Gods and Monsters in Latter-day Saint Reconciliation Stories

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Introduction

Reconciliation stories portray a main character (or groups of characters) in conflict with another character/group. Conflict is resolved usually by (1) new perceptions or compromises that unite both sides, or (2) one side's victory and the other side's surrender. Such reconciliation stories are typically associated with politics, class division, or religious themes (Thomas 1). Familiar mainstream examples of reconciliation stories include: *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Shylock the Jew is defeated by a radical reading of his own contract; *King Lear*, wherein Lear finally realizes that Cordelia did love him far more than her lying sisters; and *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Elizabeth realizes her first impressions of Darcy were wrong.

Reconciliation stories commonly evoke allegories of Christian theology. Characters "sin" by their actions and "fall." Ultimately, they must seek forgiveness and redemption in an arc that parallels the general notion of Christian grace and redemption:

> The comedies and tragedies tend to handle forgiveness with a certain moral, even theological, clarity, since, however secular or pessimistic the context may be, the assumptions of a Christian *Weltanschauung* color the action and dialogue, even if, as in Lear, they may have to compete with more agnostic or nihilistic attitudes. When characters in these dramas experience reconciliation, wrongs are acknowledged, reparation, if possible, is implied, and healing takes place in an ethos of deepened consciousness. (Forker 289)

We find that works created by Latter-day Saint writers not always, but very commonly, employ a third pattern of reconciliation, distinct from the more common narrative tropes of compromise or surrender. This third reconciliation pattern appears only rarely in stories generally, but it emerges more often when writers have deliberately integrated "Mormon" tropes or references into their material. Notable examples include the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* series (Moore and Eick's revision of the Glen Larson original) and *The Expanse* series (Corey; see also Pierce).

This third, less-common story pattern portrays reconciliation with a distinctly alien "other," wherein protagonists form an alien/human hybrid community separate from either of the two original communities. Fantasy and science fiction (hereafter F&SF) provides the ideal venue for authors writing in the Latter-day-Saint tradition to develop this theme. Latter-day Saint Christianity, in all its forms, is neither Protestant nor Catholic, nor is it a compromise between them. It is essentially a third, distinct mode of Christianity, in which religious authority derives

neither from scripture nor from papal authority. Differences between Latter-day Saint and Protestant/Catholic beliefs ultimately translate into a distinct conception of what Christian reconciliation fundamentally is, and thus opens up a distinct mode of allegorical storytelling to represent that reconciliation. A rough overall sketch of this third-way reconciliation plot is diagrammed in Figure 1.
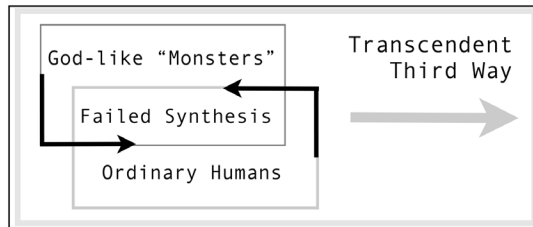
Two conflicting sides will merge into successful synthesis in typical reconciliation stories: Both sides unify in perception and compromise, OR one side entirely surrenders to the other. The third, less-common pattern portrays both a failed attempt at synthesis and a more successful third way: reconciliation with a distinctly alien "other" by formation of an alien/human hybrid community separate from either of the two original communities. F&SF provides the ideal venue for authors writing in the Restored-Gospel tradition to develop this theme.

Figure 1: Third-way Reconciliation Plot

Our article will briefly review the essential nature of the third-way plot device as found in the works of Orson Scott Card, Stephenie Meyer, Brandon Sanderson, and Glen Larson, which leads us to the next question: just how common is this plot device among other Latter-day Saint authors? To address this question, we examined the novels of other Latter-day Saint authors with which we had no prior acquaintance, to see whether, and at what rate, the third-way reconciliation motif also showed up as a plot device in stories by these other authors: James Dashner, author of the Maze Runner series; Brandon Mull, author of the Fablehaven series; Lisa Mangum, author of the Hourglass Door series; Ally Condie, author of the Matched series; and Shannon Hale, author of the Books of Bayern series.

