

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Published in *The Globe and Mail* 5 April, 2008

Old-time religion, old-fashioned abuse

THE SECRET LIVES OF SAINTS:

Child Brides and Lost Boys in Canada's Polygamous Mormon Sect

By Daphne Bramham

Random House Canada,

464 pages, \$32.95

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There's big love for *Big Love*, the Tom Hanks-produced, Golden Globe-nominated HBO series about a renegade sect of polygamous Mormons, which is now entering its third season and acclaimed by critics everywhere.

But Mark Olsen, one of the show's creators, recalls another emotion: when, early on, he "actually had the nerve to drive, very quickly, through Colorado City," the Arizona-Utah border town that's home to 8,000 members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the FLDS), on which *Big Love* is ever-so-loosely, and myopically, based.

Polygamy was outlawed in the United States and Canada and renounced - half-heartedly - by the mainstream Mormon church in 1890. That drive through God's brothel was "scary, scary," Olsen remembers. "We drove in, chickened out, drove right out again."

Compare *Big Love* to *The Secret Lives of Saints: Child Brides and Lost Boys in Canada's Polygamous Mormon Sect*, Daphne Bramham's new book on the FLDS, and you'll see how Olsen took a powder on the truth of polygamy. Cruelty doesn't play on prime time, after all, but quirky does.

Bramham doesn't do quirky. A journeyman columnist for The Vancouver Sun who's written extensively on the FLDS in Canada, she's unflinching - though still she missed interviewing the U.S. FLDS "Prophet" Warren Jeffs. She had to. Jeffs, 52, was a fugitive headlining the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list with Osama bin Laden until 2006, when he was caught.

In 2002, he'd declared himself Prophet of the FLDS's 30,000-plus members in North America when the incumbent, his father Rulon, died. By marrying all but two of dad's 75 widows, including two adolescent sisters given to the old man for his 90th birthday, Jeffs became his own stepfather. But he became Rulon, too. Dad's final atrocity had been to have all of Colorado City's dogs rounded up and shot after a Rottweiler killed a child there. The son set to banning (fun, the black race, the colour red) and defrauding, and assigning child brides. For forcing a 14-year-old to marry her cousin, Jeffs got 10 years to life last November as an accomplice to child rape.

More charges are pending: bigamy, incest, child rape, civil-rights violations, white collar crime, racketeering, tax evasion, welfare fraud. Jeffs is a pedophile using a vast community as slaves, says a Utah PI researching a civil suit on behalf of boys driven from the sect. (Numbers work against boys in polygamy. hence the *Lost Boys* part of Bramham's book. If girls love and marry boys, who'll be left for the geezers?)

Winston Blackmore, also 52, is FLDS lead geezer in Canada. Alternately fawned over, toyed with and ignored by Ottawa and Victoria - Canadian legislators come off as badly in this book as the polygamists - Blackmore hides in plain sight in a B.C border town he christened Bountiful.

Settled by the FLDS in the 1940s when it was running west from prosecution, the site expedites cross-border trading of child brides. Blackmore and Jeffs have feuded since 2002 when Blackmore, too, wanted to be Prophet. As loser, Blackmore has a mere 26 wives and 115-plus children. But he's laughing all the way to the bank. Unpaid child and spousal labour, tithing from the faithful and government handouts (including more than \$1-million annually for his school, which blithely ignores the provincial curriculum) have made him a multimillionaire.

Bramham couldn't interview him, either. "You'll know you're nearly [to Bountiful]," she says, "when you see the first NO TRESPASSING sign." Only Hana Gartner got the interview, for a 2003 *the fifth estate* documentary that provided most Canadians' first glimpse into Bountiful. Gartner got another interview in 2006, about the feud, but missed the story. Compared to the weaselly, sunken-eyed Jeffs, Blackmore seemed sunny and ... well, quirky.

In *Saints*, Bramham misses nothing. This book is comprehensive, desultory, exhausting and, for anyone who cares about the brutality under which some Canadian women and children subsist, with state sanction, hugely sad. It's a page-turner, a train wreck of evangelical sanctimony and perversion crashed into Canadian "civility" and religious tolerance, from which you just can't look away.

The closest *the fifth estate* got to the real Winston Blackmore in 2006 was to video him shovelling manure from the back of his truck. A metaphor, perhaps? Bramham tells us straight: how so-called "sister-wives" in their "plural marriages" discover, along with their children, that polygamy is not big love; it's small love indeed.

Bramham cites studies saying women "are hard-wired" for intimacy that can't be found in polygamy. She documents the sadness and the heavy lifting of the wives, many on antidepressants; the despair of a woman who was "Winston's stepmother and stepmother to her own two stepmothers which ... made her her own stepgrandmother"; the girls who get to Grade 10 before they're married off to fat, bald, married guys; the boys, simply dispatched. And, behind it all, the financial frauds on taxpayers.

Bramham found a better story stateside than she did at home, and so the book, ostensibly about the FLDS in Canada, feels unbalanced. In Bountiful, she finds only self-important Winston Blackmore to talk about - and oh yes, our villainous governments. What a shock. Who knew? But in the United States, she had the shiny sick story of preternatural megacrook Warren Jeffs, star of *America's Most Wanted*, complete with his getaway Cadillac (red, of course), his rape of boys, even his suicide attempts during his trial. Bramham lingered there, not here.

But who wouldn't? It'll be fitting, at least, for our own Winston Blackmore to feel the sting, by comparison, of so very little love.

Dawn Rae Downton has written most recently about cults on the death of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, whom she knew.