



Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide

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Mark Twain once derided the Book of Mormon as "chloroform in print." Long and complicated, written in the language of the King James version of the Bible, it boggles the minds of many. Yet it is unquestionably one of the most influential books ever written. With over 140 million copies in print, it is a central text of one of the largest and fastest-growing faiths in the world. And, Grant Hardy shows, it's far from the coma-inducing doorstep caricature by Twain.

In *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Hardy offers the first comprehensive analysis of the work's narrative structure in its 180 year history. Unlike virtually all other recent world scriptures, the Book of Mormon presents itself as an integrated narrative rather than a series of doctrinal expositions, moral injunctions, or devotional hymns. Hardy takes readers through its characters, events, and ideas, as he explores the story and its messages. He identifies the book's literary techniques, such as characterization, embedded documents, allusions, and parallel narratives. Whether Joseph Smith is regarded as author or translator, it's noteworthy that he never speaks in his own voice; rather, he mediates nearly everything through the narrators Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. Hardy shows how each has a distinctive voice, and all are woven into an integral whole.

As with any scripture, the contending views of the Book of Mormon can seem irreconcilable. For believers, it is an actual historical document, transmitted from ancient America. For nonbelievers, it is the work of a nineteenth-century farmer from upstate New York. Hardy transcends this intractable conflict by offering a literary approach, one appropriate to both history and fiction. Regardless of whether readers are interested in American history, literature, comparative religion, or even salvation, he writes, the book can best be read if we examine the text on its own terms.

Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide Details

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Jake says

When it comes to scripture, I am devoutly skeptical. However, I generally appreciated Dr. Grant Hardy's scholarly work *Understanding the Book of Mormon*. He reads the way I love to read. Hardy digs deep and buries himself in the text. He engages in thorough cross-referencing and rigorous comparing and contrasting.

To get the most out of Hardy's analysis, I reread the *Book of Mormon* while reading his book. In particular, I found his assessments of Captain Moroni and the Book of Ether innovative. I also like how he takes both believers and non-believers to task for cherry picking passages they like and essentially dismissing the rest of the book. Still, I have serious concerns with *Understanding the Book of Mormon*.

Implicit in every chapter, and often explicit, is Dr. Hardy's adoration of the *Book of Mormon*. This bias leaks into his textual analysis. Where the *Book of Mormon* exhibits literary weakness--as everyone from Moroni to Mark Twain agrees it does--Hardy backs away from his touted strategy of close textual reading. He even boasts of working from "gaps" and "omissions" in the text to beef up Nephi's simplistic characters and one-sided storytelling.

It's important to point out that Dr. Hardy focuses on the *Book of Mormon*'s narrative elements, not its theology. That is to say he primarily explores characters, events and, above all else, the narrative voices of Nephi, Mormon and Moroni. Hardy would have us believe that each narrator has a distinct voice. Certainly on a rudimentary level they do. As Hardy ably demonstrates, each narrator displays a basic awareness of his political and social surroundings.

But as Dr. Hardy points out, Mormon's narration incorporates close to 200 "phrases he has picked up." Hardy suggests this might be intentional use of "phrasal allusion." The opposing argument, every bit as reasonable, is that the *Book of Mormon* narrators aren't especially distinct. What is more, Hardy grudgingly admits that Moroni's voice is even less distinctive than Mormon's. He states that Moroni's writing contains "...an unusually high proportion of phrases borrowed from previous *Book of Mormon* authors."

Dr. Hardy seems to want it both ways. He digs deep to find textual evidence of unique voices. Yet elsewhere he confesses that "it is not always clear whether these kinds of verbal echoes are deliberate or whether Moroni is simply relying on common tropes..." Hardy buries one of his frankest confessions in the End Notes: "Latter-day Saints have long been wary of acknowledging just how much of the language of the *Book of Mormon* is derived from the Bible...."

Frankly, at the core of my criticism of *Understanding the Book of Mormon* is a suspicion. As Dr. Hardy makes clear in his Afterword, he doesn't just want us to "understand" the *Book of Mormon*, he wants us to like it. Even if we don't believe it, he wants us to hold it in high literary esteem. In short, Dr. Hardy wants learned skeptics like me to give the *Book of Mormon* more respect than it gives us. For the *Book of Mormon* narrators unmistakably promise stern eternal consequences to those who remain in unbelief.

Dr. Hardy rightly assesses the *Book of Mormon* as stubborn. Indeed, the *Book of Mormon*'s narrators demand nothing less than spiritual allegiance. So I find it foolhardy at best—and covertly evangelical at worst—that Hardy attempts to build a bridge between Lehi's tree of spiritual fruit and that great and spacious building where worldly folk like me are said to dwell.

