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The Magic and Mundanity: Eileen Kump’s Bread and Milk and Other Stories

Gloria L. Cronin

Eileen Kump’s slender and sophisticated volume, Bread and Milk and Other Stories, represents a significant addition to the steadily developing genre of the Mormon short story. Its genesis derives from two distinctly Mormon taproots: the peculiar history of the author’s grandmother who grew up among the polygamous United Order of Southern Utah, and Kump’s uniquely Mormon belief in the richness and power of the ordinary bread-and-milk experiences of life. Speaking of the power of attraction her grandmother’s stories held for her, Kump tells us:

Grandmother’s life had first attracted me as a writer because of the historical significance of her childhood in the United Order. That needed to be recorded. But aside from such historical significance, I began to see the beauty and disappointments of her life, the pulse of it, the heartbeat. The richness of it and the power lay essentially in the little everyday happenings that formed its greatest part: soapmaking day; gathering sand with which to scour the knives, forks, and spoons; the square of cheese that sometimes lay beside the nightly meal of bread and milk; the gift slipped through the window on Christmas Eve.

The second taproot is what gives the work its thematic coherence. Speaking recently on the subject of the life-sustaining power of everyday experience, Kump says, “There is importance—even magic—in the mundane, in the bread and milk of living.” Furthermore, she

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1 Eileen Kump, Bread and Milk and Other Stories (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1979). All subsequent page references will be to this volume.
3 Ibid.
explains, immersing ourselves hopefully and affectionately in the everyday “is a sure way to befriend mortality and make life an adventure.” Through Amy, the central character, Kump begins to test artistically her grandmother’s premise that life is indeed an enterprise worth embracing and trusting. As Amy’s life unfolds for the reader and, one suspects, for the writer, we see behind the surfaces of the events the serious fictional exploration of those multiple Christian paradoxes of finding through losing, of communion at the heart of aloneness, of vitality at the core of crisis.

Structured around the progressive rites of passage which form the essence of each story, the total collection forms a modified bildungsroman, one that deals not only with the female initiation story but also one that treats initiation as a lifelong experience. As Amy systematically penetrates terror, humor, tragedy, and magic through her experiences with evil, loss, birth, death, courtship, marriage, pregnancy, child rearing, old age and death, Kump deftly underscores through a process of incremental repetition her central theme—the essential holiness of daily human endeavor.

The tone of these initiation stories differs markedly from the majority of initiation stories in the broader tradition of American letters. To begin with, they are written by a woman about a woman. But more significantly, they avoid the usual late romantic formula of isolation, male bonding, fragmentation and alienation, frontier or urban wasteland symbology, and Freudian interpretation of the maturation process. Though a story about a persecuted desert community in the grips of poverty and fragmented family life provides a prime opportunity for the easy application of such a traditional literary formula, Kump successfully skirts all temptation to resort to low seriousness and romantic despair and to their opposites—gratuitous optimism and unearned hope. And herein lies the true mark of the artist. Out of deceptively simple materials and an extremely understated style, Kump slowly and carefully illuminates the deep mystery of human experience—that at the heart of the ordinary lies the crucial rite of passage into genuine human experience, and that at the often crisis-ridden nexus of that true rite of passage, fear of loss and annihilation can yield the power of grace, wonder, and apotheosis.

Treating her subject matter with unpretentious directness, charming humor, poetic simplicity, delicious irony, and powerful understatement, Kump repeatedly establishes for herself and the
reader the firm belief that though the rite of passage is often ambiguous and difficult, it is a normal, safe conduit through which the immature ego passes into mature awareness and joyful acceptance of the paradoxes of life. Relying on the multiple assurances conveyed by her title, the patterned inevitability of the life-cycle myth which undergirds the stories, and the statement from the prologue that these stories depict the period after the Persecution when the "more ordinary struggles for survival [and] perfection" (p. x) engage the Saints, Kump manages to illuminate for the reader that larger, brighter sphere of meaning which makes holy the bread-and-milk experiences of life.

