

Novel taps into fascination with Mormonism

Richard Helm, The Edmonton Journal

Published: Wednesday, April 11, 2007

EDMONTON - In case you hadn't noticed, Mormons are very big these days. Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, a Mormon, is a serious player down south in the race for the Republican presidential nomination. Warren Jeffs, North America's best-known polygamist as the head of the offshoot Mormon sect, The Fundamental Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, goes on trial in Utah April 23.

HBO is set to roll out the second season of its topical TV drama, *Big Love*, about a modern-day suburban polygamist played by Bill Paxton, struggling to balance the needs of three wives, seven kids and three separate Mormon households. And opening in cinemas next month is *September Dawn*, a Jon Voight movie filmed last year in Alberta that re-examines one of the darkest chapters in Mormon history. The Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 occurred in southwestern Utah on Sept. 11, of all days, when more than 100 Arkansas emigrants bound for California -- men, women and children -- were slain by Mormon militia, including some who posed as Indians.

The shadow of that mass killing also haunts the pages of an impressive new novel by Toronto author Alissa York. Set in frontier Utah, *Effigy* (Random House, \$32.95) blends fact with fiction in the story of a girl rescued from a wagon-train massacre who is now the teenaged fourth wife in a Mormon ranch household.

In an interview, York said her novel had its beginnings in 2001, when she was seized by news coverage of the breakaway Mormon sect in Bountiful, just outside of Creston, B.C. She was shocked to find polygamy was occurring in Canada.

"It got me wondering what that life would be like, to be a polygamist's wife, and I started to read about it," York said. "That led of course to Mormon history and I basically got a buzz on and read everything I could which, in turn, led to mention of the Mountain Meadows Massacre."

The exact number of dead remains in dispute, as does the issue of whether Mormon leader Brigham Young had any complicity in the attack. But it's generally reported that 17 of the youngest children were spared, owing to Mormon doctrine regarding the shedding of "innocent blood," and eventually reunited with relatives back home in Arkansas. York's fictional foray

starts from the proposition that there were 18 young survivors, and one was taken in by the attackers to be raised in the Mormon life.

York, 36, grew up in Athabasca. Her parents Allen and Ann, both teachers and originally from Australia, emigrated to Canada to find work in the rural north.

When she was seven, the family moved to Victoria. After living for a while in Winnipeg, she now makes her home in Toronto with her husband, writer-filmmaker Clive Holden.

Effigy is her second novel. Her first novel, *Mercy*, a story of obsessive love between a new bride and the priest she meets on her wedding day, was published in 2003. York also won the 1999 Journey Prize for her short story *The Back of the Bear's Mouth*.

Although faith and the church loom large in both novels, York says she's not very religious. She says she knew "absolutely nothing" about Mormons before beginning her research for *Effigy*, but acknowledges they seem to be remarkably topical these days.

"It does seem to be in the Zeitgeist right now," she said. "And of course fundamentalist religion is very much on people's minds because there's a huge revival of pretty much every fundamentalist religion in the States, and then you have all the stuff going on with Muslim fundamentalists in the world."

If she were an American, there's absolutely no chance she could ever support a guy like Romney as president, York said.

"I think within the community there are people who are very much more open-minded but the people in power in the church are very, very conservative people," she said, citing long-standing restrictions on women and minorities.

"And the fact is all of this stuff is written into the scripture as well as the history of the church, so as much as the established church will deny its connections to the fundamentalist wings, they both sprang from the same place. They both have to be accountable for this scripture and doctrine their church is based on ...

"Part of the reason why they flourish and continue to flourish in the way that they do is that it's all about hierarchy and obedience. Stories like the Mountain Meadows Massacre really teach us what is the problem with hierarchy and obedience."

Dorrie, the child bride at the centre of *Effigy*, cannot recall anything of her life before the age of seven. A solitary soul, she devotes any spare time to taxidermy, bringing new life to the trophy kills delivered by her husband, Erastus Hammer. She has secluded herself in a workshop world of dead things, away from the watchful eyes of the elder wives. As the novel opens, Hammer brings Dorrie a family of wolves to fashion into a tableau and her world slowly comes un-

done. She struggles with her craft, she is troubled by violent dreams, and the only helping hand comes from the new hired man.

rhelm@thejournal.canwest.com
www.edmontonjournal.com