Margie says

I was interested in the narrators of the Book of Mormon and started reading with anticipation, and there were definitely some interesting insights which caused me to look at the situation differently; however when I finished reading, I felt slightly dirty. Hardy represented some scripture heroes in a strange and kind of negative light and made some leaps on what the Narrators were thinking as though he were reading their minds. Here's a little spoiler on Mormon as narrator ** He indicated that Mormon loved Captain Moroni as a fellow military commander, implied that Mormon was biased and that he tried to prop up/justify how a battle-hardened soldier could be righteous. He indicated that Mormon, who also had been a battle-hardened soldier, inserted the verses "...if all men had been and ever would be like unto Moroni, the powers of Hell would be shaken forever" (off the top of my head so may have quoted it incorrectly - but you get the idea - Alma 46-ish) to make a warrior seem righteous. This ticked me off as a veteran to hear Hardy refer to military leaders as trying to justify being righteous while they were killing the enemy during war and caused me to wonder whether Hardy had ever seen anything close to combat and had to kill someone who was trying to take away his rights and then come home where judgy people whisper about whether he was able to be righteous after killing or not. Grrr. This was one of the quite a few issues I had with Hardy's interpretation of motivation. I give it a three (3) because not everything was faulty reasoning and got me to thinking. I'm going to read a rebuttal of Hardy's book by Duane Boyce found here for some perspective: <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-le...>

Kathy says

I wanted to like this book very much, and looked forward to reading it. I appreciate Hardy's approach of looking at the narrators of the Book of Mormon and teasing out their approaches to the material they were conveying. It was interesting to note their different styles. However, like some others, I had a hard time with Hardy's judgmental approach to several of his subjects. He was fine when confining his analysis to the actual evidence in the book. It was off-putting, however, when he indulged in mind-reading or psychoanalysis of Nephi, Mormon, or Moroni. Did I gain anything of lasting value? I did come away with an appreciation for the different contexts in which the various parts of the Book of Mormon were constructed. I did come away with a greater sense of the deliberateness of the construction. I did come away with an increased sense that this book is much more complex than many of its critics are willing to admit, and an increased conviction that an unlearned farm boy could not have made this up out of whole cloth.

William says

Though the Book of Mormon is didactic with mostly two-dimensional and superficial characters, Hardy shows a way to recognize some of the greater complexities of the text by dipping below the surface of the words to observe the complex narrative structures developed by the internal narrator(s). He shows how the narrative structures, with all the interweavings, complex and convoluted turnings, still pull together into a cohesive text.

Hardy brings a lot of new and novel insights to the text (though perhaps occasionally too creative, but he's forgiven because of his other insightful observations). He has picked up on numerous details that lifelong

Mormons have probably missed. Whether people believe the Book of Mormon was written by ancient American-Israeli prophets, or a composition by Joseph Smith, Hardy's work clearly demonstrates that the text is much more sophisticated than past critics have been willing to admit, and it deserves much more attention than it has received.

Trevor Price says

Grant Hardy managed to get a book about the Book of Mormon published by the prestigious Oxford Press. That alone should draw attention and help potential readers ignore the terribly generic title and stock photograph decorating the book's cover.

I suspect there may not be a person in the course of history (including Joseph Smith himself) more obsessed and devoted to the Book of Mormon than Grant Hardy, so in some ways that uniquely qualifies him to write this book. Refreshingly, though, he is brutally honest in dealing with the text's shortcomings as well.

Hardy divides his book up into three parts, mirroring the three main narrative characters of the Book of Mormon (Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni). He then engages in extensive literary analysis, leveraging his unparalleled efforts in reading the text deeply (including "reading against the grain", as he would put it).

So to start with the good, the section on Nephi is five-star material. Brilliant, engaging, and ingenious. I loved it. Because Nephi (whether he be a historical person or not, Hardy repeatedly asserts) narrates in memoir form, it allows for a lot more interesting opportunities to climb inside his mind and tease his story apart. I'd eat up any similar literary masterpieces like this section were they to be published.

Now on to the bad. I'd give Hardy's other two sections (on Mormon and Moroni) two stars. There are occasional insights that kept me reading the book until the end, but so much of these sections involves agreeing with Hardy about patterns and allusions he has discovered in the Book of Mormon. Any reader who thinks he's finding patterns where there are none is bound to find this boring and tedious. I wasn't sold on his central argument that the text's "narratological strategies are of more than just a passing interest." Where Hardy finds intentional, deliberate repetition, I imagine that most readers instead will find a mere lack of vocabulary and/or ideas.

With this book, I think Hardy will persuade some non-believers that the Book of Mormon is "better than it sounds" and unsettle some unprepared believers who stumble into its frank treatment of anachronisms. But hopefully it paves the way for more work like his analysis of Nephi.