In "The Willows," the first story, we witness eight-year-old Amy experiencing her first transition from childhood irresponsibility to a discovery of evil and precariousness as her Edenic Mormon world is invaded by the genteel world of spitting, swearing Sevys and a threatening federal marshal. Wrenched from tea parties under the orchard trees, from her closeness to Will, and from daydreams of refined life in Salt Lake City, Amy must come to terms with persecution—the loss of half of her family, and the nightmarish burden of the adult secrets of the community. The crash of the warning rock heralds both the arrival of the federal marshal and Amy's symbolic fall into human experience—a transition which leaves her both frightened and suspicious. After seeking her mother's hiding place and being sternly rebuffed, she is forced to a realization of the fragility of life and the adult burden of preserving a society. Assuming the household tasks in her mother's absence, she nevertheless craves the security of dependency. And even though that night her father cradles her protectively in his arms like a Santa Claus returned home for Christmas, her sense of security is again shattered a few hours later when she discovers that Will and Aunt Edna have gone and left only the playthings wrapped in the little green scarf—a reminder of the previously idyllic family existence. However, the culminating experience in this story is Amy's awakening from her dream of innocence to a sense of evil. As she confronts McGary, who has no guns and knives in his beard as childlore had promised, she learns a powerful lesson about the banality of evil. Kump's brilliant summary statement of this initiation is restrained and psychologically consistent with the age of her protagonist: Amy, back arched stiffly against the porch post like an animal at bay, announces to McGary with all the injured trust of childhood, "'I don't have a pa anyhow'" (p. 15).

Yet, despite the potentially shattering nature of these childhood experiences, Amy in the next story, "China Doll," is depicted as an
emotionally healthy child whose family is intact and whose ability to love is unimpaired. But the further initiations carry her into the bewildering trauma of being within earshot during her mother’s difficult delivery of Esther and of encountering the fickleness of magic and the meaning of death. The focus of this story is the contrasted responses to life of the skeptical Harriet and her ever-optimistic and uncrushed daughter Amy. Paradoxically, the story opens with a cornucopia image of plenty as Kump describes Harriet’s well-stocked basement—the result of a fruitful summer on Grandfather’s farm. Yet, knowing that what is given may also be taken away, Harriet wavers between joy and fear:

Knowing how life is, Harriet was skeptical, but again this morning warm wings of excitement hovered. Every morning since the day the family had come home from Grandpa’s ranch, the wings had been almost more than she could bear. Not only had Grandpa’s fields and orchards yielded far beyond what Seth could get their own sandy soil to produce, but Esther was almost well, healed by herbs and faith, and cool mountain air.

(P. 19)

By contrast, in believing the promises of Marcus the Magician, who turns up to entice the family to a circus entertainment and ends up walking off with a cheese in payment for the tickets, Amy teaches Harriet the importance of fantasy and trust. Yet Harriet, aghast at Amy’s foolishness, believes that “magic [is] deceptive, artificial” and that “its pleasures [have] no wings” (p. 22). Both are correct, but it is Amy with her optimism who best handles the trial of Esther’s death. As Amy cradles the dying infant with fierce maternalism in an attempt to outwit death—a gift of self Harriet cannot seem to make at this time—we see Amy’s superior emotional resources. And as the family builds the small grave near their house, Kump draws further contrasts between Amy and Harriet. Clearly resigned and worn with grief, Harriet seems to have little understanding for Amy’s dilemma. When Amy resourcefully finds her own solution—that of giving Esther the valuable china doll to take with her into the grave—Harriet, ever skeptical and practical, asks with deep world weariness, “To what use?”

Yet the father understands that to recover from loss one has to believe and sacrifice as Amy intends to do. In defense of Amy’s generosity, Seth replies, “‘To Amy’s use. . . . She isn’t as acquainted with life as we are. . . . She’s happy from inside out’” (p. 25). In such a manner he aids Amy in her discovery that the empty, still point
of human loss can be healed through the grace consequent upon giving—the kind of giving demonstrated by Amy’s tangible offering of love and trust. Thus, Amy’s love provides the vehicle of passage.

