

Sheri Holman's New Novel

Reviewed by Paul Devlin

The Mammoth Cheese: A Novel

by Sheri Holman

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I enjoyed Sheri Holman's new novel, *The Mammoth Cheese*. It is a fun, well-constructed and thoughtful story, told with a light touch (for the most part). *The Mammoth Cheese* suffers from none of the heavy-handed tactics that often make "this year's hot literary novel" completely boring and unreadable. It has a controlled exuberance and healthy goofiness (which it is self-conscious of) which make it both thoughtful and comic. Reading *The Mammoth Cheese* was a unique experience for me because it is the first novel I'd read with the *intention of reviewing it*. (In these pages last year I reviewed Richard Flannagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, but only after I had bought it to read for pleasure and felt cheated out of \$14.)

The Mammoth Cheese is Holman's third novel and the first that takes place in the present day, although many of the characters are preoccupied with the past - particularly with the early days of the American Republic. Her earlier books (which I have not read), both literary-historical-fiction best-sellers *The Dress Lodger* and *A Stolen Tongue* take place in a more remote past in the Old World. I don't think *The Mammoth Cheese* became a best-seller, but it got great reviews and deserves them. *The Mammoth Cheese* takes place in Three Chimneys, Virginia (thirty miles outside of Charlottesville) in a presidential election year after the terrorist attacks (presumably 2004). Holman grew up in rural Virginia, but this is doesn't seem to try to be a veiled memoir (it's too far fetched for that) or simply a local color exercise.

The mammoth cheese of the title refers to a “mammoth” cheese that is made by Margaret Prickett, struggling dairy farmer and single mother, in honor of the newly elected President, Adams Brooke – a man of the people; whose big campaign promise is one-time debt amnesty for small farmers like Margaret. Margaret is an exasperating though fascinating character; bit of a hippie who refuses to modernize her farm or let her 13-year old daughter, Polly, use store-bought shampoo or eat trucked-in out-of-season vegetables. She is both excessively old-fashioned and an odd sort of chic at the same time. Margaret’s family has been farming in Virginia since before the Revolution. (Did they own slaves? We don’t know. This is a problem.) Margaret believes in the maxim of the ancient Roman historian Varro: “the herd is the foundation of all wealth”. She is dedicated to her cows and treats them with perhaps more care than she treats the people around her. Margaret’s dairy-farming exploits allow Holman to go off on some rather heavy-handed by informative digressions on cheese-making. These not handled lightly, like Balzac’s digressions on paper making in *Lost Illusions*, on the contrary, they are closer to Melville’s digressions on whales in *Moby Dick*. But then Holman can shift gears with this extraordinary piece of writing, describing Margaret working in her cheese cellar:

Margaret...unlocked the door to an even darker moonscape if a chamber, where in semitwilight her soft cheeses bloomed blue and green...She settled each upon her palm, stroking them like sightless ocean creatures, easing their crine into a velvety softshell. It was not legal for her to sell these, her favorite, secret children, because they grew from raw unpasteurized milk and were aged under two months. But a few chefs had ferreted out her contraband and were ordering it for the best restaurants in Charlottesville and Washington and as far away as New York City. ...The cheeses were as old as humanity itself, they were as close as you might come to circulating the earth and ether of a place, your plot of land balanced on the tongue of a diplomat in Dupont Circle or a starlet in SoHo.

The idea to make a *mammoth* cheese has been suggested to her by Pastor Leland Vaughan, the local Episcopal priest and father of August Vaughan, Margaret’s farm-hand (who is has a life-long crush on Margaret and a whole big unrequited love thing going on – Margaret is oblivious to this). August, who is a good honest man (and the polar opposite of Margaret’s sleazy ex-husband) is also a top-notch Thomas Jefferson impersonator who has Jefferson-impersonating gigs all over Virginia. He knows so much biographical and historical minutiae about Jefferson, Monticello, and

Jefferson's times that it might scare Dumas Malone. Now, back to the mammoth cheese. Why would August's father, Leland, suggest she make it? Well, because a group of Massachusetts Republicans (back when Republicans were the competitors with Federalists, not Democrats) made a 1,235 pound cheese in honor of Jefferson. August tells Margaret the details.

He told Margaret that it took a day's milking of nine hundred Republican cows – no Federalist milk allowed. That it took six months to make and transport – by sled, by sloop down the Hudson River, and by cart to the nation's capital. One man joked by the time it reached Baltimore, it was strong enough to walk the rest of the way. Jefferson's friend Charles Wilson Peale had recently discovered the bones of a mastodon, back then thought to be a woolly mammoth, and thus the cheese was immediately dubbed 'the Mammoth Cheese' by Jefferson's detractors who observed it on its way to Washington.

Let me not forget to mention that Pastor Vaughan has advised Manda Frank, who had taken too many fertility drugs, to keep all eleven babies she is pregnant with. The story of "the Frank eleven" is a major plot-line of the novel. (Other reviewers have pointed out that the eleven babies and the mammoth cheese together represent the American tendency toward excess.) Keep in mind: "the herd is the foundation of all wealth". The whole town of Three Chimneys is overjoyed at the birth of the Frank eleven and in the days surrounding the birth everything seems too Norman Rockwellian – but this all changes when some of the babies (who are all very premature) start to die. Then a darker side of the town comes out. Embarrassment and indifference take over. This is all narrated skillfully. The Frank Eleven plot and mammoth cheese plot and all the other neat sub-plots are all in harmony.

