

# BOOK REVIEWS

***Polyester Pride*** by Kathryn Ellen Davis (San Francisco, CA: Robert D. Reed Publishers, 2002), 264 pp., Paperback. \$14.95.

Written as a candid story about abuse and self-defeatism, *Polyester Pride* by Kathryn Ellen Davis is a book women of all ages, cultures, and classes would find speaks to them of womanhood and life. Davis tells the tale of a fictional character she names Lisa Munson who marries right after high school in the early 1980s. Soon realizing that her husband Bill isn't the man she thought he was and married life with him isn't the fairytale she'd dreamt it would be, Lisa begins to endure life as she pushes her own wants, needs, and desires aside to attempt to fulfill those of her alcoholic husband.

Through the dialogue of the characters and the flow of the story, the reader starts to see how the class and culture of the woman surrounding Lisa have influenced her tendency to put Bill on a pedestal and bear his degrading comments and actions. She grew up seeing her mother give up her desire to go to college because of her father's demands. She was taught to be quiet and take care of her husband's needs.

It isn't until Lisa's friend Deborah returns to town that things begin to change and improve for Lisa. Deborah recommends Lisa read some books by Catharine MacKinnon (1991) and Adrienne Rich (1993) on feminism. Feminist theory becomes the theme of the book as Lisa rebuilds her dreams and takes charge of her life.

Davis presents a modern-day version of feminist theory that defines feminism as woman working toward self-assurance and passion. Through the support of Deborah and a group of elderly women and her reading, Lisa learns that it is possible to live a rich, self-fulfilling life that is undeniably her own. She begins to draw away from Bill and the expectations of the small town in which she lives to seek personal growth as her perception of success is altered. No longer does she perceive success as placating her unfaithful and abusive husband and happiness as keeping a clean house. Looking at the everyday choices she makes, she questions for whom she is making them. Are they for Bill? For her parents? For her neighbors? For herself? As she grows to recognize that her needs and perception of success matter, she begins to take charge of the direction of her life as she takes strong steps to play out her heart's desires. Lisa fights to achieve what Quindlen (2005) describes as authentic success, or the inspiration to embrace her own uniqueness. And it is a fight! Lisa ends up in family court and also is threatened by an unidentified homophile as she searches for happiness and meaning in her life. She shatters the roles she was being forced to play as she faces adversities.

You're probably wondering, as I did, what the title means. The reader learns that one of Lisa's mentors owns a lime green polyester suit that she wears

with pride to each of the women's meetings. The suit is one she wore to speak at a conference in the days when women did not wear pants at formal public meetings. The suit becomes a metaphor for her quest for her own, and women's, rights to express themselves in various ways.

This is a book I would recommend every woman read. Upon finishing it myself, I immediately passed it on to my three teenage daughters. Although I found Davis's style of writing somewhat elementary, unpolished, and at some points sensationalized, her message comes across loud and clear. She is saying to women that we need to work together to become who and what we want to be. Although women have made great strides in some areas, the characters and the community of *Polyester Pride* reflect the political structures and preconceived notions about women that remain in our present society. These notions still cause some women to live without passion and self-assurance, which is disappointing and dangerous. Davis is saying feminism is not the antiquated concept that brings to mind the old days of bra-burning and protests. It has been redefined to represent the power that together women have to improve their lives. *Polyester Pride* gives the reader hope.

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***The Belles of New England: The Women of the Textile Mills and the Families Whose Wealth They Wove*** by William Moran (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 292 pp., \$14.95.

Some nonfiction works delve so deeply into their subjects that the only reader who can enjoy the book is a scholar whose life revolves around that topic. If it is a book that contains needed information and research, then these more academic tomes fulfill their mission.

But there are other nonfiction writers who set their stories against the larger tapestry of history and show how any given topic is merely one thread in the larger story of past human existence. William Moran, a former writer, editor and producer at CBS evening news, has accomplished this with his *Belles of New England*, an intricately researched study of the textile mills of Massachusetts and Maine and the folks who labored within them. In addition to examining the intricacies of the mills themselves, Moran sets their rise and fall against what was happening in the U.S. at the time, from the Civil War to the rise of labor unions and corporation culture.

