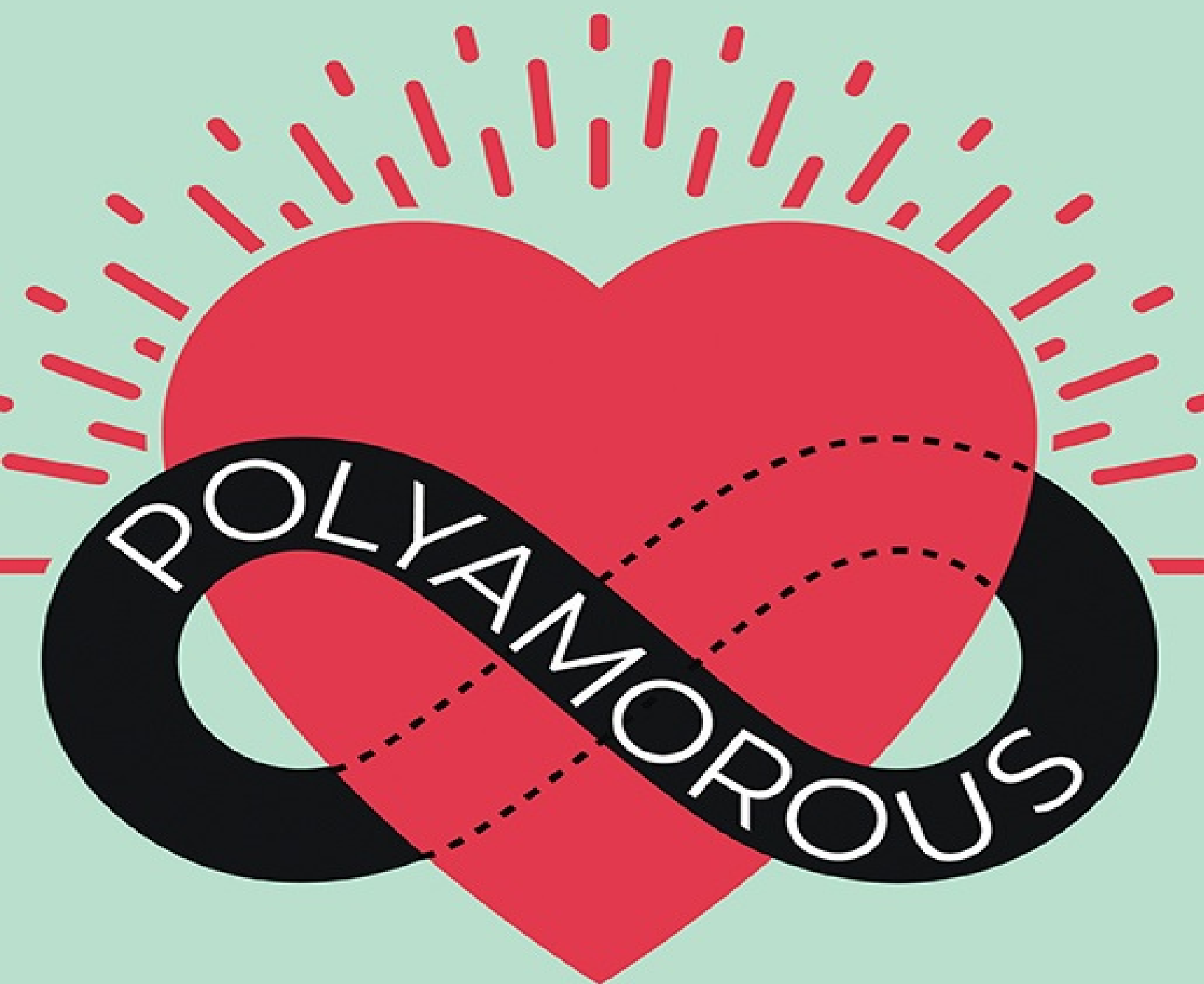
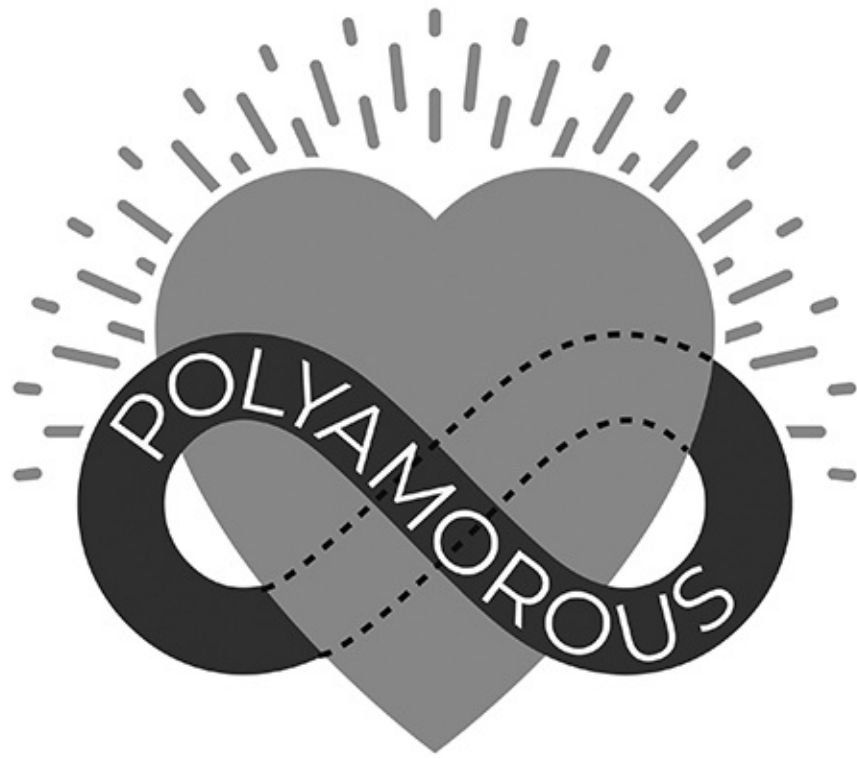


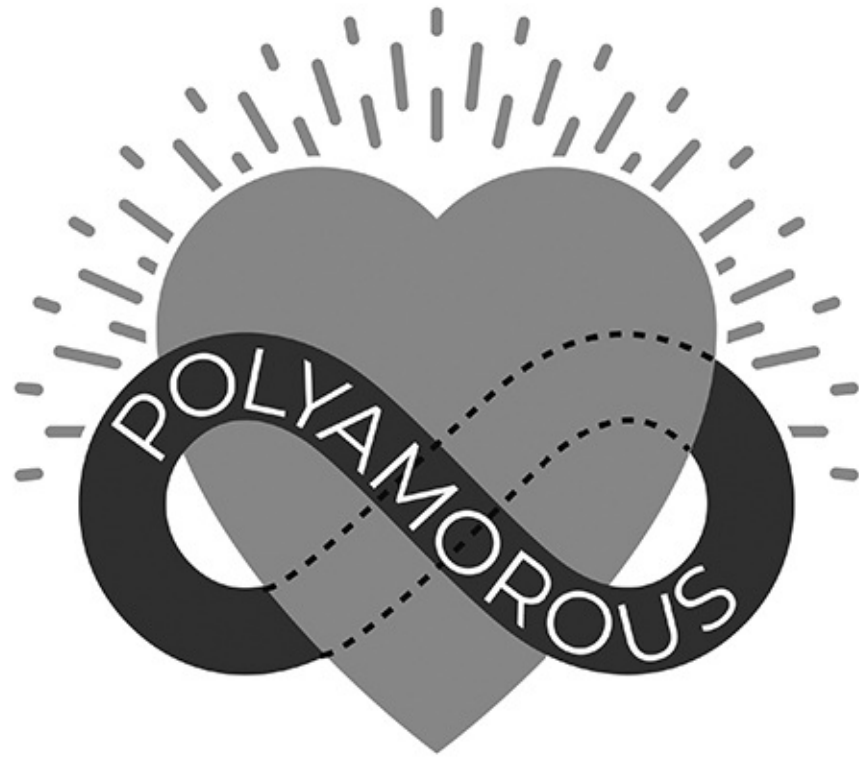
JENNY YUEN



Living and Loving More



JENNY YUEN



Living and Loving More



DUNDURN
TORONTO

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— J. Kirk Howard, President

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*To Co & Co,
the best company a girl like me can have.
Love you both.*

And to my baby girl, Ella. You're our little rainbow miracle.



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PREFACE

What an Affair Taught Me

This can't last. This misery can't last. I must remember that and try to control myself. Nothing lasts really. Neither happiness nor despair.

— Laura Jesson, *Brief Encounter*

DAVID LEAN'S 1945 FILM *Brief Encounter* tells the tale of Laura Jesson, a married woman with kids whose complacent life becomes complicated after a chance meeting with a stranger named Alec.

The film struck me deeply when I first watched it. That's not just because it's a masterpiece — beautifully shot in contrasting black and white — but because it also illustrates the brutal consequences of unintentionally falling in love.

Sitting on the couch, I was transported to three years before. I felt a stab of guilt and a wave of empathy for Laura because I'd had my own brief encounter that became an affair, lasting more than a year.



Sunday, March 31, 2013

I knew I was caught.

It was time to raise the white flag.

I still remember the stunned look on my then boyfriend's face, even though he knew what had been going on for quite a while.

"I have something to tell you," I told him quietly. "I had an affair. It's over now, but it went on for about a year."

His lips quivered. Then the name-calling, which I felt I deserved — "Fucking whore. Fucking slut."

A few days prior, I had broken it off with the other man — Mr. San Diego. Even though we loved each other, I knew affairs were never meant to last. We severed ties and he blocked me on Facebook. It hurt both of us. He showed me a note he wrote to his friend that said, "Why does it hurt more that my girlfriend

dumped me than if my wife had?”

A year and half earlier, in July of 2011, a friend and I took a trip to San Diego to attend Comic-Con. We had gone the cheap route, trying to save two hundred dollars by taking several connecting flights. On the final flight of three that day, from Denver to San Diego, there he was: slender, wearing a neat, crisp shirt and well-fitting slacks. Handsome-nerdy, I'd say. My friend was feeling nauseous from the ups and downs of the multiple flights, and I agreed to switch my window seat for hers. Mr. San Diego, who was nearly forty, sat down beside me; his wife and two young sons were sitting in the row ahead.

Feeling chatty, I struck up a conversation with him, mainly about our destination (his home): things to do as a tourist and the geeky exploits of visiting a pop-culture convention. We didn't exchange information, but he managed to find me with the details I had given him about my job.

He emailed me.

I didn't think anything of it. I was happy in my relationship. We added each other to Facebook. He came to Toronto in the spring of the following year and asked if I wanted to meet for a friendly drink. Again, I thought nothing of it. We spoke mainly about U.S. politics and I dropped him off at his hotel after.

But things changed in the summer. I was struggling with my relationship at home. I felt trapped and thought a solo trip would help calm my nerves. So, I went to San Diego again for Comic-Con, but this time I decided to turn it into an extended week-long trip.

Usually, when I'm travelling alone, I feel exhilarated and free. This time, I felt lonely. San Diego turned out to be quite a barren city that felt more like a small town to me before the convention started.

The only night I went out on the town was when Mr. San Diego picked me up and we went to a dive taco bar. By the end of the night, it felt like a date. And there was this wild attraction, the spark of excitement that I needed and had not felt in a really long time. He dropped me off at my hostel in his rare sports car — to this day, when I see one, it brings me back to that time.

In the movie *Unfaithful*, Diane Lane plays a complacent wife entangled in an affair with a hot Spanish dude after a chance meeting on the street. In a flashback after the famous snow globe murder scene, Lane's character rewinds to the day she met him. Instead of allowing herself to know him, she hails a cab and he remains a stranger.

Mr. San Diego and I were soon chatting on Facebook and the flirting intensified, escalating to X-rated messages. I prayed he wouldn't offer to drive me to the airport. He didn't.

Though I was thankful to have escaped California still relatively faithful (by

my definition), the intimate texts continued when I returned home. My home life was going downhill, but when San Diego proposed an illicit meeting in New York City, I became wracked with guilt and checked myself into therapy.

I decided to go, anyway.

San Diego booked a luxury hotel room under my name and I arrived a few days earlier than him. He left me a five-hundred-dollar Visa card because he didn't want me to spend my own money.

I was nervous about seeing him again in person. He had to conjure up a story for his wife that almost didn't fly. But then it did.