This analysis can improve our understanding of the history of Latter-day Saint motifs in F&SF and their influence on the wider genres they represent. This understanding may also provide us with additional insights to address a longstanding question: what is it, exactly, about Latter-day Saint theology/culture that drives a particularly strong interest in F&SF themes among both Latter-day Saint readers and writers (Morris; Neugebauer; Winston)?

Third-way Reconciliation: An Overview

In life as in fiction, we often find ourselves stuck with difficult choices, unsatisfactory compromise on one hand, or the brute-force defeat of one side by the other. To have better choices requires some kind of novelty, an invention, an alternative vision, and this is the very stuff of F&SF. Stories in these genres are (or can be) more than a simple-minded escape from reality. Rather, this invention of third ways and higher ways is essentially the substance of real technical and moral progress.

Arguably, effective F&SF by any skilled writer will always invoke the possibility of progress through transcendence of current limitations. Whether authors intend it or not, situations in F&SF stories serve to model problems in the actual world: dystopian worlds and futures to be avoided, or hypothetical worlds and futures where solutions to real problems can be explored and vicariously experienced. What is distinctive about F&SF by Latter-day Saint authors (and more common in F&SF influenced by Latter-day Saint motifs) is not the idea of transcendence per se,

because this idea is inherent in the F&SF as a whole. Rather, we suggest that this common idea of transcendence rather more frequently manifests itself in work by Latter-day Saint authors as a specific strategy of narrative conflict and resolution, where conflict between two community is reconciled by a third community.

A typical third-way story, in the Latter-day Saint mode, features two or more communities in mortal conflict and protagonists caught in between. More often than not, it also includes a protagonist in dangerous love with a literal or figurative monster from the other side: humans against alien bugs with Ender caught between (Card), humans against vampires with Bella caught between (Meyer), humans against killer robots with Baltar and Six between (Moore & Eick), human agents of Preservation against god-like forces of Ruin with Vin, Elend, and Sazed between (Sanderson).

Individuals or groups in conflict are, of course, a staple of F&SF, as well as fiction generally, and indeed in all of actual history. What is much more typical in fictional endings (and accepted narratives about historical events) is that one group simply defeats and subsumes the other group. The rebels win, the oppressive government is overthrown, the enemy is defeated, etc. (as is evident in classic *Star Wars* or *The Hunger Games* trilogy). Alternatively, each group adjusts its perception of the other, and they merge (*Shrek*, *The Sixth Sense*). Humans alter their perception of ogres and ogres alter their perceptions of both humans and themselves. A boy tormented by visions of the dead finally realizes that the dead just want his help. The warring parties negotiate, misunderstanding is resolved, and peace is restored. Either way, the two conflicted groups, as thesis and antithesis, now become a synthesis in the usual Hegelian sense (Lost and Found 1).

Prominent Latter-day Saint writers usually do something very different to resolve their groups in conflict. One side does not crush the other, but neither do both sides realize it was all just a misunderstanding. There is no epiphany and no compromise that allows both groups to merge in happy or unhappy synthesis. Rather, in third-way reconciliation, some plain human(s) and some being(s) from the opposing side usually join forces and create a third group or way of being, a resolution of conflict which is always emphatically not a merged compromise of the two sides nor the abject surrender of one side to the other (Figure 1).

Brandon Sanderson's first *Mistborn* trilogy nicely exemplifies the general difference between the merged synthesis of two groups and the transcendence of a third way. The *Mistborn* series puts the conflict in terms of cosmic forces. Preservation vs. Ruin are the forces operating through most of the story. The Lord Ruler of the first book specifically embodies a failed synthesis of the two forces; the consuming forces of Ruin threaten to destroy the whole world, and the Lord Ruler does keep Ruin in check with the powers of Preservation, but the result is centuries of stagnation and a tyrannical oppressive government. The Lord Ruler also partly preserves but partly ruins the whole ecosystem of the world: it's hotter, plants are brown instead of green, and volcanic ash falls constantly everywhere. That miserable synthesis is opposed by the heroes of the story, who defeat the Lord Ruler but, in doing so, accidentally release Ruin from its prison. Final victory over

