

MAGGIE RAYNER

**IN
POLYGAMY'S
SHADOW**

**From a Mormon Childhood
to a Life of Choice**



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Author's Note

This book is a memoir. It is a true story according to my best recollections, given the inevitable flaws of memory.

I have chosen to publish my memoir under my pen name rather than my family name. The names of my family, and the names and identifying characteristics of friends and other people mentioned in my story, have been changed to protect their privacy. Places and locations remain the same. In some instances, I've compressed events and time periods in service of the narrative. Otherwise, this is a true and honest account, and I have not knowingly misrepresented any material facts.

*For my children,
who received Mormon tapes in the mail
instead of loving grandparents in their lives*

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IN POLYGAMY'S SHADOW

Introduction

I LIVED A LIE to stay safe. My parents were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the LDS or Mormon church, founded in the 1800s by Joseph Smith.

The church portrays Mormonism as smiling families, with sparkling white teeth, living in Utah. Disillusioned members describe the church as a birthday cake filled with maggots. Those outside the faith consider the founder, Joseph Smith, to be—at the very least—a charlatan, a sex addict, and a pedophile. After Smith started his new church, he committed adultery with a young girl living in his home, who became pregnant. He framed his moral lapse as spiritual wifery, and opened the floodgates for his sexual appetites and those of his male followers. Under the auspices of plural marriage, or polygyny (one man having multiple wives), commonly known as polygamy, women became commodities to be traded. Their children were schooled to carry on Smith's religious rituals. The bonds of the family unit were weakened or rendered nonexistent. Loyalty to church over family continued after Smith's death. In the opening years of my life, in the 1950s and 60s, my parents placed the needs of the church above the needs of our family.

From my earliest memory, the limitations imposed on me by the church and by my parents were: don't think, don't feel, don't question. My activities and friendships were monitored. The books I read were censored. The daily mantra was: accept, obey, and take your preordained place in the patriarchal order. The threat of violence from my father, a highly respected church leader, rendered me an unwilling participant in the faith.

I fled home at eighteen to a shared house of non-Mormon

young women, and an entry-level office job in the city. I moved less than ten miles from home, yet it was as if I had entered a foreign country without a map or guidebook. For eighteen years, my life had been defined by the parameters of the religion. There were rigid rules about alcohol and tobacco, caffeine, clothing, music, entertainment, sex, how often to attend services, how much money to give in tithing and donations, and whom to socialize with.

Individuals' decisions about whether or not to follow these rules were unacceptable. Church leaders defined purity and goodness. The world outside their influence was considered evil. Men had absolute authority over their wives and children. Dysfunctional family systems flourished, including the one in my family. Both my parents were emotionally and intellectually immature, governed by their fear of an unforgiving Mormon god and the authority of their church leaders. Their lives were church-centered, and they were dependent on it.

Anytime I expressed an opinion or desire that conflicted with LDS doctrine, I was stamped down by my mother, and if he heard, by my father. My parents blindly obeyed the church. Through its eyes, and those of my parents, there was something wrong with me. I was flawed. Whenever I told my mother that I didn't want to go to services she admonished: "That's Lucifer talking, not you. He's a trickster, lying in wait to trip you up and get you to turn your back on your Heavenly Father, any way he can." I didn't buy it. Yet I had no choice but to live it.

I've been asked why, of the seven surviving children in my family, I was the only one who protested. Both my sisters were married in the Mormon temple. On graduating from high school, my oldest and youngest brothers served church missions, and they, too, had temple weddings. I don't have a definitive explanation for my resistance to Mormonism. My mother didn't welcome my birth? I learned early that I couldn't trust either of my parents, and that my mother lied to me? I was smarter than my siblings? Take your pick.

In 2011, the leader of the polygamous Mormon community in Bountiful, British Columbia, was in the news for tax fraud. My

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sympathies were with the children and young girls of Bountiful. I understood, from my childhood experience, why there was no need for barbed wire or metal bars to keep them contained and submissive. Indoctrination, isolation, and continuous pregnancies were sufficient. Their ongoing plight motivated me to write the article, “Polygamy and Me: Growing Up Mormon,” published in the *Vancouver Sun*. I wrote about my polygamous ancestors and my parents’ belief that they would live the principle of plural marriage in the afterlife. I wrote about my exposure to polygamy as an adolescent. And I wrote about my belief that Mormonism is a crock.