“Jephthah’s Daughter” traces Amy’s passage into puberty. It is a lighthearted and delightful account of one of the more perplexing aspects of such an initiation, the initiate’s essential imaginative ignorance of the psycho-symbolic meaning of the events which transpire on behalf of herself and the community. Amy, who has been chosen as May Queen, must enact ritually before the community the tragic story of Jephthah’s daughter, who because of her father’s promise must on risk of death take vows of chastity and be confined until death to the companionship of her maid servants. This highly ironic and humorous comment on the early stages of Mormon female adolescence (not to mention the upcoming trials of Mormon womanhood) is made all the more poignant and funny since Amy is quite unaware of these ironies. Yet the satire is secondary to the crowning experience of this story. Amy, ironically betrayed by her own zest for life, cannot summon up the appropriate feelings of tragic waste and loss necessary to provide the emotional climax for the community. Full of remorse for her inability to summon up a tragic response for her audience, Amy bursts into genuine tears and inadvertently brings about the best May Day celebration in the history of the community. The story is an insightful and sensitive comment on the dilemma of Amy, who stands upon the brink of adulthood yet lacks the requisite experience to act with full conviction and understanding. She is, nevertheless, able to negotiate the passage because of the honesty of her emotional responses.

“Regarding Courtship,” a complex story whose central focus is very clearly on three contrasted adult responses to the traumatic initiation into loneliness, takes us deeper into Amy’s early adult experiences as it details the account of one suitor rejected and another accepted. Bryce, the choice of the community for Amy’s hand, is sent to Boston on a two-year mission. Unsure of her desires, Amy refuses to marry him before he goes. His immature response to the loneliness of Boston and the injunction to put Amy out of his mind causes Bryce to send the inevitable self-pitying and rejecting letter which betrays Amy’s trust in him. Bryce fails to negotiate the initiation into manhood.

The second part of the story contrasts Bryce’s immature response to loneliness with that of a much more mature, self-possessed, and taciturn suitor whose encounter with isolation has produced in him
both pain and a superior reverence for life. Hearing of Amy’s rejection by Bryce, Israel intuitively acknowledges Amy as the possessor of the kind of power and warmth he has experienced only once before in his life. Kump gives considerable time to the account of his childhood when Israel, pushed to the verge of isolation and terror separating boyhood from manhood, experiences nevertheless the saving grace of human empathy and love as he makes the transition. At age nine he is given the responsibility of driving Aunt Clara north to recover her health. One night, while he is lying under the wagon, “as a man was supposed to do,” the wolves come so close he fears for his life. On the brink of terror, he experiences that fulness of human love felt only at moments of great human suffering. ‘‘Israel . . . would you like to come and get in the foot of my bed?’’ Aunt Clara calls (p. 47). In this crucial rite of passage, Israel has learned that the moment of annihilation is also the moment of grace.

As an explanation of why he must marry her, Israel tells Amy she reminds him of Aunt Clara, for whom he would lay down his life. Sensing the relationship between his early experience of terror and aloneness and his subsequent reverence for life and human bonds, Amy wisely resolves never to ask him if he loves her. It is an affair rooted in far deeper human feeling than Bryce’s untried romantic love. Her own knowledge of ‘‘aloneness,’’ her warm nature and her instinctive power to heal qualify Amy for commitment to Israel. Hence, moved to the edge of a truly fine human contract, Amy passes into a more mature insight into the deeper purposes of marriage and love in the context of adult responsibility, history and community. Completely free from self-pity over Bryce’s rejection, she gains understanding which borders on epiphany as she grasps that mysterious sacrifice of private motive for communal purpose which constitutes one more juncture of grace in the midst of crisis:

Love was important, but so was life. Her mind spun. What was important?
A tiny spring had made poplars grow in the desert. Maybe farms someday.
Surely Israel’s regard for her was a beginning of importance. And love or
not, . . . it was suddenly painful to think of him alone out there unanswered.

(P. 51)

‘‘Bread and Milk,’’ perhaps the most successful of the stories, continues to trace the development of this insight as it describes Amy’s passage into the isolating vulnerability of first pregnancy. Mystified with the wonder of it all and possessed of a deep need for seclusion, she hugs the secret greedily to herself until the night she
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imparts it to Israel in the seclusion of their bed. Her disappointment and shock are considerable when Israel tells her he has already guessed and rolls away from her in sleep. Later, alone in the coolroom, dipping into the honey jar, Amy firmly resolves to maintain her integrity and privacy by hiding the fact from the community. She is not yet ready to relinquish self and permit the ritual passage by allowing the community to participate in what she mistakenly and egotistically believes to be a private event.