Tom Doggett says

A decade ago there were few scholarly books written for the non-Mormon audience about the Book of Mormon, and in another decade there will probably not be many more. However, within those twenty years I doubt that there will be a book that approaches the depth and complexity in regards to the text as Dr. Hardy's volume. The approach to the characters and editors of the story of the Book of Mormon will, undoubtedly, infuriate some members of the LDS Church. Dr. Hardy's aim is not to produce a summary of a sacred history, but rather to puzzle out the human biases and contexts of the Book of Mormon editors. Laudably, he tries to walk a fine line in asking the reader to set assumptions of historicity aside as they explore the text;

how well he personally succeeds at following his own advice as he guides the reader through the Book of Mormon is debatable. Personally, I found that Dr. Hardy occasionally cannot resist the urge to point out what he feels are inconsistencies of the presentation of the text against Joseph Smith as author. All that aside, the book is fascinating as it takes the risks of humanizing sacred stories with human flaws as well as asserting, on occasion, that perhaps the Mormon story behind its production deserves a closer look. I should also note, of course, that this is a book interested in looking at **narrative**, not theology.

Personally, I do not believe in the Book of Mormon as an ancient historical work, but that lack of belief certainly did not prevent me from enjoying this amazing work. For anyone interested in having a deeper and richer understanding of one of the foundational books of scripture of the Latter Day Saint movement and the myriad of churches that accept the Book of Mormon as scripture, do not pass up this exploration.

And, truth be told, simply to have some state in black and white that Nephi is almost certainly unfair in his treatment of his brothers, that Captain Moroni is not really the paragon of Christian virtue described in Alma 48:11-13, and that the Jesus in 3 Nephi can often be overly verbose and confusing in his speech patterns: that is something amazing to read from an LDS author!

Alejandro Rodriguez says

This book carefully makes connections within the text that are not obvious, and with those connections makes a compelling case that The Book of Mormon is a sophisticated work of scripture, and not just propagandistic ramblings of a country boy. The literary connections, and perspective that Hardy provides is complex and provocative, especially towards the end of the book with his examination of the Book of Ether. However, this book is extremely boring.

A traditional, faithful LDS Member will read this book and perhaps feel slightly disconcerted as Hardy exposes the text's complexities, anachronisms, and undermines some traditional assumptions about the major narrators. However, these complexities also chisel away the critic's assumption that The Book of Mormon is a poorly written propaganda pamphlet.

This is a great book if you want to gain a deeper knowledge of The Book of Mormon's contents, and it's theoretical methodology. I do not recommend this book if you are looking for spiritual or doctrinal insights.

David Cook says

I first became aware of Grant Hardy when he was the editor of the Readers Edition of the Book of Mormon which I found surprisingly helpful and fresh. I was fascinated how the deletion of verses changed the experience of reading scripture. Hardy is a first rate scholar of religion and Mormonism.

I have read several commentaries of scripture. Most fall into the model of commentary on individual scriptures with what others have said and how the verse has been interpreted. Rarely is there any deeper analysis. Hardy does an outstanding job and provides insight that I had never considered. This book deepened my understanding and appreciation for the Book of Mormon. It is by far the best "commentary" I have ever encountered.

Favorite quote:

"Historians specializing in subsequent periods will want to account for the growth and increasing visibility of the Mormon Church by examining its founding scripture, among other things. Latter-day Saints, for their part, will continue to identify points of connection with the ancient world in an attempt to better understand the text and lend support to its claims of historicity. Each group, however, will have more success if they read the Book of Mormon as a narrative, interpreting its message in an accurate but nuanced way, and giving greater weight to the themes that are actually more important to the story."

Anna says

Born and raised a Mormon, I've been on that inevitable intellectual and spiritual journey of my mid-twenties to deeply analyze the doctrines, beliefs, and scriptures of the religion of my youth, as well as to find a comfortable stance as to what I believe and where I want to situate my life and devotion.

Grant Hardy is a *really* good guide for looking at what the *Book of Mormon* really says, does, and signifies. His excellent scholarship and insightful literary connections make *Understanding the Book of Mormon* a comfortable read for believers, non-believers, and ambivalent truth seekers (like me) alike. He is direct and unbiased, though a devout Mormon himself, and, as such, gives the book perhaps a gentler treatment than many before him have.

Overall, Hardy makes the point that whether or not one sees the *Book of Mormon* as divinely translated scripture, it is much more complex and rich than a shallow or quick reading would suggest. Despite clear historical anachronisms and sometimes painfully redundant and derivative language, the Book is worthy of deep consideration and discussion, especially as a landmark nineteenth century text. Referencing Mark Twain's tongue-in-cheek comment that Wagner's music is "better than it sounds," Hardy ends the afterword with the conviction that "Whether Joseph Smith worked by craftiness, by genius, or by revelation, the Book of Mormon is a remarkable text, one that is worthy of serious study. It is better than it sounds" (273). And, after being guided along by Hardy, I certainly agree.

