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An Absolute Gift

Maureen Clark, *Confessions of a Once Upon A Time Mormon Girl*,
Hypatia Press 2026.

Born in the Covenant of her parent's Mormon temple marriage, Maureen Clark's life was one of contentment, stability, and community—until a secret ceremony preceding her temple marriage to Jon Clark in 1975 shattered her and Jon's trust in the church. They married the next day, but splinters of that dark ritual scarred their future together.

In *Confessions of a Once Upon A Time Mormon Girl*, Clark, married and determined to forgive the church she once loved, built a “spiritual core” upon the promise of an eternal life with her husband. That core held her together. It held her marriage together, decade after fragile decade.

At the core of Mormonism is the exchange of promises between the church and its members. Sacrifice is required for the eventuality of eternal happiness. Sacrifice and secrecy. Jon and Maureen were traumatized by ceremonial vows of throat-slitting and disemboweling if they questioned the ritual or broke the promise of secrecy. Jon never recovered. He pretended, for Maureen, for thirty years. And then he told her, “I’m leaving the Mormon Church.”

Clark's spiritual core allowed her to stay in the church and love the church and keep her promises to the church even after Jon's defection. Then came the change in perspective. The questioning. The “fighting with [her] belief in Mormonism.”

First, the church “believes human beings can be perfect,” which causes “constant striving for perfection and the subsequent lying about that effort.” Mormon women try hardest to be perfect, “bending and contorting” and “lying their way to insanity as I was.” *As I was*, she writes.

Clark writes, and the secrets come out. Mormonism teaches women to sacrifice themselves from the time they are young girls. To put themselves last. To show their “church face” even to family. To bury emotions. To be silent or else to lie about their faults and indiscretions, especially to their leaders—who are men—because Mormon men have the power to excommunicate them.

And yet, writes Clark, the men from her childhood church community in Swede Town near Salt Lake City were “gentle souls” and the women “seemed to have the real power over everything that

mattered. Memoir is paradox, and Clark captures that concept in every chapter.

Women teach “less about rules and more about the heart.” Women are “invisible.” Women “hold the priesthood” when they do temple work—but only while they are inside the temple. And they are never to talk about it outside the temple walls.

Mormon women are modest and chaste until their temple marriage, after which they are expected to switch from guilt, fear, and abstinence to sex, pregnancy, and childbirth. The pain and the mess. The loss of libido. The “frazzled nerves, the anger”—and “the love you feel for this little person who didn’t exist the day before yesterday.”

Mormon women follow their husbands. They support their husbands’ education and careers. Wives’ and mothers’ careers come last or not at all. Husbands hold up their end of the bargain through priesthood obligations. “Mormonism counts on its members to be overloaded with busyness to keep people active in the church, and it works.”

It works until, as Clark writes, someone—she—decides they are “not defined by a church,” but they have “intrinsic value as a human being.” Clark enrolled in college after a midlife crisis that almost destroyed her marriage. She studied Medieval history, discovered stories of individuality in “lives ruled more by religion than mine.”

“It was like someone handed me a magic wand.” Not “contained” by religion, Clark writes, she had freedom to read and to think and to learn. To experience “a different kind of eternity.” To revel in the mysteries of literature and art and the natural landscape. To realize that “knowledge is boundless.” It needs no permission or restriction or proclamation. Anyone can seek it.

In 1995, the United States prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation, and the Mormon church released its *Proclamation on the Family*, narrowing its already-narrow view on who is allowed to be who they are. Clark still had one foot in the church, teaching twelve-to-eighteen-year-old girls how to become Mormon women. But she saw how girls and other young people who did not conform were ostracized and crushed by the *Proclamation*. She knew too much. She asked to be released. And she released herself from the church.

Writing a memoir is an exercise in grieving. In grieving the death of old beliefs. In grieving the myth, the mirage, the smoke and the mirrors and the “crooked little teachings” that make a memoirist question her life.

Clark the memoirist likes questions. Before her husband left the church, she thought she “knew the truth about God.” After her husband left the church, she followed him off and on and off again,

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accepting and then refusing to accept a church's take on who she is.

"I'll take ambiguity," she writes, "choosing what is true to me, which ideas feel right, praising the freedom to ask them as the true and absolute gift from the universe." Her absolute gift to readers is her thorough questioning of beliefs and motives and devotions—and secrets—and her courage to write them.