

Exquisite Adaptations

—AN ESSAY BY—

ELIZABETH J. CHURCH

I grew up in Los Alamos, New Mexico, the birthplace of the atomic bomb. My father was one of the scientists who created the bomb; my mother, a biologist, was one of the well-educated, intellectually curious women whom bomb scientists tended to marry. At the conclusion of the war, my father, a research chemist, chose to stay in Los Alamos, and my mother joined him. I was brought up in a unique community, where physicists successfully challenged the accuracy of police radar guns and parents carefully designed neighborhoods so that their children could walk to school without once having to cross a street.

Many of the women I knew while growing up were unable to pursue their own careers. It was the 1950s, and for the most part a woman was expected to acquiesce to her husband's wishes and invest her talents in her children. I benefited from this dynamic; I owe the generous women of my childhood an enormous debt. But as I matured, and especially after I left Los Alamos for college, I wondered: What could these women have done and been? What more could my mother have accomplished, had she been given the opportunities I was finding as a result of the women's movement?

I set out to tell the story of the women who married the men with extraordinary minds, the men who chose their wives in large part because these women were capable of appreciating the intricacies of their chosen fields of study. I wanted to highlight the sacrifices these women made, in the 1950s and onward, so that their husbands could pursue their science. And I wanted to think about how these women came to redefine themselves during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s.

As I wrote, I thought a good deal about my mother, her mother, my aunts, and all the women who had come before me — women of incredible fortitude. I thought about the differences between me and my mother. She grew

up impoverished during the Depression and came of age in the cataclysm of World War II. My time was characterized by the idyll of Los Alamos, the outrage of Vietnam, and the cynicism of Watergate. I wondered what a woman who could bridge our differences would look like. What might such a woman think? How might she feel about the dramatic changes brought on by the totality of these events? Meridian, the narrator of *The Atomic Weight of Love*, is this woman.

Robert Oppenheimer chose the location for his secret city well. Perched atop the spread fingers of several mesas in the mountains of northern New Mexico, Los Alamos is essentially an isolated university town on steroids. World-class minds focus not only on national defense but also on space exploration, medical breakthroughs, and environmental issues. Nature permeates the town, and plentiful hiking trails wind through aspen and ponderosa forests. Anasazi ruins sit atop sheer, flesh-colored canyon walls dotted with ancient hand- and footholds dug into the tufa rock. Mountain lions, bears, and smaller animals populate the canyons, and crows abound. This community — at the tail end of World War II and through the present — is the setting for my novel.

In *The Atomic Weight of Love*, Meridian Wallace marries Alden Whetstone, her University of Chicago physics professor, and follows him to New Mexico. She agrees to put her formal ornithological studies on hold for a year but attempts to continue her work on her own. Finding one crow she can identify by a malformed foot, she establishes a spot in a canyon where she can observe communal crow behaviors. As the years pass, Meridian settles into married life. In true Darwinian spirit, she adapts, tries to fit in by taking dancing and drawing lessons, volunteering, and making a good home. In 1970, Meridian meets a Vietnam War veteran who is twenty years her junior, and her concepts of partnership, love and obligation, womanhood, and what right she might have to her own ambitions begin to change.

Meridian's losses and her desire for more, while prototypical of women of the 1950s and 1960s, continue today, as do the questions they provoke. What lines do we draw in our relationships, and is it possible to find a viable balance between achieving our potential and loving someone? What is the right amount of compromise or adaptation? When does adaptation become self-abnegation?

My mother suffered a terrible loss when her husband died suddenly at age forty-three. He left her with four young children. Her courageous response was key to my growth as a woman: she went back to school and obtained her graduate degree in biology. In later years, she and I would talk about the fact that my father's death, while crushing, actually freed her to follow her dreams, to find a kind of fulfillment that she would not likely have found within their marriage.

Freedom exacted a high price from me, too. Publication of *The Atomic Weight of Love* comes when I have reached age sixty. Had my husband not similarly died prematurely, I would likely not have been able to call an abrupt halt to one career so that I could pursue my dream of writing. But I wonder, too. Had my husband survived, could I have created a more appropriate level of compromise within my marriage? Meridian's story helps all of us to re-think the choices we've made, and to consider instead limitless possibilities.