Initially, however, the story of the mills revolves around the women who worked within them. Most were recruited from nearby farms to live and work in the mill towns like Lawrence and Lowell, Mass. Once there, the lives of these

early 19<sup>th</sup>-century women were closely monitored by the business. Ten-to-twelve hour shifts six days per week were the norm. At night, the young women would live in dorms, which were closely monitored by older women. Instead of rebelling against this rigid monitoring, these women thrived, given that their lives back on the farm offered little hope of living independently. —They know that marrying a farmer is a very serious business,|| wrote *The Atlantic Monthly* as quoted in *Belles*. —They remember their worn-out mothers.||

For the first two dozen years, the mills offered solace, disposable income and limited freedom to an overlooked population. Workers discovered untapped talents and strength. A few formed their own magazine in 1840, *The Offering*, which was the first publication wholly run by women. As the decades passed and life within the mills grew less idyllic due to increased demands for large profits as well as shoddy construction and decreased access to slave-picked cheap cotton, the descendents of these women helped lead the union movement and abolitionism.

But the story of New England textiles isn't solely about newly-transplanted farm girls. Moran deftly weaves in the huge immigrant population that also gave their labor to this industry. Largely made up of Irish families driven from the Isle during the potato famine, the stories of these people also touches on ideas of assimilation and xenophobia that the U.S. still struggles with. Also, Moran eloquently writes about the economic shift from a mostly agrarian economy to an industrial one. The picture he presents isn't always scenic. He quotes historian Hannah Josephson, who wrote —it was of the textile companies that the term 'soulless corporation' was first used in American journalism.||

Moran's text is a satisfying read for both the academic and the casually curious reader. *Belles* also makes you want to know more about both these women and the times they labored in, which should be a crucial component of any examination of their legacy.

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***Refugee Women*** (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) by Susan Forbes Martin (New York: Lexington Books, 2004), 174 pp., \$19.95.

*Refugee Women*, by Susan Forbes Martin, is a masterful look at the plight of refugees and internally displaced persons with an emphasis on the special problems and needs of women. Martin has twenty years field experience working with refugees. She served as the Executive Director of the United States Commission on Immigration Reform from 1992 to 1997 and was Managing Editor of *World Migration Report: 2000*. She currently serves as the

Director of the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University. She is also a founder of the Board of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. This vast experience adds great legitimacy to this study.

Writing in a clear, concise style, Martin expertly details six key issues facing refugee women today. By discussing the roles of women in their home communities and the roles they play as refugees, she highlights the total disruption displaced women confront. They face the breakdown of their family structures, economic disaster, domestic violence, sexual violence and exploitation, and loss of status within their communities.

Women also face unique legal issues as refugees. Many laws designed to protect refugees do not always include women specifically, leaving them very vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. They are often trapped in host countries or camps. Women are frequently attacked and sometimes even killed by male refugees, soldiers, and even aid workers. More needs to be done in officially registering women independently rather than as part of a family group, recognizing that they are vulnerable in ways men are not, and protecting those not accompanied by men. Agencies such as the International Red Cross, the World Food Program, and United Nations relief agencies provide essential supplies to refugees such as food, water, medical supplies and shelter but, again, women are often unable to attain these supplies due to a variety of constraints.

Additionally, Martin explores the economic activities and needs of refugee women. Even as refugees, women are the primary care-givers to children and the elderly, thus it is essential they have access to economic resources. Due to cultural and religious barriers, many of these women are prevented from working outside the home or working in close proximity to men. Women also fear for their safety when leaving refugee compounds and this inhibits their ability to find gainful work. Many often turn to prostitution to feed their families and this exposes them to violence, disease and unwanted pregnancies.

Another issue Martin highlights is women's health needs. Acquiring sanitary supplies, accessing medical facilities and family planning clinics is often difficult for women and as a result they often suffer from social isolation and poor health. Attention to psychological problems is also critical, especially if women have been the victims of rape, torture or have experienced the violence of war. While some agencies do attend to these needs, Martin points out that not enough is being done in all places refugees reside.

