



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

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“Balancing Bountiful: What I Learned about Feminism from my Polygamist Grandmothers” by Mary Jayne Blackmore is an emotional and empowering autobiographical account of her life within an isolated Fundamental Latter-Day Saints community, and how through exploring the lifestyles of others as well as exploring her own, became a feminist and an activist in her adult life. In the book, she recounts her childhood years, her years as a wife, a student, and a mother; then, at the latter end of the book, she describes her life outside the community and her experiences travelling and experiencing other ways of life. She dives into traditional gender roles within her polygamist community, the negative image of her community, and how their way of life was highlighted and enflamed by media, as well as her experience with the outside world, changed her views on feminism and faith. Blackmore shows through her personal experiences that there is no concrete definition as to what the right type of family is.

One common theme throughout the book is the gender roles and place of women within her community. Throughout the childhood section of chapters, in addition to her later chapters, Mary Jayne gives examples of the rigid gender roles she faces in Bountiful, British Columbia. Blackmore knows there is something unfair about the gendered division of labour and her role as

a woman in the community, and she states this relatively early in the book. "... I've learned that the traditional decisions of work doesn't seem fair" (p. 127). In an early chapter, she describes an instance during house chores with her grandmother where she complains about making the boys' bed. But for her grandmother, and similarly for Blackmore, this is the role they know and continue to follow, "For her, this kind of labour division isn't even a matter of fairness. For her, there is a clear and obvious difference between how boys and girls work..." (p. 128). The author goes back and forth in her mind about this division of labour, whether it is fair or unfair, and the differences in the expectations of men and women. One could say this is the beginning of the feminist movement brewing inside the author. The theme of the role of women in this fundamentalist society and the authors' views of these roles evolve alongside her story. These roles Blackmore grew up adhering to were able to help her grow as a feminist as she experienced the outside world.

As Blackmore aged, her experiences with the outside world grew. She went to school to obtain her education degree, and within her education, she developed as a person as well as a feminist. She "[felt] that fire the feminists [were] talking about" (p. 198). Themes of feminism and gender roles within the autobiography are tightly intertwined and can be seen as connected themes. Sprinkled throughout the book are moments in Blackmore's life of the feminist deep within shining through. From the art history class she took during her education in Utah and beginning to see many of her family members as feminists to her growing independence in her adult life, she grows as a woman and a feminist. Her education opened her eyes and encouraged a new way of thinking and seeing the world she lives in. She was able to come to her own conclusions about feminism

and the role of women within broader society, not just her isolated community. The authors “...heart bleeds for women, [their] secret fears and pain in the confusing longing and betrayal of [their] sexuality” (p. 197). Being freed from the chains of the protected community she grew up in was just one barrier in a long battle of life. Mary Jayne overcame barrier after barrier, but one consistent barrier that challenged her was the media and the negative and outdated views they illustrated of her family style.

Another running theme that pops up frequently throughout Mary Jayne’s personal life account is the media’s negative and antagonizing portrayal of the community. This negative portrayal of their ways of life and family style has made its way into the minds of most of society. There were successful moments of challenging those views listed within the book, and the women even made some people think, “well, there goes the assumptions that media makes that these women are only in college because the men have sent them” (p. 187). Sadly, the media’s narrative prevailed and continued to cast a shadow on the polygamist lifestyle. This alienated her community and her family, and with the Canadian legislation that has outlawed the practice of polygamy, “...criminalizing a family structure or relationship style puts vulnerable people within that demographic at risk...” (p. 205). Regardless of the tireless effort from groups of women, Blackmore and the community women were defeated in their many efforts to show the media their authentic lives. This subject was a force that pushed the author to explore her life in another light, as it also helped her become an activist for her community.

As she explored outside her isolated faith in her adult years, she could see through interaction with communities outside her own that the ‘right family’ is an abstract concept that

cannot be defined directly. Modern society pushes the nuclear family type in everyday life through mass media like television and movies, so many people are not familiar with the fundamentalist Mormon lifestyle. She has a chapter titled “Families, Not Felons” (p. 289) and recounts her time at her father’s sentencing hearing after he was charged with practicing polygamy. Blackmore and a few of the community members make signs, and among the many signs, one said, “There is no cookie cutter for family” (p. 290). The author went to festivals, like Burning Man, and was there to be a voice for not only her family that was discriminated against but all family styles that are looked down upon. Near the end of the book, Mary Jayne took a spiritual journey, and this journey was able to show her that “[her] family is not the enemy. There is no enemy” (p. 307).

This autobiography is a valuable academic tool, but academics are not the only people who would benefit from reading Blackmore’s account. Reading this autobiography would be helpful to many people, from women and men looking for a recreational read to academics in the sociology or anthropology discipline wanting to learn more about a small, isolated lifestyle within our borders. This personal account of Mary’s life can help people understand the complexity of the family and how families vary within Canada. With the domination of the nuclear family type, some people find it hard, or even impossible to understand that there are other successful family types.

Families can come in many shapes and sizes; this piece is a perfect example of that. I believe the author’s intentions with this book were not to gain sympathy, but it was a way for her to tell her life story and how her faith and upbringing moulded her into the feminist voice she is today. Mary Jayne Blackmore used this platform to voice her lifestyle and show people that there is value in everything and that her upbringing does not define who she is or make her any less of

a person. As stated in the subtitle of the book, what she learns about feminism from her polygamist grandmothers is woven throughout her life and throughout her narration.

“Balancing Bountiful” was a window into the life of someone that society has tried to quiet. Through Blackmore’s personal recount of her life, we were able to see how she redefined herself and how her life growing up in the polygamist community changed who she was and who she became. Media and Canadian legislation repressed her community, and as Blackmore prevailed through traditional gender roles and her struggle to find a feminist within, her story was able to show the strength and resilience of her faith. To use Mary Jayne Blackmore’s own words, “Eve Ensler reminds us that it is important to listen to women’s stories the way they choose to tell them” (p. 198).