

Canadian writer unearths secret life of Mormons

Lee Shedden, For the Calgary Herald

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Alissa York will read from and sign her novel, Effigy, on April 19 at 7 p.m. at McNally Robinson Booksellers.

Alissa York writes about arresting subjects. Her highly lauded, dark, 2003 novel, *Mercy*, tackled a Catholic priest's illicit love affair, detailed descriptions of butchering animals, and an illegitimate child abandoned in a bog and raised by a drunken scavenger.

More than three years in the writing and research, York's new novel, *Effigy*, mines similarly disquieting material. A newspaper-headline plot synopsis of *Effigy* might look a lot like the press release prepared by the publishers: "Mormons. Polygamy. Taxidermy. Amnesia. Massacre. Murder. Circus. Goldrush. Pony Express. Love."

Beneath the sensational trappings, York displays a gift for the creation of suspense, not through plot but through character. *Effigy* is more about individuals reacting to extreme situations than it is about the situations themselves.

The 37-year-old author, who was born in Athabasca, Alberta, has lived all over Canada. From her home in Toronto, where she moved from Winnipeg two years ago, York says her goal is to provoke strong emotional reactions in her readers.

"I want people to really feel a lot. It's not my goal to just make people think. I want them to think, but I want them, more than anything, to feel."

Effigy (Random House, 448 pages, \$32.95) was conceived in 2001 after York read a newspaper article about a community near Creston, B.C., where a fundamentalist Mormon sect has continued the old Mormon practice of polygamy. (The mainstream Church officially outlawed the practice in 1890 under pressure from the United States government.)

The news story led her to read about the history of the Mormon Church, which in turn led her to *Effigy*'s underpinning event, the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

York describes the massacre as "the biggest skeleton in (the Church of Latter-Day Saints') closet. It's still a thing that many people have never heard of." On Sept. 11, 1857, a group of Mormons, reacting to threats to their sovereignty by U.S. federal troops, slaughtered a party of emigrants

from Arkansas, about 120 in all. Only 17 young children were spared, due to a Mormon doctrine that forbade the shedding of "innocent blood."

In one account, though, the number of survivors was given as 18, which prompted York to speculate about the life of an imagined 18th child. That child became Effigy's damaged heroine, Dorrie, the fourth wife and young bride of Erastus Hammer. The polygamist Hammer is a murderer and trophy hunter who, York says, encapsulates "the violence of the West, the way the West was won -- or lost, depending on your point of view -- the tremendous violence that rolled across the land and all the bodies that fell in the wake of this . . . this progress, this Manifest Destiny."

Hammer, as blunt and unthinking as his name, displays "a lack of respect for life . . . he doesn't understand that he's connected to the people and the animals that he kills. Often times trophy hunting is about possessing the qualities of the particular animal, whether it's their grace, or their beauty, or their strength, and the irony is that as soon as you kill that animal, that life force that you're trying to own disappears. He's trying to connect by controlling.

"The same with his wives -- another collection -- he can't properly connect with any of them because he's all about owning and controlling."

To atone for the guilt she feels for having survived the massacre, Dorrie throws herself into taxidermy, a misguided way of trying to resurrect the dead. Valued for this skill alone, she fits uneasily into Hammer's family with his three other wives, each of whom is a sensitively drawn character.

Juggling multiple narrators with a rare ease, York weaves a complex array of themes through the novel. As she discovered with the publication of her two previous books, *Mercy* and a collection of short stories, *Any Given Power* (1999), individual readers will focus on different aspects of a closely woven book like this one.

"It's amazing the variety of responses you get," she says. "One person feels that the book is all about this, and someone else feels it's all about that. It's a very liberating thing, to realize that readers bring so much to a book; it's something different for everyone. I really enjoy that process, but it's harrowing, too, of course."

Readers weaned on the nationalist CanLit written by previous generations may notice Effigy is set Canadian writer unearths secret life of Mormons 04/15/2007 10:47 AM entirely in the United States, without even a whisper of Canada in its pages. York says this choice was dictated by her characters and by their historical context, and that relocating the story for extra-literary reasons would have involved fundamental distortions.

"If somebody had told me that I was going to wind up writing about 19th-century Utah, I would have thought, 'What are you talking about?' I've never thought anything about Utah in my life.'

But as a fiction writer my job is to tell the story, to get the characters right, to get the language right.

"I can't take (questions of nationalism) into account. It doesn't feel like that's my job."

Lee Shedden is a Calgary freelance writer and the publisher of Brindle and Glass.