodland and Fellows, “Editorial,” 1.

¹⁸⁹ Woodland and Fellows, “Editorial,” 1–2.

¹⁹⁰ Woodland and Fellows, “Editorial,” 2.

¹⁹¹ S. P. Richards, “Listen and I Will Tell You,” *The Surprise* (Ogden, UT, manuscript newspaper) 1, no. 1, February 14, 1887, p. 5, LR 6391 29, CHL.

¹⁹² Richards, “Listen and I Will Tell You,” 5.

and communicate them with others. Doing so required learning “the art of composition and the construction of our language, and the intelligent arrangement of ideas and use of words.”¹⁹³

The youthful writers of the *Youth Educator*, a manuscript newspaper from St. George, Utah, understood the role that reading and writing could play in their eternal progression. After their manuscript paper’s inconsistent publication over the past four, the members of the Pinto MIA decided to start up the paper once again. In the opening editorial, the editors (or one of them) asked, “Now, my young friends, why have we started this paper? What is designed to be accomplished by it?” They succinctly answer: “We wish to improve our minds by studying and writing upon subjects that will enlighten our understandings, strengthen us morally, and fit us for that higher sphere to which we all aspire.” That higher sphere the author felt they all aspired to was exaltation, and it was not merely a gift that was given to them. It required enlightening their minds and strengthening their morals. Reading and writing were important vehicles for accomplishing this goal. But this did not mean that they were to only read scripture or church books. “For this purpose then,” the editors continue, “we shall study and write upon various subjects, including, perhaps, morality; history, profane and Sacred; home industries, religion, and the Principles of the Everlasting Gospel.” While this curriculum is heavy toward religious topics, by including “profane” history and home industries as topics, the writers indicate the importance of all knowledge in eternal progression. The editors conclude with, “There is talent in Pinto of various kinds; Let each one seek to know himself, and to develop those talents wherewith God has endowed him; and in so doing we may improve ourselves, be a benefit to our fellows, and gain many steps towards Everlasting Life.”¹⁹⁴ Manuscript newspapers not only served a

¹⁹³ Richards, “Listen and I Will Tell You,” 6.

¹⁹⁴ E. B. Thornton and M. W. Harrison, “Editorial,” *Youth Educator* 3, no. 1, December 11, 1879, [p. 2].

communal purpose (discussed in chapter 3) but also served a deeply personal purpose. For some, these papers could provide an outlet through which to channel and develop their godly potential.

As one can imagine, the task of trying to become like God could feel daunting and overwhelming. As Terry Givens writes, this belief “can be more conducive of feelings of inadequacy than of comfort or complacency.”¹⁹⁵ Some writers in the *Youth Educator* certainly felt this. “We are, in His sight, poor, weak mortals,” said one, “learning a little here and there and trying to store up knowledge that will become useful to us. What a great amount we have to learn before we become like unto God and we have the promise that we shall.”¹⁹⁶ Despite this feeling of inadequacy, this writer at least felt that becoming like God was still something he or she would achieve.

For some the idea of reading, writing, or reciting aloud was terrifying, making them truly feel inadequate. “It seems rather a hard task for any of us to write for the paper,” wrote one editor. “When we are called upon to write, read, or recite, we should be willing to do the best we can. At first it seems quite a task and almost impossible for us to perform, but Little by little the acorn said, each day it ‘grew’. And so in wisdom and knowledge may me and you.”¹⁹⁷ This growth in intellectual endeavors was not just reliant on self-discipline and trying harder, though certainly these MIA members and their leaders felt that was part of it. Because so much of studying and writing was wrapped up in spiritual goals, some members expected spiritual aid. “If we do try [write for the paper] we shall succeed,” writes someone signed only as Peter. “For the Lord said He would help those who would help themselves and if we want to get wisdom and knowledge let us ask the Lord in prayer nothing doubting, and we shall receive. May we all strive

¹⁹⁵ Givens, *People of Paradox*, 32.

¹⁹⁶ Alex, “Miss Editor,” *Youth Educator* 4, no. 4, April 1881, [p. 3].

¹⁹⁷ “Editorial,” *Youth Educator* 1, no. 2, February 20, 1878, [pp. 1–2].

to make the paper interesting, which I am satisfied we can if we will try for there is plenty of intellect in our midst if it was only cultivated.”¹⁹⁸ They believed God would help them in this endeavor; he would help them cultivate their intellect if they would just ask for his help.

Young readers were also frequently encouraged to seize the day and make sure they were reading now, for they might not have the opportunity to read and progress as much in the future. In this outlook, youth was an irretrievable time in which to grow, learn, and store knowledge for a future date.

In 1867 in an address to the Springville, Utah, Sunday School, William Mendenhall, one of the children’s teachers, said this: “Now my dear children let my impress upon your youthful minds, the necessity of improving every hour, gather from good Books words of wisdom, glean from the written word lesson of instruction and particularly treasure up the wise sayings and councils of B Young and his brethren, our Bishop and his associates, Read the Juvenile instructor. Keep it clean and treasure it up, it is more valuable than gold.”¹⁹⁹ Despite progression taking place over eternity, Mendenhall and others felt the need to encourage children and youth to take advantage of every hour to improve themselves.

One reason older generations were so adamant about the youth taking advantage of the opportunity to read and educate themselves is that they felt they had never had such opportunities while young. In a manuscript newspaper published in Lehi City in Utah County, the Club, one member of the older generation targeted the habits of the youth. Manuscript newspapers often provided opportunities for older members of the community to lecture, advise,

¹⁹⁸ Peter, “I’ll Try,” *Youth Educator* 1, no. 5, April 17, 1878, [pp. 7–8].

¹⁹⁹ William Mendenhall, “To the Springville Sunday School,” July 24, 1867, William Mendenhall Papers, MS 8932 1, CHL.

and express their concern for the young people. The Club's masthead boldly proclaimed that the paper was "Devoted to choice literature and amusements."²⁰⁰

A writer for the Club named J. E. R. admonished the youth, mostly complaining about how young people had every chance to go to school (unlike their parents) but instead chose to remain in their ignorance. The older generation had been the pioneer generation. Arriving decades earlier, these settlers had to worry more about digging irrigation ditches than getting education. For them, "It is no disgrace for persons to be ignorant of what they never had the chance to learn," but for the youth "it is disgraceful for them to remain in ignorance when opportunities offer for them to obtain instruction." Ultimately, J. E. R.'s advice to the young boiled down to this: "Now my advice to the young is to study go to school. use the long winter evening profitably by going to night school or reading good books instead of so much novel reading."²⁰¹ This admonition makes it clear that in 1872 many young people's time was beholden to the seasonal rhythms of a largely agrarian society. They still had plenty of work to do during the spring, summer, and fall. But in the discretionary time they did have during the winter, according to J. E. R., they were not using it profitably. The previous generation had sacrificed to create an opportunity for youth to receive an education they had never had. How did the youth respond? By drowning themselves in novels instead of useful study. Perhaps a self-indulgent novel every now and then was not too much of a problem, but when novel reading became a habit that prevented youth from taking advantage of their winter nights, J. E. R. felt a need to say something.

Many young people echoed these calls to take advantage of their younger years to study and read. In the opening issue of the *Youth Educator* the editor wrote: "Young friends youth is

²⁰⁰ *The Club* (manuscript newspaper, Lehi City, UT), December 13, 1872, MS 9190, p. 1, CHL.

²⁰¹ J. E. R., untitled, *The Club*, December 13, 1872, p. 1.

passing swiftly by, let us try and improve our minds while we have a chance. Times may not always favor us as they do at the present, also let us try and improve our morals now to day as it will be much easier to check bad habits and govern our passions and bridle our tongues now than it will be in after years.”²⁰² This editor listened to what many senior members of the community said: good habits are formed in youth, when individuals possess more discretionary time than after they marry, have children, work, and receive more demanding church responsibilities. Despite the relative amount of free time for young people, another author in the *Youth Educator* reminds us that young people’s discretionary time was limited by season: “Let us improve the time that is now afforded us, and learn as much as we can for if we do not we will see the time we will be sorry for it; so that now we have started our joint meetings, let us try and see how much we can learn this winter. I am satisfied if we will do as we are told, we will learn very fast; though sometimes we think our Presidents are very hard on us, in giving us so much to do, but we must study so much the harder.”²⁰³ Young Mormon people largely had to cram their quest for self-improvement during winter months. Considering the lofty goals of Mormon progression, no wonder Mormon young people and their elders felt they had to decisively take advantage of what little time they could dedicate to self-improvement. If they failed to take advantage of, the whole year might feel lost. This is not to say that no reading took place during the rest of the year, but winter was a crucial time for reading.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Mormons young and old recognized a special relationship between books and individuals. This relationship centered primarily on self-

²⁰² *Youth Educator* 1, no. 1 February 7, 1878, 1.

²⁰³ *Youth Educator* 1, no. 9, November 22, 1878, 5.

improvement, the quest to enhance one's knowledge, intellect, and character for the purpose of becoming like God. With the injunction to "seek ye out of the best books, words of wisdom" firmly emblazoned in Mormon scripture, Mormon cultural arbiters sought to delineate what those best books might be.²⁰⁴ They tapped biographies and scriptures as the best books to inculcate the kind of progression Mormons hoped to achieve and struggled to work out fiction's place in human progress. They also hoped to teach young people how to read the best books. According to these arbiters, only by following their counsel to read purposefully and intently could young people progress on their paths to Mormonism's highest individual aspirations. They also encouraged youth to take advantage of the free time they did have to read the right books. In short, they sought to frame the relationship between individuals and books as one in which one's theosis was at stake.

²⁰⁴ "Revelations Printed in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, June 1832–June 1833," p. [5], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 4, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelations-printed-in-the-evening-and-the-morning-star-june-1832-june-1833/15>.

Chapter 2: Books, Reading, and the Navigation of Mormon Masculinity, Femininity, Marriage, and Parenthood

In August of 1877, seventeen-year-old Annie Wells confided to her diary about the “splendid novel” she was then reading, *Marquis of Lossie*, a romantic piece of fiction. Wells, the daughter of the prominent Emmeline B. Wells (editor for the *Women’s Exponent*), wrote, “I never read a good novel, with out I [feel] allmost jealous of my heroine, and even now I keep building castles in the air about this book only putting my self in as the heroine.” She even composed a poem about her reading experience:

Who ever read the daring deed;
Of some great hero,
Who rode upon his flashing steed
As brave as any hero
Without a thought of admiration
A longing for such a one they feel
And when they close the splendid volume
They recognize their beau-ideal

Concluding her entry, she writes, “Really not a very excellent poet am I, but then that expresses my opinion and no one else need read it.”²⁰⁵

Wells’s entry is a fascinating example of how young people in Zion reacted to their reading material—particularly the romantic fiction that many cultural arbiters decried as dangerous. In fact, Wells’s reading experience exemplifies exactly what scared these arbiters about fiction. They would have been alarmed by Wells basing her beau-ideal on a novel’s character, as most nineteenth-century novelists would have been loath to cast a polygamous Mormon as the prototype for their idea of a romantic hero. For instance, George Reynolds—a high-ranking church leader who had just been released from prison after his failed bid to the US Supreme Court to legally uphold his polygamous marriages—wrote that the “young lady whose

²⁰⁵ Annie Wells Cannon, journal, 1877 Jun 30–1881 Sep 4, typescript, MSS 2307, box 2, folder 7, pp. 7–8, LTPSC.

mind is crowded with thoughts and fancies of the impossible and unnatural heroes and heroines of romance, and whose matrimonial aspirations are turned in the direction of some modern counterpart of her beau ideal of chivalry” will come to believe “how insignificant, how wearisome, how disgusting become the constantly recurring duties of her every day life as a wife and a mother; whilst plural marriage she personally avoids as utterly incompatible with the notions she has formed of life.”²⁰⁶ These novels could also inspire ideals about romantic love that some Mormons did not believe should be the focus of marriage. For instance, as early as 1853, Mormon leader Orson Pratt said that love was not “such as is often described in novels, which acts irresistibly, forcing all the other powers of the mind into subjection.”²⁰⁷ If Wells represents at least how some young Mormon women reacted to novels, then reading novels did indeed inspire at least some of what cultural arbiters feared would happen.

Just a few years later, Wells would marry John Q. Cannon, the son of an apostle. In her journal, Wells admits, “He is not one of my heroes that I used to dream about in my school days, no he possesses scarcely a trait of my beau ideal of long ago.” Even though Cannon did not match the beau ideal that Wells seemingly constructed as she read novels, she married him, and said, “I love him with all my heart and soul and I know him to be an honest good true and noble man.”²⁰⁸ Despite the fears of cultural arbiters, Wells was indeed able to give up the beau ideal, and perhaps notions regarding romantic love, from the Marquis of Lossie and marry the son of an apostle.

Wells’s diary is a record of the internal conflict one Mormon woman felt regarding love and marriage, concepts that were in flux during this tumultuous time in Mormon history due to

²⁰⁶ George Reynolds, “Influence of Outside Literature,” *Contributor*, September 1881, 358–59.

²⁰⁷ Quoted in Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 64.

²⁰⁸ Annie Wells Cannon, journal, p. 20.

generational change, decreasing isolation from the rest of the county, and the federal governments increasingly strict legislation regarding polygamy (also referred to as plural marriage). This chapter examines the connections between reading and fears and hopes regarding courtship, marriage, and parenthood—in short, the connection between reading and the strength of Mormon families, the building blocks of Zion. Examining a history of reading reveals the precariousness of the Mormon family (particularly polygamous ones) during this time period. As Mormons argued about reading and books—which they did because the act of reading itself was in flux, with the ever-increasing amount of non-Mormon printed material available—they also hashed out what masculinity, femininity, marriage, and parenthood should look like in Mormon society. These discussions also reveal many Mormons’ deep belief that books could profoundly help or harm families and help them navigate the changes in and threats to Mormon society.

As in other areas of their lives, Mormons exhibited great faith (and fear) in reading and writing with regard to its potential to create happy and faith-inspiring homes. Many believed that the wrong kinds of books and reading could emasculate young men, and that Mormon manhood was based in diligent, focused study; temperance; and self-sacrifice. Many also believed that being a true woman involved obtaining education, improving oneself intellectually, and defending polygamous marriages. Books and reading were also mediums through which Mormons could discuss ideal marital relationships. More and more, as romantic love in marriage became the ideal, a lack of true love between spouses and unequal marital relationships resulted, at least partly, from a lack of reading by either partner. Regarding parenthood, anxieties surrounding what parents and children read indicate parents’ fears about their ability to raise faithful, believing children in what seemed to be an increasingly difficult world for Mormon families. But if poor reading choices or a lack of reading could have such deleterious effects on

Mormon families, the opposite was true. Seeking after good books could create lasting, happy marriages between intellectual equals and help parents raise faithful, believing children.

Families in Flux

The importance of marriage in Mormon belief cannot be understated. Historian Kathryn Daynes writes about its importance to nineteenth-century Mormons: “In Mormon theology, unconditional or general salvation, consisting of being resurrected, comes to all through God’s grace. The degree of glory the resurrected being will receive, however, depends on one’s righteousness and obedience to the gospel in mortal life. The highest—and most desirable—degree of glory is exaltation. Because exaltation is the continuation of the family unit throughout eternity, an individual must be married to become exalted.” The continuation of marriage and family throughout eternity was “more than a central doctrine. It is in fact embedded in the most sacred of Mormon religious rituals, including marriage for eternity.”²⁰⁹ Anything that threatened an individual’s marriage therefore also threatened his or her future exalted status.

Daynes writes that eternal marriage had two goals: “first, on this earth, to prepare bodies to receive spirits waiting in the preexistent state and to train them properly so that they will choose righteous ways; second, in heaven, to continue the procreation of spirits for new worlds, thus increasing the dominions and glory of God himself.”²¹⁰ Parenthood was thus a crucial part of marriage as well. A parent was to raise up children in the gospel. This practical but deeply spiritual nature of marriage meant that romantic love was deemphasized, as it could elevate romantic attraction above God and a religious community.²¹¹ Church leaders preached similar sentiments over the next several decades. But increasingly, “young women rejected plural

²⁰⁹ Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 4.

²¹⁰ Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 71.

²¹¹ Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 64.

marriage in favor of romantic love.”²¹² Also, toward the close of the nineteenth century, Mormon fiction writers began to more freely emphasize the importance of romantic love in their own stories.²¹³

By 1860, just prior to the time period under examination, “plural marriage was pervasive but far from universal,” writes Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. “Although by 1860 more than 40 percent of the territory’s inhabitants—men, women, and children—lived in plural households, the composition of those households varied widely. Two-thirds of polygamist husbands had only two wives. Another 20 percent had three. Those who had four or more were often members of high church councils or bishops of local congregations.”²¹⁴

However, from 1870 to 1890, of the women who married, only one-tenth married polygamously.²¹⁵ During this time of flux regarding Mormon marriage, many feared that young women would become involved with those outside of the faith tradition.²¹⁶ Although “plural marriage was the Saints’ preferred marriage arrangement, the highest priority was for all worthy men and women to marry.”²¹⁷ Instead of women marrying a worthy man, many Mormons feared they might be seduced by young men of the outside world. A romantic novel, as Annie Wells’s journal indicates, could facilitate young women imagining themselves in the arms of some non-Mormon hero. From there, perhaps, it would be all too easy to act on these internal fantasies, especially as contact between non-Mormon men and Mormon women became more likely.²¹⁸ As discussed in the introduction, throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the US federal government

²¹² Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 173.

²¹³ Ethan R. Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 65.

²¹⁴ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), xix.

²¹⁵ Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 114.

²¹⁶ For some examples of these fears, see Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 197–98.

²¹⁷ Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 112.

²¹⁸ Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 199.

continued to ramp up pressure against Mormons practicing polygamy. The pressure was so great that it eventually led to Wilford Woodruff, then the church president, revoking the practice of polygamy in 1890. The federal government's determination to stamp out polygamy contributed to Mormon feelings of uncertainty about the future of their marriages and families.

Polygamy and Reading

By seeking to proscribe and prescribe how and what the rising generation read, many older Mormons also sought to navigate the pressures that the polygamous family faced during these decades. They also sought to inculcate positive feelings about polygamy, particularly in the women of the rising generation. As one example, historians have discussed how home literature (that is, fiction written by Mormons for Mormons) reflected some of these anxieties regarding marriage. This fiction was used for didactic purposes and often contained heavy-handed moralizing from the narrator.²¹⁹ In one editorial, church leader B. H. Roberts said the following regarding the “effective and pleasing method of teaching doctrine, illustrating principle, exhibiting various phases of character, and making the facts of history at once well known, and giving them an application to human conduct” that had become a part of Mormon home literature. He wrote, “Stories illustrating the evils overtaking young women, who marry those not of our faith, have appeared both in the *Juvenile Instructor* and the *Contributor*. Nor do I think any one reading those stories can doubt their effectiveness.”²²⁰ An entire genre had sprung up that epitomized fears about Mormon marriages and provided guidance about how to navigate such fears.

²¹⁹ Matthew Durrant and Neal E. Lambert, “From Foe to Friend: The Mormon Embrace of Fiction,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1982): 325–26, 335–36; Lisa Olsen Tait, “The 1890s Mormon Culture of Letters and the Post-Manifesto Marriage Crisis: A New Approach to Home Literature,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2013): 98–124; Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region*, 31–32.

²²⁰ Horatio [B. H. Roberts], “Legitimate Fiction,” *Contributor*, February 1889, 136; Durrant and Lambert, “From Foe to Friend,” 336–37.

There were certain kinds of reading material that some Mormons worried might negatively shape young Mormon women's relationship to polygamy. One author in the Contributor worried about "the tempting influence of the enemies of our people approaching, with oily tongue, fine manners and persuasive promises, our young people."²²¹ Although using the gender-neutral term youth, the author's language does portray a particularly gendered fear. The author feared "the smooth-tongued libertine addressing the unsuspecting maiden," the "infidel, blasphemer, or bigoted fanatic laboring assiduously with the unsuspecting youth," and the way in which "young girls [are] decoyed through invitations, presents, books, and letters to abandon the principles of the Gospel."²²² In response to all of this fear, the author writes, "I have prayed, in the anguish of my soul, for some angel's voice to cry out: 'O, send the stranger away, for he will entice thee to do evil!'"²²³ For this author, books played a role in seducing young women away from marriage within their faith community. A "stranger" with an "oily tongue," a "smooth-tongued libertine," could cause serious damage. For this author, the power of rhetoric and language was powerful, powerful enough to spur people to do terrible things.

Here was a fear that young women were being too choosy in their marriage partners or would not want polygamous marriages. What young women read might shape whom they wanted to marry and what they thought about polygamy. Not only could certain kinds of reading prevent marriages from even happening, but, according to some, it might even break them up. One Mormon male church leader quoted and paraphrased one of "the proposed methods of untying the Mormon Gordian knot" that he read about from antagonistic non-Mormons back East. This Gordian knot was what Easterners referred to as "the Mormon question," polygamy.²²⁴

²²¹ K. G. M. "Character Sketches: II The Spartan Child," *Contributor*, November 1879, 31.

²²² K. G. M. "Character Sketches," 31.

²²³ K. G. M. "Character Sketches," 31.

²²⁴ R. W. Young, "External Strength of Mormonism," *Contributor*, April 1880, 153.

The proposed method was to ““send Harper’s Bazar to every Utah wife, and in a few years the Mormon fabric will be a thing of the forgotten past.””²²⁵ Mormon women, married and unmarried, and their reading habits, became objects of worry for both Mormon and non-Mormon men and women.

Some church leaders and parents feared not only what was read but how that reading occurred. Ronald Walker has noted that church leaders and parents “had some misgivings” about the youthful members of the Wasatch Literary Society, which sprung up in the 1870s in Salt Lake. These young people (mostly in their late teens and twenties) were the children of prominent church leaders; however, the society, dedicated to secular literary exercises, was unsupervised. Also alarming was how “too few men within the society accepted mission calls” and “many members rejected polygamy . . . and when they did marry, some chose spouses who were lapsed Saints or not even Church members.” Although many members were still faithful, believing Mormons, it appears at least some leaders and parents worried at how secular literary culture might be affecting the marriages of young people.²²⁶ Walker argues that imitators of this organization began to pop up. Brigham Young, feeling a need to fill this desire for such societies and “wishing to avoid the Wasatch’s excesses,” decided to create Mutual Improvement Associations as a churchwide function.²²⁷

These fears indicate the power of unsupervised reading, reciting, and writing in groups. Walker quotes Heber Wells as saying that those unbelievers who did belong to the society had been that way before they joined: “It is simply absurd to think that an association where nothing of . . . [a religious nature] is discussed but where a few persons meet and go through exercises for

²²⁵ Young, “External Strength of Mormonism,” 153.

²²⁶ Ronald W. Walker, “Growing Up in Early Utah: The Wasatch Literary Association, 1874–1878,” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 1 (2004): 71.

²²⁷ Walker, “Growing Up in Early Utah,” 72.

literary culture, could be the means of turning out nothing but infidels.”²²⁸ But some still seemed to worry what happened at these meetings. Some of these fears undoubtedly revolved around the fact that young people whose religious belief was perhaps suspect (even though they were children of church leaders) met together to read, write about, and recite secular works. How might they interpret them? What meaning would they pull from their pages? Would they pull these young people further from the gospel? Such fears may have sparked the decision to create an atmosphere (MIAs) in which readings, recitations, and writings could be interpreted according to the tenants of the faith.

For instance, YLMIA, instituted by the church, provided spaces for young women to read about, discuss, and write on polygamy. These associations could provide controlled environments in which to shape young women’s feelings toward polygamy. At a YLMIA meeting in Ogden (northern Utah), a Sister Kimball admonished the young women, among a host of duties, to “seek knowledge; study good books; . . . [and] speak well of polygamy.”²²⁹ YLMIA hopefully could be a place where young women became educated and articulate defenders of polygamy.

The discursive sphere of periodicals was one that Mormon women had claimed a part in, and it was here that Mormon women had long defended polygamy. MIA manuscript newspapers therefore became an important potential training ground for young women to practice writing defenses of polygamy, among the many other topics they wrote about. In an editorial written by the “Editress” of a St. George (southern Utah) manuscript newspaper, Annie M. Romney, a 19-year-old recently married polygamous wife, wrote about a recent article published in the

²²⁸ Walker, “Growing Up in Early Utah,” 71.

²²⁹ “R. S. Reports,” *Woman’s Exponent*, July 1, 1873, 18.

Woman's Exponent.²³⁰ It was an article on "Celestial Marriage" (polygamy) written by "one of our young sisters of St. George."²³¹ She extolled the article as "certainly very commendable" and wrote, "We hope that the sentiments therein expressed are the sentiments of many of our young women."²³² Although just barely nineteen herself, Romney said that "it is a pleasure to all who are interested in the building up of the 'Kingdom of God,' to see the young begin to step forward in the performance of sacred duties; and show to the world that they understand and appreciate the Religion which we profess," of which polygamy was the most distinctive practice.²³³ During the era of polygamy, Mormon women frequently sought to defend themselves from the attacks of non-Mormon observers. Those who wrote in manuscript papers knew what others said about Mormon women: "We, as a sisterhood, have been looked upon by those who know us not, as a poor, down trodden race of women, who hardly dare say their heads are their own."²³⁴

Manuscript newspapers provided them an opportunity to demonstrate their agency, to not merely be objects of pity or rescue but to demonstrate that "their heads are their own," that they were well read and could express themselves articulately through the written word. In these papers, Romney could claim, "But with all the freedom of women, there is no place where they enjoy the freedom which we do in Utah; either socially, religiously, or politically. This assertion would seem incredible to the world, but it is nevertheless a fact; and that, too, without striving or

²³⁰ "Annie Marie Woodbury: Time Line," FamilySearch, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/timeline/KWC3-Y5V>; Mary Vilate Lee Romney, *Through the Years with Park and Vilate Romney* (Salt Lake City: self-published, 1959), 1, 2, 3, <https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/records/item/43788-through-the-years-with-park-and-vilate-romney?viewer=1&offset=0#page=1&viewer=picture&o=search&n=0&q=woodbury>; "United States Census, 1880," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9YBV-9YJ1?cc=1417683&wc=XCMF-W38%3A1589415070%2C1589395180%2C1589403421%2C1589395457> : 24 December 2015), Utah > Washington > St George > ED 93 > image 1 of 34; citing NARA microfilm publication T9, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., n.d.

²³¹ Annie M. Romney, "Editorial," *Young Ladies Diadem* (St. George, Utah, manuscript newspaper) 1, no. 6, December 5, 1877, [p. 1], MSS A 1051, USHS.

