Speaking for Edgar Mint

The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint, by Brady Udall (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 384 pp.

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IN AN EPISODE in *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint,* the main character chastises his friends who have masqueraded as Mormon missionaries to rescue him from placement with a Mormon family. The friends have studied the culture and are dressed for the part with white shirts and ties, they know they can't smoke and must "stick together at all times" (295), and they carry scriptures and wear name tags. Though a young convert, Edgar knows the language is not quite right: "Mormons don't say 'Praise the Lord.' . . .And they don't say 'Praise Jesus' either" (295). Likewise, in this well-received novel, much of the outer appearance seems right, but some of the details reveal an author speaking in a voice outside his own culture.

The fictional Edgar Mint is a mixed-blood San Carlos Apache boy whose life is shaped by a singular event revealed in the novel's first line: "If I could tell you only one thing about my life it would be this: when I was seven years old the mailman ran over my head" (13). Edgar then narrates his tale of hospital recovery, boarding school horrors, Mormon conversion, placement with the Mormon family in fictional Richland, Utah, and quest to let the mailman know he survived the accident. Flashbacks reveal that his Indian mother was alcoholic, his white father absent, and his maternal grandmother harsh and condemning. Indeed, Edgar may suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome in addition to brain injury.

Among the strengths of the book are the layers of complexity in depicting small-town Mormonism, a culture Brady Udall knows well from his upbringing in Arizona. The Madsens, Edgar's host family, are working out their own difficulties in coping with tragedy, a hormone-driven teenage daughter, and a nerdy younger son. Their family, the neighbors, and the ward are rendered in such precise and rounded details that they will seem quite familiar to Mormon readers. Udall's care with detail, including Edgar's talismans that accompany his journeys—a urinal tablet and an old typewriter to compensate for the brain damage that leaves him unable to write by hand—creates a compelling and seemingly realistic tale.

The novel has been widely praised, even listed as one of the "Best Books of 2001" in the *Los Angeles Times* where Jonathan Levi observes, "Brady Udall's prose strikes a perfect balance, sometimes minimalist, sometimes lush." Several reviewers call Udall's realistic descriptions of the "orphaned" boy and particularly the boarding school as Dickensian. Sanford Pinsker ad-

mires "the sheer pleasure that the shape and ring of its sentences bring," and Jennifer Reese acclaims Edgar's character as "lovely and complex. . .an innocent whose struggle to survive is at odds with his fundamentally gentle nature." The Association for Mormon Letters list has featured three very positive reviews emphasizing Udall's craft and his frank depiction of Mormonism. After brief mention, though, none of these critics discuss the complicated nature of Edgar's ethnicity.[1]

Edgar's Indian identity influences every major plot development: his treatment at Indian Health Services, where he encounters an idealistic doctor who saves his life and will follow him throughout the book; the boarding school on the White River Apache reservation; the Indian Placement program with the Mormon family; and the final revelation that a white couple had intended to adopt him. These events would not be plausible if Edgar were not Indian. Yet the Indian issues do not figure in these plot events. At the boarding school, the students are fundamentally tribally indistinct. Once Edgar is placed with the Madsens, there is no commentary or seeming awareness about the complications he faces as an Indian child immersed in an all-white social environment. Edgar's Indianness virtually disappears.

Udall has spoken of his own experience at a high school football game on the White River reservation at Teddy Roosevelt boarding school (Willie Sherman in the novel). He remembers the hateful stare of one of the students and describes that event as the root of this story: "I knew one day when I wrote a novel it would be the first thing I'd write about. I'll never know anything about that boy, but as the god of my own little universe, I decided to give him a story and a name."[2] That character becomes Edgar Mint.

