

ber 2007), <http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/94.2/bushman.html> (accessed August 7, 2010).

2. Interview: Terryl Givens and Richard Bushman, Part I, *By Common Consent*, March 1, 2007, <http://bycommonconsent.com/2007/03/01/interview-terryl-givens-and-richard-bushman-part-i/> (accessed August 7, 2010).

3. This description is particularly true of *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), in which Givens spends Chapter 5 (117–54) showcasing much of the important Book of Mormon research done by FARMS and BYU scholars. *A Very Short Introduction*, discussed below, likewise makes use of this scholarship and refers its reader to other Mormon research sources.

4. Terryl Givens, interviewed in Helen Whitney, *The Mormons*, PBS documentary, <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/etc/whitney.html> (accessed August 7, 2010).

5. Ibid.

6. Terryl L. Givens, “Lightning Out of Heaven: Joseph Smith and the Forging of Community,” *BYU Speeches*, November 29, 2005, <http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=10924> (accessed August 7, 2010). The address’s popularity is highlighted by its being reprinted in condensed form under the title “Lightning Out of Heaven” in *BYU Magazine* (Summer 2006), <http://magazine.byu.edu/?act=view&a=1851> (accessed August 7, 2010).

7. Ibid.

8. Givens, Interview, *The Mormons*. On the collapse of the sacred in Mormonism, see also his *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82–93; *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37–51; and “Lightning Out of Heaven.”

## The World According to Golden

Brady Udall. *The Lonely Polygamist*. New York: Norton, 2010. 572 pp. Hardcover: \$26.95. ISBN 978-0-393-06262-5

*Reviewed by Phillip A. Snyder*

Brady Udall has always been a highly readable writer, one who en-

gages his audience with the immediate appeal of his narrative voice and the sometimes quirky attraction of his narrative settings and semi-misfit characters. Like John Irving, the writer to whom he's most commonly compared, Udall fills his fiction with great energy and humanity, softening the pathos of near-tragedy with a warmth and humor that betray a deep affection for the messed-up human race. His short story collection, *Letting Loose the Hounds* (New York: Norton, 1997), features stories first published in an unusual variety of venues—*Aethlon*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, *The Midwesterner*, *The Paris Review*, *Playboy*, *Story Magazine*, and *Sunstone*—attesting to the widespread appeal of his fiction.

His first novel, *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint* (New York: Norton, 2001), develops along a narrow tragicomic line with its character-driven, first-person narrative delivered by a brain-damaged, mixed-blood boy whose faulty memory screens him from the core mission of his life for much of the novel. A broad contemporary rewriting of the Dickensian *bildungsroman*, *Edgar Mint* demonstrates Udall's facility for creating characters whose earnest intentions are undone by their offbeat incompetence in executing those intentions, especially toward Edgar's well-being in this case, as well as Udall's tendency in his writing to wrap up catastrophic and chaotic events within the truly miraculous by the novel's graceful conclusion.

Udall's newest novel, *The Lonely Polygamist*, joins its predecessors as a story of Irvingesque and Dickensian scope and temperament, but with a jocular narrative voice, an unconventional *mise-en-scène*, and various malcontent-but-yearning characters—all elements colored by Udall's own personal vision. The protagonist, Golden Richards, struggles to preside over and support a huge family consisting of four wives and twenty-eight children in a fictional fundamentalist community located somewhere in southern Utah, one that corresponds very broadly with the infamous FLDS communities of Colorado City, Arizona, and Hildale, Utah, recently featured in *National Geographic* (February 2010). However, it would be a mistake to consider *The Lonely Polygamist* another iteration of the current preoccupation with polygamy in American popular culture because Udall uses polygamy, not for its prurient appeal, but primarily as a familial milieu against which individual isolation and estrangement can be measured and explored—thus

the hint of oxymoronic tension in his title which raises the obvious question: How can a polygamist possibly be lonely?

The novel begins with a typical Udall passage that pulls its readers into the narrative by asserting the story's basic theme and then instantly complicating it, foreshadowing at the same time the novel's irresistible opening scene:

To put it as simply as possible: this is the story of a polygamist who has an affair. But there is much more to it than that, of course; the life of any polygamist, even when not complicated by lies and secrets and infidelity, is anything but simple. Take, for example, the Friday night in early spring when Golden Richards returned to Big House—one of three houses he called home—after a week away on the job. It should have been the sweetest, most wholesome of domestic scenes: a father arrives home to the loving attentions of his wives and children. But what was about to happen inside that house, Golden realized as he pulled up into the long gravel drive, would not be wholesome or sweet, or anything close to it. (16)