²³² Romney, "Editorial," [p. 1].

²³³ Romney, "Editorial," [p. 1].

²³⁴ Romney, "Editorial," [p. 2].

fighting for.”²³⁵ Manuscript newspapers, church leaders hoped, could prepare young women to shape public opinion about Mormonism and Mormon women for the better. As an example of how these hopes might play out, we can look at Mattie Horne Tingey. Born in 1857, Tingey had participated in YLMIA meetings and served as the editor of her ward’s manuscript newspaper. She also attended the University of Deseret and participated in the Wasatch Literary Association. These experiences no doubt prepared her to speak at the World’s Congress of Representative Women during the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago.²³⁶ Such a platform provided an important opportunity to shape opinion; manuscript newspapers provided early experiences in crafting arguments for future opportunities.

But manuscript papers also provided an opportunity to push back against polygamy. For instance, in another paper in St. George under “Local and other matters” (likely written by Julia Westover), the author seems to poke fun at men and polygamy. She sarcastically writes: “A chance for the ladies. A gentleman remarked a few evenings since that he just wanted five more wives. only think of it girls, five wives. There is no more need of the weary watching and waiting, and what a relief it will be to us older girls, for perhaps when he get the number he wishes, we can prevail on him to take the rest of us, as there will not be many left.”²³⁷ Her remarks seem to ridicule the excesses of polygamy and some of the men who practiced it, but they also demonstrate the angst that young women felt about having to wait for worthy partners to propose to them. So while reading and writing could lead to impassioned defenses of polygamy, it also allowed for some to subtly push back against current marriage practices.

²³⁵ Romney, “Editorial,” [p. 2].

²³⁶ Mattie Horne Tingey, “The School of Experience,” in *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women*, ed. Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 83–84.

²³⁷ [Julia Westover?], “Local and Other Matters,” *Youth Educator* (St. George, UT, manuscript newspaper) 2, no. 2 January 31, 1879, p. 6, LR 6952 26, CHL.

Mormon Manhood, Womanhood, and Marriage

As Mormon writers discussed the importance of reading, they also hashed out what an ideal Mormon man or woman looked like. Since such an important part of Mormon masculinity and femininity included marriage, these discussions also often focused on what ideal marriages should look like, and perhaps how they might differ from marriages of the past. Reading played a role in shaping ideas about manhood, womanhood, and marriage and helping to solve threats to gendered identity and marriages.

Manhood

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Mormon women often worried about Mormon men and their fitness to be good husbands. Often, their fears connected to books, reading, and intellectuality, and the lack of men who pursued or valued such endeavors in themselves and in women. While men generally outnumbered women in sex ratio during the nineteenth century, women wanted to marry “worthy” men—that is, men who lived according to the teachings of the church and would therefore be exalted with his family in the next life.²³⁸ Therefore, it is more important to look at the “ratio of ‘worthy’ men to ‘worthy’ women” when examining fears regarding marriage.²³⁹ Here it seems that women were worried if there would be enough worthy men to make good husbands in life and in the eternities.

Some women wrote on this crisis regarding the young men of Utah and their Mormon manhood, particularly regarding their moral habits, spirituality, and dedication to learning. After having read an article by Emmeline B. Wells entitled “Education and Culture of Women,” a woman named Gipsy Golden decided to write a bold article giving advice to mothers. The Wells article had mostly discussed the past disadvantages women faced in obtaining a meaningful

²³⁸ Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 113.

²³⁹ Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 113.

education but that “a positive revolution is now being effected in the culture and education of women.”²⁴⁰ Wells also highlights the role of mothers’ “training and influence” in developing their children’s “culture of mind.”²⁴¹ It is this article that made Golden feel “like saying something to mothers in regard to training their boys.”²⁴²

She had seen several things that made her worry about the boys of Zion. She had visited some of the monthly joint YWMIA and YMMIA meetings and found that “the girls take more interest, advance more rapidly, attend more regularly, and are more attentive to instructions than the boys are.”²⁴³ She continues:

I have also noticed in many families that parents do not seem to think their boys need any education, or refinement; they have no books or papers provided for them, from which they might gain knowledge, and appear only to wish them to know how to work. When they come in at evening, after their day’s work is done, instead of having the Bible, Book of Mormon, or some other good work for them to read, they find employment for their minds and hands by playing cards for pastime, or any frivolous game for amusement; thus their education is neglected, and their minds allowed to go to waste.²⁴⁴

Not only did parents fail to inculcate in boys this mental culture, allowing them to waste their time in frivolous amusements, but Golden “fear[ed] that . . . the parents allow their boys to grow up without teaching them to pray, or ask a blessing upon their food, or to acknowledge in any way the power of God.”²⁴⁵ The young men of the time were less spiritual or religious. This belief that men were perhaps innately less spiritual than women is reflected in a joke written in a St. George manuscript newspaper under the title “Hints for the Family.” It simply reads:

²⁴⁰ Emmeline B. Wells, “Education and Culture of Women,” *Woman’s Exponent*, May 1, 1878, 180.

²⁴¹ Wells, “Education and Culture of Women,” 180.

²⁴² Gipsy Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” *Woman’s Exponent*, June 15, 1878, 9.

²⁴³ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

²⁴⁴ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

²⁴⁵ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

“A wife can generally hide any small thing from her husband by hiding it in the Bible.”²⁴⁶ The joke appealed to an audience who recognized that men did not often read the scriptures. While funny to some, the idea could fill others, like Golden, with angst regarding men’s lack of spirituality. Likely for her, reading shaped one’s spirituality. To round out her list of complaints, Golden decries “how sadly are their manners neglected also!” They apparently would show up to parties or meetings with “hair uncombed, wearing their dirty overalls, without coats, and their breath smelling horribly of whiskey and tobacco.”²⁴⁷ In short, to Golden it seemed that when compared to the girls, the boys were not as sharp, not as faithful, not as spiritual, not as refined, and not as cultured. As far as fears of reading go, Golden was not so much concerned about what young men were reading as she was about the fact that young men did not seem to be reading at all.

Golden’s giving advice to the mothers of boys seems particularly brazen when one considers her admission, “I have no boys of my own.” Although she had no personal experience in raising sons, she still felt “a great desire to say or do something to improve the condition of our boys in Zion.”²⁴⁸ Perhaps she had daughters and felt dismayed at the prospect of her daughters marrying these unimpressive boys. But she may also have had no children. Either way, her letter demonstrates the import these issues held for a women who, though she had no boys of her own, felt that the improvement of the boys of Zion would “bring its own reward.”²⁴⁹ Golden does not go on to explain what this reward might be, but it seems that the most important of these rewards would be Mormon boys growing up to be her ideal of a true Mormon man: someone

²⁴⁶ “Hints for the Family,” *Bee Hive* (manuscript newspaper, St. George, UT) 1, no. 5 [1886?], p. 7, MSS A 1053, USHS.

²⁴⁷ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

²⁴⁸ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

²⁴⁹ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

who sought after spirituality, refrained from intemperate activities, and developed sharp minds. For Golden, reading books was an important part of shaping these kinds of men.

One fictitious story by Susa Young Gates, Brigham Young's daughter and an influential writer and editor, in the *Young Woman's Journal* presents a foil to an ideal Mormon manhood in the character of Leonard Fox. Through Leonard's tragic story, the reader is presented with characteristics that are the antithesis of Gates's version of Mormon manhood: selfishness instead of self-sacrifice, indifference instead of devotion, dissolution instead of discipline, emotionality instead of emotional control, and light reading instead of studiousness. At the center of Leonard's lack of manhood is his reading habits.

Gates begins her story with the admonition of a mother to her son: "Leonard Fox, if you don't stop reading them trashy novels, day after day and day after day you'll go clean crazy." When Leonard, age twenty, asks why, his mother responds, "Cause you act so silly after reading 'em. Stalk round like a theater-actor, and stand outdoors looking up at the sky when you ought to be chopping wood or milking the cows." After retorting with some ill-advised lip, Leonard's father calls him over to speak with him, also commanding him to stop his novel reading. Leonard complains, "Why, father, I have often heard you say that novel-reading was no worse than theatre-going." "It isn't," replies the father, "but your novels and your plays should be of the best and most elevating kinds. And further, they should be only a means of recreation, not comprise a man's whole and sole occupation. You are almost a man, my son, and you must turn over a new leaf." His father goes on to tell him that if he read the novels of George Eliot or Thackeray, perhaps it might be different. Seizing the book in Leonard's hand he exclaims, "Humph, as I thought, the worst of stuff—"Under Two Flags, by Ouida." Ouida's books are unfit for any one, man, woman or child to read, much less for a silly, high-strung boy like

yourself. There's Ouida for once in her right place.' Suiting the action to his words he flung the book between the flaming logs and at once dismissed his son."²⁵⁰

Ouida was the penname for Marie Louise Ramé, a European-based “literary phenomenon” who wrote “extravagant melodramatic romances of fashionable life” during the second half of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth.²⁵¹ When she first started writing, critics denounced her for poor grammar, supposedly incorrect literary illusions, and the immoral nature of her work.²⁵² Her books dealt with “late-Victorian ideas regarding sexuality, masculinity, femininity, commodification, marriage, and family” and contained “explicit sexual scenes and . . . sexual metaphors. Homoeroticism, incest, rape, marital abuse, seduction, adultery, voyeurism, and prostitution appear repeatedly in her fiction along with a kind of pedophilia.”²⁵³ Ouida was also an independent, unmarried woman earning a living from her pen who presented a public persona built on ostentation, excess, eccentricity, and scandal.²⁵⁴ Under *Two Flags*, the book Leonard's father burns, was wildly successful, Ouida's most famous at that point in time. The main character's name is Cigarette, a young woman who fights in the French Foreign legion: “She smokes, drinks, and gambles; she has had many lovers, none of whom she really loved, and she is preeminently interested in her own enjoyment.”²⁵⁵ In short, the content of her books and her public persona went against many values held by Mormons about sexuality, gender, marriage, and family, making her work the exemplar of trashy literature for Gates's story.

²⁵⁰ Homespun [Susa Young Gates], “Whatsoever a Man Soweth,” *Young Woman's Journal* 1, no. 1 (October 1889), 1–2.

²⁵¹ Natalie Schroeder and Shari Hodges Holt, *Ouida the Phenomenon: Evolving Social, Political, and Gender Concerns in Her Fiction* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 9; *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Ouida,” January 21, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ouida>.

²⁵² Schroeder and Holt, *Ouida the Phenomenon*, 24.

²⁵³ Schroeder and Holt, *Ouida the Phenomenon*, 10, 13.

²⁵⁴ Schroeder and Holt, *Ouida the Phenomenon*, 9.

²⁵⁵ Schroeder and Holt, *Ouida the Phenomenon*, 75.

However, that does not mean that Mormons did not read Ouida. In fact, decades later, Annie Wells Cannon would remember that “there was a time when young women read Ouida’s novels in the budoir and at the sound of a footstep hid them under a pillow, to day far plainer books are discussed in mixed society.”²⁵⁶ However, a clipping from the *Woman’s Exponent* complicates that notion. At the very end of the paper, the editor included a quote from one of Ouida’s novels: “How well society drills us!—that we meet with such calm impassiveness, in its routine, those with whom we have sorrowed, joyed, loved, and hated, in such different scenes.”²⁵⁷ Printing a book’s extract in a respected religiously oriented periodical, albeit on the last page, perhaps belies the idea that young girls only read Ouida’s books secretly in their beds. The *Exponent*’s use of this quote demonstrates that adult women, not just adolescents, read Ouida’s work and found at least a few lines worthy of reprinting. Gates’s choice to portray Leonard reading an Ouida novel could indicate that young men also read her work, demonstrating that romance reading was not the exclusive domain of women. However, her choice also indicates that she felt reading such fiction could emasculate men. This gendering of Ouida’s books likely leads to the fictitious father of Leonard to call him a silly, high-strung boy, one who needed to turn over a new leaf and become a man.

At this point in the story, the narrator steps in. Although Leonard was “weak not vicious, imaginative yet not lewd nor low; was truthful and moderately fond of his parents’ religion, Mormonism,” he could have had more character, steadiness, and patience. The narrator blames the “worldly prosperity of his father . . . [for] his weakening habit of novel-reading.” These words nicely sum up many of the fears for not only young men but for the next generation of Mormons as a whole. They had not converted to the faith and sacrificed so much to join the

²⁵⁶ Annie Wells Cannon, “Books as I know Them,” [1940?] MSS 2307, box 2, p. 13, LTPSC.

²⁵⁷ *Woman’s Exponent*, July 1, 1873, 24.

Saints in Utah; instead, they had simply been born into it, and merely feeling “moderately fond of [their] parents’ religion” would not be enough to keep them as steady and faithful members of Zion during this period of transition. The “worldly prosperity” of their parents, and the increasing access it gave to eastern goods, might also end up being the ruin of this next generation.²⁵⁸ For Gates, more purposeful parenting was needed to combat these dangers.

After the crying and sobbing “with boyish abandon” that followed the book burning, the story shifts to Leonard’s affection for a young woman named Dora. In his pursuit of Dora, he tries to act just as the lovers and heroes in his favorite novels. Doing so, according to the narrator, held great danger: “He little realized how constantly he was acting a part, posing before his own self as a character in fiction, in short so full was he of himself and his own likeness to greatness and romance that there was little space in his heart for true and genuine affection.” His lack of true affection comes to a head at a dance, where, in trying to win Dora’s affection, he completely and publicly embarrasses himself and looks very unmanly, especially when compared to his non–novel reading, down-to-earth brother, who also happens to admire Dora. Unsurprisingly, Dora rejects his advances.

In his despair at having been rejected, Leonard thought: “‘Oh, if I could but die,’ and the thought once in his mind, grew and grew. Had he not read of others taking their own lives? Were they not mourned by friends and relatives as others were?” He then pushes away a thought about what God will think of him (demonstrating a lack of spirituality) in committing suicide, only thinking what Dora will think of him. On what was to be his last night on earth, Leonard pulls out a novel to read (he had never abandoned the practice even after his parents’ admonitions),

²⁵⁸ Under the leadership of Brigham Young, Mormons had long sought for economic and cultural self-sufficiency in Utah. Young and other leaders strongly encouraged Mormons to use the money they had to support home-manufactured goods rather than goods from eastern states.

which happens to be Ouida's *Two Flags* again, instead of studying his law books, as his parents thought he was doing. He then downs an entire six-ounce bottle of laudanum and waits for death. In a drug-induced stupor, he thinks of his mother and sets out down the stairs to see her once last time before he dies. He presumably falls down the stairs, where his mother saves his life.²⁵⁹

Being rescued from the brink of death does not seem to change Leonard all that much. He dreams up another scheme to secure Dora's love—a scheme that again comes from his novel reading: "He would transfer his affections to some other girl, and through jealousy bring his scornful sweetheart to her senses." The first installment of this story ends with Leonard continuing to "read more trash than ever." As he did so, he "posed and acted, performing a part which he was constantly trying to make a reality, that what between his own selfishness and the constant weakening of his resolves by novel-reading, his mind was unable to see things in their true light, and his mental vision was, as it were, distorted and inverted."²⁶⁰

The second installment begins with Leonard putting his plan of jealousy into action, which ends with his marriage to another woman besides Dora. He does not seem to truly love her and leaves her at home pregnant with their child while he goes off to study law back East. But thanks to the "hard and continuous study," Leonard receives a "partial awakening from his stupid day-dreams. He began gradually to see the folly of his past course. How his fatal habits had been almost as debauching as drink." Here Gates provides an antidote for novel reading. It is only when Leonard begins to diligently study law, useful knowledge, that he begins to see things clearly. Yet the narrator sadly notes that she is "not writing of things as they might be or should be, in the realms of romantic fiction; but of things as they are; and of this particular event as it really happened in our work-a-day life right here, in Utah." This means that Leonard's vice of

²⁵⁹ Gates, "Whatsoever a Man Soweth," 6–7.

²⁶⁰ Gates, "Whatsoever a Man Soweth," 1–2.

novel reading was extremely difficult to abandon. Only prayer and faith could ultimately cure him.²⁶¹

The climax of the story arrives when Leonard begins to think of his “little wife at home” and decides to return. Tragically, his wife dies in childbirth before Leonard leaves for Utah. Upon receiving news of her death, he turns “raving mad.” The narrator then flatly condemns the lack of manhood in Leonard brought about by novels: “Aye, the selfish mind weakend by habitual mental intoxication and disobedience to counsel, the manhood enervated by neglect of energy and manly duty, even in its agony selfishly counting once and for all, its own loss, its own remorse gave way and reason fled from its throne before the shrieking demons who entered that temple of mortality.”²⁶²

Leonard does return to Utah. He shapes up and begins to care for his daughter. But “he never dares read a story or novel. Not even the very best. He warns every young person he meets never to read novels.” But the story closes with one character disagreeing with Leonard’s new strict proscription. “Still I think he carries his warning to an excess,” she says. “Young folks like something bright and gay to read. And books or novels are as great an educator as the theater. I only wish we had novels or stories written by our own people, with proper lessons taught therein. As for Leonard, he denies himself the least sort of story. Yet is he Leonard still.”²⁶³ According to Gates and her story, fiction, in moderation, is not itself evil. But novels that come from outside of Utah should be read with special care. If only Mormons themselves would take up their pens and write interesting, instructional, and wholesome fiction then would the appeal of Ouida and other “trash” be lessened.

²⁶¹ Homespun [Susa Young Gates], “Whatsoever a Man Soweth,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 1, no. 2 (November 1889): 47.

²⁶² Gates, “Whatsoever a Man Soweth,” 47–49.

²⁶³ Gates, “Whatsoever a Man Soweth,” 50.

Overall, Gates's story focuses on the excessive indulgence in the wrong kind of fiction, especially its consequences for Mormon manhood. Novels directly lead to Leonard's lack of manhood and the destruction of his family. His ability to feel true, genuine love for a woman—whether Dora or his wife—is replaced with grandiose notions about romance and his desire to play the part of one of his favorite romantic heroes. His sense of manly duty is also debased. Instead of staying at home to care for his pregnant wife, he abandons her to chase after his own desires outside of Utah. While many Mormon men were separated from wives and children for years at a time as missionaries or as fugitives from antipolygamy legislation, constantly trying to evade federal marshals, in no way would they ever be described as failing to fulfill their manly duty. These missionaries felt true love for their families, but they also loved God and understood their duty to him to preach the gospel throughout the world, which required sacrifice. Love of family should not supersede love of God. Although missionaries and Leonard both left families, missionaries were cast as willing to sacrifice their own desire for the good of Zion; Leonard was merely self-indulgent and selfish. This selfishness created pain and suffering for Leonard's family. The lack of emotional and mental stability brought on by the novel reading also seem to fly in the face of even keel, grounded Mormon manhood. In this story there is a deep angst about what indulgent fiction reading can do to men. During a time when the federal government targeted polygamous men and when the future of Mormons' marriage system seemed up in the air, Gates felt the next generation needed to be full of dutiful, loving, manly men who would act as good husbands toward Utah's women.

But self-improvement through reading and writing could provide an avenue to remedy the perceived lack of spirituality and mental culture of the next generation of men. For example, take the inaugural issue of the *Surprise*, a manuscript newspaper for the YMMIA in Ogden,

Utah. In one article, S. P. Richards (likely Samuel Parker Richards, a thirty-eight-year-old who had been married almost ten years) lays out why writing and reading a manuscript newspaper is “one of the greatest priviliges within our reach.”²⁶⁴ Richards hoped that young men being able to submit their ““little piece”” to the paper would help young men to exercise their minds, develop God-given talents, and instruct and amuse fellow association members.

Although self-improvement served as one impetus for starting a manuscript newspaper, Richards’s article makes clear that it was not the only reason. That reason perhaps stemmed from the fact that many of the YMMIA members in Ogden were approaching or already were of marriageable age. It seems that, recently, the young women of Ogden had started their own manuscript newspaper, the Young Ladies’ Advocate, and a desire to compete with the young women may have been another catalyst for the Surprise. Richards admits that “some excellent articles have appeared in the ‘Young Ladies’ Advocate.”” This means that at least some of those involved in the local YMMIA read the Advocate, or perhaps they just heard it read aloud during the monthly joint meetings of the young men and young ladies’ MIA. In any case, he encourages the young men to compete against their counterparts, saying, “There is plenty of talent in the young men’s association to make a lively, instructive and interesting paper,” so “why should we not show some of equal, if not of superior merit” than the writers of the Young Ladies’ Advocate? “Wake up boys,” Richards cheers, “and show your determination not to let the fair sex outstrip you in the edition of a truly meritorious manuscript paper. We only wish to excel on our merits and to do so we will have to wake up and work diligently, for our sisters have now got

²⁶⁴ S. P. Richards, “Listen and I Will Tell You,” *The Surprise* (manuscript newspaper, Ogden, UT,) 1, no. 1, February 14, 1887, p. 5, LR 6391 29, CHL; “United States Census, 1900,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6S7Q-V69?cc=1325221&wc=9B7R-442%3A1030549801%2C1030568601%2C1030705101> : 5 August 2014), Idaho > Blaine > ED 27 Tikura, Era, Island, Little Wood River, Silver Creek, Wapi Precincts > image 16 of 24; citing NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

their hand in, and the start they have in the race will necessitate us putting our ‘best foot’ forward and our broad shoulders to the wheel.”²⁶⁵

Perhaps Richards’s words merely indicate some sort of a friendly competition. But why make it a competition at all? Richards’s article perhaps provides some insight into the gendered culture of letters within Mormonism. Competing to create the best manuscript newspaper does not have obvious goals. In running manuscript newspapers intended as exercises for young people, editors were not probably competing for subscribers or readers. When Richards refers to the sisters already having their “hand in” and a head start “in the race,” what race is he talking about? Is it the race of self-improvement, of public perception regarding the young men and women of Ogden, or something else entirely?

If discussing the race of self-improvement, the fact that many of the young men of the MIA were approaching marriageable age perhaps has something to do with their desire (or demonstrates pressure from their leaders or others) to start a paper and improve themselves. Just as Gipsy Golden in the *Woman’s Exponent* had warned years earlier, “Alas! how can a woman be happy with a man who has no idea in common with her; one who has never read anything to improve his mind, or studied refinement, or elevation, or sought for spiritual knowledge, as she has?”²⁶⁶ These ideas about men being unmatched intellectual companions for women, of not being able to keep them happy through intelligent, well-read, well-reasoned discussion, perhaps influenced the decision to debut the *Surprise* and Richards’s gendered call to action. While Richards himself was already married, this article may have been an attempt to cast himself as a capable literary man, not one of the men about whom Golden might have worried.

²⁶⁵ Richards, “Listen and I Will Tell You,” 6.

²⁶⁶ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

By stoking a “determination not to let the fair sex outstrip you” and a “wish to excel on our merits,” Richards also seems to prod the young men to claim a budding manliness and push back against this rhetoric of men’s lackluster nature. They wanted to achieve success on their own merits as men, without any help from the “fair sex.” Their success seemed to be predicated upon creating a paper better than that of the young women, an act that they hoped would proclaim their intellectual superiority for all to read and hear. It seems that the division of the MIA into different branches for young men and young women, as well as the decision to create manuscript newspapers as organs to those gendered branches (sometimes), created a local culture of letters in which young men and young women interacted with each other in a discursive sphere. In this sphere, Richards seems to be pushing back against ideas that men are unmatched with the young women spiritually and intellectually. For Richards, not only could they match the young women, they could do work that was “superior.” This occurred in a context in which Mormon women had increasing contact with non-Mormon men in Utah, which could have led to anxieties for young men about losing out on marriage partners.²⁶⁷

Mormon Womanhood

As ideas about femininity, marriage, and reading were in flux, Mormon writers discussed the connection between all three. They argued about the importance of reading and what reading and education might mean for women’s femininity and marriages. Many argued that a real woman should be one who focused on her own mental culture instead of merely on fashion or looking pretty for men. In doing so, Mormon women would be able to elevate themselves to an equal station with men. They were not radical feminists seeking to overturn the patriarchal nature of

²⁶⁷ Daynes, *More Wives Than One*, 199.

Mormon society, but they did want to demonstrate that women were equally intelligent as men and equally important before God.

In Mormon society, education for women became particularly important, especially as Mormons somewhat altered the concept of separate spheres. For younger girls, education in the 1880s and 1890s consisted of public elementary and intermediate schools, academies and colleges for a basic secondary education, and YLMIA.s.²⁶⁸ As for older women, in 1870 Mormon women became the first US citizens to vote. In 1872 they were admitted to the bar in Utah and encouraged by Brigham Young to enroll in medical school in the East so as to improve medical care in Utah. They also attended institutions of higher education in Utah, some becoming faculty members and trustees.²⁶⁹ Education for women, therefore, meant more than just ensuring that they would be able to teach their children. Educated women could contribute in the public sphere.

In this context, some writers disparaged a vision of Mormon femininity that focused merely on beauty. In a manuscript newspaper for both young men and young women in St. George, someone who merely calls himself or herself “A Scrutinizer” believed that the young women of today had little depth. “The girl of today,” writes the author, “is raised up in the parlor, to be an ornament and nothing more.”²⁷⁰ The author then comments on the lack of depth in education: “Her education consists of a few lessons in grammar, Latin, music and drawing. She completes nothing. A few years after she graduates she remembers nothing but her school flirtations.”²⁷¹ Ultimately, the author concludes, “She can dance, she can flirt, she can make love

²⁶⁸ Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 253.

²⁶⁹ Carol Cornwall Madsen, *Emmeline B. Wells: An Intimate History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017), 193.

²⁷⁰ A Scrutinizer, “The Girl of Today,” *Bee Hive* (manuscript newspaper, St. George, UT) 2, no. 4, January 4, 1887, p. 8.

²⁷¹ Scrutinizer, “The Girl of Today,” p. 9.

as no other girl in this wide world can do, but when we have said that, we have said all that possibly can be said in her favor. She is beautiful, charming, and always interesting, but she is a mere ornament and nothing more.”²⁷² Essentially, it would be difficult to have a happy and successful marriage with a woman like this, and some of the defining features of that woman were a lack of depth and a squandering of educational opportunity.