Reader response surprised me. What was so familiar to me, although a part of my life that I’d hidden, initiated a deluge of questions. I squirmed under the scrutiny, grappling with embarrassment about having revealed what I’d kept secret and was a source of shame. Everyone who approached me about the article wanted to know more about my Mormon upbringing.

The dam that I’d built to contain my childhood experiences began to crumble, then burst. I sat back down at my laptop. Two questions surfaced. Would a baby brother have lived if my father had taken him to a doctor instead of insisting that a church blessing would heal him? And did my overburdened and depressed mother purposely try to drown my sister and me? As an adult, I can only guess at the answers. As a child, in survival mode, these questions never occurred to me. They were simply confusing and traumatic events among the many that I knew of in my family, or lived through without choice. I present them as examples of the environment I was raised in, and the only world I knew.

My intent in writing my memoir is to answer the questions I’ve been asked about the practices of the religion I experienced growing up and my responses to them. I also write as a cautionary tale to anyone who is considering the religion, and as a testament to those leaving or who have already left. Readers desiring to compare LDS scripture with Christianity, to review the DNA evidence refuting Smith’s claims, or to get updates on supposed Mormon prophecies since my childhood, can find information online. Much

of what I write about is not acknowledged by the church or any of its members. Secrecy and denial are a necessary part of practicing the faith.

Mormon history and practices have been edited by the church to attract new members. Anyone investigating the faith is embraced by a nurturing social network, with the message of families first. After baptism, converts are gently encouraged to align their choice of friends, how they spend their time and money, and their family life with the mores of the congregation. The pretense of love is the lock on an invisible prison. LDS public relations grind out the slogan, "More people than ever are joining today." Yet the online forums of members raised in the faith—those that are leaving—tell a different story. Pain and grief pour from their posts. Their words weep with betrayal and loss as they navigate the maze ahead: on their own, often without family. The average person takes for granted the basic beliefs and skills that those who renounce the faith must master: understanding what personal needs are and their entitlement to them, dreaming their own dreams, and believing they are possible. I traveled the road to personhood by trial and error, a consumer of self-help books and therapy. My heart goes out to those yet to follow. Leaving is only the beginning. Creating a life of independence and choice, from the inside out, is the journey.

Although I left the church, its impact on me, and on my children and granddaughters, remains. My mother sent Mormon tapes to my children in the mail, instead of being a loving presence in their lives. My children's birthdays and Christmases passed without notice from my mother and father. My children have no contact with their aunts and uncles or cousins. No loving or social bonds outside the church were formed. Life in my family was about church, not personal connection. My granddaughters have never met my brothers or sisters, or any of my nieces and nephews.

A few years ago, I had a conversation, or rather a non-conversation, with my eldest and best-loved brother, Rob, during an afternoon visit on one of his trips to British Columbia. At the time,

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he was a businessman and lived in a predominately Mormon town in southern Idaho. I saw him every ten years or so, for a few hours. Seven years older, he had always been kind and caring, and a surrogate father to me in my childhood.

“When it comes to financial investments,” he told me that afternoon over lunch, “the church advises us that we should . . .” Stunned, my immediate thought was, *What do you think?* Yet I stayed quiet, afraid to speak, reverting to the behavior of my childhood. If I’d been the person I am today, rather than the made-up, voiceless person I was as a child and that he knew, would he still love me? Would I ever see him again? I couldn’t risk it.

I chose the name Maggie Rayner as a pen name to allow me, safely and freely, to write my thoughts and feelings about the Mormon church and my family. While I refer to myself as Maggie in my memoir, that wasn’t my name at the time. Most people today know me as Maggie, a woman who bears no resemblance to the person I once was, chained by another name to a past that offered no hope of emotional wholeness or happiness.