Ruin can only happen when the heroes (Vin, Elend, and Sazed primarily) find a way to transcend the original conflict between Preservation and Ruin. Both sides are encompassed by Creation, a higher pattern that allows "Harmony" between otherwise irreconcilable forces of Preservation and Ruin.[1] Creation contains both sides and yet is a third thing more powerful than either side of the original fight. To create, something has to be put together that endures (preservation), but the pre-existing building blocks must also be moved out of their original places (ruining the original situation).
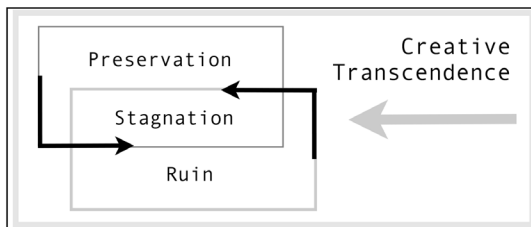
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Figure 2: <u>Mistborn</u>: Stagnant Synthesis vs. Creative Transcendence

Hegelian synthesis may be represented as the overlap between two circles or boxes (Figure 2), but such synthesis often produces an absurdity—something that is unsustainable, logically impossible, or self-contradictory (McGowan 19; Peirce 492). For example, a society can't be both preserved and ruined at the same time unless, for instance, because the so-called preservation is actually ruin in the form of stagnation. In philosophical terms, the situation calls for what C.S. Peirce describes as evolutionary Thirdness, rather than a two-sided synthesis of one idea and its negation (104). We can diagram this Thirdness as a third, larger circle/box, drawn around the first two, smaller regions. That bigger circle/box contains and unifies all the sets, but it is more than either of the enclosed sets. Peirce's model of an evolved, third solution better captures the logic behind the general plot strategy of many successful examples of Latter-day Saint F&SF:

CONFLICT: Story conflict emerges from a clash of beings from two communities; one tends to be distinctly alien/other, and one tends to be more generically mainstream or human. Formix vs. Ender, Edward vs. Bella, Cylon vs. Human, The Lord Ruler and his minion nobles including Elend (Preservation/Ruin) vs. Vin and other ordinary Humans (the "skaa").

PROTAGONISTS: Initially, a mainstream (usually human) character is identified as the sympathetic focus, but a member of the alien/other community is eventually portrayed sympathetically and usually becomes a "love interest" of the human protagonist, or at least a close companion.[2]

ANTAGONISTS: The love interest/companion and the antagonist tend to be the same, either the exact same being, or at the very least, the love interest comes from the same alien/other community that threatens the protagonist.

RESOLUTION: Some individuals from the two clashing communities solve their problems by forming a third, new organization distinct from either of the original groups. The new, third group in one way or another plans to reproduce their mode of being: Ender vows to help the Formix

queen hatch her eggs somewhere, Edward and Bella produce their hybrid who apparently will have more hybrid children with the werewolf Jacob. Likewise, in the *Battlestar Galactica* universe created in the second iteration of the series, the whole current population of Earth is descended from both humans and Cylons, the narrative equivalents of Adam and Eve.

The Adam/Eve story told from a Latter-day Saint perspective is likewise a story of third-way reconciliation between Gods and humans. Adam and Eve's ultimate goal is not a simple surrender to God and return to paradise (a failed synthesis), but they must rather go on to become Gods themselves, beyond the realm of both ordinary humans and their Creator-God.[3]

Further Examples of Third-way Reconciliation

We examined F&SF stories by five other Latter-day Saint authors in a second round of study. Four of those five also developed this same contrast between failed synthesis and third-way transcendence. We'll discuss these stories in general terms, to avoid spoilers for anyone still planning to read any of these.

Maze Runners

The story begins as author James Dashner's protagonists, the teenage "Gladers," awaken without their memories inside a giant maze world. The maze world is populated by killer cyborg "Grievers" that harass Gladers on a daily basis. Both the maze world and Grievers were obviously constructed by unseen, God-like technocrats. Their motives are unknown, but they clearly intend to impose extreme hardships on the Gladers.