According to some, this vision of Mormon femininity came about because Mormon women had the wrong priorities: they worried far too much about fashion than about improving themselves intellectually. One writer for the *Women’s Exponent* addressed this subject. She “felt how heavily the chains of Eve have hung upon woman.”²⁷³ Once, “when a dreaming, aspiring girl,” she was happy “to think that [she] was born in an age when women would rise above the dead level of mediocrity to a higher understanding and practise of life!” But having “grown mature and more observant” she lost her faith in such an ideal. She now believed “that women are more enslaved to-day than ever before by fetters of their own making.”²⁷⁴

The fetters she refers to are the fetters of fashion, and these fetters keep women from reading, studying, and becoming educated. She writes: “Converse with the majority of women upon the subject of the higher education of our sex, and what is the response? They have no time to study. . . . The truth is, their manner of dressing and living is injurious to the health, and arbitrary Fashion demands all their leisure—she will accept no half-hearted worship. . . . How can a woman, devoted to fashion, fancy work and fashionable society, find time to study higher things, or to cultivate herself to a higher intellectual life?”²⁷⁵

²⁷² Scrutinizer, “The Girl of Today,” p. 9.

²⁷³ Ruby Lamont, “The Idol of To-Day,” *Woman’s Exponent*, July 1, 1887, 17.

²⁷⁴ Lamont, “The Idol of To-Day,” 17.

²⁷⁵ Lamont, “The Idol of To-Day,” 17.

But this desire for Mormon women to be educated over fashionable could create problems for single women in a culture that placed such theological and social importance on marriage. They argued that Mormon men wanted to marry those who exhibited a femininity based on fashion, not erudition. These men deserved at least some of the blame for women of the rising generation ending up as “old maids.” One writer in the *Woman’s Exponent* believed that “the sensible girls of this generation will mostly be old maids, because men go in for the girls who giggle the most, who are dashing, who sport the most false hair, and who pad the most atrociously.”²⁷⁶ Annie Wells Cannon said some men “prefer a woman ‘who is pretty and does not know too much,’” a woman whose “eyes are a beautiful color but . . . lack the clear intelligent light that should beam from them.”²⁷⁷ The prospect of choosing to be either a learned, cultivated old maid or a fashion-focused married woman must have been difficult for some. These men, who held so much power in the marriage market, were reinforcing one idea of Mormon femininity at the expense of another.

To emphasize the importance of being an intelligent, well-read woman, Ruby Lamont discusses women’s fears not just about getting married but about retaining their husbands’ love after marriage. She bemoans how women spend “the little life allotted to us” by “trying to look pretty and attracting the love and admiration (?) of the other sex. Their admiration! Would not their admiration for something higher and better be more acceptable to a thoughtful and noble woman?” She then warns: “Ah, sisters, you who depend upon fashion to hold for you the love of husband or lover will discover soon enough how transient such love can be!”²⁷⁸ Just as outward

²⁷⁶ Kate Thorn, “The Sensible Girls of This Generation,” *Woman’s Exponent*, January 1, 1874, 120.

²⁷⁷ Camelia [Annie Wells Cannon], “The Same Education for Young Men and Young Ladies,” *Woman’s Exponent* November 15, 1879, 89; Susanna Morrill, *White Roses on the Floor of Heaven: Mormon Women’s Popular Theology, 1880–1920* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 85.

²⁷⁸ Lamont, “The Idol of To-Day,” 17.

beauty was transient and faded with age, so was a spouse's admiration that rested on that beauty. But being thoughtful, well-read, and educated might provide a more solid basis for lasting marital love. This message might have been particularly poignant to Mormon women who feared their husbands marrying more wives, perhaps younger and more beautiful ones. Reading, books, and education could add to these women's sense of security in their marriage, one that was based off of intellectual parity instead of purely physical attraction.

Marriage

These discussions about what made a true Mormon man or woman and what role reading played in their creation also blended directly with discussions about what an ideal Mormon marriage looked like. Many Mormon women claimed a vision of marriage that included equally matched spouses, a marriage that could be emotionally and intellectually fulfilling as husband and wife discussed books and ideas with one another. In such a marriage, true love could flourish. Books and reading roles in creating such a marriage were paramount.

Although many women lauded the increased educational opportunities for girls and women,²⁷⁹ others still pointed to a gender gap in education, with negative consequences for marriages and families. One writer for the *Women's Exponent*, Annie Wells Cannon, titled her article "The Same Education for Young Men and Young Ladies." For Cannon, far too many girls failing to receive an equal education as their brothers, and there was no reason that "sons should be better acquainted with the arts and sciences, and other things pertaining to the development of the mind, than your daughters."²⁸⁰ She understands that not all families have the means to provide for equal education, but, she argues, then "give the best opportunity to the one most

²⁷⁹ Emmeline B. Wells, "Education and Culture of Women," *Woman's Exponent*, May 1, 1878, 180.

²⁸⁰ Cannon, "The Same Education," 89.

likely to profit by it”—whether son or daughter.²⁸¹ By doing this, Cannon seems to believe the state of books in the world would be better: “If this example had been followed from the beginning, the world would contain more works of true merit and not half so much rubbish.”²⁸² While these family resources definitely applied to formal schooling away from the home, it also referred to informal schooling in the home, in which case the purchase of books might eat up some of the family’s income.

For Cannon, this gender gap in education led to problems in marriage. The first problem was one of sociality. “Men are often ashamed to take their wives with them among learned people, because they are so ignorant,” she writes. “And even if they do take them, the wife seldom enjoys it, because she knows nothing of what is going on.”²⁸³ But “if girls were educated like boys, there would be none of this. A man would be proud to take his wife with him anywhere, and would love to bring learned and noted people to his house to meet her.”²⁸⁴ A lack of learning embarrassed both husband and wife at gatherings of “learned people.” A perfect example of this sentiment again comes from Cannon’s own journal. Shortly after her marriage, she wrote:

I have decided that though I am taken up with my household duties I will not neglect my former advantages for I think it more necessary than ever that I should educate myself and be a cultivated and refined woman I do not mean to deteriorate. I dont intend to carry my kitchen and cooking into the parlor as some women do. I know some who entertain Senators and such dignitaries with these subjects. How to make puddings, soup etc. How much paregoric they give their children etc. just as if such things interest a Senator. I mean to read and have parlor subjects for the parlor and leave the kitchen subjects in the kitchen.²⁸⁵

²⁸¹ Cannon, “The Same Education,” 89.

²⁸² Cannon, “The Same Education,” 89.

²⁸³ Cannon, “The Same Education,” 89.

²⁸⁴ Cannon, “The Same Education,” 89.

²⁸⁵ Cannon, journal, May 24, 1880, p. 21.

Having grown up in a literary household and having read many books in her youth, Cannon did not want her new domestic duties to cause her to “deteriorate.” She wished to make clear to any potential parlor guests that her sphere of interests and learning extended beyond cooking and caring for children; she would be well acquainted with politics, literature, and any other “parlor subject.” For Cannon, taking time to read and improve herself would help prepare her for just the sorts of engagements that she discusses in her Exponent article.

The second problem was that, for Cannon, ignorance on the woman’s part made it difficult for the man to truly love her. “They love these wives, because ‘they are such excellent cooks, and have such submissive dispositions;’ but they do not love them with the true, generous love of the soul, that would be impossible, because their tastes are different and they are not equally matched.” But if educated, if well-read, then “he would love to sit with her in the evening, when the day’s labor is done, reading their favorite books, or discussing popular subjects. Too often do we hear of a man spending his evenings away from home, because there is nothing there to interest him—no congenial spirit; and no one likes to read and discuss subjects with himself. One needs a companion in his joys as much as in his sorrows.”²⁸⁶ But in this example, being well-read is not for the benefit of the wife (except for feeling more confident in social functions or having her husband at home more); the focus seems more on providing for the husband’s wants, and blame is placed upon the woman for her husband’s decision to spend time outside of the home. Ultimately, Cannon’s words indicate the importance of books and intellectual discussion in marriage—here marriage became not just about being economic partners or a support system in “sorrows” but one in which equally matched companions could experience “joys.” Joyous marriages would keep men at home with their wives. For Cannon, this

²⁸⁶ Cannon, “The Same Education,” 89.

problem was existential. She worries: “Is it possible that we are degenerating?”²⁸⁷ What exactly she means by this is not clear, but her use of the word degenerating in the article, coupled with her use of the word deteriorate in her journal, to describe their state perhaps indicates a sense that self-improvement became particularly difficult after marriage and childbirth, with their attendant duties. Perhaps she was reminiscing on an earlier time when, as a single woman, she had more time for self-improvement. Whatever her meaning, she indicated the importance of continuing self-education for women once married.

For young women, they were told the time to study, read, and enrich their minds was now, as a young person, because it would only get more difficult to find time to study as an adult. One young woman wrote the following in a manuscript newspaper: “A friend once said to me young lady read and store your mind with good things before you take up the burdens of a wife and mother, for then you will find that you will have something else to do, and if you do not have a good supply stored away you will be weighed and found wanting.”²⁸⁸ If young women did not take advantage of their youth to study and read, their marriages would be negatively affected, probably in the manner Cannon describes above. It also hints at the importance of reading for being a mother (discussed in the next section).

Gypsy Golden also believed there was a discrepancy between boys and girls that would become a problem during marriage, although she blamed the boys for this. As discussed above, she believed that the young women of the current generation were outperforming the young men in their MIA classes, and she worried if young men were reading at all. She wondered: “But, alas! how can a woman be happy with a man who has no idea in common with her; one who has never read anything to improve his mind, or studied refinement, or elevation, or sought for

²⁸⁷ Cannon, “The Same Education,” 89.

²⁸⁸ *Bee Hive* 2, no 2, [n.d.], p. [2].

spiritual knowledge, as she has?”²⁸⁹ Golden’s letter indicates that intellectual stimulation and equality was an important source of happiness for some women within marriage. The ability to discuss ideas and books that had been read could prove to be a boon for couples. Since marriage—monogamous as well as polygamous—was key not only to Latter-day Saint society but to theology, anything that threatened it needed to be nipped in the bud, and anything that could strengthen it should be encouraged. It seems she believed that keeping young men away from dissolute habits and encouraging them to read a bit more could help them turn into husbands more likely to read the scriptures or spend an evening in substantive discussion with their wives rather than spend money on vices or their time away from the home.

In short, as Mormons discussed the importance of reading, they also hashed out an ideal vision of marriage in which studious, virtuous, loving men and educated, unadorned women formed a well-matched couple. This vision of matrimony was one that advocated love, connection, and intellectual fulfilment.

Parenthood

Young Mormons were also expected to become good parents, parents who would raise their children to live as faithful members of Zion during a difficult time of transition. As parents and other Mormon writers debated about various topics regarding reading, they revealed their anxieties surrounding their ability to raise faithful, believing children in what seemed to be an increasingly difficult world for Mormon families. Would they as parents be up to the challenge? Would their children choose to continue to be Mormons? These questions were real and troubling. They had a deep faith that the right kind of reading could transform them into more prepared parents and it could create a nurturing and enjoyable home life for children, one that

²⁸⁹ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

would protect them from the wicked influences of the street. To faithfully raise their children, parents also needed to become the most immediate cultural arbiter in their children's lives, guiding them along the path of discovering appropriate reading and eschewing what was not.

Responsibility of Mothers

During this time period, the responsibilities for child rearing mostly fell upon mothers. For instance, in 1878 Emmeline B. Wells wrote in the *Women's Exponent* that "much of the culture of mind and deportment depends upon the homelife, the early impressions, the associations of childhood, the atmosphere of the surroundings, the tone of the elements which characterize the mother's training and influence."²⁹⁰ In 1889 the *Contributor* printed several quotes from president of the church Brigham Young, who had now been dead for over a decade. These quotes said in no uncertain terms that mothers were ultimately the ones responsible for their children's proper education and development: "If your children do not receive impressions of true piety, virtue, tenderness, and every principle of the holy Gospel, you may be assured that their sins will not be required at the hands of the father, but of the mother." Another quote read, "Hear it again! The blood of these wicked children will be required at the hands of their mothers."²⁹¹ So while this section deals with parenthood and Mormons sometimes used this gender-neutral term, mothers ultimately had a far heavier burden and responsibility placed upon their shoulders when it came to raising children to be believing and faithful Mormons.

Parent Preparation

Some Mormons also felt that reading was an essential part of preparing to parent. One source stands out because of how it touches on several different themes: angst, hope, gender, motherhood, and education of young people. Reading seems to connect all of them together and

²⁹⁰ Emmeline B. Wells, "Education and Culture of Women," *Woman's Exponent*, May 1, 1878, 180.

²⁹¹ Brigham Young, "Education," *Contributor*, June 1889, 281-83.

provide a recourse of action for the author of this letter. On February 17, 1876, a woman simply signed Louvina wrote to the *Woman's Exponent*. It is not clear whether or not Louvina really existed or if the editor created a fictitious character for didactic purposes. In any case, she had recently read an article in the last issue of the *Exponent* titled "Affectation." The article particularly called out fiction readers, who the author felt had no internal strength of character, as they often tried to imitate the stories' characters. Such people were "liable to be drifted hither and thither . . . [to] the will of a stronger mind."²⁹² Louvina wrote, this article "set me to thinking and I felt I must commit some of my thoughts to paper and send them to you."²⁹³

This article motivated Louvina to take up her pen. As mentioned before, it is possible she was not a real person. She could have been a rhetorical device used by an editor to demonstrate the appropriate way to read the "Affectation" article, internalize it, and act upon it. She begins her letter by describing how she enjoys the *Exponent* and that she only regrets not appreciating and subscribing to it before. She says all Latter-day Saints should take it, especially since the alternative was "the trashy papers which come from the outside world."²⁹⁴

She then delves in to what seems to be a source of her angst: "I have many times been asked by Gentiles whom I have met, about my religion, and when they have brought up arguments against our belief and practices, I have not been able to refute them."²⁹⁵ These experiences impressed upon her mind how necessary it was for young people (and herself) to "study the principles and doctrines in which we believe, and instead of being so anxious to read the last new novel, we should be enriching our minds, and storing up useful knowledge for the future time when we are called upon to take the places of our older sisters who are now at the

²⁹² "Affectation," *Woman's Exponent*, February 15, 1876, 140–41.

²⁹³ "Affectation," 140; Louvina, letter to the editor, *Woman's Exponent*, March 15, 1876, 155.

²⁹⁴ Louvina, letter to the editor, 155.

²⁹⁵ Louvina, letter to the editor, 155.

head of our societies.”²⁹⁶ She indicates here that women and girls have an obligation to learn how to defend the faith, especially as Eliza R. Snow, Zina D. H. Young, Bathsheba W. Smith, and other “leading sisters”—that is, the elite circle of Mormon female leaders—continued to age.²⁹⁷ Eventually, a new generation of Mormon women would have to take the place of their foremothers in defending their beliefs, polygamy, and their way of life.

But that time seemed to have arrived even before the passing of these great women. Louvina acknowledges that women were not called on foreign missions to preach (and defend) their faith. Men served missions, leaving Utah behind to do so, so previously they were the ones who needed to possess the knowledge necessary to effectively preach and defend. However, although women did not serve missions, Louvina says, “We have many opportunities for vindicating the tenets of our church.”²⁹⁸ The increasing contact that Utah Mormons experienced with non-Mormons began to change the responsibilities of ordinary Mormon women: they too would be responsible for defending the “tenets of [their] church”—not just male missionaries or elite female leaders.

Louvina’s reaction to the “Affectation” article also centers around her fears and hopes as a mother. The article had taught, “All persons who have arrived at the age of understanding [meaning eight years old] should be able to give ‘a reason for the hope that is within them.’”²⁹⁹ This exhortation seems to have laid a great burden at the feet of a young mother like Louvina, who would primarily be held responsible for the education of her children. She wondered, “And besides we who are, and those who will some time be the mothers of sons; can we teach them

²⁹⁶ Louvina, letter to the editor, 155.

²⁹⁷ Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, “The ‘Leading Sisters’: A Female Hierarchy in Nineteenth Century Mormon Society,” *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 25–39.

²⁹⁸ Louvina, letter to the editor, 155.

²⁹⁹ “Affectation,” 140.

aright; Can we instill good principles into their young minds; and bring them up in such a manner that they will be able to take their part in helping to bear off the kingdom, when those who are now at the head shall have passed behind the veil?”³⁰⁰ She worried that if she did not “exert every nerve, and watch and pray always” and failed to teach them well, then when her children grew up and if they were not worthy, “there will be no place for them in the Church of our Lord, and they will look back to their childish days and blame me, their mother, for not implanting the Gospel truths into their youthful minds.”³⁰¹

What was Louvina’s response to these pressures and hopes? She wrote: “Therefore, let us young sisters quit all this light reading and attend our meetings, where we will receive good instructions; let us improve every opportunity, read and study our Church Books, and prepare ourselves to be worthy mothers to the great and noble spirits, who are to come forth in this last day and generation.” She directly tied eschewing light reading and engaging in useful reading to her ability to effectively defend the church and to raise believing, contributing members of that church. Although church leaders and cultural arbiters had often decried the evils of fiction, it seems that many Latter-day Saints continued to read it despite the proscription. But this instance perhaps reveals a pattern of how novel reading ebbed and flowed among ordinary Mormons. In times of relative calm, Mormon readers could engage in novel reading without too much regret. But when certain events—such as Louvina not being able to respond adequately to her non-Mormon neighbor, in conjunction with a poignant article—triggered deep-seated Mormon anxieties; regret and remorse filled novel readers for time wasted. These emotions sparked a desire to reform, laying aside light reading and taking up “Church books.”

³⁰⁰ Louvina, letter to the editor, 155.

³⁰¹ Louvina, letter to the editor, 155.

One letter, from a woman simply signed Saloame, to the *Woman's Exponent* demonstrates that one does not perhaps necessarily be a biological mother to the youth that an adult could shape. Saloame begins her letter with feelings of deep inadequacy, noting how in comparison to the writings of women like Germaine de Staël, George Eliot, and George Sand her “tiny buds of thought wither and look unspeakably mean.” Saloame acknowledges that she is not one of “the cultivated few” but one of “the thoughtless masses,” who reads the papers, not the “giants of literature.” Perhaps this is false modesty: after all, how could she know her writing was inadequate unless she had read Staël, Eliot, and Sand? In any case, does this mean she should not continue to read and to write due to her own professed ignorance? She asks herself:

Shall I not sit in the gates and point the way to the fair temples above, because I cannot reach my weak hands up to grasp the ponderous key? Must I sit sullenly down and refuse to hold a helping hand to aid the climber who, down, still farther down than I, but feebly walks among the rubbish and debris? Because, forsooth, I may not ever reach the lofty top and hear the glorious music peal from crag to crag, nor smell the freshness of the flowers divine, may I not upward point the way to one, who, catching the refrain, is fired to struggle on and cling to that strong, mental staff, an aim in life?

“No,” she answers. “I’ll be myself an earnest worker, and with voice and pen will seek to waken fruitful thought in heedless youth—to elevate myself, and through the force of my example, linked with searching words, portray to those around me the beauty of a studious life.”³⁰²

For Saloame, self-improvement was not only for her benefit; it was also to provide an example for the “heedless youth” around her. As she progressed in reading, learning, and knowledge, her example would lift others up with her. It is interesting that these heedless youth do not seem to be her own children. Perhaps this reflects the communal ideals of Zion, in which the community played an important role in the education of children—not just parents. It could also reflect Saloame’s desire to publicly justify her quest for additional improvement. Since one

³⁰² Saloame, “Letter,” *Woman's Exponent*, May 15, 1881, 192.

reason why Mormon women received education related to being able to properly raise their children, and because Saloame perhaps lacked children of her own, her claim to set an example for the heedless youth around her highlights her need to justify why she wanted to grow and “reach the lofty top” of continual improvement.

Protecting Children

Part of the responsibility of being a parent was creating the right atmosphere for children. This atmosphere needed to be fun, stimulating, and safe from the increasing temptations available to Mormon youth, and reading seemed to be the ideal activity to accomplish these goals.

Returning to the letter written by Gipsy Golden, we read how this responsibility for creating this nurturing atmosphere landed specifically with mothers, whom she hoped to “awaken . . . to a knowledge of the importance of their duties.”³⁰³ “O, sisters!” she wrote, “let us try to take more pains with our children, and have books and amusements ready for them, so that they may remain at home, contented and happy, and not have any excuse to go to saloons, or billiard halls, for enjoyment.”³⁰⁴ Zion’s boys needed to “learn to spend their money for good books, instead of whiskey and tobacco, and instead of their evil habits form good ones.”³⁰⁵ A young man who did not read was on a slippery slope, one that would lead to spending free time outside of the home (where the mother could influence him) and on the streets and in the taverns. Drinking, gambling, and wasting money, these boys would devolve into dissolute men who were unfit for marriage and the eternal promises of God. Golden had such faith in books that she believed if mothers would just provide books to their sons, they would stay home reading instead of forming evil habits.

³⁰³ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

³⁰⁴ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

³⁰⁵ Golden, “Hints to Mothers,” 9.

One way to make sure young people had enjoyed their home atmosphere was by making sure readers were not only trained to read silently but to read out loud. One author, Henry Naisbitt, in the *Contributor* called reading out loud “one of the fine arts.” He bemoaned how “there are many silent readers, but few who can read to others as readers should read. Books, magazines and newspapers are being multiplied, but to secure reading, that is, the ability to read in an accomplished or correct manner, there is needed a vast amount of judicious and faithful training.” Apparently, in order to receive this training, many of the youth and teachers in Utah had been “taking lessons from a famed reader of this country; his public displays have given evidence of intense study in this grand art.”³⁰⁶ Edwin Hamill, formerly a professor of English literature, rhetoric, and elocution at the Illinois Wesleyan University and the author of the *Science of Elocution*, gave public readings and reading courses throughout 1880–81.³⁰⁷ The twenty individuals who benefitted from two courses of lessons with Hamill in Pleasant Grove, Utah, felt it had done much good for them: “Elocution has given a higher tone to reading and acting than has ever been known here before, and we will try not to retrograde into the old sing-song style again.”³⁰⁸ The goal of teaching ordinary people elocution was not to create professional readers or actors; instead, for Naisbitt, “Ordinary readers want to master ordinary reading matter, that which belongs to our sacred books, to current literature, to the daily press.” In mastering ordinary reading matter, readers might cause “even familiar words [to] glow again with new beauty and come with new force upon every repetition.”

Masterful readers had the power to create delightful home environments:

³⁰⁶ H. W. Naisbitt, “Reading,” *Contributor*, June 1881, 280.

³⁰⁷ “Prof. S. S. Hamill and Daughter,” *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, November 13, 1880, 3; “Hamill the Elocutionist,” *Deseret Evening News*, October 26, 1880, 3; “Pleasant Grove Items,” *Territorial Enquirer*, March 30, 1881, 3.

³⁰⁸ “Pleasant Grove Items,” 3.

Who would not like that good readers should be increased in number? Who is there that is not fascinated by the well rendered music of our mother tongue? Who would not like so fine an accomplishment, as a permanent feature of the domestic circle? Would not every hearthstone, every home, have one more satisfying and enjoyable attraction if those who gather, who dwell there, were thus able to aid in that communion of soul with soul, which consists in the reproduction of the best thoughts of the gifted and master minds of all the ages of the past? And would not love for thought, for literature, for art, for poetry, for science, for history, for revelation and inspiration, be wonderfully increased and be better appreciated by a faithful rendering of the spirit of the great original.

It would make family togetherness enjoyable, ensuring young people wanted to be home; would knit family members together; and would inspire all to appreciate the beautiful and the godly that could be found in good books. They would increase in their love “for thought, for literature, for art, for poetry, for science, for history, for revelation and inspiration.” They would learn to love knowledge, whether it came from revelation or a science textbook. Reading out loud was one way for parents to also serve as cultural arbiters because they could read books to their children that were exemplars of the kind of literature that should be read. With all of these benefits readily available, Naisbitt charged, “Let, then, our young men, our young ladies, learn to read, to read aright, to read well, to read intelligently, to read aloud—to others.”³⁰⁹ If they did, they could entertain and instruct their children one day when they became parents.

Reading out loud in the home could also provide an important opportunity to control how readers interpreted books and messages. Just as the Wasatch Literary Society had made leaders and parents nervous about their unsupervised literary activities, so could the unsupervised act of reading silently. As Alberto Manguel has noted, “Allowing someone else to speak the words on a page for us is an experience far less personal than holding the book and following the text with our own eyes. . . . The ceremony of being read to no doubt deprives the listener of some of the freedom inherent in the act of reading—choosing a tone, stressing a point, returning to a best-

³⁰⁹ Naisbitt, “Reading,” 280–81.

loved passage.”³¹⁰ Reading out loud provided a ready-made space where parents could interpret books in ways that matched Mormon values. In doing so, Mormons were drawing on a long-standing Protestant tradition of setting aside time each day to read the Bible (or other books) aloud as a family.³¹¹

Another way that parents were to protect their children was by serving as the most immediate cultural arbiters for their children, helping them to understand what constituted worthwhile reading and what would be harmful reading. Especially as printed material became evermore available after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, and as dissident groups like the Godbeites established their own Liberal Institute for learning, Mormon parents likely had more reason to fear and wonder what their children were reading and how it might affect them. A speech or article by William Mendenhall, titled “True Education What Is It?” explicitly discussed this role of parents. Mendenhall had been born in Delaware, converted to the church in 1841, and came to Utah (specifically Springville) in 1852, eventually serving a mission in 1876.³¹² Mendenhall begins: “Parents and others who have the care of children can scarcely attach too much importance to the subject of selecting or providing for them proper reading matter.” He recognized that reading was important and that parents needed little convincing to teach their children to read. But in teaching their children to only read, parents failed in their duty, for their instruction should not stop there: “But many [parents] fail to notice that by doing so [teaching their children to read] they create an appetite that must be satisfied in a proper

³¹⁰ Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking, 1996), 123.

³¹¹ William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 257; Louise Stevenson, “Homes, Books, and Reading,” in *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880*, vol. 3, *History of the Book in America*, ed. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 327.

³¹² “Autobiography of William Mendenhall,” MSS B 289, the Works Progress Administration (Utah Section) Biographical Sketches, ca. 1930–1941, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6xs80kg>.

manner, or improper means of gratifying it may be found.” Reading was a double-edged sword, one that could potentially lead to disastrous effects. If parents left children to their own devices, “tastes for particular kinds of reading matter are generally acquired”—usually not good reading matter. “Why not, then,” Mendenhall continues, “as well acquire a taste for that class which will instruct and benefit, as that which will have the opposite effect. Why not acquire a taste for reading standard works on history, biography, science, art, religion, etc., as well as the light, trashy, sensational stories and unreasonable novels that are written?”³¹³ Parents were the keys in guiding their children, as soon as they could read, toward satiating their reading appetite with appropriate reading material.

