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Women's Studies

In Full Bloom: Tales of Women in Their Prime
Sharon Creeden
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“Mature women are like fully open flowers—soft, voluminous, responsive to the wind, yielding to the touch,” says Creeden who has selected thirty folktales reflecting issues women face, including childbirth, aging and death. Each tale is paired with a vignette about a notable American woman. The tales are from a wide variety of countries including China, Ireland, Mexico and the United States. Creeden began collecting these tales more than a decade ago. She notes: “One reason was professional: as a storyteller, I was telling less to children’s groups and more to women’s groups. Women wanted to hear stories about women. The second reason was personal: I sought guidance from stories about women who had lived through the experiences which I was living.”

In most cases, the pairings work well. “The Lion’s Whiskers,” an Ethiopian folktale, tells of Bizunesh’s efforts to gain the affection of her stepson. Her kindnesses rebuffed, Bizunesh visits a wise woman who promises to make a magic charm—if Bizunesh supplies three whiskers from the chin of a lion. The lessons Bizunesh learns in getting close to the lion enable her to gain her stepson’s trust. This tale is paired with a profile of Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln, stepmother to ten-year-old Abraham Lincoln. Unable to read, she insisted the children attend school and purchased books whenever she was able. Johnston Lincoln blended the two families and one of her children later said, “when father and mother married he had children and … she took the children and mixed us all up together like hasty pudding, and has not known us apart since.”

In a folktale from Turkey, a clever woman helps a dust sweeper trick a corrupt judge into returning the poor man’s life savings. The tale is paired with a profile of Belva Ann Lockwood, who entered George Washington University law school with fourteen other women in 1870. Only Lockwood and one other woman completed the two-year program. When the university refused to grant their diplomas because the male students objected to women graduates,

Lockwood appealed to President Ulysses S. Grant, ex-officio president of the school. Within twenty-six days her diploma arrived, and Lockwood set up private practice.

In Full Bloom is not meant for use in an academic setting, but this collection of tales will be of interest to the general reader, particularly women “in their prime.”

Rebecca Maksel