As I lay there, pretending to be asleep, waiting for him, the adrenaline of arousal coursed through me, with a flash of "maybe we shouldn't do this" doubt.

My thoughts froze when I heard the key card in the lock.

He quietly entered, took off his clothes, and slipped under the sheets.

I kept pretending to be asleep and curled up to him, skin on skin. I could feel his heart pounding. Without speaking, we lay in each other's arms. Oddly, things were quickly feeling comfortable.

The girlfriend of my boyfriend's best friend was also in New York that particular weekend. I had heard she and her guy were having similar relationship problems and agreed to meet up with her for a coffee. We had hung out a few times before, but I didn't know her well.

A bout of brutal honesty was my undoing.

She told me things had not been going great at home, and when I confided in her why I was in New York, she told me she was there for the same reason.

On that trip, San Diego told me more intimate details about his wife, his children, and the turbulence at home. How she was abusive. I sympathized with him.

He paid for things because he had the means to. As a woman who has always paid her own way and taken care of herself, it felt nice to let someone else handle that job without feeling guilty about it.

He told me that the saddest part about our time together was the moment it began, because it meant it would be a minute closer to ending. He dreaded going home. I did, too.

As we parted ways at Newark Airport, I said, "I love you."

He shouted out a *Star Wars* reference: "I know." (Ironically, my current partner Adam bought us a set of copper bracelets with the same quotes written in French. I have the "*je sais*" one.)

The secret texts and the dialogue continued for several more months, quickly deleted to conceal the affair.

You become the other woman, hidden away. But I knew I didn't want

anything more. I didn't want to marry him or to wreck his family. Then I broke it off, very suddenly.

My boyfriend and I were still living together when he found out, but we had definitively split up a month before. Our communication with each other was poor, and looking back, I wish we had been secure enough to be honest with each other about what we both really needed in a relationship.

A few days before the big confession, he was looking over my shoulder on Facebook and asked, "Who's that guy? I've heard weird things about him."

"Like what?" I asked.

"That he has a bipolar wife and he financed your trip to New York," he said.

The woman I had met up with in New York had told her boyfriend, who, of course, told my boyfriend. What friend would conceal such a betrayal?

My boyfriend was the passive type. But this was the nail in the coffin.

The erosion began.

His mother, whom I loved and cared about, immediately deleted me from Facebook. His family never spoke to me again, which was worse than him hating me.

I helped him find a new apartment, but those subsequent weeks leading up to the big move were the roughest — waves of guilt, melancholy, anger, all rotating in cycles. I always thought that as long as no one knew, no one could get hurt. But with affairs, it always comes out one way or another.

I have friends who have approached me for advice when it comes to affairs and infidelity. Some of them say they are thinking about going through with it. Nothing is black and white or good people versus bad. After living it, I understand why people can be unhappy in their marriages and relationships. Do I endorse cheating? No. But I understand why it happens. Life is messy. Everyone makes decisions and those decisions have consequences.

When I look back, I smile and laugh about the excitement and exploration of those experiences, but my heart sinks thinking about the deception, hurt, and burning of bridges the affair caused. I handwrote my ex and his family separate apology letters. I meant them. I didn't expect a response or forgiveness, but I think a genuine "I'm sorry" is what they deserved. They never wrote back, which I unequivocally accept.

I'm not looking for sympathy and I understand there will be some judgment from others reading this story. I don't condone cheating and would never do it again, but I recognize that relationships, like people, are complex. If you do something that hurts another person, you have to own your shit and take responsibility. Then life moves on.

At the beginning of this year, something urged me to reach out to San Diego.

I wrote him, apologizing for abruptly ending the relationship, saying that he didn't deserve it and that I hoped everything was better at home.

He responded a few minutes later.

Our abrupt ending helped me actually get on with my life — something you knew I was incapable of at the time. You helped me get started with a therapist ... he helped me sort out how my life was going ... what it was doing to me ... who I was becoming. A year or two afterward, I finally divorced her. I've been mentally and physically much healthier since then. Career-wise things are as good as they can be ... I don't get to NYC as much. I miss New York greatly ... it's a bit of a second home to me. My kids are happier ... I've got a loving girlfriend ... and I seem to use a lot of ellipses when writing. I'm glad I met you on that flight too. Thanks for the note. I have always wished you the best.

It filled my heart reading that because it was a positive outcome from a devastating scenario years later. Some good had come out of it.

But having experienced an affair — and seeing the destruction it caused first-hand — helped change my view on relationships. My view toward life, really. I vowed to live a more — for lack of a less hipster word — *authentic* life, especially in my relationships. To be honest, open, and transparent in love. No more lies.

And so, when I was presented with two relationships I was interested in pursuing, as you'll read about in Chapter 1, I let both know the other existed. The affair, in its weird roundabout way, was the catalyst that led me to polyamory.

Polyamory — multiple romantic relationships with everyone's knowledge and consent — didn't come as an excuse to cheat. On the contrary, it reinforced the values I learned from experiencing an affair.

In this book, you'll hear from many others who discovered polyamory in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. After the affair, I viewed forming new connections outside of a monogamous relationship as “dangerous” because in monogamy, you have to set your boundaries and adhere to them for fear of what new “feelings” could potentially become.

In contrast, I found it an amazing experience to reach out to, connect with, and talk to various poly people across Canada and learn just how different every situation, every structure is — just like the people who comprise them.

I'm not an expert on polyamory nor am I the face of polyamory. I don't think

there's a "face" because we're all so different and our situations are so varied. What works for one poly relationship can be so vastly different from another — whether you're polyfidelitous, solo poly, a relationship anarchist, a throuple, a quad, or beyond. Some — and I can concur with them — are ambiamorous, which means they're happy being in either polyamorous or monogamous relationships, or the fifty shades of gradients in between each end of the spectrum. In other words, they're flexible with whatever their relationships transform into, whether that involves one or more people. There's no right or wrong way of approaching it. And that's the beauty of it. You can DIY your own relationships as you see fit.

In fact, it was my partner Adam who came up with the book title. *Polyamorous* is all about putting the emphasis on the *us* in these types of relationships.

I wanted to write a book about polyamory in Canada because, well, I'm Canadian. We have different laws than the United States and the rest of the world, and different social attitudes. But it's the stories that really connect us. It was fascinating to research Canada's history and our potential future with regard to non-monogamy, especially with more than a hundred poly groups that have sprouted up across the country.

But this isn't a how-to guide (there are already lots of illuminating resources out there). I found it fascinating to hear about the specific challenges and benefits people have discovered through their unique relationship structures. I will endeavour to dispel misconceptions the general public has when it hears the words *non-monogamy* and *polyamory*. I want to give underrepresented groups within polyamory a voice and to show readers that a family with a number of adult partners taking care of kids can be just as healthy as a nuclear family, perhaps with even more emotional support benefits. I wanted to show that sister communities like kink and swing are different than polyamory, but that we stand side by side as allies. The stories within these pages are merely a snapshot of the many that exist in all shapes and sizes. Because of the sensitive and personal nature of these accounts, and for the protection of privacy, some people were comfortable giving me their full names, others, first names only, and some preferred pseudonyms.

And while it's paramount to strive for ethics within all your relationships, sometimes there is still unethical behaviour in polyamory that needs addressing. But with continued education and dialogue, the next wave of people — Millennials, I'm looking at you! — who decide to explore this relationship structure can learn from past mistakes and create better resources to tackle these problems.

With more worldwide media coverage of consensual non-monogamy, society is seeing it with a different and, to an extent, more accepting and flexible lens. Poly is becoming more normalized, but there's still a long way to go, especially when it comes to legal issues.

Polyamory is about choice. It isn't enlightened; it's just different. Polyamorous people aren't trying to "convert" monogamous people. People can and should be able to choose to love whomever and however they want, in any combination. That includes *actively choosing* monogamy if that's what floats your boat. Being non-monogamous won't protect you from cheating, loneliness, failed relationships, or divorce, but it may not be the cause of it, either.

The climax of *Brief Encounter* presents Alec and Laura faced with the realization that neither an affair nor a future together are possible. They don't want to hurt their families, so they part ways. The final scene shows Laura returning home to her kind and patient husband, who, it's presumed, has some kind of understanding of what's going on. He thanks her for coming back to him, and she cries in his arms.

Perhaps humans aren't meant to be monogamous, but if they choose to be, they should be honest with themselves and each other with what they need in life. They should also know there is another option out there if they're attracted to more than one person at a time.

Be honest, open, and loving.

And then go from there.

1

The Welding

The untold want by life and land ne'er granted, Now, voyager, sail
thou forth, to seek and find.

— Walt Whitman, “The Untold Want”

The heart's not like a box that gets filled up; it expands in size the
more you love. I'm different from you. This doesn't make me love
you any less. It actually makes me love you more.

— iOs, *Her*

IT WASN'T A WEDDING. It was *welding*.

For years, I thought I was too commitment-phobic to walk down an aisle
without running the other way. Maybe I watched that Julia Roberts movie,
Runaway Bride, too many times.

But on that June morning, as several friends helped carry layers of scalloped
printed newspaper that comprised my gown — stories my partner Adam and I
had worked on together over the years at *the newspaper* as reporter and
photographer — I took confident strides toward my unorthodox future.

Several feet away, I could see Adam, beaming, a silver-haired fox. He stood
six-foot-plus in his newspaper vest collaged with photos, including one of Iggy
Pop from the *New York Times* Sunday styles section. Charlie sat in the front row,
where his encouraging smile caught my eye, and I knew I was making the right
choice to unabashedly love two men.



Our story began as a love triangle and eventually became a committed V.

In 2015, even though all three of us would have categorized ourselves as
monogamous, Charlie and Adam and I started exploring the possibility of
polyamory.

I discovered the two loves of my life — Charlie and Adam — a few weeks
apart in the summer of 2013 when I felt that spark and connection with both, in

different ways. But because we thought monogamy was our only choice, there was a lot of heartbreak for all three of us, with me caught in the middle.

From the get-go, I was always honest with both men — how I cared about and was attracted to both of them and valued each of them in my life. Looking back now, I think that laid the foundation for open communication, and the respect and trust needed in any relationship, but especially poly relationships. Otherwise, things fall apart pretty quickly.

I struggled at the time with what life was supposed to look like: One partner. Monogamy. I was often told “You can’t have it all,” but living an ordinary life just wasn’t me.

Around that time, I discovered *Design for Living*, a 1933 black-and-white pre-Hays Code film by director Ernst Lubitsch. The film focuses on Gilda, a petite, quirky blonde played by Miriam Hopkins, who ends up in a polyamorous relationship (or as close as you could get to one in those days) after a chance encounter with two men, George and Thomas (Fredric March and Gary Cooper), on a train to Paris.

They both fall hard for her, and she for them, but she cannot decide between the two. So instead, she ends up marrying Max, a stout, rigid, and commanding husband who is very much about “keeping up with the Joneses.”

What changes toward the end of the story (spoiler alert), after Gilda realizes “the normal life” isn’t for her, is that her two loves come and rescue her from her unhappy marriage.

By that point, both men realize they need her and all three realize that each of them brings something different to the relationship. The result is balance. The takeaway is that this love — although unconventional — is possible, but it can’t come from a place of starvation or fear. And the two men can still remain friends, even though they had been fighting for the attention of the same woman.

While I don’t agree that Gilda required “rescuing,” her succumbing to a monogamous marriage — even though in her heart she knew George and Thomas were the right people for her — resonated with me as a cautionary tale.

As the film winds to a close, the starlet is in the back of a cab sandwiched between her two loves and they drive off to Paris to live together, not knowing whether it will work or fail. She kisses one and then leans over and kisses the other, and the screen fades to black.

Although my relationships with both Adam and Charlie began a week apart that summer, a number of conflicting factors contributed to my uncertainty about the future: The nearly thirty-year age gap between me and Adam. My desire to sooner-rather-than-later become a mom with Charlie. A long-distance relationship. And, of course, being in love with two people at the same time.



Charlie and I met on July 24, 2013, in one of those “meant to be” Hollywood-type stories, as our paths crossing was really quite against the odds. I had recently split from my ex after my very messy affair and decided to take a solo road trip to Montreal to check out the Just for Laughs Comedy Festival.