If we return briefly to the story of Leonard Fox mentioned earlier in the chapter, the melodramatic boy whose habit of novel reading emasculates him, we find the ideal role parents were to play as cultural arbiters. At one point in the story the narrator interjects: “Who knows, a little more kind firmness from his father, a little more firm kindness from his mother, a little watch care from both, books of the right sort obtained and put into his hands, and the active mind turned gradually into another channel by congenial and constant employment in some mental work or profession—who knows what all this might have done? . . . Time and favorable circumstances would have made props to his character and steadied the weak walls with a solid foundation of experience and proven facts.” Then the narrator really drives home the moral for parents: “Still, let our judgments be gentle, our conclusions moderate. How much better should we or may we do under the same or similar circumstances? Oh parents, how great indeed should be your wisdom. From God alone will ye obtain power to act your part always aright.”³¹⁴ For

³¹³ William Mendenhall, “True Education What Is It?,” William Mendenhall Papers, MS 8932 1, CHL. If this presentation or article was created around the same time as the other articles in this collection, it is likely it was created sometime before 1876, when Mendenhall left on a mission.

³¹⁴ Gates, “Whatsoever a Man Soweth,” 2.

Gates, God would guide parents as they sought to raise their children; he would help them as they sought to put “books of the right sort” into their hands so that they could strengthen their sons’ and daughters’ characters, avoiding the tragedies of Leonard’s story.

An “incident” related in the *Woman’s Exponent* reflects how class might have made it more difficult for parents to serve as cultural arbiters for their children. Although this article was published eight years after the time period under examination, the author is looking back in time on events that happened a few years ago. She met a lady outside of the *Exponent* office who was “anxious to get a copy of the paper, for she dearly loved to read it.” Surprised, the author asked why the woman was not a subscriber, “for it was easy to be seen she was a lady of means.” “‘I was a subscriber at one time,’ she replied, ‘but now the children are growing up it seems they must have other reading. Such as the ‘*Exponent*’ and the *Juvenile* are too dry for them, they must take the *New York Ledger*.’ She then mentioned other periodicals equally as trashy, ending by saying with a heavy sigh ‘You see my expenses are very heavy.’” In the author’s mind she exclaimed, “‘Horrors! can it be possible that there are many mothers in Israel in this dire condition?’” Since that meeting, the author regrets to say that she has met several mothers in similar circumstances.³¹⁵

However, it is not only mothers who failed to guide their children’s reading material. One day, as this same author was reading an issue of the *Juvenile Instructor*, a man asked her husband if her husband would be willing to “assist him [the man] win his rounds as a teacher.” The husband agreed and began to make ready to depart. While getting ready, the teacher noticed the author reading the *Instructor*, and began to talk to her about it: “‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it is a nice little magazine, but I am not taking it now, can’t afford it. My children are reading a nice continued

³¹⁵ Ida, “An Incident,” *Woman’s Exponent*, December 15, 1898, 74.

story in an Eastern paper we are taking. They can hardly wait for the time for it to come.”

Despite this father’s mistake, the author, in her article, brings the focus back to mothers: “Oh! let us as mothers in Israel choose good reading for our children, that we may do nothing that will in any way tarnish their characters.”³¹⁶ Although both fathers and mothers could equally provide reading material that might tarnish their children’s characters, mothers had to carry the majority of the burden of responsibility for their children’s reading habits and ultimately their personal development.

Her stories also indicate how reading differed due to class. Some could simply not afford to subscribe to multiple homegrown papers (the Exponent, Instructor, Contributor, Deseret News) as well as to papers back East. And, much to the horror of the author, when faced with a choice between the homegrown and Eastern papers, many seemed to choose the latter. Not only was their subscription money supporting Eastern business over local business (something that went against the spirit of Utah economic independence) but it was being used to purchase what some felt was “trash.” But the parents and the children from the stories did not seem to think of it this way. For them, the Instructor was dry and the Eastern papers were the ones that provided the kinds of stories one could scarcely wait to finish. When faced with a choice between which one to spend money on, it may have made more sense to spend money on the Eastern papers. After all, most church-sponsored periodicals were read aloud in Sunday School or MIA meetings, so they could still hear them there.³¹⁷ In short, young Mormon people, despite swimming in a sea of prescriptions and proscriptions, oftentimes exercised their agency to read what they found most

³¹⁶ Ida, “An Incident,” 74.

³¹⁷ Jan Shippo, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 110.

exciting and entertaining, shaping even their parents literary habits: quite a reversal from the expected role of parents as their children's cultural arbiters.

Amidst a sea of changes in several aspects of their lives, many Mormons discussed the importance of reading and books in shaping their masculinity, femininity, and families. In doing so they began to articulate what ideal Mormon men and women, marriages, and parents looked like. They believed that more study could elevate both men and women, keeping them from immoral activities; increasing their spirituality, their knowledge, their depth of personality; and making marriages happier and more fulfilling. They also believed reading the right kind of books—preferably church books over light fiction—could help them guide their children through the challenges Mormons faced in the late nineteenth century. They would also be able to guide their children in how to select appropriate reading material amidst a sea of choices, some of which could be damaging. In short, Mormons held an uncommon faith in appropriate reading's ability to transform marriage, parents, and children; but this also meant they feared the damage that inappropriate reading could do.

Returning to the story of Annie Wells Cannon that began this chapter, there was no reason to fear how her reading of romance novels might have affected her choice in marriage partner. Yes, she read her romance novels, imagined her beau-ideal, and fantasized playing the part of a non-Mormon heroine. Ultimately, she largely conformed to marital expectations. She married the son of an apostle and a high-ranking church leader in his own right, John Q. Cannon, in a monogamous relationship. However, worries about John were perhaps more called for. John drank, gambled, was accused of embezzling church funds, and, ultimately, committed adultery

with Annie's younger sister, leading to his excommunication. After a two-year divorce from John and the death of her sister in childbirth, Annie and John remarried (with John being sealed posthumously to Annie's sister, making them a polygamous family in the eternities) in what all accounts called a happy marriage, having twelve children in total. Annie would go on to be a state legislator, editor, and member of the general board of the Relief Society (the church's organization for women), and John would go on to be the editor for the *Deseret News*.³¹⁸

Whatever may have been the effect of reading romantic fiction, one thing is certain: in many ways, the real life of Annie Wells Cannon rivaled the most dramatic of any plot of romantic fiction published in the nineteenth century.

³¹⁸ Kenneth L. Cannon II, "Wives and Other Women: Love, Sex, and Marriage in the Lives of John Q. Cannon, Frank J. Cannon, and Abraham H. Cannon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 74–83. For a detailed account of these events, see Madsen, *Emmeline B. Wells*, 230–71.

Chapter 3: “Polished Instruments in the Hands of Our Father in Heaven”: Becoming Useful Members of Zion

“Never before was there a community whose young people had resting upon them so great responsibility as those now growing up in the villages and towns of Utah,” wrote Junius Wells, the editor of the *Contributor* magazine. Why did such a weight rest upon the young people of Utah? “At present we have a religion that is derided; a church that is distrusted and feared by those unacquainted with its spirit and genius; a community politically ostracized, and oppressed by unjust and unconstitutional laws; a political organization, (a Territorial government) which gives us no influence upon the destiny of the nation, with which our own destiny is indissolubly connected.”³¹⁹ It would be the “mission of the young people of this community to reverse all this: to make our religion if not universally believed, at least universally respected; our church trusted and admired; escape the political ostracism which checks our progress; blot out the unjust and unconstitutional laws which oppress us; cast off the swaddling bands of Territorial government and adorn our Deseret in the more fitting habiliments of a commonwealth in the American Union.”³²⁰ No pressure. But how could young people effect such a drastic reversal? “The youth of a community with such a mission as this must be stalwart of intellect, determined in effort, steadfast of purpose, unyielding in integrity, of unbounded faith in God and in his overruling providence.”³²¹ To spread the gospel to the whole world and to preserve the faith they had inherited, young Mormons needed to be intelligent, well-read, and studious; therefore, what they read became the object of debate, anxiety, and institutional support.

As Mormon writers proscribed and prescribed how and what to read, they argued over more than just how the rising generation spent their leisure time; instead, they were trying to

³¹⁹ Junius F. Wells, “Our Mission,” *Contributor*, December 1888, 74.

³²⁰ Wells, “Our Mission,” 74.

³²¹ Wells, “Our Mission,” 74.

secure a bright future for Zion, their religious community. Because the 1870s and 1880s were such tumultuous decades for the Mormon community, at times it must have seemed that the very fabric of their society was under threat. They placed high hopes in the next generation to not only maintain Zion but to expand it and raise its prestige in the eyes of the world. To do so, they needed to become “polished instruments in the hands of our Father in Heaven”—that is, effective missionaries, church and civic leaders, and productive members of Zion generally.³²² Mormons believed in the power of books, reading, and study to bring about internal transformations within people. They hoped to harness this power to bring about the necessary transformations within young people to help them fulfill these roles, but they also feared reading’s power to stunt this growth. The stakes were very high for this Mormon community. Its anxieties surrounding what young people read should not therefore be seen as something pathological but rather as a very real concern about the continued existence of their religious community.

Members of Zion

All members of the church in Utah were members of Zion. Even though not all church members would need to prepare to become missionaries and leaders, all young people needed to learn what it meant to become members of Zion. Teaching all young people this lesson was particularly important because of the difficult transitions of the 1870s and 1880s. Reading, writing, and study were important components to inculcating a Zion spirit into its young people.

However, this desire existed during a time when it seemed American print culture was decidedly against Mormons. For instance, in 1871, Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Utah and had the occasion to visit with the Mormon prophet Brigham Young. According to one account of the

³²² Buttles, untitled, *Youth Educator* (manuscript newspaper, Pinto, UT) 4, no. 1, January 5, 1881, [p. 6], LR 6952 26, CHL.

meeting, “Mr. Emerson asked him what books there were from which one could get a correct impression of [Mormon] opinions. He said, shortly: ‘There were none. They didn’t print anything,’” an indictment against not only the Eastern press but also against the lack of publishing in Utah by Mormons. However, after a few words from his secretary, Young admitted that *The Rise, Progress and Travels of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, by George A. Smith, was “as good as anything.”³²³ For Mormon women, their concern about their representation was even more pronounced; due to polygamy, Mormon women attracted “the attention of intelligent thinking men and women everywhere.”³²⁴ This was not a good thing, as Mormon women and their views were frequently “grossly misrepresented through the press, by active enemies who permit no opportunity to pass of maligning and slandering them; and with but limited opportunity of appealing to the intelligence and candor of their fellow countrymen and countrywomen in reply.”³²⁵ This exasperation was one reason for starting the *Woman’s Exponent*, for “who are so well able to speak for the women of Utah as the women of Utah themselves?”³²⁶ This also was the time period, beginning in the 1850s, when about one hundred novels that demonized and satirized Mormons began to be published.³²⁷ This portrayal of Mormons in American print culture led to a feeling that, in the realm of reading and writing, Mormondom and its people were under attack.

When books were published by non-Mormons that were sympathetic to Mormons, they were greeted with great emotion. When George Q. Cannon read Elizabeth Kane’s *Twelve Mormon Homes*, which detailed her travels and visits with Mormons throughout Utah, he wrote,

³²³ James B. Thayer, “An After-Clap of Mormonism,” in *Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers*, ed. William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 383–84.

³²⁴ “Woman’s Exponent,” *Woman’s Exponent*, March 15, 1873, 160.

³²⁵ “Woman’s Exponent,” 160.

³²⁶ “Woman’s Exponent,” 160.

³²⁷ Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 171.

“The perusal of [the book] touched me so deeply that I could not repress tears.” He believed such a book “cannot fail to do good and dissipate many prejudices and misconceptions which prevail in relation to the people of Utah. At least I think so.” He adds, “I wish the whole world could read it.”³²⁸ In short, building up and defending Zion would be done as much by writers and publishers as anything else.

When it came to Mormon leaders and the older generation’s hopes and fears regarding Zion, they first and foremost worried that young people might not want to even stay in Zion. The creation of MIAs was just one manifestation of these hopes and fears. When discussing how the MIAs first began, Junius F. Wells wrote: “The education and training of the young men, owing to the unfavorable circumstances of a new country, had not been such as to cultivate intellectuality among them, or to clothe their manners with too much grace. They often manifested but little regard for religious exercises, and they found their amusements in other than intellectual pursuits, causing some of the older inhabitants to have grave fears for the future.”³²⁹ While Wells worried about a lack of intellectual pursuits leading to young people becoming uninterested in their parents’ religion, R. W. Young felt the opposite—some books might indeed lead to people abandoning Mormonism. “We are blamed for objecting to the introduction of antagonistic books and periodicals in our midst,” he wrote. “In short, we are censured for not adopting a policy of disintegration, for not undermining our own foundation.”³³⁰ Church leader George Reynolds also worried about the effect books could have that denied God’s existence or the right of religious leaders to govern civilly: “The influence of books of this kind cannot but be detrimental to the spiritual health of those who are not intelligent enough to perceive the

³²⁸ George Q. Cannon to Thomas L. Kane, letter, March 9, 1874, vault MSS 792, series 6, subseries 4, subseries 4, item 1, box 33A, folder 3, LTPSC.

³²⁹ Junius F. Wells, “Mutual Improvement,” *Contributor*, October 1879, 12–13.

³³⁰ R. W. Young, “A Second Daniel,” *Contributor*, April 1881, 212–13.

weakness of the arguments used, and with such has the direct effect of lessening their faith in, and respect for God's government on earth."³³¹ Reading was a sword that cut both ways: the right books, read in the right way, could bolster young people's faith and respect for their parents' religion and community; the wrong books, especially read by those perceived to be not wise, experienced, or "intelligent" enough, could potentially destroy Zion's future.

If young people did decide to remain a part of the community, the older generation still wondered, What kind of people would they be? If Zion was to truly be Zion, a place where the pure in heart dwelled, then a certain amount of moral policing was necessary. Some worried about the connections between literacy and potentially criminal actions. In 1880, O. H. Riggs wrote several pieces for the *Contributor* about the possible connection between education and crime, at times citing literacy statistics to further his argument.³³² One story from the *Juvenile Instructor* starred one young man whose novel-reading habits led him to commit the "murder of two human beings" (one being his father), demonstrating how some Mormons feared that outside cultural influences would bring "so much trouble to many a happy home."³³³ Throughout the 1880s the *Juvenile Instructor* publicized gruesome murders that were supposedly the result of novel reading.³³⁴ Crime such as this was obviously not supposed to occur in Zion, which was to be an almost utopian-like society. If books had the power to help build up Zion, they also had the

³³¹ George Reynolds, "Influence of Outside Literature," *Contributor*, September 1881, 358.

³³² O. H. Riggs, "Relation of Education to Crime," *Contributor*, September 1880, 271–74; see also O. H. Riggs, "Education and Crime," *Contributor*, May 1880, 182–84; O. H. Riggs, "Relation of Education to Crime," *Contributor*, August 1880, 248–50. Such ideas about the connections between education and all kinds of social problems were not unique to Utah. One such proponent of these connections was Horace Mann, the champion of public schooling. Barbara Sicherman, "Ideologies and Practices of Reading," in *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880*, vol. 3, *History of the Book in America*, ed. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 284–85. See also, Christine Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late-Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 35–36.

³³³ Jakusee, "Novel Reading," *Juvenile Instructor*, January 1, 1882, 7.

³³⁴ Matthew Durrant and Neal E. Lambert, "From Foe to Friend: The Mormon Embrace of Fiction," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 50 (1982): 327–28.

potential power to tear it down. Because books had such powerful potential to shape the essence of who young people were and would become, special care was taken to make sure they read and interacted with only the best books.

Others also worried about what kind of morality books might inculcate in readers. George Reynolds particularly worried about the popular “Society Dramas,” “which though reputedly respectable, have a very detrimental and injurious effect on the minds of the youth.”³³⁵ Reynolds objected to these dramas because their “plots lie in infractions of the seventh commandment, in the infidelity of husbands and wives to their marriage vows.”³³⁶ He worried that from such books “the youthful learn to regard sexual sins in a far different light to that in which they are exposed in God’s holy word” and that they would “beget curiosity as to things forbidden.”³³⁷ This curiosity would breed in youth “feelings and passions which cannot be righteously exercised.”³³⁸ He also condemned “a yet lower and still more dangerous description of literature,” a literature that was “intended to be impure” and displayed “suggestive and half indecent pictures.”³³⁹ Reynolds regretted that such periodicals were “sold by the score” in Utah’s larger cities and that “non-Mormons [were] not the only purchasers.”³⁴⁰ For Reynolds, these threats to young people’s virtue was not just a personal issue; it was a communal one. “Their [morally questionable works] influence as a weapon framed against the development of God’s purposes is most potent,” he argued, “as Zion, the pure in heart, can never be built up by any people who permit themselves to be polluted with impurities such as these suggest.”³⁴¹ For Reynolds, abstaining from morally

³³⁵ Reynolds, “Influence of Outside Literature,” 359.

³³⁶ Reynolds, “Influence of Outside Literature,” 359.

³³⁷ Reynolds, “Influence of Outside Literature,” 359.

³³⁸ Reynolds, “Influence of Outside Literature,” 359. This is likely an allusion to the fear that reading such books would lead to masturbation, a common worry in nineteenth-century America. Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 139.

³³⁹ Reynolds, “Influence of Outside Literature,” 359.

³⁴⁰ Reynolds, “Influence of Outside Literature,” 359.

³⁴¹ Reynolds, “Influence of Outside Literature,” 359.

objectionable works of literature (and the sexual acts they either subtly or not so subtly portrayed) was key in building up the kind of religious community he and other leaders envisioned.

The quest to shape young people's reading led to both overt and subtle forms of intervention. One of the most direct forms was brought about by the highest church leaders through the apparatus of the MIAs. At one of the semiannual conferences of the YMMIA, John Taylor, the successor to Brigham Young, spoke upon the subject of "proper education." According to Taylor, the books that young people were reading in conjunction with their MIA duties were perilous. He said "many of the books we use are full of teachings that lead away from God, and that the greatest endeavor should be to teach the things of God."³⁴² Taylor likely knew about what kind of books were being read due to some regulations put in place a year earlier. These regulations were presented as suggestions by some of the church's apostles during an MIA conference, which were then ratified unanimously.³⁴³ The fifth of these suggestions read as follows: "All books used in libraries, for the use of the Association, to be inspected and approved by the General Superintendent and his Council, and all works containing skeptical, immoral or improper doctrines or principles, to be excluded therefrom."³⁴⁴ The infrastructure for carrying out this suggestion was put in place a couple months later. Church apostles wrote: "We have called to our assistance a Library Committee of three, to whom the secretary or librarian of each Association is requested to immediately report a list of all the books in their respective libraries. The general supervision of the Association libraries, preparing lists of suitable books, arranging for their purchase and distribution, etc., will devolve upon this committee, whom all

³⁴² "Association Intelligence," *Contributor*, May 1881, 256.

³⁴³ "Semi-Annual Conference," *Contributor*, May 1880, 190–91.

³⁴⁴ "Suggestions," *Contributor*, May 1880, 191.

Associations should consult, when about to lay the foundations for libraries, or to purchase additional books for those already in existence.”³⁴⁵

This effort to control what kinds of books were placed in MIA libraries was perhaps the most intentional, far-reaching action by the highest-ranking leaders of the church to control what young people did and did not read. They feared that books containing “skeptical, immoral or improper doctrines or principles” could create serious problems; for these leaders, the books they were currently reading led them away from God by causing them to doubt in his very existence, introducing them to or wetting an inappropriate appetite for immoral material, and teaching them things that were simply not true. These books could, page by page, create an entire new generation without faith, morality, and truth. For these leaders, these books were slowly undermining the foundations of Zion’s future.

Individuals like Junius Wells (who was also one of the individuals placed on the MIA Library Committee that monitored books the associations used), in his magazine the *Contributor*, tried to more subtly shape the reading tastes of young men and women. He viewed himself as a cultural arbiter that needed to shape the uncultivated tastes of youth in Utah, so in many issues Wells included a “Review of Books” or “Publications Received” column in which he could “review books and periodicals that can be recommended to the Associations as suitable for their libraries and general reading.” While not “exhaustive,” Wells felt these reviews “at least serve to direct the attention of those wishing to purchase libraries, to a class of reading matter that will be a credit to their collections and of profit to their readers.”³⁴⁶ These books included things specifically written for Mormons, like long poems about church history;³⁴⁷ stories of church

³⁴⁵ Wilford Woodruff, Joseph F. Smith, and Moses Thatcher, “Instructions,” *Contributor*, November 1880, 63.

³⁴⁶ “Review of Books,” *Contributor*, October 1879, 23.

³⁴⁷ “Review of Books,” *Contributor*, October 1879, 24.

missionaries;³⁴⁸ and many other works written by “home writers” (that is, Mormon authors from Utah).³⁴⁹ His book recommendations definitely tilted toward faith-inspiring home literature, but he also did not hesitate to recommend material published in the East. He recommended the periodical *Youth’s Companion*, in which Wells had “never yet seen an article in its pages with an objectionable moral” and which he could not “advise a better investment for an imported juvenile publication.”³⁵⁰ He also suggested *Harper’s Monthly*³⁵¹ and *Abbott’s Illustrated Histories*, which were “excellent volumes to place in the hands of young men, whose tastes for literature lack cultivation, as an incentive to seek healthy reading matter, in which is blended historic fact with entertaining narrative.”³⁵² By shaping young people’s tastes and the purchasing habits of those buying books for them (whether parents or association librarians), Wells sought to contain the potential damage that the wide variety of literature available to Utahans might cause to Zion and its youth. Realizing that Mormons could not ignore the print culture of the East (and nor did many Mormons want to), Wells sought to help young people and their parents navigate the proliferating amount of print entering Utah.

While Taylor’s and Wells’s influence could be felt throughout all of Utah, local leaders also sought to cultivate readers’ tastes. One representative from Heber City said his YMMIA “had a good library—great many Church works” and that he “intended to encourage the reading of these works, that the novel reading of the place may be done away in a measure.” He concluded that he “was desirous of doing all he could to build up the Kingdom.”³⁵³ As another example, Katie Whittle, a young woman in her late teens, felt she could provide some “advice to

³⁴⁸ “Review of Books,” *Contributor*, November 1879, 48.

³⁴⁹ “Publications Received,” *Contributor*, July 1880, 240.

³⁵⁰ “Publications Received,” *Contributor*, June 1881, 288; “Publications Received,” *Contributor*, January 1881, 128.

³⁵¹ “Publications Received,” *Contributor*, December 1880, 96.

³⁵² “Review of Books,” *Contributor*, October 1879, 24.

³⁵³ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, March 1880, 144.

the young folks” in her local manuscript paper.³⁵⁴ “Never spend your spare moments in reading novels and worthless trash of that sort, but read the church works, and study up the principles of life and salvation,” she wrote.³⁵⁵ She told the young people that if they wanted to “live [their] religion as [they] should do” they would “have to study and get [their] minds enlightened, so that [they would] know how, and in what way [they were] to live up to [their] requirements.”³⁵⁶ She advised them not only on what to read but also on the correct manner to read: “Do not read much at a time, but meditate as much as your time and capacity will admit of; ever remembering, that little reading and much thinking, little speaking and much hearing, frequent and short prayers and great devotion is the best way to become wise.”³⁵⁷ A last example is Henrietta Stout, president of her local YLMIA, who wrote from Rockville, Utah, “a little, isolated place.”³⁵⁸ Despite not being at the center of Zion, she and her sisters of the church felt it was their “duty to strive to become one with our sisters in adding our mite to build up the Kingdom of Heaven, and perform our part in benefitting each other, and do that which becometh daughters in Zion.”³⁵⁹ She said she and the other women were trying to “fulfill our mission,” which included meeting together (a challenge when some members were “mothers of several small children”), studying and reading, and generally learning “to live nearer the Lord and serve Him more diligently.”³⁶⁰ To accomplish this, “We have united with the young men in donating for a library, consisting of

³⁵⁴ “United States Census, 1900,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M3VY-WGX> : accessed 15 January 2020), Kathryn J Whittle in household of John T Whittle, Election District 10 & 1 Evanston city, Uinta, Wyoming, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 58, sheet 21B, family 452, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1972.); FHL microfilm 1,241,827.

³⁵⁵ Katie Whittle, “Advice to the Young Folks,” *Enterprise* (manuscript newspaper, Evanston, WY), September 1886, p. 3, MSS 2720 22, CHL.

³⁵⁶ Whittle, “Advice to the Young Folks,” 3.

³⁵⁷ Whittle, “Advice to the Young Folks,” 4.

³⁵⁸ Henrietta Stout, “Y. L. M. I. A. Report,” *Woman’s Exponent*, December 15, 1878, 106.

³⁵⁹ Stout, “Y. L. M. I. A. Report,” 106.

³⁶⁰ Stout, “Y. L. M. I. A. Report,” 106.

about thirty volumes suited generally to our wants.”³⁶¹ They also enjoyed reading the Woman’s Exponent, which was “always a most welcome visitor and is read with increasing interest.”³⁶²

All three of these examples demonstrate a connection between young people’s reading habits and building up the kingdom of God. The two were linked. If MIA leaders and even fellow MIA members could develop the proper tastes within young people in their local areas, they had done their part in building up God’s kingdom in their small corner of the world. Helping young people to eschew “trash” and to treasure up church books would help them live their religion as they ought, “live up to [their] requirements” as members of Zion, become wiser, and improve themselves more generally. Books and reading became a particularly important battleground that would decide the makeup of the future rank-and-file members of Zion.

Leaders

As some of the most important Mormon leaders of the earliest generation began to pass away, those who remained increasingly began to remind young people that they would be the next leaders. Their leadership in the church, in their communities, and perhaps even in the nation would be crucial to the survival and growth of Zion, especially in such a tumultuous time for the church. In order to meet the broad, unpredictable challenges that these future leaders would meet, church leaders encouraged young people to read widely and become acquainted with all kinds of useful knowledge. This broad base of knowledge might, in some way, prove valuable to them in whatever duties became required of them.

Young people were reminded by current church leaders that they would soon take the passing generation’s place and that they needed to prepare to do so. One report from a local

³⁶¹ Stout, “Y. L. M. I. A. Report,” 106.

