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Top 8 books on Mormonism of 2012

Posted by [Stephen O. Smoot](#) | [6 comments](#)

The best books on Mormonism published this year —

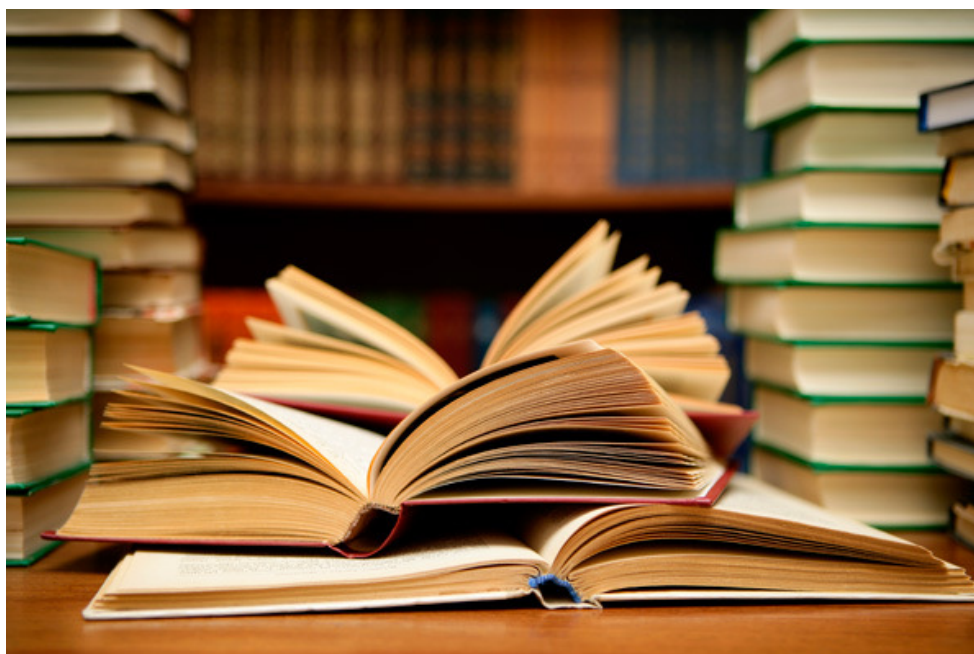


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2012 was a busy year for Mormons. The presidential campaign of Mitt Romney brought to the forefront of public discourse the celebrated “Mormon Moment”, and with it increased attention towards Mormonism, not all of which was flattering or complementary. Still, if Mormons are good for anything, it’s not missing any opportunity to share their beliefs and history with others. 2012 saw the publication of several wonderful books about Mormonism. This is besides the numerous articles on Mormonism published in a respectable number of academic journals and newspapers.

Some of the best Mormon books of 2012 are presented here. This list is, I admit, subjective. It reflects my own opinion as an avid reader of books on Mormonism.

8. *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Vol. 1: Joseph Smith Histories (1832–1844)* and *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Vol. 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Church Historian’s Press, 2012). The Joseph Smith Papers Project continues along uninterrupted since it released its first volume back in 2008. Although these volumes are dense, they provide a treasure-trove of primary historical documents that shed further light on the life of Joseph Smith. Those brave enough to wade through hundreds of pages of text and footnotes in search for historical gems need these and the other volumes of the Joseph Smith Papers on their shelves.

7. *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2012). In this Festschrift, edited by Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin, a collection of essays dedicated to Mormon scholar S. Kent Brown cover several subjects, most of them related to ancient Christianity and Judaism. However, since Brown published and taught on Mormon as well as non-Mormon subjects, several essays explore aspects of Mormon scripture and theology. Some of the essays are perhaps more pertinent and interesting than others to the average Latter-day Saint reader, but the volume altogether is both enjoyable and interesting.

6. *The Mormon People: The Making of An American Faith* (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 2012). This introductory volume by Matthew Bowman appeared on the shelves just as the 2012 Mormon Moment began to heat up. Considering the many half-baked books and articles on Mormonism concocted to stir up sensationalism and score political points, this enjoyable book on the history of Mormonism is a welcomed addition to anyone’s library, especially non-Mormons who want an approachable overview of a complex religion.

5. *In Heaven as it is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2012). Seer stones? Adamic languages? Chains-of-Belonging? This and more early Mormon esoterica, which is, understandably, overlooked in the average Sunday School class, is paid close attention to by Samuel Brown in a volume that will perplex most readers, but excite those few who want to delve deep into the speculative and enchanting world of early Mormon mysticism.

4. *“A Peculiar People”: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). What was it about Mormonism that drove mobs to burn Mormon settlements and polemicists to rail against the character of Joseph Smith from the pulpit and the press? How could such unmitigated religious persecution be tolerated in a country where freedom of religion is a cardinal virtue? J. Spencer Fluhman provides an excellent historical analysis of the “how” and “why” of 19th century anti-Mormonism, and what it means for modern religious discourse and tolerance. Mormons will come to better appreciate the plight of their forebears without the soapy melodrama present in many Mormon retellings of their history, while non-Mormons will develop sympathy for a religion that has fought hard to gain acceptance into mainstream American culture.

3. *Exploring the First Vision* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University, 2012). At the heart of Mormonism lies Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Understandably, controversy revolves around Joseph Smith’s claims to having seen God and Jesus Christ; skeptics dismiss his claims as fraudulent, while believers make passionate pleas for the authenticity of his claims. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper have compiled a collection of essays from leading Mormon historians exploring the issues and controversies surrounding Joseph’s vision. While acceptance of Joseph Smith’s claims ultimately rests on faith, this book dispels many of the myths and misunderstandings surrounding the First Vision generated by both Mormons and non-Mormons alike. Whether you believe Joseph Smith’s claims or not, this book offers a rewarding look into the history behind Joseph’s theophany and its significance for Latter-day Saints.

2. *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012). Next to Joseph Smith himself, Brigham Young is arguably the most prominent and controversial figure in Mormon history. Biographies of Joseph Smith’s successor in the presidency of the LDS Church run from scathingly negative critiques to faith-promoting hagiographies. John Turner, however, has found a comfortable middle in this polarizing spectrum with his new biography of the “Lion of the Lord”. His look into the life, ministry and teachings of Young is fair and evenhanded. Considering Young’s larger-than-life legacy, which is marked by triumph and brilliance as well as shortcomings and scandals, Turner’s careful scholarship makes this biography an excellent and informative read.

1. *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Ensign Peak, 2012). With characteristic erudition and unmatched literary grace, Terry Givens, joined by his wife Fiona, offers what is one of the most intellectually stimulating and immediately relevant treatises on Mormon theology seen in a long time. The Givens make a compelling case for the vitality of Mormon theology in the modern world. Far from the laughingstock lampooned by Bill Maher or The Book of Mormon musical, the Givens show the power and relevancy of Mormonism’s answer to mankind’s greatest questions: where did I come from? What is my purpose here on earth? What happens when I die? But besides just crafting a beautiful portrait of Mormon belief, the Givens also compare and contrast Mormon teachings to the thoughts of the great poets, sages, and prophets of history, showing how Mormonism has many distinctive truths to offer serious seekers of God. ■