



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

Reviewed by: Julia Staron, MacEwan University

Mary Jayne Blackmore's book, "Balancing Bountiful: What I Learned about Feminism from My Polygamist Grandmothers" provides insight into her experience and dynamics of her family life within the works and sense of faith, her feminism and as an individual. Living in a Mormon community burrowed in the mountain community of Bountiful, British Columbia, she details enjoyable memories of her childhood living within a polygamist family. Despite her happy childhood with multiple mothers and a growing number of siblings, Blackmore's extensive questioning of the context of gender roles and desired roles as a woman leads her to become a teacher and activist empowering youth within her community. Blackmore's memoir addresses the various changes she goes through as a woman, wife, mother and feminist, the criticisms her family is exposed to through media and government, and the question of God's role in her life through self-discovery.

Blackmore's childhood reflects various areas of Mormonism that shaped her. From her early youth, she was expected to care for others; she speaks of "...the ever-enduring happiness that shall come to the woman who fulfills the first great duty mission that devolves upon her to become the mother of the sons and daughters of God" (p. 119). Her responsibilities as a woman in her

community maintained specific gender roles, where expectations required tending to the physical and emotional needs of others, more so than boys and men in the community. “Already I’ve learned that the traditional division of work doesn’t seem fair” (p. 147); despite her indisputable tenderness for her family, the fundamental prevalence of gender roles and biases were always in high regard, “often, our lunch-hour discussions turn into lectures on our responsibility as young women to learn and care for our health as we become mothers, which we feel assured we fully intend to be” (p. 133). The church foundationally chastened women and young girls more so than boys, mainly with how they dressed, “I am proud of who I am and I love my family and religion but the truth is I kind of resent that the boys never really get stared at” (p. 151).

Blackmore’s criticism of the media aims to reduce the generational prejudice her family faced. In media conferences, when the family did interviews, the focus was upon perpetuating stereotypes of polygamy as a petri dish of abuse, being uneducated, the existence of child brides and that there was brainwashing and limited freedom of choice, “most media groups cover the summit in similar ways, belittling the value, efforts and innovation of the women to advocate for their families and lifestyle” (p. 221). Blackmore supported her father, whom she believed was a good man throughout her youth, depicting her family structure as the opposite of its presentation, confronting media notions as arbitrary and stereotyping. “I find it hard to build a life and feel safe in a world where irresponsible media is depicting my family as abusive and grotesque. It is unsettling that strangers speak as violently as self-proclaimed vigilantes without asking questions or confirming their information” (p. 228). Moreover, diminishing the hard work and education of women in her community maintains continuous discrimination.

Blackmore argues that the government's role in determining the definition of family is inherently problematic. While polygamy doesn't follow the "nuclear family" structure, correspondingly, familial structures vary. She notes, "The idea that the government could prosecute polygamy in our current society seems bizarre if not laughable" (p. 238). Blackmore argues that the government should not impede on defining specific family structures and punishing those outside of it, mainly when "there is no cookie cutter for family" (p. 337). She outlines this hypocrisy because while the Canadian government draws the line "... about why multicultural Canada is so protective of the "institution of monogamous marriage." With a failure rate of 50 percent, I'd argue that it is currently a failing institution" (p. 315). Her primary backing for decriminalizing polygamy stands since if polygamous families feel they must hide, vulnerable people will hesitate to go outside of their communities and, in turn, will "...be treated as second-class citizens when they need to seek services" (p. 276). She indicates that if governments are maintaining these structures, they need to provide better alternatives after breaking up families to prosecute the fathers.

Additionally, the perpetuation of extremism within religion exists when there is essential secrecy to sustain it. Blackmore maintains views that the United States and Canadian governments criminalizing polygamy "...[creates] an environment that attracted fanatical religious extremism coupled with an environment where secrecy is essential for people to live their religion: the perfect storm for potential religious abuse" (p. 275). Her point stands that the government should have no place in who one loves or how they construct their families, only to protect and remove vulnerable people, victims of extremism, "I know these women and how they think, or at least I used to. But

listening to them say they have choice- I now disagree with this pretty strongly. If you have two choices and one is family and heaven and the other is loneliness and hell for eternity, those are not choices” (p. 235).

Feminism, within Blackmore’s context, takes off with her initial realization that her grandmother has modelled a feminist nature. “...Grandma Mem is a feminist too, even if she would never have called herself one. She worked all her life supporting education and helping women to better themselves and their lives. I’ve decided my husband, brothers and father are also feminists because they support their wives getting an education” (p. 224). The mainstream idea that polygamy posits undermining women and creates a prejudice against their education and freedoms as individuals directly contradicts positions taken by Blackburn’s family members, who encouraged her pursuits. “I tell Dad I feel we don’t need more helpers; we need more trained teachers. I tell him my decision to start college in the fall. He is thrilled” (p. 218). The idea of undermining feminism is the result of those who propagate its beliefs, “...when I think about the feminist fire, it feels relevant that these positions of power were mostly held by men, whether in the media, law enforcement, religion, family or just tradition” (p. 345). After the church split and her newly developing beliefs during college, Blackmore’s experiences express that rather than eradicating traditional aspects of femininity to become a feminist, the feminist context strives towards equality, not towards a particular classification of what establishes a feminist. She acknowledges that defining herself is a paradox within itself because her feminism is not reduced because of her religion, “I will be a radical optimist fundamentalist feminist Mormon.” I enjoy the paradox of it almost as much as I enjoy the benefit of living in seemingly opposite worlds” (p.

224). Blackburn's book exemplifies the benefits of encouraging feminist ideas, which may extend into the community she helped shape, making flawless arguments about the harms of deliberate stereotyping.

When questioning her faith and the authorized power of man, Warren Jeffs teachings created mass divides of levels of faith within her family. "As his eerie voice rises in fervour, my guts churn at the graphic imagery of this fiery destruction he is conjuring as if casting a spell" (p. 213). The ability to dismantle families in their beliefs caused mass tensions, "... they gather uniting their faith and prayers calling on God for his destruction" (p. 213). Blackburn describes how her father's instant classification in their community led to her questioning the negative aspects of her religion, "in one day, my father went from being one of the most esteemed men in the church to being publicly chastised and rebuked with no explanation. I feel I'm losing the whole world" (p. 195). This split allowed contemplation for how she wanted to raise her children, "I think about ways my childhood was utopian. I think about the ways in which it was not: about the babies who die too soon, about the mothers and fathers who leave their families, about the tensions between families when religious beliefs become divided" (p. 297). Blackburn's studies allowed her to develop the minds of her children and those she taught within her community, expressing that polygamy, like any other family structure, can have its faults but that there are also benefits to the large community. Polygamy does not take away from the merits of her community's hard work, free thought and ability to provide and construct empowering, happy and thriving communities.

Blackmore's book provides a compelling guise into the life of a polygamous family structure and the sense of community that it develops and lasts throughout her life. It allows

Staron

perspective and insight into a robust community and how polygamy does not restrict her feminism. This memoir acknowledges the range and ability to construct feminism, how the government and media perpetrate emerging problems with stereotypes of family structures and the inspiring role of women in society. Other disciplines that may benefit from this book are psychology, sociology, religion, women's and feminist studies.