



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: What I Learned about Feminism from My Polygamist Grandmothers" vividly portrays her upbringing in the tight-knit community of Bountiful, BC. Reflecting on her early years amidst Fundamentalist Mormon principles and the influence of the closed-off polygamist community she grew up in, Blackmore navigates the complexities of gender roles and societal expectations. Her experiences of living with her father, multiple mothers, and a vast extended family within the confines of Fundamentalist Mormon concepts prompt her to confront the influence of tradition and dogma on her spiritual beliefs. Ultimately, her narrative chronicles a profound transformation, leading her to embrace a belief system centred on humanity, community, and personal agency. Despite the comfort of her familial bonds, Blackmore embarks on a journey of self-discovery, coupled with her path to finding empowerment as a teacher and activist within her community. Through her memoir, she navigates the challenges of media scrutiny, government criticism, and personal faith, offering a poignant exploration of identity and resilience in the face of adversity. By sharing her path of self-discovery and empowerment, Blackmore inspires readers to embrace their identities and strive for positive change within their communities.

Blackmore's journey into feminism is intricately intertwined with the influences of her

family dynamics and personal experiences, as depicted in her memoir. She illuminates the feminist nature embodied by her grandmother, who, despite not identifying explicitly as such, devoted her life to supporting women's education and empowerment (pp. 219-220). Blackmore's family, including her husband, brothers, and father, are portrayed as feminists for their unwavering support of women's pursuits, particularly in education, which challenged prevailing stereotypes and biases. Contrary to mainstream perceptions that polygamy inherently undermines women's rights, Blackmore's family encouraged her pursuit of education, signalling a departure from traditional gender norms within their community. In her narrative, Blackmore offers compelling feminist criticisms of the government's role in defining family structures and criminalizing polygamy. Confronting the depiction of polygamist women as victims or child brides, a portrayal she opposes despite her own experience with an arranged marriage at the age of sixteen (pp. 294-295). Instead, Blackmore emphasizes the agency and autonomy of polygamist women, many of whom passionately advocate for their chosen lifestyle (p. 190). Blackmore's encounters convey that instead of eliminating traditional feminine traits to embrace feminism, the feminist framework aims for equality rather than adhering to specific criteria for defining feminism. She recognized the paradox of defining herself because her feminism remains abundant despite her religious beliefs: "[w]ithout strict rules to govern our every decision, we all must figure out the edges for ourselves. I still feel a strong commitment and loyalty to my Mormon heritage and the teachings of Jesus Christ and want this wholesome family life for my own children to grow up in" (p. 188). Through her book, Blackmore illustrates the positive outcomes of promoting feminist concepts, potentially influencing the community she has contributed to by presenting compelling arguments against intentional stereotyping.

Mary Jayne Blackmore thoroughly examines the multifaceted issues entrenched within her religious upbringing, shedding light on their pervasive nature across societies. Despite acknowledging the varying degrees of harm experienced within her community, she astutely identifies the abuse of power as the primary culprit, asserting that it transcends the realm of religion itself (pp. 296-297). Her departure from the faith unveils shared hardships among friends both within and outside polygamy but also serves as an impactful reminder of the broader societal challenges that permeate various facets of life (p. 295). In a thought-provoking analysis, Blackmore draws intriguing parallels between the manipulative tactics employed by the financial services industry and the insidious nature of religious indoctrination, persuasively arguing that the detrimental effects of polygamy are not unique to the practice but rather indicative of broader societal issues (p. 237). Transitioning from her examination of broader societal issues to a retrospective exploration of her early childhood, Blackmore eloquently underscores the paramount importance of community and family in providing both physical and spiritual sanctuary (p. 43). Emphasizing the cohesive bond shared among community members, particularly among women and mothers, she portrays them as the unsung heroes who ensure the seamless functioning of the community (p. 10). Blackmore navigates the complexities of her evolving understanding of feminism and its intersection with her lived experiences within and beyond the confines of Bountiful (p. 10). Her introspective musings not only shed light on the transformative power of personal growth but also serve as a testament to the enduring personal narrative with broader socio-cultural insights; Blackmore offers a compelling narrative that transcends the boundaries of individual experience, inviting readers to embark on a journey of self-discovery and introspection.

While acknowledging the challenges that exist within fundamentalist Mormonism,

Blackmore consistently emphasizes the media's role in disseminating misinformation and contributing to the generational misconceptions surrounding her family's polygamist lifestyle. She meticulously examines how media conferences often perpetuate damaging stereotypes of polygamy, portraying it as a breeding ground for abuse, ignorance, and restricted agency (p. 190). Standing staunchly by her father and her family, she confronts these portrayals head-on, emphasizing the stark contrast between media depictions and the reality of their familial dynamics (p. 228). Blackmore mainly focuses on the experiences of those who choose to leave the lifestyle. While her community remains open to media interaction, she criticizes the tendency of headlines to undermine the genuine efforts of women advocating for their chosen lifestyle (p. 190). Despite the challenges, Blackmore underscores the positive aspects of polygamy, such as fostering strong community bonds and support networks. However, she acknowledges the persistent ignorance surrounding fundamentalist Mormonism, evident in the surprise of attendees at an advocacy conference regarding their community's varied practices (pp. 187-191). Through her nuanced examination of media portrayal and its impact, Blackmore aims to challenge preconceived notions and advocate for a more accurate representation of her community and lifestyle. Blackmore's meticulous analysis extends beyond critiquing media portrayals to address the broader societal implications of these misrepresentations. She delves into the ways in which these stereotypes perpetuate discrimination and hinder efforts to foster understanding and acceptance. By illuminating the disconnect between media narratives and lived experiences, she provides an account for individuals to reconsider their assumptions and engage in more nuanced discussions about complex issues such as polygamy.

Mary Jayne Blackmore's memoir comprehensively explores her life within the unique

context of a polygamous family structure in the Fundamentalist Mormon community of Bountiful. Targeting primarily the youth of her community, who have grown up amidst media stereotypes and criminal accusations, Blackmore aims to inform and empower with her narrative. She skillfully portrays her religious community in a nuanced and positive light, challenging the prevailing misconceptions. “Balancing Bountiful” challenges stereotypes the media perpetuates, making it a valuable resource for fields such as sociology, psychology, women’s studies, and religion-oriented disciplines. Blackmore’s memoir acts as an asset to individuals seeking more profound understandings of unconventional communities, women seeking validation in their feminist identity, and those interested in debunking biases against Fundamentalist Mormonism. She not only shares her journey to discovering and embracing her feminism but also deconstructs biases, making it a compelling read for anyone interested in studying misunderstood cultures or exploring diverse forms of feminism. In addition to its academic value, Blackmore’s memoir is a compelling piece of literature that captivates readers with its authenticity and depth. By sharing her experiences and insights, Blackmore invites readers to reflect on their own biases and preconceptions, fostering a more profound comprehension of unconventional communities and alternative forms of feminism. Ultimately, Mary Jayne Blackmore’s narrative stands as a testament to the power of storytelling in challenging stereotypes, empowering individuals, and fostering empathy and understanding across diverse communities. It is a must-read for anyone interested in exploring the complexities of family, faith, and feminism in contemporary society.