Glader survivors escape the first-book maze only to discover the larger world outside is just another, larger hellscape, full of disease, more danger, and more death. There the Gladers meet other ordinary people trying to survive in that world, and they also meet the God-like technocrats (World-In-Catastrophe: Killzone-Experiment-Dept.) in nominal control of everything that happens. The Gladers are invited to (re)join WICKED, but most Gladers find the deal they are being offered untenable. This is the failed synthesis (Figure 3). Instead, the Gladers strike out on their own, and eventually, with the help of sympathetic WICKED insiders (essentially the love interests from the alien/other community), the surviving Gladers find a way to escape to safety, presumably to begin a new race of humans free from the more-or-less constant threat of death.
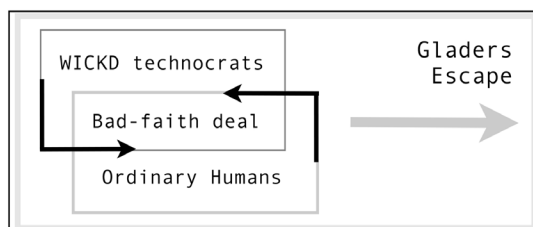

In the Maze Runner *series, Glader survivors escape the first-book maze only to discover the larger world outside is just another, larger hellscape, full of disease, more danger, and more death. There the Gladers meet other ordinary people trying to survive in that world, and they also meet the god-like technocrats (World-In-Catastrophe: Killzone-Experiment-Dept.) in nominal control of everything that happens. The Gladers are invited to (re)join WICKED, but most Gladers find untenable the deal they are being offered. This is the failed synthesis. Instead the Gladers strike out on their own, and eventually, with the help of sympathetic WICKED insiders (essentially the "love interests" from the alien/other community), the surviving Gladers find a way to escape to safety, presumably to begin a new race of humans free from the more-or-less constant threat of death.*

Figure 3: Maze Runner
             Reconciliation Plot

Dragon Watchers

Brandon Mull's YA series *Fablehaven* (followed by the *Dragonwatch* stories) describes its world(s) in somewhat gentler tones, but here again, gifted teenagers are put in more or less constant peril. These are a sister and brother, Kendra and Seth Sorenson, about 13 and 12 years old when the series begins. Kendra and Seth visit their grandparents' farm for the summer, which is surrounded by an enormous, wooded preserve. The youths are told to stay out of the woods (they don't), to not drink unpasteurized milk straight from the farm's cows (they do), to stay in their beds and keep their windows closed during Midsummer's Eve (they don't), and more. Each time they disobey, Kendra and Seth suffer consequences but also gain knowledge about the magical forest surrounding the farm (Fablehaven), which turns out to be one of several magically walled and guarded preserves/prisons for magical creatures. The inmate fairies, witches, demons, and dragons are sometimes friendly but quite often treacherous and/or murderous if given a chance. Kendra and Seth find themselves pulled into the situation shown in Figure 4.
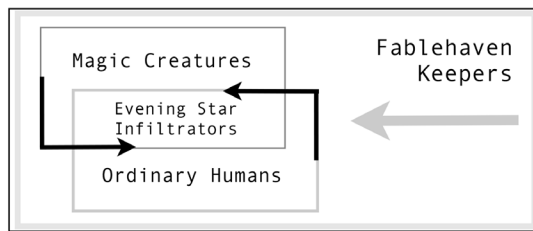
Fablehaven protagonists Kendra and Seth gain, through each transgressive act, a bit more knowledge and a bit more magical ability themselves, knowledge and abilities that make them more effective in assisting their grandparents and other Preserve keepers who constitute the third community in this version of the reconciliation plot. This third community restores and maintains reconciliation by keeping assorted magical creatures contained and the human and magical worlds safely separate. The Sorenson's primary antagonists belong to the Society of the Evening Star (SES), which constitutes the failed synthesis in this version of the third-way reconciliation plot.

