



Breaking Clean

Judy Blunt

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Blunt has turned the memories of her childhood and young adulthood in rural Montana into a beautifully written memoir that is a meditation on how land and her life will always be intertwined. A must read.

Born into a third generation of Montana homesteaders, Judy Blunt learned early how to "rope and ride and jockey a John Deere," but also to "bake bread and can vegetables and reserve my opinion when the men were talking." The lessons carried her through thirty-six-hour blizzards, devastating prairie fires and a period of extreme isolation that once threatened the life of her infant daughter. But though she strengthened her survival skills in what was--and is--essentially a man's world, Blunt's story is ultimately that of a woman who must redefine herself in order to stay in the place she loves.

Breaking Clean is at once informed by the myths of the West and powerful enough to break them down. Against formidable odds, Blunt has found a voice original enough to be called classic.

Breaking Clean Details

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Author : Judy Blunt

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From Reader Review Breaking Clean for online ebook

Katherine says

Wonderful writing in this memoir! Blunt takes the reader right inside her life--and her mind--and the journey is sometimes painful, the emotion raw. If I had any complaint it would be that the telling is a little fragmented with experiences related out of chronological order which had me needing to go back to read the first chapter or so again after finishing the book.

This book really packs a punch and made me think; I definitely won't be forgetting it any time soon. 3.5 to 4 stars

Greg says

Completely arresting. I was engrossed from the first page by this tale of rural resilience. The narrative is extraordinarily detailed (how can the author remember everything she's described is beyond me) and written in language that matches the toughness of her upbringing. Blunt also offers a harsh look at the culture of her ranching community, with honesty about its sexism and racism, its narrow viewpoints, and its willfully contrary isolation. But what stuck with me was the book's enthralling description of ranch life and the merciless lands of northeastern Montana. (Also so many terrifying/fascinating cow AND human mutilation stories!!!!) Highly recommend!

Deidre says

I saw so much of myself, my family & community in this book. Powerful, thoughtfully written, brought me to tears & laughter on the same page. Blunt captures the voice of the ranchwoman perfectly. This book forced me to look at the uneasy pull between wanting to emulate your grandmother's grace & strength & the desire to leave behind the ranch way of life that limits women's choices & voice.

Brian says

I have been on a bit of Western kick lately. I heard about this memoir from an article on books of the New West. Two of the five books I absolutely loved (Terry Tempest Williams' Refuge and James Galvin's The Meadow) and this was the only one of the other three that the library had. So I gave it a go.

Since I read about it alongside the two previously mentioned books, I was probably constantly comparing them. And this book simply did not stand up to them. As far as memoirs go, it was OK. Blunt tells about her life growing up on a Montana ranch in the 60s and 70s. It is fascinating to read about a life so different from mine. And rural Montana in that time really feels like the 40s and 50s as it was so remote from any other part of the country.

For me, what kept her story from being really good, or even great, was that she did not do much to situate

herself in relation to major societal and cultural issues. She talks about some experiences with the women's right, the shift from family ranching to corporate ranching, being a single mother, and more, but after teasingly great anecdotes she would just drift off to another anecdote. And so the book felt like scene after scene of her experiences.

Of course I am aware that is how life works. It does not have cultural and temporal continuity all of the time. But I believe adding that in is what separates mediocre nonfiction like Blunt's memoir from really great nonfiction like *Refuge* and other works like it.

Tifnie says

...I feel like the author has ADHD. She is all over the place and it's hard to keep track of events.

Breaking Clean is about the author's life growing up on a remote farm in Montana set in the 1950's. Her hardships, poverty, isolation, education, and returning to farm and isolation as a young married wife.

I read that Judy Blunt was gaining recognition much like Frank McCourt with her style of writing, her story, and similarities of poverty. Unfortunately, I cannot agree. The only similarity they shared was growing up with poverty. Frank McCourt was truly a story teller in the way he shared his life with us.