Jean Kelly says

This is a complicated book that examines the Book of Mormon as one would examine a work of literature. Rather than seeing it as a jumble of odd stories, difficult and disjointed, the author offers a detailed guide to the contents that meets the needs of both believers and outsiders. By focusing on the narrative, he shows that there is an organizing principle at work. I read this to try to get some understanding of what Mormons are all about. I am not sure I know yet, but it was fascinating reading.

Matt Evans says

I heard a radio interview w/ Grant Hardy and his wife. They compared the Book of Mormon to V. Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. That alone made me want to read it. And I did, and I'm in the middle of reading it

again. This book will transform your understanding of the book -- that description's vague, I'll add more to it later.

04/2013: read it again.

Corey Wozniak says

I've been a sloppy reader of scripture. Grant Hardy taught me how I should have been reading the BOM this whole time. He reads between the lines, against the grain, and just pays good attention, and his hard work is richly rewarded. Here's a handful of random insights to serve as teasers from the first 1/4-or-so of the book:

- 1) Laman and Lemuel can be read much more sympathetically. In fact, in some senses they may have been more "orthodox" in their Jewish faith than Lehi or Nephi.
- 2) Lehi and Nephi, even though they saw the same vision of the Tree of Life, interpreted that vision very differently.
- 3) Nephi may have had some disagreements with Lehi on a number of matters, including Nephi's disposal of Laban.
- 4) Nephi was most likely son-less, and may have experienced marital strife.
- 5) How the BOM deals with the old archetype of knowledge vs. happiness.
- 6) Many more gems.

This book will forever change the way I read scripture (i.e. it will prevent me from reading it lazily.)

Nelson says

UPDATE: Having read Robert Alter's *The Art Of Biblical Narrative* and having learned that Grant Hardy idolizes Alter, I think Hardy's volume would have been strengthened by a discussion of Leitwort in the Book of Mormon, as Alter has done with the Bible. Hardy's analysis is more narrowly focused on narrator analysis (no, not a Hebraism). But because the only Hebrew and Egyptian present in the English Book of Mormon lie in proper names, Leitwort and wordplay would have been applicable in narrator analysis. For instance, wordplay on the name Nephi, on Enos, on Alma and Leitwort on Noah.

This Oxford publication is a must-read for anyone with a literary interest, especially those outside the Mormon faith if they are to understand this fast-growing movement. Using narrator analysis, Hardy treats the *Book of Mormon* as a literary piece and uncovers the rich complexity underlying the text.

As a believer, I've used aids to read the Book of Mormon my entire life. When I was nine, I had trouble grasping the language of the Book, so sister missionaries had me read the *Book of Mormon Reader* cartoons along with the Book itself. I gained further light and understanding in seminary when the CES materials analyzed every single verse, allowing me to extract meaning from the entire text, and not just the "meat" verses. Only on my mission did the Book come alive without the help of aids. And now, as a college grad, this Hardy's guide provides a scholarly, non-devotional perspective on the Book.

Hardy dismantles the black-and-white message of the *Book of Mormon* by examining closely each author's motives. My moral development owes to reading the Book at face value the first eleven times. But Hardy's

guide put more color into the characters.

Jaycee Limutau says

So I began reading this as my "Sunday Novel" but being 3 months shy of reading it a full year I had quit that notion as I often didn't take the time to pick it up on Sundays. This is not my usual fluff I tend to gravitate to. This is a book you need to invest time into to understand. Not an easy peasy read. That being said once I did focus my time on completing the book it was enjoyable and enlightening. Great book for believers and nonbelievers alike. I feel the author did a good job at laying down the facts even if it may shake someones world. All in all it makes you think and realize just how much "nonthinking" I have been doing all these years while reading and rereading The Book of Mormon.

Benita says

Saw Jacob Walley reading this and he recommended it. Initial response (after ~50 pages): my gads, a thoughtful examination of the Book of Mormon that is accessible to believers and nonbelievers alike. Too early to rate, but my mind and my spirit have needed a dose of something like this! I have to buy my own copy and return the public library's copy because I **need** to scribble in the margins!

Having now finished the book, I can say it lived up to my hopes and expectations. It was thoughtful, not preachy, gave me new insights into the Book of Mormon and will color how I read it for the rest of my life. I will also dip back into the book again and again to remind myself of Grant Hardy's ideas about Nephi, Mormon and Moroni. Hardy had to do some things to make the book accessible to non-believers, that I could have dispensed with, but I do understand the need for that so the book could reach a wider audience--and be subjected to wider scrutiny. I bogged down in the analysis a few times, but I think that is because of my own shallow acquaintance with some of the Book of Mormon (despite years of reading it). This has made me want to know it better. No small feat.