Figure 4: <u>Fablehaven</u>
Reconciliation Plot

The temptation/fall motifs of Fablehaven include the usual "Mormon" twist. The Temptation/Fall of Adam/Eve is viewed by traditional Christianity as an unmitigated tragedy. It is different in the Restored-Gospel telling, as in Fablehaven, where Kendra and Seth gain, through each transgressive act, a bit more knowledge and a bit more magical ability themselves--knowledge and abilities that make them more effective in assisting their grandparents and the other preserve keepers, who constitute the third community in this version of the reconciliation plot. This third community restores and maintains reconciliation by keeping assorted magical creatures contained and the human and magical worlds safely separated.

In most of the series, the Sorensons' primary antagonists belong to the Society of the Evening Star, which constitutes the failed synthesis in this version of the third-way reconciliation plot, as shown in Figure 4. The Society includes magical beings who have infiltrated the human world and who intend to overthrow the existing Preserves, unleash hoards of demons, and (by mixing worlds) destroy both magical and ordinary versions of the world.

Hourglass Doors

Lisa Mangum's YA time-travel trilogy begins with *The Hourglass Door*, followed by *The Golden Spiral*, and concludes with *The Forgotten Locket*. The story parallels in some obvious ways the initial setup of the *Twilight* series. A high school girl (Abby, like Bella) is intrigued by a mysterious fellow student (Dante, like Edward) who seems to be keeping some dangerous secrets. Here again we find Temptation/Fall tropes with the usual Restored-Gospel twist. Abby (like Bella) opens the

figurative Pandora's Box of secrets kept by Dante (like Edward) and endangers her life as a result, but she also gains knowledge and abilities in the process that allow her to assist and ultimately save her true love. Abby (like Bella before her) is pulled into the dynamic shown in Figure 5.
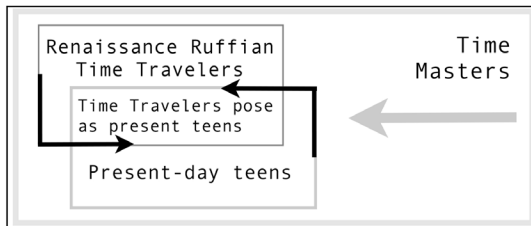
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Figure 5: <u>Hourglass Door</u>
             Reconciliation Plot

Dante (like Edward before him) attempts a failed synthesis between the present-day high-school world of Abby and his secret background as a time-traveling fugitive. It's worth noting that *Twilight*'s vampire Cullens were mostly time-travelers too, by virtue of having been (un)alive for a century or more. Dante and Edward both create an unstable, unsustainable situation by coming from an older time/way of life but trying to pass as ordinary high school students in the present day.

Besides the obvious *Twilight* comparisons, there's also a deep connection between the Hourglass Door series dynamic and that of the Fablehaven series. In both storylines, the antagonists from the magical/time-traveling side are attempting to dissolve protective boundaries between their world and the ordinary human world. In both storylines, human protagonists have to abandon the safety of their ordinary world and enter a transcendent state where they have the power to keep the two conflicting realms separate and safe.

Dystopian Matches

Ally Condie's YA dystopian-romance trilogy begins with *Matched*, followed by *Crossed*, and concludes with *Reached*. The essential dynamic is shown in Figure 6.
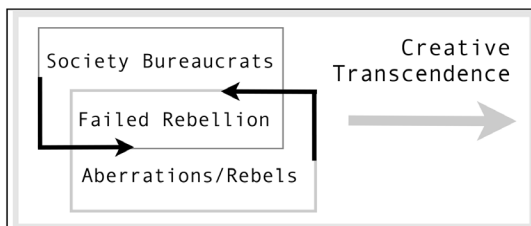
Matched *protagonist Cassia is initially a minor bureaucrat within the Society (tightly controlled by God-like technocrats). She's been "matched" by the Society to Xander, another petty bureaucrat, but then she becomes aware of a system-glitch in the Matching program, and clues suggest that her "true" match is a problematic boy from the "Aberration" class of social pariahs named Ky. Cassia and Ky embark on some quiet acts of disobedience (failed synthesis). The early story prefigures the major, failed synthesis and final transcendence later in the series: the unauthorized couple are found out by Society officials, and both are sent to rehabilitation/death camps. But they eventually escape and eventually find the effective third-way path to true freedom and love.*