On the Sunday morning when she can no longer button her dress, she finally understands the true meaning of mortality and responds with mature awareness. While conducting a hymn she lets the concealing shawl drop for all to see. As she walks to the window, she comments with deep feeling, ""Do you hear the quail? Do you hear its cry? It is lonely. Now for goodness sake, sing as if you are lonely, lonely for the Father!"" (pp. 59–60). Her sense of human isolation, intensified by the mystery of childbirth, prompts her to renewed awareness of the fragility of human experience and her need for the support of the community. Hence, she articulates for everyone the shared experience of human estrangement from the Father. It is one more encounter with that consoling grace which is available only when at the crisis of the passage the initiate sacrifices ego and accepts the shared human condition.

"Four and Twenty Blackbirds" treats the theme of individual isolation even more powerfully than the previous stories. The painful nature of the son's passage into manhood and the ambiguity of the experience provide the emotional core of the story. Kump successfully depicts the pain of the son as he seeks his father's love and approval and the helplessness of mother and father as both come to an awareness of the cost of the bonding process.

The triple point of view in the story functions as a metaphor for the helpless separateness each of the actors feels. Perhaps the most moving and complex of the stories, "Four and Twenty Blackbirds" begins with the dilemma of a harsh father who, raised during a period of pioneering and colonization, agonizes angrily over a seemingly irresponsible son who must be taught the value of life and work. The focus then moves to the agony of the boy, who, isolated for a week up a remote canyon, has been charged with the care of his grandfather's sheep. The eleven-year-old boy wears his feet to blisters bundling and herding the animals, chopping more wood than he needs, relentlessly polishing the smokestack of the lantern, mending the tear in the bedding, and repeatedly sweeping the floor of the shepherder's
wagon as he strives to meet the challenge of passing from childhood into adulthood.

The reunion of father and son after this harsh test is touching. The son hugs the awkward older man and begs to sleep alongside him on the narrow cot in the wagon. It appears the crucial bonding of father and son is secure. However, the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of the process is only too apparent during the homecoming scene. The crucial *rite de passage* is Amy’s as well as her son’s. As Amy removes the boy’s shoes and discovers the dreadful blisters which Israel has failed to notice, her horror threatens to alienate Israel, who swiftly remembers the pain of his own boyhood experience but is nevertheless the victim of his own inarticulateness and rigid past as he fails to reassure both mother and son of the inevitability, even the necessity, of the suffering as part of the initiation into manhood. While Amy stands torn with love for both men, Israel can only bury his tenderness and pleasure in the boy in stern command. “‘Raise up, Laun. Come on now, Laun, *raise up!*’” (p. 69) he orders, and when Laun finally looks up, Israel realizes Laun’s “‘were not the eyes of a friend’” (p. 69).

Bewildered, Israel retreats to the barn where he recalls the picture of his own father—patriarchal, articulate, totally self-assured—and he wonders how he did it. All Israel understands of fathering is that “‘your own strength became a hand full of air, if not a mockery, unless your children were good’” (p. 70). But he has not his father’s air of moral authority nor his father’s warmth or verbal fluency. But just as Israel had been rescued from the terror of his initiation by Aunt Clara’s call to come in at the foot of her bed, so Amy softens Laun’s passage by drawing the new initiate into the circle of nursery rhymes, thereby providing the counterbalance of nurturance to add to Israel’s pride in the boy’s accomplishment—a passage into the full charity of womanhood for Amy.

However, Israel’s subsequent isolation from the warmth and reassurance of the family circle is powerfully delineated by Kump as she shows him entering the kitchen later that night only to find it empty. Upstairs, where the children ought to be asleep and “‘Amy available to him,’” he hears the note of a nursery rhyme. Having failed to understand the relationship between the trial and the moment of grace, he finds himself isolated in his uncertainty and failure from that intimate circle of warmth and friendship upstairs.