Complicated Sorrow - 2004

IT'S FIVE-THIRTY IN THE MORNING and pitch-black. My Toyota Tercel rattles across the loading ramp onto the Bowen Island ferry, headed for Horseshoe Bay on the mainland. The lights on the car deck dim and shadowy figures stumble up the stairs to the passenger lounge. I shiver in my Tercel and stay put. I don't want to talk to anyone.

I have no desire to visit Dad in the hospital in Penticton. On my last visit to his care home four years ago, I drove Mom over and counted the minutes till we were out of there. How much time does Dad have left? And how is Mom coping? It would have been so much easier for me to stay home. Go? Stay home? Argh! Which will I regret?

The surface of the Trans-Canada Highway east is icy. I take it slow. It's eight o'clock now and the sky shifts from black to gray. Not much of an improvement. Snow falls lightly at the lodge in Manning Park, my stop for coffee and breakfast halfway through the trip. My stomach is in knots. How will I feel when I see Dad? I *could* turn around and drive back home, no one's stopping me. I slurp the strong brew and choke down bacon and eggs without tasting them. I'm an adult now, with my own family, not a frightened child. Competent. Successful. People respect me. I pay the check with a twenty-dollar bill and don't wait for change.

Mom phoned yesterday and told me that Dad had been transferred, stricken with a flu virus, from his care home to a private room at Penticton Regional Hospital. At ninety-four his mind wanders, although his body has stayed strong. That was until he caught the flu. He and Mom are in separate care homes. Mom's

mind is alert; only her body has deteriorated. She's sure to go on and on about the Mormon church. I'll keep my mouth shut, as always. She's upset enough already.

Close to the sprawling Okanagan town, Skaha Lake comes into view. The sun is sharp and the sky suddenly blue. Good thing I remembered my sunglasses. I drive straight to Trinity Care Home, take a few deep breaths, and go in. Mom is waiting for me in her room. As soon as I see her hunched over in her wheelchair, all I want to do is take care of her.

Outside, the dry air crackles with cold. I settle her and her wheelchair into my Tercel and drive the short distance to the hospital, careful not to jar her frail body. Her mouth is a tight line and her eyes blink away moisture. With the harsh smell of disinfectant filling my nose, I wheel her from the elevator through the hallway to Dad's room on the fourth floor.

Dad is unconscious. Harmless. An IV on a metal pole drips fluid into a vein in his hand. My stomach relaxes. "I'm sure you want time alone with him, Mom. I'll be back in a little while." Her eyes are liquid with pain. I pause in the doorway and glance back. Bent double with osteoporosis, Mom clasps the limp hand of the man she's been married to for sixty-three years. Her lips move, but no sound comes out. Maybe she's praying. At the end of the hallway, in the family room, I sink into one of the soft chairs, cradle my face in my hands, and weep.

Back at Trinity with Mom, her body appears smaller, more crumpled than when we left for the hospital. What is she thinking and feeling, knowing Dad will soon be gone? A nurse's aide bustles in to take care of her. At least she has the comfort of her belief in Mormon heaven, and her church family, for support. Hopefully, her church family will visit. I want her to be well taken care of even though I'm not able to do it.

I return to the hospital and sit beside Dad. He's still unconscious, but twists and turns and pushes the sheet and blanket away from his body. I gently pull both back in place. My chair semi-reclines, comfortable enough to doze half-sitting up. There's no

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longer any need for the caution around him that I never grew out of. He'll never erupt in anger against me again. I'm safe. I'm in the same room with Dad and I'm safe. He can't ever hurt me again.

Hour by hour my vigil slides by. The terror trapped inside me for decades drains away. Peacefulness takes its place. I visualize Dad as he was in my childhood, dark-haired and handsome, wearing a suit and tie and a crisp white shirt. He's smiling. In his hand is his briefcase, filled with books of scripture. I picture him at home in his jeans and cowboy hat, a different man. And I think of myself as a small child, trying to please him, vying for crumbs of attention. Is there anything I need to say to him before he dies?

