

BOOK REVIEW

DWELLING IN THE SEAMS

BOUND ON EARTH

by Angela Hallstrom

Parables, 2008

212 pages, \$12.95

Reviewed by Lia Hadley



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PIECING AND SEWING quilts has long been a part of Mormon women's heritage. Our pioneer ancestors never had much to work with, gleaning bits of still usable fabric from worn clothes and turning them into patches that would somehow fit together. And then, over countless hours, they hand-stitched each piece together, fingers handling every inch of each square of the quilt numerous times. Then came the binding when the whole quilt was sealed up, creating a single entity from what was once the remains of many lives.

Bound on Earth assembles a quilt from pieces of the lives of grandmother Tessa, mother Alicia, and daughters Marnie, Tina, and Beth. But rather than focusing on the fabric of the quilt, Hallstrom turns her eye to the seams where the pieces come together. And what does she find? Unevenness, places where the fabric won't lie smoothly, where the stitching is loose or coming undone.

Two sisters, Marnie and Tina, sit in Primary, already feeling the tugs of separation. Marnie, the righteous daughter, fits in

well. The lessons bolster her every thought and emotion. But Tina, the troublemaker, sits stewing in a horrible sense of her own damnation. But then, at fast and testimony meeting, Marnie stands up to let flow her righteousness. As she begins speaking,

She notices the heads turning back around and away from her as people shift in their seats to face forward again. This ward knows Marnie, knows what she will say—what she always says—and while it's charming and sweet, it is hardly dramatic. They get back to shushing their children, thumbing through their lesson manuals, closing their eyes.

But Marnie's testimony keeps going. 'I know,' she says, again and again. When she finishes and sits back down, her father covers her knee with his hand.

Marnie is an obedient girl who dutifully accomplishes all that is expected of her (including testifying every month). Her father approves of her, his hand on her knee, but a thread frays and a seam opens as the con-

gregation ignores her.

As time passes, some of these seams tear deeply. Mother Alicia develops a great fondness for Kyle, the charismatic boy dating her daughter Beth. She is overjoyed when Kyle and Beth marry, feeling that she finally has a son. But soon Kyle descends into a bipolar disorder.

The first time he went off his meds and relapsed, we rallied around him. 'You can do it, Kyle. We're here. Be strong!' And he was, for a time. He seemed so much like his old self that when Beth became pregnant, I even allowed myself to be optimistic. But then Stella came and Kyle's crash was so swift, so terrible. I can't get the sight of my daughter out of my head: Beth holding her newborn in her arms and sobbing from fear and exhaustion and confusion and betrayal, her young body limp and drained of hope. I vowed then I would never trust him again. Never again.

Alicia's pain stems not only from the damage Kyle has done to her daughter, but also from the hole he has left in Alicia's own heart. The heart that had grown to love him as a son.

Beth convinces Alicia to let Kyle recover at the family's home after some rehab. Though she allows it, Alicia shifts into a distant, supportive role, unwilling to be hurt again. So, when Kyle tries to talk to her, they speak across a rent seam that is practically a chasm:

'Do you still love me?' he whispers. His voice is very small. He is so young still, not quite twenty-five. A boy. He doesn't look me in the face, but at a point just past my shoulder. 'You did, before, I know you did.'

'Kyle, I . . .' My voice trails away. I hear Stella, rattling against the bars of her crib.

He finds my face, looks at me straight. 'It's a yes or no question. Please just answer it.'

I close my eyes and try to find the Kyle I loved. My almost-son. It is easy: in my memory he has taken up residence in corners and rooms and he's lodged there, permanent, his place as sure as if he had been born to it. This boy, not of my flesh, not of my blood, but grafted in.

'You know I do,' I answer.



LIA HADLEY makes her living teaching all levels of college writing. She also works as a part-time librarian at her local library—mostly so she can find good books to read. She has ambitions to start a Ph.D. program in the near future in anthropology/women's studies. Lia is married to a former professional clown who keeps her entertained.



DANISHKHAH

Then I go and get his child.

It works: this searching moment, where the embittered mother-in-law makes a first attempt to close the rift between herself and the boy who has betrayed her and her daughter, where she stops seeing Kyle as “other” and sees him as part of her, sees that they are a pair. With skill and insight, Hallstrom manages to circumvent what could have been a horrible sentimental moment replete with tears, hugs, kisses, and testimonies. Instead, she shows a heart beginning to beat again and leaves room for the rebuilding of the relationship to happen.

In many ways this ragtag quilt, full of frayed holes and loose seams, asks the question: “Is family worth it?” As Hallstrom pulls at the seams and peers through them, the closest we seem to get to an answer is “Maybe yes, maybe no.”

After maintaining this tension throughout the book, however, the concluding pages try to simplify the answer to “Yeah, it really is,” in a tone dismissive of the question’s weight. In the last chapter, the family gathers, enough pieces present that the quilt is ready for rebinding. The grandmother, Tessa, gives a short speech to the family:

I chose your grandfather long before I had any idea what marriage

was all about . . . But you get married and you work hard and you try; then you look around and suddenly there’s a room like this, full of all these people you love.

It’s amazing, really. A miracle.

At this moment, Tessa is looking at the quilt as a whole, not at the pieces nor their shoddy seams. And in the closing lines of the book, she folds her current version of the quilt up to put in her cedar chest for later.

It is hard to imagine eternity. The vastness of it. The emptiness waiting to be filled. She trusts there will be children there, and music, and cake, and husbands and wives and daughters and sons. It will be heaven, after all.

And she is not afraid.

It seems strange that Hallstrom picks such a clichéd Mormon moment to end on. Like putting heart-shaped iron-ons over the most worn parts of an heirloom quilt. Throughout the entire book, she has been tugging hard at seams and pushing her stories through the worn patches, and now she suddenly stands back to look at the whole, lit dimly so it can look its best. The whole, the final chapter argues, is more important than the seams and thin spots in the material.

If this is the case, then does the true an-

swer in the book come just a moment previous to Tessa’s folding up of the family quilt?

Any minute now a grandchild will bring her a plate, and she won’t beg off and request just a sliver, as she has for years and years. She’ll take the thick slice they offer her and enjoy every bite.

Maybe the reason Tessa is not afraid is because she knows she’s dying, so now she can take the time to appreciate the whole, enjoy the moment, be in the fabric instead of the seams. She will eat every bit of that cake, because now it doesn’t matter. Eternity will deal with the rest. What is there to be afraid of? Her quilting days are finished.

Ah, but what about the reader? This persistent question, “Is it worth it?”, doesn’t give up so easily. The reader probably isn’t about to die of cancer. The reader, more likely, is still in the midst of her own seams and patches and will live a long while yet.

So the question keeps coming: is it worth it? Is life for the Mormon woman to be the quiltmaker, eternally dwelling in the seams? Or is there a way to stitch the seams and keep the thin spots patched while living in the fabric? As one such reader, looking at my own life quilt of ragged patches, awkward stitches, and loose seams, I think the answer of the book is “Sometimes, hopefully.”