The central event in “‘Sayso or Sense’” deals with Amy’s childhood dream of a house of her own. Determined to have a cool cellar in
which to can in the heat of the summer and a house angled away from the neighbors, Amy encounters crushing opposition in the form of her immovable father-in-law, for whom all cellars are only too reminiscent of the pitiful dugouts of the generation before. She is doubly baffled by Israel’s “Mosaic” adoration of his father and convert’s passionate zeal (see p. 74). In fact, her faith in the whole patriarchal system is shaken when its twin pillars in her life conspire against her to become the unwitting destroyers of her dream home. The story is delightfully funny in its depiction of Amy’s desperately trying to find the humor and good spirits to succumb to a male conspiracy which produces house minus basement, closets, and private front view. Her subsequent struggle to capitulate with genuine charity involves a tremendous sacrifice of individuality and privacy. Her father-in-law’s vision of a house, not as a separate entity with its exclusive south-facing aspect but as part of a growing community integrated by north-facing houses, brings once more the realization of the isolating yet integrating demands of community and tradition.

We laugh when, just as Amy predicts, the whole neighborhood troops through her kitchen door amid all the rituals of canning or, funnier still, in the midst of Israel’s Saturday night bath. We laugh again when she dreams that God while conducting a priesthood meeting explains to Israel and her father-in-law, who are sitting on the front row, that “when they came to earth, men could have their choice—say so or sense—but they couldn’t have both because that wouldn’t be fair to the women” (p. 78). But the dream is really about her deep hurt. For the two men, building the home involves a necessary personal bonding process which cancels her private hopes of sanctuary. Their communal philosophy of “home” eclipses her private wishes to the point that she finds herself resentful of her father-in-law’s “rich prophetic” voice and ability to cow Israel (p. 74). Yet as she subdues the profound disappointment and accepts the symbolic compromise house that results, her anger over the nature of the men who rule her life distills first into comedy, then into understanding. Finally one day, after a fit of tears over the neighbors who troop through the privacy of her house, her love for her father-in-law enables her to complete the ritual passage. “‘Trivia is trivia and must remain so in a world of sorrow’” (p. 80), he explains to her with intended kindness. As her love for him carries her past the disappointment and isolation of the past months, Amy once more enters that sphere of grace which lies within and without the moment

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of passage. "How could a dream matter to Israel when it made less and less sense to her" (p. 80).

The final story, "God Willing," provides a fitting coda to the collection. It pictures Amy as an old woman facing death. Long since bereft of Israel, she tries to relive the experiences of her life right up to the arrangements for Israel's funeral. Frightened by the memory of their last words together about the privacy of sorrow and the public necessity of funerals, she flees into the garden with her hoe in an attempt to shut out the hurtful memory. Failing to do so, however, she allows full reign to the remembrance of her pain at his death and the insensitivity of well-meaning neighbors and family. The remembered discussion of eternity with the three women at the funeral functions as a painful initiation into acceptance of the conditions of her own impending departure.

Kump's intention in this story is to reinforce once more the ironic conjunction between isolation and grace at every passage in human experience. As memories of her grandchildren and the affairs of the moment mingle with snatches of doctrine about the hereafter and free agency, we see that Amy's well-tempered faith finally provides her with the power to reconcile and transcend the hiatus between the temporal and the spiritual, the present and the future. As the pain in her arm intensifies, she actually defeats the sordidness of the experience through a brilliant act of memory which illuminates once again the active presence of grace at the still point of crisis. As Amy slides down into death while vividly recalling waiting in her white dress for Israel on her wedding day, Kump brings us once more to the heart of the paradox. The moment of passage is at one and the same time the moment of union and arrival—a union actual and symbolic which has survived all the trials of the human endeavor and emerged intact.

Hence, we see Bread and Milk as a coherent collection of stories bound by the unifying consciousness of one central character and a common theme—that progress toward salvation which hinges on the ultimate integrity of an isolating pattern of linear time punctuated by saving intersections of grace and isolation in the midst of passage into deepening maturity. Bread and Milk is a deeply felt and sophisticated artistic performance which affirms that the other side of the coin stamped mutability and passage is the coin stamped charity and stability.