³⁶² Stout, “Y. L. M. I. A. Report,” 106.

meeting at which church leader Wilford Woodruff spoke reads: “The young have got to take our places for the old are passing away, and I pray God to bless every effort for good. . . . Elder Woodruff then related his experience at St. George in effecting a reformation among the young. The young ladies should not have their minds full of novels and fashions but should begin to feel the importance of better things.”³⁶³ These two ideas seem connected. When young women let their heads get full of novels and fashion, they could not store up the useful information that might prepare them to take the place of the “leading sisters” of the previous generation.

However, it seems that young people themselves also often discussed their grooming as future leaders. MIA manuscript newspapers are full of admonitions to one another to study, read, and prepare for their future positions as leaders. There are several articles in the Pinto Youth Educator that echo these admonitions. In a letter to the “dear friends of our Mutual improvement associations,” Pat Joe wrote, “We as young men and women should improve the time we now have, for we know not when we might be called on missions, or to hold some office in the church.”³⁶⁴ Another Educator author, Bridget, wrote: “When we are called upon to write, read, or recite, we should respond to the call, and do the best we can, and that is all that is required of us. There is a great work for the young to perform; therefore we must prepare and qualify ourselves for the future. Let us all endeavor to do right, that we may be prepared to combat the evils and temptations by which we are surrounded, and gain the great reward promised the faithful.”³⁶⁵ They seemed to believe, or had learned to parrot, the elder generations ideas about their future duties and their responsibility to prepare now.

³⁶³ “Report of First Ward Special Meeting—Association,” *Woman’s Exponent*, November 1, 1877, 82.

³⁶⁴ Pat Joe, untitled, *Youth Educator* 1, no. 3, March 7, 1878, [p. 9].

³⁶⁵ Bridget, “A Few Words on Duty and Right,” *Youth Educator* 3, no. 1, December 11, 1879, [p. 4].

They did understand that they would all have different roles to perform. John W. Platt, the sometime editor of the *Educator*, a single twenty-six-year-old at the time of his article,³⁶⁶ wrote: “We do not all have missions of the same kind to perform, one may be a preacher of the gospel, and a teacher at all times, another perhaps is a farmer, and another a machinate, still all are needed to build up the kingdom of God.” For men and women, “as the kingdom grows and increases there will be many offices to fill”: presidents of relief societies and young ladies’ associations, missionaries, and bishops. He also discussed women’s role in teaching their offspring the gospel. But in short, he hoped, “May God inable us all to become useful men and women is the prayer of the editor.”³⁶⁷

Young people were to prepare for a variety of possible roles. But how? Reading and study seems to be one important way they were supposed to do so. An article signed AJ (probably Agnes John), published in the *Portage Observer* manuscript newspaper, discusses how this preparation should occur: “I think we should read as many good books as we can get to read, in this way we can obtain a great deal of useful knowledge, and improve our minds in this way, for those who read a great deal cannot help but study on some of the good things they read, and it will prove a benefit to us.”³⁶⁸ Another writer for the *Bee-Hive* manuscript paper wrote: “As the bee gathers from the various flowers the sweets that produces the honey, so may our members from every good source gather up that knowledge, learning and wisdom, that shall qualify and prepare them for the many great and responsible duties that shall be required of those who are

³⁶⁶ “United States Census, 1880,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MNSL-T7L> : 15 July 2017), John W Platt in household of Benjam Platt, Pinto, Washington, Utah, United States; citing enumeration district ED 95, sheet 399A, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), FHL microfilm 1,255,339.

³⁶⁷ John W. Platt, “Editorial,” *Youth Educator*, vol. [?], no. 2, March 12, 1884, [pp. 1–3].

³⁶⁸ AJ [Agnes John], “The Following Is from One of Our Sisters of the Y.L.M.I.A.,” *Portage Observer* (manuscript newspaper, Portage, UT) 1, no. 1, March 1889, p. 6, LR 7113 21, CHL.

faithful and true to every call.”³⁶⁹ Who knew what kind of responsibilities might be thrust upon young people? Who could really predict the future? But by reading about a variety of topics and seeking out the best books from a variety of places, like bees visiting flowers, young people could find knowledge and wisdom that could hopefully prepare them for the duties they knew would eventually come.

When discussing preparation for future leadership positions, Mormons often focused on church positions. However, they also sought to prepare for civic leadership positions that would shape the nation. When Congress passed the Edmunds-Tucker Act in 1887, the shockwaves reverberated throughout Mormon communities in Utah. The law made stripped women of the right to vote, disincorporated the church, and seemed to threaten the very Mormon way of life.³⁷⁰ One author, signed Chronocler, expressed what this meant for the young men and young women who wrote, edited, and read their St. George manuscript newspaper, the Bee-Hive.

Sensing the magnitude and gravity of the Edmunds-Tucker Act’s passing, Chronocler took on a somber tone, using KJV biblical language and placing the events occurring within a Mormon timeline for the end of the world, which included greater wickedness and persecution until Christ would come, cleanse the earth, and establish a reign of a thousand years of peace. Chronocler begins (as many manuscript paper editors did) by reproving fellow association members for failing to submit as many articles as hoped: “Verily, verily, thus saith the Chronocler,—we as young men & young women must not in the future, as we have done in the

³⁶⁹ “Editorial,” *Bee-Hive* (manuscript newspaper, St. George, UT) 2, no. 4, January 4, 1887, p. 8, MSS A 1053, USHS.

³⁷⁰ Jean Bickmore White, “Women’s Suffrage in Utah,” in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, ed. Allen Kent Powell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), https://www.uen.org/utah_history_encyclopedia/w/WOMENS_SUFFRAGE_IN_UTAH.shtml; Ray Jay Davis, “Antipolygamy Legislation,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 1, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 52.

past, neglect our ‘Bee-hive.’”³⁷¹ But this time, the passage of the act looms over the paper: “For know ye not, that if we do [neglect the paper], we will be considered as drones? Therefore let us be up and a coming with our selections, and make things lively, for the day cometh, yea, it is even at our doors, when we will not enjoy the privaleges that we now enjoy.”³⁷² Why did the author feel that the Saints in Zion would no longer have the opportunity to read, write, improve themselves, and share their ideas with one another? The author says: “Know ye not that Congress is trying to destroy the Church that God has established upon the earth[?]”³⁷³ For the author, Congress’s intentions indicated that a chain in millennial events had just been sparked, in which “Satan must play his part of the drama” by laying persecutions upon God’s people. But there “must needs be greater [persecutions] still, untill God’s people shall have been brought into bondage.” At that point, “God [would] send a Deliverer to his people; then will his wrath be poured out upon the wicked; and verily, verily, then must the Saints of the most High God take the reins of government, and save the Constitution.”³⁷⁴

It is within this context that MIAs proved important for young people. “Is it not needful then,” continues the author, “that we make the best use of our time, and fit and qualify ourselves for various positions, which we will no doubt have the privalige of occupying if we are thus qualified; and is not here in the Young Men’s & Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Asociations the place to gain this knowledge?”³⁷⁵ The Chroniecler argues here that MIAs are the best places to gain knowledge that will prepare them for important leadership positions. But in the context of these millennial predictions, these leadership positions would not only be

³⁷¹ Chroniecler!, “Chronecles: Ch. 1!!!,” *Bee-Hive*, n.d., p. 14.

³⁷² Chroniecler!, “Chronecles,” 14.

³⁷³ Chroniecler!, “Chronecles,” 14.

³⁷⁴ Chroniecler!, “Chronecles,” 14.

³⁷⁵ Chroniecler!, “Chronecles,” 14–15.

ecclesiastical, as so many other manuscript newspapers seem to indicate. Chronocler is discussing something different here. When the Saints took the reins of government and saved the Constitution, it would be their turn to occupy positions of political power as well. Here the kingdom of God and the political government of the United States would finally blend together. And for the Chronocler, researching, studying, and then carefully expressing findings in a manuscript newspaper was one crucial way to qualify young Latter-day Saints for such a crucial task.

Missionaries

Many Mormon leaders believed strongly that the rising generation's reading habits would directly affect their ability to fulfill one of the most important commandments of their faith: to preach the gospel to all nations and peoples. Since the beginning of the church in 1830, it had depended on conversions to strengthen its numbers. Missionaries, always men, were to be sent to "every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people."³⁷⁶ Not until this message reached the whole world would Jesus Christ come again and usher in a reign of millennial peace. In short, missionary work was an essential part of Mormon belief. And while early Mormon scripture said "the weak things of the world, those who are unlearned and despised" would preach the gospel, many felt that missionaries would need to be as well-read and educated as possible to be successful in their time.³⁷⁷

More and more, education and reading ability was seen as a necessity for missionary work. One writer for a non-MIA manuscript paper wrote in 1873 about his missionary service in

³⁷⁶ "Revelations printed in The Evening and the Morning Star, June 1832–June 1833," p. [1], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelations-printed-in-the-evening-and-the-morning-star-june-1832-june-1833/19>.

³⁷⁷ "Book of Commandments, 1833," p. 77, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-commandments-1833/81>.

his youth to the islands in the South Pacific. “At the time I was young and inexperienced,” he wrote, “and destitute of an education, so much so, that I was unable to read.” Due to his illiteracy, he requested the following: “I ask permission to remain at home and school myself for one year, before starting on my mission, that I might be the better prepared for it.” Despite his lack of education, he was requested to go “at once.”³⁷⁸

While this might have been the attitude of the past, during the 1870s and 1880s education and literacy became more and more important for missionaries. “We call upon the youth of Israel to prepare for the conflict which like inexorable fate awaits them,” wrote Junius F. Wells, the editor of the *Contributor* magazine, in an article titled “The Preservers of Faith.”³⁷⁹ “If they would fulfil with honor the duties assigned them by virtue of their position and the circumstances with which they are surrounded, then let them make intelligent preparation for the work before them, by diligent thought, by careful study.”³⁸⁰ The whole of Christendom was threatened by “false science” and “deism,” and Wells believed the young people of Zion were the ones who would be responsible for saving not only the Mormon community from these ills but also the whole of the Christian world.³⁸¹ He continued: “Those who would arrest the attention of intelligence must be intelligent themselves. It is not enough that the world be told they are in error, that the path they walk in leads to destruction; it must be proven. It is not enough to cry, Lo, here is Christ, here is truth; it must be demonstrated. This is the work devolving upon the inhabitants of Zion, and especially the youth, upon whom the weight of this mission will fall.”³⁸²

³⁷⁸ Ed., “Travels on the Islands in the South Pacific Ocean,” *Philomathean Gazette* (manuscript newspaper, Payson, Utah) 2, no. 18, February 24, 1873, p. 2, MSS A 2591, USHS.

³⁷⁹ Junius F. Wells, “The Preservers of Faith,” *Contributor*, January 1889, 116.

³⁸⁰ Wells, “The Preservers of Faith,” 116.

³⁸¹ Wells, “The Preservers of Faith,” 116.

³⁸² Wells, “The Preservers of Faith,” 116.

For example, one writer for a manuscript newspaper (simply signed “Your Friend Kirk”) sought to give some advice to “our young friends.”³⁸³ His advice was this: “get an education.”³⁸⁴ Kirk reasoned that “in years that are passed our Elders have been called out into the world to preach the Gospel when they had no education.”³⁸⁵ They had been despised by the well-educated but had “gained victories over them” with the help of God.³⁸⁶ And while Kirk still believed God would help the missionaries whether they were educated or not, he did recognize that “times have changed.” He wrote: “We now have good schools in our Territory where we can get an education if [we] strive for it. There is no excuse for ignorance. . . . The Church is growing, spreading and gaining influence And more elders will have to go and preach to the world; and if they have an education and put their trust in the Lord they will be able to do much good.”³⁸⁷ God had made up for shortcomings in the past when missionaries had had no chance to become educated. But such was not the case for the next generation of Mormon missionaries. Their learning could only help them to preach more effectively than ever.

MIAAs were some of the most important proponents of this agenda to educate prospective missionaries. As explained by Junius Wells, apart from self-improvement and study, the chief purpose of these associations was to prepare young men for missionary service. Yes, the meetings of these associations allowed for reading manuscript newspapers, dialogues, performances of scenes from plays, and songs, but the “leading” and “chief” features of the association meetings were to inform future missionaries’ scriptural literacy. “This, as the basis of our programme, maintains the character of the Associations, and does more than anything else to

³⁸³ Kirk, “Education,” *Youth Educator* 4, no. 4, April 1881, 5.

³⁸⁴ Kirk, “Education,” 5.

³⁸⁵ Kirk, “Education,” 5.

³⁸⁶ Kirk, “Education,” 5.

³⁸⁷ Kirk, “Education,” 5.

qualify the members for missions, or any other position they may be called upon to occupy in the Kingdom.”³⁸⁸

MIAAs developed several different kinds of scripture reading programs to ensure that young people (but particularly future missionaries) would learn the scriptures. In his article about scripture reading, Junius F. Wells describes the three different kinds of scripture reading that took place in MIA meetings. This article also provides hints about how gendered reading was prescribed for young men and why novel reading might be dangerous for them. Wells seems excited about the work that MIAAs were accomplishing with regard to scripture reading.

“Scriptural exercises,” he says, “in some form or other, have been almost universally attached to the programmes of the Associations.”³⁸⁹ Due to this scriptural focus, “a more general acquaintance with the Bible, Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants is being had by the young, and their faith is being strengthened by a knowledge of the written evidences found in those sacred volumes.”³⁹⁰

Wells then goes on to name the three most common kinds of scriptural reading done through MIAAs: Home Reading, Historical Subjective Reading, and Doctrinal Reading. Home Reading included just what it sounds like. Each member would read scriptural books at home throughout the week and then report the number of chapters they read in each scriptural book (Bible, Book of Mormon, etc.). These statistics were recorded, added together, and then presented at larger combined meetings of the MIA; these figures were even regularly published by the Contributor. With pride Wells notes, “At one of the quarterly conferences in Weber stake, were reported upwards of sixty thousand chapters, read during a single quarter.”³⁹¹ Wells

³⁸⁸ Junius F. Wells, “Membership and System,” *Contributor*, October 1880, 28.

³⁸⁹ Junius F. Wells, “Scripture Reading,” *The Contributor*, February 1880, 108.

³⁹⁰ Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 108.

³⁹¹ Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 108.

recognized that these statistics were somewhat problematic. He understood that young people often did not read deeply or carefully—perhaps merely trying to get as many chapters as possible to out-rival a fellow association member. But for him, at least they were reading the scriptures, instead of “idling about the streets, or engag[ing] in foolish play.”³⁹² Any kind of consistent contact “with the heavenly truths contained in them, will surely make its impression upon the reader.”³⁹³ In fact, according to Wells, “Inveterate enemies of the Saints have been at times induced to take up the Doctrine and Covenants, trying to find a flaw, with which to break down the arguments of the Elders in the advocacy of its Divine origin. But in proportion to the extent and thoroughness of their reading have they lost ground and been shaken in their opposition, and sometimes converted to the Truth, though such a result was farthest from their expectations.”³⁹⁴ No matter one’s state of mind, scriptures could change readers, and Wells hoped the same could occur with Zion’s young people. But that does not mean all associations reported such success. For instance, the twelve associations in the Sevier, Utah, area, which reported 435 members, reported reading just 165 chapters in the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and other Church works in one quarter.³⁹⁵ Not all young people read the scriptures often; many seemed to not read them at all.

The next kind of scriptural reading, Historic Subjective Reading, required members to read diligently at home so they could participate during meetings. This reading essentially called for members to take historical incidents in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and church history and

³⁹² Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 108.

³⁹³ Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 108.

³⁹⁴ Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 108; In his book *Faith in Reading*, David Paul Nord finds similar beliefs among nineteenth-century evangelicals for how readers would respond to religious publications. These individuals believed that religious works “could not fail to deliver to readers the sacred message contained in it.” For them “the meaning of a text resides entirely in the text and that the text is hegemonic, that is, the reader is a passive vessel into which meaning is poured.” *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 133.

³⁹⁵ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, April 1881, 222–23.

arrange them chronologically. The goal of this was to “secure to every attentive member a knowledge of the leading historic events recorded in the Scriptures, in the order in which they are named, which will be of incalculable advantage to them in future researches for names, dates, incidents or doctrines.”³⁹⁶

The last kind of reading was called Doctrinal Reading, which was “conducted most satisfactorily in classes.” It was targeted more towards older members, those most likely to be called to serve missions or to teach in Zion. This study required “searching out and committing to memory those passages of Scripture which relate to the principles of the Gospel.”³⁹⁷ Then, “Each principle is taken up singly, beginning with Faith and discoursed upon by the member, who advances as many quotations from the Bible, in support of it as he can commit to memory and retain, then quoting from the Book of Mormon and Doctrine of Covenants, upon the same subject.”³⁹⁸ Memorizing scriptures had two purposes: (1) to strengthen the faith, or “testimony,” of the individual doing the memorizing, and (2) to make “weightier his arguments before others,” an “indispensable necessity to those, expecting to be Saints and to be engaged in the great work of preaching the Gospel to the nations that sit in darkness.”³⁹⁹

Because only men served as missionaries during this time period, Doctrinal Reading was likely intended more for young men. They were the ones who would need to have command of Bible verses so that they could convince potential converts of the truth to be found in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, women were also crucial to spreading the gospel and defending their religious community. At least some women felt they needed to be able to defend their beliefs to the increasing non-Mormon population of Utah, as is evident by the letter

³⁹⁶ Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 109.

³⁹⁷ Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 109.

³⁹⁸ Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 109.

³⁹⁹ Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 109.

from Louvina to the Woman's Exponent discussed in chapter 2. Susanna Morrill identifies writing as "the female missionary tool." Writing allowed women to "attend to their home and familial duties while also furthering the cause of the LDS community." This was especially true as the conflict between church and federal government heated up, as "women defenders of polygamy felt compelled to proclaim their feelings through the medium of the written word."⁴⁰⁰ As one woman expressed triumph at the success of the Woman's Exponent over the last nine years, she wrote, "Woman's mission is diverse from that of man; she has not been called, except in rare instances, to go out among the nations to preach the Gospel, but by the aid of the pen many of the sex have borne strong and earnest testimonies of individual and general experience, which are recorded in the columns of this little paper. . . . She is thus enabled to address thousands at once, instead of a small audience."⁴⁰¹ To prepare to do this kind of missionary work, young women needed to undertake their own reading, study, and preparation. They needed to read what opponents of polygamy wrote, peruse what the women of the Exponent wrote, and learn how to synthesize this information and then write and express it for themselves. MIA manuscript newspapers would provide an important venue to practice such skills.

Returning now to the MIA programs for scripture reading, the heavy dose of memorization that Historic Subjective Reading and Doctrinal Reading required perhaps explains one of the fears regarding novel reading. Several historians have argued why several Mormon leaders gave such passionate antifiction diatribes, but none have connected their concerns about

⁴⁰⁰ Susanna Morrill, *White Roses on the Floor of Heaven: Mormon Women's Popular Theology, 1880-1920* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 80.

⁴⁰¹ "Our Little Paper," *Woman's Exponent*, May 15, 1881, 188.

fiction directly to missionary work.⁴⁰² One of the common condemnations of fiction was its apparent ability to destroy memories. In an earlier issue of the *Contributor*, Wells writes:

Make fact the basis of our reading—there is none more profitable than scriptural—and we will find that the written words of inspired or studious men will afford us intelligence and useful knowledge that will be of benefit to us all our days. While if we only indulge our appetites for fiction, the best portion of our lives will flit away, leaving us no farther advanced than at first, and indeed worse off; for we will have lost memory, and even the every day objects and incidents of life will have passed from our recollection. There is no more common result of the novel reading habit than the destruction of memory.⁴⁰³

This fear of memory loss makes more sense if placed within the context of preparing young men for missionary service. Scriptural reading was “useful knowledge,” particularly for a missionary. But scriptural knowledge was hard won through lots of rote memorization, and there was only so much room inside a young man’s head. According to Wells (and many other Mormon cultural arbiters), novels would fill that head with fluff, useless words and stories, taking up valuable space and making it impossible for missionaries to draw on the words of God in the moments that they would need them most. In short, excessive novel reading could inhibit the missionaries’ millennial duty of preaching the gospel to all nations, gathering scattered Israel, and bringing them back to Zion—no trivial worry.

Despite this fear, MIA scriptural reading programs presented a hope. They would be able to “popularize . . . the study of the scriptures,” helping young people to strengthen their faith. The hard-won knowledge they would receive, when “coupled with the Spirit of Truth,” would “make of those who obtain it, the most useful and successful servants of the Lord, in the

⁴⁰² Matthew Durrant and Neal E. Lambert point out this fear regarding memory loss but do not seek to explain why memory loss might have caused such angst among cultural arbiters. Durrant and Lambert, “From Foe to Friend,” 326–27. Richard H. Cracroft’s article on Brigham Young’s views on novel reading discuss the connection between novel reading and kingdom building, but do not focus much on young people’s future roles in building that kingdom. Richard H. Cracroft, “‘Cows to Milk Instead of Novels to Read’: Brigham Young, Novel Reading, and Kingdom Building,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2001): 102–31. Terryl Givens, in his history of Mormon culture, does not address this particular fear regarding novel reading. Givens, *People of Paradox*, 170–78.

⁴⁰³ Junius F. Wells, “Choice of Books,” *The Contributor*, December 1879, 60.

important work he has for them to do.”⁴⁰⁴ Scripture reading exemplified the hope and the responsibility older generations placed upon their youth in Zion.

But Mormon cultural arbiters such as Junius Wells recommended young men read not only the scriptures but other books that would encourage and prepare them to serve as missionaries. He began a somewhat irregular column at the end of his *Contributor* magazine originally called “Review of Books” to recommend books and periodicals that would be appropriate for MIA libraries and for general reading.⁴⁰⁵ In one of these columns he recommended *My First Mission* by prominent church leader George Q. Cannon. This sixty-six-page book retailed for twenty-five cents but could be bought by MIAs for just twenty. Wells wrote:

This is the first of the “Faith Promoting Series,” and is an exceedingly interesting and profitable work for young people. It is written in the author’s clear and entertaining style, and secures the attention of the reader from the beginning, which increases until the end is reached. We are greatly pleased to welcome the advent of such a book, and are of the opinion that but few young men of our people will rise from its perusal, in whose breasts is not produced a livelier appreciation of the honor, nobility and benefits of missionary labor.⁴⁰⁶

The decision to publish books such as these, which targeted young people and sought to be lively and entertaining, was likely in part a recognition that many young men did not enjoy reading the archaic language of the scriptures. Mormon leaders would need to put other kinds of books into their hands to inspire them to rise up and prepare to serve missions.

Mormon leaders began to feel it was important to educate future missionaries, and that meant paying special attention to what they read. Institutional programs such as MIAs could help encourage scripture reading, and other cultural arbiters could encourage missionaries to read

⁴⁰⁴ Wells, “Scripture Reading,” 109.

⁴⁰⁵ “Review of Books,” *Contributor*, October 1879, 23.

⁴⁰⁶ “Review of Books,” *Contributor*, November 1879, 48.

missionary stories instead of novels that would destroy a mind that was supposed to memorize dozens of scriptures. While Mormon young women likely did not prepare to serve a foreign mission, they prepared in their own way to preach and defend their beliefs through their pens. In short, during the 1870s and 1880s, Mormon leaders felt that what Utah's young people read would directly shape their effectiveness in expanding the kingdom of God on earth.

Manuscript Newspapers: Microcosms of Zion

The manuscript newspapers of the MIAs were microcosms of Zion. Manuscript newspapers were ubiquitous in Utah throughout the 1870s and 1880s, and they seem to have become more common as MIA officials, like Junius Wells, encouraged associations to start their own paper. Some papers were specific to just a YLMIA or YMMIA, but some were edited by both young men and young women and read during monthly meetings when YLMIA and YMMIA of a local area met together. Oftentimes individuals were assigned to act as editor (or coeditors) for a particular issue. They then took charge of ensuring that other members of the association submitted short essays or letters to the paper. This setup allowed for young Mormons to learn what it meant to be a part of Zion. Here they would learn to do their duty, listen to and obey their leaders, read useful books, and practice expressing their ideas on paper. It also provided leadership opportunities that could develop future leaders of Zion.

When editors of MIA manuscript newspapers took up their pen to write their customary introductory editorials, they frequently used the space to call out fellow association members. They criticized members for not submitting articles to the paper and encouraged and inspired them to do so in the future. In fact, so frequently did this occur that editorial complaints about submissions become a universal genre in Utah manuscript newspapers.

The editorial of Caroline M. Thornton, editor for the fourth issue of the *Youth Educator* manuscript newspaper, hints at the genre of editorial reprobation. Thornton was in her early twenties, the eldest daughter of a farmer in a small town of southwest Utah,⁴⁰⁷ and the *Youth Educator* was a paper for both young men and young women. Thornton begins her editorial by noting the weakness and hypocrisy of humankind and “how easy and natural it is to preach one thing and practice an other.”⁴⁰⁸ “For example,” she continues, “in our associations here we can get up and tell what we should do and how much better off we would be if we did thus and so, but sad to relate the thus and so, is seldom done when it should.”⁴⁰⁹ She obviously had the paper in mind. Association members might say in meetings how important the paper was and talk about the benefits of reading, writing, and improving themselves, but their actions often indicated to editors that they perhaps did not mean it. Thornton then relates how Sunday morning came (perhaps the due date for essays) and “only one essay had been handed in,” causing “many gloomy for bodings for the coming Wednesday night.”⁴¹⁰ She initially seems to consider demurely brushing it under the rug: “I thought I would give it up and not have any thing to do with it, and again of writing the editorial and telling the company calmly that that was all.”⁴¹¹ But rethinking it she realized she should perhaps put her foot down: “Now this is not at all necessary, if each will comply with the request made when it is made all will be well and will feel better. May we all listen attentively to what those in authority may say, and ever be found in

⁴⁰⁷ “United States Census, 1880,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GYBV-9BYG?cc=1417683&wc=XCMF-BZ9%3A1589415070%2C1589395180%2C1589415359%2C1589395814> : 24 December 2015), Utah > Washington > Pinto > ED 95 > image 1 of 2; citing NARA microfilm publication T9, (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., n.d.).

⁴⁰⁸ [Caroline M. Thornton], “Editorial,” *Youth Educator* 1, no. 4, March 20, 1878, 1.

⁴⁰⁹ Thornton, “Editorial,” 1.

⁴¹⁰ Thornton, “Editorial,” 1.

⁴¹¹ Thornton, “Editorial,” 1.

the line of our duty is my humble prayer.”⁴¹² Instead of calmly stating that only one essay had been submitted, she chose to remind all members of their duty.

