

## IN PRAISE OF POLYGAMY

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*A Review of the Book*

***Love Times Three. Our True Story of a Polygamous Marriage***, Joe Darger, Alina Darger, Vicki Darger, Valerie Darger, and Brooke Adams. 2011. HarperCollins, New York. 294 pages. ISBN 978-0-06-210390-1 (Paperback, \$17.99)

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It is likely that all of us have pondered polygamy. Perhaps this is because in mainstream, Western society, it is the forbidden alternative to the one and only permitted form of mating system, monogamy. For ordinary persons, polygamy is likely to conjure up images of primitives in a ring of huts on the African savanna or pashas with exotic harems and eunuchs. Even if we consider polygamy in modern society, we may imagine bearded, wild-eyed patriarchs surrounded by women in long calico dresses, living in the outback of the American West. So, here is a first-hand account of current polygamy in a suburb of Salt Lake City, describing a family whose appearance and daily lives are much like their societal counterparts, apart from their chosen marital arrangements.

Some precision in terms and concepts may be helpful: Polygamy is an umbrella term that refers to all mate-bonded arrangements apart from monogamy (i.e. one male & one female). It traditionally refers to heterosexuals but just as easily can be applied to homosexual unions. Anthropologists recognise three kinds of polygamy: polyandry (one female and multiple males), polygyny (one male and multiple females), and polygynandry (multiple females and multiple males). (Bigamy is the minimal form of polygyny or polyandry.) Mating system is not the same as family structure, nor is genetic parentage, but there are obvious correlations: Monogamy typically yields nuclear families, while polygamy yields extended families. This book is about polygyny (and apart from passing mentions, the other forms of polygamy are ignored).

In the American context at least, polygamy often is associated with religion, most famously with Mormonism. In a nutshell, among the instructions given to Joseph Smith on the golden tablets was one to engage in 'celestial' marriage, and this principle was important in the early history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), that is, orthodox Mormonism. However, LDS now prohibits polygamy, hence many splinter groups exist, one of which, espousing independence and fundamentalism,

includes the authors. The book has a 9-page appendix which explains this thorny diversity. Religious belief permeates the book, but none of the phenomena nor practices described actually depends on it, although the authors might disagree, being devout Christians. The same principles and practices could apply to secular plural marriage.

So, why this book? The authors are clear from the outset: They wish to inform the public about misperceptions and discrimination suffered by polygamists. More precisely, they seek to dispel stereotypes common in the media. For example, it seems that many ordinary persons associate Mormon polygamy with under-aged brides and over-aged grooms, often united by force, or at least by intimidation. However, apart from a certain amount of match-making, bonded mates seem to emerge from mutual attraction, at least in the authors' case. (But exactly when does this amount to arranged or coerced marriage?) Underage marriage is roundly condemned.

But the polygamists' situation is far worse than facing prejudice or persecution, as prosecution is also a risk. In the state of Utah, practicing polygamy is a felony, the prohibition of which was been confirmed by US Supreme Court decisions, we are told. The illegality applies to both legal marriage *and* cohabitation. So much for freedom of association, or religion! So, the authors' closing plea is for polygamy to be decriminalised, or at least to be classed as a misdemeanor. In case you wonder precisely what the authors are seeking, it is to be able to fulfil all six marriage dimensions as laid out by such groups as the Coalition for Marriage, Institute of American Values, etc. In the authors' view, their polygamy fulfils five of the six: financial partnership, sacred promise, sexual union, personal bond, family-making bond. What is missing is the sixth: legal recognition.

So, who are the authors? Joe Darger has three wives (here called sister wives, although co-wives is less confusing); two of the three are twin sisters but the third is unrelated. (Sororal polygyny is a common form of mating system across human societies, but fraternal polyandry is rare.) The Dargers have 24 children, aged from infancy to young adulthood. They live in one household, containing 11 bedrooms, 5 bathrooms, and have 11 computers and 10 motor cars. At various times, all of the partners have jobs outside the household, though usually at least one wife works at home. (The fifth author, Brooke Adams, is a journalist, presumably a ghost-writer, about whom little is said.)

To keep expectations in check, it should be made clear that this is a trade book, designed for the general public, not a scholarly monograph. It has no bibliography or index but has footnotes, including the main anthropological references to polygyny. It has 14 colour plates that flesh out the text. It has 12 well-written (if a little repetitive) chapters, with titles like 'A New Marriage', 'Sister Wives', 'Children by the Dozen', 'A Day in the Life of a Polygamous Family', and 'Going Public'. Most chapters tackle each topic via multiple, first-person autobiographical reflections, which allows for comparative viewpoints on the same events. There are no data, but the ethology is in the descriptions of real-life behaviour, sometimes given in detail. For example, when Joe drives two or more wives in the car, the one who sits in front beside him is the one whose turn it is in the daily rotation.

Finally, there is nothing salacious in this book. By convention, each couple's intimate lives are theirs alone. If anything, their sex lives seem submerged by other priorities,

basically subsistence and childcare (but this is my inference). Joe scrupulously rotates among the three wives' bedrooms (and there is no mention of his having any private space of his own), although days can be swapped for special occasions, such as birthdays or anniversaries. (But what to do on Valentine's Day?) The stated aim is for fair-minded interdependence, based on CTR, that is, communication, trust, respect. However, there are apparent contradictions, or at least complications. Joe describes the situation as "fair, not equal" and portrays himself as the ultimate decision-maker (dictator?). A repeated claim is that making a polygamous marriage work is harder than a monogamous one, because of there being more pair-wise relationships entailed.

Courtship is unexpectedly interesting, in that it can be done collectively. Joe pays court to Alina and Vicki (unrelated) simultaneously, and they respond both individually and jointly in the unfolding 'dance'. For example, when coming home from a polyamorous date, Joe must alternate whom he drops off first, so that neither has a presumed advantage. Later, when Valerie joins the marriage, she is courted by all three of her predecessors.

Arguably, the most attractive aspect of the arrangement is the child-rearing, which fits well into the general realm of communal child-rearing. Sarah Hrdy (2009, *Mothers and Others*, Harvard UP) would not be upset by what is said, I think. That is, both the wives and the children consider themselves lucky to be sharing child-care duties. (There is a chapter in which some of the children reflect positively on their upbringing.) Prominent is the necessary division of labour, in terms of day-to-day management of such an enterprise. Chores are distributed among all, by age, but apparently not by sex. The authors do not deny that conflict occurs, both among mates (jealousy, insecurity) and between generations (adolescent unrest, relations with peers outside the family). Home birth is preferred, as is home schooling in the childhood years, although older offspring go to secondary schools and university. The overriding theme for collective child-rearing is mundane: Careful time management.

So, what are we to make of all this? With only minimal data, lacking validation or replication, is such a narrative of any use? For those inclined to be dismissive, recall that most of post-modern socio-cultural anthropology is based on no more than these methods. At worst, the book is self-serving propaganda, but by 'coming out', the authors apparently are taking real risks of prosecution. At best, it is an earnest and accurate case study of one polygynous marriage, from which much can be learned. More likely, the truth is somewhere in between, but even if half of it is true, it is more than I have ever read before on the subject on polygamy in an urban, Western society. Read and ponder some more.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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