

---

## **Red Water** by Judith Freeman

**Booklist Review:** Freeman weaves a tale of rare passion and color as she revisits the darkest crime in early Mormon Utah, teasing her narrative out of the lives of three of the wives of a man excommunicated by the church and, eventually, executed by the state for his role in the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Shrewd use of multiple perspectives allows Freeman to capture many of the ambiguities surrounding the sinister figure of John Lee, who led a band of fanatical Mormons and angry Paiutes in a murderous attack on a wagon train passing through their frontier territory. The subtle narrative strategy also enables Freeman to probe the tensions inherent in the Mormons' nineteenth-century practice of polygamy. But artistic sophistication does not guarantee historical veracity, so even readers deeply impressed by Freeman's literary gifts may wish to consult nonfiction sources for other perspectives on historical events still shrouded in obscurity and controversy. Freeman's vivid and dramatic story, which implicates even Brigham Young in the horrid deeds, deserves high praise for its artistry but deep dubiety as to its reliability.

*(Reviewed January 1, 2002) -- Bryce Christensen*

**Publishers Weekly Review:** In 1857, in a field in southern Utah, a party of Mormons and Native Americans slaughtered more than a hundred men, women and children who were traveling to California. Only one man was ever tried, and executed, for the horror that became known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre—John D. Lee. This well-told novel by Freeman (*The Chinchilla Farm*) presents Lee's story from the point of view of three of his 19 wives: Emma, his "English bride," who recognizes that the man she loves is made up of equal parts tenderness and savagery; Ann, a child-bride of 13, who is hardened and wise beyond her years; and Rachel, the faithful, older wife, who remains devoted to Lee even after his excommunication and eventual execution. Freeman's novel is well researched (drawing heavily upon the work of historian Juanita Brooks), and her nuanced, perceptive portrayal of Mormon life stands in stark contrast to other Mormon-themed fiction (particularly the recent novels of Brigham Bybee). The book's descriptions are memorable, evoking the bleak but stunning landscape of the region. The motif of the red scenery reflects the raw bloodiness of the massacre, a metaphor that is often brilliant but occasionally overdone ("The very atmosphere of this brute red world seemed impregnated with sorrow and evil, colored by all the innocent blood shed that day"). Rachel's deeply pious character is remote and slightly underdeveloped; her section is the shortest and the last. Overall, Freeman has crafted a novel that is historically faithful, character-driven and deeply poignant. 9-city author tour. (Jan.)

— *Staff (Reviewed January 7, 2002) (Publishers Weekly, vol 249, issue 1, p49)*