Duty and obedience are two central themes to this editorial genre, and Thornton is no exception. For instance, one editor complained: “Now, ‘Dear Girls’ if we work to make our paper a success, and we think all do, we must take more interest in it! There are some of our best talented ‘Girls’, we are sorry to say, who have neglected to write.”⁴¹³ Another wrote that if the paper did not receive submissions from certain members, “we will think they are sick, or have turned traitor to the cause, and forsaken us entirely.”⁴¹⁴ One editor compared the paper to a human being starved, having received so few submissions for nourishment.⁴¹⁵ For Thornton and the rest of these editors, the lack of submissions was a collective failure, and as the editors it was their responsibility to recognize this failure and spur fellow association members to write. It was the editors’ responsibility to show that “it is much easier to write an essay the first opportunity we have after we are called upon to write” and to encourage members to “try when called upon to do our best and make our paper a success.”⁴¹⁶ Manuscript newspapers, in a way, reflect Mormon communitarian ethos during this period. All needed to labor for the collective good, for the improvement of Zion and of self, not for money, recognition, or other baser motives.

An important part of being a member of Zion was responding to the call of your leaders, in the case of manuscript papers, that meant the editor of the paper. One author in a manuscript paper started off his article with a strong show of obedience, saying, “Mr. Editor Being called to write for the Paper I respond to the call. Knowing it to be good to develop and enlargen the mind

⁴¹² Thornton, “Editorial,” 1.

⁴¹³ Amy [Calkin?], “Editorial,” *Young Ladies Diadem* (manuscript newspaper, St. George, UT) 1, no. 3, August 29, 1877, [p. 1], MSS A 1051, USHS.

⁴¹⁴ “Letters from Aunt Lou. Letter 2nd,” *Little Girls’ Magazine* (manuscript newspaper, St. George, UT) 1, no. 3, November 12, 1879, [p. 5], MSS A 1052, USHS.

⁴¹⁵ Irene Haskill, “Starving to Death,” *Youth Educator* 4, no. 2, February 2, 1881, [pp. 1–2].

⁴¹⁶ From a Friend, “For the Youth’s Educator,” *Youth Educator* 2, no. 1, January 3, 1879, [p. 2].

it will cause the writer to seek for wisdom.” He felt that by studying the lives of “the leading men of the Church,” his fellow members would “find they were obedient to those that were placed over them.” Likewise, “We will have to obey those that are placed over us.”⁴¹⁷ One sign of this obedience to authority was writing for the paper when called upon, all the while enlarging one’s mind by careful reading and study.

Another sign of obedience was to accept leadership callings when they came from one’s leaders. One “editress” wrote of her assignment, “We willingly respond to the call [of acting as cochairs of the paper] by giving a short editorial. we should always be on hand and willing to act in any position we are called upon to fill, by those placed over us.”⁴¹⁸ One young woman who submitted to her paper wrote that “when our Presidentess [leader of the local YMLIA] calls upon us we must not refuse. For I know that we all feel better to get up if we don’t say half a dozen words.” This author had heard that “there is going to be a division line drawn” between the obedient and the disobedient. Not writing for the paper would put her on the wrong side of the line: “I know that we wouldn’t like to be left on the opposite side and so we must do what we are told we have a good Presidentess and if we do as she tells us we will do right for she will not tell us to do any thing but what is right.” Although obedience for obedience’s sake does seem to be important, more important was the effect obedience to the YLMIA leaders would bring: “we should sustain our paper and must try to make it a success and write those things that will be pleasing in the sight of God.”⁴¹⁹ In short, obedience to righteous leaders would bring about an important collective success: an informative, interesting, faith-inspiring paper.

⁴¹⁷ Harry [Lacey?], “To the Youths Educator,” *Youth Educator* 1, no. 1, February 7, 1878, pp. 2–3.

⁴¹⁸ Laura Gardner, “Editorial,” *Young Ladies Diadem* 1, no. 7, June 27, 1877, [p. 1].

⁴¹⁹ Eugene Macarthur, untitled, *Young Ladies Diadem* 1, no. 7, June 27, 1877, [pp. 8–9].

Thornton's editorial and her position as the editor of her mixed-gender manuscript newspaper presents an interesting atypicality in relations between young Mormon men and women. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, only men held the priesthood, the power of God that allowed men on earth to direct the affairs of the church. As such, women had limits on their ability to influence and shape the church and its members in formal institutional settings, especially because women speaking to mixed-gender audiences was not particularly common.⁴²⁰ Yet manuscript newspapers seem to have occasionally provided an opportunity for women to rise (if only for a month and if only in a limited capacity) to a position of power over not only women but also men. As the editor of a paper that was written by and for both young men and young women, Thornton had the ability to remind young men to "comply with [a] request made when it is made" and to "listen attentively to what those in authority may say."⁴²¹ This editorial could be read as Thornton reminding young men that although her authority was brief and limited, she had authority to make a request of them nevertheless. Besides this editorial assignment, women in the church would almost never have an opportunity to direct men as well as women in a leadership position.

Another important lesson manuscript newspapers would impart to the young had to do with the importance of working and succeeding as a collective. Some manuscript writers provided metaphors to stress the importance of the collective work of manuscript papers. One writer for the Bee-Hive paper further evoked the parallel between the paper and a beehive, the latter was an important Mormon symbol for industry and cooperation.⁴²² The observer

⁴²⁰ "Introduction," in *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women*, ed. Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017), xviii–xix.

⁴²¹ Thornton, "Editorial," 1.

⁴²² Richard G. Oman, "Beehive Symbol," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 1, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992), 99.

complained that the last issue of the Bee-Hive was practically empty besides the editorial because “the drones had taken possession of the Hive, and the working Bees had ceased their labors, all but one.” The author reminded everyone to do their duty and submit their articles, saying “let us all wake up and take an active part, and contribute to the Bee Hive, and see if we can’t fill it up, and be working Bees and not drones.”⁴²³ Another editor compared the paper to a clock. She wanted to have fourteen or fifteen submissions for this paper, not two or three. “It does not all depend upon the Editress, for to make the paper interesting,” she reminded her audience, “no more than it depends solely on the pendulum of a clock to make it run.” Instead, “it is a unity of effort, as little time and labor, given by all, to make the paper a success.”⁴²⁴ Whether a clock working perfectly in sync or a beehive filled with contributing, busy bees, the message was the same: a successful manuscript paper required the labor of all, not just a few. It was a perfect training device for teaching young people to become members of Zion, for building up and maintaining Zion required the same obedience, industry, and communal effort.

One writer for the Young Ladies Diadem explicitly asserted that young people’s present duties prepared them for bigger responsibilities to come. She felt that the purpose of the MIAs was “that we come together and endeavor to improve in all that is good, in all that will benefit us and fit and prepare us to take part in building up the kingdom of God on the earth.”⁴²⁵ Part of that included working towards creating a manuscript newspaper that would be “a jewel, a pearl of great price” that would “contain written articles which will be an honor to the writers, as daughters in Zion and children of the everlasting covenant.”⁴²⁶ She exhorts, “I hope we will each

⁴²³ A Member, “The Thoughts of a Member,” *Bee-Hive* 2, no. 3, [1886?], p. 11.

⁴²⁴ Rhoda W. Young, “Editorial,” *Young Ladies Diadem* 1, no. 8, January 30, 1878, [p. 1].

⁴²⁵ Dora L. Young, “St. George June 22, 1877,” *Young Ladies Diadem* 1, no. 7, June 27, 1877, [p. 10].

⁴²⁶ Young, “St. George,” [p.10].

one of us do our part towards, making our paper in very deed the Young Ladies Diadem.”⁴²⁷

MIAs and their manuscript newspapers were the tools to build up the kingdom of God on the earth.

If every association member remained dutiful regarding their papers, positive outcomes would result for both the community and for individuals. In one short article a manuscript paper writer wrote, “It is the duty of the members of the M. I. A, to read, recite, write or render, any subject that may be allotted unto them by those placed over them in the M. I. A.s and if each and every one will do this our meeting will become both interesting and instructive.”⁴²⁸ In such a setting, learning became a group effort. As another manuscript newspaper writer said about the purpose of their newly started paper, “As the forms of our bodies are all in a different mould, so likewise are our brains; all running in a different channel, gleaned from different sources, pondering upon far different topics which are important unto all.”⁴²⁹ In an agrarian society in which people had little time to learn for themselves, everyone had a responsibility to offer their morsel of knowledge to the rest of the group. This pooling of facts and perspectives was simply an efficient way to educate young people on a variety of subjects: “in this way the great stores of universal knowledge are searched out and disseminated for the mutual benefit of mankind.”⁴³⁰

But learning was also supposed to be “interesting,” even entertaining. That these papers remained pleasurable was crucial. Zion was also to be a place of conviviality, and such an atmosphere could only facilitate learning by making it enjoyable and entertaining. Doing so could be difficult, however. Caroline Thornton once bemoaned: “The Editor is expected to have

⁴²⁷ Young, “St. George,” [p. 10] .

⁴²⁸ A Member, “Duty,” *Bee-Hive* 4, no. 5, April 10, 1888, p. 8.

⁴²⁹ “What This Journal Has in View,” *Surprise* (manuscript newspaper, Ogden, UT) 1, no. 1, February 14, 1887, pp. 1–2, LR 6391 29, CHL.

⁴³⁰ “What This Journal Has in View,” 2.

an interesting paper, no matter whether the articles sent such or not. . . . How then can we have a lively paper if we all feel so solemn and sedate that can't write about any thing except Obedience. Obedience.”⁴³¹ Obedience, no matter how bedrock a principle, could become a monotonous topic if dwelled upon.

There were also individual benefits to writing in the paper. Although many first-time writers expressed their discomfort at writing—such as Sneezzer, who felt she could make ginger tea, coffee, or sling far easier than write something, or Pat Joe, who was more comfortable “hawling wood, trapping or going to see the girls” than writing compositions⁴³²—many also recognized the benefits of doing so. One editorial reminded readers of the following: “Let us stir ourselves up to our duties and try to be on hand to write for the paper, or to do any that we may be called on to do, for we are the ones that will be benefited, and if we will strive at all times to learn to do as we are asked we soon will become conquerors of all that we under take to do.”⁴³³ The benefits of these manuscript exercises would not just be for the community, but for the individual, who would grow little by little, like an acorn, “in wisdom and knowledge.”⁴³⁴ Others noted the importance of having a paper that was “interesting to all.” Having an interesting paper was not just about entertainment but also undoubtedly about helping those who attended MIA meetings, where the paper was read aloud, to “improve [their] minds, and try to make [themselves] useful.”⁴³⁵ They hoped their words would benefit someone: “Always desirous to respond to every call we cheerfully take upon us the duty of Editress for our paper the coming

⁴³¹ Caroline M. Thornton, “Editorial,” *Youth Educator* 2, no. 3, February 28, 1879, [pp. 1–2].

⁴³² Sneezzer, untitled, *Youth Educator* 1, no. 4, March 20, 1878, p. 2; Pat Joe, untitled, *Youth Educator* 1, no. 3, March 7, 1878, [p. 9].

⁴³³ Croly[?], “Editorial,” *Youth Educator* 1, no. 2, February 20, 1878, [p. 1].

⁴³⁴ Croly[?], “Editorial,” [p. 2].

⁴³⁵ Mary A. Rankin, letter to the editor, *Young Ladies Diadem* 1, no. 7, June 27, 1877, [p. 12].

week and if we can suggest anything that will be a benefit to our little society we will be amply repaid for all the anxiety we have had lest it might be a failure.”⁴³⁶

Manuscript papers truly became microcosms of Zion. Producing them became an activity that allowed young Mormons to slowly learn the ropes of what it meant to be a contributing member of Zion. They were to learn obedience, leadership, and the importance of unity with their brothers and sisters; to gain knowledge and skills in reading and writing; and to enjoy learning with one another. Once again, the activities of reading and writing proved crucial vehicles to prepare young Mormons to build up the kingdom of God.

One editor for the manuscript newspaper the Bee-Hive sums up the importance of the connection between reading, writing, and the future success of Zion. The editor once again draws on the symbolism of the beehive, the eponym for the paper but also the symbol for Utah Territory. “The Bee Hive what does the name signify[?]” began the editor. “That it is the hive in which the bees may store their little sweet mites. And yet the Hive is empty, yes empty, I think it may well be called a sluggards Hive.” Once again, fellow association members had failed to submit the written results of their studies. “If it were possible to convey the thought to the little busy bees that the paper was named after them and that it was to imitate their industrious habits me thinks, the little workers would blush and hang their heads in shame, and say for shame, let us sting the drones to death. For this is the case, we are a hive of drones, and deserve to be stung to death.”⁴³⁷ This piece of editorial reprobation can also be read as a parable about what might happen to Zion should these young people fail to prepare for their future roles in Zion. They needed to take

⁴³⁶ Annie E. Bentley, “Editorial,” *Young Ladies Diadem* 1, no. 8, March 13, 1877, [p. 1].

⁴³⁷ Untitled, *Bee-Hive* 2, no. 2, [1886?], p. 1.

advantage of their youth to store up honey in the hive, or else there would be nothing to draw upon when they got older. The continued focus on drones (a stingless male bee that does not gather nectar, or, more metaphorically, one who lives off the labor of others) demonstrates a worry about idleness and social parasites. In a culture that valued thrift and collective industry and that could at times see reading as an idle activity, cultural arbiters among the older generation devised ways to make reading an active, purposeful activity. This kind of reading (via MIAs, manuscript papers, and other avenues) would be useful in preparing young people to live as contributing members of Zion. As the Bee-Hive editor wrote, the consequences of failing to read, write, and submit could lead to the spiritual death of many of the members of Zion's beehive.

Chapter 4: The MIA Course of Reading, Navigating Change, and Making the People of the Books

In 1888 church leaders decided to expand their commitment to teaching young members of Zion what to read and the correct way to read it. Church leaders, periodical editors, and other cultural arbiters had been recommending books for decades, but the 1888 Mutual Improvement Association Course of Reading demonstrated a formal, institutional commitment to prescribing reading materials. This moment of prescribed reading also serves as a case study for many of the themes covered thus far. The instigators of the program believed that reading could convince young people (who had never had to sacrifice much for their beliefs) of the veracity and brilliance of the gospel, prepare them to become leaders and contributing members of Zion, shape them to become more Godlike, help them deal with some of the issues of the day (for example, science versus religion), and instruct them in correct reading material and correct reading habits. However, it also shows the uneven distribution of power between men and women when the MIA, as an institution, sought to support certain readers and their needs at the expense of others. It also showed the church's willingness to throw institutional support and resources toward the reading of nonscriptural books—in short, it demonstrated how Mormons were becoming a people of the books, people who turned to all kinds of books, “the best books,” in order to navigate some of the most crucial aspects of their lives during a time of flux.

Origin

As early as May 1888 the *Deseret News* announced that Junius Wells would give a lecture called “A Course of Reading” at the next general YMMI4A conference, to be held later that summer.⁴³⁸ On June 3 he stepped up before a vast congregation to give his extensive speech and introduced

⁴³⁸ “Y. M. M. I. A. Conference,” *Deseret Evening News*, May 24, 1888, 3.

the idea of a church-sponsored course of reading for the young people of Zion. As he looked across the sea of faces, he felt “infinite joy” that so many had come and attributed such a grand showing to the “youth of this people, the young men and women of Zion,” who he felt were “interested in the cause of Zion.”⁴³⁹ Wells began by tracing the history of the MIA organizations, taking some pride in the progress they had made. “It has not been many years since,” he related, “when great fears were expressed by those who had stood and borne the heat and burden of the day, in the defense of the cause of Zion, for the future of Zion; at least, if not for the future of Zion, they were perplexed in looking about them to see where were those who would follow voluntarily in their footsteps.”⁴⁴⁰ The young people had caused serious worries with their “rude, impolite and often profane conduct” as well as their Sabbath-breaking, intemperance, and profanity.⁴⁴¹ And while he felt that these associations had “effected a very great reform in this respect,” including preparing several young men for successful missionary service, there was still some cause to worry about whether or not young people would take up the banner of their community and faith.⁴⁴² Wells wanted young people to have their own internal belief in the gospel, their own “assurance” of its truth and the mission that God had called this people to engage in; he did not want them to “depend upon the testimony of any other man.”⁴⁴³ This mission from God included the “establishment of the kingdom of God upon the earth,” and “it has been proclaimed in our hearing by inspired men, from our childhood, that this was the destiny of the youth of this people.”⁴⁴⁴ They had begun to live up to this destiny, but “the time has come when we should take an onward step.”⁴⁴⁵

⁴³⁹ Junius F. Wells, “Lecture by Asst. Supt. Junius F. Wells,” *Deseret Evening News*, June 9, 1888, 5.

⁴⁴⁰ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁴¹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁴² Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁴³ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁴⁴ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁴⁵ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

This onward step included reading. Unfortunately, “It is said of us,” Wells points out, “with more or less truth, that we are not a reading people.” Young men and women had often indulged in the pastimes of youth and failed to study and ponder upon the “weightier and more important considerations of life.”⁴⁴⁶ The young men had also fallen into the trap of seeking wealth and allowing their vocations to demand all their attention, leaving no room for the cultivation of their minds: “Therefore, they are unread and unlettered; and as long as this condition prevails among us, we will fail to realize our great destiny.”⁴⁴⁷ But the time to put off the follies of youth was now here: “We are now called upon to step forth and take a front rank, so advance in the scale of human intelligence, to inform and educate ourselves, according to the injunctions of Holy Writ and the counsel of the inspired Prophets of God.” He also acknowledged that “those who have occupied high and important positions among us have been, in some instances, notorious for their knowledge of the past history of the races and peoples of the world,” making it clear that book knowledge and qualifications for leadership were indeed connected.⁴⁴⁸ “There is much that we need to know, to qualify ourselves for the mission that is before us,” lamented Wells.⁴⁴⁹ The sheer volume of information that might prove crucial to the building up of Zion was overwhelming. Therefore, for Wells it was “vain for us to hope to acquire that knowledge without systematic study, without we give our hearts and our thoughts to reflection, and to the improvement and cultivation of our minds.”⁴⁵⁰ Thankfully, this was possible thanks to the structures of the church. Wells would rely on this structure to effect what he believed would be a great change: “We have an organization that is capable of prescribing to

⁴⁴⁶ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁴⁷ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁴⁸ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁴⁹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁵⁰ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

its members the manner and methods to be pursued to make them in all respects capable and prepared for the duties of life that are before them.”⁴⁵¹

One impetus for the course of reading was the explosion of print material during this time period, which created a certain amount of anxiety among cultural arbiters and readers. Wells felt a course of reading could help manage this difficulty. He describes the feelings of many who have walked into a library or bookstore and “gaze[ed] upon the shelves of books, row upon row, in bindings of every hue, and [were] bewildered to know which of these [they] should select, for [their] information, for [their] culture, and the development of [their] faculties.”⁴⁵² In such an environment, “We are as likely as not to make a choice that is bad.” Such an environment made many young people in Salt Lake wonder, “What shall I read? and How shall I read?”⁴⁵³

The MIA course of reading would answer both of those questions. No other course of reading would help Mormons answer these questions, likely an allusion to the popular Chautauqua Society’s course of reading in New York. The Chautauqua movement began in 1874 through the efforts of a Methodist minister who believed “religious and secular knowledge were not at odds.”⁴⁵⁴ About 225,000 people (four-fifths of whom were women) participated in its home-study program between 1878 and 1894.⁴⁵⁵ The movement largely targeted white middle-class Protestant readers, but eventually Jewish and Catholic reading groups based off this model were established.⁴⁵⁶ The MIA Course of Reading was essentially to be a Mormon version of Chautauqua. But Wells believed that Mormons could not follow such a reading course as

⁴⁵¹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁵² Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁵³ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁵⁴ Barbara Sicherman, “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,” in *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880*, vol. 3, *History of the Book in America*, ed. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 288.

⁴⁵⁵ Sicherman, “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,” 288.

⁴⁵⁶ Sicherman, “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,” 288; Christine Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late-Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 131.

Chautauqua because non-Mormons were “not in sympathy with the motives which we have in view and with the work that must occupy our lives.”⁴⁵⁷ Only a Mormon reading course could meet Mormon ends; however, as discussed below, it is clear that the MIA reading course was indeed shaped by Chautauqua.

Wells hoped for several results from this course of reading. An “attentive reader” would “have read and studied every principle and doctrine that pertains to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints”; absorbed the histories of several countries; studied science that taught “truths that we are safe in accepting, without the fictions and theories that are dangerous to the peace and satisfaction of the human mind”; become acquainted with the great general literature of the world; and “will have laid the foundation for correct habits of reading thoughtfully, reading with method and an aim in view.”⁴⁵⁸ Such a course would not only create such positive action in Mormon youth but also discourage “the desultory reading that many indulge in, the habit that many have adopted.”⁴⁵⁹ It would stop young people from “reading themselves down into utter frivolity of thought, by glancing upon page after page of some work of trashy, light literature, without thought, . . . [and] ruining the mind that God has given them.”⁴⁶⁰ Such a course would free these people from “bondage, a slavery from which they will not be likely easily to escape.”⁴⁶¹ They would be freed not only by the assigned books but by the ways they would be taught to read them; the golden rule of the reader was “READ WITH ATTENTION,” for as Wells wrote, “It is better to read but ten pages, and know what we have read than to read a

⁴⁵⁷ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁵⁸ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁵⁹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁶⁰ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁶¹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

thousand in the manner that is often customary among us.”⁴⁶² Remembering and internalizing what they read would prove crucial in fulfilling their destiny in building God’s kingdom.

For Wells, this course of study exemplified what mutual improvement was all about: “developing the noblest, the best traits of character, to make us, indeed, men in the image of Almighty God, and capable of bearing the responsibility that He calls us to bear in this life; successful men, fulfilling the object and measure of our creation upon the earth; doing all that God sent us here to do.”⁴⁶³ On a cosmic timeline, this would aid young people in the Mormon quest to become more like God; doing so would also aid their ability to do God’s will on earth now. Such knowledge could be gainfully employed as a missionary, church leader, or regular member of Zion to help build up God’s kingdom.

Wells also seemed concerned with the contentment of young Mormons in Zion, frequently using words like happy and delight to describe the goals of the program. He hoped this course would help young people feel “happy with the profession of Latter-day Saints” by helping them study and articulate “a reason for the faith that is in us.”⁴⁶⁴ He also wanted young Mormons to learn about and appreciate the world around them, such as the history of foreign lands and peoples so that, in a missionary sense, they could “have a proper appreciation of those to whom [they were] sent.”⁴⁶⁵ He also felt that in order to be “happy and enjoy life” young Mormons needed to understand the natural world around them, including the “sciences of life.”⁴⁶⁶ Later he said: “Our delight cannot be made perfect, our success and happiness in life cannot be secured except on the attainment of knowledge that puts us into harmony, to a certain

⁴⁶² Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁶³ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁶⁴ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁶⁵ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁶⁶ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

degree, at least, with the things and people of the world.”⁴⁶⁷ While these goals all related to building up Zion, Wells seems to truly hope that this course would not just be a necessary, boring means for an end; he also seems to have hoped that this would improve the quality of life for young Mormons.

Turning to the practicalities of instituting such a reading course, Wells remarked that this course of reading would extend for four or five years. In front of the audience, he unveiled the five categories of study and the corresponding books that would compose the first year’s course of study. For a book on doctrine, it would be *The Gospel. An Exposition of Its First Principles*, by B. H. Roberts; for science, *First Book of Nature*, by James E. Talmage; for history, *A Child’s History of England*, by Charles Dickens; for general literature, *Readings from Washington Irving*; and for home literature, *The Life of Nephi*, by George Q. Cannon. Wells was perfectly clear regarding his expectations regarding these books: “They will be read methodically. They will be read as directed, within the time that is prescribed. This set of books will be prepared and will be introduced into every society. The themes and subjects of which they treat will be more or less elaborated in supplemental articles to be published in the *Contributor* from month to month.”⁴⁶⁸ Different aspects or themes within these books would be discussed every week. At the end of winter and the first year’s course, “test questions will be sent out which the readers are expected to answer, and which will indicate the attention they have bestowed upon the course of reading, and the fidelity with which they have followed it.”⁴⁶⁹ In short, Junius Wells was dead serious about this course of reading. Zion’s youth would read it, they would read it closely, and

⁴⁶⁷ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁶⁸ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁶⁹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

they would discuss it, and Wells wanted to know if they truly complied and internalized this knowledge.

Wells began to close his sermon with what for him was surely a beautiful vision: “What a grand and glorious spectacle it will be, young men and young women of Zion, when it may be said that there are five thousand, a third of the members of the Young Men’s Associations, who are pursuing this course, this methodical course of reading!” Not only were they growing in wisdom and knowledge, but they were “laying the foundation for far more extensive, more comprehensive reading in the future[,] . . . forming correct habits of reading, learning how to derive the best knowledge from books[, and] learning how to secure to themselves those implements that will qualify them as husbandmen in the great field that God has called them to labor in!”⁴⁷⁰ They would become self-sufficient readers. Long after current church leaders and cultural arbiters had gone, the MIA Course of Reading generation would know how and what to read, constantly plucking, digesting, and applying the knowledge gleaned from the best books to their work in building Zion. He closed his thoughts by quoting two Mormon scriptures that enshrine the value of education and knowledge, seemingly leaving God’s own stamp of approval on such a course: “And knowledge is power, for no man can be saved in ignorance. The glory of God is His intelligence.”⁴⁷¹

Although Wells pitched the Course of Reading and acted as its greatest champion, the course did receive significant support from the highest levels of church leadership. At the same YMMIA conference that Wells proposed the Course of Reading, it was adopted for all MIAs—including Young Ladies MIAs, even though it seems no women were represented—by a

⁴⁷⁰ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁷¹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

unanimous vote.⁴⁷² The MIA superintendency—consisting of Wilford Woodruff, Joseph F. Smith, and Moses Thatcher, all apostles in the church—also strongly supported the reading course.

Only four months later would MIA leaders hold a joint meeting with the YMMIA and the YLMIA, although the meeting had originally been scheduled for only the young men’s association. This may have been the first time that the YLMIA received official word in one of their own meetings about the reading course on which they were supposed to embark that winter.⁴⁷³ This decision and process demonstrate the imbalance of power between genders. Here the all-male leaders of the general MIA could make decisions that affected YLMIA seemingly without input from female leaders. As we will see below, while MIA leaders frequently commented on how this Course of Reading would benefit all young people in Zion—young men and young women—they created a program more specifically designed for young men and seemed most interested in whether young men completed the course.