This paragraph also underscores the juxtaposition of a polygamous family against the traditional nuclear family values celebrated in mainstream American culture, again hinting at oxymoronic tension and raising another obvious question: How can a polygamous family possibly act out a domestic scene that can be described accurately as wholesome or sweet? Actually, Golden's homecoming and the denouement of this "family home evening" gone "awry" (to repeat the term Golden uses with Wife #1, Beverly) partake fully of the familial wholesomeness and sweetness often lying beneath the turbulent surface of ordinary domestic life. The scene unfolds like a big family reunion taking place in a huge (7,000 square feet) vacation rental—with assorted kids running all over, girls monopolizing the bathrooms, women commiserating with each other in the kitchen—the only difference being that everyone belongs to one lone and earnest man who feels like a helpless outsider in his own home and whose general emotional discomfort is matched by the physical discomfort of a bladder in desperate need of emptying. With no immediate hope for a conventional means of relief from either distress, Golden nevertheless presses forward that evening with pluck and improvisation, trying ineffectively to put his house in order; but what ails this

house and its inhabitants lies beyond his powers of perception and remediation.

Much like Edgar Mint, Golden lived an isolated childhood, deserted by his ne'er-do-well father, Royal, ignored by his martyred mother, Malke, and sequestered from the outside world. Udall describes young Golden as the "boy at the window"—a description he also uses for Golden's son Rusty, aka "The Family Terrorist," who shares his father's alienated status within the family—to accentuate his loneliness and dissociation. Indeed, to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this same sense of individual alienation within the family, Udall divides the novel with four italicized chapters titled after a different family domicile—"Old House," "The Duplex," "Big House," and "Doll House"—each of which focalizes its omniscient observations on the internal preoccupations of the characters who inhabit them.

Golden and Rusty are not unique in their dissociation; everyone seems to be a lonely polygamist of some kind, mostly incapable of comprehending, let alone bearing, each other's lonesome burdens. Trish, for example, Wife #4, mourns her stillborn children (Daniel, Martine, and Jack) and carries that ache in much the same way that Golden mourns the death of Glory, the handicapped daughter on whom he doted; but the two never manage to connect emotionally over their common grief except in the brief aftermath of Jack's stillbirth. Golden takes the dead infant in his arms, the only child he and Trish have together, and, rocking him tearfully, sings the only song he can think of, a love ballad about a girl named Cushie Butterfield—but even here theirs remains a grief apart.

As usual, Udall balances the soberness of his theme with an intertwining of both subtle and ribald humor throughout the novel, as in the foregoing tableau which uses an amusingly inappropriate song to illustrate Golden's fundamental character and, thereby, deepen the pathos of the scene. While Golden's intentions tend to be pure and guileless, his actions tend to be earnestly inadequate, often to humorous but humane effect.

He shares this trait with a number of other characters as well. For example, when Trish decides to take the love-making advice she reads in an article from a *Cosmopolitan* (miraculously found in sister-wife Nola's beauty salon) during one of her nightly "turns"

with Golden, her plans inevitably go “awry” with hilarious results that, in typical Udall fashion, also help prevent Golden from consummating his “affair” which, in turn, keeps open the possibility for the inevitable but limited happy ending we’ve come to expect from Udall. When the remaining evidence of her aborted seduction of her husband reveals itself to Trish during her fecund late-night reconciliation with Golden, she responds with deep and cleansing laughter, the full meaning of which she understands only as a gift returned to honor and humor her previous good intentions. All may not be well at the end of the novel, which features the ritual catharsis of both a funeral and a wedding, but at least the entire Golden Richards family will be living together at the newly renovated Big House under one expansive roof in yet another valiant attempt to achieve family unity.

This humane blending of the tragic and comic in his plots and characters may be Udall’s greatest strength as a writer worth reading and rereading. Like Flannery O’Connor, he knows that grace must be available to even the most grotesque character and that fundamental human empathy can ameliorate even the most sorrowful situation. *The Lonely Polygamist* fulfills the promise clearly evident in Udall’s excellent previous work and reveals a fine novelist working in full narrative power.

### **The Plan of Stagnation**

Elna Baker. *The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance: A Memoir*. New York: Dutton, 2009. 276 pp. Cloth: \$25.95. ISBN 978-0-525-95135-3

*Reviewed by Holly Welker*

*The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance: A Memoir* by Elna Baker is a book about Mormons for an audience of non-Mormons; for that, everyone who works in the field of Mormon literature should be grateful. It attempts—and more importantly succeeds in—making Mormons human and complex to outsiders; it even makes us somewhat intelligible. Baker addresses the impact of “preconceived notions” about Mormons on her rela-