

# MARTHA MOODY

## A Fantastical Western Novel

review by Judith Stein

Susan Stinson, Spinsters Ink,  
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*Martha Moody* is a rich and complicated novel, nearly edible in its sensuous physicality. At its heart, *Martha Moody* is the love story between Amanda Linger and Martha Moody. But *Martha Moody* is more than mere romance; its careful crafting draws us deeply into the complicated layers of women's lives.

Set in the small-town west sometime in the last half of the 19th century, *Martha Moody* is a grand story about love and sexuality, and the need for truth and the penalty for lies. The plot is both simple and ornate—we travel with Amanda Linger as she moves from a life parched by the absence of nourishment to the deep richness of her life fully lived. Along the way we encounter the fanaticism of Carrie Nation's temperance movement, the survival of unlikely friendships, the price paid by women who break social norms and pivotal opportunities for friendships to survive betrayal.

At the beginning of *Martha Moody* Amanda Linger lives stuck in a loveless marriage on a one-cow farm near the town of Moody. The only real feeling remaining between Amanda and her husband, John, is the affection they both shower on their beloved milker, Miss Alice. John is a lifeless man, controlled by his discomfort with the messiness of the physical world. His one passion is playing trumpet in the Oddfellows Temperance Brass Band. John is distressed by Amanda's sensuality as much as her size: "He didn't like the way my body shifted with the rhythms of my hands. I had big hips and a belly that folded back against me when I leaned to reach Miss Alice..."

And Amanda is a ripe and sensuous woman who knows her own nature even as she knows that she should repress it. After seeing Martha Moody bathe with abandonment in the creek, Amanda is a changed woman. "I have a carnal attraction," Amanda tells Miss Alice, who gives more milk if she's told stories during milking.

Amanda Linger is woman who knows the power of words; she has memorized the Bible, and told and retold Miss Alice her favorite sections. Amanda especially loves the images of physical power: "when God brought streams out of the rocks and caused waters to run like rivers in the desert." Waiting nights for John's sour-tuned temperance band to conclude their rehearsals in the Lingers' barn, Amanda copies down bible stories for the sheer pleasure of forming the letters and touching their power. And certain bible stories feed Amanda's sensual nature—the image of Mary anointing Jesus' feet with oil arouses Amanda sexually, creating a desire which cannot be satisfied by her repressed and repressive husband.

Watching Martha Moody in the creek, speaking with Martha in that wild setting on a Sunday morning when Amanda knows they should both be in church or at least waiting modestly at home, these small rebellions open Amanda to her desire for change. Knowing only that she wants to see Martha again, Amanda churns some of Miss Alice's sweetest cream to butter and approaches Martha about selling the butter in her general store.

In this world both dry and constrained, butter becomes the sweetest lust—the golden, precious slippery balm that moistens both bread and body into sexual heat. And *Martha Moody* is a very sexual and sexy story, where the lust between Amanda and Martha, brought to fulfillment in the aftermath of a visit by Carrie Nation, takes Amanda "to the milky heart of the world where I churned and churned and churned."

For a short while after their first encounter, Amanda is content with their thrice-weekly visits. But opening one forbidden door leads Amanda further away from the woman she is supposed to be. The next night, instead of her usual bible-verse copying, Amanda "wrote a story from thin air." And what a story! Miss Alice has become Azrael the angel cow, and Martha, already too large and strong for a decent woman of her time, flies on the angel cow's back to churn life into a dry and dying town. So we meet Amanda's other Martha, a giant woman with special powers, "able to wrestle buffaloes ... and touch the tops of mountains with her languid double chin."



Susan Stinson

Still from *Gracious Flab, Gracious Bone* by Evie Leder

The Martha of Amanda's stories celebrates her size and power in the face of the world's desire that women be restrained and modest. Even as Amanda herself dares to go to town without her corset, the Martha of her stories expands until she is "huge past the point where size can be considered anything less than a blessing of range to the human world."

And this is one of *Martha Moody*'s biggest gifts to the reader. Without fanfare or rhetoric, *Martha Moody* draws for us the exuberant sensuality of two fat women lovers. Size becomes power becomes abundance becomes the deepest sexual experience. Fat women who love themselves have always known the immense power unleashed when our self-love replaces the self-hatred we are supposed to feel. *Martha Moody*, a feast for any reader, is a banquet for fat women and those who love us. ✨