

WE'RE ASKED TO SEE Bill's wives as modern women, but they're so infantilized they'll do anything for a scrap of power

## The big problem with Big Love

**It pretends to be a free-to-be-you-and-me take on family issues. It's really Mormon porn.**

**BY WENDY DENNIS** • Critics are mostly raving about *Big Love*, HBO's new dramatic series chronicling the life of a supposedly progressive polygamist family, which premiered on TMN last month. I'd watch a show about paint drying if it were produced by HBO, but, in this case, I find myself weirdly allied with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which officially distanced itself from the show's perky portrayal of polygamy. The Mormons can hardly claim the moral high ground here—polygamy was officially outlawed in 1890, but it's still widely practised in Utah, where the church largely turns a blind eye to its creepy paternalism. Still, at least somebody's sounding the alarm.

*Big Love* is the story of Bill Henrickson (Bill Paxton), who's an average family guy except for his three wives and seven children. They all live in a Salt Lake City suburb, where their three houses back onto the same backyard. Bill owns the local Henrickson's Home Plus (wink, wink), while his wives mostly do housework, schlep around squalling kids, hide purchases from him, and vie to be his favourite. We're meant to see the Henricksons as the Good Polygamists, and Bill as a consummately nice guy and charmingly paternalistic babe magnet. Otherwise why would all these tasty women line up to wash his socks?

In contrast, the Bad Polygamists live in a cult governed by The Prophet (Harry Dean Stanton), the Darth Vader of polygamists who has 31 children, hordes of grandchildren, and has just plucked himself a ripe teenage bride from the family arbour.

What's deeply distressing about *Big Love* is that, while a viewer can easily pick the evil-doer polygamists out of the crowd, the fundamentally Talibanesque nature of the

Henricksons' seemingly modern brand of plural marriage—a marriage the show depicts as an aspirational ideal—is much trickier to nail.

Mark V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, who are partners in life as well as co-creators of the show, have said they wanted to take a humane, non-judgmental view of polygamy, which they saw as the perfect template through which to survey modern marriage and the family. Aside from the sheer lunacy of suggesting that you can treat polygamy neutrally (like, hey man, it's cool with us if you want to take three wives), you'd have to have a chip missing to think that the ideal hook to discuss the modern family is an illegal, regressive practice associated with rampant spousal and sexual abuse, where the greybeards get first dibs on the hotties by running the young men out of town.

The misbegotten premise that polygamy is a quirky lens on the modern family, along with a blind spot about women you could drive an SUV through, are what's so insidious about this show. While *Big Love* pretends to be a free-to-be-you-and-me take on family issues—families come in many shapes and sizes now, we're all here by choice, the sexes are equal—what's really being served up is Mormon porn.

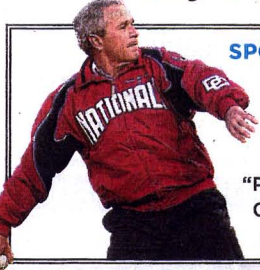
Misogyny masquerades as modernity throughout the show in viscer-

ally disturbing ways. Henrickson is cast as a much-put-upon guy who has to service a bevy of needy, grasping women. Think *Father Knows Best* with sex-on-demand, where Robert Young and Jane Wyatt decide to take the babysitter for a wife. In this male harem fantasy, we're treated to lots of gratuitous nude shots of Bill slam-banging away, or being orally serviced by one of his concubine wives, all of whom possess a surface sweetness, but are secretly angling to get a piece of him sexually, emotionally and financially. Poor, sexy Bill—so many vaginas, so little time.

First in line (Jeanne Tripplehorn) is the older, wiser wife who rules the roost. Second at bat (Chloë Sevigny) is greedy for attention, like many middle children. Bringing up the rear (Ginnifer Goodwin) is the juicy child-bride who squeals like a porpoise during sex. She used to be the babysitter. Seriously.

We're asked to see these wives as modern women, but they're so infantilized, willing to deny their own needs, and powerless in this so-called "progressive" equation, they'll do anything for a scrap of power, including debase themselves and passive-aggressively target each other. They also plead for favours, and are cringingly grateful when Bill throws them a bone, be it an allowance hike, new car, or his Viagra-fuelled boner. (Meanwhile, Bill and his polygamist buddy are portrayed as models of male bonding.)

Furthermore, while Bill purports to give his wives an equal voice, his boyishly democratic



### SPORTS AND POLITICS... ACCORDING TO TV

"Last night in Florida, the Gators got a congratulatory phone call from President Bush. And UCLA shot so badly they got a phone call from Dick Cheney."

—*The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*

"President Bush threw out the ceremonial first pitch at the Cincinnati Reds-Chicago Cubs game. Like Bush, it was high and to the far right."—*Jay Leno*

all-American charm is merely a smokescreen. When wife No.1 scores a longed-for teaching gig, he's Mr. Supportive, but instructs her to confer with the other wives first, since her job will increase their work. Thus, he deftly dodges dirtying his hands with domestic concerns, while offloading that task to the other wives, who're guaranteed to be resentful. For a patriarchal male, it's a win-win. He gets to stay augustly above the fray, while setting up the women to bicker demeaningly.

What's not addressed in any credible way (sorry, but only a guy could come up with the babe magnet theory to explain it) is why any self-respecting woman would willingly join a harem, stand in line for sack-time with her husband, or subject herself to listening to him get it on across the yard with a barely legal-age sister-wife. Except for Paxton's mother (Grace Zabriskie), who's portrayed as a loon, but who at least had the gumption to let her polygamist husband rot on the floor when he fell off the couch (someone's poisoning him), there's not one female character in this show who possesses any integrity, or makes you feel good about being a woman—unlike, say, Carmela on *The Sopranos* or Bree and Lynette on *Desperate Housewives*.

Furthermore, although the show makes it pretty clear why polygamy works for men, it also implies—troublingly—that it's the answer to a modern woman's prayers because it banishes her child-care woes and mother-guilt. After all, what woman doesn't long for a domestic doppelgänger to lighten her household and child-raising load, or—even better—take the heat off her when her husband wants sex and she's not in the mood? In *Big Love's* Progressive Polygamist Utopia, uterus is destiny, men don't have to think about child care, women are relieved to have another woman service their husbands if they'd rather read *Vogue*, and the male libido is so primary, women feel obliged to provide their husbands backup.

What's more, Olsen and Scheffer (who seem mostly to dislike women and misunderstand them, as well as find heterosexual relationships confounding) appear to be asking us to see gay marriage and polygamy as analogous—just another alternative lifestyle that may seem odd (and must be kept secret lest others disapprove), but is really just like yours or mine. The analogy implodes, however, because the two aren't equatable. Gay marriage, in fact, has far more in common with straight unions than it does with polygamy because both are intimate partnerships of equals—in other words, a fair fight. At the end of the day, no matter how much you tart polygamy up in modern garb, it'll always be a man's game. Which is why, at its core, *Big Love* is really just a Big Lie. ■