

Young at Heart

Set for Life by Judith Freeman (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 312 pp., \$19.95.

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IN FIVE SHORT YEARS Judith Freeman has established herself as a serious contender in the arena of American fiction. Her first major work was a collection of short stories, *Family Attractions*, published by Viking Penguin in 1988. Next came a novel, *The Chinchilla Farm*, published by W. W. Norton in 1989, and then in 1991 the work here reviewed, which is of the same high quality as its predecessors.

Reared a Mormon, Freeman employs Mormon motifs in some of her short stories and in her first novel. Especially powerful is the story "The Death of a Mormon Elder" from *Family Attractions*—a story about a convert from Mexico who in a Utah setting reverts to his native beliefs. *The Chinchilla Farm*, about a woman who sheds both Utah and her Mormon identity, would seem to reflect Freeman's own process of distancing herself from her Mormon past.

Mormons are conspicuously absent from her latest novel, which takes place in the Bear Lake district of southeastern Idaho, with brief sorties into Utah, Wyoming, and California. It abounds with small town characters who might be Mormons but don't have to be, since the precise nature of their religion isn't an issue. Even in her earlier fiction, Freeman has appealed basically to a general American readership. One of her achievements is that she treats regional materials in such

a way that their broader American implications become visible.

Set for Life presents a family affected by a bizarre eventuality. Phil Doucet, a retired carpenter, is ironically restored to health by a transplanted heart salvaged from the brain-dead body of his own grandson. The dead boy's parents, Phil's daughter Joyce and her husband Dan, grieve profoundly, while Phil's other daughter Helen offers comfort and support. Though the daughters no longer live in the town where their father resides, they remain loyally bonded to him. Phil remembers his eccentric wife and her parents, now dead, with gratitude and respect, as do his daughters. Phil's current friends and his daughters' spouses and their relatives enter the scene at various times, contributing to the solidarity of this small family.

This doesn't mean Phil and his daughters are innocent of conflict with one another. Helen admits to herself that she loves many of her friends more than her sister Joyce. Phil too dislikes the conservative religious and political attitudes of Joyce and Dan and at one moment cruelly exposes a well-intentioned deception Joyce has practiced in order to make her invalid father-in-law a little happier. However, the important fact is that the family functions despite its internal frictions. In a time of crisis, these people can rely on one another.

This work features another major character, who remains unconnected from Phil and his family till mid-novel. She is a pregnant sixteen-year-old runaway named Louise. Her stepfather is a white racist and neo-Nazi. He belongs to a paramili-

tary group that intends to purify a rural Idaho county of Jews, blacks, and evolutionists by burning crosses and threatening violence in other ways. When her stepfather knocks her mother down with a blow intended for Louise, Louise decides to run away. Escaping this violent man and seeking an abortion are her only clear objectives. Otherwise, her wanderings are aimless.

Fortunately, she is taken in by a young truck driver, who lets her stay in his apartment in Casper, Wyoming, and eventually conveys her to Los Angeles where she has an abortion. After that, they cohabit for a time in Pocatello, Idaho. Fundamentally a decent person, the truck driver hopes to marry Louise. However, they bicker constantly, and after a quarrelsome ride on a mountain road, Louise escapes from him and begs a ride from Phil Doucet, who happens to be nearby.

Having nowhere else to go, Louise boldly asks Phil to let her stay the night in his house. Then she asks to stay till the weekend, and after that she asks to stay a while longer. Fully aware of the impropriety of taking in a displaced juvenile, Phil agrees to her request reluctantly. He seems prompted to make this imprudent concession by the youthful, generous heart of his dead grandson. Phil's borrowed heart is frequently mentioned throughout the novel. In fact, imagery of the human heart often appears in relation to other characters as well.

Louise and Phil rub against one another in predictable ways. She finds his countrified manners quaint and is disgusted by the fact he hasn't had a working TV for many years. He, for his part, can't tolerate her tough, lewd talk, nor can he understand her passion for stark red lipstick and baggy, worn-out clothes. He inquires into her past but learns only that she comes from a home dominated by an abusive neo-Nazi. Despite their quarreling, he recognizes that he is becoming attached to her. As for Louise, for the first time in her life she understands how a

family should be, and she wants to stay on indefinitely in Phil's house.

There's a good deal of suspense in all this, because Phil's daughters and neighbors quickly become aware of the girl's presence. There seem to be no easy solutions for a girl as troubled and poorly prepared as Louise. However, the novel does arrive at an affirmative ending, whose details will be left for the reader to discover. The important fact is that Louise is put on the road toward a constructive, responsible life through Phil's supporting love.

Louise is the means by which Freeman imports urgent American issues into the tranquil setting of the Bear Lake valley. In modern America, freeways, television, and consumer economics make rural places susceptible to the problems that afflict big cities; in effect, the rural has become suburban. Louise is a walking repository of American problems. She knows a brutal racism intimately. She has been made pregnant during her teen years by an irresponsible male. By the practical fact of her own abortion, she has entered a heated national debate on the pro-choice side. Most important, though she tries to be tough, she is representative of the underparented child, the child who has not known steady love and encouragement from adults.

At one moment Phil remembers a TV interview with an anthropologist who emphasized "the plight of young people in America, the decline of love, the despair she saw on the faces of children who had been abandoned by parents whose own personal lives took precedence. It was the children who really suffered in these times, she said, and the only solution was for everyone to take a child" (p. 203).

This is what Freeman's novel is about. For her, the most important remedy for healing modern America is a sufficient love for the nation's children. That's a profound message. Unloved children become unloving and criminal adults. Furthermore, it's a message Freeman articulates without preaching. It emerges simply from