Governor (and then President) Adams Brooke is a somewhat slippery figure. He grew up on a farm and has a romantic attachment to the ideal of the American small farmer. Yet Holman makes you question whether or not you believe him. There is a kind of earthiness mixed with slick flashiness to Brooke. (If you are trying to recall "who is *Brooke Adams*?" – she's the "cheesy" B-movie actress. *Brooks Adams* [1848-1927] was, of course, the younger brother of Henry Adams, and an interesting historian.)

Brooke's rhetoric about "the land" is benignly narrated, though Holman alludes to its somewhat sinister overtones (e.g. the Nazi obsession with land, being tied to the land, etc) when Margaret Prickett (who vigorously and quixotically campaigns for Brooke) invents the slogan BROOKE NO OPPOSITION, which her rebellious daughter Polly instantly is creeped out by. However, in a moment of bonding, they invent a outlandish acronym for it. The next day, Polly wears the acronym as a sign all around town, at first with enthusiasm and later to her great embarrassment. She tears the sign up when she is picked up and given a ride home by her history teacher, a popular young radical named Stanley March, who had gone to Columbia and came all the way down from New York City to teach in this rural Virginia town. And he has a crush on 13-year old Polly. March is perhaps the most disturbing character in the book. Indeed without March in the book (and the story could easily work without him) it might be a book of characters who are, shall we say, struggling to become 3-D. Not quite 2-D but pushing out of 2 into 3 and falling back. Perhaps. A nice exception to this is when the narrator stuns you with the erstwhile dull Mrs. Vaughan's folksy yet poetic cosmological theories.

Anyhow, back to Adams Brooke. None of the other reviewers of this novel, as far as I can tell, have mentioned Brooke's literary antecedent. Richard Eder suggests in his review that Brooke may be based on the character of the president in the TV series *The West Wing*. Maybe so; I've watched *The West Wing* enough times to know. But I think Brooke is clearly a variation on Willie Stark, the Governor of Louisiana in Robert Penn Warren's classic novel *All the King's Men* (1948). (Stark, in turn, was based on real-life Louisiana governor Huey Long.) Just as *All the King's Men* begins with a visit to Stark's boyhood home which is staged for the media, *The Mammoth Cheese* begins with a visit by Governor Brooke (staged for the media) to the hospital room of Manda Frank, who has just given birth to the Frank Eleven. Immediately I thought that the opening chord is a riff on that of *All the King's Men*. As *The Mammoth Cheese* progresses, similarities between Stark and Brooke abound: they both claim to be a friend to the small farmer, both grew up on farms and worked their way up, both have the physique of farm work, both claim to be men of the people – and so on. And both have characters have "eerie auras" around them, for lack of a better term. Yet Brooke seems calmer and does not seem to be possessed of the lust for power that drives Willie Stark. Brooke is also a bit of a smoother operator, perhaps a "Willie Stark of the Information Age". Nonetheless, I think there is a loud echo of Stark in Brooke. The main difference is that Brooke is more of a ghostly figure, one whom we hear about second or third hand and his own psychology is not examined in the way Warren does Stark's.

The Mammoth Cheese is a good novel, but far from perfect. I really like the book and don't want to dwell on its flaws, but I must point out a few. First of all, the ending is a mess. Like Hemingway (in *Green Hills of Africa*) advised readers of *Huckleberry Finn* to do: skip the ending. Secondly, some of the day-to-day factual elements of the book don't stand up to scrutiny. Not in a "magical realist" way, but in a humdrum, "that just wouldn't happen like that" way. I'm talking about simple physical facts. But that's nitpicking. Holman's keen observations of human nature and *vast* historical research make up for it, in my opinion. Third, some clunky, overly "trying-to-be-symbolic" scenes needed to be cut.

But the biggest problem is that there seems to be no minorities in this small Virginia town. There are practically no black people in the book. *And they certainly have lived in Virginia just as long as almost all the white characters* (who are almost all FFVs, or SVFs, [if that's a term] if not wealthy FFVs or SVFs). I got the impression that Holman is seriously trying to come to terms with American history and American democracy, and I do not think that this can be done without acknowledging that America did not become a totally honest democracy until around 1965. Not to mention the fact that the town, however small, seems unrealistic, demographically. There are also no new immigrants in town. Only the town's psychiatrist, Andrew Friedman, like March, also from New York, seems to have any non-WASP ethnicity (and he wants to be a southern gentleman! – we are told he wanted to hang a Confederate flag in his office until he found out only crackers did that sort of thing anymore).

Certainly, the narration of parts of the book seem a bit corny. It's almost as if parts of the book seem pulled by two forces – wanting to be simple enough to be picked by a middle brow book club and wanting to be a profound achievement. In other words, the narration is lightly sappy at times. At first I thought she was using the Joycean/Faulknerian technique of having the narration wobble and warp and conform to the consciousness and intelligence of the character it is describing. To a degree this seems to be the case (especially with 13-year old Polly) but perhaps Holman loses control of this in other parts of the book and with other characters. Nevertheless, these are all minor quibbles with a fine novel.

Paul Devlin is the editor of this publication. He earned his BA in English from St. John's University in 2002, and will graduate with his MA in in English from St. John's in May, 2004.