



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 memoir, "Balancing Bountiful," sheds light on the author's empowering journey and evolution from a once sheltered child to a curious feminist seeking liberation within the polygamist community of Bountiful, British Columbia. Blackmore, the fifth child of "[her] father's 150 children," provides a reflective account of her experiences growing up within a fundamentalist Mormon community and alludes to how experiences with religion, education, and the media prompt her to ponder what the right type of woman, family, and community are (p. 9). Though she had an idyllic childhood centred on togetherness, Blackmore recounts struggling to find her place as a woman within the narrow Mormon narrative, ultimately causing her to leave the church and community. Blackmore's memoir offers insight into the strict inner workings of her polygamist community and challenges the harmful stereotypes about her family that the media perpetuates.

Blackmore describes growing up during the "glory days of Bountiful," where children "worked hard and played harder" (p. 9). While Blackmore spent a fair share of her childhood gallivanting around the Skimmerhorn mountains and getting dirty in the mud, the anticipation of

the Great Destruction is what ultimately “shadowed [her] formative years” (p. 9). Her memoir delves into how religion can foster connections and bring people together, but also how it limits personal choice by inflicting fear and order. Blackmore explains how children in her tight-knit community grow up riddled with anxiety and have nightmares of the world ending and losing their families. Children grow up believing that they must “strictly follow God’s word” and “keep sweet no matter what” to avoid burning in hell (pp. 17, 99). As a child, these teachings were plausible for Blackmore, and she states that she would “shrug off” any doubts about her religion since she knew the church always had her best interest. Now, as an adult, she feels a responsibility to break the cycle of fear that “crippled [her] family and community” (p. 9). The immense pressure to be a good, faithful Mormon resulted in Blackmore committing more to others than to herself and left her feeling like a “mindless [puppet] of a religious patriarchy” that the media claims she is (p. 194). Blackmore likens her experience with Mormonism to living inside a box, causing her to leave the church because “[she] needed a new way of looking at the world that wouldn’t leave [her] only choices to be miserable or to be burning in hell for eternity” (p. 11). However, the root of the problem is not religion or Mormonism itself; instead, it is the abuse of power that cultivates fear and order. Blackmore explains how “perpetrators of abuse, such as Warren Jeffs,” use fear tactics in combination with religious teachings to “manipulate vulnerable people under a pretense of protecting the sacred” (p. 273). Thus, she encourages children in her community to question the conditions of their lives and look for solutions that could lead to a more equitable, balanced society.

Concerns about traditional gender roles and how the media portrayed her family led Blackmore to learn more about feminism and women’s experiences. She grew up knowing that

the world had “no use for lazy women” and that women should always strive to be good, committed wives and mothers who “labour tirelessly in the work of God” (p. 116). Domineering limitations and strict gender roles regarding the division of labour reduce the roles of women to being only the caretakers and leave no room for personal choice or autonomy. Due to significant differences in appearance, behaviour, and values to outsiders, the community of Bountiful became a spectacle and target for harsh judgement by others; Blackmore explains, “being a kind of visible minority and living life in the glare of the media is just part of life for fundamentalist Mormon women” (p. 130). The media posits that these women are all victims of grooming and brainwashing. Blackmore describes that “after so many years of being told through the media and well-intended outsiders that I’ve been brainwashed, I’ve become hyperaware of which decisions and values are actually mine and which have come from ‘brainwashing’” (p. 236). Through university education and worldwide travels, Blackmore began to challenge traditional gender roles and question what she wanted her role in life to be. She made countless efforts to provide a new, reflective story about polygamy to the media. However, Blackmore eventually realized they were more concerned with a good story than her well-being. The implications of these negative stereotypes weighed heavy on Blackmore, as she felt like an imposter in a very unsafe world as a result of the media “depicting [her] family as abusive and grotesque...without asking questions or confirming their information” (p. 195). Blackmore hopes that her stories will inspire outsiders to be more curious about polygamy women’s experiences rather than amply assign prejudice to these individuals.

Much of the judgment surrounding polygamy comes from its illegal status and being labelled by the media as a “scandal” or, more commonly, “Canada’s dirty little secret” (p. 189). Blackmore

illustrates how this stereotype poses significant problems for her community by fostering a grave sense of fear and secrecy among people. Polygamy has been illegal in Canada for over thirteen decades, making those who practise it a target for persecution and prosecution. Blackmore recounts having family members who grew up terrified of the police and spent their days anxiously waiting to be taken away from their parents and community (p. 89). She argues that by criminalizing a family structure, such as polygamy, the government fails to protect families and prevent harm and instead evokes feelings of fear in those who practise it (p. 272). The presumed need to keep polygamy secret makes individuals more vulnerable, as they forego services such as counselling and even limit friendships out of “fear of exposing family members...[and] repercussions from the law” (p. 273). While Blackmore does not practise polygamy anymore, she feels that decriminalizing it would greatly enhance the lives of people by mitigating the split between the community and outsiders. Hence, she concludes that:

If a polygamist family structure were legal in society, those who practise it would have access to the same resources and support systems as the rest of society...This would create a safety net for the vulnerable people in this demographic to access health and wellness services as well as advocate for their families...A culture that is saturated in secrecy and religious dogma is not protected by anti-polygamy laws. People living within the culture are made more vulnerable because they are less likely to seek counselling, health services or even friendships outside of their community because of fear of exposing family members and loved ones to repercussions from the law. Re

moving the need for secrecy would remove a crucial layer of oppression on the vulnerable people within polygamist relationships (p. 273)

Blackmore’s memoir successfully highlights how the lack of personal choice undoubtedly does more harm to individuals than good. She vows to encourage her children to make their own

decisions, formulate their own opinions, and question what appears unfair to them and hopes that other children in her community will begin to do the same (p. 295).

Blackmore's intended audience is the youth from her community, namely the "young powerful women," who deserve a narrative about their community alternative to the distorted, stereotypical, and harmful one the media provides. Youth in Bountiful will appreciate their ability to connect with and relate to the experiences and challenges that Blackmore shares. Her memoir also serves to deliver an empowering, enlightening, and unique perspective on polygamy that is often overlooked by those outside of the community. Thus, her memoir is a valuable source of information about polygamy for those in the general public who have a limited understanding of the topic and who hold biases against polygamist communities. Blackmore touches on themes about religion, family structure, and the influence of the media, which may be of interest in academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, family studies, and religion. Additionally, themes of autonomy, feminism, and gender roles make Blackmore's memoir suitable for those interested in feminism, women's studies, and gender studies.