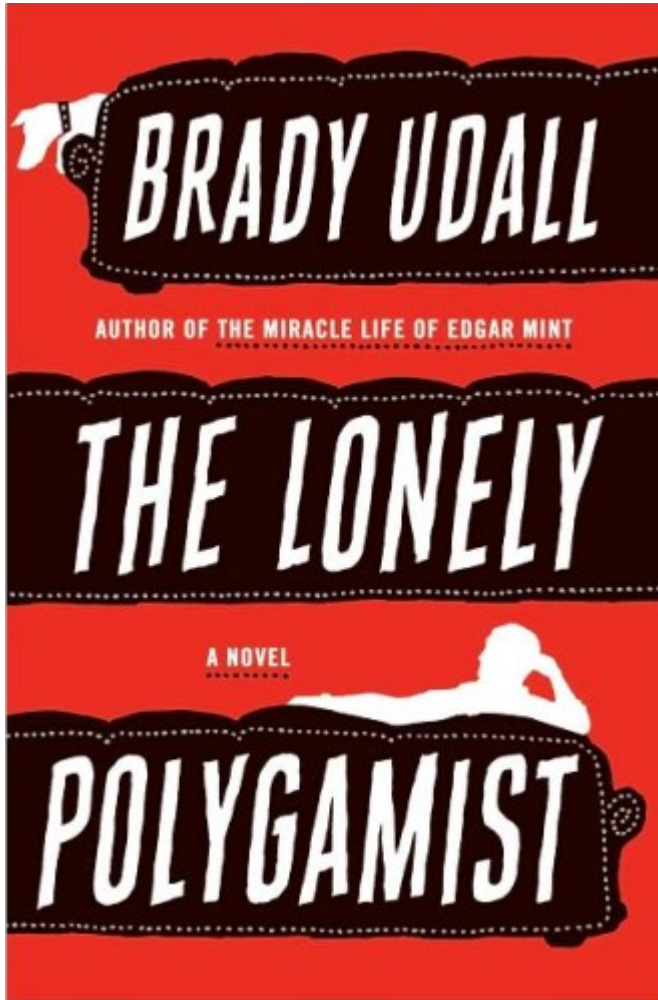


No way out

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

February 18, 2011

In Review



The Lonely Polygamist

By Brady Udall

Norton

In the opening scene of this new novel, the protagonist, Golden Richards, comes home from work to one of the three houses where his four wives and 28 children live, and he literally cannot find a pot to piss in. The bathrooms, of which there are never enough, are all occupied. The house is in disarray and chaos. Golden goes to the utility closet and is at last able to relieve himself in a bucket in the company of an exiled dog.

This utility closet becomes a metaphor for a lost man looking for a way out of his life's problems, and he is only one of several characters in this tragic-comic novel who attempt to plot their escapes. Udall's novel is big, laugh-out-loud funny and finally disturbing.

Udall, who comes from a Mormon but not a fundamentalist background, searches for and finds a spiritual meaning in plural marriage--each person involved must trust in the abundance of love and believe that no amount of love can be hoarded and claimed as one's own. It's a generosity so extraordinary that it made me put down the book and say, "What?" I had never looked at marriage in this way, and it caught me off guard.

By the end of the novel, when Udall has taken the reader into dark places and funny places--often at the same time--he attempts to reconcile the gigantic mess that he has made. At that point, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. He makes the risky choice of reconciliation, choosing, to the heart-aching disappointment of this reader, not to give his characters an easy way out. They do not flee from the choices and commitments they have made; they do not take the individual option, much as I would have loved for them to do so. We end up with something quite different from the classic American novel, especially the classic Western, in which freedom is won and the hero rides off into the sunset.

This novel is worth all of its sprawling 600 pages. It's a valuable enterprise to live alongside Trish (wife number four) while she falls in love and lets another heart into her lonely existence, or alongside son Rusty (son number five) as he rages to find just a little piece of love to call his own, or alongside Golden as he fumbles like a rat through a maze.

These characters are rich, puzzling, messy and beautiful. I'll be puzzling the ending for a long time. Like Golden in the utility closet,

I'd still like to help them find a way out. That may say more about me than it does about Udall, but it makes for one brave and provocative novel.