

The Books of Our Lives

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My dear brothers and sisters, it is indeed a privilege to be with you this morning. It is now a new year—2005—as well as the beginning of a new semester here at Brigham Young University. My sincerest desire is that you have a wonderful experience as you flourish in the academic and spiritual atmosphere here and live amidst the outstanding students with whom you associate.

There are many aspects of getting a valuable education, and one of these is having your head in books, books, and more books a great deal of the time. Perhaps most of these books at this stage of your life are textbooks assigned to you by your professors. However, I do hope you also have the opportunity and desire for some recreational reading. I have loved books and received joy from reading them for as long as I can remember. I recall my parents reading to me as a young child as well as taking me to the library, giving me the opportunity to leave with an armload of simple books to read as fast and as often as I wanted.

When I went to bed at night I always took a trusted companion with me that I had hidden in my bedroom: a flashlight! When it would get late into the evening and I was still reading, my parents would say, “Lights out. It’s time to go to sleep.” Since I had my flashlight, I could get under the covers or go into the closet so they

couldn’t see the light under my bedroom door and I could keep on reading.

I had some very favorite books as a young girl. I have read them several times, and I can still identify these stories by hearing the first sentence or two of the narrative. Here are examples of three of them:

“‘Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,’ grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.”¹

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”²

“I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with.”³

You may have been able to identify these books as *Little Women*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Wuthering Heights*. Upon hearing or seeing one or two sentences that introduce a book that I have so enjoyed reading, then the plot, characters, locale, message, and emotions I felt while reading that novel are vividly recalled.

I believe that a book is like a life. A book has a beginning and a conclusion—as does our earthly existence. Some books are lengthy and some are short. Most are composed of several

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chapters. Each chapter adds to the previous one with more knowledge and experience. Some chapters are filled with the joy and success of life. However, there are also chapters containing sadness, challenge, and tragedy. Each one of us here is writing the book of his or her life, and reading, learning, loving, serving, and worshipping are integral parts of the process.

In his book *Protocols of Reading*, Robert Scholes said:

*If a book or a story or any other text is like a little life, and if our reading actually uses up precious time in that other story we think of as our lives, then we should make the most of our reading just as we should make the most of our lives. Reading reminds us that every text ends with a blank page and that what we get from every text is precisely balanced by what we give. Our skill, our learning, and our commitment to the text will determine, for each of us, the kind of experience that text provides. Learning to read . . . is not just a matter of acquiring information from texts, it is a matter of learning to read and write the texts of our lives.*⁴

If one sentence can cause me to recall a book and what it meant to me, I might ask, “What one sentence would I want to summarize my life’s story and thus cause others to remember me and the life I led?” How do you want to be remembered and described by those who knew you during your sojourn here on earth?

Upon my reading the following short descriptions of four men and women, I believe that you could identify them by one or two sentences.

For example, “[He] has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it” (D&C 135:3). Of course this is a description of the Prophet Joseph Smith by John Taylor following the Prophet’s martyrdom.

Another description is: “If all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto [him],

behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men” (Alma 48:17). This is a description found in the Book of Mormon of Captain Moroni as he prepared to lead his people in defending their country and religion. In one sentence we are told the character and stature of each of these men.

Here are two descriptions of women we honor as described by Bruce R. McConkie: “She, as the mother of all living, set the pattern for all future mothers with reference to bringing up their children in light and truth.”⁵ And, next, “[She] is one of the greatest women who has ever lived on earth; the spirit daughter of God our Father, she was chosen to provide a body for his son.”⁶ Of course these short sentences describe Eve and Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ.

Another statement that is a beautiful summation of a woman’s life was made by her son:

*Blessed is my mother, for her soul is ever filled with benevolence and philanthropy; and notwithstanding her age, she shall yet receive strength and be comforted in the midst of her house: and thus saith the Lord. She shall have eternal life.*⁷

What a wonderful tribute the Prophet Joseph Smith paid to his mother, Lucy Mack Smith. We know that she played a significant and vital role in his development and life.

As our lives are unfolding today, we have completed several chapters and are moving forward with anticipation to those that lie ahead. You are in an exciting and very important chapter at the present time. What occurs here will determine and define future chapters, just as preceding ones brought you here to Brigham Young University. Why exactly your book is being written at this time in the latter days we do not know, but prophets and Church leaders have stated that you have

been saved to come at this time and in this dispensation.

