

Book Reviews

ORSON SCOTT CARD. *Seventh Son*. New York: TOR, 1987. 241 pp. \$17.95 hardback. \$3.95 paperback.

_____. *Red Prophet*. New York: TOR, 1988. 311 pp. \$17.95 hardback. \$3.95 paperback.

_____. *Prentice Alvin*. New York: TOR, 1989. 342 pp. \$17.95 hardback.

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The publication of *Prentice Alvin* brings us to the halfway mark of Orson Scott Card's projected six-volume series *The Tales of Alvin Maker*, making a good point to evaluate what he has accomplished so far. I consider this to be a landmark work in contemporary fantasy and in Mormon fiction both; but before I go into detail, let me make a few general comments about fantasy.

As Tolkien took pains to explain in "On Fairy-Stories," when someone reads a story that takes place in an enchanted world, he or she does not experience a "willing suspension of disbelief" but rather a "secondary belief." If the author has done well, the reader can accept the world and its laws on his or her own terms, and believe in the story within that framework. This type of literary belief happens to some extent with all fiction, of course, but it is an essential element with fantasy.

There are several advantages to stories set in fantastic worlds. One is the sheer delight and marvel of events not possible in the real world. Another is the wonderful ideological neutral ground a secondary world can make. I can set aside my cosmology as I enter and accept a world where wizards cast true spells, or reincarnation happens, or several gods make occasional appearances, and there explore with the author some universal truths about morality and human nature. The elements that make up this other world may or may not have anything to do with the author's own cosmology. C. S. Lewis populated his world of Narnia with talking animals and creatures from several mythologies and his own

imagination, but used the world as a place to explore basic Christian themes—Christ himself is a major character in the series, in the form of the lion Aslan. Lewis wondered, “Supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? . . . I thought one could.”¹

And he did, for me. After finishing *The Chronicles of Narnia*, among other reactions I found myself with a much greater feeling for Christ as a personal, physical, intimate friend. This is one example of a principal value Tolkien saw in fairy-stories: “recovery . . . regaining a clear view . . . seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them.”² As Lewis said about *The Lord of the Rings*, “By putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. . . . This book applies the treatment not only to bread or apple but to good and evil, to our endless perils, our anguish, and our joys. By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly.”³

In *The Tales of Alvin Maker*, Card does the same thing for Mormonism that Lewis did for general Christianity in Narnia. But the world of the *Tales* is much closer to our own than Narnia is. This world is an alternate America in the early 1800s, an America with a slightly different history, a world where magic works.

The central character of the series is Alvin Miller, Junior, and *Seventh Son* is the tale of his birth and childhood. Alvin is a child with a powerful destiny, as witnessed at his birth when the very elements rise to kill him. He survives through the efforts of his family and a five-year-old girl named Peggy, a “torch” who can look into people’s souls and see their thoughts, memories, and possible futures. As Alvin grows, it becomes apparent both that he has abilities exceptional even in a world with magic and that he has an unseen enemy that causes numerous deadly accidents to happen to him and that entices others to become his enemies as well.

Fortunately, he also has friends, both some *other* unseen power that saves him from the accidents and important human teachers. One teacher is an Indian who gives Alvin visions showing how not to misuse his power, and whom Alvin in turn heals. Another is Taleswapper, a wandering storyteller from whom Alvin learns the name of his power—he is a Maker, the first in thousands of years—and the nature of his enemy. Taleswapper names that enemy the Unmaker, a being who wishes to destroy everything, from personal relationships and individual integrity to the very fabric holding all matter together.

Alvin is this alternate world's analog for Joseph Smith, and his story is its version of the Restoration, a momentous time when God will once more "show his hand of power in this world." But Card is not content to deal only with Mormon themes. He uses this opportunity to recast the forging of America as well. The tales of the Founding Fathers in this world are different, but they are just as moving and capture their same spirit, vision, and heroism.

An important theme in Card's fiction is that true greatness of character requires concern for all people, no matter their gender, nation, family, language, or race. *Red Prophet* shows that as an author he practices what he preaches: the Indian side of the American experience is the major focus of this volume. The first third of it covers the same time period and some of the same events as *Seventh Son*, but from the point of view of the Indians and those who deal with them. The story then becomes a complex chessboard as Indian, settler, and French leaders all try to carry out their different plans or machinations. Alvin and his brother Measure are unwillingly caught in this turmoil and become major pieces in this game. They are involved in forces beyond their control, but they have an important part to play and are profoundly changed as the events build to their inventive, magical, and disturbing conclusions. But one of the most important events in the book happens halfway through it: the prophet of the title shows Alvin a vision of the Crystal City, the once and future place whose inhabitants live in harmony, with no poor among them.

In *Prentice Alvin*, Alvin's development again takes center stage, while the circle of Card's concern expands yet again, this time to include the blacks' side of American history. The story opens on a plantation where the Unmaker appears to the owner and increases the slaves' suffering through dark deeds sure to bear evil fruit. Then we see the torch Peggy, now a young lady hardened by the burden of her vision, in near despair at the miserable life she sees before her—until providence sends her way someone in desperate need of help, an act that changes the lives of all the characters in the story.

