



FACT AND FICTION

Boise State faculty publish books in a broad range of genres. Here's a look at two authors and their work.

Brady Udall: A NOVEL APPROACH

The inspiration for Brady Udall's critically acclaimed first novel, *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*, came from an unlikely source.

"My wife's ex-boyfriend – he was actually her boyfriend while I was still her boyfriend – was run over by a mail truck when he was a kid," said Udall, a creative writing professor at Boise State.

"When she told me that she was seeing another guy, for some reason she told me this story."

The conversation occurred about 20 years ago. Rather than dashing out to confront the boyfriend, Udall was intrigued. He paid him a visit. The ex showed him the scars on his neck and described how, as a boy of 7 or 8, he had suffered injuries when the mail truck slammed into him.



JOHN KELLY PHOTO

Boise State creative writing professor **Brady Udall** stands in the doorway of his home office, holding the manuscript for his new novel, *The Lonely Polygamist*.

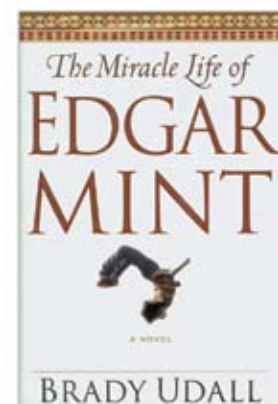
That wish became the foundation for *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*, a follow-up to Udall's first book, a collection of short stories called *Letting Loose the Hounds*.

Published in 2001, *Edgar Mint* has sold more than 100,000 copies and has been translated into 20 languages.

Udall's first novel also has garnered critical accolades and comparisons to the works of John Irving. The *Chicago Tribune* called *Edgar Mint* "a poignant, picaresque odyssey." The *Los Angeles Times* observed that "Edgar Mint is nobody's Everyman, but he is the hope and the pain of a child looking for, and eventually finding, a home." *Newsweek* described the book as "extraordinary," "fall-down funny" and "like nothing you've ever read."

Mint has continued its success in paperback. A movie version, produced by musician Michael Stipe of the band R.E.M., is in the works, and the novel also paved the way for Udall's new book, *The Lonely Polygamist*, due out later this year from W. W. Norton.

Udall's editor at Norton, Carol Houck Smith, said that she is "clamoring" to read *The Lonely Polygamist*. "Brady manages to be direct and clear-eyed about human beings and their flaws – but is tender," she said. "He loves his characters. Writers must do that; otherwise how can readers become attached to them?"



The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint

By Brady Udall

W. W. Norton, 2001
Paperback edition,
Vintage, 2002

THE ROOTS OF INSPIRATION

Both *Edgar Mint* and *The Lonely Polygamist* are based on real-life experiences that intrigued Udall and set him on investigations to learn more. For *Edgar Mint*, Udall spent hours gathering background at a school located at the old Fort Apache near his hometown of St. Johns, Ariz., that he remembered from his adolescence. His fictional character Mint is half-Apache and attends the ferocious Willie Sherman School, which is loosely based on the Fort Apache school.

Udall recalled an incident that occurred after a junior high football game at the reservation school: Students from the opposing team went back to their dormitories and threw rocks through barred windows at Udall and the other players who were waiting to go home on the bus. "They were throwing things out of the windows at the bus, breaking windows and stuff," he said. "They had to haul us out of there, and so that stuck with me ... the place itself

The ex said he wanted to let the driver of the mail truck know that he hadn't died in the accident. He was alive, and he was OK.

"I thought that was the perfect idea for a novel," Udall said. "I knew that the first novel that I would write would be about a child who had been run over by a mailman and who was searching for that mailman to tell him he was OK."

was such a strange place.”

Years later, Udall returned to the school, eventually gaining the trust of the students and faculty and gathering enough material to work with.

“There was definitely a lot of hands-on, journalistic-style research,” he said.

That persistence also led to the genesis of Udall’s next book, *The Lonely Polygamist*. Udall is a descendant of one of the West’s largest Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints families; his relatives include Stewart Udall, the former secretary of the interior, and Morris Udall, the longtime Democratic congressman from Arizona. Udall said that he was always curious about his family’s polygamist past and decided to find out more about how the now-underground practice, which is no longer part of LDS church doctrine, is carried out today.

He had a friend who had polygamy contacts and was put in touch with a family that was willing to share its story. “You have to be very circumspect; what they’re doing is technically illegal, and so I promised them that I would respect their privacy if they would talk to me. If they didn’t want me to write about anything, I wouldn’t,” he said. “And so what happened was that they were kind and talked to me, and I spent days with them.”

Udall’s success has led him to pass on to his students the hard lessons he learned while writing his own novels. “It’s completely different than writing short stories, and students are trained to write short stories (in MFA programs),” Udall said. “It’s odd, because the only way most writers can make their living, at least fiction writers, is to write novels.”