In a four-page pamphlet, the MIA superintendency largely echoed Wells’s sentiments regarding the purpose and importance of this program.⁴⁷⁴ They wrote: “The purpose in view is to cultivate among the young men and women of Zion a taste for good literature and to form correct habits of reading. In a word, to answer these questions, which arise in the minds of every seeker after knowledge. What books shall I read? How shall I read them to the best advantage?”⁴⁷⁵ As the purpose indicates, developing good taste in reading was not the only goal; church leaders also

⁴⁷² “Y. M. M. I. A.,” *Ogden Daily Standard*, June 5, 1888, 4.

⁴⁷³ “Joint Meeting,” *Deseret News*, October 10, 1888, 13.

⁴⁷⁴ Wilford Woodruff, Joseph F. Smith, and Moses Thatcher, *A Course of Reading under the Auspices of the Mutual Improvement Associations* (Salt Lake City: Contributor Co., 1888?), BX 8608 .Ala no. 8540, LTPSC.

⁴⁷⁵ Woodruff, Smith, and Thatcher, *A Course of Reading*, 1.

wanted to teach young people how to correctly read good works. The cursory reading of light fiction would not do in this case. Focused, disciplined study would be needed.

These leaders also hoped that, upon completing the course, young people would “be well informed upon the doctrines of the Church; the history of the nations, ancient and modern; upon the established truths of science; and will have secured a fair introduction to the best general literature of the world.”⁴⁷⁶ Not only would they have knowledge, they would be endowed with the skills necessary to read and obtain learning for themselves, “with habits of methodical, attentive reading well established, by which all the treasures of knowledge, to be derived from books, may be brought within their reach.”⁴⁷⁷

In order to accomplish this, the superintendency would print their own books to distribute to the young people of Zion. They would print a whopping three thousand sets, which meant fifteen thousand books in total—a massive print run.⁴⁷⁸ This print run also represented a significant financial investment at a time when the church and its finances were under severe strain from the polygamy-induced attacks of the federal government. In less than two years from when the course of reading was announced, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would renounce polygamy, allowing them to keep their beloved temples. Their commitment of resources during such troubled and cash-strapped times indicates the value church leaders placed on this course of reading. Perhaps it was even vital considering some of the changes the church was undergoing. Although the cost of making the books and handling them was to be earned back by associations and their members who purchased the books, it still represented a

⁴⁷⁶ Woodruff, Smith, and Thatcher, *A Course of Reading*, 3.

⁴⁷⁷ Woodruff, Smith, and Thatcher, *A Course of Reading*, 3.

⁴⁷⁸ “Joint Meeting,” *Deseret News*, October 10, 1888, 13; General Superintendency YMMIA circular letter, Salt Lake City, November 1, 1888, M257.4 D2851 1888, CHL.

significant financial investment.⁴⁷⁹ The superintendency announced that the five books would be sold in sets for the price of three dollars in advance (or one dollar in advance and the rest in five monthly installments of fifty cents) and each book would be “handsomely bound in uniform cloth binding [and] enclosed in a neat case.”⁴⁸⁰

Distribution and Adoption

Wells and the superintendency largely relied upon the local leaders of MIAs to ensure that the books were distributed and the reading course carried out. Wells indicated that local leaders were to “use their best endeavors to introduce this course of reading, and to see that it is followed faithfully by the members of their respective societies.”⁴⁸¹ In a November circular letter to local presidents of the YMMIA, the MIA General Superintendency wrote that the books would be ready for delivery later in the month. In all of their circular communications, the MIA General Superintendency seems to only have addressed the leaders of the YMMIA, never the YLMIA. This distribution date seems to be later than Wells had hoped for; a year later he would admit that there were some delays in the publishing process, causing a setback in their distribution and adoption by many MIAs throughout the territory.⁴⁸² They knew they depended upon the cooperation of MIA presidents and their “fellow-officers to introduce this Course of Reading.”⁴⁸³ But they felt “assured that [they would] appreciate the object had in view, and [would] cheerfully do what [they could] reasonably to insure the success of the enterprise.”⁴⁸⁴ They then reminded the presidents of the hoped-for goals of this program. They wrote that if this course of reading would “induce a large number of our young people to spend a portion of their time, this winter,

⁴⁷⁹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5; “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, November 1889, 40.

⁴⁸⁰ Woodruff, Smith, and Thatcher, *A Course of Reading*, 3.

⁴⁸¹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁴⁸² General Superintendency YMMIA circular letter; “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, July 1889, 355.

⁴⁸³ General Superintendency YMMIA circular letter.

⁴⁸⁴ General Superintendency YMMIA circular letter.

in reading and studying, we will reap a rich reward in the mental and moral improvement that will surely follow among them.”⁴⁸⁵ It seems that these local MIA leaders would then canvas their community, visiting fellow association members, introducing the course to them, and encouraging them to purchase the books.⁴⁸⁶

Not until November and December, when the books were finally ready for purchase, did Wells and others begin again to vocally support the program. The Salt Lake Herald-Republican lauded the choice of books and the authors selected for the program and felt good about proclaiming, “We can conscientiously recommend them.”⁴⁸⁷ In the November issue of the Contributor Wells reduced the price to now \$2.50 for a set, reminding readers that this was not a money-making scheme, for this cost was expected to just pay for their production and handling. He felt his object was building up the youth of Zion, not making money. He also further detailed how the reading course would work and instructed participants and MIA leaders about the best way to carry it out. Individuals would read at home, and they would need to finish all five books by April. He advocated all to dedicate “a portion of each day or evening . . . to the perusal and study of these books,” specifically citing an hour or two each day as the time necessary to spend in order to complete the course in the allotted time.⁴⁸⁸ Wells knew that this would sound like a lot of time, particularly for those who thought “they ‘have no time to read.’”⁴⁸⁹ So he challenged these busy bees to find frequent, purposeful periods of ten or fifteen minutes throughout the course of the day to pick up one of the books and read. He reminded them, “Even in the lives of

⁴⁸⁵ General Superintendency YMMIA circular letter.

⁴⁸⁶ “Y. M. M. I. A. Officers,” *Ogden Daily Standard*, October 11, 1888, 1; this practice of canvassing the community to encourage reading has an earlier nineteenth-century parallel in US history: the “colporteurs (traveling book distributors) [who] carr[ied] tracts and books to people on the frontier of American settlement.” David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

⁴⁸⁷ “A Course of Readings,” *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, December 2, 1888, 6.

⁴⁸⁸ Junius F. Wells, “The Course of Reading,” *Contributor*, November 1888, 35.

⁴⁸⁹ Wells, “The Course of Reading,” 35.

the busiest, if there is a purpose in view to which they are to be dedicated. These fifteen minute thoughtful, attentive readings have educated some of the most notable men in history.”⁴⁹⁰ But despite such short burst of reading, young people were to “read with attention and thought, not hastily, but for the purpose of getting an understanding and appreciation of the matter read.”⁴⁹¹ The doctrinal, historical, and scientific books would require deeper study than the general and home literature, which were designed more for wholesome recreation and entertainment and to instill in the youth an “impulse to untrained minds to seek for and appreciate pure and wholesome literature.”⁴⁹² Again, the hope was not that young people would only read these five books; “On the contrary,” wrote Wells, “while all are enjoined to read these, they are urged to extend their reading as much further as they can, while observing ‘to read with attention and thought;’ and it is especially desirable that the works referred to by the books of the course and subjective titles of lectures should be consulted and read.”⁴⁹³ The purpose of the Course of Reading had an inherent tension: it was supposed to encourage young people to “extend their reading as much further as they can” while also demonstrating the kinds of books that should be read, narrowing the field as to what sorts of books could be read.⁴⁹⁴ Wells also appealed to MIA leaders, encouraging them that they could “do nothing this winter that will promote mutual improvement to the extent that a general distribution and faithful reading of the books of the First Year’s Series will accomplish.”⁴⁹⁵ If they did, they would help bring about a “revolution.” He believed that instead of “idle, foolish jesting engaging [young people’s] conversational powers, thought upon doctrine, history, science and sacred biography, will seek and find expression upon

⁴⁹⁰ Wells, “The Course of Reading,” 35.

⁴⁹¹ Wells, “The Course of Reading,” 35.

⁴⁹² Wells, “The Course of Reading,” 35.

⁴⁹³ Wells, “The Course of Reading,” 35.

⁴⁹⁴ Wells, “The Course of Reading,” 35.

⁴⁹⁵ Junius F. Wells, “The First Year’s Series,” *Contributor*, December 1888, 76.

the lips of hundreds, to whom such subjects have been strangers all their lives.”⁴⁹⁶ It would turn carefree, careless youth into thoughtful, informed adults.

The Five Books

As the days got shorter during the winter of 1888 and 1889, Wells likely imagined young people holed up in their homes, studying the books he and others had so consciously decided on. Each had been chosen for specific reasons, and as a whole, this set of books also taught some important lessons.

The books were printed by none other than Junius F. Wells himself. As the editor and printer of the Contributor he had the resources to be able to carry out such a project. The books themselves were praised for their aesthetics.⁴⁹⁷ Wells wrote: “The appearance of the five volumes comprised in the first years series of the M. I. A. Course of Reading is all that could be desired. The books are of about the same size, bound uniformly in a handsome dark olive colored cover, having a beautiful design stamped upon the side, embracing the Association monogram entwined in twigs of wild sage and sunflower, typical plants of our Territory.”⁴⁹⁸ They were then all grouped together in a “neat case.”⁴⁹⁹

These production decisions provided a powerful visual, tangible lesson about the importance of the book as an object in Mormon culture. Church leaders could have foregone the gold stamps, the handsome cloth bindings, and decorative elements to provide simpler books at a much cheaper cost, especially when one considers that three of the books were already in print. This perhaps could have made the books even more affordable and allowed more young people

⁴⁹⁶ Wells, “The First Year’s Series,” 76.

⁴⁹⁷ “A Course of Readings,” *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, December 2, 1888, 6.

⁴⁹⁸ Wells, “The First Year’s Series,” 74.

⁴⁹⁹ Woodruff, Smith, and Thatcher, *A Course of Reading*, 3. Another case indicates they were sold for \$2.50 a set. B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel: An Exposition of Its First Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Contributor Company, 1888), M257.4 M993c #1.

to purchase the set. But they decided to direct the scarce financial resources available during this time toward sturdy and beautiful books; this decision reflects a kind of reverence for these printed words that they hoped would effect the salvation of Zion. Books that contained such important words, ideas, and principles deserved to be clothed in something equally weighty, and the common flowers of Utah Territory wrapping themselves around the MIA logo gave these books a further gravity; they showed how these books were being used for a distinctly Mormon purpose—to improve the youth of Utah, preparing them for many future endeavors. Church leaders also wanted young people to own their copies of these books, to be proud of them, and for them to last. “It is desirable,” wrote the superintendency, “that every reader should own and preserve these books; they will form the nucleus of a valuable library, and will possess a peculiar interest and value in after years from the present association.”⁵⁰⁰ Hopefully, these books would jump start a desire to begin building a personal library.⁵⁰¹ These visually striking books could again serve as a visual reminder on the shelf of the quality reading material prescribed and hopefully influence their owners to place works of equal worth next to them on the shelf.

Printing or reprinting these books in matching bindings and grouping them in a case together sent another powerful visual image to readers. This image grouped non-Mormon authors like Dickens and Irving and placed them on the same shelf as Mormon leaders, indicating that truth, wisdom, and knowledge could come from many sources, not exclusively the pulpit. It also demonstrated how science, history, and literature, as well as religion, all fell under the same umbrella for educating and improving those in Zion. As Wells had said when first introducing the reading course, “All that the world contains of truth, all that it can teach us that is

⁵⁰⁰ Woodruff, Smith, and Thatcher, *A Course of Reading*, 3.

⁵⁰¹ In other parts of the United States, teachers hoped their students would begin their own libraries, for they believed that readers would delve into a book’s pages much more enthusiastically if they owned the book rather than just borrowed it. Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border*, 35.

in harmony with the principles the Lord has revealed for our salvation it is our privilege and duty to acquire a knowledge of.”⁵⁰²

A Reason to Believe

Some of the books in the MIA Course of Reading were written at the instigation of the superintendency of the MIA. B. H. Roberts’s *The Gospel. An Exposition of Its First Principles* is one such instance. His writing of the book was interrupted by Roberts’s many church duties, including serving overseas as a missionary, yet it was at last finished in 1888 in time to be published with the other four works.⁵⁰³

This book was to be the first read in the series, probably because Wells felt it was “of great value to the young men and women of our people.”⁵⁰⁴ It would be of such great worth because Wells and other leaders still seemed to worry about young people, “whose religious convictions are not wholly formed,” and their belief in or commitment to the faith of their mothers and fathers.⁵⁰⁵ He believed the book made “so clear and pertinent an argument” regarding the principles of the gospel that it could not fail to “convince the sincere inquirer for the truth,” to “convert the youth of our own people to an intelligent appreciation and sincere acceptance of the faith of their fathers.”⁵⁰⁶

The preface to *The Gospel* also explicitly lays out this same purpose. Roberts begins by clearly laying out his intentions: “This work has been written for the purpose of instructing the youth of Zion in the first principles of the Gospel.”⁵⁰⁷ The reason this instruction was needed was because the newest generation of Mormons had been raised in Utah. In contrast, these youths’

⁵⁰² Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁵⁰³ B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel: An Exposition of Its First Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Contributor Company, 1888), p. v, M257.4 M993c #1, CHL.

⁵⁰⁴ Wells, “The First Year’s Series,” 74.

⁵⁰⁵ Wells, “The First Year’s Series,” 74.

⁵⁰⁶ Wells, “The First Year’s Series,” 74–75.

⁵⁰⁷ Roberts, *The Gospel*, iii.

parents had converted to the church in other states or in foreign countries and then chose to emigrate from their homelands to come to Utah and join the rest of the church. Because of the weightiness of this decision, “they carefully and thoroughly examined every principle advanced” by Mormon missionaries.⁵⁰⁸ They listened to missionaries and discussed what they were learning about in their home “until they not only intellectually assented to it as a grand system of truth, but also became imbued with its spirit, and felt and enjoyed its powers.”⁵⁰⁹

However, Roberts acknowledges that “with the youth of Zion it has been different.” He admits the folly of past thinking regarding the young people of Zion:

Being removed from the errors of the sectarian world, it has been thought they would accept the Gospel as a matter of course. It may be stated as a general truth, that too much in this respect has been taken for granted; and in too many instances our youth have not been instructed so thoroughly in the things of God as they ought to have been. Many have grown up in lamentable ignorance of even the First Principles of the Gospel—which ignorance is often confounded with unbelief, or mistaken for infidelity.

Growing up in Zion, the youth simply had not needed to undergo the same rigorous intellectual and spiritual study and conversion that their parents had, nor did they often need to defend their beliefs from members of other religious traditions. It seems that even the past thirteen years of MIA meetings had not been enough to educate and inspire the youth. Roberts did not believe the youth to be unbelieving or unfaithful; instead, they simply did not understand their parents’ beliefs. Hence the need for the book: “To such the Gospel has only to be presented intelligently, and in its native simplicity, to be accepted,” and that is what Roberts set out to do.⁵¹⁰ Another reason for focusing on his presentation as intelligent is the common trope of Mormons as deluded or deranged. Such a presentation might help young men as missionaries or young

⁵⁰⁸ Roberts, *The Gospel*, iii.

⁵⁰⁹ Roberts, *The Gospel*, iv.

⁵¹⁰ Roberts, *The Gospel*, iv.

women in their own discursive missionary sphere in defending the gospel in a more intellectual manner.

In the conclusion to his preface, Roberts states that “it is the earnest hope of the author that by a patient perusal of these pages those who now believe the Gospel will find their faith strengthened and confirmed; and those who do not believe it, be convinced of its truth.”⁵¹¹

Roberts’s hope that this book would strengthen believers and convince nonbelievers demonstrates how reading and intellectuality intersected with faith. For Mormons, religious belief stemmed not only from spiritual experiences but also from intellectual experiences. For Roberts, Mormon youth needed more of the latter, an intellectual explanation for their beliefs that they could hang their hats on in times of intense uncertainty regarding the future of their community. He, Wells, and others believed a book could help accomplish this goal.

Missionaries and Whiteness

The second book in the reading course was Charles Dickens’s *A Child’s History of England*. Dickens initially published the work serially but then published three separate volumes. Those who advertised on behalf of the MIA course of reading never referred to it by this title, always cutting off the *A Child’s* part of the title, undoubtedly trying to ensure young people did not feel juvenile. Hopefully, the more engaging style intended for a youthful audience would make the history book less dry to young Mormon readers. And read it young Mormons must, for MIA leaders purposefully selected this book with issues of missionary work and race in mind.

One of the most obvious reasons Mormon leaders selected *History of England* had to do with the missionary goals of the church. When Wells introduced the course of reading, he emphasized the reasons for studying history: “If we are to go abroad into the world, we should

⁵¹¹ Roberts, *The Gospel*, v.

desire to know the history of the world to which we shall go and bear out testimony, learn things that are regarded by the world and to have a proper appreciation of those to whom we are sent. We can in no way so readily reach the hearts of our fellow men as by proper consideration for their present condition.”⁵¹² In order for missionaries to effectively reach the hearts of the people they were teaching, they needed to understand their backgrounds, their situations, their beliefs, and their values. Only then could they know how best to tailor their religious message. The choice of a history book about England makes particular sense in this contest. The church had historically had great success in its evangelization efforts in England; around 32,000 British and Irish individuals received baptism, crossed the Atlantic, and traveled to Zion to be a part of the religious community.⁵¹³ Ensuring that young people gained a knowledge and appreciation of English history (Wells complained that virtually none of the young men had ever read a book about English history)⁵¹⁴ would continue to aid proselytizing efforts in such an important area.

Although the connection between missionary work and the history of a foreign country is more evident, there may have been a racial reason for the choice of the history of England. Historian Paul Reeve has convincingly demonstrated how during the nineteenth century, many Americans branded Mormons as a nonwhite people. They began to see Mormons as a distinct race, but they cited Mormons as an example of “racial regression, never racial progress.”⁵¹⁵ Mormons sought to challenge this narrative and to claim whiteness by distancing themselves from other racially suspect groups, such as by denying the priesthood to black Mormons. Another way Mormons sought to claim this whiteness was by “asserting Anglo-Saxonism. . . . It

⁵¹² Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁵¹³ W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10.

⁵¹⁴ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁵¹⁵ Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 9.

was an attempt to position Mormons at the top of America's racial ladder while others tried to push them several rungs down."⁵¹⁶

The choice of *History of England* may have been one way Mormons sought to assert Anglo-Saxonism—using reading in identity formation. According to Wells, “no happier choice could have been made” than the *History of England* in “the creation of an interest in history,” and the history of England “at once the most important to us, and in which the development of our present civilization and the growth of free institutions is but reflected.”⁵¹⁷ He felt it was the most important because “the tree of liberty, blessed with such a vigorous growth in this country, and promising eventually to extend its spreading branches over the whole land, first sprung into existence in England, and for that reason English history is so important to the youth of America.”⁵¹⁸ This interpretation reflected a kind of Anglo-Saxon triumphalism, in which “the story of civilization itself became intertwined in the Anglo-Saxon narrative of progress, uplift, freedom, and racial superiority.”⁵¹⁹ It seems, therefore, that one of the possible reasons for why Wells and others selected this book was that they wanted to inculcate a sense of Anglo-Saxonness within the youth of Zion. They wanted to claim the institutions and traditions of England as their own during a time when institutions, religious beliefs, and modes of behaving were believed to be just as important markers of race as skin color.⁵²⁰ When Mormons' whiteness became suspect, these leaders sought to inculcate this whiteness within the youngest generation; it seems MIA leaders believed that if young people could absorb the history of England and learn to place themselves at the end of the trajectory of English history, they could

⁵¹⁶ Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 11.

⁵¹⁷ Wells, “The First Year's Series,” 75.

⁵¹⁸ Wells, “The First Year's Series,” 75.

⁵¹⁹ Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 39.

⁵²⁰ Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 3–4.

distance themselves from Native peoples, African Americans, and any other racially suspect group and try to claim whiteness for themselves. Reading became a tool of racial self-fashioning and distancing.

Science “We Are Safe in Accepting”

The nineteenth century was a tumultuous time for those who believed in the literalness of the Bible, as evolution, geological dating, and other ideas challenged the origin story and history laid out in the Bible. Wells wanted young people to become acquainted with scientific truths that “we are safe in accepting” and hoped to help them avoid “the fictions and theories that are dangerous to the peace and satisfaction of the human mind.”⁵²¹ The choice of *The First Book of Nature* could help young people navigate these treacherous waters.

The author of the book was Professor James E. Talmage. Talmage received education from universities in the Eastern United States and taught as a professor of chemistry and geology at Brigham Young Academy when *The First Book of Nature*, his first book, was published. He would later go on to be the president of the University of Utah and eventually become a member of the church’s Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.⁵²² For Talmage, faith was not in theory diametrically opposed to science; both revealed truth. He believed in evolution and a geological time scale for the earth but reasoned these truths could coexist with biblical texts.⁵²³

The purpose of Talmage’s book was to inculcate in its audience an appreciation of a Creator’s design for the world. In the book’s introduction, Talmage says, “Man says these things

⁵²¹ Wells, “Lecture,” 5.

⁵²² Becky White Workman, “Talmage, James Edward,” in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, ed. Allen Kent Powell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994),

https://www.uen.org/utah_history_encyclopedia/t/TALMAGE_JAMES.shtml.

⁵²³ Dennis Rowley, “Inner Dialogue: James Talmage’s Choice of Science as a Career, 1876–84,” *Dialogue* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 123.

were natural consequences [the rain falling, seeds sprouting, or any other kind of natural phenomena],—taking place in obedience to the laws of Nature. Nature then is but another name for the will of God; . . . [The things of nature] are indeed an embodiment and a realization of His all-wise designs. By learning the use and purposes of things, to a small degree, at least, we grasp the idea of their Creator; and to do this is to become truly wise.”⁵²⁴

In his book, Talmage presents a limited view of evolution. He notes, “Some people have argued that from such minute and simple structures [amoebas] as this one, all the higher animals have been developed in course of time through a process of growth or evolution. Such an idea is without the least foundation in fact or observation.”⁵²⁵ Although he did not believe in an evolution that included such drastic transformations, he did seem to advocate for an evolution that allowed for growth in an individual species. He wrote, “An animal may grow and develop till it becomes perfect in its own sphere; but one cannot transform itself into others,” an idea that squared well with Mormon theological ideas about the potential of humankind.⁵²⁶ Talmage sought to reassure young Mormon readers of their genealogical distance from monkeys. He writes, “The soul of man is the direct offspring of Deity; . . . Then let us not assert that our Father’s children are scarcely above the monkeys; for such is not true.”⁵²⁷ The Contributor also published further articles that could be paired with several of the books. For example, B. H. Roberts published a series of articles titled “Man’s Relationship to Deity” to supplement Roberts’s book in the series, though some of the articles could have been paired with Talmage’s book. The articles dealt with how fossils, evolution, the age of the earth, and other topics

⁵²⁴ James E. Talmage, *The First Book of Nature* (Salt Lake City: Contributor Company, 1888), 2–3.

⁵²⁵ Talmage, *First Book of Nature*, 129.

⁵²⁶ Talmage, *First Book of Nature*, 130.

⁵²⁷ Talmage, *First Book of Nature*, 11.

interacted with the biblical narratives.⁵²⁸ Talmage concludes the book by expressing his hope that by contemplating the heavens, the animals, the plants, and the rocks and minerals, young people could see “unmistakable proof of a wise and powerful direction; the hand-marks of a Creator [that were] left upon the fabric of Nature in every part; [and that] all things, the small and the great, declare with one accord the wisdom of the Almighty Mind that called them into being.”⁵²⁹

If Robert’s book was written to intellectually and spiritually persuade young people of the particular virtues of Mormonism, the purpose of Talmage’s book was perhaps even broader. During a time when many felt science was assailing faith, Talmage’s book was to help inspire or sustain a belief in God’s very existence as the creator of this world; it was to teach “some of the most sublime lessons of faith in the Creator, through the study of His creations.”⁵³⁰ It also tried to portray the message that science and religion were not opponents per se; they were both vehicles to finding truth, though that belief was sometimes put to the test.

Literature

Although MIA leaders tried to form a distinctly Mormon reading course, clearly the choice of Washington Irving’s book demonstrates how some of the books that reading programs like Chautauqua recommended were indeed suitable for Mormons. Just the year before the MIA reading course, Chautauqua had included Readings from Washington Irving in its book list for 1887–1888.⁵³¹ The Chautauqua edition of the book even had green cloth binding and the society’s gold-stamped logo in front of a floral design; it therefore seems that Wells borrowed

⁵²⁸ B. H. Roberts, “Man’s Relationship to Deity,” *Contributor*, March 1889, 177–83; B. H. Roberts, “Man’s Relationship to Deity,” *Contributor*, April 1889, 212–16; B. H. Roberts, “Man’s Relationship to Deity,” *Contributor*, May 1889, 263–68.

⁵²⁹ Talmage, *First Book of Nature*, 264.

⁵³⁰ Junius F. Wells, “Recent Home Literature,” *Contributor*, March 1889, 94.

⁵³¹ *Book List 1878–2018* (Chautauqua, NY: Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, 2018).

not only a book title from Chautauqua but also modeled the MIA book covers after the society's covers. This appropriation demonstrates how Mormons selectively picked and chose elements of US book culture but repurposed them or remodeled them for their own ends.

Wells believed Irving's book would create more positive outcomes for the youth of Zion. He lauded the choice of Irving: "As an introductory to American Literature, and with a design to create a taste for all that is elegant and pure in it, no better selection of an author could have been made."⁵³² Some of the selections of his work would just be plain wholesome fun. "Christmas," "The Stage Coach," "Christmas Eve," and "Christmas Day," would entertain young people with yuletide traditions and cheer during the Christmas holidays, while "Rip Van Winkle" would "be enjoyed for its quaint humor and weird legends almost religiously believed by the inhabitants of the Empire State, before the roar and rush of commerce drove from her mountains and streams all the elves, fairies, ghosts and witches belonging to romantic and poetic lore."⁵³³ This marked the only fiction in the entire MIA Course of Reading.

While entertainment was part of the reason for selecting Irving, Wells also believed it would spur further reading of the kind he and other church leaders hoped young people would engage in. Irving's piece "'Stratford-on-Avon' is calculated to increase an interest in the master of the English language—Shakspeare—and beget a zest for a study of his great works."⁵³⁴ If they could pique young readers' interest in such works, hopefully they would fill their leisure time with the likes of Shakespeare and other members of the approved literary canon instead of those pesky, harmful, "trashy" novels.

