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## INTERVIEWS AND CONVERSATIONS

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# The Best Place to Deal with Questions: An Interview with Brady Udall

*Note: Brady Udall's most recent novel, The Lonely Polygamist (reviewed this issue), published by the W. W. Norton Press in May 2010, explores ideas of home and family by inhabiting the space of a Mormon polygamous household in which the title character is lonely—even with four wives and twenty-eight children. Kristine Haglund, editor of Dialogue, interviewed Brady Udall, May 18, 2010, at the Elliot Hotel in Boston, two weeks after the release of the novel.*

*Kristine:* As you well know, Mormons are always interested in famous Mormons' relationship to the Church. From what I've read, it seems that you like the Church, like Mormons, but never were really a believer, never "gained a testimony," in the vernacular.

*Brady:* That's right. I grew up in the Church, went on a mission. I'm proud to be a Mormon. I did what you're supposed to; I prayed and hoped to be a believer, but it just never took.

*Kristine:* And that's a problem for Mormons, theologically. That's not supposed to happen.

*Brady:* Right. It's not supposed to happen, and yet we open the possibility when we tell people—like, as a missionary, I told people—to ask. We tell them that if you ask God, you'll get an answer. Of course, the idea is that there's only one answer; but implicitly, there's this other possibility. And I just never got that answer. But it has never really bothered me that much. I think many of us, if

we're in that really difficult place, we worry about it, we obsess about it, and I see people go through that, and I've felt it somewhat—some of the conflict with family and so on—but it never really bothered me as much as it bothers others.

*Kristine:* I think that situation of wanting to believe but never getting there is a lot more common than we usually think, more than anyone admits. There are a lot of people in any congregation who don't get up on Fast Sunday.

*Brady:* Right, right. And it's so painful for some people—when they feel that they can never be completely honest about their feelings. And I think it's just too bad. It's too bad there's not an open place for people like that. There's not really a place for those of us who feel that way.

*Kristine:* Do you think that has to do with the fact that Mormonism is still a new religion? Do you think we'll ever mature enough as a faith that there will be that space?

*Brady:* Yes, absolutely. We're really just a teenage religion. We're so worried about what other people think. It's weird, in the history of a church, to go so quickly from being a peculiar oddity to being mainstream and worried about image. It's bizarre, and it hasn't been entirely healthy for the Church to make that leap so quickly.

*Kristine:* And also strange for a religion to come of age in a time when data get stored, when everything is recorded. There are some good things about having your founding documents lost!

*Brady:* Yes! Media has become so prevalent, and everything's instantaneous and worldwide. But I think it will come with maturity. All of these issues just need time.

*Kristine:* It seems to me that although you describe yourself as not being a believer, you *get* believers just right. I'm thinking especially of one of the children in *The Lonely Polygamist*, Faye, in her little prayer cave. That rings so true to me, that certain kind of melancholy, mystical child, who's prone to that kind of fervent belief that is right on the edge of something darker.

*Brady:* Maybe. She's a damaged child. That's what she's responding to. She's damaged in some way or another, and she's trying to heal herself, I guess. I'm not sure that I really get belief any more

than anyone else, but there's such a dearth of religious or spiritual or searching (however you want to put it) people in modern American fiction. If someone's naturally religious or spiritual, they're usually looked down on, or they're a villain. Whether it's a priest or a pastor at church or a religious family, they're somehow suspect.

*Kristine:* Zealots.

*Brady:* Somebody asked me to name a book, or a few, with religious characters who were sympathetic, and I can barely think of any. It's hard to think of contemporary books where a religious character is treated with depth or respect. And that's too bad. I don't entirely understand it. So I guess one of the things I try to do is write books with people like that.

*Kristine:* It does seem like a real failure of imagination that we somehow can't think ourselves into that space where a sane, good person could be religious.

*Brady:* It might have to do with the nature of writers maybe?—that we keep ourselves a little detached, look at everything a little skeptically. We're a little distrustful of the simplicity of belief and may be inclined to think there's something dark behind it.