He now teaches a form and theory class on novel writing to help make up for the hole in his own education. “It would have been great to have had pointers,” he said. “It could have saved me a lot of time.” Instead, he said that he spent about three years writing the first 100 pages and six months writing the rest.

But the result is a novel that has allowed him to travel to places like France, where *Edgar Mint* was a bestseller, for readings. Its success has been beyond anything he had hoped for, he said.

“I used to think that writing is kind of a completely frivolous, narcissistic activity that had no real merits beyond the fact that a few people might read it and you enjoyed yourself writing it,” he said. “But I found that it can actually touch people and have an effect in ways that you may not have intended.” —**Julie Hahn** ◆

Charles Odahl:

A SEARCH FOR CONSTANTINE

Charles Odahl was on a mission. For more than 25 years, he traced the subject of his quest across deserts, into crypts and through catacombs. He explored cities in Europe and the Mediterranean Basin, dug up dozens of late antiquity coins and other early Christian artifacts and translated innumerable ancient texts.

Odahl, a Boise State University history professor, lived, ate and slept the life of the first Christian emperor of the Roman world. Finally, in 2004, he published his magnum opus, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*. Two years later, it was released as an expanded paperback and e-book.

Today, the book is considered the definitive work on Constantine. It is cited repeatedly in scholarly papers, articles and books. It has been translated into Romanian and is found in libraries and college classrooms worldwide.

Considering there were approximately 82 recognized Roman emperors from 31 B.C. to A.D. 476, focusing one’s life’s work on just one may seem obsessive. But consider who this emperor was, and what he did. Commonly known as Constantine the Great or Saint Constantine, he transformed pagan Rome into the Christian empire of Byzantine times, freeing early Christians from centuries of tyranny and persecution while serving as a role model for medieval kings in western Europe over the next millennium.

“Ultimately, we owe so much to Constantine,” said Odahl, an expert on ancient and medieval history, and classical and patristic Latin. In addition to changing the course of Roman history, Constantine “pulled Christians out of the catacombs and into civilization and he created Christian architecture as we know it,” Odahl said. “He created the weekend by making Sunday a religious holiday, and he also created Christmas.”

Odahl’s 424-page *Constantine* has received critical praise for its depth, clarity and comprehensive approach. “A splendid volume ... The scholarship is impeccable,” wrote Hans Pohlsander of the State University of New York. Irish reviewer David Woods predicted that Odahl’s book will stand as “the standard account of the reign [of Constantine] for many years to come.” And Jacquelyn Winston of



CARRIE QUINNEY PHOTO

Boise State history professor Charles Odahl displays some of the artifacts he collected during his 25-year quest to research the life of Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome.

Constantine also built a number of church monuments, including those at the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem and the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul in Rome. He's also responsible for founding Constantinople, one of the greatest cities in the world. It was Constantine who closed the *New Testament* canon at 27 books.

CONSTANTINE REMAINS RELEVANT

A study of Constantine continues to be relevant as we journey through the 21st century, Odahl said, because many of the current issues about the relationship between politics and religion have their roots in Constantine's world. It was Constantine who set up the model for the Christian imperial theocracy; it wasn't until the American and French revolutions that the modern idea of the separation of church and state emerged.

Today, the sentiment "God Bless America" commonly heard at political rallies, and the "God is Great" of Muslim theocracies, indicate how the line between church-state separation again may be shifting. "Whether the theocratic or secular model of government wins out in this century, studying Constantine is most relevant today," Odahl said.

Odahl is working on his next book, expected to be published this spring. *Cicero and the Catilinarian Conspiracy* examines the concepts of power and status in the late Roman Republic, the republic's fall and the rise of the new system of government dominated by a single ruler, the emperor. — **Kathleen Craven** ◆

Azusa Pacific University called the book "one of the most balanced and finest works on [Constantine's] life that has been published."

During 15 trips to Europe, Odahl immersed himself in the world of the first Christian Roman emperor while leading tours and teaching classes. That hands-on experience was critical to the volume he ultimately produced.

"Most researchers who have studied Constantine have done so from their offices," he said. "I thought I needed to get out in the field to see where he fought his battles, minted his coins, built churches and transformed Rome into the Christian capital."

AN EMPEROR LIKE NO OTHER

Born Flavius Constantinus around A.D. 273 in the ancient town of Naissus in modern-day Serbia, Constantine emerges in Odahl's writing as one of the shrewdest political leaders and field commanders, and most sincere religious reformers and extensive imperial builders among all the Roman emperors.

Constantine's avid devotion to Christianity was born in the year 312 on a march to Rome. Believing he had received a revelation from the God of the Christians, he adopted this deity as his divine patron. Placing the Christian cross on his soldiers' shields, he easily defeated his rival and became a lifelong Christian disciple.

In addition to building Christian churches in a design that distinguished them from pagan temples,



Constantine and the Christian Empire

By Charles M. Odahl

Routledge, 2004,
expanded edition 2006