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A staging of magnificent lives

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Effigy

Alissa York

Random House

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The trick of taxidermy is giving a semblance of life to something dead. It's a deliberate skill, granting a kinetic air to a static thing, and those who become true artists develop a kinship of sorts with the animal. It shows in the degree of authenticity, the push of energy in the stitch and glue of muscle, sinew and tissue.

To create believability in a growl, in a fluff of pin feathers or a sublime love in a mother watching over her cubs is testament to an inhabiting, a confluence, an overarching assumption of life force. Taxidermists work alone, and the effigy they create comes from the strange union of life and death.

It's much the same for writers of historical fiction. The infusion of life into characters long dead and often forgotten takes a sure hand and a unity with their lives, purpose and history. Alissa York illuminates that challenge in framing her grim second novel, *Effigy*, against the backdrop of a bloody, senseless massacre. Deftly, with shifting points of view, she describes the life of a Mormon household in 19th-century Utah. Like the taxidermist whose story propels the novel, York bends to her task with grit, and it shows in the magnificent lives she stages.

The characters that populate this story are drawn tightly like a suture pulling skin. It's the characters and their stories that make this novel move. York succeeds masterfully in drawing us in, making the unknown seem to breathe, and *Effigy*, true to its name, stands as a vestige of a by-gone time, resolute, staunch in its timelessness and memorable for its haunting presence.

Erastus Hammer is despicable. He's proud and vain, and the four wives he keeps in his household all bear the brunt of his simmering anger. Indeed, each of the wives bears a loss, and the novel comes to be about the things we give away or lose or walk away from, the evisceration of selves.

Dorrie, the fourth wife, is the taxidermist. Her role is to create mounted prizes of Hammer's kills. She's the youngest and the newest, and fitting into the silent battleground that is the Hammer household is hard. There's the harsh dominance of Mother Hammer, the first wife, and the furtiveness of the second and third wives, Ruth and the oddly named Thankful. Each of these women has surrendered vast parts of themselves to be part of the household, and their secrets make for powerful storytelling.

But there's also Tracker, the ranch hand who has lost himself and his people, and Bendy Drown, a child contortionist whose story of survival in a West maturing from raw frontier would make a fine novel on its own. York manages to weave a spellbinding, unwavering story out of all these diverse characters.

Against it all is the immutable presence of the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857, when a handful of Mormons dressed as Indians and their Indian allies slaughtered a wagon train of pioneers. It's this little known historical footnote that offers the novel its resonance.

For it's the things we keep secret and the things we condone that define us in the end. York understands this, and in the obdurate faith of the Mormons lies the seed of truth that challenges their faith and their sense of themselves.

The massacre is told in dreams of a crow flapping relentlessly to and fro across the scene of death, and it's anchored in the present by the wolf family that Dorrie needs to fashion into a testament to Hammer's hunting skills.

Alissa York, who garnered critical praise for her first novel *Mercy* in 2003, has written a book that, like the taxidermist at its centre, succeeds brilliantly in rendering life force to a static thing. It's grim stuff, but the evocation of history is compelling and vivid and real.