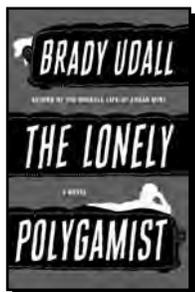


INTERVIEW

FAITH BY PROXY

A Conversation with Author

BRADY UDALL



I'm not naturally a religious or spiritual person. So it's a bit ironic or contradictory for me to say that we need more God and religion in our literature. But the most important thing to deal with is how God influences our lives.

If we exclude science fiction and vampire authors, Brady Udall is currently Mormonism's brightest literary star. Breaking onto the scene with his short story collection *Letting Loose the Hounds* (1996), Udall has been characterized as a contemporary Charles Dickens. His first novel, *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint* (2002), tells the sprawling story of a Navajo boy who converts to Mormonism and winds up living with a Mormon family in the Church's Indian placement program. Udall's most recent novel, released May 2010, is *The Lonely Polygamist*. Weighing in at more than 600 pages, the book follows Golden Richards, a Mormon fundamentalist with four wives and 28 children, as he navigates his increasingly complicated life.

One of Udall's trademarks is his provocative opening lines. From *Edgar Mint*: "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." From *The Lonely Polygamist*: "To put it as simply as possible: this is the story of a polygamist who has an affair."

STEPHEN CARTER: At the beginning of *The Lonely Polygamist*, I was hyper aware of just how much was going on literarily at any one point: the metaphors, the humor, the descriptions, the characterizations—and the great thing is that you kept that quality up. It must have taken you ten

years to write this.

BRADY UDALL: It took ten years in the thinking, researching, and writing. The writing itself took six to seven years. I'd stop for a while now and then, when I didn't know I was doing, and then start again. But that's what I try to do: something with the language and the story, but without being too obtrusive.

STEPHEN: A *Salt Lake Tribune* article quotes you as saying, "I'm not sure I believe in God on most days, but the search for God is the most important human endeavor there is, and most writers won't even take the subject up." This seems to imply that you are attracted to questions of God.

BRADY: Well, yes and no. I'm attracted to them, but I don't feel qualified as a person or writer to address them very well. I'm not naturally a religious or spiritual person. So it's a bit ironic or contradictory for me to say that we need more God and religion in our literature. But the most important thing to deal with is how God influences our lives.

See, I'm not a believer. Ever since I was a little kid, I've doubted. Sitting in Sunday school, 7 or 8 years old, we'd be learning about Adam and Eve, and I'd raise my hand and ask about dinosaurs and cavemen. The contradictions drove me crazy.

I see my unbelief as a weakness. I think I would lead a better, more fulfilled life if I could live beyond my intellect. What I do is write about characters who *do* believe in God, and I try to understand them. Maybe the people I'm writing about are the people I wish I were. In *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*, Edgar believes in God without question, even though he's been through horrible experiences. His faith never flags. I know there are people like that. I've met them, and I'm always deeply impressed.

I do believe in some things. I believe in my wife and children. I believe in beauty, and the goodness of people, as corny as it may sound. Just because I don't know if I believe in an afterlife doesn't mean I'm depressed about things.

STEPHEN: What was it like being on a mission while not being in the spiritual "groove?"

BRADY: When I was 18, I decided that I wasn't going to go on a mission. I was sure my parents were going to be very, very upset. But I made it a point to go home and tell them about my decision. Instead of disapproval, they just said, "We support you." That was about the worst thing they ever could have said because it meant that I had to make a choice instead of just react to everyone else. Everyone around me was a believer. It was the first time I made my very own choice. My mission was my last attempt at faith. That's how I saw it.

And my mission turned out to be one of best experiences of my life. I emerged from it with a certain faith in the meaning of the Church in people's lives that I hadn't seen growing up. That doesn't mean I fully believed in the Church, but I felt closer to something real and spiritual.

STEPHEN: What kind of missionary were you: the leadership type or the type like me who was always being assigned to trunky companions?

BRADY: I wasn't what you'd call a successful missionary. I wasn't convinced myself, so how could I convince others? I would say, "You really don't have to do this, you know." People would get baptized in *spite* of me. I introduced the subject, and off they went.