This volume is the story of Alvin's apprenticeship as a blacksmith, his growth as an adolescent, and his struggle to understand his power and calling in life. But it is Peggy's story as well, for she, like Alvin, must leave home and learn what she never could have learned otherwise. As she grows in graces and knowledge, Alvin grows in frustration at his ignorance and his near-slavery under an unfair master. His anger leaves him open to a direct assault by the Unmaker, but by mastering himself he gets a revelation giving him the first inkling of what it means to be a Maker, and he

is able to bear his lot with more patience until someone can teach him what he needs to know.

The scenes where Alvin comes into a comprehension and mastery of his power are the most thrilling of the series yet. Understandings of the nature of matter, energy, life, human relationships, spiritual rebirth, and true creativity are encompassed in a coherent whole in a way that made me feel as if I were at Alvin's side learning with him, leaving an excitement that lasted days after I closed the cover. But not all is joyful. There are loss, and rage, and grief, as well as the gathering storm clouds of future persecution. The book ends on the dissonant chord of hope and menace.

The *Tales* show Card in his best form yet, with a mastery of all aspects of writing. The most obvious strength is his storytelling ability. Last Christmas, I gave the first two volumes to lots of friends and relatives, and the most common remark I've received is how engaging and enjoyable the stories are. Card knows how to pace events, raise tension, make climaxes that work, and create satisfying conclusions.

Part of what makes the story important to the reader is the skillful characterization. Card's characters are well-rounded people: there are heroic and villainous acts, and even heroes and villains, but no good guys or bad guys. Each character has his or her strengths and weaknesses, insights and blind spots. The narrator lets us into each of their minds, so we can see the world through their eyes, and even if some of them disgust us we understand them. They talk and think differently from each other, in ways appropriate to their personality and setting. We do not see people in the past with attitudes of the 1980s (a weakness of *M*A*S*H*). For example, even while a slave child's adoptive mother fights fiercely for his education, she finds it unnatural to imagine blacks or women voting or holding office. The effect of this care on the author's part is a responsive care by the reader: I have come to love the people in Alvin's tales with an intensity seldom matched in my reading.

The narration is nearly always in the style of speech of the characters currently focussed on, and adapts well to their age, education, and culture. In fact, at certain codas in the story it can be lyrical, even in frontier speech, and sometimes breaks into meter. Alvin's homecoming in *Red Prophet* and Peggy's departure in *Prentice Alvin* are scenes of particular beauty.

I am very impressed with the craft Card uses in building the stories, the skill with which he gives natural justifications to events and makes diverse elements fit together. To bring Napoleon and La Fayette to Canada, where their separate schemes would play a

part in the Indian wars; to combine seamlessly American history with Book of Mormon events; to have a modern prophet figure taught indirectly through a variety of mortal angels—an itinerant William Blake, a young female seer, an Indian mystic and his warrior brother, the small son of an African princess and a slave-owner, an archetypal redbird—is adroit historical play worthy of Tim Powers.⁴ And although there are many symbolic actions in the series, they are the best kind of symbols, the kind that have a good sensible meaning as themselves before they stand for something else. The symbols are woven into the story with such care that many of them will be missed on first reading.

Card also knows how to handle magic. The magic of the different peoples is well researched, having a convincing wholeness and consistency; it is well thought out, including the implications and limitations such powers would have; it is well written, bringing the sense of awe and wonder magic should have. It appears safe to guess that part of the inspiration behind the *Tales* was the interest in the folk magic of Joseph Smith's life and times prompted by the forged "Salamander Letter." Perhaps Card wanted to give a fictional justification to this study and show how people could believe in magic and Christianity at the same time; perhaps he simply thought it was a great idea, and explored what it would be like in a world where folk magic beliefs were true. Whatever the motivation, it works. One of the benefits of a fantasy world is that magic can give a tangible, objective reality to the psychological and spiritual side of life. For example, the curse on the murderers at Tippy-Canoe makes the horror of what they did much more hard-hitting. This integration of the magical and the spiritual is evident throughout the series, as it is in all great fantasy. The magic gives beauty and expression to the psychological reality while the psychology gives depth and meaning to the magic.

Because of all these strengths, the *Tales* are an important work of fantasy. But they also add some new and important things to the genre. Most fantasy has been based on European mythology, Norse or Celtic or Greek. With passing time, authors have used other cultures for their inspiration, but Card is one of the first to use the beliefs, setting, and ideals of pioneer America as his basis. This alone adds a freshness and originality hard to achieve. Card is not quite the first to do this, however. Manly Wade Wellman has written a series of loosely-connected stories about a man named simply John, who wanders around modern Appalachia with a silver-stringed guitar, sharing and learning folk songs and the stories behind them, and encountering supernatural terrors.⁵ These stories, like Card's, show a love of rural American life and

language. I suspect that Taleswapper owes at least as much to John as he does to William Blake. Be that as it may, it is interesting to note that Card, like Wellman, began publishing fantasies based on folk America after moving to North Carolina.

Card's other major contribution to the fantasy genre is his explicit use of Mormon elements and themes—but I will consider this from the viewpoint of Mormon fiction.