Although much of Martin's book is poignantly sad, she points out that changes have been made over the last ten years to address the needs of displaced women and their children. Making sure women have equal and unhindered access to water and food supplies is a policy of most humanitarian aid agencies and refugee camps today, although achieving this end is not always

possible in extremely unstable locations. Medical facilities started staffing female workers when it was realized that many refugee women were reluctant to visit male doctors. Likewise, having female staff available in refugee camps allows women to discuss their experiences without embarrassment. Income generating projects for women and access to educational facilities for girls allows them to better their lives. While great strides have been made, much more still needs to be done and Martin offers practical solutions to ongoing problems. That is one thing which makes this book unique.

Finally, Martin discusses the issues of repatriation, settlement in the country of asylum and settlement in a third country. While repatriation is the most desirable goal, it is not always possible and efforts need to be made to integrate refugees into their new host environments as successful participants and not simply as marginal people. Women do not always have the skills necessary to make this transition and so it is essential they be allowed access to training and educational programs.

While supporting her arguments with hard facts and statistics, Martin constantly reminds us that the key focus of this book is people. The sensitive inclusion of interviews and diaries of refugee women gives faces to the facts. We are reminded, often jarringly, that we are reading about human beings with hopes, dreams, and fears who have suffered great loss and hardship. The words of aid workers allow us a glimpse inside the camps and holding centers where we see the stark reality of refugee life with all its deprivation. *Refugee Women* is an extremely valuable and enlightening book.

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***The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love*** by John Shelby Spong (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 2005), 310 pp., \$24.95.

The author and co-author of twenty books, John Shelby Spong not only challenges his readers, he invites believers and non-believers alike to challenge him. Indeed, his writing prompts not just reader response but profound questions from his readers. His current volume, *The Sins of Scripture*, will either inspire or deeply disturb those already familiar with the Christian-Hebrew writings of the New and Old Testaments of the Bible. Why? Spong tackles issues and offers interpretations few do, e.g., he suggests that St. Paul was gay and his hostile position on homosexuality was a reflection of his own self loathing. Spong also argues that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married.

My own continuing questions (especially as a woman) concerning interpretations of Scripture and the role of semantics and translations are

relevant to what Spong brings to light in preparing us to approach the Bible with new eyes.

John Shelby Spong, a priest-scholar in the fields of theology and religious studies and the Episcopal Bishop of Newark for over twenty years, until his retirement in 2000, describes himself not simply as a firm God-believer, but as a —believer in exile.¶ He has long been immersed in contemporary biblical scholarship which is rooted in linguistics and history and argues that historical context plays a role in biblical interpretation. Spong details how the Bible has been misread and how its overall message of divine love eclipses what he lays out as ‘texts of terror.’ Specifically, Bishop Spong scrutinizes those texts used to justify ‘homophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny, corporal punishment, and environmental degradation. Thus, he explores *Genesis* 2:18-23— ‘She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man, *Leviticus* 18:22— ‘You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination,’ and *Proverbs* 23:13-14— ‘Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you beat him with a rod, he will not die...you will save his life from Sheol.’

Bishop Spong is accustomed to facing sharp criticism from staunch traditionalists, bible literalists, and fundamentalists who oppose his style of thinking and subscribe to a literal, unchangeable view of the Bible. No doubt, many scholars of religion will not accept Spong’s in-depth examination of the —word of God,¶ and the varied linguistic meanings of the Bible but, they hopefully will acknowledge and respect his life-long commitment to formal Biblical study and research at Union Theological Seminary, Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools and Edinburgh, Oxford, and Cambridge. Spong notes that he has delivered more than two hundred lectures each year in the past five years which he calls —stretching experiences [which] stimulate his mind,¶ and are a —proven catalyst for writing.¶ What this deeply dedicated scholar has realized in this book is to challenge those who may still cling to an —appalling theology¶ —not merely patriarchal, but what the Jesus Seminar Founder, Robert W. Funk, calls —tribal attitudes toward creation, women and children.¶ Spong argues repeatedly that —the use of the Bible to justify our prejudices must be abandoned.¶ However, we should —not abandon the sacred story in which *The Sins of Scripture* are embedded...the ‘terrible texts,’...We rather claim it for our own.¶ (p. 297).

I recommend this book to any reader as a new growth experience—as a challenge to one’s own thinking — for, how do we know what we really think until we do hear what we say?

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