STEPHEN: So what's your relationship with the Church right now?

BRADY: I go to church—though not all the time—to be with my family. I like a lot of it. Some things I have a hard time with, which is why I still avoid much of it. But I like the sacrament, singing hymns, listening to testimonies. I just always hope there's a place for me there.

STEPHEN: Is there?

BRADY: My ward in Boise is the most wonderful ward. It's an urban ward, so it has all kinds of different people. People with lots of money, people with none, people with and without an education. People don't look down their noses at me. I've never felt so at home in a ward.

STEPHEN: So when you "came out," so to speak, about your faith, did it make a difference in your writing?

BRADY: I "came out" after I got married, but I was always the questioning type; people could tell I wasn't toeing the line, though I never openly rebelled. In my early 20s, I decided that I couldn't pretend anymore—I couldn't put up the illusion of faith. That was a very good decision for me, very freeing. I don't know if it affected my writing much, though. If you write about the subjects I do, you can't care too much what people think about you.

STEPHEN: Even what your family thinks?

BRADY: Well, yeah. Having this book come out is uncomfortable. It's hard on my relatives. I did a reading in Salt Lake; several of my brothers and sisters and my mother-in-law came. They're always supportive, but I really worried about what I would read that night. I had huge anxiety about it. I kept thinking, "Maybe I should censor all this and make it nice." But I didn't . . . well, maybe a little here and there.

STEPHEN: How large is your audience in mainstream Mormonism?

BRADY: I don't think I have a very big readership, but it is a broad one: some Mormons, some Jack Mormons, some who have never heard of Mormons. That pleases me. I'm not writing for any one group of people, that's for sure. I just hope someone out there will be moved by what I write. That's what I'm writing for: a true emotional experience. Not an intellectual or theological one. That's what I think fiction is. As Faulkner said,

"It's all about the human heart in conflict with itself."

STEPHEN: You teach creative writing at Boise State University. Do you have many Mormon students there? Do you find yourself treating them any differently than you do your other students?

BRADY: At any one time, we usually have two or three Mormon students in our program, and they're all quite talented. But I don't foster them any differently. Occasionally they will ask me, "How should I handle this?" and I give whatever advice I can. But there's not much difference in how or what they pursue in their writing. Occasionally they'll use Mormon elements, but I guess I just never think of Mormonism as deserving special treatment.

STEPHEN: While in my creative writing program, I wrestled a lot with how to portray Mormonism. I had to overcome the idea that there were only two ways to tell a Mormon story: the General Conference way or the anti-Mormon way. I always felt the bishop was reading over my shoulder.

BRADY: I've had friends and students who have the same problem. You just have to let the bishop go, even though it's hard. I did that at an early age. I was more interested

in everyone else. Not my mother, not the bishop. I've never liked either side—General Conference or anti-Mormon. I just want to use everything in my experience to make my fiction.

STEPHEN: Which authors would you point to as fulfilling your wish that American literature would take God and religion more seriously?

BRADY: There are very few, especially in the last 50 years or so. I have no one to point to.

STEPHEN: Most people would probably think that scriptural commentary would be most helpful in the search for God. Obviously fiction works better for you. What qualities make it so effective for you?

BRADY: Fiction is very specific. It focuses on the individual and doesn't usually work well with generalities, with groups. There's something very personal and intimate about good fiction, and I guess this strikes me as a better way of understanding God's relationship with man.

STEPHEN: Are you willing to give us a hint about your next project?

BRADY: I am thinking about a young adult novel that is, in some ways, an investigation of the afterlife.

Congratulations to this year's winners

Brookie and D.K. Brown Fiction Contest

Sunstone Award
JACK HARRELL
"The Prophet Claude"

Moonstone Award
LARRY MENLOVE
"A Season in the Wilderness"

Watch for them in future
issues of **SUNSTONE**

Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest

First Place
MICHAEL PALMER
"Pioneer Spirit"

Second Place
STEVEN L. PECK
"Reverencing Creation"

Third Place
KATE M. HERRICK,
"Sacred Space, Strong
Women, and Climbing Vines"