

**Calvert, K. (2015). June Mickle: One Woman's Life in the Foothills and Mountains of Western Canada. Calgary, AB: Rocky Mountain Books.**

Reviewed by: Kayla Patrick, MacEwan University.

Kathy Calvert's book, "June Mickle" is an endearing and honest memoir of June Mickle's life well lived among the rugged terrain of the Canadian foothills and Rocky Mountains. From the pages of June's own diary to interviews with June and members of her community, Calvert captures June's remarkable life, full of peaks and valleys that she forged through with tremendous strength and grace. The chapters are organized by major life events in chronological order from before June entered the world through to her old age. The themes embraced in June's story revolve around independence, defying gender norms, ranching culture, family ties, and the importance of community in rural life. From the harsh reality of pioneer life in the early twentieth century to coping with family struggles and devastating loss, Calvert recounts how June carved out a legacy complete with great trials and rewards.

Calvert depicts June's childhood as what fostered June's strong connection to the land, and was the precursor to the self-sufficient attitude that carried June through the rest of her life. June grew up as an only child, which was unheard of in the early twentieth century, due to a hunting accident that killed her father right before she was born. Calvert recounts that at this time "children were taught to look after themselves early in life" highlighting the differences in expectations of children then compared to modern times (p. 17). Calvert noted that June felt as if it was just her mother and her "fending off a tough world" thus revealing the hardships that loss can bring to the

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family dynamic. An advantage to this misfortune is the growing independence instilled in June from a very young age and the formation of a close bond with her mother. Calvert asserts that June's early life helped her develop "an emotional connection to the land, which would dominate her life and be fundamental to pivotal life decisions" (p. 46).

Calvert emphasizes how June defied gender roles and societal expectations of the time due to her hardworking attitude and the desire to follow her unconventional passions. June's stepfather, who was surprisingly non-sexist "raised her like he would his son" creating a bond stemming from their common love of horses and teaching her how to fend for herself in the often relentless way of life on the prairies (p. 53). Young girls at the time would be expected to learn only domestic abilities such as cooking, sewing and cleaning. However, June became a jack of all trades, excelling at these abilities as well as all of the responsibilities associated with maintaining a ranch. Calvert notes "everything June liked doing was much more suited for men than women" and such were hardly seen as "feminine pursuits" (p. 72). In her adult life, June took on the role of a savvy business woman, initiating and exceeding at multiple business ventures that garnered herself and her family a great deal of success. Such pursuits were rare for females during this time of the century, thus emphasizing how June defied social norms, especially the expectation of the husband being main source of income.

Community was an important facet of rural life in the early twentieth century, as technology was limited, therefore community bonds had to be strong. Calvert acknowledges that specifically country dances were the main source of socialization "that kept people in touch when regular communication was not possible" (p. 62). Calvert identifies the stark contrast between how

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interactions in society changed after the introduction of technology explaining that June lived in a time where “computers and televisions had not yet driven everyone into social isolation where interaction came solely from a screen” (p. 67). Having a tight-knit community was also important for survival as June realized that “what made life there possible was having close friends and neighbours who could be relied on for help at a moments notice” in the rural and isolated country (p. 125). Calvert relied heavily on interviews from June’s community to recall important details to accurately portray June’s story.

June becomes conflicted by her growing social awareness as rural societal expectations of marriage and bearing children began to pervade her independent mentality. Dating in the early 1930s was typically initiated by the male and would take the course of a courtship, with the end goal of marriage. Calvert recounts feelings of resistance as June “felt a serious relationship is not what she wanted at the time” and that she was just “a young woman enjoying the free like in the foot hills (p. 69). June’s mother was a “product of a generation and felt all girls were destined to marry, settle down, and have children” and she would remind June of this expectation from time to time (p. 72). Parents often influence their children’s mate choices with good intentions, as did June’s mother wanting her “to settle down with down with someone stable, regardless of how she felt about the man” (p. 75). Thus, emphasizing the importance of stability over romantic love during this time. However, Calvert noted that June eventually began to “pay more attention to the cowboy than his horse” and she fell in love at first sight and married the man she described as her best friend (p. 75).

With a family comes family tensions that have the ability to derail or strengthen the family

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unit. Calvert noted “keeping the family peace would be a trademark of the new marriage (p. 105). Calvert revealed that some of the family strain came from family occasions “fraught with tension and fights” due to the drinking culture at the time (p. 138). Many of these problems still plague families today. However, June’s marriage withstood the hardships overtime. Further, June did not approve of her children’s spousal choices, however “she did not believe in interfering with her children lives” (p. 256). Calvert recounts that June’s son’s marriage fell apart due to incompatibility and her daughter’s husband “become a prisoner of the rum bottle” leaving the family constantly off balance (p. 260). One of the realities of a divorce is that Faye’s husband still “had rights as a father to his children and he was an undeniably fixture in their lives” in the future to come (p. 287).

Throughout the book, Calvert emphasizes June’s role in the family, not just as a mother, but as the organizer. June’s husband thought of June as “the rock in their foundation” and that she “held the family together and provided the direction they needed” (p. 154/178). Highlighting June’s essential role in the family indicates that if it was not for June, family life could have been considerably different. June is described as “the spirit of it all” (p. 217).

Calvert depicts how June and her family’s life was rattled due to disease and loss; realities in life that no one is immune to. After losing her parents and husband, June was facing something no parent should ever have to encounter, losing a child. Calvert discloses June’s intimate feelings as she was taken back the day her daughter died from terminal cancer, recalling “it was such a heartbreaking thing to watch my daughter fade and die” (p. 306). Being the strong and resilient woman June was, she realized “she was left to live for them and the family she still had, and the

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living would be as complete as she could manage” (p. 308). Life after loss is challenging, however, June was able to move past and enjoy the rest of the time she had on this Earth, as she felt she deserved it. Now in her sixties, June was a widow and feelings of loneliness were inescapable, however, Calvert noted that June “was not ready for any romantic involvement that might lead to marriage or any other commitment” and she realized that she liked her independence (p. 312). Many widows in this age demographic feel similar to June, as she thought “cohabitation was fine, but she had absolutely no interest in remarrying” (p. 318).

I believe Calvert’s aim in writing this book is to enable June Mickle’s legacy to live on and depict what ranching culture on the Western Canadian prairies and foothills was truly like from a female perspective. Unfortunately, it is a way of life becoming extinct with modern age, thus Calvert captures a snapshot of this time in history. A potential limitation of the book may be the absence of mentioning the actual people Calvert interviewed and discerning their perspectives from June’s own interviews and diary entries. The discipline of Sociology may benefit predominantly due to its discussions on society, family and the hardships families encounter, as well as history, anthropology, women’s studies, gender studies, and film studies. Calvert’s “June Mickle” was a pleasurable and engaging read and I would recommend it to anyone interested in early pioneer family life and ranching culture in Western Canada.