

tnr.com
Captive Audience

Blonde pixies Elizabeth Smart and Jessica Lynch are back in the public realm--stick-straight hair, blank eyes, and all. Being unabashedly fascinated, this reader rushed out to buy the tell-all books: *Bringing Elizabeth Home: A Journey of Faith and Hope*, penned by Lois and Ed Smart and featuring a frighteningly monochromatic jacket photo of the Smarts and their six blonde children; and *I Am A Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*, by ex-NYTer Rick Bragg. Both tomes lean heavily on wide-spaced fonts, tearful homecoming scenes, and a near-complete lack of new revelations (besides Lynch's anal assault records, which were all over newspapers during *I Am A Soldier's* publicity push). In the case of the Smarts' book, you get a bonus: helpful quotes from the Book of Mormon.

Can anybody blame us for feeling cheated? We Americans come from a long tradition of female captivity narratives, stretching back to the grandmother of them all: *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. Back in the year 1682, Mary Rowlandson, a housewife from Lancaster, Massachusetts, was kidnapped by Wampanoag and Narragansett Indians during a bloody raid on her hometown and held captive for eleven weeks. After finally being ransomed back to her husband, she penned a vivid, lengthy memoir about her time with the savages.

The book sold like flapjacks--it's one of the top four best-selling titles in the history of American publishing. Why? Partly because, like all captivity narratives, Rowlandson's plays to one of our deepest anxieties--the question of whether the victim might be complicit in her own captivity. (Female captivity narratives tend to be more gripping than male narratives because we can accept that they might fall under the control of others; men are somehow expected to escape.) But the other reason Rowlandson's book sold so well is that, unlike its two recent imitators, it's a real whizzbanger of a story, following all the rules of great narrative: |

1. Leave no gory detail untold. Rowlandson specializes in blood and pain. During the raid, various colonists are knocked on the head and guts spilt on the ground. "The bullets were flying thick, one went through my side, and the same (as would seem) through the bowels and hand of my dear child in my arms," recounts Goodwife Rowlandson. Later: "There was one [colonist] who was chopped in the head with a hatchet, and stripped naked, and yet was crawling up and down."

By contrast, the few details Ed and Lois provide about Elizabeth's captivity have been carefully screened to minimize sexual innuendo. Lois's comments about the physical examination of her daughter after recovery are limited to diet and the state of Elizabeth's musculature: "She wasn't able to get much exercise, since she usually sat around tethered by a cable. When she did come down from the canyon, she walked and was forced to carry a heavy backpack." Bragg, as would be expected, is better on details. But he faces a potentially insurmountable challenge: Jessica Lynch doesn't remember anything about the three hours following the accident that wounded her--easily the most interesting part of her captivity. So Bragg writes: "Jessi lost three hours. She lost them in the snapping bones, in the crash of the Humvee, in the torment her enemies inflicted on her after she was pulled from it ... her memory just skipped, like a scratched record, from the last few seconds inside the speeding Humvee to a blurred circle of faces staring down at her in what she slowly began to recognize as a hospital bed." Nice try.

2. Illustrate transformation in the main character. Rowlandson's book satisfies our curiosity about how captivity changed her (and would change us if we'd been held in her place). "The first week of my being among them I hardly ate any thing: the second week I

found my stomach grow very faint for want of something; and yet it was very hard to get down their filthy trash; but the third week, though I could think how formerly my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve or die before I could eat such things, yet they were sweet and savory to my taste." Elizabeth, on the other hand, returned exactly the same way she left, at least according to her parents: "Elizabeth exhibited some of the traits of Stockholm syndrome, but unlike most victims she never bonded with her kidnapers. She did what they said in order to survive. She was never fooled by their diabolical and distorted views." Yeah, okay. What really happened?

3. Have a consistently creepy villain. Here again, good Mary does a fine job of keeping hatred of the Indians alive all the way through. A pregnant captive with a young child asks to go home; the Indians become "vexed with her importunity" and "strip her naked, set her in the midst of them, and when they had sung and danced around her (in their hellish manner) as long as they pleased they knocked her on the head, and the child in her arms with her. When they had done that they made a fire and put them both in it." The best Bragg can do is inform us that the Iraqi hospital staff sang Jessica lullabies: "When the pain was more than she could take without screaming, an older nurse would come in with talcum powder, dust her shoulders and back, and rub them as she sang to Jessi, trying to calm her." Hey, wait a second, that's not scary!

4. Maintain a believable voice. Rowlandson's first-person perspective is a distinct advantage. We don't care what Rick Bragg or Ed and Lois Smart have to say about the captivities; we want it from the horse's mouth. This reader was salivating when she heard that Elizabeth had written a chapter in the Smarts' book. The "chapter" turned out to be a single page long. Elizabeth says not a word about the captivity itself, sticking instead to simple declarative sentences ("I'm doing great"), expressions of gratitude to everyone who helped find her, and Mormon-ish platitudes such as "You have to live every day knowing how precious God's gifts are." Jessi, of course, doesn't write her story directly. And any journalist who's ever had to construct a story out of quotes from an unreflective subject will find paragraphs like this one (about Lori Piestewa, Jessi's Hopi friend who was killed in Nasireyah in the same car crash that wounded her) unintentionally hilarious: "Lori was from a place called the Painted Desert. As a little girl, she had sprinkled sacred cornmeal on the desert wind to feed the spirits of her ancestors, and then had fallen to her knees in the Catholic Church to pray to a Holy Mother that missionaries had carried on mule-back into Arizona centuries before. What could they possibly talk about? 'Stuff,' Jessi said."

The search is still on for a Mary Rowlandson for our frightened times. This writer calls upon Al Qaeda to kidnap a pretty, 25-year-old blonde female--preferably one with an MFA from Iowa who also happens to speak Arabic. Take her to your caves and let her hear all your plans and witness your devilish cruelties. Then fall into a deep sleep one night, allowing her to escape through the mountains with the help of sympathetic villagers. Now that--that!--would be a story.

November 21, 2003