President Ezra Taft Benson delivered this message to the students at this university in 1979. It is also applicable to you in 2005:

For nearly six thousand years, God has held you in reserve to make your appearance in the final days before the Second Coming of the Lord. Every previous gospel dispensation has drifted into apostasy, but ours will not. . . . God has saved for the final inning some of his strongest children, who will help bear off the Kingdom triumphantly. . . .

. . . Make no mistake about it—you are a marked generation. There has never been more expected of the faithful in such a short period of time as there is of us. Never before on the face of this earth have the forces of evil and the forces of good been as well organized. . . .

. . . Each day we personally make many decisions that show where our support will go. The final outcome is certain—the forces of righteousness will finally win. What remains to be seen is where each of us personally, now and in the future, will stand in this fight—and how tall we will stand. Will we be true to our last-days, foreordained mission?⁸

How privileged you are to be writing the chapters of your lives right now. With that privilege, however, there is a responsibility to be living in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Each one of us is valuable in the sight of God. The scriptures tell us that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). In your book of life you have so much to offer. As each of us writes his or her book, hopefully we will strive to become the man or woman

we want to be as the last chapter closes. In our past, present, and future, we did not—and do not—have control over many occurrences and circumstances that come therein, but we do have our agency to choose which of the many available paths to take. J. M. Barrie wrote, “The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another; and his humblest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it.”⁹

We are accountable for our actions and choices and have a personal accountability to the Savior for them. As we write the text of our lives and the one sentence that describes it, we have an eternal perspective. How blessed we are to have the guidance of a prophet of the Lord, President Gordon B. Hinckley, as well as a loving Father in Heaven and Savior, Jesus Christ. That we reflect their teachings and love by always standing tall as we “go forth to serve” in every chapter of our lives would be my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*.
2. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.
3. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*.
4. Robert E. Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 19.
5. Bruce R. McConkie, “Our Sisters from the Beginning,” address delivered at the dedication of the Nauvoo Monument to Women, 29 June 1978, in *Ensign*, January 1979, 61.
6. McConkie, “Our Sisters,” 61.
7. *Teachings*, 39.
8. Ezra Taft Benson, “In His Steps,” in *Speeches of the Year, 1979* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 59–60.
9. J. M. Barrie, *The Little Minister* (New York: J. H. Sears and Company, Inc., 1923), 3.

Around 130 million books have been published in the history of humanity; a heavy reader will at best get through 6,000 in a lifetime. Most of them won't be much fun or very memorable. Books are like people; we meet many but fall in love very seldom. Perhaps only thirty books will ever truly mark us. They will be different for each of us, but the way in which they affect us will be similar. We need simplification because our minds get checkmated by the complexity of our lives. The writer, on rare but hugely significant occasions, puts into words feelings that had long eluded us, they know us better than we know ourselves. They seem to be narrating our own stories, but with a clarity we could never achieve. Literature corrects our native inarticulacy. Books in my life (3). There is an English proverb that says, "Books and friends should be few but good". And "Except a living man there is nothing more wonderful than a book!" I totally agree with it. Any book is a wonderful thing! Just imagine it may seem that it's just paper pages with a cover and letters inside, sometimes with pictures. But the moment you start reading a book the whole new world opens to you! A book can form our values and our characters. It gives us an opportunity to imagine the future and to look into the past. One can learn a lot by reading books. And I am sure that the time spent on a good book is never wasted. And it's really a pity that people started to read less. But it, of course, depends on the author greatly too and on his or her talent. Books play a significant role in our lives. They provide us with knowledge of the outside world, they also have the ability to transpose us to an alternate world. The importance of books in our life cannot be undermined for they not only help in broadening our horizons but also act as doorways of connecting us with the world around us. They function as survival kits, they influence us and leave an impact on us. Just like there is unimaginable importance of books in our life, the habit of reading has a quintessential role to play. It is a significant habit to inculcate in order to facilitate complete and all-round growth of children. If children get in the habit of picking up a book from an early age, they will never feel bored or listless and more importantly, never have time for any kind of negative emotion.