As Dad lies unconscious, is there a part of him aware and hanging on in the hope that his six other children will visit? Does he know he's dying? I have no idea exactly what happens after death. I don't believe, as he did all his life, that there are multiple worlds waiting for him to rule over or women eager to bear him spiritual children. Dad's life as an obedient worker bee for the church has simply been in service to an 1800s testosterone-fueled fantasy of Joseph Smith's, a fantasy that enriches the corporate coffers of the Mormon church today.

I comfort myself with the belief that after death, a loving existence with no Mormon requirements waits. Spirituality is important to me, not religion. I believe in an afterlife filled with loving energy that we all have access to here on earth. Different words are used throughout the world to describe what I call God.

Occasionally, if I think about dying and the mystery of what happens after my spirit leaves my body, a chasm of fear cracks open and leaves me faint. Then certainty rushes in like a tide and washes through me. I'm convinced that there is something more. Something fluid, expansive, and loving that can't be defined in language the way organized religions do. Something impossible to comprehend through the narrow lens of humanness.

The dogma of Mormonism has spoiled me for opening myself to any authority other than myself to interpret spirituality or the afterlife. I've searched for answers in Buddhism, Wicca, and nonde-

nominal churches and come up empty. I trust in a peace that passes all understanding, impossible to catalog, reached through a personal connection with universal loving energy. I experienced this peace as a child, when the forest and streams called to me and offered comfort, and when I gazed up at the endless night sky filled with stars. It speaks to my soul in the twilight state between dreaming and waking, and flows through my being when I quiet myself and ask.

Ten days after my vigil beside Dad in the hospital, I travel back to Penticton with my husband for Dad's funeral. On the ten-minute drive from our downtown motel to the Mormon chapel on South Main Street, the clock in our VW van starts ticking. The hair on my arms stands up. In eight years of owning this van, the hands on the clock have never budged. "Do you think he's here, trying to tell me something?" I whisper.

Is Dad's spirit directing the electromagnetic field of the clock? Has he kick-started it in an attempt to tell me something? If so, I have no idea what or whether I'm the only one he's trying to communicate with. As we drive, my eyes are riveted on the black metal arrows and the minuscule, steady progress of the minute hand. I've heard stories about clocks stopping, grandfather clocks chiming, and phonographs playing on their own after a death.

At the chapel, wall-to-wall people spill out the front doors onto the sidewalk in the frosty morning sun. We park in the rear lot and go in the back door. A cacophony of voices in the hallway and foyer roars in my ears. My oldest brother Rob and his wife Ann have picked up Mom and her wheelchair from Trinity Care Home, directly across the street from the church.

Dad's open coffin rests on a gurney in the women's Relief Society room used for informal gatherings. Members file past to pay their respects. We had a family showing at Everden Rust funeral home last night.

My husband and I join my siblings, all dressed in black, on one of the front pews in the chapel. I turn my head to check who's behind us, but don't recognize anyone. The air is heavy, as if filled

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with a sluggish fog. A complicated sorrow ambushes me. It rolls through me in waves, takes up residence, and makes it hard to breathe. I swallow and blink back tears. Am I grieving the loss of what I never received from Dad or the loss of my preschool adoration of him? My sister Sarah, beside me, reaches out and touches my arm. I keep my eyes on the podium.

The program has, of course, been arranged by my brothers, although my sisters and I are included. Rob and my youngest brother, Peter, the only practicing Mormons left among my siblings, sit at the front facing the congregation with the bishop (the ecclesiastical leader of the ward or congregation) and his two counselors. The bishop announces the opening song: "I Know that My Redeemer Lives." While the organ pumps out the prelude, I pick up the black book from the rack on the back of the pew in front of me and turn to page 136. The lyrics are familiar from my childhood, as if no time has passed: "I know that my Redeemer Lives. What comfort this sweet sentence gives . . ."

After an opening prayer by one of the Pentiction congregation, Rob is the first of my brothers to speak. As my turn on the program gets closer, I start sweating. Will I be able to open my mouth? If only I had a bottle of water with me. Anything loving I have to say about Dad froze inside me after his beating when I was five. What can I say about the man who reduced me to an animal with his belt while he laughed and forced me to hit my sister? What can I say about the father I watched hurt my family in so many ways? The only redeeming thing I can think of is that when we lived in Gibsons, he bought his favorite maple walnut ice cream, in round two-and-a-half gallon tubs, for us kids, and yard-long boxes of cones.

