

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

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Kathy Calvert's book, "June Mickle: One Woman's Life in the Foothills and Mountains of Western Canada" is a biography detailing the vibrant life of an exceptional woman. June was born in 1920 into a hard-working, adventurous Alberta pioneer family. Beginning at a very young age, June's family instilled the importance of independence, determination, and community within her; these values guided her for the rest of her life and influenced every decision she made. With intimate detail, Calvert chronicles June's childhood, passions, romances, heartbreaks, triumphs, and adversities. Calvert recounts the experiences that allowed June to grow into a confident, tenacious woman who was successful in all areas of her life; she was a wonderful friend, wife, parent, artist, and businesswoman who was more than capable of tackling the countless challenges that life threw her way.

When June's mother – Clara – was pregnant with her, she lost her husband in a tragic hunting accident and quickly had to become a self-reliant, single parent. Clara was June's first role model and she successfully instilled the value of independence in her daughter. When June was an infant, Clara decided to move in with her brothers. With their help, she raised June to be autonomous early on. June remembers one incident as a young child when she tagged along with her Uncle Bob to feed horses and was struck on the head by one of the beasts. When Uncle Bob sent her home, she had to cross several fields alone with the cut on her head. Her uncle felt

“children [should be] taught to look after themselves early in life” (p. 17). When Clara eventually remarried, her new husband Tip had a comparable parenting style. “For a cowboy in Alberta during the thirties, [Tip] was remarkably non-sexist” (p. 53) and did not have a problem with June helping to maintain his ranch, laborious work that was typically done by a young boy at that time. Tip also taught June to train horses, an activity that she found both fulfilling and confidence-inducing. Tip’s progressive attitude aided in cultivating a strong sense of independence within June.

Independence became a recurring theme in June’s life. When she became a mother herself, she adopted a parenting style very similar to that of her own caregivers. June shared her passion for horses with her two children, Don and Faye, as early in their lives as she could. When Don was quite young, he was thrown from a horse, but June did not allow this to deter his enthusiasm for riding. Like “most farm parents, [June] had a fatalistic view of survival. [She believed] kids had to learn to deal with the riskier elements in a rough environment – there was no overprotection” (p. 134). As her children grew older and became interested in dating, June continued to foster their independence by choosing not to interfere with their relationships, even when she strongly disagreed with their choice of partners; she felt her children were capable of making their own decisions. Later in life, after the untimely death of her husband Bert, June chose to continue being as self-reliant as possible. She enjoyed the company of men, and was comfortable cohabitating with partners but had no desire to remarry as she wanted to continue her pattern of independence.

Another important value that Clara modeled for young June was determination. Clara was determined to provide for June, she kept up with her large share of the chores when she lived with her brothers, and later with Tip. At one point, Clara successfully balanced working at a fulltime

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job, maintaining a home, and raising June alone. June's first test of perseverance came at the age of six, when she contracted smallpox, a deadly disease that killed many young children at the time. Despite the odds being against her, June endured the agony of the disease and eventually fully healed. Her persistence continued throughout her childhood and teenage years as she grew accustomed to the somewhat primitive conditions associated with farm life during the era: hauling water, chopping wood, washing clothes by hand, and braving harsh prairie winters in a drafty home. These chores never seemed to end for June. She maintained a similar lifestyle after marrying Bert, and continued to endure the hardships of farm life through two difficult pregnancies.

When her family acquired a guiding and outfitting business, June quickly adapted to the drastic change despite an assortment of new challenges. June had to become competent in many previously unfamiliar areas: operating a skidoo, skiing, dealing with difficult guests, and even staving off grizzly bears. Bert had knowledge of the backcountry, hunting, and riding that was required to keep the business running, but June's hard work and determination "was the heart of their success" (p. 217).

Later in life, June's family had to cope with several health issues. June herself successfully beat cervical cancer. Then her beloved husband Bert passed away following a massive heart attack. Not long after, June's daughter Faye was diagnosed with stomach cancer. As June did her best to care for her daughter, her heart broke as she watched Faye's health rapidly decline. Faye too passed away and "the thought of facing the long span of coming years devoid of the people who had charted her happiness was beyond [June]" (p. 309). However, June persevered through her extreme grief by escaping through time spent with friends and family, sewing, painting, traveling, and riding.

After facing these immense challenges with the help of those around her, June reflected on the importance of community. June acknowledged that “what made life possible was having close friends and neighbours who could be relied on for help at a moment’s notice” (p. 125). Living in somewhat isolated areas, the nearest neighbours were always willing to help each other out in any way that they could. If someone was traveling into a nearby town, they would graciously offer to pick up and deliver any store-bought staples that the neighbours needed. It was also a “well-established practice for ranchers to pitch in to help each other out for the big jobs like branding, harvesting, or bringing in winter wood” (p. 158). Throughout the winter months, dinners, dances, parties, and poker games were frequently held. These social events allowed everyone in the community to keep in touch and helped them survive the monotony of long Albertan winters.

Bert and June were always more than willing to support the youth in their community. June “sometimes felt like the mother of a halfway home” (p. 183), as many children came to live with her family over the years, often when they were unhappy with their own families. June and Bert took them in and often found them paid work. The Mickles ensured that everyone felt welcome in their home.

Calvert tells June’s remarkable story beautifully. It was a pleasure to read about June’s life. Calvert’s detailed writing, interspersed with photographs of June, her friends and family, and her beloved horses, allow the reader to feel as if June was an old friend. This book would likely be of great interest to parents, as well as those studying history, sociology, or feminism, or anyone with an appreciation for Canadian culture. Through the examples set by June, Calvert inspires readers to live a full life, focusing on the importance of self-reliance, perseverance, and friends and family.