I drove seven hours to Quebec, making stops along the way. I was to be in La Belle Province for *trois jours*. On the second day, I had some time to kill, so I strolled down boulevard St. Laurent. After falling into a smoked-meat coma at Schwartz’s, I noticed all those obnoxious pictures I took of my food had drained my battery and I wandered into the nearest café to find an outlet. It had a pi (3.14) symbol on the front and an advertisement for chess and London fog lattes in the window. Foreshadowing!

My high school French was rusty and embarrassing. The Asian girl with ombre-tipped hair behind the counter asked me if I was “attempting” to order a drink. “Yeah, I guess I am,” I responded in English.

She began making random comments about the process of doing ombre highlights at home or in a salon, so I quickly ordered a cold drink and made my escape. Walking back toward the front of the café, I scanned for available wall outlets. They were all occupied. Except one.

There was a guy sitting at the table, but the plug was free.

“*Parlez-vous Anglais?*” I asked.

“Yes.”

Relief washed over me. I asked if I could sit down and plug in my dying phone.

“No problem,” he said.

He had his headphones on and seemed to be daydreaming. I didn’t want to interrupt, but I also felt awkward just sitting there at the small, intimate round table for two, not saying anything.

So, being the curious reporter, I asked him about his life.

He was in Montreal with his sister and brother-in-law. They were all from London, England, and had travelled to Toronto for their father’s remarriage to a Canadian woman. The road trip to Quebec was a good excuse to get some poutine with squeaky cheese.

For the next forty minutes, Charlie and I got lost in each other. We talked about our families, our lives in two different cities, places we’d travelled to and places we’d still like to see, and how annoyed we were that our friends were getting married, having kids, and buying houses together. Ironically, some of those things are now what we want as a married couple — the

American/Canadian/British/Millennial dream.

That's what connected us — talking about these subjects with such confidence and ease. Years later, we still joke about the weirdo behind the café counter.

I had to leave to meet a friend, so we exchanged information. A friend request popped up on my Facebook the following day. I didn't really think anything of it.

Two nights later, with us both back in Toronto, I offered to take Charlie on the "Scott Pilgrimage," my own constructed tour of locations around the city that are featured in the namesake movie and graphic novel series.

I wasn't even sure it was a "date," per se. I messaged my friend and joked I would text her a safe word to let her know I wasn't murdered. "*Foliage*," I said.

"Michael Scott's safe word?"

"Damn straight."

Charlie met me at work and I drove him back to my place, where we walked my dog, Wampa, before going for dinner at Korean Village. I was startled and flattered when he sat beside me instead of across from me in the booth.

Later, I showed him the Metro, the last operating porn theatre in Ontario. He pulled me close to him as a picture of Ron Jeremy reflected at us from the marquee. The loud hum of a street sweeper was nearing. He grabbed my hand. And didn't let go.

After spending the night together, we went our separate ways. He sent me a text saying he just realized he was heading home to London that day. I offered to meet him at the airport to see him off.

We both agreed that we didn't see this as a booty call, but having just split from my ex, I wanted to take it slow and see where things went. I didn't want to fall back into my serial monogamist patterns.

Fast-forward a few weeks.

I was covering a Scarborough by-election with Adam, who was my photographer that night. After Mitzie Hunter was declared the winner, we decided to catch up over a beer (for him) and a soft drink (for me — Asian flush barrier). I told him about Charlie, showed him photos, and shared stories about our escapades that night.

Up until that point, Adam and I were, as he calls it, "gal pals" — work confidantes who were comfortable friends. But there was a moment — which, in hindsight, I admittedly felt as well — where we had that "click." I approached him one day in the newsroom several weeks after the by-election. Adam describes it like that scene in *Wayne's World*, where Cassandra is onstage playing heavy metal, but Wayne Campbell can only see her through a misty

kaleidoscope with “Dream Weaver” playing.

I emailed Adam one night after that moment, on a long weekend, to tell him I was going to London.

“Without me?” he said.

“I’ll bring you back a chicken pot pie.”

He realized then I was going to see “the other guy.”

And then, for whatever reason, call it my exhibitionist nature, I ended up sending him some sexts. That’s the night when we went from gal pals of seven years to something more. Something we couldn’t have ever imagined.

Adam’s been there for me when I’ve needed him most and vice versa. He’s my rock. We’re old souls and he’d always be my first pick when I needed help with a lede. One symbol of our synchronicity throughout the relationship has been the numbers 11:11. We’d randomly check our phones, see it was 11:11 a.m. or p.m., and send screenshots to each other.

I found myself falling fast. But I was also into Charlie, and I wanted to see where that would go.

The month after I met Charlie, he invited me on a “second date” in London. I hadn’t been in years and was always up for an adventure, and so I flew over and spent seventy-two hours with him. It was a risky amount of time to spend together, but it turned out to be a lot of fun. He showed me the Natural History Museum, his childhood school, all his favourite haunts. Holding hands, we walked around Regent Street and Clapham. There was something good there, I knew it.

And so, our love triangle formed.

For over a year, the indecision killed me. I loved Adam, but my urge to become a mom one day started to grow stronger. The biological tick of my clock started getting louder, and I wasn’t sure it was all that smart to be committing to a man who was thirty years my senior. Adam and I had wrestled with the pros and cons of him becoming a dad again in his sixties. He already had a grown son from a previous marriage. I feared I’d never become a mom, and being with a man who already had been through those life stages made me resentful.

I made columns and charts. I read what felt like a million stories about older fathers, age-gap relationships, and long-distance relationships.

My friend Javiss was prophetic when he said, “You need to accept Adam’s past and he needs to celebrate your future.”

Charlie and I wanted to see where our relationship could go, but it was premature in those early stages of “dating.” It was hard to gauge if we had a future together, and we were an ocean apart. It would have been too much pressure and unfair to ask one or the other to uproot themselves and make the

move. However, the more we saw each other — back and forth from Toronto to London, or through stolen moments on Skype — our connection grew stronger. I spent hours in therapy trying to get rational advice about whom to choose. I was honest with both of them all the way through. We were all stuck.

In November that year, I went to London for a month. The plan was for me to stay with Charlie for three weeks. Adam would come meet me for the last week.

Charlie, during one of our late-night talks, confessed to me that he had a dream in which we had a daughter together. He described in great detail what she looked like, the tiny grip of her hand around his, the little black pigtails, and how they were picking up “Mommy’s dry cleaning.”

It was indescribably powerful.

Adam’s arrival — as predicted by our therapist — was fraught with mixed feelings. There was the relief and excitement of seeing him, but also the ache of missing Charlie.

Charlie had offered to put us up at his sister’s place, where I had stayed for the first three weeks, and he would crash with a friend, but Adam decided it would be good to have our own Airbnb for the last leg of the trip — on Adam’s Row in Mayfair, appropriately.

But I felt distant and conflicted, even in our own space. After a trip to Bray-Maidenhead, a nearby suburb of London, to Heston Blumenthal’s psychedelic fine-dining restaurant called The Fat Duck, we headed back to the city and our Airbnb. The plan was for the three of us to have dinner together, but Adam was deeply hurt that Charlie and I still clearly had romantic feelings for one another, despite only labelling ourselves as platonic friends. “I’m not going to dinner,” he said. “He’s not a gentleman.”

Charlie and I went to dinner alone and I explained to him what had happened. We both agreed that our feelings had evolved further than we had anticipated, but we felt them nonetheless. After we walked around in the rain for a bit, he kissed me goodbye and told me he would take himself out of my life. He didn’t want to be *that guy*.

Adam and I flew back to Toronto. Everyone felt gutted. And yet, I found it hard to not text Charlie. Our relationship continued, if only seemingly on a friendship level, yet again. For me, there was just so much relief that he wasn’t out of my life for good.

The torment of feeling deep love and connection and feeling immobilized by indecision caused a lot of heartache for all three of us. None of our friends could offer any advice other than for me to choose wisely, whatever that meant. But the main message was: you have to choose.

Charlie felt ostracized because vicinity dictated that Adam and I were “more

of a couple” than he and I were, and couple privilege did seem to come into play, with Charlie often relegated to the “friend only” role.

Life is complicated, but none of us had ever been in this situation. I sounded like a broken record to my friends, trying to make sense of an equation that made sense in my head but not in my heart. It was the biggest fight between my two most vital organs. I gave myself a deadline: for two months, I would cut off all contact with Charlie to see whether Adam and I could have a future together on our own.

On March 7, I boarded a solo flight to Cuba.

I needed a place where Wi-Fi was spotty so I could make a decision.

On the plane, I met a woman in her sixties named Dolly, who had the seat beside me. She was travelling with a man named Wally, whom she’d met on Match.com. We started talking. She was a widow and described how she and Wally met — and about her husband, whom she still loved very much. I still feel a kindred-soul connection with her. I told her about my dilemma, half hoping a perfect stranger could share some wisdom.

“You look really happy there,” she said, pointing to a picture of me peeking out from behind Charlie’s back — a selfie we had taken at Brighton Pier, which had been virtually devoid of tourists that day, except for us. It had been pouring the night before, but the next morning, the November sun gave us an iconic picture of the two us, in that moment in time.

“What about the other guy?”

I showed her Adam and I standing, smiling in front of the Eiffel Tower, after we had made up after a fight, which had brought us closer. “You sound like you really love the other guy, too,” she said.

On the beach, with a notebook with the same repetitive columns drawn out — “PROS” and “CONS” — I gave myself a deadline to make a decision, and stick with it.

When I got home, I wrote the following letter.

Dear Charlie,

It’s been a difficult two months of being unable to communicate with you. And I can sense it has been hard for you, too.

But thank you for allowing me the space to think and focus on my relationship with Adam.

I have started realizing some key things about myself, but I think I still need more time. I haven’t yet really figured out if I can truly handle the age gap between him and I. And I need to be sure.

But just because I haven’t figured out myself yet, I do not want

you to wait. I don't think that's fair to you and keeps us all in limbo.

So, it's with a very heavy heart that I have to say I need to make a complete break from you, relationship-wise.

Adam and I need more time to see whether getting married is the right thing to do, but that doesn't mean I will spend more time trying to decide who I want to be with.

If the wedding doesn't feel right, then at least I will be very clear about it and not be clouded by my feelings for you. I can't ping-pong anymore.

This is extremely painful and heartbreaking, knowing I am giving up a good man I love and dearly care for. I am grateful for all the time we've shared in London and Toronto.

But I also have to make the most logical and rational decision based on the best information I have at this point. The truth is we still don't know each other very well in a real-life setting. And I respect my relationship enough with Adam to see if, purely, it can or cannot work.

I'm so sorry.

I will be available on Skype if you want to talk about it further. I'll leave the ball in your court with how you want to proceed from here in terms of staying in contact or being friends.

My therapist told me, "I can't tell you it's the right thing because I don't know for sure, but I do know that if you want to see if things can work between you and Adam, you can't keep Charlie in your life as he has been because you will never have a clear head about things."

On deadline day, I saw Charlie's name pop up in my inbox but couldn't read his response to my email. Not quite yet. I was out in public and I knew I would cry.

My friend Chris came over. Charlie had created a second-a-day video for documenting all the things he did while we had been apart and not talking to each other, and I just bawled in my friend's arms as I showed him the footage. I felt relief that I could see and talk to Charlie again, but crushed that it would only be as friends. It didn't feel right, still, but I thought it was the only choice.

Surprisingly, it was actually Adam who laid out an alternative option in spring 2015, when he saw how conflicted I remained. "What if we could see if the three of us could work together?" he mused.

I think all three of us needed to be honest with not only each other, but with ourselves. What did we each want out of life? For me, I knew I loved these men

in equal but different ways. Adam said this was a situation that could work because we all gain something. Charlie would have me as his legal wife and be a dad; Adam would keep the connection he formed with me and have someone who loved and cared for him into his retirement years; and I would be free to love the two men I love.

After much discussion, Charlie made the brave decision to fly over from the U.K. and begin a life with me, with us. In our structure, we are a V, meaning Charlie and Adam are not romantically involved with each other and I am the “hinge” or “pivot” in the middle of the V — the one who balances the emotional weight of the two sides. But honestly, the guys balance me.

I’m not looking for the “perfect partner.” That’s a different kind of unicorn. Both men are complete human beings just the way they are.

Our connection was more powerful than primal biological needs. Both men knew that what they shared with me and vice versa was rare, and we were not prepared to waste it.