*Kristine:* Is it a difficult task, technically, to develop a character whose faith is simple or whose worldview seems maybe uncomplicated?

*Brady:* No, not really. Like in my last novel, *Edgar Mint* has this very, very simple faith, even though all these terrible things happen to him.

*Kristine:* And yet no one could say he's one dimensional.

*Brady:* I hope not. I know people like that. He says somewhere, "I believe in God. I just don't have faith in him." And that's sort of like a play on words, but it's also how I know a lot of people must feel—that there's just this innate belief there; but what the world, or God, has done to them is hard for them to comprehend or make sense of. So they believe, but they don't have what they'd call faith.

*Kristine:* Why is fiction a good place to explore the search for God? Why not personal essays or reporting? Why fiction?

*Brady:* That's a good question, and I actually think fiction is the best way to understand humans' personal attempts at connection with God. And that's because fiction can only be about one person, or two people, or maybe one family; and in its specificity, we can see this search for connection at work. That's why we love stories, why the Bible is full of stories, why Jesus spoke in stories. We can only understand truth in its human context or form, I think. That's not to say that philosophy or theology isn't worthwhile, just that for most of us, what touches us, what's meaningful about God—it sounds corny—but it's in our hearts. It can't be intellectualized.

*Kristine:* Yeah, and fiction is the right form to get at the specificity of that experience, and that particularity, the physicality of things. And your books are very concrete; they pay close attention to physical details, as a way of getting at the metaphysical.

That's something I somehow didn't understand until I had children—that most of what we really care about is embodied. We don't love "Love" as an abstraction. We love the people around us whom we touch. Pretty soon after my first baby was born, I had to quit watching *ER* on television. George Clooney was cute and all, but I just couldn't handle watching an injured or very sick child. So, of course, your books are hard to read, and, I imagine, excruciating to write, as you explore that detail, pay attention to what happens to physical bodies.

So why do you go there? Why does the search for God go to children hurt and dying, and to such particular descriptions of them?

*Brady:* Yeah, I go there, and I'd like to say I have no idea why, but I'm drawn to it, by that same fear you mention. It's such a strange thing; it's something I think about and worry about every day. It's there all the time. If we had a psychologist here, she could maybe tell me why I have to do that. But when I start writing about it—start writing about people who are going through it—I feel like something meaningful is happening.

Writing about somebody's love interest in a book, I kind of have to force myself to do that. I don't feel compelled. But when Golden [the protagonist in *The Lonely Polygamist*] loses his daughter, that's exceptionally compelling. I can barely even stand it, it's

so compelling. It's probably my way of dealing with my own fear. It might seem twisted or weird. I guess you might wonder why I'd do that in such a public way. But I really do believe that, just as fiction is the best place to deal with the question of God, it's also the best place to deal with the questions of why we lose the people that we love, and where do they go, and how do we just keep on going when they're gone? I don't think we'll ever understand God in the way that we'd want to, but I think we can at least try to understand what it means to lose someone that we love.

*Kristine:* I think this is the one part of parenthood that nothing can ever prepare you for—that knot of fear that you live with all the time. I think that fear drives a lot of cultural weirdness, and I think you're probably right that fiction is a much better place to explore it than, say, car-seat manufacturing or school-lunch policies.

*Brady:* I think you're right, and I've had people write letters or emails that mean a lot to me, that say, "I lost a child" or "I had something terrible happen to me when I was a child" and "this is comforting," or "reading this, I felt less alone." Something just that simple tells me that fiction can provide that consolation. It can give at least a suggestion of understanding what's inside someone else, and that, in turn, provides understanding of oneself. I don't know. I think there's value just in that kind of comfort it can offer.

*Kristine:* Yeah. While I was reading your book and rereading *Edgar Mint*, and thinking about these questions, we had a terrible thing happen in our town. There was a freakish windstorm that lasted maybe twenty-five minutes. Some little boys were playing outside, and a tree limb fell on a third-grader from my son's school and killed him. And what I noticed in the aftermath is that there's *nothing*—no generalization, no theological statement, nothing that is worth saying—in that situation. And what you do in the book, you say, "This is physically what happened. This is what people did . . ." And fiction can do that, simply bear witness; and in a way, that's so much more helpful—more meaningful—than trying to theorize it.