⁵³² Wells, "The First Year's Series," 75–76.

⁵³³ Wells, "The First Year's Series," 76.

⁵³⁴ Wells, "The First Year's Series," 76.

Home Literature

The Life of Nephi, by George Q. Cannon, rounded out the reading list. The book had originally been published in 1883 by the Juvenile Instructor Office as the ninth book of the Faith-Promoting Series. It served as a biography of one of the main characters from the Book of Mormon, a prophet named Nephi. For Wells this book was an important part of Home Literature—works written by Mormons for Mormons. It was an important movement, one that had already generated positive effects. These effects could indicate a “vast improvement in the quality of our books, in a cultivated taste for the best literature among our readers and in an impetus given to book-writing and book-making.”⁵³⁵ These improvements would “go far towards advancing our home literature to a conspicuous and leading place in the literary world.”⁵³⁶

Among the great works of Home Literature that had thus far been produced, Cannon’s The Life of Nephi was, for Wells, “beyond a doubt, one of the most clever biographies and faith-inspiring reviews of a wonderful life of faithfulness, that will ever appear in our literature.”⁵³⁷ The book was of the “purest diction,” was “absorbing,” and possessed an “exalted style.” Wells summed up his feelings with, “The biography of the Prophet Nephi, cannot fail to be read by the youth of Israel with intense delight and great profit.”⁵³⁸ There seemed to be a variety of ways young people could profit from this book. The first was how it reinforced Mormon identity. The choice of a biography of a prophet from the Book of Mormon, as opposed to someone like Moses from the Bible, spoke specifically to Mormons. It encouraged young people to identify themselves as people of the books, the Book of Mormon being one of those books that marked

⁵³⁵ Wells, “Recent Home Literature,” 94.

⁵³⁶ Wells, “Recent Home Literature,” 94.

⁵³⁷ Wells, “Recent Home Literature,” 94.

⁵³⁸ Wells, “The First Year’s Series,” 75.

Mormons as a distinct people.⁵³⁹ As Cannon says in the preface, “My aim was to make the children of our Church familiar with the events described in the Book of Mormon. . . . I have felt that, as I owed so much of my own success in life to the important and interesting lessons contained in that precious record, it was a duty incumbent upon me to do all in my power to have it read and appreciated as widely as possible by every member of our Church, but especially by the rising generation.”⁵⁴⁰ This book would hopefully spur them on to “careful perusal” and appreciation of this divine record.⁵⁴¹ And read this record they must. For Cannon was worried about the times this youngest generation was growing up in. “The age in which we live is one of doubt and unbelief,” he wrote.

Skepticism is spreading. All faith in divine things, as taught by the ancient servants of God, is being unsettled. Man’s reason is being extolled as a higher standard than God’s revelations. The personality of God, the origin of man and his fall, the atonement of the Savior[,] the places of reward and punishment, known as heaven and hell, and the existence of a personal devil, are all questioned, and, by many members of religious sects denied. The Bible is no longer accepted as a reliable standard, only so far as its teachings may agree with the new and fashionable views entertained respecting religion and science.⁵⁴²

Cannon pointed to the Book of Mormon as a possible savior from eroding belief in God, in the Bible, and in other foundational Christian beliefs. He explains, “Fortunately for us, we are in a position to stem and turn this tide of infidelity, so that it shall not overwhelm our young people.” Why? Mormons were not “dependent upon the Bible alone” for the confirmation of these beliefs, for the Book of Mormon did “corroborate and furnish ample proofs of their heavenly origin.”⁵⁴³

⁵³⁹ Janiece Johnson, “Becoming a People of the Books: Toward an Understanding of Early Mormon Converts and the New Word of the Lord,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 27 (2018): 1–43.

⁵⁴⁰ George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Nephi, the Son of Lehi, Who Emigrated from Jerusalem, in Judea, to the Land Which Is Now Known as South America, about Six Centuries before the Coming of Our Savior* (Salt Lake City: Contributor Company, 1888), i–ii.

⁵⁴¹ Cannon, *Life of Nephi*, iv.

⁵⁴² Cannon, *Life of Nephi*, ii.

⁵⁴³ Cannon, *Life of Nephi*, ii.

Reading the Book of Mormon, according to Cannon, would save the rising generation from these tides of unbelief and ensure their continued presence in the Mormon community.

Another way *The Life of Nephi* might profit young people is by helping young people improve themselves. The study of biography was an important part of Mormon self-improvement. Through the study of the life of Nephi, young Mormons could embark on a path of distinctly Mormon character growth, one that would help them achieve the highest goals of Mormon beliefs. It would also prepare them to become leaders in the church and community. In the preface of the book, Cannon argues for the importance of learning about a figure like Nephi: “We think we do not overrate it when we say that no man of the nation of which he was the founder did so much as he towards giving shape to the methods of government, to the forms of worship and to the mode of life which prevailed for about a thousand years among that people. He was to them what Moses was to the children of Israel.”⁵⁴⁴ His example could profit young Mormons as they learned about the governmental and religious practices that would help them build Zion.

These books all held one thing in common: men wrote them. Not one woman wrote any of the books that MIA leaders felt were so worthwhile to study. Such a decision sent signals that the course (and all the resources put into it) were intended more for the young men than the women, or it indicated that MIA leaders believed women would find this series just as instructive or interesting as the young men did. Indeed, Cannon, in his preface to *The Life of Nephi*, wrote, “My aim was to make the children of our Church familiar . . . with some of the prominent men of that mighty people of which Nephi was one of the greatest progenitors.”⁵⁴⁵ He wanted to help

⁵⁴⁴ Cannon, *Life of Nephi*, 2.

⁵⁴⁵ Cannon, *Life of Nephi*, i; emphasis mine.

them become acquainted with great men after whom young Mormon men might model their behavior. But no attempt is made to provide a model that young Mormon women might follow. The choice of all men also could have sent a signal to both men and women that, in a mixed-gender reading audience, men's voices were the most worthwhile to study and that women's words mattered only when addressing one another. If the Course of Reading was to set up a model for future reading, apparently female authors did not have a place in it.

“Not as Thoroughly and Universally Read as Its Merits Deserve”

It soon became clear that the MIA Course of Reading did not achieve the success its promoters had hoped for. By March of 1889 the MIA General Superintendency sent out a letter to local YMMIA officers informing them not all the MIA sets had sold. They asked officers to “make a further effort” in procuring subscribers so that they might be “distributed and read,” hoping that they would all be gone come June.⁵⁴⁶ Whatever efforts these local leaders made, it was to no avail. By June, Wells and other leaders decided to extend the program for another year, as only about half of the three thousand sets had been distributed and those MIAs that had received the sets had not completed them.⁵⁴⁷ They would redouble their efforts to get the word out about the benefits of the Course of Reading.

Wells and others cited a couple explanations for why they believed the course had not been as successful as hoped. First, they blamed the delay in publication for the lack of distribution. The delays in printing the books delayed their availability till late November, already well into the crucial season for MIAs, which usually increased their frequency of meetings during the winter months. In a largely agrarian society, these months provided the most

⁵⁴⁶ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, April 1889, 238.

⁵⁴⁷ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, November 1889, 40; “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, July 1889, [355].

discretionary time for reading. So “owing to the lateness in the season,” readers did not have as much opportunity to read the books.⁵⁴⁸ Others thought money was the problem. Apostle Moses Thatcher, in speaking during a YMMIA conference, said he understood that there was a scarcity of means, “yet he thought there were few young men who could not manage to set apart \$2.50 for these books.” He chastised them for the way they spent what money they did have, wishing “that the young men spent less on things that were not so useful to them as this Course of Reading.” He simply wanted all of the sets sold, “not because of their money value but for the good they would do.”⁵⁴⁹ Part of the blame rested on Wells for the delays in publication, but many also believed it rested with the young people’s lack of understanding regarding the importance of this program.

During the summer, the reports started to come in regarding the Course of Reading; however, the Contributor only published the numbers of the young men’s associations. Nowhere in the Contributor’s pages did writers address the success (or lack thereof) among the young women, despite the Contributor’s claim of representing the MIAs of both men and women. In the 307 YMMIA associations throughout the Territory, 6,756 members regularly attended meetings (it’s not clear what counted as “regular” attendance), although 12,765 were on the rolls. But of those YMMIA members, only 53 completed the reading course. These were largely from Utah and Cache Counties, with more rural counties having perhaps one or none that completed the course. Shockingly, no one in Salt Lake finished the course, though the city did count over a hundred members as currently reading it. There were far more who reported that while they had not yet finished the course, they were reading it. A total of 1,347 were reading the five books,

⁵⁴⁸ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, November 1889, 40; “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, July 1889, [355].

⁵⁴⁹ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, July 1889, [355].

though only 877 sets of the books had been sold at this point in time, indicating that price was indeed a barrier, as many probably had to share the books, which also probably contributed to the delay in the completion of the course.⁵⁵⁰ This was not as strong a result as leaders had hoped for; Wells sulked that “the Chatauqua Scientific and Literary Circles number about one hundred thousand such readers in the United States; and its course is not more appropriate for the general public, than is the M. I. A. Course for the young men and women of our people.”⁵⁵¹

Several leaders felt that “the reading course adopted last year was not as thoroughly and universally read as its merits deserve,” so they sought to encourage local leaders to help put books into young people’s hands and excite those youth to read them.⁵⁵² They spoke to local leaders at meetings and published articles to motivate these local leaders. At one of these meetings for YMMIA officers of the Utah Stake, one of the questions asked of them by more senior MIA leaders was “Has your ward been canvassed with a view of placing the reading course in the hands of the young people?” With this and other questions, “the most advantageous methods of obtaining practical affirmative answers . . . was freely and pointedly discussed.”⁵⁵³ They wanted to make concrete plans that would ensure every home was visited and a set placed with the young person residing there.

The winter of 1889–90 came and went, and the reports regarding the MIA Course of Reading made their way to MIA headquarters. While there seemed to be some improvement, MIA leaders were again disappointed with the results. In this report only 25 of the 32 stakes had sent in their numbers to the MIA. So although nearly 1,500 sets of the reading course had been

⁵⁵⁰ “Statistical Report of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Associations for the Year Ending May 31st, 1889,” *Contributor*, August 1889, 400.

⁵⁵¹ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, November 1889, 40.

⁵⁵² “Y. M. M. I. A. Conference,” *Ogden Daily Standard*, October 29, 1889, 4.

⁵⁵³ “Officer’s Meeting,” *Utah Enquirer*, November 22, 1889, 1.

sold, only 581 were reported from the MIAs.⁵⁵⁴ They reported that only 123 members had finished the course this year, with 952 still reading. Due to the lack of reporting, those numbers were probably still a little larger, but they still did not represent the kind of response MIA leaders had been expecting.⁵⁵⁵

By the fall of 1890, the once shining enthusiasm of Wells transformed into an exasperated frustration. In October he wrote in the *Contributor*: “Two years ago we attempted to introduce a course of reading, designed for the entertainment and instruction of our members at their homes. The introduction of this system for the purpose of forming correct habits of reading we regarded as a very important part of the work of Mutual Improvement. While the success of the introduction has not been all that we hoped for it, we think it is because our plan and purpose have not been fully explained.”⁵⁵⁶ Part of the failure may have been that, at least in Salt Lake, politics had occupied so much time of MIA leaders that they barely held meetings at all.⁵⁵⁷ But Wells clung to the hope that young people simply had not yet understood the importance and benefits of such a program. Surely once these clicked, the youth would devour the five books and the supplemental articles, discuss them with gusto, and place them on their shelves with pride. To make this happen, the MIA leaders would give one final push, endeavoring through “letter and missionary assistance” to “make the value of this Course of Reading known.”⁵⁵⁸

The MIA General Superintendancy called Elder Milton H. Hardy to serve a mission not to a faraway land but to the youth of Zion. Wells said on this front: “The educational character of the Mutual Improvement Associations, it is safe to say, has not been fully appreciated. . . . It is a

⁵⁵⁴ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, August 1890, 398. This could also point to the possibility that many YLMIA members purchased sets or that people who were not association members bought them.

⁵⁵⁵ “Statistical Report of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Associations for the Year Ending May 31st, 1890,” *Contributor*, August 1890, 400.

⁵⁵⁶ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, October 1890, 472.

⁵⁵⁷ Junius Wells, “The YMMIA,” *Contributor*, October 1890, 474.

⁵⁵⁸ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, October 1890, 472.

subject for congratulation that the General Superintendency have recently appointed Elder Milton H. Hardy, one of the foremost educators of the Church, to a special mission among the Associations, to make their opportunities and duties more plain in this direction.”⁵⁵⁹ Over a thousand sets of the books sat unsold; it would be the responsibility of this evangelist of erudition to finally put them in the hands of young readers and convince them of the benefits of reading them.⁵⁶⁰ It seems that Hardy was finally able to distribute most of the books. The Contributor started advertising in June of 1891 that the MIA sets would soon be gone.⁵⁶¹ When the statistics were published the following August, 694 reported having bought sets, 729 members were currently reading the course, and 98 members had completed it.⁵⁶² In total, throughout the three years of the course, only 274 reported completing the course, a far cry from the 5,000 that Wells had envisioned at his introductory speech.

There again existed some barriers for young people to access and read the books. One writer, a local MIA president, disclosed in the Provo Daily Enquirer that “since the adoption of the Mutual I. A. Reading course by the general presidency, there have been doubts as to its actual practability in all the associations.” There were two main problems. The first problem was that the books were only sold in sets, not as individual books, making it difficult for many of the young people to buy the books. They either had money for all of them, or they could not buy any of them. The second problem was that “the books were without a prescribed diagram and could only be read with profit by completing each book at a time.”⁵⁶³ In short, MIA officers and members did not receive sufficient instruction on how to actually go about reading the books.

⁵⁵⁹ *Contributor*, December 1890, 74–75.

⁵⁶⁰ “Association Intelligence,” *Contributor*, December 1890, 79.

⁵⁶¹ “Secure a Set of the M. I. A. Reading Course,” ad, *Contributor*, June 1891.

⁵⁶² “Statistical Report of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Associations for the Year Ending May 31st, 1891,” *Contributor*, August 1891, 399.

⁵⁶³ Robert Skelton, “M. I. A. Work,” *Provo Daily Enquirer*, December 14, 1891, 4.

However, the author argues that, at least in his own MIA, they have been able to overcome these problems thanks to local as well as territory-wide efforts. They, and several other presidencies, overcame the first problem by purchasing several sets of the books (with funds raised from the association members) and then placing them in their local MIA library for all to read. The local Provo Book and Stationary Co. also arranged for individual books to be sold at fifty cents apiece. The author concludes that with all of this effort, young people had “no excuse left for not having the books.” The General Superintendancy had overcome the second problem by creating the new MIA manual, “in which there is mapped out each week’s work in perfect detail, making it so simple that none can mistake its practical adaptability.”⁵⁶⁴ It seems that, at this point, the MIA leadership decided to move on from the Course of Reading as a standalone guide to reading. In 1891 the MIA would unveil a new manual that would guide local MIAs in their reading, lectures, and meetings throughout the coming years. However, they did not give up on the Course of Reading entirely; they simply had invested too much energy and too many resources to just consign the books to the dustbin. The young people had the books, so why not encourage them to continue to use them? Therefore, the five books would become incorporated into this new MIA manual.⁵⁶⁵ The Provo MIA president had already been using the manual, and he extolled its virtues: “The compilers have given the keynote to the successful use of the Reading Series, and every association that will complete successfully that course of reading will be prepared to cope successfully with any highly educated or cultured class of persons without fear of humiliation or lack of collateral information.”⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁴ Skelton, “M. I. A. Work,” 4.

⁵⁶⁵ Junius Wells, “Y. M. M. I. A. Manual,” *Contributor*, September 1891, 434.

⁵⁶⁶ Skelton, “M. I. A. Work,” 4.

Although these undoubtedly were some of the reasons that the course failed, leaders seemed unwilling to acknowledge perhaps one of the most obvious reasons young people failed to read: they simply did not find the books interesting. More research into the reception by everyday young Mormons to this reading course is needed, but it is likely that many young people exercised their agency regarding their reading material. For several reasons they spent their leisure time reading novels, papers, and magazines from the East Coast, or they simply chose not to read at all. They chose to spend their leisure time in a different way.

Concerning the young women's reaction to the Course of Reading, there seems to be largely silence. Nowhere in the pages of the *Woman's Exponent* or *Young Woman's Journal* is the MIA Course of Reading mentioned: no reports, no statements of support, and no reprimands for a lack of reading. One likely reason is that young women and their leaders were more interested in canvassing for the soon-to-be-published *Young Women's Journal* than in the Course of Reading.⁵⁶⁷ In May of 1890, while the course was still going on, the *Young Woman's Journal* did report some kind of reading numbers. Among the 8,304 YLMIA members reporting, they read 29,418 chapters and did 28,611 miscellaneous readings, so perhaps some of those chapters or readings included the course of reading books.⁵⁶⁸ So while some probably read the books and maybe some YLMIAs encouraged a more formal study, it seems that YLMIA leaders did not feel as invested in the MIA Course of Reading. The *Young Woman's Journal* had just published its inaugural issue in October 1889, one year after the Course of Reading started, and the *Woman's Exponent* had been popular reading among some YLMIAs for a long time. Perhaps YLMIA leaders and members felt that these periodicals, as well as other books written by or

⁵⁶⁷ Susa Young Gates, *History of the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: From November 1869 to June 1910* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911), 107.

⁵⁶⁸ "Condensed Report of Y. L. M. I. A. for the 1/2 Year, Ending April, 1890," *Young Woman's Journal*, May 1890, 270.

about Mormon women, would be more profitable and interesting reading for them. These publications more readily addressed their needs, questions, worries, and hopes. About a decade later, YLMIAAs decided that they would need their own reading course, one specifically suited to their needs—for instance, a course of literature began in 1903.⁵⁶⁹

In short, the case of the MIA Course of Study exemplifies themes regarding reading in Mormon culture from 1870–1890. It demonstrates gendered divisions of power, the fear regarding the challenges facing young Mormons, a desire for self-improvement and growth, a need to prepare to help build up Zion, and a deep hope that reading and good books might be able to help them navigate all of these things. The amount of time, energy, and resources that MIA leaders put into ensuring that books got into the hands of young people highlights just how willing they were to put their ideals about books into practice. Such an effort institutionalized further the idea that Mormons were becoming a people of the books.

Although it seems that the Course of Reading was a failure by the standards of Wells, who hoped it would reach more people than it did, this failure did not seem to weaken MIA leaders' faith in the power of books. They did not blame the books for the failure but the mechanics of publishing and distribution; they also placed much of the responsibility on the shoulder of readers themselves. Their reaction to failure was not to abandon books but to simply make another one, the MIA manual, a book that would detail more precisely how to read the five books in the reading course. This setback and the reaction to it thus further exemplify the belief that Mormon cultural arbiters had in the books they selected: if only these books could get into

⁵⁶⁹ Gates, *History of the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association*, 185.

young people's hands, and if only young people understood the importance of reading them and were instructed precisely how to do so, a great transformation might yet be brought about.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to make strides in reconstructing the book cultures created for young Mormons during a time of flux and uncertainty. It has focused not only on the role of fiction in the Mormon community but also on the myriad genres that were important to Mormons: biography, history, scripture, Church works, science, and so on. Through the use of manuscript newspapers, archival material, and other sources, it has also tried to include more voices than previous histories, demonstrating how Mormons young and old, female and male, prominent and unknown, engaged in a discussion about reading and created book cultures that suited their needs. This discussion and creation revealed how ideas about reading were often laced with ideas about gender—about womanhood, manhood, marriage, and how institutional structures often privileged “masculine” ideas about what constituted worthwhile reading. In such a time of change and generational anxiety, older Mormons not only talked about reading but also undertook all manner of actions to ensure that “proper” reading occurred; they tried to instill a culture of letters that would convert young people to the faith of their parents and prepare them to become useful instruments in the hands of God, young people who could sustain, defend, and expand Zion.

The importance that Mormons placed on books during such a crucial period substantiates the claim that Mormons were, or at least were becoming, a people of the books. They relied on the best books to help young people fill the roles older Mormons hoped they would fill, and they feared the setbacks that “trashy” books might effect. They believed books transformed people for good or for ill. They were commanded to “seek ye out of the best books, words of wisdom.”⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁷⁰ “Revelations Printed in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, June 1832–June 1833,” p. [5], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 4, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelations-printed-in-the-evening-and-the-morning-star-june-1832-june-1833/15>.

Mormons believed the scriptures—the Book of Mormon, Bible, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price—definitely fell into the category of the best books, but scriptures did not hold a monopoly on that designation either. Mormons became a people of the books in a wider sense; they came to rely on the power of all books—including those written by non-Mormons on secular topics—to help them change people, become more like God, and build up Zion.

Hopefully, this research can prove useful in assisting other important projects relating to a history of Mormon reading. While I have sought to incorporate the voices of more everyday readers, the scope of this thesis has limited my ability to search out the individual experiences of readers, particularly young readers. I have tried to delineate what Stanley Fish has called the “interpretive community” of Mormons, particularly Mormon youth, during this time period. That is, I have tried to demonstrate how Mormons created guidelines for their community about which books to study and how one was supposed to read them.⁵⁷¹ But just because young Mormon readers existed in such an interpretive community does not mean they read in lockstep with those interpretive values. As Michel de Certeau has written, readers do not just passively consume whatever is presented to them. Instead, they “poach” from books fragments of the text that they then use to create a variety of interpretations that differ from the author’s position.⁵⁷² This means there are hosts of atypical readers, readers who do not use or read texts according to the guiding principles of an interpretive community.⁵⁷³ By combing through more letters, diaries, and manuscript newspapers of Mormon youth, scholars could gain greater insight into how

⁵⁷¹ See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

⁵⁷² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 165–76; for a particularly succinct, clear summary of the idea of “poaching,” see Janice Radway, “Beyond Mary Bailey and Old Maid Librarians: Reimagining Readers and Rethinking Reading,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 35, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 291.

⁵⁷³ Frank Felsenstein and James J. Connolly, *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 128–29.

individual readers actually made sense of this world of reading, of change, and of tension. They would learn how Mormon readers poached and if they read according to their interpretive community or if they were transgressive. Doing so would also provide more insight into the noninstitutional world of reading. When they were reading books unrelated to some kind of MIA assignment, for instance, what did Mormons choose to read? What books were most meaningful or popular, and why? Such research will continue to flesh out the intellectual or mental universe of many everyday Mormons.

So, were the efforts in trying to maintain and prepare young people successful? While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to ultimately trace how manuscript newspapers, MIAs, the Course of Reading, or certain books helped people on an individual level to develop certain skills or navigate the changes they faced, ultimately the church survived. Although Zion became ever more incorporated into American society over the coming decades, it survived, and the church continued to grow. Leonard Arrington wrote that, in the late 1880s and 1890s, “the success of these programs [MIAs, as well as other education programs] made it possible for the church to retain the loyalty of most of its young and well-educated members; they, in turn, upon reaching maturity, developed and directed programs that were effective in helping the church to serve its youth.”⁵⁷⁴ It seems that these programs perhaps did help some, though it is likely that they were totally ignored by or were counterproductive for many individuals. As Arrington says, these efforts showed the rising generation that one day they, too, would need to devise their own ways of retaining the loyalty of their own children.

When many old and young Mormons felt their religion was perhaps a generation away from extinction, and when they tried to navigate the changes their society was undergoing, they

⁵⁷⁴ Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 253.

trusted the power of reading to save and to help navigate. Older Mormons hoped to transfer a love of reading and study, of reading only “the best books” and eschewing what they deemed harmful, and of imbibing “useful knowledge” for whatever roles young Mormons might one day fill. In short, they hoped young people might themselves truly become a people of the books. If they did so, if they adopted the kind of reading older cultural arbiters prescribed, Zion’s glorious future might be secured.

However, the desire to secure a happy future for Zion did not just belong to Mormons during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In Mormon culture, worries about the young people of the community is a continuity. There is a cautionary tale in the Book of Mormon about what happens to a community when its young people reject the community’s values and faith. In this story one community’s children started to grow up and began to be “led away” by “lyings” and “flattering words” from dissenters and robbers who had been committing murders among the people. Ultimately, “because of the wickedness of the rising generation,” their parents’ community “began to decrease as to their faith and righteousness.”⁵⁷⁵ This scriptural story still resonates with modern-day church leaders and members. A 2009 church manual for young adult students of the Book of Mormon interpreted this story as an “illustrat[ion] that it only takes one generation for apostasy to occur.”⁵⁷⁶ The manual then quotes a 2001 discourse from President Henry B. Eyring, a member of the First Presidency, the highest ecclesiastical body in the church. In this talk, Eyring says, “The young people of the Church . . . hold the future in their hands. The Church has always been one generation away from extinction. If a whole generation were lost,

⁵⁷⁵ 3 Nephi 1:29–30 (The Book of Mormon).

⁵⁷⁶ “3 Nephi 1–7,” in *Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121–122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/book-of-mormon-student-manual/chapter-39-3-nephi-1-7?lang=eng>.

which will not happen, we would lose the Church.”⁵⁷⁷ To the present day, the church is still very much concerned with the decisions that its young people will or will not make in the future. It is constantly reevaluating how its youth are taught and what kind of church-supported programs will best help them to face whatever challenges it perceives the youth are facing and to prepare them to carry the standard of the church in the future.

Those older Mormons who lived through the years 1869–1890 likewise felt the church was one generation away from extinction. They were some of the first Mormons to worry that a whole generation—a generation born into the faith, not one that had voluntarily converted to it—might not choose their parents’ way of life. This period was one of transition and flux, one in which older Mormons feared, hoped, and wondered. They asked themselves if the next generation would hold fast to the faith of their fathers and mothers, if they would be able to face the challenges they were facing, and if Zion would cease to exist as they currently knew it or if it would cease to exist altogether. While some of the challenges posed to Zion were unique to this specific historical context (completion of the transcontinental railroad, threats to polygamy, etc.), the fears these challenges sparked in Mormons (and the hope that young people might be able to remain believers in spite of them) are part of the fabric of Mormon life, no matter the century.

⁵⁷⁷ Henry B. Eyring, “We Must Raise Our Sights” (address to religious educators at a conference on the Book of Mormon, Brigham Young University, August 14, 2001), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teaching-seminary-preservice-readings-religion-370-471-and-475/we-must-raise-our-sights?lang=eng>; “3 Nephi 1–7.”

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