Vincent DeLaine, a minor character, is a thinly veiled representation of Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene): "a Native American poet of great stature, author of five books at only thirty three years of age, a voice of his generation" (203). Alexie has been particularly critical of writers who appropriate Indian voices. In his review of Ian Frazier's *On the Rez,* which was generally favorably reviewed for its representation of Oglala Sioux life, Alexie observes: "[Frazier] admires the Oglalas because of who he believes them to be, not because of who the Oglalas believe themselves to be." Alexie also questions: "Does [Frazier] ever admit that somebody from 'the rez' has a different life experience than somebody who is just writing about the rez?"[3]

By assuming the first-person voice of Apache boy Edgar Mint, Udall, however sympathetic he may be, is writing from a world view he can only imagine. And he imagines this world without distinctive San Carlos Apache cul-

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1. Jonathan Levi, "Best Books of 2001," *Los Angeles Times,* 2 December 2001; Sanford Pinsker, "He Lived to Tell His Ferociously Funny Tale," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* 24 June 2001; and Jennifer Reese, "Edgar's Ordeals," *New York Times Book Review,* 1 July 2001. AML-List reviews by Andrew R. Hall, David Hanson, and Terry L. Jeffress available at www.xmission.com/~aml/reviews/index.html.

2. Quoted in Brandon Griggs, "Udall Mints a Dickens of a Tale in 'Miracle Life,'" *Salt Lake Tribune,* 17 June 2001.

3. Sherman Alexie, "Some of My Best Friends: Review of *On the Rez* by Ian Frazier," *Los Angeles Times,* 23 January 2000.

tural markers other than skin tone and locale. The fiction of any contemporary American Indian writer is embedded with subtle allusions to complex tribal histories and practices. Udall's only nod to such history is a one paragraph summary about the U.S. Army's pursuit of Geronimo and establishment of Ft. Apache (later the boarding school) to deal with "unpredictable savages" (106). This characterization is made in Edgar's voice, apparently without irony. Later Udall again has Edgar resort to stereotype as the students set a fire: "we kept it up, circling the blaze, bare-chested and heedless, our eyes full of fire, stomping and howling like the savages we were" (182).

Granted, Udall is writing fiction and his invented character has the convenience of being separated from his Apache mother and grandmother, from his tribal roots. Yet his Apache uncle assists in caretaking at Willie Sherman, so Edgar would not be totally detribalized. The potential adoption by a white couple and later by the Madsens completely ignores the kinds of problems that led to the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978), designed to protect Native children from being assimilated by non-Indian families. As with the fake missionaries, the details do not ring true.

Udall justifies his position by saying, "I grew up around Native Americans; they were my friends. . . .What I saw were people who were living their lives just like we were. They weren't talking about being Indians all day long. They were just regular people."[4] Simply to dismiss criticisms as "political correctness," however, is to fail to see the complexities of history and the moral implications of appropriation and resistance. When an author presumes to speak in behalf of another, he or she has a tremendous burden to speak truthfully. Consider how defensively Mormons react when they are misrepresented in history, the media, or literature. Udall does catch Edgar's sense of humor, a survival humor, but the Indians in the novel are consistently portrayed as violent, drunk, hateful, as victims and "savages." Much of American Indian survival humor works by providing an avenue for people to endure with their indigenous identities intact. Edgar survives the external challenges, but at the novel's resolution he is assimilated without regard to his origin. His redemption comes at the price of his tribal affiliation.

Udall may see American Indians (tribally undefined) as "regular people," but he gives no indication of how they might tell their own stories from their own perspectives. Unfortunately, this novel falls into a five-hundred-year pattern of literary colonization, from Cabeza de Vaca's encounter narratives to the enormously popular Tony Hillerman detective series. Such writers appeal to—and reaffirm—the mainstream imagination. One has only to read the works of Alexie, Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), or Laura Tohe (Navaho) to recognize the differences in voice and detail when American Indian writers tell their own stories. Perhaps the most revealing example is the way in which Udall's great-grandmother, Louise Udall, let Helen Sekaquaptewa speak for herself as a Hopi and a Mormon in *Me and Mine*.[5]

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4. Brady Udall, "Interview," KUER, 21 June 2001; available at www.kuer.org.

5. *Me and Mine; the Life Story of Helen Sekaquaptewa*, as told to Louise Udall (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1969).