*Brady:* I think it's more meaningful than trying to simplify it, because there's no simplifying it or making sense of it, is there? It has to be the worst thing that could happen to a human being,

having your child hurt or abused or killed. And I'll continue to write about it. It sounds crazy, but I know I will. When I sit down to write, that's what drives it. *The Lonely Polygamist* is about a lot of things, but really—Golden losing his daughter, and Trish with her lost children—that's what drives them, what drives the novel. You can have twenty-eight children, or you can have one; but if you lose one, that's what your life is about, and it doesn't make a bit of difference to anyone how many other children they have.

*Kristine:* I have a friend who started a career in public policy and ended up writing fiction, and she said that the thing that was hardest for her about working on policy was that you had to compare, had to decide what was least bad. And she said fiction felt more real to her than "real-world" policy, because she could say that one person's death was infinitely horrible. One person is the whole universe, and no one's death or pain is less or more than another's. You can't count that.

*Brady:* I agree.

*Kristine:* Another place where you go to really explicit physical detail is with the fallout scenes. Why go there? Why set this in the '70s so that the nuclear testing is the backdrop?

*Brady:* Well, when I was doing the research, I met any number of polygamist families. And as I was talking to them and just being around them, mostly in southern Utah and northern Arizona, I heard all these stories about their cancers and their children with birth defects. And I sort of knew all that stuff; but when I was there—looking right at it—it really got under my skin, and so I started doing the reading and the research. I was just beyond horrified that the facts are as they are. I knew right away that this would be part of the book, and I knew that it would be at the very center of the book. And in fact, the scene with the explosion is right at the numerical center.

I thought the editor would probably make me take it out, and at least one reviewer has said it's not necessary and shouldn't have been included. I sort of assumed that would happen more, actually. But it works because that's just part of that story to me, and that's why it's set in the '70s. There's no other reason. I don't like symbolism, really. I don't find it useful usually, but here it works very nicely—the correlation between the nuclear family, the tree

of life, all these things—and it seemed very easy to make it work that way if you want it to. But to me, that’s just extra. It’s really secondary to the fact that it’s part of these people’s lives, part of their stories.

And clearly, it wasn’t just polygamists who experienced this. It was other Mormons, too, patriotic people who did not speak out, so they were the easiest people to abuse. When the wind was blowing the other direction, toward Las Vegas, they didn’t set off bombs, only when it was blowing toward Utah.

*Kristine:* It doesn’t seem like mainstream Mormons have even remotely begun to deal with this, and I don’t even know if they can.

*Brady:* They haven’t. They haven’t dealt with this at all. My own father grew up in Fredonia, Arizona, and his sister—my aunt—has uterine cancer, and she actually got part of a settlement from the government. I didn’t know this until recently. I was talking to my dad about it, and he still spoke as though it wasn’t really a problem. And I asked if they’d watched the blasts, and he said yes, but it happened a long time ago—fifty years ago, eons—and it’s not a big deal. And that bothers me.

If there’s a Mormon mindset, at least in the Intermountain West, it’s “Let’s just let those bad things be, keep our chins up, and keep movin’ on.” And that’s [laughing], it’s an old-fashioned way of doing it, and it’s maybe hard as younger people for us to understand. So this was just a way of doing my small part to let people know about this, to start looking at it. And I’m shocked by how many people ask if this is real, if it really happened.

*Kristine:* I don’t know if I’ll be able to articulate the way this is connected in my head, but I’ve been thinking about it: about Mormons’ ambiguous relationship with the physical landscape they inhabit and the American political landscape. It’s as though the requirement of being überpatriotic to prove their American-ness somehow alienates them from the land they inhabit. You would think Mormons more than anyone would identify with their abused landscape and love it, but they mostly don’t. And maybe that’s because it was the landscape of exile. There’s this constant sense that it ought to be something else, some *place* else—it’s supposed to blossom as the rose, be something it’s not.

