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Bread and Milk and Other Stories Eileen Gibbons Kump

Karen Lynn

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Book Reviews

KUMP, EILEEN GIBBONS. *Bread and Milk and Other Stories*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1979. 91 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Karen Lynn, professor of English, and director of the Honors Program, Brigham Young University.

“Trivia is trivia and must remain so in a world of sorrow” (p. 80) Amy Gordon’s father-in-law assures her. Yet a principal message of *Bread and Milk*, a collection of eight short stories, is that much of the joy of life is bound up with these very trivia.

Amy Gordon, the Mormon pioneer woman whose life the stories trace, lived in a time when happiness lay in contentment, not excitement. The commonplace happenings in the stories—daily chores, small moments of forgiveness, a May Festival—are the secure, precious givens of existence that enable Amy and her family to accept life, even in its tragic moments, with equanimity and thankfulness. A story might focus on nothing more earthshaking than the teenage Amy’s secret wish to be chosen May Queen, or her reluctance several years later, as the young wife of Israel Gordon, to announce her first pregnancy. When major events do occur, they appear, as they do in life, against the backdrop of the everyday: the death of Amy’s little sister coincides with a magician’s visit to the town, and Amy’s own death is set alongside her preoccupation with sorting and recording her memories.

The historical Amy Gordon was the grandmother of Eileen Kump. The author states in the Prologue that the stories “must be called fiction, I suppose, because so much of them is made up. . . . That doesn’t mean the stories aren’t true. They are. They could have happened as well as what happened” (p. x). And many of the details certainly carry a quirky, whimsical, real-life conviction: Israel’s sincere but self-conscious love letter to his future wife, the mysterious and pathetic love song about “waiting in the rain” that no one but Amy knows, the May Day celebration that never questions the appropriateness of, or asks the reason for, the tradition that requires the Queen and her attendants to reenact every year the story of

Jephthah's daughter and her companions bewailing their virginity upon the mountains. Either Eileen Kump was fortunate in being able to elicit such details from her remarkable grandmother, or else it is Eileen Kump's imagination that is remarkable.

The author chooses not to rely heavily on plot. Most of her stories show a character at a moment of reconciliation or decision, and the interest lies in that character's interior monologue. "The Willows,"¹ the first story, is one of the strongest. Eight-year-old Amy must enter the world of adult deception and ambivalence, reconciling her belief that lying and hating are sins with the need to protect her polygamous family (her mother is hiding with other polygamous wives in a willow grove) from the federal officers, the "gentiles," who have become such monsters in her mind. "China Doll" is the admirably understated story of the death of Amy's little sister. It is principally Amy's mother's story; several of the stories focus only partially on Amy. In "Jephthah's Daughter," the adolescent Amy doubts she will ever satisfy the exacting standards of the bishop's May Day committee, since "breadmaking was a weakness in-born" (p. 30) and the committee seeks domestic skills as well as beauty. "Regarding Courtship" views Amy through the eyes of her future husband. "Bread and Milk"² details the self-consciousness of Amy as Israel's newly pregnant wife. It is her assignment to lead the singing in church. "How can I stand up there with my arms raised, my middle big?" she asks her mother. "I will have to stand up there and be weighed like a sack of grist" (p. 59).

"Four and Twenty Blackbirds"³ is the poignant account of Amy and Israel at cross-purposes over the disciplining and rearing of their son Laun. Israel doubts his adequacy as a father at the same time that he doubts the strength of his young son. "He was not this boy. Had his own ma . . . wept over him because he was so pale? Had he cried? . . . 'Raise up, Laun. Come on now, Laun, *raise up!*' The boy did it, his eyes on Israel all the while. They were not the eyes of a friend" (p. 69). In "Sayso or Sense,"⁴ Amy's husband and father-in-law build her a new house. She had spent years dreaming of how each detail of the house would be. As her reasonable suggestions are disregarded one by one, she halfway suspects that in a pre-earth life all priesthood holders were given the choice between sayso and sense,

¹First printed in *Dialogue* 8 (Summer 1973): 63-71.

²First printed in *Out of the Best Books*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1966), pp. 297-300.

³First printed in *Western Humanities Review* 27 (Winter 1973): 71-77. Also appeared in *Ensign* 4 (June 1974): 28-31.

⁴First printed in *BYU Studies* 14 (Winter 1974): 263-69.

and chose the former. "God Willing" is the story of the death of the widowed Amy and, in retrospect, the death and funeral of Israel twenty years earlier.

Although she chooses a Mormon setting for her stories, Eileen Kump is too sophisticated a writer to rely on oversimple, pseudo-spiritual solutions to her characters' dilemmas. The readers may sometimes feel, however, that the implications of each tension are not really followed through: we are convinced of Amy's anxieties over the disclosure of her pregnancy, but rather suddenly she decides not to worry about it any more; and when her careful and exact vision of her new house is shattered, she reconciles herself to her fate in a way that seems almost facile. Since Eileen Kump's imagination, taste, and craftsmanship are so evident—in this reviewer's opinion, no finer short fiction has ever been written by a Mormon author—it is tempting to wish for a sustained treatment of a really complex set of problems, perhaps in novel form. Most of the stories in *Bread and Milk* take up a single, already-existing conflict and then allow it to melt into resolution under the warmth of good will, faith, and the passing of time. How wonderful it would be to see what Eileen Kump could do if she decided to present the growth of an interwoven set of difficult conflicts and then see them through to a working-out. All the prerequisites for accomplishing such a task seem to be there in abundance.