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Fresh Meat/Warm Weather Joyce Eliason

Mary L. Bradford

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ELIASON, JOYCE. *Fresh Meat/Warm Weather*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. 145 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Mary L. Bradford, editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.

The jacket on *Fresh Meat/Warm Weather* proclaims this book a "novel." But "Notes for a Therapist" would be a more fitting designation: a collection of dreams, jottings, letters, poems, reminiscences and jokes prepared by the patient in the hope that the

therapist will be able to stitch them into a life. This form puts all the burden on the reader, who, playing the therapist, must ask "What is this troubled, disoriented young woman trying to tell me?"

Born in Manti, Utah of "Jack Mormon" parents, the heroine of this autobiographical novel disappoints her father by being a girl, tries unsuccessfully to win the approval of her beautiful older sister, wonders fleetingly about various doctrines of the Mormon faith, and goes off to college in the big city—Salt Lake City. There, she contracts a disastrous marriage, becomes a mother, divorces and decides to move to Los Angeles. Somewhere on the Hollywood freeway she loses her acting ambitions, becomes a script writer and marries again—again disastrously. All of this is told in one or two paragraph flashbacks, complete with irritating switches in point of view.

As the reader-therapist, I would want to explore her relationship with her sister; I would want to know more about her feelings for her father. Mourning becomes her at the end of his life and at the end of her book, when she identifies herself by the pet name he called her in her childhood, and says, "And then she knew who she was." Does this mean that she was just Daddy's little girl all along? If so, so what? Does this represent growth on her part?

And what am I to make of the passage, a few pages later, when she visits her therapist and sums up her life in these words: "I don't want to immobilize a man in order to keep him anymore. Maybe I don't even want a man anymore. Maybe I just want me. It is clear now. Clear as the green glass bookends that look like water."

An admirably liberated statement I think at first, and then I look at the choice of words. The use of "maybe" twice in one passage seems to cancel out the assurance of "It is clear now." And are the bookends simply a weak attempt at metaphor or an ironic lack of clarity?

I am alarmed that she would simply divest herself of her relationships with men, or threaten to, without exploring her reasons for always choosing weak men instead of strong ones like her father and her grandfather, while at the same time harking back to her pioneer heritage in a seeming attempt to find her own strengths. Why else would fitful installments from a letter supposedly by her dead grandfather keep turning up on the left hand pages, and finally ending the book? (on the right hand side).

She seems to blame the system into which she was born (the

Mormon Church and Manti) for her mixed-up life and yet leaves that unexplored as well. The childhood memories, of her dog, her playmates, the town dentist, the store, the Church, the Temple, all seem tame and normal and undeserving of blame. Yet she rails away: "Another lesson learned from the Mormons: Don't go thinkin' you're too good. Don't tell your daughter she's pretty or it may go to her head. Don't get the big hat. Be humble." This is a few pages after "We had been baptized into the Church but didn't believe it. But it was a good way of life." A clear inconsistency, but consistent with her disorientation.

Much of her trouble seems to stem from a frustrating search for her identity as a woman. She is unsure of her appearance and worried about growing older. Her relationships with other women are unsatisfying; and remembering a certain Aunt Reba who died of cancer, she fears her own death. These attitudes often bring on self-conscious litanies like this one (masquerading as a poem): "There is something dead/about the way I do the dishes/ and wipe off counter tops/ and move my legs/ and sit and stand."

The writing is often as flaccid as a teenager's diary, the figures trite: "Sometimes I feel completely flat like something just ran over me," and "He looked like a piece of paper." There are old jokes, one attributed to her daughter: "No, I'm not a Mormon, I'm just a human being"; and one to her grandfather: "When God passed the rule about not drinking coffee, he didn't mean the Danes." The scenes dealing with sex are awkwardly written. The writer seems to be watching herself writing and thinking "How daring!"

I must admit, however, that I am attracted by the immediacy of some of the descriptions of people and places—Manti often comes alive—and to the insight the writer shows in dealing with certain cultural discomforts. Her definition of a Jack Mormon:

Jack Mormons are Mormons who aren't really. Or aren't all the way. It usually means they are Mormons but they don't keep the Word of Wisdom which forbids the use of tobacco, alcohol, coffee, tea, Coca-Cola, drinks too hot or too cold or anything that's bad for the body. When you ask somebody "Are you a Mormon?" and he says he's a Jack Mormon, that means he takes a drink. It also excuses him for almost everything.

Later at a Hollywood party she is thrilled to be noticed by a "famous man with a legendary background." As he approaches, she wonders if he is attracted by her purple dress or by her legs.

"I understand you are from Salt Lake City," he says, and then rhapsodizes over the mountains, the Temple, and the Sky Room at Hotel Utah. When he asks the inevitable "Are you a Mormon?" she thinks the right answer is "No." But he is disappointed and moves away with the words, "I have always loved the Mormons."

"Well, actually I WAS I wanted to yell out to him. I could have said Yes, but now he is gone. . . . It wasn't my legs."

Such flashes of humor and insight make me wish that Joyce Eliason had been able to turn these notes into a novel.