What I did enjoy about this story was the description of the landscape much like another book I read called *Where Rivers Change Directions*. At times it took on a calming presence in the story. As well as her love of the animals and what they meant on a producing farm. What I didn't enjoy was her abruptly ending a topic to start another one often not finishing her train of thought.

Oh well.

Audrey says

Judy Blunt was a third generation ranch wife in Montana. She literally broke free of that life in her 30's, moved her kids to Missoula to get her degree and is now a writer there. The writing is clean and frank. It gave me a very vivid image of farm life and I actually feel like I learned some things about animals and crops (or learned enough to know I need to learn). She describes that life so well but without judgment - it just is. It helped me understand how hard small farmers work and how soft we've become as a society and how disconnected from the land we are. The book can be put down and picked back up without major disruption, as it's like a memoir. It made an interesting co-read with my other book, *Animal Vegetable Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver.

Aisha says

I had a hard time with this book - and I had a lot of questions afterwards. Why couldn't she be happy where she was? Why couldn't she make her husband understand and treat her like a partner? Ok - if I must be honest- I think her LACK of communication was a huge part of it. And maybe that's the point - the "voice" she talks about finding took her that long. She shut out her husband from the beginning - couldn't talk to him, couldn't stand up for herself with the in-laws, etc.

I wonder about her kids now. What happened to John? Was he able to ever stand up to Frank? What about her twin siblings Gail and Gary and how Judy makes it seem like their birth changed life forever (it seems that she is implying for the worse?)?

I think for the older generation - they TOTALLY understand the inequality that came with the rural lifestyle in the 70's. I however, believe that there were other families who communicated with each other, had fun with their kids, and were happy doing so.

I think the story of Frank "retiring" is more common than not for that generation.

I'm a generation younger - and have a hard time thinking a woman would live like this and not talk to her husband - but Blunt talks a lot about her childhood and coming of age - and she doesn't do a lot of talking even then. Parents seem to ignore a lot of what is going on - and it seems like it is excused to the rural lifestyle - but I know not all raised in the west went through this.

I also wondered about God and found it tragic that there was no hope through Jesus in this tale. Her one introduction to God was a bizzare childhood catholic mass.

There were 3 happy parts for me. 1. the thought of her mother pregnant with her enjoying the quiet of where she lived that summer, books perched on her belly, a horse reaching in the window for a snack. 2. The story of Gail in the pasture with the angus bull. 3. the way the community came together to see she and John across the nearly impassable muddy roads when their daughter was sick and they HAD to go to the hospital. I pictured the lights of the pickups at the end of each road that they could see as they came to the top of a hill looking out at the road they must traverse. Each set of lights there ready to pull them out if needed, and then going back home as soon as they passed safely by. This is a fabulous picture of what living in a rural area can be - a friendly network of people who know the only other people you have are each other - you look out for each other.

The writing style was really interesting. She keeps you going because she states right at the beginning the "breaking clean" part of divorce. And then goes backward and forwards and it is a really neat style. So there isn't really any wondering what ultimately happened - but why.

Mel says

Judy Blunt's memoir *Breaking Clean* is a crisp, sharp, enjoyable read. Blunt carries her reader through a wide range of emotions as she travels through her youth in Montana. Her writing is engaging in its simplicity. Her subject matter, in many ways, familiar.

Though few of us have experienced Big Sky country and all of the harsh realities that go with that life, especially as a child, we have all experienced isolation, disappointment, parental abandonment, and rebellions in one way or another. We have all experienced a sense of different-ness in our worlds, a sense of being disconnected from those to whom we should feel most connected. Or at least I did. Blunt captures the emotion of her turbulent youth eloquently.

Blunt carries her readers through the experience of her youth and while one is given the impression that the author has had to distance herself from this lifestyle it is deeply ingrained in who she is. Her rural youth defined her adult life. The life she lives today seems to always be seen through the lens of where she came from. In her discussion of feminism, and she sees herself as a feminist, Blunt writes of the women of her youth, whom she does not view as feminists, "I grew up admiring a community of women whose strength and capacity for work I have yet to see equaled, true partners in the labor of farming and ranching." (153).

