Clarion Review

General

Leaving Riverton
Jodi Barrows
SNS Publishing
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Four young women meet the Wild West when they leave home in Louisiana and travel by wagon to Texas where their grandfather has purchased land. Stalwart Liz lively Megan and their cousins head towards Fort Worth in 1856 when the threat of Civil War is already looming. Jodi Barrows a professional quilting author and teacher has pieced together bits of her own family history to craft her first novel concerning the adventures of the Mailly family quilters all.

Once the wagon train sets off adventures abound. The young women's resolve is tested as they become separated from the men employed to lead the group and they face trials including a flash flood and the inevitable encounter with Indians. The women have emotional roads to travel as well: Liz widowed the previous year has ambivalent feelings towards her devoted suitor Thomas who accompanies them on the journey; Megan has been recently thwarted in love by her beau's possessive mother. While the trip to Texas is ultimately successful there are no romantic resolutions probably because the story will continue in two further novels following the Mailly women after their arrival in Fort Worth.

The author has also tied the story in with her quilting business offering lectures and quilting techniques via her website apparently operating under the reasonable assumption that there may be a market for women who are interested in both the craft of quilting and reading about the female pioneer experience. It is a worthwhile scheme but historical fiction writing like quilting is an exacting art and requires real craftsmanship to succeed: this particular piece is a little weak at the seams. The dialogue is painfully stiff and the clichés pile up like tumbleweeds in the Texas desert: a grizzled cowboy with old sorrows who shows up to help the ladies is called Tex and a tough young Texas Ranger named Colt offers lines like "Women have got no business on the frontier." Character development is hampered by passages such as "They all laughed at the charismatic yet pensive Megan. She sat down still in an excited state of mind and

continued on. ‘I am most excited at the prospect of having a dress shop. My own new’ she emphasized ‘treadle machine…The dresses will simply fly off the machine.’”

Nevertheless anyone interested in quilting or American folk crafts in general will likely find the descriptions of quilting materials and techniques of interest and there are details (the packing of the wagon train for instance) that help keep the reader interested. Moreover the author has clearly shown the value of quilting as both a means of creative feminine expression and as an important art that well may have helped pioneer women like the Maillys retain a link to the ordered civilization they left behind.

Laurie Sullivan