And that analogy was no better expressed than in the lit-up 11:11 barnboard sign hanging over the Welding ceremony space, where I made my commitment to Adam first. It was at precisely that time that I began the walk toward Adam to Sigur Rós’s “Staralfur” in four-inch red patent-leather Valentinos while yards of newspaper gown flowed behind me, my mom linking arms with me on the right and my left hand holding a bunch of mint and red paper flowers while our Shih-poo, Wampa, walked with us down a red carpet.

During the ceremony, I often glanced over at Charlie, dressed in a bespoke matching newspaper bow tie, who was tightly holding on to my mom’s hand as she sat beside him, and wiping tears away with his other hand.

I could feel our own connection, standing up there in front of our friends and family.

In December, when Charlie moved in with me, I think we all had fears about how this would work, how we would deal with jealousy, envy, and all the other irrational but inherent feelings that we would be navigating in a relationship that included more than two.

A few weeks before the Welding, I could feel the anxiety Charlie felt about the non-legal — but obviously meaningful — gathering. He worried it would feel too intense for him the day of, or that he and I would lose out on some “first” experiences together, as neither Charlie nor I had ever been legally married before and planned to marry the following year.

But it was surprising — I think for many of our friends and family, as well as for us — how natural it all felt.

The three of us held up welding masks in some of the photos — ’cause that’s

how we roll. During our two dances — Ella Fitzgerald’s “The Nearness of You” and Tame Impala’s “‘Cause I’m a Man” — my two guys flawlessly alternated between being on the floor with me and my mom, all laughing and having a ball.

We have a term for this in the poly community: *compersion* — feeling joy that your partner is experiencing joy, even though you may not be the direct cause of it. And boy, compersion was filling the place to the roof that day. It was perfect.

There was a moment after the speeches when Adam and Charlie hugged each other in front of everyone. I was between them and touched both of their faces, and we were all overcome by emotion. A photographer captured that joyful moment that I will never forget between the three of us as we embraced. It encompassed everything about our relationship without words. It’s my favourite photo of us and I can feel my heart skip a beat whenever I look at it.

A friend who was skeptical when I first brought up the concept of polyamory found he had to explain the three of us to some of his friends recently. “It’s a feeling,” he told them. “When you see them in person, you can feel how much they care for and love each other.”

We’re poly by circumstance. But not in a “sister-wives” kind of way, though there is definitely an element of family here. Charlie puts it in a way that is so simple: “I love you. You love me. Adam loves you. You love him. That’s it.”

We’re mostly “out” to our co-workers, friends, and families. My seemingly traditional Chinese parents have shockingly accepted our future plans — my mom told me to bring them both home for Christmas dinners. I think they like having two “sons,” not only to carry their groceries, but to have more people to talk to.

My dad, who is in his eighties and has survived a war and seen some shit, and who endured his own romantic strife as a new immigrant in Canada in the 1950s in an interracial relationship, told me: “We’re not like our parents’ generation. We’re open-minded. You’re all adults, be happy.” Having them accept our relationships brought me closer to them.

There was no pronouncement or marriage registration at the Wedding. We didn’t advertise it as a marriage. We stayed far away from loaded terms such as *husband* and *wife* and had disclosed our relationship to family members and friends months prior and made sure they knew it was not a wedding. To avoid the legal hot water of anti-polygamy laws, we also got advice from one of Canada’s most prolific criminal lawyers, a Toronto family lawyer and retired Ontario Superior Court justice. As long as it wasn’t registered and wasn’t presented as a wedding, we would be fine.

I am lucky and grateful to have two men I love and whom both love me. It’s

the connection — even though they are both different — that strengthens our bond. And it's the emotional maturity, honesty, openness, and respect on everyone's part that allows this to work.

"I just want you to be happy," both partners have said. "And he makes you happy, so I can accept and support that."

Charlie offered our apartment to Adam and me to enjoy for an intimate night before a Wedding-moon trip to Venice. Charlie had decorated the apartment with hearts, flowers, and candles with a touching personal note to the two of us. The next evening, Adam and I agreed it felt right to ask him to come home after he was done work just so the three of us could spend time together.

It took two years, but the triangle opened up to more love than we had ever imagined. Those two even call each other "Co" — as in "co-partners." (They endearingly call me "Chairman," because I can be a dictator.) But things were never forced — camaraderie blossomed naturally.

I'm grateful for how things have organically worked so far, and I'm indebted to polyamory for the lessons it's taught me and how much it's changed my way of thinking, my communication skills, and the framework of my relationships, and, really, opened another door into living.

I wouldn't give up having my loves for anything. And I respect and totally support them if they feel they need to explore other connections elsewhere, as well.

"I think the appeal of this is that we were three 'ordinary' people who just morphed into this — no big cause or pressure," explained Adam.

And when things aren't right between me and one of them, the other partner supports us both. In fact, if I'm fighting with Charlie and expressing it to Adam, Adam listens but remains neutral. He'll send me the Swiss flag emoji, which is my "aha" moment to take a breath and calm myself down.

Charlie put it so poignantly, and I don't think he intended to: he's a huge *Star Trek* fan, and he said one of the reasons why he loves the sci-fi show is because there really isn't much conflict between the crew members and the principles of the show hinge on discovery. Discovering what is out there. I never would have figured *Star Trek* could be a good analogy for poly — but there you have it.

When we finally let go of perceptions about how life and relationships "should be," it allows us to open up to a different, alternative way of what life *could be*.

It's our design for living.

2

The Roots and Evolution of Polyamory: Canada and Beyond

By the time I was six, I made an important discovery that I get along much better with animals than humans.

— Glenn Gould

It was a very straightforward triangle. Triangles have happened since the cavemen, I suppose. I had differences with my husband. I left him, I fell in love with someone else and in the meantime, my husband did his best to woo me back. There was really no great mystery to it.

— painter Cornelia Foss

FOR DECADES, RUMOURS FLOATED around in artistic circles that Canadian pianist Glenn Gould was asexual. In fact, the story circulated for much of his life and continued after his death in 1982, but it was finally dismissed in the 2010 documentary *Genius Within: The Inner Life of Glenn Gould*, which chronicled his affairs with several women, including Cornelia Foss, wife of American composer Lukas Foss.

Gould, the Toronto prodigy of the ivory keys, met Foss and her husband (who was working for both the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and the Brooklyn Philharmonic) when he was in Los Angeles in 1956. Their chance encounter sparked a romance between Ms. Foss and Gould, and, in 1967, Foss took her two children and left her husband for Gould.

But it wasn't a clean break — not in the traditional sense.

"I had more or less left my husband," said Foss in the documentary. "The marriage was over, as far as I was concerned. I was going to marry Glenn and he wanted the children and me to come to Toronto and start divorce proceedings. He had already contacted lawyers. However, my husband had an enormous ego and was not sure I was going to be doing this. When I left, I said, 'You're not taking this very seriously,' and his response was, 'Don't be ridiculous. You're

not going to marry. I'll see you next weekend. Have fun.'”

Her love affair with Gould lasted until 1972, when she returned to her husband.

Is it not ironic that the man who was involved with such a complicated instrument, the piano, would also be involved in the simplest instrument: the triangle?

The couple's triangle wasn't a *ménage à trios*, per se, but polyamory could have been a practical workaround solution for Foss and the two men who loved her.

In Gould and Foss's case, their story took place during the free-love era of the 1970s. It would have been the perfect time for the trio to openly explore polyamory.

Here's how the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines polyamory: “Having simultaneous close emotional relationships with two or more individuals, viewed as an alternative to monogamy, especially in regards to matters of sexual fidelity; the custom or practice of engaging in multiple sexual relationships with the knowledge and consent of all partners involved.”

The word was added to the dictionary on September 14, 2006, after seven years of consideration, likely because poly peeps were pushing for it and it was being used more in conversation. Kind of like the word *meh*.

But there's nothing meh about consensual non-monogamy.

According to *Oxford*, polyamory combines the Greek word for “many” with the Latin for “loves.” And it does tend to focus more on the relationship and connection aspect, rather than sex, although sex can play a large role in the relationships.

Polyamory falls under that big umbrella tree (Canucks over 35 will get that reference) of non-monogamy. Branches of non-monogamy include swinging (mostly based on sex where there's a swapping of partners, often in couples) and open relationships or open marriages (where a couple agrees one or both members can have the freedom to be sexual with others).

The key philosophy of polyamory is that it's built on a foundation of love, honesty, trust, transparency, intimacy, equality, open communication, and commitment. Polyamorists reject the view that sexual and relationship exclusivity are necessary for deep, committed, long-term, loving relationships.

Poly relationship structures can look like anything. Think of it as the chart of molecules you had to draw and configure in chemistry class. In polycules — any system of connected non-monogamous relationships — the structure could be as simple as a V, (A is dating both B and C, with their approval, but B and C are not dating each other) or a triangle (A, B, and C are all dating each other), but it

can also get very complex (e.g., A is dating B and C. B is dating A and D. C is dating A, E, and F. F is also dating G).

Sound complicated? Perhaps on paper, but not if you're in the relationship.

See page 38 for a helpful table that breaks down the types of non-monogamy.

THE TYPES OF NON-MONOGRAMY*

Open Relationships	<p>“We can have sex with other people. As long as it’s just sex. No love.”</p> <p>“I’m solo poly and also date casually.”</p>
Relationship Anarchy	<p>“We are in a relationship, but we haven’t explicitly negotiated monogamy, so it’s open.”</p> <p>“I’m RA. My partner is poly. We make it work.”</p> <p>“I negotiate all my relationships, and I live on my own.”</p>
Poly/Mono Relationships	<p>“I’m RA. My partner is monogamous. We make it work.”</p>
Dating Around	<p>“No expectations. Maybe we’ll be partners, maybe we won’t.”</p> <p>“I’m solo poly and also date casually.”</p> <p>“I never specifically said we weren’t exclusive. Never said we were, either.”</p>
Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell	<p>“My husband’s not gay, he just goes to the bathhouse on weekends.”</p> <p>“OK, honey, you guys go do that kinky stuff. I don’t want to hear about it.”</p> <p>“Don’t tell me about it, don’t bring ’em home, don’t fall in love.”</p> <p>“You can have other partners, but I really prefer not to know the details.”</p> <p>“My husband visits a prodomme. I don’t know what they do.”</p>
Commerce	<p>“My boyfriend digs that I’m an escort.”</p> <p>“Yes, Mr. Hefner, I’d love to be part of your harem. Wow, nice mansion!”</p> <p>“We sometimes hire a partner for threesomes.”</p> <p>“My husband, the minister, is not having relations with that male escort ”</p>

male escort.

Cheating	<p>“I visit the brothels when I travel.”</p> <p>“My husband the senator is not having relations with his secretary.”</p> <p>“What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.”</p> <p>“No, seriously, we’re a poly/mono couple. My wife just doesn’t know.”</p>
100 Mile Rule	<p>“We’re monogamous. Except when he’s on the road.”</p> <p>“When my husband’s on deployment, we can fool around.”</p>
Soft Swing	<p>“We like swing clubs and public sex, but only have sex with each other.”</p>
Casual Sex	<p>“I’m too busy for a relationship. So are all my partners.”</p> <p>“I have partners who transition from friends to lovers to friends.”</p>
Swinging	<p>“My wife and I like to hook up at raves.”</p> <p>“Oooh! Key party!”</p> <p>“Dogging! Need I say more?”</p>
BDSM/&D/s	<p>“I am a prodomme.”</p>
Non-Monogamy	<p>“As your Dom, I like sharing you with my friend Jay. He does, too.”</p> <p>“My husband isn’t into BDSM, so I found another partner that is.”</p> <p>“My RA partner is kinky. We make it work.”</p> <p>“BDSM play parties! Need I say more?”</p> <p>“My husband doesn’t go to play parties, but my sub and I like hooking up at them.”</p> <p>“As your Dom, I’ve arranged this gang-bang for you. Have fun!”</p>
Closed-Group Swinging	<p>“We like swinging, but only with Alice and Bob.”</p> <p>“Cuckold fetish! Need I say more?”</p> <p>“You can do D/s stuff with other people, but only if there’s no sex.”</p> <p>“This is my dom, his other sub, her boyfriend, my boyfriend, and our sub. His wife will be by later.”</p> <p>“I like watching someone else dominate my husband.”</p> <p>“As your sub, I like having sex with whoever you tell me</p>

“AS YOUR SON, I LIKE HAVING SEX WITH WHOEVER YOU TELL ME TO.”

Religious/Social Polygamy “My husband died. As his brother, Onan, it is your duty to give me a baby.”

