



Blackmore, Mary Jayne. (2020). Balancing Bountiful: What I Learned about Feminism from my Polygamist Grandmothers. Halfmoon Bay: Caitlin Press.

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Mary Jayne Blackmore's "Balancing Bountiful" is a creative non-fiction memoir that chronicles the author's ongoing journey with faith, family, and feminism. Beginning with some of her earliest childhood memories, Blackmore takes readers through her experience living in a closed-off polygamist community in the mountains of British Columbia. There she lives with her father and a multitude of mothers, siblings, and extended family relatives in the fundamentalist Mormon community of Bountiful, mostly separate from broader Canadian society. In this setting, she begins to question the role of gender in her life. Schisms in her religion's hierarchy and encounters with new ideas while attending college to become a teacher spark questions about the influence of tradition and dogma in her spiritual life and the role of government in defining families. Her questioning ultimately leads to a divorce and the decision to leave Mormonism, Christianity, and religion, to instead "believe in people . . . in community, and . . . in nature" (p. 302). This book seamlessly interweaves narrative with compelling ideas around family, faith, religion, the influence of media, the role of government, and deciding for oneself how to live, all through the lens of feminism.

Fear and religious indoctrination are prominent topics throughout Blackmore's book. She

was born into a polygamist family in a polygamist town, both of which were founded on fundamentalist Mormon teachings. Her book successfully provides insight into how pervasively fundamentalist religious teachings can influence individual choice and community life. She was baptized at a young age in “the pond where kids have been baptized since Dad was a kid” (p.42). In addition to regular church meetings, religious messaging was nearly constant at home (p. 19-20), at social gatherings (p. 62), at school (p. 111), and in work-life (pp. 148-149). At six years old, she made plans with friends to “marry the same guy and be sister-wives . . . [to be] farmers and mothers in God’s kingdom after the Great Destruction and Jesus comes again” (p. 14). Although questions arose from an early age, she often suppressed them due to fear and a deeply entrenched belief in her church: “I shrug off my doubts. I know everything the church teaches us is for a reason, and to prepare us for . . . the Great Destruction that is coming so soon” (p. 120). For decades, religious belief directed most, if not all, of Blackmore’s major life choices, including an arranged marriage to a stranger at sixteen (p. 156). In college, she also realizes that her decision to become a teacher, which she first believed was a feminist decision, was influenced by her religious patriarchal upbringing (p.192).

Although problems exist in fundamentalist Mormonism, Blackmore frequently points out the media’s role in spreading misinformation and sensationalism about polygamists. As individuals left polygamy, vocal about abuses they experienced, reporters became familiar in Bountiful (p. 81): “living life in the glare of the media is just part of life for fundamentalist Mormon women” (p. 130). However, despite community members being open and accommodating to the media (p. 291), Blackmore laments that headlines and articles frequently “belittl[e] the . . . efforts

and innovation of the women to advocate for their family and lifestyle” (p. 190). Many embrace the lifestyle by choice and most, including Blackmore, find many aspects of polygamy they love. Living somewhat apart has created a strong sense of common purpose and community bonding (p. 285). Large families mean a lot of love (p. 49) and a great deal of support: “we may be misunderstood . . . but we are here for each other through thick and thin” (p. 273). Despite decades of journalistic coverage, widespread ignorance remains regarding essential aspects of fundamentalist Mormonism. Blackmore notes that while attending an international advocacy conference in Winnipeg in 2005 with fourteen other Bountiful women, other attendees were “surprised and impressed to meet us and learn that there are groups of polygamists who do not follow the doomsday regimen of Warren Jeffs” (p. 189). Blackmore has met reporters frequently and values the role of media in a democratic society (p. 291). However, in doing so, she has had to deal with reporters attempting to push specific agendas and stereotypes (p. 294).

As Blackmore examines the various problems that exist in her religion of origin, she is keen to point out that the same issues are common across society. Although she admits that she and other community members have experienced harm to varying degrees, Blackmore believes it is predominantly the abuse of power that has caused harm, not religion (p. 296). Since leaving her religion and living a secular life for many years, Blackmore notes that in her experience, friends both inside and outside polygamy experience the same abuses and hardships with similar frequency (p. 295). The financial services industry uses the same tactics to sell their products that Mormon missionaries use to sell religion (p. 238). Even the indoctrination present in her religious

community parallels indoctrinating influences experienced by all Canadians: “otherwise-kind people use religion to criticize children, and TV commercials are making all of my children’s [shopping] decisions . . . isn’t this all just brainwashing” (p. 236)? Blackmore makes a clear and compelling argument that the harms done by polygamy are not unique to polygamy.

Blackmore frequently offers feminist criticisms about the government’s role in defining family and criminalizing polygamy. Despite being criminalized in 1890, ostensibly to protect women and children from harm, the law has done little to discourage polygamous or poly lifestyles (which Canadians also choose for non-religious reasons). Blackmore persuasively argues that the criminal system is ultimately misguided (p. 272). Polygamist women are often portrayed as victims and child brides, labels Blackmore does not identify with (p. 293) despite entering an arranged marriage at sixteen. Many women fervently advocate for their lifestyle: “we are Canadians . . . we choose to be here . . . we love our family and we don’t need to be saved” (p. 190). Blackmore argues that by criminalizing polygamy in Canada and the United States, governments have created an environment that promotes and perpetuates cultures of secrecy (p. 272). Governments have also created an environment that attracts fanatical religious extremism and the potential for religious abuse (p. 236), as seen in the case of Warren Jeffs in the United States (p. 173). Ultimately, Blackmore is convincing as she argues that criminalization makes polygamist women more vulnerable (p. 237) and that at some point, one must simply believe women when they say they are happy (p. 269).

Blackmore’s intended audience, the youth of her community who grew up after Bountiful was beset with criminal accusations and media stereotypes, will likely find this book informative

and empowering. She effectively portrays her religious community in a nuanced and positive way. She also successfully depicts polygamist women as intelligent, sophisticated, and willful participants and role models in their community. I believe it is a highly informative educational tool for secondary students both inside and outside her community.

Although Blackmore's goal was to display polygamist women's proud legacy to empower the young women in her community, her book has much broader utility. She touches on influences from her study of sociology. However, by writing a narrative account of her experiences and insights, her book will likely appeal across various academic disciplines. In addition to sociology, other fields that may benefit from this book are psychology, anthropology, education, women's studies, gender studies, religious studies, social work, law, journalism, and more. I would recommend it to anyone interested in feminism, women's studies, sociology, religion, or psychology. It may be of particular interest to counseling and mental health professionals with clients who have been or are currently members of high-demand religious communities.