



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 insightful memoir that reflects on Blackmore’s life as a member of the Fundamentalist Mormon community, and how she grew to become the feminist fighting for fundamentalist women that she is today. “Balancing Bountiful” is separated into three sections, following the story of her idyllic childhood with her large and booming family in Bountiful, British Columbia, to her underage marriage in the church and navigating her life as a mother with her university education, and then her divorce and her journey through self-discovery, spirituality, and feminism. The memoir is inspiring and eye-opening, as Blackmore provides a unique perspective on faith, polygamy, and feminism, all wrapped into one complex and intriguing story.

Blackmore reflects on her childhood in her traditional Mormon fundamentalist family in a very idealized manner. She grew up loving all the mothers, siblings, cousins, grandmas, and aunts in her family, regardless of if they were seen as “different” in their current society. From a young age, Blackmore was taught to follow the strict gender roles taught by the Mormon church, and further enforced by the men in her family. In the chapter “Cleaning Up After Boys,” Blackmore states she has “already learned that the traditional division of work doesn’t seem fair” (Ch. 24), and despite this she looks up to her grandmother, who also enforces and teaches these traditional

gender roles to Mary and her sisters. The women in Blackmore's family work tirelessly and endlessly – at an unfair disadvantage compared to the men in the family – as that is what they've been directed to do in their church, and they must focus on their work in order to prepare for the worst. Mormons are taught to always prepare for The Great Destruction. Despite Blackmore's suspicions of her own religion and why the women of the Mormon Church are treated so differently than the men, she "shrugs off her doubts" because she "knows the church teaches everything for a reason, to prepare them of the Great Destruction that is coming so soon" (Ch. 22). To calm these fears, Mary Jayne and the other girls are taught to "keep sweet" by the men in the church, and even sing songs referring to keeping sweet in the face of the Great Destruction. In the face of death and wreckage, Blackmore's church deems it best for girls to be as sweet and innocent as possible.

Though these early chapters provide a lot of context to those who may not know a lot about the average lifestyle of a young Mormon girl in a traditionalist fundamentalist family like the Blackmores, but it does take a while to get to the chapters that reflect on Mary Jayne's development as a feminist, which should be the meat on the bones of this memoir. Blackmore's legacy in the fundamentalist community is definitely one of a brave activist for her community, rather than a small girl who obeys traditional men and works endlessly to please them.

In her teenage years, the concept of feminism – that is not taught to the Mormon girls – finally starts to blossom in her developing mind. At the end of chapter twenty-four, Blackmore says, "No matter what I do, though, I will never stop having to cook and clean up after boys. Maybe, I think to myself, before my exhausted body finally forces my mind to stop churning, I will learn more about feminism" (Ch. 24). It is these little inspirations that guide her into becoming a fierce and brazen feminist, and this particularly takes off when she gets her university education,

after her underage Mormon marriage at the age of seventeen. Her journey through university inspires her to become a rare contradictory wonder of polygamist and feminist. When her university peers curiously question her about her ways, Blackmore describes herself as a “radical optimist fundamentalist feminist Mormon” (Ch. 40), and she sticks to these labels throughout her activist work in her adulthood.

Blackmore has strong opinions when it comes to the legality of her family life as well as the way the media represents families like hers because of it. In the chapter “God Sits With Me,” Blackmore states:

I’m hopeful that, with a modern perspective and educated professional minds working to update this 120-year-old law, polygamy will be decriminalized, as these changes would allow law enforcement officials to focus on abuse and harm prevention and would provide women security to seek services when they require them without feeling they are putting their family at risk of repercussions of the law.

She also makes the claim that “criminalizing polygamy ultimately makes women in this lifestyle more vulnerable” (Ch. 50). It’s moments like these where “Balancing Bountiful” is the most shocking and eye opening – for better or worse. Blackmore provides a unique outlook on how she believes her unusual way of upbringing should be normalized in the public eye and in the eye of the law in order to keep the women in fundamentalist family structures safe. It’s a rather perplexing topic, as she describes in the earlier chapters how members of the media such as documentarians from National Geographic were always looking for a way to shove a camera into their lifestyle and community and portray the fundamentalists of Blackmore as abused and forced into their marriages and lifestyle. These negative media portrayals are how a lot of people who aren’t a part of the fundamentalist Mormon community have learned about them, and the decriminalization of

these types of marriages are definitely not a widely supported movement, but Blackmore fights for feminism, and she does a convincing job at justifying her activism for fundamentalist women and families in this book. Some very strong points are argued when she points out that fundamentalist women do not have access to the help or safety they may need when the Canadian government would rip their family apart if a woman ever reached out for aid. She makes the argument that “men can marry men; women can marry women. Poly families are becoming accepted,” and that the “idea that government could prosecute polygamy in our current society seems bizarre if not laughable” (Ch. 42), proving that feminists should be in support of all women, even fundamentalist women.

Though she grew up proud of her fundamentalist Mormon roots, in the latter half of the book she is faced with a lot of trials and tribulations when it comes to questioning her own faith. She faces issues with the family she grew up loving; her father is arrested for polygamy, and they start to butt heads with each other on their opinions on what is right and wrong when it comes to marrying young girls. She divorces her husband who she married at seventeen. A time where she didn't really understand her own womanhood when she was coaxed into this relationship. When Blackmore leaves the church, she gets to try all the life experiences she was told by various men that Mormon women are not allowed to partake in. Mary Jayne's life has taken a rollercoaster ride from extreme tradition to wonderful curiosity, questioning, and most of all acceptance. These two ends of the spectrum have blended to create the feminist activist Mary Jayne Blackmore is today, as she fights for women of the fundamentalist community. In one of the last chapters Blackmore attends her father's trial. Her family carries signs in support of their father and their family stating “there is no cookie cutter for family,” (Ch. 59) which is a perfect statement to describe the love

Blackmore has for her unique family.

“Balancing Bountiful” gives an insightful and honest perspective on fundamentalist Mormon families that have had to stay in the shadows for so long due to governmental laws and judgement from the public eye. Mary Jayne’s story is empowering and inspiring, and it may be especially thought provoking to young women who come from a similar situation as her. Blackmore takes a step in a bold direction to unravel and dispel the taboo assumptions made by the media and society to show that although her family is quite different than the normalized nuclear family, the Blackmores still have as much love for each other as any other family does, and the government should treat them like any other loving family. She also proves that you can be a “paradox” of feminist and polygamist, as she fights fiercely for women who were raised like her to have equal opportunities as women in “normal” families. “Balancing Bountiful” dives into the topics of religion, media and society, gender roles, feminism, and family, and would be a useful read to anyone studying sociology, religious studies, or gender studies.