“We are looking for our third to help open our chakras and bring us to a higher spiritual realm.”

“As the leader of this radical new religion of truth, I get a harem.”

“I now pronounce you man and wife and sister-wife.”

“Since the Prophet wills it, we must be married.”

Polyfidelity “I’m bisexual, so I have one of each!”

“We’ve been swinging with Alice and Bob for fifteen years. They almost feel like family.”

Solo Poly “I prefer to live by myself.”

“I’m committed to my partners. We don’t plan to marry.”

“I negotiate all my relationships, and I live on my own.”

“I am self-sufficient, and practice kink with one of my partners.”

Polyamorous Relationships “This is my wife, her boyfriend, my boyfriend, and our girlfriend. Her husband will be joining us later.”

“We finally decided we were in a relationship with Alice and Bob. And why stop there?”

Con Sex “Dragon*Con Room Party! Need I say more?”

Unicorn Polyamory “My husband allows me to have another girlfriend, but I am not allowed to have another man.”

“We are looking for our third to complete our family.”

“You can only be my girlfriend if you agree to my husband’s girlfriend, too.”

* Some of these examples may overlap or intersect with other categories. For a comprehensive map graphic, go to blog.franklinveaux.com/2017/12/an-update-to-the-map-of-non-monogamy. Data used with permission from Franklin Veaux. More info at Morethantwo.com.

Rewind to “caveman” times, when, contrary to our current societal constructs, it was more common for people to form little clusters of intimate communities. “Human beings and our hominid ancestors have spent almost all of the past few million years or so in small, intimate bands in which adults had

several sexual relationships at any given time,” Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá write in *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*, “No group-living nonhuman primate is monogamous, and adultery has been documented in every human culture studied — including those in which fornicators are routinely stoned to death. In light of all of this bloody retribution, it’s hard to see how monogamy comes ‘naturally’ to our species.”

Ryan and Jethá delineate monogamy as being more about property rights than innate sex, beginning with farmers and land ownership. The custom of restricting women to one sexual partner derived from the patriarchal system where a son inherited land and wealth from his father. “Why would so many risk their reputations, families, careers — even presidential legacies — for something that runs against human nature?” they write. “Were monogamy an ancient, evolved trait characteristic of our species, as the standard narrative insists, these ubiquitous transgressions would be infrequent and such horrible enforcement unnecessary. No creature needs to be threatened with death to act in accord with its own nature.”

In ancient Chinese culture, women didn’t have social status and had to obey and rely on their husbands. Even if that husband was dead, she couldn’t remarry. On the flip side, the husband could have many wives and many concubines — and not be held to legal restrictions. The emperor had imperial harems.

Sororate marriage — where a man could also marry his wife’s sisters, sometimes during the same marital ceremony — was common, especially in the Zhou dynasty. A woman having multiple husbands — polyandry — was considered by the Han Chinese as immoral and illegal. However, historic research shows that in mountainous areas of China, polyandry existed and continues to exist today.

In a study about the Inuinnait people, also known as the Copper Inuit, Diamond Jenness (the famous New Zealand-born, Quebec-settled anthropologist and member of the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913–16) indicated that “polygamy was uncommon, partly because males preponderated over females in the population, partly because it was not easy for a hunter to support more than one wife; and polyandry was discouraged because it invariably led to quarrels and murder, thereby instigating new blood feuds.”

And while Mother Nature has done her best to steer us on a course away from monogamy, a good percentage of the human population still sees it as a major route on their life map.

Dealing with the shame and guilt of desiring someone other than your partner, or being forced to choose between multiple loves, is a gut-wrenching process. People tend to put pressure on their one “significant other” to be

everything to them — best friend, confidante, co-parent, lover. They then feel dissatisfied, disappointed, or rejected when that person doesn't measure up.

But there is another way. And it might be right for you.

Often incorrectly confused with term *polygamy* — the practice of having multiple spouses — polyamory can also be called *poly*, *polya*, or *polyam* in its short-forms and is often used as self-identification (as in, “I am poly”). According to *Slate*, the term is intertwined with the rise of feminism but its roots go back to the 1840s in the United States. “Polya” and “am” are concise ways to demarcate *polyamory* from *polygamy* — and also *Polynesian*. Some people also like using the terms *consensual non-monogamy (CNM)* or *multi-linking*.

The stats are hard to track. Many people aren't “out,” and few studies on polyamory provide concrete data. However, most researchers would surmise between 4 and 5 percent of Americans participate in some form of ethical non-monogamy.

Distilling Australian academic Kelly Cookson's research data, American sociologist Elisabeth Sheff finds that “sexually non-monogamous couples in the United States number in the millions. Estimates based on actually trying sexual non-monogamy are around 1.2 to 2.4 million. An estimate based solely on the agreement to allow lovers is around 9.8 million.” That number includes poly couples, swinging couples, gay male couples, and other sexually non-monogamous couples.

In Canada, estimates are roughly the same, at 4 to 5 percent, according to numbers published by the journal *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* in 2012.

In its December 2017 study *Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada*, the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family found that 82.4 percent of its 480 survey respondents agreed that the number of people who identify as polyamorous in Canada is increasing, while 80.9 percent agreed that the number of people involved in polyamorous relationships is increasing.

And if we're gauging the popularity of consensual non-monogamy by Google search hits, *polyamory* was the fourth-most-searched relationship term in 2017.

The same year, dating site OKCupid recognized that polyamory was prevailing amongst its users — who are generally thirty-five or younger — and the website catered to the growing demographic by allowing people to search the site as couples. According to OKCupid's data, 42 percent of its members would consider dating someone in an open or polyamorous relationship.

But how did Canadians get here, and why did polyamory grow to this extent? Turns out that its roots are in the United States. “It's hard to believe, but during the heart of the Victorian era, during a time when chastity was the rule, divorce

was unheard of, and petticoats were unmentionables, the most radical American women renounced monogamy as an instrument of their servility,” wrote *Slate*’s Libby Copeland.

But it wasn’t until spring 1990 that the word *polyamory* made its debut in popular culture. Actually, it wasn’t that expression exactly, but rather *polyamorous*, which was published in an article titled “A Bouquet of Lovers,” written by Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart in *Green Egg* magazine.

According to Wikipedia, there were no other verifiable sources that listed *polyamory* as the term we know today until Jennifer L. Wesp created the Usenet newsgroup alt.polyamory in May 1992.

But polyamory’s earliest roots from the late 1840s to the 1870s can be traced back to an upstate New York Oneida commune that practised “complex marriage.” A Christian minister named John Humphrey Noyes, who was conducting an experiment in promiscuity, ran the commune. The belief was that sex was a kind of worship, and in order to live a life without sin, men and women had to be free to worship — get it on — all over the place with whomever they pleased. In Oneida, the three hundred people who lived there were all considered to be married to one another.

Second World War–era pilots and their wives in the United States introduced the concept of what we know as “swinging,” where “key parties” — the likes of which were portrayed in Ang Lee’s *The Ice Storm* — became common practice, according to Vancouver investigative journalist Terry Gould. Elite pilots and their wives would sleep with each other before the men flew off to fight the Japanese. In his book *The Lifestyle*, Gould interviewed two American researchers, Joan and Dwight Dixon, about this air force ritual. It was understood that these pilots and their wives “shared each other as a kind of tribal bonding ritual, with tacit understanding that the two-thirds of husbands who survived would look after the widows” (*The Polyamorists Next Door*).

By 1953, when the Korean War ended, this ritual “had spread from the air bases to the surrounding suburbs among straight, white-collar professionals,” according to Gould.

In the 1970s, during what esteemed academic and polyamory expert Elisabeth Sheff calls in *The Polyamorists Next Door* the second wave of polyamory, non-monogamy “evolved as a direct result of the sexual revolution and intertwined with ... the bisexual and free love movements. Like other aspects of the polyamorous community, the history of the movement has some points of contention.”

A fringe group in San Francisco called Kerista, founded by a man who called himself Jud the Prophet, consisted of three large group marriages that relied on

rotating sleeping schedules to make sure intimacy was evenly distributed. They were big on ideals of polyfidelity — multiple partners, but closed structures — and intentional communities, even though some labelled it cult-like. The group's 1979 handbook mandated egalitarianism.

During this time, “communes often emphasized the value of intimate relationships, personal growth ... co-operation over competition ... though only a minority of contemporary communes endorsed sexually non-exclusive relationships,” according to Sheff. “Multilateral” group marriage and swinging coexisted with the intentional community movement.

After the AIDS crisis in the 1980s contributed to driving polyamory underground, along came the aforementioned alt.polyamory, which helped build a community.

It also paved the way for the third wave of poly — thanks to the Internet.

In the 1990s, the web helped sexual nonconformists connect. Bisexuals and kinksters who practised BDSM overlapped in communities, both online and in person. The Internet's influence continued to evolve, with many people in forums chatting about their dating experiences and asking advice on jealousy and other poly topics. Polyamory suddenly became accessible with one click. “Where[as] most second wave polyamorists tended to have a more singular identity focused on ‘swapping’ within heterosexual relationships, third wave polys tend toward bi/multi-sexual relationships that involve not only non-monogamy, but sometimes other forms of unconventional sexuality,” Sheff said in her blog post “Three Waves of Non-Monogamy.”

“It's extremely rare to find anyone who has had only one sexual partner for his or her entire life,” wrote trailblazing polyamory advocate Deborah Anapol in her book *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners*. (Anapol's death in 2015 was widely mourned by the North American poly community.) “So the question is not so much whether to love more than one, but rather whether it works better to have multiple partners sequentially or at the same time. There are definitely some people who are far better off taking it one at a time, and there are some situations that cry out for other possibilities.”

In more recent years, polyamory has become a topic in the media, though it's sometimes used as fodder.

From the 2000s onward, HBO's *Big Love*, about a Mormon family in Salt Lake City, and reality TV series *Sister Wives* and *Married and Dating*, brought non-monogamy into the mainstream, though many within the CNM community would like to dissociate polyamory from religious and patriarchal connotations.

In 2009, *Newsweek* speculated whether polyamory was the next sexual revolution. “It's enough to make any monogamist's head spin. But traditionalists

had better get used to it,” reported journalist Jessica Bennett.

Some celebrities have even come out of the poly closet, including British novelist Neil Gaiman and his musician wife, Amanda Palmer, who initially had an open marriage. “For the record, I actually know quite a few people (artists and otherwise) who are in open relationships, but don’t go around broadcasting it. Neither do we,” said Palmer during a Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything) session in 2013. “I don’t really hang with the poly community or go on ‘open marriage’ pride marches. That being said, there aren’t a lot of people trying to oppress our way of doing things. If people showed up with pitchforks on my lawn regularly, doing some parades might start to look more tasty.”

However, Gaiman told the *Times* in December 2017 that while his marriage is “a theoretically open relationship, it’s kind of closed in practice. Neither of us is going to sleep with other people when we’ve got a two-year-old with us; and neither of us is going to sleep with other people when the other can’t because they’ve got a two-year-old with them.”

There has also been tabloid chatter for years that actors Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith are purportedly in an open marriage. Actor Tilda Swinton downplayed rumours that she was in a polyamorous relationship with her boyfriend and the father of her children. Her love life “is not the polyamorous sin marathon that appears in the tabloids,” she told *GQ* writer Zach Baron in a 2014 interview. “There are two men in her life, [John] Byrne, who now lives elsewhere, and [Sandro] Kopp, with whom she shares a home, an arrangement she has in common with millions of other people — but neither is it boring,” the articles states.

The world’s best investor, Warren Buffett, was said to have had another woman in his life other than his (now deceased) wife, who knew and approved of the relationship. In a telephone interview with the *New York Times* in 2006, Buffett’s daughter, Susie Buffett, said, “She has been with my father all these years for all the right reasons. I’m so thankful. She loves him and takes care of him. If Warren didn’t have a cent, she’d be with him.”

Polyamory is often incorrectly lumped in with polygamy — where it’s usually a man who has many wives under his control. In Arizona and Utah, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints presents an ongoing and problematic culture. Its domineering leader, Warren Jeffs, was well publicized as being involved in sexual abuse of underage girls. In Canada, polygamy has also been well documented — especially in the Bountiful, B.C., region, where many Mormon families reside — and has conflicted with existing Canadian laws dating back to 1890, when Mormons settled in the Prairies with their multiple spouses.

