Communities that are conscious of themselves as viable seldom enjoy being the subject of an analytical critique that reveals tacit bias and unvoiced, albeit privately acknowledged, negative behaviors that reflect badly on the community’s public face. This presents a dilemma for an outsider who wants to understand the complexity of a community’s social life: should only the public face, without qualification, be presented, much like a travelogue designed to highlight the more interesting and wonderfully enjoyable features of the community’s life, or should the researcher seek to present the “good” side along with the more objectifiable and less satisfying side of daily life?

Throughout human history, family variation has always been the name of the game. Acknowledging that families often come in different sizes and shapes does not mean that a family system does not have its structural weak point. This is the domain where values often collide and where pragmatic adaptations are required. Because every family system has its tension or contradictory features, it is unfair to criticize a family system through only focusing on its contested domains. There is no culture or family system that lacks some tension arising from the pursuit of personal
desires while striving to adhere to social obligations. Every marriage system has its strengths and limitations.

To document that many people find monogamous marriage less than satisfying does not mean monogamous marriage cannot be very satisfying. By the same token, to acknowledge that a polygamous family can be dissatisfying for some does not mean that polygamous marriages cannot work or bring satisfaction to many of its participants.

In discussing those tension points, I do not want to suggest, hide, or advocate that there are only “problems” in the plural family system. This is not so. Many Angel Park residents do find rich satisfaction in their plural marriage, while others do not.

I am aware that many outsiders have visited the community with their minds already made up and, after performing a “gracious open-minded” posture, leave only to criticize the community’s family system. I have strived not to do this. I have sought to get it as right as I could without being sensational. In fact, a few community members have, without my asking, provided their life stories, which I found remarkable but, upon reflection, decided not to include in the book. Although their rich stories, however accurate, would have made for sensational copy, I was not able to determine their representativeness, so I decided not to include in the book what I considered to be a hyperdramatic accounts of their lives.

I am immensely grateful to the community and to former community members who have opened their homes and shared their lives with me. I appreciate the time and patience they have extended as they explained their religious beliefs and shared their insights into what has been for me a truly remarkable, albeit at times frustrating, portrait of family life. I recall telling my academic colleagues that some of the most memorable and insightful conversations I have ever had were with community members,
whose knowledge and intelligence is second to none. I will be forever in debt to the community for its kindness, tolerance of my presence, and steadfastness in addressing my never-ending queries.

In any culture or small community there are people who “are more successful in upholding or achieving its values” (Lepore 2018:xviii). My primary aim is “to allow readers to form their own opinion about the community I found so compellingly complex” (Bair 1995:xvii). It is the richness of the family system that I wanted outsiders to appreciate more fully. To that end, I strove to provide a rich account of the polygamous family’s cosmology and social organization as they shape their members life satisfactions, uncertainties, and dissatisfactions growing up in America’s most unique experiment in family living.

Whatever else it is, this book is, like Carol Greenhouse’s book, “a testimony to my debt to you” (1986:17). Although over the last twenty years there has been massive national media and scholarly attention (e.g., through CNN, Oprah, the National Geographic, the New York Times) probing family life in various fundamentalist communities, I have decided, out of respect for the community’s privacy, to keep its public name anonymous. I have included the names of some historical or media-centered figures who resided in other fundamentalist communities and have discussed some of those members’ published work. I have not done so, however, for anyone who continues to live in Angel Park. Thus I have not included any maps, illustrations, or photos from the community.

My intention is to understand how individuals reconcile often competing ethical obligations with the pragmatic demands of living to provide a clearer appreciation of the plural family’s complexity and vibrancy. I have further attempted to “conceptually translate” to outsiders unfamiliar with the plural family’s more
salient beliefs, norms, and unvoiced nuances. It is also my hope to provide a window for community members to see themselves through fresh eyes. A longtime community member, upon learning what I was trying to understand, said: “Interesting, maybe you tell us what we are doing right and what we are doing wrong and then we can make changes.” I have no idea how my effort will be received. I know I learned much from the community and hope in some small way the community can learn something if not from me than from how anthropologists try to make sense of life.