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Fall 2003

Review of *Breaking Clean* By Judy Blunt

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Karell, Linda, "Review of *Breaking Clean* By Judy Blunt" (2003). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2365.
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Breaking Clean. By Judy Blunt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. xi + 303 pp. Map. \$24.00 cloth, \$13.00 paper.

"Few shared my place of origin or the events of my life, but many, it seems, shared my experience." In *Breaking Clean*, Judy Blunt's memoir of her life as a Montana rancher's daughter, and eventually as a Montana rancher's wife, she reminds us that storytelling mines the minute and the particular in order to unearth larger truths. In this memoir, those truths are about the cramped inarticulateness of women's lives and the paucity of real, vibrant choices, as well as the ranching community's support for its members during the inevitable crises that occur on the windswept Montana Plains.

Now a writer living in Missoula, Montana, Blunt traces her childhood, early adulthood and marriage, and eventually her chosen separation from the ranching community that both supported and restrained her. It is a lyrical book and, following the current trend of women's memoirs, blends rage and resignation, explanation and exultation, as it tracks the movements of her life. For example, when Blunt describes a harrowing run to the hospital with her ill child, she reckons directly with the sheer danger of an isolated ranch during a Montana winter. Fearing that the roads would prove impassable anyway, she and her husband postpone leaving until the child's fever

spikes so dramatically that there is no other alternative. True to the gender roles of the time, it is Blunt who finally must make the decision to try for the hospital. They do make it, and the nurse's incredulous "You're not taking her back out there?" is balanced by Blunt's offer of "my grandmother's evenhanded shrug, weighing the odds."

Although the title, *Breaking Clean*, suggests the clarity of a clean break, Blunt's memoir offers no such consolation. The "break" that enabled her to move, presumably "on," to a new life in Missoula is given the least attention in the text and thus seems conspicuously underexamined. The strengths of the book lie in Blunt's clear eyed-glance backward and her

ability to keep sentimentality at bay. The result is a memoir challenging the code of the West that deems women valuable as supporting players in the western drama only to the degree that they perform tirelessly and obediently; there are no relationships between husband and wife "partners" in this West. But the memoir also remembers fondly a community that watched carefully, ready to help, attuned to the need for support, during the dark night of snowy driving toward desperately needed medical care.

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