She goes on in the next passages to flesh out these women as able to endure anything, in silence. While Blunt refuses to be silent she endeavors to carry forward the ideal of enduring.

In the end, this is a lifestyle from which she fled, it is clear that it is this lifestyle that has shaped her views. The text is a vivid reminder of how we come to be who we are, by facing and owning who we were and from whence we came.

Grace says

Judy Blunt's *Breaking Clean* continued my recent trend of reading books about the West, and like most of the Western authors I've picked up recently, Blunt tells her story in a sparse, no-holds-barred way that I both appreciate and identify with. She takes it one step further, though, making explicit her thoughts and feelings about the role of women in the West in a way that other writers (Annie Proulx and Pam Houston come to mind) haven't. The book is simply fabulous.

Breaking Clean is a fairly chronological retelling of Blunt's life growing up on a secluded Montana ranch, her marriage to neighboring rancher and life as part of an increasingly corporate ranching culture, and her eventual decision to leave the land and the lifestyle that makes up the only thing she has ever known. Skipping entire years and dedicating multiple pages to describing in painstaking detail the seemingly small events that her memories turn around (including a multiple page account of pulling a calf that made me cry with its honesty and gorgeousness), Blunt is less interested in a literal retelling of the events of her life and more in sharing with readers both her visceral love for the land and the lifestyle on which she grew up and her crippling disappointment and rage at the role she was forced to take as a woman in that lifestyle and on that land.

Blunt makes no secret of her feminism, nor does she shy away from idealizing the strong backs and stiff upper lips of the women around who she came of age--women who would never call themselves feminists. She sees, at a young age and increasingly as she grows up, the ways in which these women are short-shrifted. She takes on the problems of patriarchal land and family management and the traditional movement of family ranches from father to son head-on, calling them what they are and speaking with clarity about the role of these practices in her eventual decision to take her children away from the land she loves.

Breaking Clean is just the right mixture of thought and action, switching seamlessly from Blunt's internal monologue to the physical reality of the land around her and back again. Blunt's version of self-reliant feminism, invented from equal parts 1970s coming of age and a lifetime of exposure to the old world customs and near superhuman strength of ranching women, may well be the most comfortable and reasonable one I've ever observed. Even if you don't want to read Blunt's book for the feminism, though, you should read it for the stories. Her retelling of the great blizzard that plagued her family's ranch in the early 1960s, freezing most of the cattle to death, her baby sister facing off with an Angus bull, and her own uncomfortable move from a one-room school house to high school in "town" are worth the read in and of themselves. Blunt is both a fantastic theorist and memoirist and first-rate storyteller, and it doesn't get much better than that.

gillian says

This book is fantastic. It was the first time I read a memoir that truly moved me and I have not forgotten the story after all these years. In fact, I think of this author often. I grew up in Montana, but not the area she describes, and I think it's a fascinating tale for anyone from anywhere. I loved the tone she took to describe her experiences and how she processed them and the actions she felt she had to take. I think I read later that she became a professor of writing (U of M in Missoula?) and I always wished I could have taken a class from her. I highly recommend this book for anyone who wants to read a very interesting perspective from a very outnumbered and unstudied corner of the world, and for anyone who enjoys great writing.

Cheryl says

I had this book sitting on my shelves for quite some time because I wasn't sure if I could handle reading it or not. This book covers mention growing up in a world and a culture where women are not viewed as equal, which strikes a bit too close to home for me in some ways. I am glad I was finally willing to pick it up and dive in, though. The author is quite gifted in painting with words the world of the prairie out on the Highline in Montana and the joys and struggles of growing up in a hand-to-mouth existence.

