

A Feminist Looks at Polygamy

Real Property. By Sara Davidson. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1980. \$10.95.

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In an earlier best-seller, *Loose Change*, Sara Davidson documented the impact of the Sixties on her fictionalized self and two other intelligent females. *Real Property* moves on into the Seventies, but not in novel form. It is a collection of seventeen articles, nearly all of which have previously appeared in such magazines as *Ramparts* and *Esquire*. Some articles are based on interviews and observations of notable people: Jacqueline Susann, Richard Alpert (the Harvard psychologist who gave himself over to Indian mysticism and adopted the name of Baba Ram Dass), Mrs. Salvador Allende, a rock group called Rhinoceros. Other selections are more personal, describing Davidson's trip through the Sinai Desert or her arrest in Venice, California for growing marijuana.

Of perhaps the greatest interest for LDS readers is the article called "The Man With Ten Wives." Together with "The Nelsons" (yes—that's Ozzie, Harriet, Ricky, and David) this article comprises Chapter 4, "A Happy Family." Both the chapter title and the juxtaposition are ironic: her account of the Nelsons reveals longstanding discontent in a family that was once America's paradigm of happiness, and "The Man With Ten Wives" acknowledges that happiness does indeed appear to be possible under polygamy.

The "man with ten wives" is Alexander Joseph, who converted to Mormonism, left mainstream Mormonism for a fundamentalist polygamous group, and then set up his own polygamous establishment in the desert. The Joseph household received Sara Davidson as a visitor in 1975. "You know, Sara," one of the wives tells her, "if you stay much longer you'll have to stay forever. Us

wives do the recruiting." Davidson admits at the outset that her purpose was to "seek out the Josephs and find the flaw in their story." Her feminism—perhaps the closest thing to a single unifying thread holding the seventeen articles together—has not predisposed her kindly toward polygamy. And she in fact editorializes more explicitly about polygamy than about anything else in the book. Whereas she may simply describe for the reader's judgment Jacqueline Susann's questionable literary motives or the smug California commune dwellers who "are experimenting with herbs and Indian healing remedies to become free of manufactured medicinal drugs, but see no contradiction in continuing to swallow mind-altering chemicals," she is much more blunt in her reaction to the household in Glen Canyon. When she is flying in Joseph's private plane with Joseph and Carmen, a twenty-three-year-old wife who is a law student, the experience is finally overwhelming. She can contain neither her scorn nor her breakfast: "I have never been sick on a plane but it is happening now. This is too much to deal with. A thirty-nine-year-old phony Indian [Joseph] preserved in aspic from the Sixties and all these nubile, prim girls mouthing 'correct principles.'"

Yet she notes many things that intrigue her: Joseph's piercing voice, his pistol with the handle engraved "for Christ's sake," the wives' mutual helpfulness and their preoccupation with their responsibility for bearing children, and finally her realization that "the marriage works for these people . . . each wife adds a new dimension to the family." Her admiration for certain of the wives battles with her assumption that no emotionally healthy woman could elect to become a polygamous wife.

Davidson is unquestionably a skilled journalist, approaching her various tasks with frank curiosity and writing in an informal, inviting style. Her choice of sub-