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The Lonely Polygamist

Brady Udall

Angela Hallstrom

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Brady Udall. *The Lonely Polygamist*.

New York: W.W. Norton, 2010.

Reviewed by Angela Hallstrom

Brady Udall's *The Lonely Polygamist*, published in 2010, arrived amid a wave of pop-culture interest in the polygamist lifestyle: HBO's *Big Love* was gearing up for its finale; TLC's reality show *Sister Wives* had just hit the airwaves; and real-life stories of Warren Jeffs, child brides, and FLDS compounds were common tabloid fare. Although Udall had been at work on his novel for many years before polygamy became a hot cultural topic, some skeptical readers—Mormon and non-Mormon alike—wondered if the novel's intentions were more sensational than literary.¹ Once reviews began rolling in, however, it became clear that *The Lonely Polygamist* was more than a fictional exposé of “alternative lifestyles” and was instead a serious work of art.

The novel tells the tale of Golden Richards, a 1970s-era polygamist living in southern Utah with his four wives and twenty-eight children. Golden is at heart a good man, but he has fumbled his way toward middle age and now finds himself overwhelmed by the chaos his choices have wrought. While his children cyclone through the house and his wives alternately chastise and ignore him, Golden struggles to deal with his grief over a daughter's death, maintain his grip on a struggling construction business, and keep an adulterous attraction at bay.

Within a year of its publication, *The Lonely Polygamist* had become the most critically acclaimed work of literary fiction ever written by a Mormon author. Named one of the best books of 2010 by critics and newspaper columnists across the country, the novel was hailed as “a potential classic” by the Associated Press, and *Publisher's Weekly* proclaimed it “a serious contender for Great American Novel status.” *Entertainment Weekly* celebrated

1. Christian A. Winn, “Telling Tales Out of School: Brady Udall Prepares to Let Loose *The Lonely Polygamist*,” *Boise Weekly*, May 27, 2009.

the novel as the best work of fiction published in 2010, noting that “this tale of Golden Richards and his four wives is packed with more heart, more humor, more tragedy, and ultimately more hope than any other novel published this year.”²

Although *The Lonely Polygamist* has garnered a great deal of national attention, some Latter-day Saints have been reluctant to embrace the book. While many Mormon readers enthusiastically support novels by Orson Scott Card, Brandon Sanderson, and Stephenie Meyer—LDS authors who have found great mainstream success writing in the science fiction, fantasy, and young-adult genres—*The Lonely Polygamist* has received a cooler response within our community, which many LDS readers would claim is justified. Not only does the novel contain instances of coarse language and deal frankly with sex, but its story centers around contemporary polygamy, a practice nearly all twenty-first-century Mormons would prefer to distance themselves from.

Brady Udall himself was prepared for a wary reception by LDS readers. Udall hails from a large Mormon family, better known in political circles than literary ones (Arizona politicians Stewart Udall and Morris Udall are his great-uncles). He served a mission, graduated with a degree in English from BYU, and attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, considered by many to be the top creative writing program in the country. His first published book, a collection of stories called *Letting Loose the Hounds*, was critically well received, but it wasn’t until his first novel, *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*, published in 2001, that he began to find popular success.

Although Udall does not consider himself a very religious person, he says he’s “proud to be a Mormon,” and his LDS upbringing and continued association with the Church leave an indelible mark on his fiction.³ Both of Udall’s novels not only explore religious culture (with a decidedly Mormon flavor), but they are peopled with devout believers and spiritual seekers, an anomaly in contemporary literary fiction—a genre that often demonizes religious characters or, more commonly, ignores them altogether. And while it is clear that Udall is not writing with Mormons in mind as his primary audience, LDS readers were enough of a concern that his publisher requested he write a letter aimed at explaining the novel to Mormons uncomfortable with its focus on polygamy. In the letter, he explains, in part,

2. Karen Valby, “Best Books of 2010: Fiction,” *Entertainment Weekly*, December 22, 2010, online at http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20326356_20451849_20890146,00.html#20890145.

3. Kristine Haglund, “The Best Place to Deal with Questions: An Interview with Brady Udall,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 195.

his personal perspective: “The church has struggled to distance itself from polygamy, claiming that it no longer has a connection to the practice. And yet I don’t think we can sweep polygamy under the rug so easily. . . . When we see a polygamist family among us, we must remember we are looking in the mirror; we are looking at ourselves.”⁴

As a Mormon, my experience reading *The Lonely Polygamist* was like looking in a mirror, albeit a funhouse version, that stretches, twists, and amplifies what would otherwise be a familiar reflection. The novel rarely involves modern Mormons in its narrative, focusing instead on the small community of polygamists who are clear about their separation from the contemporary LDS faith. But the cultural and spiritual practices of the novel’s characters still strike a very familiar chord. The Richards clan holds Family Home Evening; they read the Book of Mormon; they get baptized at eight; and the boys receive the priesthood at twelve. In fact, Rusty, the “family terrorist” and most compelling character in the novel, looks forward with great anticipation to his twelfth birthday, a particularly momentous occasion when “you received the priesthood, when you became a deacon in the church and were supposed to do things like pass the sacrament on Sunday, paint the houses of the less fortunate, and start being a man” (290). Sentiments like these mirror the feelings of many mainstream Mormon boys today. The difference is that Rusty has a set of birthday wishes particular to a polygamist preteen: he wants to have a party at the Skate Palace and invite nonfamily members (“kids . . . who wouldn’t normally be caught dead around him, mostly because he was a plyg kid”); and, even more heart wrenching, he wants to move back to the Big House with his mother, from whom he’s been separated in an attempt to straighten him out. Neither of these wishes comes true.

The Lonely Polygamist is a sprawling novel: 599 pages long, alternating between four different points of view, and bursting at the seams with characters, themes, and emotional extremes. The narrative expertly ricochets from comedy to tragedy, diving headlong into emotionality in a way that few contemporary novels will, focused as they are so often on irony, detachment, and cool emotional distance. Reading the novel is an immersive experience. The Richards clan—Golden; his fourth wife, Trish; and the misunderstood Rusty in particular—lift themselves off the page as fully realized human beings. In this way, *The Lonely Polygamist* truly is a “big” novel: more than just a polygamy story or a tale of the American West with

4. Angela Hallstrom, “A Great Mormon Novelist: An Interview with Brady Udall,” *Irreantum* 12, no. 1 (July 2010): 108.

a sensational religious twist. The novel is simpler, and grander, than that. It is the story of a peculiar American family—outsized and exaggerated, to be sure—but lovingly rendered by one of the most talented American novelists writing today.

Angela Hallstrom (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) is a fiction writer and editor and has served as a creative writing instructor at Brigham Young University. She recently edited an anthology of short fiction by Mormon authors, *Dispensation: Latter-day Fiction* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2010).