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Mary Jayne Blackmore’s book “Balancing Bountiful: What I Learned about Feminism from My Polygamist Grandmothers”, is a compilation of short memoirs recounting her upbringing in the small community of Bountiful, BC. Through her mostly chronological recollection of her early childhood through to her thirty-seventh year, Blackmore, who describes herself as “the 5th child of her fathers 150 children, growing up in the glory days of Bountiful, BC” (p. 9), illustrates to the reader how growing up in a community based in the Fundamentalist Mormon principals of “Keeping Sweet” and the influence of her grandmothers and mother, in addition to her own self discovery, have helped to shape her into a self proclaimed and active feminist.

Blackmore begins the recount of her early childhood, with a significant focus on the importance of community and family. Being rooted in community ensured both physical and spiritual safety. Physical safety against a world that holds no place for the shared values and beliefs of the community, against the reporters, a justice system, and non-community members, continually attempting to expose and distort what the community is. “The strength of our community is our security against the outside world.” (p. 43) Spiritual safety against their own beliefs of avoiding eternal damnation, in helping to keep each other accountable in following the
path of righteousness. She recalls of her childhood, “as kids we tried not to worry about the End of Times and shared in the dream of the greater good of ‘the community.’” (p. 9)

This community was also credited in part, for the natural progression that her life would take, and the place she always returned to amidst her quest to achieve her ideal feminist self:

Like our parents before us, we were living out the natural patterns of culture and traditions we had been born into, celebrating the seasons and cycles of life as our ancestors had done. As a young person, it never occurred to me to want something different. I loved the life of family and community I had grown up in, and I wanted that same connection to family and the land for my daughter and son. (p. 295)

At the epicentre of the community, Blackmore emphasizes, are the women and the mothers. It is the cohesive bond of these community members that ensure the efficient operation of the community as a whole. They are the raisers of children, the teachers, and the healers. Blackmore’s observation of her grandmothers who, “devoted their lives to children, education, and community.” (p. 10) can be attributed as being one of the foundational pillars for her journey into Feminism. She shares her grandmother’s stories of:

our pioneer grandmothers and the hardships they faced crossing the plains to bring their families out west so they could serve God without the persecution of enemies of the Saints. She tells us of women in the church whose faith was so strong they could heal their sick babies, or mothers who had to bury their small children along the wagon train and never wavered in their praise or their faith in God. Women, she reasons, are still created the same. It is our minds that have grown weak. If we can rise to the strength and character and faith of our pioneer grandmothers, we too will be able to accomplish what they have done. (p. 115)
The strength Blackmore garners from the women in her community, and her grandmothers who’d gone before her, is demonstrated throughout her essays, and continues to afford her the drive and vision to work towards doing “the same thing, in my way, with what I have learned about feminism and the world both in and outside of Bountiful (p. 10)

While community and the women and mothers of the community continue to be attributed to the basis of Blackmore’s journey into finding her feminist identity, acknowledgement needs to be made to the continual reference of the deep-rooted patriarchal values and religious beliefs of the Bountiful community members. A religion that, per the direction from men, dictates the actions of females to ‘Keep Sweet’ to, “make it easier for your brother to stay on the path of righteousness,” (p. 100) among many other reasons, and keeps a community living in fear of hell and in preparation for end times. A religion, that from the outsider’s perspective, believes in the indoctrination of girls to be wives and mothers without access to or limited access to education. It is within Blackmore’s recognition of this paradox, that her belief’s around feminism start to not only to take shape but she begins to formulate a plan for her future. Recalling a memory full of obvious division in gender roles, and responsibilities, Blackmore remembers, “Maybe, I think to myself, before my exhausted body finally forces my mind to stop churning, I will learn more about feminism.” (p. 129)

Community, family, religion, and the lessons learned from her mother and grandmothers are the pillars for which Blackmore’s journey into finding her feminist self take flight. This journey further progressed as she endeavored to complete her high school and university education and worked towards giving herself permission to explore her feminist identity and beliefs outside of her assumed position in her community, religion, and her marriage. It is in Blackmore’s quest to
further develop this identity, through education, travel, spiritual experiences and external relationships. That she is able to work towards and become a catalyst for change not only in the trajectory of her own life, but in her community as well. She summarizes, “A long time ago, I set out to live a life as a faithful and obedient Mormon, a committed daughter, wife and mother. I set out to live a life as an educated and feminist mentor, teacher, and friend. I set out to be good and helpful and forgiving. I set out to be a woman.” (p. 316)

Though a specific method or theory was not utilized in the creation of her work, as it is a personal account of Blackmore’s life, Feminist Theory is the framework for which her journey is based in, which in its broadest definition, is the idea that women should not be considered lesser than but equal to men.

The intended audience that Blackmore sets out to share the background of her life with, are Sociologists, who can glean a more in-depth knowledge and understanding of an often misunderstood and unconventional community and family style; women, who are seeking validation in what it means to be a woman and be a feminist; and for the blossoming feminist, who can find solace in learning that perhaps there isn’t only one way to be a feminist.

Blackmore’s recount of her life sets out to do two things. First, as can be assumed from the title, to reveal her journey from a young woman living simultaneously in the joy of her childhood and in fear for her salvation, to embarking on a journey of discovering her feminist identity. Second, and perhaps unintentionally, it sets out to deconstruct, at least in part, some of the biases that have been placed on the Fundamentalist Mormon community. In doing so, she has crafted an anthology that was both cause for reflection of one’s own biases of family and feminism in addition
to maintaining the readers attention throughout. I would strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in studying a culture and family style that is deeply misunderstood, or anyone who is interested in further developing the understanding that there is more than one way to be a feminist.