ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Raw Edges: A Memoir
Phyllis Barber
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One divorce is bad enough, but when it becomes a tale twice told, survivors can feel as shamed and branded as Hester Prynne. Regardless of the whys, hows, and wherefores, it is nearly impossible to avoid lonely doubt-wracked nights and days convinced that all the world sees is a tarnished person whose luster cannot be restored. This memoir shares the inner turmoil, self-doubt, and deepest fears of a resilient woman who, despite her feelings of failure, has found success and love in remarkably creative ways.

The episodic format of the book echoes its title, dipping first into one moment of Phyllis Barber's life and then another. The death of her first child at age two, for example, remains a wound that does not heal. The book resists conventional narrativity; readers must follow a looping trail that doubles back on itself in a way that mirrors the emotional processes of all those who struggle to heal from life's wounds.

The spine of the book is the author's thousand-mile bicycle ride from Colorado to Vermont, a journey for which she was both physically and psychologically unprepared. She and her biking partner often fail to communicate successfully, though battling rain and challenging hills could, in other circumstances, become a bonding experience. Plagued by ill-temper and knee problems, Barber nonetheless finds that their planned route reverses the trail of the early Mormon pioneers, bringing her face to face with the spiritual doubts with which she has struggled for most of her adult life.

Other spiritual experiences sustain Barber as well, such as sharing Goddess rituals in Peru with other women. Similarly, her chance encounter with Russian matryoshka dolls provides a metaphor for the ongoing self-discovery similar to that which she experienced during her thirty-three year marriage to a man who maintained polyamorous relationships because he felt (genuinely) that monogamy shackled his soul. Barber's earnest efforts to accept the beliefs of the original tenets of Mormonism is a testament to her belief in her marriage vows, even when her husband continued to be openly involved with other women.

A Nevada native with seven books to her credit, including *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*

, and the novel, *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, Barber is a member of the Nevada Hall of Fame. However, her empathy and ability to articulate the emotions of divorce, loss, and struggle render her more than simply a regional or Mormon author, but an author of national scope.