*Brady:* The relationship is almost a confrontational one. I think it



comes from that pioneer background, where we're gonna come fight the elements, and make the desert bloom—right?—but it's a fight, rather than a real relationship.

*Kristine:* There's something about identifying with the government, with (at least in the case of the Nevada tests) the destroyer of the land that is strange to me.

*Brady:* It is strange—and disturbing. And you see it in other cultures or subcultures, too—the crappy little shack with a flagpole flying the American flag. And you think, there are some people who have benefited from being Americans, but it's not clear that you have—and yet still, that's the person who's affirming, "I'm here, I'm part of this," and that's part of the Mormon mindset that's kind of disturbing sometimes. We want to be affirmed, want to fit in so badly that we'll look aside when something like this happens to our own children, our own parents and brothers and sisters. We won't complain. We won't make anything of it.

*Kristine:* So, one of the things that inevitably happens when a Mormon writes an important book is that someone (like, say, my cousin in his piece in *Slate* yesterday)<sup>1</sup>—

*Brady:* Ah, he's your cousin. I was wondering . . .

*Kristine:* —brings up the question of the Great Mormon Novel. And it seems to me that the Great Mormon Novel needs to be, or would most likely be, "Western" in some way, and yet we can't do it, because we don't know or love the land in the ways that regional fiction writers seem to.

*Brady:* That could be, but I'd suggest the opposite, actually—that the premise that Western literature has to do with the land is mistaken. It's a problematic assumption, even though it's widely held, and it's something that I try to work against as a writer.

*Kristine:* Okay, so is there a regional literature, or does good writing always transcend place?

*Brady:* No, there *is* regional literature, but it has little to do with the land. To me, it's about the people. And it seems to be particularly about the West that people make this assumption—Midwestern literature, Southern literature, it's about Midwesterners, about Southerners—but then when we get to the West, it's all about the land. The land comes first. And that's never going to



work. Especially not for a Mormon literature, it's not going to work. It might work for Native American literature, it might work for some other kinds, other staples of Western literature, but I don't think it will work for Mormon literature at all.

And I don't want to beat this subject to death, but even the idea of the Great Mormon Novel is deeply problematic; and bringing up Milton and Shakespeare is a little misleading, and maybe kind of provincial. Nobody asks: Where's the Jewish Shakespeare or the Catholic Milton? Besides, we've been around a little less than two hundred years. Give us some time! And, as far as the Great Mormon Novel, it's clear that *everyone* has something in their head about what that should be; and to most people it's a social novel, or even sociological—your cousin suggests that in his review—and that is something I completely reject.

Good literature—great literature—is specific. Take *Huckleberry Finn*. A sociologically minded critic might say that it doesn't take on the important questions, doesn't deal with slavery, doesn't talk about the Civil War, it's only about a kid and a slave on a raft going the wrong direction. And yet it's probably the greatest work of American literature we have. So the great Mormon novel will show up sometime, and nobody will know. It'll be a book like *The Backslider*, that doesn't announce itself as "great," but simply is. Someday it will happen.

*Kristine*: And probably being noticed and called "the Great Mormon Novel" would be its death.

*Brady*: Right. What will have to happen is that it will have to be around for fifty years, and then people will suddenly look around and realize they've got it. And maybe it will never happen, I don't know. But I will say it's a little disturbing to me that there are so few books you could even put in the running. There are more Mormons in this country than Jews; and when you think of the arts—movies, plays, literature—you'd just never know we're even here. When it comes to the arts, we've got a problem, and it's hard to define exactly what it is.

*Kristine*: There are all kinds of things people have posited as the source of the trouble—our prudishness, our busy-ness . . . But I think it might be even more the kind of self-consciousness that

tries to figure out if the Great Mormon Novel is here yet. And you can't create when you're that concerned about reception.