It isn't just the Mormon religion that practises polygamy. Under Islamic marital jurisprudence, Muslim men are allowed to practise polygyny — one husband with up to four wives — in accordance with the Quran. However, polyandry — the practice of a wife having more than one husband — is a no-no. Hinduism and Judaism have also practised polygamy.

Canada's historical poly moment came in 2011 when the B.C. Supreme Court distinguished the nuances between polyamory and polygamy when it excluded polyamory from its anti-polygamy laws, provided there was no marriage ceremony. The Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association (CPAA) gained media traction, clarifying consensual non-monogamy's separation from polygamy, which tends to be built on patriarchal values. (See Chapter 13 for more on this case.)

Though Canada's map of polyamory was by and large adopted from the neighbours to the south, the early polyamory groups in British Columbia paved their own way and found their own identity. In Vancouver, Vanpoly took root beginning in September 1998 when its organizer, Kathy, attended a conference for bisexual people in the city; in the program, there were polyamory workshops and a number of people signed up for them. "I was desperate to connect with other people in the Vancouver area who, like me, had more than one sexual-loving relationship," she is quoted as saying on the organization's website. "I discovered that many other people in those workshops felt the same way: they wanted to connect with others interested in the ideas surrounding the polyamorous lifestyle, but there wasn't an avenue for it."

The potential for support and community seemed endless. Intoxicated by that idea, the new friends forged ahead with plans to build their own Vancouver poly community. Since then, the meetings have fluctuated in frequency, location, and attendance. "When our meetings have been empty, it's also given me glimpses into how difficult it is to live the passionate life when you feel you stand alone," she said.

Kathy, now fifty, no longer identifies as poly, although she is in a long-term relationship with a person who is. She's still living in B.C., in a suburb of Vancouver. She said she created Vanpoly as a social group, but that she wasn't very interested in the outreach and advocacy component. There was also some bad behaviour in the group — "one person involved in the leadership leveraged their position to enhance their sexual access to newcomers" — that turned her off. "In the early days, it seemed to me that people wanted to marry polyamory to other subcultures they were involved in — naked bike riding, sci-fi fandom, Wicca. I don't care for that aspect. I don't think participation with X has to go hand-in-hand with poly," she said.

She credits one person among the small group of leaders who grew the advocacy aspect “in the early days” of the Vancouver group with the blossoming of a poly resources network across Canada: Zoe Duff. Duff, the head of the CPAA, moved from Toronto to the West Coast in the late 1990s. She said she was able to access various meet-up groups via mIRC and ICQ — early online chat platforms — using her desktop computer. “When I got here, I had to use a hairdryer to give my computer a ‘blow job’ to get it to start because the Victoria climate was too damp,” she said, laughing. “There was also Second Life and IMVU, where you were an avatar and got to meet people. Each of those would have its own poly section.”

While living in Victoria in 2000, she began placing ads in the local alt paper for monthly coffee meets. By 2005, there was enough interest to support a workshop weekend highlighting sessions on a number of alternative lifestyles, including BDSM, swinging, and polyamory. “I was scared to death to run ads about it. I thought I’d get picketed,” she said.

In 2013, following the media coverage of the B.C. Supreme Court case, the CPAA hosted the first PolyCon in Vancouver with participants coming from across Canada, the U.S., and Europe. Three years later, the Victoria poly community hosted a live and online PolyCon with sessions broadcast to YouTube.

Fast-forward to 2018. Enter “polyamory” in your Facebook search bar and the results will reveal over a hundred groups from all over the world. Some groups are quite large, such as U.S.-based Polyamory Discussion, with more than 33,000 members — a far cry from just two decades ago.

According to the CPAA’s website, there are nearly a hundred poly support or community groups (online or in-person) listed throughout Canada and these are sprinkled across the country, with resources available in most of the provinces/territories. Some of these groups want to be recognized with legitimate status in the public eye. Polyamory Edmonton, for example, has been seeking non-profit status since 2014. “We [want] to be a non-profit/society so that we can better support our community, to be organized and accountable, [and] have a board of members committed to grow the poly community in Edmonton,” said founder Alyson Sildra. “Non-profit/society status is the first step to showing our community, and everyone, that polyamory and ethical non-monogamy is an identity. It is not merely a lifestyle that is optional; it is how we live and how we love.”

In 2015, a Facebook employee who identifies as polyamorous ran an algorithm and found that the most (unofficially) active poly city in the world per capita was Nanaimo, B.C., located on the east coast of Vancouver Island

(population 92,004, according to the 2016 census). “Might not be true now,” said Ivo Beitsma, an admin of the Nanaimo Poly 101 group, which boasts a membership of 500, “but I liked growing the community on social media.”

In Canada’s “centre of the universe,” the Polyamory Toronto Meetup group formed in 2011. There are now more than 1,700 members, but lead organizer Eva Dusome said she’s seen well over 3,000 members over the years, active and not.

Their meet-ups happen at pubs, games nights, or “Chat and Learn” events at the local community centre in the gay village where groups discuss relevant topics such as consent within polyamory, emotional resilience, challenging insecurities, raising children within polyamorous configurations, and polyamory for people over forty-five. “Because polyamory can be stigmatized, we wanted to create events where people could come with all of their partners and be comfortable; that’s a rarity for some people. They’re not able to go to mainstream social events with all of their partners,” said Dusome.

Open Toronto, an online site for poly/open resources, sent a newsletter to its subscribers in March 2018 announcing it was launching a new project called Healthy Open Relationships, which “will be a combination of comprehensive courses, online discussion forums for community support, coaching calls, and everything else you need to overcome the obstacles in your life,” going beyond the standard advice given to people to read books, join a local community, try online dating, and seek therapy.



In June 2016, Blossom herself created what some in the poly community called a bit of a “dumpster fire.” In a video on her YouTube channel, *Big Bang Theory* actress and real-life neuroscientist Mayim Bialik revealed that she does not “get” open relationships and polyamory, particularly when it comes to women. Because — science. “People in open relationships are exchanging one cultural construct for another — that of equating male and female sexuality,” she lectured “But as a scientist, I’m here to ruin everybody’s good time and to tell you that the assumption that male and female sexuality can be treated pretty much the same is in direct opposition to our biology. It goes against millions of years of evolution.”

Bialik says the male body produces millions of sperm every day whereas a woman produces only one egg per month. “For all of evolution, women have carefully selected a mate. And their hormones and physiology favour careful selection. Men don’t need to be as selective because they are constantly able to

have sex. Biologically, not just colloquially.”

Acknowledging that “monogamy is a cultural construct,” she goes on to repeatedly assure the viewer that, yes, “sex is fun.” But how can one juggle multiple partners, because she rarely has time for her husband? “I don’t get that. One relationship seems like enough!”

The biased opinion purports that biology is the limit, but she throws in her own misconceptions, including the contention that people in open relationships are more prone to getting STIs because “people aren’t protecting themselves. It’s tremendously heartbreaking when a relationship is in trouble, but it would never occur to me to look for someone else to love or have sex with if the relationship I was in wasn’t working,” she says.

More gas on the dumpster fire. (To her credit, she later apologized for her remarks after tons of poly people from all walks of life criticized her comments and stereotypical misconceptions.) When I told my partner Adam about this, he replied: “Like belly buttons, everyone has a theory.”

“She’s an actual scientist. But biology is only part of the human picture,” I responded.

“It’s complicated,” he said.

And just like that, he simplified it. Relationships and humans are complicated and can’t be reduced to mere science.

Whether or not polyamory is a choice or inherent in our genes is still contestable. But according to a 2017 *Global News* report, research points to how such “flawed assumptions” about the standard of a successful relationship are based on monogamous pairing. “Monogamy is a standard that we all think is appropriate, and infidelity is uniformly condemned. Few people think it’s acceptable to have multiple partners in a committed relationship,” says Lucia O’Sullivan, psychology professor at the University of New Brunswick, and sexuality and relationships researcher. “But the amazing paradox [is] the high rates of infidelity.”

In a 2015 study published in the *Journal of Sex Research*, O’Sullivan and study co-author Ashley Thompson found that 30 to 75 percent of men and 20 to 68 percent of women in the Western world have experienced some sort of infidelity. (The reason the numbers are so broad is because people report infidelity differently: for some, it means sexual intercourse; for others, it could be watching pornography or having a celebrity crush.) O’Sullivan says that when they looked at the numbers of infidelities committed through standard sexual intercourse, the rates were high. “I just think it’s strange how many more people are threatened by that idea [of non-monogamy] than the possibility of cheating,” she said. “Which is horrifying, because cheating not only violates trust, but it

causes all kinds of discord, secrecy, painful interactions, because they're almost always exposed at some point. I think it's awful we won't embrace an honest appraisal of our tendency to want other people just by virtue of a relationship."

So, how did we settle on this one-partner structure, besides land trade?

In his podcast *The Real Reality*, Toronto clinical psychologist Dr. Oren Amitay says he hasn't seen any consistent evolutionary or anthropological evidence to suggest we are meant to be monogamous. On the other hand, he argues, it made evolutionary sense to be monogamous in the caveman days, so two people could raise a child. If a guy is depositing his seed all over the countryside, he can't be everywhere. How is he, or the women he impregnates, going to raise their kids to at least an age when they can achieve the ultimate goal of evolution: passing DNA down through the ages?

"Does it make evolutionary sense to impregnate someone else's partner?" asks Dr. Amitay. "Some people argue that the chances of getting killed — if you're smart — are low. Even if you do eventually get killed after making ten kids who are raised by other couples, you've replicated your genes better than if you were to have children with only one monogamous partner."

However, Dr. Amitay adds, others say the risk of such mating strategies is too great, especially when it leads to behaviours where murder is a likely consequence.

Dr. Amitay says that whenever the question of monogamy versus polygamy is brought up, it's usually centred around polygyny — one man, a bunch of wives. But it's polyandry that favours females: one woman, many husbands. "Apparently, if you have two [species of] birds of the same size in the same area, where one species is monogamous and the other is polyandrous, the polyandrous birds' territory is larger. Their nests are definitely bigger, their eggs are bigger, and they have more babies who are healthier because they have four or five guys working for them instead of only one. If you look at mating patterns in animals, you could argue that we were meant to be non-monogamous."

If we adapt the animal kingdom to patterns of humans, monogamy isn't natural for us, either, Dr. Amitay believes. Monogamy just became a custom. Before the 1700s, Spain, England, and France exported more puritanical ways of living. So why is the pendulum swinging back to a more frank discussion on non-monogamy? According to Dr. Amitay, there's one root cause: entitled Millennials. "So many of them believe they deserve and should be able to get everything they want. Tinder hooking-up culture has become the norm, and if you think about it, it promotes a non-monogamous lifestyle, although a lot of it also reflects an aversion to commitment," he says. "Polyamory, in its truest sense, is the antithesis of hooking up, because it is all about openly and honestly

expressing your needs and desires, and having your partner(s) hear, respect, and meet them. With hooking up, one person usually ends up wanting more, but they feel like they can't express this, because that goes against the 'agreement' of their relationship. That's the sad thing: hooking up or friends with benefits technically fall under 'open relationships,' and these maladaptive systems are far more common than outright polyamorous relationships. When done right, polyamory can be the healthiest type of relationship — if you can handle it."

American syndicated sex columnist Dan Savage pointed out at a 2017 Curious Minds talk in Toronto that "monogamy was originally about controlling women" and didn't apply to men until the 1930s. As the culture became more egalitarian, instead of extending to women the same licence men had, society did the opposite. Savage said women were not very good at monogamy and then were "terrorized and socialized" to be the guardians of the monogamous way. By the same hand, social enforcement of monogamy on men has "resulted in disaster for heterosexual relationships." According to Savage, the claim that non-monogamy is "*the end* ... the worst thing that can ever possibly happen to you, that's fucking crazy."

In a documentary featurette for *Vox*, Christopher Ryan challenges us to look at polyamorous and monogamous relationships in yet another way. "Monogamy is like vegetarianism. You can choose to be a vegetarian. And that can be healthy and it can be ethical; it can be a wonderful decision. But because you've chosen to be a vegetarian doesn't mean bacon stops smelling good."

3

Shannon, Denis, Elyssa, and Chris

ALBERTA

Love is friendship that has caught fire. It is quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing and forgiving. It is loyalty through good and bad times. It settles for less than perfection and makes allowances for human weaknesses.

