

Mormon fantasy narratives

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When I am not involved in matters religious or scholarly, one of my favorite escapes is science fiction and fantasy literature or media. My favorite series is [The Wheel of Time](#) by Robert Jordan. The series focuses on the actions of four friends, pushed by circumstances from their little village into the larger world. They discover along the way that they are meant to play central roles in the coming Last Battle of the Ages. A lot of aspects of the series drew me in. When I started reading, I was a similar age to the main characters and had just left home to go to college. Another reason was the vividness of the characters and the world they inhabited. Jordan breathed life into these people and places.

In 2007 while working on what was meant to be the last novel in the series, Jordan [died](#) from [cardiac amyloidosis](#). His publisher and his wife—who was also his editor—searched for someone to finish the series. They selected [Brandon Sanderson](#), another prolific [fantasy author](#). Having learned of this, I picked up Sanderson's [Mistborn](#) series. I immediately became a fan of Sanderson as well.

With 14 books in *The Wheel of Time* series—each more than several hundred pages long—there is so much that could be said. I also want to be careful to not spoil anything. So, I want to focus on two specific elements external to the series: the power of narrative to do religious work and the mainstreaming of Mormonism.

Narrative is a powerful element of many religious traditions. Consider that large sections of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are narrative. Christianity has a long history of story being an important part of its faith tradition. In the latter Middle Ages, Christians turned to story in miracle and mystery plays that provided moral reflection and examples of faith. In the 19th century, fiction—which had been originally despised by many Protestants—became more acceptable. By the last part of the 19th century, more ministers included non-biblical narratives in their sermons to communicate with their audiences.

The 20th century saw Christians turn to fantasy to express religious truth. The two main Christian epics—J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*—became very popular and served as templates for both Christian and non-Christian fantasy literature and media. Perhaps because of this, fantasy literature seems to be often marked by philosophical and religious reflection. There is frequently a struggle between good and evil, a quest undertaken for the good of a community or the world, and an ethical system that is either upheld or violated by the characters in the novel. *The Wheel of Time* presents an epic journey full of consideration of the nature of reality, questions about the destiny of humans, philosophical reflection on right action, and conflict between good and evil, which is sometimes complicated by ambiguity between the two.

Another aspect evident in this series is the mainstreaming of Mormonism in fantasy literature. Sanderson is a practicing Latter-day Saint (Jordan was an [Episcopalian](#) who toward the end of his life continued to take communion). Orson Scott Card, Stephenie Meyer of *Twilight* fame, and the creator of the 1978 *Battlestar Galactica* are Mormons also. Their success demonstrates how far Mormons have come in less than 200 years. While they still face a lot of opposition, Mormons are integrated into the larger American culture, and in science fiction and fantasy they are represented by some of the most successful authors and creators. Their tradition, much like other religious traditions as they develop, is founded on the acceptance of new narratives, so maybe Mormons better recognize the power of story to shape the thinking of large groups of people, but this is just my speculation.

The Wheel of Time includes a complex narrative, but externally it reminds us of the complexity of religion in the United States. It is found in the most unlikely places; it evidences the interweaving of multiple traditions in our culture. It is moving outside the boundaries of institutional religion to be found in other forms. America is still a religious nation, but the character of the religiosity is definitely changing.

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