

***The Lonely Polygamist*, by Brady Udall**

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By Susan Ager

First off, the title is perfect.

Polygamy is alluring: mysterious to most, reeking of excess sex, power and privilege.

Loneliness is intriguing, too, familiar to most, its sadness clinging like the mustiness of an old closet.

The unlikely hero of this wonderful, sprawling novel is lanky, craggy Golden Richards, the perfect example of someone lonely in a crowd. He's a guy with four women, but they are wives: needy and resentful, conspiring, one who wears "an arsenal of miniature weaponry" in her hair, one depressed and fading.

He also has 27 children, spread among three Utah houses, "each one of them a burning spotlight of attention and need." He can quickly recite their names in order, but can't always locate the right name when he needs to. One home, at 7,000 square feet, has so few bathrooms that Golden, when he is desperate, piddles in a mop bucket in a closet.

The jaw-dropping opening pages define Golden as a guy who curses with "Oh crud," and as "a man afraid to walk into his own house." He squirts nasal spray up his nostrils to calm himself.

Not only does Golden have no peace, he gets no sex, either. He's too tired for that. He spends most of his week away, making money working in neighboring Nevada on a big building project: an addition to the Pussycat Manor brothel. This he keeps a secret, along with all his longings -- for order, for comfort, for understanding.

He is, however, only one of three narrators to this astonishing tale.

Another is his fourth and youngest wife, Trish, who lives apart in a distant duplex with her spooky daughter. She is ripe with ardor and fear.

The third narrator is 11-year-old Rusty, known as "the family terrorist." Unlike the adults, whose longings stay tucked away, Rusty's needs spill out all over, and light up his imagination with wild hopes and dark plots.

Also key in this story are Golden's lost children, especially Glory, a memorable daughter whose brief life coincided with his last period of contentment.

Oh, and then there's "the other woman," another of Golden's secrets. She complicates the story with sweet moments -- a tangled mess of Golden's what-ifs.

Every bit player in this tale is finely drawn. And certain inanimate objects add vividness: the family car -- a 1963 hearse -- and a big old couch everyone calls the Barge, which looks "sunken and exhausted, as if it had spent the night sobbing in despair." The Barge travels widely.

"The Lonely Polygamist" begins wickedly funny, then grows sad and bittersweet and tragic and even slapstick. My only disappointment is it ends too quickly and neatly, as if the author's editor is hissing, "This thing cannot exceed 550 pages!"

Still, this third novel is a profoundly satisfying read, written with a ferocious verve and authenticity, a tale of a family "all tangled up, tied to each other, tripping and flailing, thrashing around like a bunch of monkeys caught in a net."

But connected. As every family is. Like it or not.

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