— Ann Landers

WHEN SHANNON MCCONNELL-OUELLETTE first married her husband, Denis, she thought she had her whole life mapped out. She envisioned raising children, living in the Alberta countryside, pursuing a career in writing, taking a few vacations, growing old with her husband, and becoming a grandma. That plan eventually became pretty damn boring.

Shannon's poly journey began four years ago, in her twenty-third year of marriage to Denis.

The two had met in 1990 at a party in Edmonton when Shannon was sixteen and Denis was nineteen. Denis's roommate had thrown the bash to celebrate his six-month anniversary with Shannon's cousin.

Denis was good-looking, older, and confident. He was downstairs in the basement, "measuring the time of actual songs" so he could make a mixtape. "Denis was going to leave. Had no intention of staying. But he saw me and was interested. I was definitely interested. We spent most of the night talking."

Deep in conversation after a few beers, Denis made a move and reached for Shannon's fingers. "That was twenty-seven years ago," Denis said. "My two strongest memories of that night would be taking hold of her hand and watching her face. We were on the sofa later and watching television, and I remember turning to look at her and she was already looking at me. It was like a Disney moment."

Shannon became pregnant four months into their relationship. They decided to keep the baby and make a go of it. In May 1994, they got married, but several months in, both cheated on the other. “While part of it was retribution for Denis cheating, I was wanting more sexual experience,” said Shannon. “I had attractions, but I was also young and dumb and looking for someone else to make me happy. I think we had differing sex drives. I wasn’t very adventurous sexually. I was waiting for the magic penis to help me have a wonderful sex life and to live happily ever after.”

The cheating continued for several more years before they both agreed to forgive and move on together, monogamously. And for seventeen years, it worked. Kind of. Shannon said she had realized that no one loved her the way Denis did. She was scared of coming close to losing him and dedicated herself to their marriage. She dared not even engage in an “inappropriate” conversation online or in person, but still fantasized about being with other men.

The couple raised two daughters together. Their lives were stable, but there was always a longing for more.

In 2013, Shannon picked up the book *Sex at Dawn*, and as she thumbed through the pages, she saw a different way to look at relationships besides two people in a closed marriage.

“As a teenager, I hated the assumption that when a boy asked me out on a date, we were automatically going steady. I went along with it, because if you didn’t, then you were [labelled] a slut. I wanted it to be like Betty and Veronica — I wanted to be able to date.”

After a search on Dr. Google, Shannon found a word to encapsulate how she felt. She had heard of swingers and open marriages, but *polyamory* felt like an instant fit. Somewhat nervously and casually, she approached her husband about opening up their relationship and was slightly taken aback when he was gung-ho about the idea. The last skeletons came out of the closet. She found out he had cheated during the last stretch of their marriage.

While it might have looked like opening up their marriage would mean divorce, non-monogamy was actually something they both intuitively desired. However, the unknown left them both uneasy.

“It gave us an opportunity to lay bare what had occurred and then to come clean with each other with what exactly we wanted,” said Denis. “Those few weeks of discussions revealed how we had hurt each other and had eroded the platform of trust that we’d worked on for the previous twenty years.”

“It helped us be honest about sex,” Shannon agreed. “It improved our sex lives. If he cheated *now*, my marriage would be over. There is no reason to cheat.”

Denis was the first to jump in.

“He told me he met someone interesting to him when he was at work,” Shannon said. “I told him, ‘If you want to explore a connection with this person, that’s okay, but if I decide to start exploring, I need you to know that if you get uncomfortable, I’m not just going to throw someone away.’”

Denis was on board.

“The tenderness of our relationship at that point was a pretty strong gravity for me,” he said. “One of the golden assumptions everyone makes is that something’s lacking. It’s not about missing something. It’s more about the variety.”

Shannon spent the next few months researching “how to do polyamory” while Denis — a shoot-first, ask-questions-later kind of guy — immediately struck up a relationship with Elyssa Martin, whom he had met while working in the oil sector.

Shannon, in contrast, was more deliberate and cautious and wanted to see the horizon clearly before walking toward it. She also had a sense that her husband wasn’t her property. “And clinging tightly to him wasn’t going to change that,” she said.

For Denis, he compared his first discovery of poly — though, to him, “relationship fluid” is a more accurate description — to having been locked in a room while the world tells you there’s only one door. “No matter how hard you struggle with one door, all of a sudden, someone opens a door you never even saw was in the room.”

He met Elyssa through a person at work in Hinton, Alberta — about 670 kilometres away from his home with Shannon in St. Lina — when she was camping near the gas plant he was responsible for, a few kilometres away. “What attracted me to her would be her laugh, but also the sense of self and autonomy she demonstrated. She had a legitimate opinion and something to share, but she wasn’t trying to impress herself upon me. There was no facade.”

Meanwhile, Shannon met Chris, who hails from the United Kingdom, online. When they connected, he was working on contract in Fort McMurray, Alberta.

Fresh from a breakup, Chris didn’t take things too seriously at first, and neither did Shannon. Then his contract in Canada was extended by an additional six months. Three or four months in, the couple was already thinking long term, but his job sent him back to England.

Shannon decided to take her daughter, who was being home-schooled, to the U.K. to see whether living day-to-day with Chris was a real possibility. They stayed with him for four and a half months and Shannon was already plotting her long-term future with him.

“It was really important for me that Chris knew the relationship wasn’t secondary to me and that he understood that he really did have a place of importance for me and my family, and that the people in my life were willing to prioritize,” she said.

Denis and Shannon — both in what were becoming serious commitments to their other partners — decided to come out to their kids.

“I realized that I had to explain why I was doing things away from home or else lie to people,” said Shannon. “And if Chris was going to come to my house, I would have to lie to my children about who he was, and I was never going to lie to my kids, that just wasn’t something I could do.

“My youngest daughter really took it in stride — she really didn’t miss a beat. She’s like, ‘What’s the problem with more people to love?’ My oldest daughter was a bit more nervous, more so about there being drama for her sister, because she had gone through my husband and I separating when she was young, and that was really difficult for her,” Shannon added.

“We set some boundaries with them and let them know that we weren’t really looking for their approval, but were really going to make sure that we were cautious about this and that we hadn’t been foolhardy,” she said.

Coming out to their respective parents didn’t go as smoothly.

Denis’s mother was initially supportive, but has found it stressful to navigate reactions from other family members.

Shannon’s dad was cool with it. Her mother, in contrast, was very taken aback.

“It was very hard for her to understand and it opened up a huge rift between her and I,” she acknowledged. “I really, to this day, don’t believe it was about my mom being intolerant or a bigot. It was her stuff from her own marriage, her own past. We didn’t speak. She went to a court and tried to file a [parental rights] report of some kind.”

After three years of dead air, Shannon received a call from her father.

Her mom was in the hospital, after a stroke.

“I did see her right at the end, and we had a conversation and kind of made peace, but it was really hard to go those three years [without talking],” she said. At one point, she had people telling her she needed to come home from a trip to England and take care of her mother.

While her mother was on her deathbed, Shannon mustered up the courage to tell her she had been a good daughter and she didn’t deserve the rejection. Her mother acknowledged it.

“I knew my mom loved me, I knew my dad loved me. [The rift] was *really* about my choice to do something different than my mom and she didn’t

understand. Everyone would get a second chance, but she didn't agree with my lifestyle and so I get tossed away? That was really hard for me to swallow."

The rest of Shannon's family were equally unsupportive.

"There was all this concern for my younger daughter, and her 'safety' in this situation," she said. "The people who yelled the loudest were the ones that cut us out of their lives and never stuck around to see if anything bad was happening. They made the decision ahead of time and they just judged. People I loved suddenly didn't want a relationship with me because of this."

Recently, Shannon and her father began mending their relationship.

Denis's mother, on the other hand, didn't really have too much of a problem with their lifestyle, but a stressful situation arose when Shannon agreed to a CBC interview in 2016. In the story, she contemplates whether divorcing her husband might be a possibility in order to marry Chris and sponsor him into Canada. The story aired coast to coast and gossip arose in their tiny rural town.

"I don't think my mother really gives a shit one way or the other," said Denis. "She loves us but she's also tired of fielding questions and she doesn't see a way out of it."

"The thing about poly is it really makes you think about the quality of your relationships," added Shannon. "You start to look at how you spend your time, and you realize you put a lot of energy toward people who don't give you the same back in return. And you start evaluating the relationships you have."



Elyssa had been living in Denis and Shannon's home for eighteen months now.

Elyssa has a basement suite, and she and Shannon alternate nights with Denis at home. Elyssa and Shannon get along as metamours — the partners of a partner — but they don't necessarily have chemistry or things in common. Chris and Denis, on the other hand, do.

Between the four of them, here's what the structure looks like: Denis and Elyssa are in a relationship. Elyssa has another partner. Denis and Shannon are married. Shannon and Elyssa are not in a sexual relationship together. Shannon and Chris are in a closed relationship together, "but that's more Chris than me," she said. Chris and Elyssa are telemours — the partners of metamours.

If you visualize it on paper, it kind of looks a bit like two Vs or one W. There is no hierarchy — no primaries or secondaries.

"I'm not interested in seeing all the world and doing lots of different things. That's one of the things [Denis] and Elyssa have in common — she's much more adventurous than I am," said Shannon.

She said the connection between Chris and Denis is warmer than the one she shares with Elyssa.

Shannon said she wrote Elyssa a letter indicating she'd respect and support their relationship and that she wasn't interested in ruining it. Meanwhile, Elyssa said Shannon is very different than any other person she's ever known. "We can very easily live together and negotiate and understand each other more now than ever before" she said. "We've got a bit of a system going and it works pretty well. We have to be mindful."

Denis said he's noticed a great spring of maturity with Elyssa since she's moved in, despite there being a significant age gap between them. "I end up in this situation where I watch my two partners leap at the same time," he said.

When Chris drove down from Fort McMurray to meet Denis for the first time, they met at the family home, where they chatted over drinks and a roaring bonfire. Shannon was relieved when her husband gave her and Chris some alone time.

"That weekend, the first time I heard Shannon and Chris making love — that was strong. Not so strong that I cried or that I was distraught," Denis said. "I was a bit overwhelmed for the first five minutes. Then I got curious about the sounds she made and the sounds he made, and then imagination fills in the gap. 'What do you think they're doing? She definitely enjoyed that. He definitely enjoyed that. Sounded like they might have broke the bed there.'"

He laughed.

Even though he struggled, he said he was forever changed after that weekend.

The male metamours' camaraderie thrived so much that Denis stopped in England and spent a long weekend with Chris on his way back from his job in Africa. In a lot of ways, Denis appreciates having Chris around because Denis is much more of a risk-taker and globetrotter. It's comforting knowing his wife has Chris as a secure base.

Chris said he and Denis have always gotten along. He sees Denis as a bubbly character who wears his curiosity on his sleeve. Denis has given Chris a few coaching tips about how to be around Shannon and vice versa.

"I regarded Denis as having been very generous toward me in allowing me to take his space in the bedroom on the weekends when I was able to come and see Shannon," he said. "In my view at that time, he didn't have to be so good about that. I now understand that Shannon was never Denis's to give. She wasn't 'owned' by him — I'm sure, however, a lot of monogamous couples hold the ownership mindset."

Chris considers maintaining and investing in a long-distance relationship the biggest challenge. He and Shannon have been lucky to be able to find the time

and money to spend four or five months of each year together — she will go over to the U.K. for several weeks at a time and Chris saves all his vacation time so he can also have six weeks a year in Canada.

“Messenger or Skype has been our lifeline when we’ve been apart, and it has surprised me how much we’ve been able to speak every day and to maintain an excellent connection with each other in all senses except the physical one,” said Chris.

There are many benefits to the relationship, which don’t really have to do with polyamory, Chris explained. “Shannon is an amazing, wonderful, talented, intelligent, beautiful lady with a kind heart and a sensitive soul. I love her very much.”

MONO/POLY/MONO

Despite discovering polyamory, Shannon has found herself facing familiar challenging restrictions, just as she had when she and Denis first got married.

Chris is cool with Denis but doesn’t feel comfortable with Shannon dating other men outside their V.

At times, when she is by herself for a month because Denis is overseas working in the African oil fields and Chris is in the U.K., she feels the mounting pressure of this boundary. She’s not looking for another full-time relationship, but needs to feel intimacy and go on dates and have sex. But it’s tricky, because her closest polyamorous friends in Edmonton are two hours away.