Figure 6: <u>Matched</u>: Failed Rebellion
             vs. Creative Transcendence

Main protagonist Cassia is initially a happy, obedient seventeen-year-old girl within the tightly controlled Society. Cassia works as a junior "sorter" for the Society. She's been "matched" by the Society to Xander, a popular and (seemingly) equally obedient boy, but then she becomes aware of a system-glitch in the Matching program, and clues suggest that her "true" match is a problematic boy from the "Aberration" class of social pariahs named Ky. Cassia and Ky eventually meet, and sure enough, there's chemistry between them. Together, they embark on quiet acts of disobedience

that prefigure the Rising, a movement of stealth rebellion in later books. The early story also prefigures the major, failed synthesis and final transcendence later in the series. The unauthorized couple are found out by Society officials, and both are sent to rehabilitation/death camps. But they eventually find the effective third-way path to true freedom and love.

It's worth noting that Condie's Matched series shares a number of structural and thematic similarities with Sanderson's Mistborn series. Condie's Official Society echoes Sanderson's various forces of Preservation. The Aberration pariahs are likewise perceived as agents of "Ruin" by the Society that have to be kept in check, and the ultimate solution in both storylines involves the third-way powers of Creativity that ultimately reconcile conflicting processes of Preservation and Destruction.

Reconciliation by Straight Synthesis

Shannon Hale's Books of Bayern stories prove to be the exceptions among all the Latter-day Saint authors we surveyed in this round of study; Hale's stories consistently used two-way synthesis strategies to resolve conflict, as is more typical in F&SF by writers from mainstream secular backgrounds. That is, Hale's protagonists either defeat their enemies by superior tactics, or they manage to resolve their misunderstandings by negotiation, or they balance conflicting magical forces. No transcendent third way, no third magical force, and no third, outside community ever proves necessary. This by no means should be taken as a criticism of Hale's work. Her stories are interesting and satisfying, and they generally sell. We only note that her plotting strategies do not (by themselves) identify her as a "typical" Latter-day Saint author.

In *The Goose Girl*, for example, the protagonist Ani uses her nature-speaking abilities (talking to animals and controlling the air) to outmaneuver, defeat, and/or negotiate with her enemies who rely on their people-speaking abilities (social savvy and political charisma). Also, the forest people, Ani's allies, are initially outcasts in Bayern society, but are finally understood and accepted as equal citizens as a by-product of Ani's victory, as shown schematically in Figure 7. All Bayern books we examined (*Emma Burning*, *River Secrets*, and *Forest Born*), as well as *Princess Academy*, follow this pattern, creating conflict between two opposing magical forces and/or two opposing political groups, then resolving the conflicts as main characters find ways to balance both the forces and the opposing communities, by victory, by negotiation, or both.
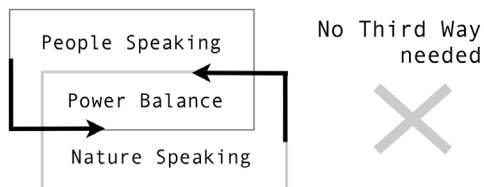
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Figure 7: <u>Goose Girl</u>: Reconciliation by traditional synthesis

The reasons for Hale's more mainstream approach to reconciliation go beyond the scope of this article, but the most straightforward explanation would be that her first Bayern story, *The Goose Girl*, is based on a traditional folktale that achieves reconciliation in the traditional ways, through total victory over an enemy and/or unifying perception/compromise.

Conclusion

The essential transcendent impulse in all F&SF may best explain why so many Latter-day Saints are drawn to these genres, because of their lived experience as members of a third community of Christians distinct from Catholic and Protestant traditions. This lived experience translates into a specific plot device among Latter-day Saint writers, common but not universal, where a third community heals divisions between two other communities. This third-way plot device is neither better or worse than the more common reconciliation strategies of victory or shared perception, but it does model the transcendent impulse of F&SF in a distinct way. Mainstream F&SF by non-LDS authors only rarely use that third-way device, but the idea of transcendence is always implicit in the F&SF impulse to model alternate realities in which we may find novel solutions to real problems of this world.