*Brady:* It's like a teenager. "Everybody's watching me! Am I doing it right?" And then when somebody does it, three-quarters of everyone wants to say, "No, that's not quite right. That's not quite Mormon." Once we get a little more comfortable in our own skin, swearing in a novel or a sex scene in a movie is just not going to bother us so much.

*Kristine:* One hopes!

*Brady:* One has to hope, because if that's really what it comes down to, it's just never going to happen.

*Kristine:* Another question about Mormonness raised by this novel, of course, is whether polygamists are our kin. To me, your novel reads very "Mormon." I don't know what it would feel like to read it as a non-Mormon—I just don't have access to that consciousness—but to me, I recognize these people. These seem like people whose mindset I get. And maybe that's because you are writing from a perspective that kind of straddles the two groups. But most Mormons, I think, don't want to understand polygamists or don't want to acknowledge that there are shared habits of mind. We really, really want to distance ourselves.

*Brady:* And I think that it's completely hypocritical and dishonest for us as a Church to say that these are people who don't have anything to do with us. The Church has put out any number of statements, and I've been attacked for not making a clear enough distinction between "polygamists" and "Mormons"; and yet, whether you like it or not, these people are doing and believing the exact same thing as our forebears, whom we hold out as heroes—our founders. My great-great-grandfather [David King Udall] was put in prison for doing this. My great-great-grandmother, his second wife [Ida Hunt Udall], lived on the Underground, and they suffered mightily for this belief. They didn't want to do it, but they did it because they believed God had told them to. It's absurd for us to turn around and cast scorn on people who are doing and believing the same thing.

And it's still part of our theology. We can't deny it. If anyone denies it, they're lying. So I don't know why we can't at least ac-

knowledge the similarity. If you decide to excommunicate people, well, okay, but at least own up to what you believe. Do we not believe it? Then let's disavow it.

*Kristine:* As soon as possible, please.

*Brady:* It would be terribly uncomfortable to say Joseph Smith was wrong, and Brigham Young was wrong . . .

*Kristine:* The Community of Christ has done just that, and of course it really changes the whole nature of their church.

*Brady:* Yes, but otherwise, we just have to own up and say, "Yes, this is who we are." But I won't hold my breath for that.

*Kristine:* But aside from the question of hypocrisy, it just seems a little comical to me. Because from the outside, we just don't seem all that different from the FLDS, but we're pointing at them saying, "They're *really* weird. We're not weird."

*Brady:* Right, and you can see how it is. It's like that embarrassing younger brother who's doing stuff you just can't stand. But he's still your brother; and at some point, you have to say, "Yeah, that's my brother; we come from the same mother and father." And I just don't think we're ready to do it.

*Kristine:* Everybody has remarked on how *Big Love* uses polygamy to do a family drama on a massive scale. But it seems to me there's more at work in choosing this family than wanting to amplify family dynamics.

*Brady:* Well, for one thing, *Big Love* is cheating, because—I've never actually seen it—but aren't there, like, only *six* children? So it's not really about family. It's about relationships between adults. And I'd say that my novel is really about family, more than about polygamy. I'm not really exploring polygamy's roots, or what it really, truly means, or its theological implications or any of that. I really was interested in looking at a very big family—exaggerating the bigness of it, but thereby understanding not big families, but just families in general, and how we negotiate them. And that's what fiction is, really—an exaggeration, a stylization of reality. And to me that's what this story does.

*Kristine:* Talk a little more about children, about their development in families. One of the things I love about the novel is the de-

scription of the track around the dining room and the living room, because every child who has ever lived has figured out where the biggest loop is in the house, and every parent who has ever lived has said, “Quit running around in circles,” and it was just such a perfect illustration of the essential futility of parenting. I think parents really can’t ever do as much as they think they can, or as much as they’d like to, to shape their children’s character or even their behavior. (Or *especially* their behavior!) And that problem is magnified by the enormousness of this family.

