

Novel is a Small Masterpiece

Frank Moher, Weekend Post

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Effigy

Alissa York

Random House

429 pp., \$32.95

The 19th-century Mormon men in Alissa York's splendid *Effigy* take their women, conjugally speaking, in the same way they took the Western plains: without ceremony, and convinced of the righteousness of their mission. Ceremony is left to the female elders, whose job it is, at least when a new bride is brought into the fold, to put her through a rough baptism of bathing and physical scrutiny in preparation for her wedding night. The deed itself is almost an afterthought, just another in the long list of tasks to which the Lord calls a man.

As for the usurpation of the lands flanking the Wasatch Range of the Rockies, in what today is called Utah, the goal of the Latter-Day Saints was loftier: to create the Kingdom of Deseret, a New Jerusalem for the New World, where they might escape their persecutors and await salvation.

The Mormon migration of 1846-7 and subsequent flowering in the desert is one of the great stories of the American West, at once epic and infused with a strangeness that places it somewhere between history and legend. Toronto novelist Alissa York aims to tell it all in *Effigy*, albeit obliquely and prismatically, through the stories of four women who have come to live together as the wives of a Utah rancher. Their husband, Erastus Hammer, is by dint of dogma and doggedness the centre of the family, but not of the novel, which might be called literarily polygamous: betrothed to a whole raft of characters, each given a narrative. This has become a popular novelistic gambit of late. In fact, the last two books I've reviewed in these pages, Michael Patterson's *Consumption* and Barbara Gowdy's *Helpless*, both use it, but rarely is it pulled off with the sort of grace and legerdemain that York displays here. Like the beehive that is the Utah state symbol, *Effigy* is a small masterpiece of construction.

Each of the women has arrived on the ranch stoically, in the manner of the day. Ursula, the stern and devout "first wife," has settled for Erastus after the murder of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, whose deep blue eyes had as much to do with her conversion as his oratory. Ruth is on the run from a lecherous employer and simply looking for a place to raise silkworms in peace; if bearing babies is part of the bargain, so be it. And Thankful has abandoned a tattered career as an actress.

The most plaintive of the four is Eudora, given to Erastus by her father at the age of 14. Numbed, she secludes herself in a barn where she practises the closest thing to art available under the circumstances: taxidermy. The animals she eviscerates and stuffs and mounts become a sort of grotesque version of life, much like her own existence, which is dour enough that she can withstand her wedding night only by imagining an effigy of herself. "She could mount herself crouching," she thinks, as her new husband hovers above her. "Even flying, if she so desired."

If the novel featured just these four women, it would still be a welcome addition to the literature about the American frontier: Larry McMurtry on estrogen. York cuts across its potential for gothic excess, however, by also including the stories of "Bendy," a circus contortionist who ends up as a hired hand on the ranch; an aboriginal guide whose tribe has been decimated and scattered by the advance of the Mormons; and even a crow that has made its home in and around the site of the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre, in which Mormon militia and the Paiute band combined to kill some 120 emigrants on their way to California, and which contains the secret of Eudora's past (secret to her, if not the reader). The total effect is exhilarating and genuinely fresh, a panoramic view of a pivotal time in Plains history, foregrounding characters who would normally be consigned to the edges of the canvas.

York writes with severe precision, each word pounded into place, no give in the language. This makes for slow-going sometimes -- Effigy is not an easy read -- but it also allows her to capture the casual brutality of frontier life with particular force. "The pattern of bodies shows the killing was swift," she writes, offering a bird's-eye view of the massacre grounds. "Here and there lie signs of a few short chases, bursts of panicked speed, but most fell not far from where they were surprised. The females and their walking young form a loose flower head, fully blown." As York powerfully demonstrates, not everyone reaped the benefits when the Saints came marching in to their promised land. For readers of her flinty, robust novel, however, blessings abound.