For Mom's sake, now isn't the time to talk about my belief that the patriarchal Mormon church is a system that attracts, honors, and perpetuates generations of men similar to my father. Dad never talked about his childhood. My grandfather's treatment of Dad and his siblings had to have been a model for how Dad treated our family. It has carried on. I've seen my younger brother Michael knock

his ten-year-old son from a chair to the floor, and I've heard the boy's screams as Michael beat him with his belt. How do my other brothers treat their children behind closed doors?

The one thing I have is Dad's journal from his missionary years, which Mom gave me. As I read it, I discovered a man with a grade eight education and poorly written grammar, who'd gone to agricultural college. He'd had some of his poetry published in the *Improvement Era*, a church publication. He'd yearned to be an airplane pilot, and his ambition was to research and write American archeology.

Instead, he put his desires on hold for eight years while he worked and sent money home to feed his ten brothers and sisters. I've never given much thought to Dad's life before he married Mom. Now I can't imagine that there was much happiness in it, other than his love of horses and the church. In his journal, he wrote of his life being stalled and his hope that serving a mission for the church would provide the answer. Some mornings, he was so depressed he had trouble getting out of bed.

In Salt Lake City, while at the mission home training to preach the gospel, he attended sessions at the temple, the highest place of worship in the Mormon faith. He was promised that if he committed his life to the church, he would become a god and king in heaven. After each session, he floated on the high he had experienced during the secret ceremonies, convinced that the euphoria he had felt was God witnessing the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's gospel to him.

My name is called to speak. I suck in my breath and squeeze past the knees of my siblings to the end of the pew. I walk up three short steps, stand behind the podium, and glance over the congregation of strangers. My body vibrates as I lay pages on the flat, wooden surface and grasp the edges for support. Face flaming, I swallow and introduce myself. My voice is hesitant, thready. Then, head down, I forget about other people and read for myself.

In 1937, my father served a mission for the church in the Texas-Louisiana mission field. He kept a diary while he was away. Mom entrusted his

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journal to me, and I consider myself to be the most fortunate of his children to hold it in safekeeping. In reading his daily writings, I met a man I never knew, and my life has been enriched as a result . . .

My talk fills the allotted five minutes, no more, no less. I move back to my seat, face still flushed, relieved it's over. My impersonal goodbye is for the man Dad was before he became my father. It contained no fond memories and no affection for my life with him. It's the best I can do for the man I can't honor as my parent, but whom the Mormon church holds in high esteem. My talk is for Mom. It's the price I'm willing to pay to please her, and to be a part of a family.



The Author

Maggie Rayner lives on the West Coast of British Columbia, with a view of the ocean. She often visits Gibsons. Sailing, biking, and hiking endure as passions. Creating beautiful interiors for herself and others is a dream realized.

For further information visit the website www.maggierayner.com.

“Maggie Rayner has produced an engaging and immediate memoir of growing up Mormon...a snapshot of a religious community riven by its tumultuous history, still haunted by the shadow – and occasionally the reality – of polygamy.”

**Craig E. Jones,
Professor of Law, Thompson Rivers University**

For Maggie Rayner, conditional love and the threat of violence were the lock on the prison of church and family in which she was raised.

Set in the 1950s and 60s on the West Coast of British Columbia, In Polygamy’s Shadow: From a Mormon Childhood to a Life of Choice chronicles Maggie’s personal struggle to keep herself from being devoured by the Mormon church and her parents’ unrelenting loyalty to it. She questions why her family eats food from a garbage dump while her father rises in the church hierarchy and her parents pay tithing on every dollar that comes into the household. She fears for her future when polygamists from Bountiful visit her congregation on the hunt for young brides.

As the church tightens its grip, Maggie battles for the right to think for herself and make her own choices. She realizes at a young age that she will have to make the ultimate choice between family and freedom. In Polygamy’s Shadow is both a story of survival and a cautionary tale to anyone thinking of joining the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

www.maggierayner.com