To summarize, we propose here that the essential impulse all F&SF stories is not to escape reality but rather to help make our shared reality perpetually a bit better than it was before, by the process of transcendent and novel creation. We therefore discount the common suggestion that Latter-day Saint readers and authors are particularly drawn to F&SF stories because "those crazy Mormons" are already detached from reality, or because Latter-day Saints are already alienated from mainstream culture, like the magical creatures and aliens of F&SF.

Rather, the believing community of Latter-day Saints perceive themselves and their belief systems as the eventual solution to current world problems, as healers-in-training for the world's current divisions, offering what is essentially a third way between, for instance, progressive and conservative thinking, between warring religious sects, or between blind faith and equally blind skepticism. This self-perception tends to manifest in a plot device where a third community solves problems between two other, otherwise irreconcilable sides. Whether this self-perception is correct or not is irrelevant to our larger point which is that all F&SF tends to operate this mode, with or without the third-way plot device, to warn about apocalyptic or dystopian futures and to try out creative new solutions to real-world problems in the realm of imagination.

Notes

1. To many Mistborn Trilogy readers, Harmony may seem like a simple synthesis, a straight compromise allowing Preservation and Ruin to merge, rather than a third-way reconciliation. However, the harmony metaphor personified by Sazed is precise in its representation of a third way. Two tones interact in a harmonic chord NOT by simply splitting the difference between the different tone frequencies: The basic note A (220 cycles per second) + C (262

cycles per second) is NOT 241 cycles per second (262 + 200/2); rather, the separate tones interact by the laws resonance to create a distinct harmonic waveform more complex than the component tone waves. Harmony is NOT the same as balance. SPOILER ALERT: In the final resolution of the Mistborn trilogy, Vin dies because she wields the remaining Preservation power against Ruin and those two can only destroy each other: failed synthesis. When Sazed recognizes that he instead of Vin is the Hero of Ages, and when he becomes Harmony, he transcends the conflict by putting both Preservation and Ruin inside a larger system which is manifest in the process of creation, a cyclical pattern (like the literal harmony of sound) that includes both Preservation and Ruin, but also novelty, all in a recursive cycle: Sazed recreates the world broken by the Lord Ruler's failed balance between Preservation and Ruin; Sazed recreates the world in order to save it, so he NEITHER preserves what what was nor does he destroy what was: it is a third way.

2. We use the term "love interest" precisely in most cases, but rather loosely in some cases. We find that literal romance between two characters, one from each side of a conflict, is typical in our sample of Latter-day Saint F&SF: Bella and Edward (Twilight), Vin and Elend (Mistborn), Baltar and Six (Battlestar Galactica), Abby and Dante (Hourglass Doors), Cassie and Ky (Matched). However, in some cases the love is genuine but not literally romantic between two key characters. Ender loves the Formix Queen but they are of different species. Kendra and Seth are too young for romance in the Fablehaven series but they do have various magical allies throughout the series.

3. Latter-day Saint theology splits from Catholic and Protestant theology most distinctly in its conception of God: the Father, Son, and Spirit form a council of three distinct beings, each with human form, rather than one universe-spanning and unembodied force with distinct manifestations as Father, Son, and Spirit. The Latter-day Saints also believe that humans have the capacity to become Gods, as taught by Church founder Joseph Smith:

> "What kind of a being is God?" he asked. Human beings needed to know, he argued, because "if men do not comprehend the character of God they do not comprehend themselves." In that phrase, the Prophet collapsed the gulf that centuries of confusion had created between God and humanity. Human nature was at its core divine. God "was once as one of us" and "all the spirits that God ever sent into the world" were likewise "susceptible of enlargement." Joseph Smith preached that long before the world was formed, God found "himself in the midst" of these beings and "saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself" and be "exalted" with Him. (Gospel Topics Essays)

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