
Red Water

by Judith Freedman

1946-

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Sidelights

Judith Freeman's body of work has garnered critical praise for the author's technical skill and insight into the human condition. In an interview for *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Freeman described what she hopes to achieve with her writing: "All writers must want to know more about themselves, but I hope my investigation extends beyond that. I look at the world partly like a photographer does. In other words, I'm recording things, and reporting on more than the state of my own life."

"Family Attractions marks the debut of a talented writer," wrote Michiko Kakutani, reviewer for the *New York Times*. The stories in this collection treat characters who attempt to reassemble their lives after a period of upheaval. For example, "The Death of a Mormon Elder" portrays a Mexican couple who must adapt to life in the United States, particularly in a Mormon community, and in "It Sure Is Cold Here at Night" a woman feels alienated from her boyfriend, a Vietnam War veteran. "The Botanic Gardens" is the story of a middle-aged woman vacationing in Australia after the death of her fiancé. "Freeman has a clear, unpretentious prose style and an ability to weave the small comic and tragic occurrences of domestic life into pleasingly organic narratives," asserted Kakutani. "Her voice--low-key, unsentimental and accented with the sounds of California and the West--is distinctively her own, and it allows her instinctive storytelling powers to shine through." "Freeman's writing is warmly intuitive, and many of her stories are braced with sardonic humor," commented Diane Manuel in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Beverly Lyon Clark found fault with one aspect of the style of *Family Attractions*: "Although Ms. Freeman tends to overstate her points by telling what she has already shown--sometimes making her metaphors and endings strain too obviously for significance--she is superb at capturing dialogue, especially the dialogue of cross-purposes." "Judith Freeman tells her tales in passionate voices strong with the authority of deeply felt experience, folk wisdom, and close observation of life," wrote Merrill Joan Gerber in a review in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. "In the best moments of these stories, we lose our awareness of reading a story and move through Freeman's fictional transparency directly into the world she wishes to reveal to us."

Freeman's debut novel, *The Chinchilla Farm*, follows the physical, mental, and spiritual voyages of Verna Fields. Unlike chinchillas, who remain with their mates for life, Fields, a thirty-four-year-old Mormon, is abandoned by her husband. Fields quits her job at a bowling alley, packs her belongings in a livestock trailer, and travels to Los Angeles, where she finds adventure. Novelist Barbara Kingsolver, writing for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, called *The Chinchilla Farm* "a beautiful, enigmatic novel that explores the nature of human connections and reveals itself in its own time." "The Chinchilla Farm is an on-the-road novel, a touching picaresque journey through the deserts of the West and the landscape of memory," noted Fern Kupfer in the *Washington Post*.

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Set for Life is the story of two intertwined lives, that of an older man who is a retired Idaho carpenter and heart transplant survivor, and a sixteen-year-old pregnant girl who is a runaway trying to escape a family of neo-Nazis. The two meet accidentally and develop a father-daughter type of relationship. Jay Parini in the Los Angeles Times Book Review commented on Freeman's "remarkable clarity in portraying characters and her luminous often lyrical prose" in Set for Life. According to Parini, the novel is "starkly beautiful and focused with an almost laser-like intensity on her two protagonists." "Set for Life is about the heroism of ordinary people, and the strength of the characters in the novel lies in Ms. Freeman's ability to describe men and women with acumen and humor, and then go inside them," remarked novelist Katherine Paterson, in the New York Times Book Review. "Freeman rarely lingers in a narrative cul-de-sac; indeed, the story drives ahead like an old-fashioned steam engine stuffed with coal," added Parini. Several commentators praised Freeman's handling of the setting in Set for Life. "It's the kind of writing, so vivid and concrete and sonorous, that makes Set for Life stand apart from so much that is now being written," asserted Parini. "Freeman is at her best painting the breath-taking natural landscape of lake and mountain," observed Paterson. "Writers with Judith Freeman's heart and mind are rare; their work should be cherished and carefully tended."

Freeman delves into the microcosm of relationships in her book A Desert of Pure Feeling. The book is set, in part, on an ocean liner "with a cast of characters worthy of Agatha Christie," according to Susanah Hunnewell of the New York Times. Hunnewell added, however, that the novel suffers from "too many plot lines" and "too many ambitious subjects." A reviewer at Publishers Weekly remarked that A Desert of Pure Feeling is strong on portraying the inner workings of the characters, but it is weak "when Freeman throws in Nazis, Mormons and Guatemalan terrorism, elements that provide a false, often melodramatic sense of scope to what is, in the end, a very intimate novel."

Freeman grew up in a large Mormon family in Utah. Although she eventually left the church and moved to California, Freeman revisited her roots when she wrote her historical novel Red Water. In 1847 a group of Mormons and Paiutes (a Native American tribe) murdered a group of more than 100 settlers who were traveling through Utah on their way to California. The only man to be tried, convicted, and executed for the crime, known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre, was a Mormon leader named John Doyle Lee. In O, The Oprah Magazine, Louisa Kamps noted that the horrific story is told from the perspectives of three different women, and "in the process she creates a vivid, believable picture of the high religious fervor and red-dust-covered hardships of the Utah frontier." A Kirkus Reviews contributor described the book as "a sobering tale of women abused by a man and a faith that demanded total obedience. Still, lacking Lee's own testimony, the ghastly event is only partially explained." David Kipen of the San Francisco Chronicle commented on Freeman's writing style: "In keeping with her religious material, Freeman forsakes stylistic embellishments in her writing here, deferring almost all hints of humor, suspense or decoration." He added that "the result is a historical novel that's tough to warm up to, easier to admire than enjoy." John Freeman of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch described the three women who serve as narrators of the story. He felt the narrative structure worked, remarking, "Writing from each of their perspectives, Freeman gives her story the intimate feel of a diary, one that captures the nuances of a lost way of life."



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In an interview with Ariel Swartley of Los Angeles magazine, Freeman said, "I was fascinated in my research to find this wacky, wild religion and to see how it transformed itself. Nineteenth-century Mormonism was so kinky. They're drinking and they're really out there. Polygamy was a divine principle they were obliged to practice. It was a millennial sect: They believed the end was coming and they were preparing for it. And I think partly because of the Mountain Meadows--it brought such shame and disgrace--that when they entered the 20th century, Mormons wanted to become much more mainstream. And by God they have."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born October 1, 1946, in Ogden, UT; daughter of LeRoy and Alice (Paul) Freeman; married Anthony Hernandez, 1986; children: Todd. Memberships: PEN West. Addresses: Agent: Joy Harris Literary Agency, 156 Fifth Avenue, Suite 617, New York, NY 10010.

AWARDS : Western Heritage Award for best western novel, 1991, for *Set for Life*; John Simon Guggenheim fellowship in fiction, 1997; Utah Center for the Book Award for *Red Water*, 2003.

CAREER : Writer. Contributing critic of Los Angeles Times Book Review.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR

- Family Attractions (stories), Viking (New York, NY), 1988.

NOVELS

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- A Desert of Pure Feeling, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1996.
- Red Water, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2002.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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