

glimpses POETIC FIRES

One of my anxieties is a suspicion that I am sitting next to brilliance without knowing it. Maybe it's a New York mental tick caused by an overabundance of interesting people literally bumping into each other. Years ago, I was standing in front of a video monitor at Tower Records. A historic performance of Toscanini and the NBC Orchestra was playing—grainy and scratchy in its original black and white taping, but still mesmerizing. An old man waddled up to me, and we watched together. As the Beethoven symphony was nearing its finale, he leaned in close to me and said, “See the young man on the first row of the cello section? That is me.”

Since then, I have had many experiences just like that one, often with neighbors who turn out to have had extraordinarily careers and possess fascinating abilities. In fact, I began Mormon Artists Group in 1999 because I discovered, to my embarrassment, that many of the people I knew at church in Manhattan were artists of significant accomplishment, and I didn't even know it. I only knew them as leaders and friends. I was unaware of their artistic passions. I determined at that moment that I would try to be an advocate for their work if I could. The impulse has only grown since then—22 projects, 77 collaborating LDS artists, and 11 years later.

Of all the Arts in America, none is more under-the-radar than Poetry. This statement is also true for Mormon culture. There are systemic reasons for this. It would take someone much smarter than I am to explain them all. But I do know this: Our awareness of fine art Mormon poetry has nothing to do with quality. Extraordinary poets who are LDS are out there. But how to find them?

I have two quick points to make today. The first is regarding the level of quality of contemporary LDS poets, and the second is to tell you about a newly-published anthology of their work.

It might surprise you to know that poets of the Church are appearing in the most prestigious publications in the world. Did you know that? These include publications that you've heard of—*The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *The New York Times*, *Iowa Review*, *Poetry*, *The New Republic*, *Slate*, *The Yale Review*—and many that only literature aficionados will recognize—*Bananafish*, *River Styx*, *Ninth Letter*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Petroglyphs*, *Kenyon Review*, *Makeout Creek*, *The American Scholar*, *Gargoyle*, and so on.

Some of the publications featuring LDS works cater to a Mormon crowd—*Ensign*, *BYU Studies*, *Irreantum*, *Exponent II*, *Dialogue*—but the majority of the publications I'm talking about are literary magazines, reviews, and quarterlies that are published by universities and small presses across the country. My point is that if you make a list of all the

places where good poets should be hanging out, Mormon poets are already there.

Secondly, I have been reading a new anthology of poetry by 82 contemporary LDS poets. It's a knockout! The title is *Fire in the Pasture: Twenty-first Century Mormon Poets*. Published by Peculiar Pages, it was edited by Tyler Chadwick. This generous volume of recent poetry by LDS writers (518 pages) includes beautiful essays by Chadwick, Susan Elizabeth Howe, and Angel Chaparro Sainz. I'll cut to the chase: The arrival of this book is a landmark event. It has the potential to elevate Mormon culture. The volume attempts to present an enormous range of voices, each one interesting.

Howe sums up the anthology in her introduction, “...the bounty of (this) anthology reminded me of Christ's generosity in feeding the five thousand. Christ took real substances—a little bread, two small fish—and he created from them...food that nourished the people and made it possible for them to return to their lives both physically and spiritually renewed. Poets take matter (language, emotion, thought, experience) and make of that matter a new creation, a work of art that did not exist before the poet organized it, a work that has the potential (each poet hopes) to nourish—to make readers see what they did not see before, to offer insight, to create empathy, to provoke thought, or to express beauty, soundness, depth. To offer abundance in place of scarcity.”

Some of the poets, I'm proud to say, have collaborated with Mormon Artists Group over our history: Susan Elizabeth Howe, Lance Larsen, Javen Tanner, Elaine Craig, Will Reger, and Michael Hicks. You might also recognize the artwork on the cover below by Casey Jex Smith, whose sketchbook, *Church Drawings*, we published in 2008.



If I have any credibility with you regarding Mormon art, I encourage you to purchase a copy of *Fire in the Pasture* and to consume this book whole. You will be quoting from it. Lines of its poetry will invade your waking and sleeping thoughts. It is available at Amazon.com for \$17.98 (the Kindle edition is a mere \$4.99). It will change you, nourish you.

— Glen Nelson

CALL FOR ENTRIES

I received notice of a contest that sounds fun. Mormon Lit Blitz Writing Contest - Jan. 15, 2012 deadline: Short creative writing (under 1,000) words, to be published online. Content is to be “engaging to Latter-day Saints.” It is open to many genres. For additional information and submission guidelines, write to mormonlitblitz@gmail.com

Mormon Artists Group is a collective of artists who are LDS. We are writers, photographers, composers, painters, printmakers, poets, etc. We are affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints only to the extent that we are members of the Church. We publish limited edition books and artworks, organize exhibitions, conduct original research, and sponsor charitable events. Additional information can be found on our website: www.mormonartistsgroup.com

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