

***Variation West*, by Ardyth Kennelly**

Review by B. J. Sedlock, Metadata and Archives Librarian, Defiance College / Feature writer and reviewer for the Historical Novel Society

[*Note*: While this review doesn't contain any spoilers, it does reveal some plot turns. Also, my thanks to B. J. Sedlock for the review! –Nancy Tropic]

I have been an Ardyth Kennelly fan for a long time, ever since a friend lent me Kennelly's first book, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, over 30 years ago. The characters in that book and the depictions of everyday life in a polygamous household in 1890s Salt Lake City are so memorable I read it at least once a year without getting tired of it. It's a great shame that Kennelly's novels, first published between 1949 and 1956, have become rather obscure. I tried to help make them less so by writing an article for the *Historical Novels Review* (issue 63, Feb. 2013) called "Forgotten Author: The Work of Ardyth Kennelly."

So when Nancy Tropic, Kennelly's step-great-niece, contacted me to say that she was publishing Kennelly's posthumous novel, I looked forward to reading it immensely.

Variation West is a family saga that begins in nineteenth century Salt Lake City. Religion is not the focus of the story, but Mormonism provides the cultural background and setting.

The book's major character in the first section is Hindle Lee, daughter of the man executed for leading the Mountain Meadows Massacre, which took place in 1857. She barely knew her polygamous father, but the shadow of that family history incident reaches through the novel. Hindle starts out working as a cleaner at a private clinic, Burdick's Institution for the Care of the Sick. When the clinic's Dr. Morgan is beaten up by thugs because of a dispute with the Church over building a health resort, she leaves with him to start a new life further West. Ten years later, widowed Hindle returns home, alters her husband's diploma, and sets herself up as an "eclectic practitioner," specializing in women's medical complaints. On a "blind impulse of fatality and fortune," she marries a polygamist and becomes his fourth wife. But eventually Hindle emigrates to Canada after Utah changes its physician licensing laws, and she can no longer practice unlicensed medicine.

The next section is dominated by Hindle's sister Lucitie's family. Lucitie had gone to England after an English visitor recognized her hairdressing talent and hired Lucitie as her maid. After getting fired, on the journey home Lucitie meets Albert Alfonse, descendant of wigmakers from the time of the French Revolution, who's a Mormon convert. Eventually they marry, and set up a hairdressing salon in Salt Lake. They take in Wyandra, child of Australian immigrants, who learns from Albert how to be a beautician.

The last portion of the story is centered on Rosetta, Hindle's granddaughter, and her second cousin Lavonne, in the mid-twentieth century. They run a beauty salon, first in a hotel and then in a hospital. A gay musician, Jeppe, comes to Salt Lake to teach at the university, learns from

Rosetta the family stories about Mountain Meadows, and wants to write an opera about the event. The ending brings the story full circle, as Rosetta and Jeppe drive to the Mountain Meadows site and are caught up in another tragedy.

It's a sprawling story of 747 pages, spread over a century with a multitude of characters. I really could have used a genealogical chart—it was sometimes a struggle to keep the characters' relationships straight.

Kennelly's readers are not spoon-fed information. The story is not 100% linear. As in her other novels, Kennelly will mention some momentous plot twist in passing, like a character's death, but the reader must continue on for several pages reading about subsequent events before eventually finding out what happened to the character. At several plot points, I thought "What???", and was kept in suspense for a while before the explanation was revealed.

Don't think I'm complaining—Kennelly's style is offbeat, but it's richly rewarding. You wind up burying yourself in her books, only occasionally coming up for air. Anyone interested in Western or Mormon history, fans of family sagas, or readers tired of lightweight genre fiction and wanting something to sink their teeth into will enjoy *Variation West*. While I will still vote for *Peaceable Kingdom* as my favorite Kennelly book, I was extremely pleased to be able to experience a new work of hers, 10 years after her death. Thanks, Nancy!

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