My mother grew up on a dry farm in South Central Alberta and in reading this book I felt like I came closer to understanding some of her stories from her childhood than ever before. In fact, in some ways I came closer to understanding my mother than ever before, even though I don't know how similar her experiences were to those of the author. The answer to that is probably both "very similar" and "not similar at all". I can see the frustration and the loneliness of being different and wanting more and never being taught the words for any of that or feeling like there was the freedom to express it. I know my memories of the prairies of Montana and Alberta colored my perceptions of the book -- but I think in the future my memories of the book will color my perceptions of the prairies of Montana and Alberta.

I am actually sending this to my mother to read because I think she will enjoy it. It might even inspire her to write more of her own memories.

Cher Johnson says

I loved this book. She's a great writer, and every time I put the book down I couldn't wait to pick it up again. Another reviewer commented on her many skills (training horses, birthing calves, growing a huge vegetable garden and canning, etc., all while raising three children) Often the cruel truth of what it's like for humans and animals to live in a such a harsh physical climate and in such an unyielding social structure would leave me feeling sad and bruised, but then her adventures and triumphs would exhilarate me. Much as I wanted to hear more about her escape from the ranch, I admire that she respected her husband's dignity and privacy by revealing little of their personal relationship. I would love to read more from this author.

Rosana says

Well, I actually live on a prairie ranch 50 miles from the closest town, so Judy Blunt's memoir certainly resonates with me. Her insights are written with an almost poetic prose and her voice conveys great strength.

I envy her ability to articulate with such clarity the complex web of human relations that are so hardly shaped by the prairie environment and history. The struggle – and pain - to conform to gender roles; the isolation of long winters and muddy spring roads; the distrust of anything new and urban are all still too real in the communities around me. I think I will suggest this book to my bookclub, as an outsider – anyone with a foreign accent will forever be an outsider around here – I am curious to hear what the “locals” will say about this memoir.

Maureen says

Stories are the lessons of a year or a decade or a life broken into chunks you can swallow. But the heart of a story lies in the act of telling, the passing on. (pg. 136) - Too bad Ms. Blunt did not take her own words to heart.

Like [a previous reader], I was hoping for more about life in the Midwest; Having read this book, I am unsure exactly what it was meant to convey.

Growing up in a small town, I could relate to her descriptions of the "eyes" that saw your every move, even when your parents were nowhere to be seen. The draw to the "city" was also something I remember. And, I felt a kinship to her "tomboy" ways and her "neutral face" that came across as aloof, and cold. But, from the bulk of the story, what I got was a seemingly self-pitying, woe-is-me middle-child who laid much blame on her "hard, and strict" mother, her "distant and unaccessible" father and the lonesome, un-forgiving prairie winds and mud. (and, if she would have used the term "gumbo roads" just once more, I would have tossed this book against the wall!) Puh-lease!! Ms. Blunt seemed more in need of a psychiatrist, than a publisher. Like I said, parts of this story resonated with me, forcing me to read on, while other, and more prevalent, parts made me wonder WHY I was reading on!!

Just not my cup of tea, I suppose

Katie says

Judy Blunt was born in mid-century northern Montana, a hardscrabble land where men held power and women put up and shut up. *Breaking Clean* is a haunting series of essays about Blunt's childhood and marriage in this place of stark beauty and isolation - a place she eventually left to find her own voice and her value as a human being.

I read an article in which Blunt stated that her book was not necessarily about her journey away from ranch life, but rather about her struggle to stay. Her strength, courage, and character are impressive; her personality is reflected through the clear honest writing, and the book carries an echo of sadness and desolation. The incredible effort to survive natural disaster and the lack of resources are never over-dramatized, simply presented as the way things were in this particular time and place, which makes them all the more impactful. The essays are laced with the sharp thin current of her own resentment and grief at being overlooked and undervalued simply because she was a woman, an item of property rather than a partner in life.

I loved Blunt's writing, and this book will stay with me for a long time.
