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A Woman's Choices: The Relief Society Legacy Lectures

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A Woman's Choices: The Relief Society Legacy Lectures. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984. 189 pp. \$7.95.

Reviewed by Jessie L. Embry, Oral History Program Director, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University.

I read *A Woman's Choices* twice—once with my scholarly eyes looking for every error because I always got better grades on my book reviews in graduate school when I was critical, rather than complimentary, of a book. Then I studied the book with my spiritual eyes, as Somerset Maugham suggests (as quoted by Elaine Shaw Sorensen), “to gain intellectual and moral stimulus.” He explains, “One soon tires of a book that does not make him feel now and then like getting up and walking the floor under the impulse of some larger vision of truth” (19).

Not all the articles satisfied my scholarly and spiritual appetites; only some led me to “some larger vision of truth.” I enjoyed Carolyn Rasmus’s “The Gift and Power of the Holy Ghost” because she told her experiences with Mormonism in a lively style, so it was not just “one more conversion story.” JoAnn Ottley’s “A Musical Stewardship—Teacher of Life” was a delightful story of how one couple juggled two music careers and a family life. Eileen Gibbons Kump painted a beautiful picture of enjoying life in “The Bread and Milk of Living.” I enjoyed reading Eleanor Knowles’s “The Scriptures: A Personal Odyssey” in which she explained the publication of the new Latter-day Saint scriptures. However, my favorite essay was Sharon L. Staples’s “Stress: A Matter of Choice.” She gave a balanced definition of stress and how to deal with it which got me “walking the floor.” Other than the stress article, I enjoyed the personal essays the most. The authors

of these essays explained how they dealt with their situations in life, avoiding a tone of judgment which suggested their decisions were the only ways to accomplish results; they had simply selected one road to travel which had led to both successes and failures.

Other essays disappointed me; I expected more understanding. Too often, when we, as women, have tried to defend our choices, we have become defensive; in order to justify our decisions, we have felt we needed to show that everyone else was wrong. For example, some women who chose a formal education have appeared to look down on women who married right after high school and did not go on for further education. Women working outside the home have argued they were spending quality time rather than quantity time in their homes; on the other hand, women who stayed home with their children have explained that quality time was not enough, quantity was also needed. For example, when I read Beppie Harrison's "A Deliberate Choice: Staying at Home," I felt she presented the virtues of her life by stepping on those who followed another path. Sally Peterson Brinton's "The Blessing of Music in the Home" gave some valuable tips on how to include music in the home but implied she had to choose between being a mother or a concert pianist—both careers could not be combined. Although these essays attempted to say, "This is only my choice," I felt an underlying tone of "but I am right and you are wrong." Since my life decisions have been different, I especially appreciated Barbara Smith's "Relief Society: A Story of New Beginnings" and her comments as general president of the Relief Society, comments which pointed to various experiences and did not limit women's possibilities.

My personal feelings about the book were mixed; I had more negative scholarly reactions. The Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at BYU has published its lecture series as monographs, and I have been an editor for some of them. I found it difficult as an editor to change a talk into a publishable document. Sometimes the speaker included a story which referred to a current event, and although everyone in the audience immediately reacted, my dilemma was to decide if a reader twenty years later could understand the reference. I also learned a joke was not always as funny when read. In other words, lectures needed to be altered to be readable. I did not find that type of careful editing in this book. Nearly all the articles read like talks, and I did not always understand—only one year later—the experiences the speakers were referring to. They could be even more confusing to a future reader.

Other material was valuable when spoken but lost some of its crispness when put into writing. "The Writer's Craft: Delight in the Ordinary" by Ardeth Kapp, Vernice Pere, and Marilyn Arnold was

probably a delightful lecture. I would have enjoyed hearing Kapp and Pere read their writings, emphasizing the words and ideas they felt were important. Arnold's comments would have helped the listeners examine the writings as literary pieces. As a discussion, it would have been useful; as a transcript, it was cold and awkward. I felt the same way about Elaine Cannon's "Finding Our Peace on Earth." Cannon has a lively speaking style which many enjoy, but, again, speaking requires different skills than writing, and I found her essay difficult to read.

I do not understand why Deseret Book published *A Woman's Choices*. If it was to give women who live outside of Salt Lake City a chance to share the legacy lectures or if it was to give women who heard the talks time to rethink the messages, the book has some value. Personally, I would rather have listened to tapes of the proceedings than to have had to read the talks exactly as they were presented. Although the book will be read and enjoyed by LDS women, a little more thought and editing could have made it a masterpiece which truly defines the choices women face.