# Table of Contents

Discussion Guide  
Author Biography  

3  
5
Discussion Questions

More Than Petticoats: Remarkable Utah Women
By Christy Karras

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- In the Introduction, the author comments that “In some ways Utah’s culture actually made it easier for [women] to succeed.” After reading the biographies, do you believe this is actually the case?

- Polygamy played a central role in most of the lives of women represented in this collection. Some were supportive and participated in the practice, and others worked tirelessly to end it. When considering their arguments and actions, do you believe one side or the other was in the right?

- In several of the sketches, the author comments that polygamous marriages gave women an added amount of freedom and spare time. Do you believe this was played a role in the women’s success and influence?

- The women selected for these biographies varied greatly in occupation, religion and background. Do you agree with the authors selections? Who would you have left out or included if you had decided which women were to be included?

- Were you surprised at the number of failed marriages represented in the lives of these 14 women? Is there any connection between that and the amount of success they encountered?

- The author’s goal in writing compiling this collection was at least in part to “go a little way toward putting Utah’s women into the larger context of the West.” Do you believe she succeeded?

- After losing four of her own seven children and acting as midwife to almost 4,000 other births, Patty Sessions would have been very familiar with pain the death of a child can bring. How did women cope with those losses in a time when infant mortality rates were so devastating?

- The author suggests that Eliza R. Snow felt that “women should vote...precisely because they had better morals than men.” How effective do you believe this argument was?

- Jane Manning James repeatedly petitioned LDS church leaders to grant her the ability to enjoy blessings bestowed in their sacred temples. Despite constantly being told no, she continued her applications while also serving others and maintaining her faith and belief in the Mormon religion. At what point would you have given up the cause?

- Emmeline B. Wells’ most famous saying was “I believe in women, especially thinking women.” In your opinion, what would the characteristics of a thinking woman be?
• In her sensational novels, Cornelia Paddock describes the practice of polygamy and the LDS church in a violent and very negative light. How do you feel about her claims to be writing of actual experiences? And why do you think her attempt to establish the Industrial Home for refugees from Mormon marriages failed?

• The author lists a number of interesting questions at the end of Ann Eliza Webb Young’s biography. “Was Ann Eliza a disagreeable gold digger who went after Brigham Young’s money? Was she a pawn of the forces opposed to Mormonism? Or was she an intelligent, desirable woman who refused to be treated like a servant by her own husband?” What do you think?

• Dora Topham was unofficially allowed to run her prostitution businesses when officials decided to regulate the industry instead of fight it. This theory has been tried by governments and law officials when faced with a number of social ills. Did it work then? Does it ever work?

• In her biographical sketch, Martha Hughes Cannon is said to have “publicly defended the practice [of polygamy], even as she had private reservations.” She pointed out that it allowed her to “choose to marry the best man around, not just whoever was single and available.” Is this a convincing argument?

• Utah’s “Silver Queen” placed a great deal of value on having a great deal of wealth. Though, as her life unfolded, it seemed to only bring her a great deal of trouble. Is it possible to attain that amount of wealth and still find happiness? Where did she go wrong?

• Maude Adams titled her autobiography “The One I Knew Least of All” and commented that “To make one’s own acquaintance is difficult enough under ordinary circumstances; but if life is begun pretending to be...this or that little boy or girl, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate whom from which. Is this a good representation of the underlying struggle that child stars face growing up on the stage or in front of the camera?

• Ann Bassett was brought to trial several times on cattle rustling charges, but juries were never able to convict. The author comments that “jurors just couldn’t bring themselves to decide against this very pleasant gray-haired lady.” Do you think that was actually the case? Would a man who had done the same things fared worse?

• Reva Beck Bosone felt strongly that women could make just as much difference in the world as men and she lived her life trying to prove that point. Is it easier or harder in today’s society for women to make the kind of difference Reva made?

• The author ends Juanita Brooks’ sketch saying that “her work was sign of hope for better relations between the state’s Mormon residents and gentiles. She shaped the way people in Utah see their history and helped start a dialogue about history that continues today – as she felt it should.” Was her investigation into a shady part of Utah’s history worth the risks she took? Should the truth always be brought to the light?
About the Author

Christy Karras has spent her adult life finding out about interesting things and telling other people about them. She’s written about a wide range of subjects, both serious and not, from aviation to zombies. She specializes in the things that make life worth living: arts, entertainment, outdoors, and travel, while drawing on a deep knowledge of history, culture, and social trends.

She is the author or co-author of four books: Motorcycle Touring in the Pacific Northwest, Motorcycle Touring in the Southwest; More than Petticoats: Remarkable Utah Women, and Scenic Driving: Utah. She is a regular contributor to the Seattle Times and has written for publications ranging from Salt Lake City Weekly to the New York Times.

She loves teaching, speaking to groups, doing radio interviews, and giving workshops on writing, editing, and publishing. She also advises select organizations on topics from publishing to product development.

Before moving to Seattle, Christy was associate editor at Wasatch Journal, where she wrote stories and managed a team of freelance writers. She was instrumental in creating the magazine’s identity, implementing production guidelines, and shaping organizational structure.

As a staff reporter for the Salt Lake Tribune, she covered arts, entertainment, the outdoors, and travel. She directed much of the paper’s fine arts coverage, was a film and music critic, and launched the popular “Single in Utah” series.

Before the Tribune years, she worked as a staff reporter for The Associated Press in Salt Lake City and Portland, covering breaking news, editing other writers’ stories, and writing for television and radio.

Her life has been more interesting than she ever intended. She was a White House intern during the Clinton administration, won $64,000 on the "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" game show, and met the Queen of England in a scene later portrayed in the movie "The Queen" (filmmakers did not consult her).

When she is not on the road, she lives in Seattle with her sweetie for life, technology analyst Bill Harper.