*Brady:* Exactly. The parents’ ability to control their children goes way, way down in a big family. The more children there are, the less control there is. As a writer, it’s like playing with your own situation. I have four kids, and I’m pretty overwhelmed with that. So let’s multiply that, by say, ten, and it’s barely conceivable; but it’s kind of fun for me—at least as an intellectual exercise—to try and make sense of that. But there really are people who are doing this. It’s not just a fantasy or an abstraction. Somebody’s out there right now who has thirty-five children. It’s crazy, and yet it works somehow. It can work. It’s very difficult, obviously. The kids probably aren’t getting enough attention and the parents are overwhelmed, but I’ve seen it up close, and it can work.

*Kristine:* I was thinking as I read that what having fewer children does is not really to give you that much more control but just a stronger illusion of control. You can mistake your *involvement* in their lives for *influence*, but it isn’t really.

*Brady:* Good point.

*Kristine:* And, ultimately, I think that might be the most hopeful thing in your book—that people, children, even left mostly to themselves, turn out pretty well. They build something good, they’re resilient to even the deepest griefs of childhood.

*Brady:* Right, and think about the correlation between Golden and Rusty: Golden’s an only child, and sits looking out the window waiting for his dad to show up, and Rusty’s one of twenty-eight kids and sits looking out the window waiting for his dad to show up. The correlation is obvious, and it just came to me strongly that it doesn’t matter—it just doesn’t matter—if you’re one of twenty-eight or one of one. It’s up to your parents and you.

You can be just as lonely and lost as an only child as you can be in a huge family. I grew up in a family of nine kids, and I know some of my brothers and sisters felt comfortable and secure in that, but I felt a little at odds, on the margins. Why? I don't know. But I don't think it would have made a difference if I'd been one of two or three. Yet I can hear my brother saying life sucked because there were so many of us and we didn't get any attention. And I just don't think fewer kids would have changed things all that much. My parents would have still been busy, and life would have been similar for me because I am who I am. I guess you can take a certain sort of comfort in that.

*Kristine:* I think the profusion of therapists maybe suggests that childhood is painful for lots of people, and it may or may not have all that much to do with bad parenting or weird sibling relationships. Growing just hurts.

*Brady:* One thing I will say, though, is that, even though people tend to think of the women living in polygamy as suffering the most, my book is sort of an argument that it can be pretty difficult for the husband, too. But in the end, it's really the children who get the short end of the stick when there are twenty-eight of them and only one father. I think it can happen, but you've got to be quite a man—it's a very rare person who can actually be a father to that many kids. And I think it's probably especially difficult for boys in that family situation.

*Kristine:* Yeah, Golden's reciting his children's names is so poignant. He's really trying to love them all, but really, remembering their names is almost all he can do.

*Brady:* I think he understands; and it's the way I feel a little bit—even though it sounds slightly corny—that when I'm doing things I shouldn't be doing, or thinking things, my mind goes to my children. My mind doesn't go toward God or my parents, I think of my children first. And that is what happens for him, kind of. His children are the force that both pushes him away and pulls him back in, brings him back to himself.

*Kristine:* I can't imagine that, after weeks on a book tour and constant interviews, there's anything you still want to say about this book, but I thought I should ask.

*Brady* [laughing]: Yeah, I can't think of anything. I guess I will just say that I've known about *Dialogue* for a long time, and I'm just glad there's a place like that for people—I'll say people like me, even though I haven't really been an active participant, haven't needed that space exactly—a place to sit on the fence and not be pushed out or pulled in, just sit and think and talk for a while.

*Kristine*: Thanks. That's kind of you. I'd like to think we do that. But I guess I also hope that people find a way, as you seem to have, to get down from the fence one way or the other and make a bigger world for themselves. Maybe the fence is a good place to get a little wider view, to see that the pasture's broader than you thought . . .

*Brady*: You're right. Hopefully, you eventually get to a place where you can just say, "This is who I am." It's not simple. It never will be. But all your readers know that.

#### Note

1. David Haglund, "The Great Mormon Novel," *Slate*, May 17, 2010, <http://www.slate.com/id/2253914/> (accessed August 1, 2010).