A common fictional approach to Mormonism is the historical novel, often set in the nineteenth century; Card has done this himself in his novel *Saints*.⁶ By way of contrast, a fantasy such as the *Tales* does not focus so much on Mormonism's historical aspects as on its mythical or archetypal ones. Mormonism has many ideas that have a profound effect on how we view life, some shared with traditional Christianity and some original, such as the pre-existence or the literal fatherhood of God.

The primary Mormon theme dealt with in the *Tales* is the Restoration, but there is scarcely a part of Mormon spiritual life that Card does not draw on. The Bible takes its place openly as part of Alvin's world just as in ours. In addition, there are borrowings from Church history, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, priesthood ordinances, and the temple. Part of the joy of the series is to rediscover LDS themes powerfully presented in new trappings.

But do not think the *Tales* are simply a tract or a hidden-object puzzle. To read them as such would be a disservice to the books and reader both. They are principally *stories*, intended for a general audience, so the reader should simply lose him or herself in the events and characters, and let them teach and move in the way that only stories can. One alert LDS couple to whom I gave the books confessed with some embarrassment that they completely missed the Mormon elements, but also said they didn't regret it, for they thoroughly enjoyed the stories in their own right. The series amply rewards rereading, and items missed the first time through can be picked up later.

Another reason not to read the series as a puzzle is that such a reading might look only for the images, and not the substance, of Mormonism. Card has always despised this superficial approach,⁷ and he does not fall for it himself, but rather makes the Mormon borrowings come alive both symbolically and factually in Alvin's world. For example, one of the themes from the temple that he develops is the way Satan operates. The Unmaker is frighteningly subtle. He appears to chosen men, claiming to be the answer to their prayers. He deceives without lying, saying things that are factually true (with one or two exceptions) but stated in a way to be

misinterpreted. Worst of all, he structures his temptations to appeal to the targets' noble and base desires at the same time, so in a perverse way they feel whole while carrying out his wishes.

The work Alvin has to do is not to restore a pure form of Christianity, though it is clear that the Christian church of Alvin's world has been tainted. In fact, I suspect that those who think Mormonism teaches that all Christian ministers and even believers are corrupt dupes of the devil (an interpretation I have never been taught nor believed) may think Card is saying that himself, if they read carelessly and miss the many quiet ways in which Christianity is a force of power in the world of the *Tales*.

No, Alvin's job as Maker is not to reform the Christian church, but to build the Crystal City. The series may or may not deal directly with the theme of expiatory redemption, but it does deal with *why* we are redeemed: so that by being cleansed and purified we may live in perfect harmony with one another and achieve our Godlike potential. Besides the theme of the Restoration, these two themes of Zion and the divine work of creation are at the center of the *Tales*. And this is one of Card's most important insights: in Alvin's world, creation and unity are inseparable. Makers and the Crystal City must go together. Just as the Unmaker wishes to tear everything apart, the job of the Maker is to help bind things together, whether particles or people. Rereading the first two volumes after finishing the third shows that this twin theme was quietly expressed many times, and also lay behind memorable events such as Ben Franklin's one true Making, the ascension of Eight-Face Mound, and the weaving at Becca's loom.

Half-way through the series, Alvin now has a basic understanding of what his job is and how to do it. What will come next? One can only speculate on details, but the general trends are clear. Spencer W. Kimball once said,

For years I have been waiting for someone to do justice in recording in song and story and painting and sculpture the story of the Restoration, the reestablishment of the kingdom of God on earth, the struggles and frustrations; the apostasies and inner revolutions and counter-revolutions of those first decades; . . . of the persecution days; of the miracle man, Joseph Smith, . . . [and] the great colonizer and builder, Brigham Young.⁸

Card has already done this directly in *Saints* and is doing it again indirectly in the *Tales*, though there may not be an analog to Brigham Young. It is certain there will be joy, frustration, and persecution. I am anxious to see how it will actually happen. If Card finishes the series with the same skill and caring he started it with, the best is yet to come.

Each volume of the series so far has ended with Alvin back at his home—the crises past, the changes made, the lessons learned—relishing the peace he finds there. This is fitting, for by taking us into Alvin’s world, Card has only taken us more fully to our family, our nation, our religion, our world, our home.

NOTES

¹C. S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” in *Of Other Worlds*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 37.

²J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 57.

³C. S. Lewis, “The Dethronement of Power,” in *Tolkien and the Critics*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose Zimbardo (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 16.

⁴The best example of Tim Powers’s ability to play with and within history is *The Anubis Gates* (New York: Ace Science Fiction Books, 1983).

⁵The complete short stories about John have recently been published in *John the Balladeer*, ed. Karl Edward Wagner (New York: Baen Books, 1988).

⁶Orson Scott Card, *Saints* (New York: TOR, 1988). Originally published in 1984 by Berkley Books under the title *A Woman of Destiny*.

⁷For example, see his letter to the editor in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Summer 1985): 12.

⁸Spencer W. Kimball, “The Gospel Vision of the Arts,” *Ensign* 7 (July 1977): 5.