“I worry over time that resentment may build up with Chris, but he’s just not willing to do the work to accept other people,” she said. “At the same time, being more open could just cause a lot more instability for my children and for what’s working right now. After three and a half years with Chris, I would choose him and fight very hard to keep it. But it pisses me off. Why did I leave monogamy just to settle into a relationship with somebody who doesn’t accept that aspect of me?”

Chris acknowledges the friction. “My concern was that Shannon would fall in love with another person and that I would end up with less of her time,” he said. “There was jealousy, too, but I think that I could cope with that better than the thought of no longer being Shannon’s main focus.”

They have both tried on a few occasions to cultivate other relationships, but Chris found it virtually impossible not to prioritize Shannon over anyone new and found himself talking about her almost all of the time. “I have a lady with whom I could have a no-strings-attached relationship if I so choose, but sex for

sex's sake isn't wildly attractive for me — it's pretty hollow compared to what I have with Shannon," he said.

However, he does recognize her need for companionship. "I think that our age difference may have some bearing on the way that we view this situation," explained Chris, who at fifty-four, is twice divorced. "I've seen enough elsewhere for me to feel that 'this is it!' and I don't need another relationship. I'm ready to spend the rest of my life with Shannon just as soon as my work and her family commitments are behind us and quietly enjoy my senior years together."

For now, they have a form of truce.

"I don't want Shannon to embark on new relationships and she doesn't want to do anything that risks our relationship," he said. "I do not control or own Shannon and have said to her that she is free to do whatever she will, but I have also felt it necessary to point out that other relationships are likely to be too hard on my heart and would take something away from what we have. It's up to Shannon and I will respect whatever she chooses. But I might not be able to be there for her if she does choose to take on other people."

FUTURE ISLANDS

Despite the speed bumps, the future looks bright for the polycule. There are some tentative plans on paper with nothing set in stone, because with polyamory, there is constant change mixed in with some stability. (In a sense, the same can be said of monogamous marriages.)

Elyssa wants to purchase property. Chris wants to work until his daughter is finished university and doesn't really have an interest in relocating to Canada, Shannon said. Once he is retired, Chris and Shannon hope to split their time between the U.K. and Canada.

"Maybe as we're aging and our health deteriorates, that could be an issue, but right now, financially, it makes sense for us," said Shannon. "We make plans, we have a vision, we communicate, we talk, and we're open to the possibility that it could look very different than it does now."

"I haven't mentioned Denis in any of this future planning, not because I exclude him from it, but rather I simply don't know what he will be wanting to do in the future," said Chris. "I can envisage a situation where Shannon, Denis, and I are all living under one roof with Shannon sharing her affections. If that works for Denis and it's what Shannon wants to do, then I'm ready to participate with a happy heart."

Shannon warns those new to polyamory not to make too many rules — and to embrace the discomfort and fear. Poly is perceived to be a Garden of Eden that will fix things or an inherently better way of being, neither of which is true.

“It fixes nothing. In some ways, it’s got some really great rewards, and in other ways, it’s got some really strong difficulties,” she admits. “The idea that you may be happier in poly is not necessarily accurate. That is the hardest part — doing poly without a lot of understanding in the world around you.”

She recommends people do as much research as possible in order to empathize with metamours and learn to diffuse situations with open discussions as they come up. “The emotions in the situation, if you’re not prepared for them, can be overwhelming,” she said. “Jealousy wasn’t really the biggest issue for [Denis and me]. It was a blip — maybe not for our partners — but it wasn’t an issue, because I think we weathered our infidelity before. It’s okay to face it head-on.”

NOT SO MUCH A COUPLE AS TWO STRONGER INDIVIDUALS

Four years into non-monogamy, Shannon said that as risky as it was to open her and Denis’s marriage to the unknown, it has allowed them to get to know themselves as people again.

“We have become stronger individuals. We are less a couple now and more two people who have loved each other for a long time and choose to keep loving each other. There’s less taken for granted. Every day, you choose to be together rather than in monogamy, where ‘we’re stuck together,’” she said.

“I thought I knew everything about my husband after twenty-three years of being with him. I didn’t know he, too, wanted variety and novelty. We never knew that about each other.”

Chris said that, before, he couldn’t have imagined sharing his partner with another man.

“I think that Shannon and Denis are special people and, if anyone could make sharing work, then they can,” he said. “It’s about the people rather than polyamory. It’s more about the challenges of a long-distance relationship than about the challenges of polyamory.”

Shannon and Denis often ponder whether they can go back to a monogamous marriage. Denis knows that if someone presented him with an ultimatum to close the relationship, he would walk away because autonomy is that important to him.

“All of us are constantly evolving,” said Denis. “Polyamory is evolution,

squared. And it's always firing on all levels. Or — you're just not doing it right.”

Shannon is relieved to be on a different path now. Four years into opening up her marriage, life is anything but predictable.

4

Blair and Karen

MANITOBA

I love my kids as individuals, not as a herd, and I do have a herd of children: I have seven kids.

— Steven Spielberg

BLAIR'S POLYAMOROUS LIFE looks the same as any so-called normal family.

He lives in a small community near Winnipeg. For the past decade, his household has consisted of his partner Karen and her husband, along with their four kids, a dog, and plenty of cats.

Not surprisingly, it's a busy place.

"About ninety-nine percent of what goes on in this household goes on in every household," he said. "That's why mentioning the cats and dog is important. We do all the same things everyone else does, because sometimes, people think poly (families) are really weird."

In reality, they face all the challenges of mainstream families: getting kids from place to place, keeping them on track in school, paying bills, and budgeting.

Blair, fifty-six, has known Karen, forty-six, for a long time as friends. His ex, in spite of opening the marriage herself prior to his relationship with Karen, suffered from ever-increasing insecurity, and the marriage eventually self-destructed.

"My ex and I had a poly relationship already. She was dating. In retrospect, it was not handled particularly well, having been unilateral on her part at the start, and we didn't have any guideposts about how to do it. We hadn't actually heard of poly yet," he explained. "When Karen and I realized we had strong feelings for each other, we already had an idea that it could be done. That's when I

discovered that there was a whole world of poly out there. Karen also knew another poly group ... so we had some models of what was possible.”

A year after his marriage ended, Blair moved in with Karen and her husband in a closed V, along with his daughters, who were in their twenties. Karen and her husband’s teen kids also live with them.

“Moving in together was pretty non-threatening to the kids, because they already knew each other. They liked the grown-ups, so [I] told them, ‘We’re going to move in’ and we did,” he said. “We built a space in the basement for the girls, and there was a lot of fine-tuning of who does what and when. Like any family, there are collisions, but it was good.”

Coming out to the kids was a very gradual thing because at the time, Karen’s youngest boy was only four or five years old. Surprisingly, as the years went on, Blair’s daughters’ friends figured out “something was going on” even before his girls did. Still, it ended up not being a big deal, he said. “They were like, ‘Okay ... What do you want to play on Xbox now?’ You know what I mean? We didn’t force anything on the kids in terms of calling each other brother or sister, we just called each other ‘housemates’ and all of a sudden, they were coming home saying ‘brothers and sisters.’ And they still do. That was really cool.”

Karen added, “When my youngest was in kindergarten, Blair went to pick him up at school, and a little friend asked my son, ‘Who’s that?’ indicating Blair. His immediate reply was ‘That’s my sister’s dad.’”

Having the kids exposed to their V has allowed them to learn alternative ways to love, that monogamy doesn’t have to be the only way that long-term, committed relationships are handled. “They’re learning about communicating well and owning your own shit better than a lot of other kids would, because we [as their parents] had to do that work,” he said.

Time management and money are still major focuses for this family. Google Calendar is absolutely critical to keep track of where everyone is going and what they are doing.

“We puzzled for ages over managing and tracking money. It’s a tough thing, as it is in every relationship — how do we make this work when we have all these kids?” Blair said. Karen explained it further: “The challenges were initially with keeping track of who owed whom what part of what expense, and that consumed a ridiculous amount of time, until we decided we were in this for the long term and merged all of our finances. Now, we have one bank account, one credit card, and three people who have remarkably similar priorities and approaches to money. Considering how often marriages break down over money, I think we’re lucky.”

The three wanted to make sure legal issues were resolved way ahead of time:

What would happen if two people die? What would happen to the house and the cars and the bank accounts? All have an answer written down on paper.

“We’re all power of attorney for each other and we have shared title on the property and made sure our life insurance was lined up,” said Blair. “We wanted to make sure that our intentions regarding guardianship were clear to avoid any legal entanglement.”

Karen added, “As the kids grow older, we adjust guardianship to survivorship, ensuring that all four adult children will share equally in our collective estate once all of us have passed. I think the kids fully understand the interdependence of our relationship, and they observe us saving and planning for a future together.”

But some things — such as merging health insurance or contributing to spousal RRSPs — are still out of reach, as those are luxuries reserved for two legally married or common-law people under current policies and laws in Canada.

“Anything we could get three names on, we made sure to,” said Blair. “Everything is blended as much as the law would allow. There are some lines you can’t cross. Legal systems tend to catch up to reality ... eventually. It’ll be a big shakeup. How will the insurance companies deal with that?”

The relationship between Blair, his metamour, and Karen became comfortable quite quickly. Early on, they faced some jealousy and confusion about how to address sleeping arrangements, but these were handled with the full spectrum of the tools of healthy and honest communication with great success, Blair said.

And there has been a real sense of goodwill and altruism.

“For me, when I know my partners are secure, I’m secure. The things that rock their world, rock your world, because you’re so intertwined,” said Blair.

Blair said he takes comfort in their collective financial stability and commitment to living productively. In addition, it’s been helpful that two people out of the three could go away for a weekend or longer, knowing there would be a person to take care of the kids, pets, and house while they were away. Because of flexible work schedules, the kids have always had someone around for them.

Something that did pleasantly surprise Blair is the amount of acceptance from his community, despite living in a smaller town on the outskirts of a big city. “I think, over time, as we’ve gotten more relaxed, I’ve found a huge amount of acceptance from people. Like, a surprising amount,” he said. “The schools have been great. They did not badmouth us. If I went over to pick up one of the kids, no problem. I got involved in school programs and they were really good about it.”

Karen sometimes wonders if that's really the case.

"Truthfully, I still wonder what people say when we're not around and tend to assume the worst. The schools have at least shown real tolerance, but our peer group, not so much ... we suffered a lot of ostracism when Blair and his ex split up," she said. "It was really awful for a long time, and I don't really trust anyone anymore. I'm grateful for the schools and for close friends who stuck by us and held on to us through the worst times. Honestly, though, I have spent many of the last ten years feeling very much alone. It would not be fair to pretend that it's all been great, because it hasn't."

Blair, while sensitive and sympathetic to Karen's perspective and experience, contends that the ostracism was more about the divorce than about polyamory itself. "Poly gave my ex leverage in her efforts to turn people against us, which really is evidence that a stigma exists," he said.

The three of them are looking at possibilities for where to move to next — and also where to retire. "How do we get all these kids out into the world? That's a big job for all of us," said Blair. "Get them out safely and happily. In that respect, it's not much different than most married couples."

5

The Struggle Is Real: How People Arrive at Polyamory, Misconceptions, and Relationship Challenges

I knew I could write infinitely about relationships. That's the most beautiful, most confusing, most rewarding, most heartbreaking thing in our lives — and not just romantic relationships: that's all relationships.

— Spike Jonze

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE.

That may be a catchy Beatles lyric and a nice platitude, but it's not necessarily rational and realistic for any relationship.

While love is the base, there are so many other things that factor into how human beings interact with one another and what a recipe for good, healthy relationships is.

Blogger Mark Manson, author of *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, references John Lennon's hit song "All You Need Is Love" in a post called "Love Is Not Enough."

"[Lennon] also beat both of his wives, abandoned one of his children, verbally abused his gay Jewish manager with homophobic and anti-Semitic slurs and once had a camera crew film him lying naked in bed for an entire day," Manson wrote. "In our culture, many of us idealize love. We see it as some lofty cure-all for all of life's problems. Our movies, our stories and our history all celebrate it as life's ultimate goal, the final solution for all of our pain and struggle. And because we idealize love, we overestimate it. As a result, our relationships pay a price."

While there is an abundance of love in polyamorous relationships — love is infinite, after all — you need more than warm and fuzzy feelings to make multiple relationships work simultaneously and efficiently. Some of those challenges are unique to poly relationships and can be daunting. Polyamory is *not* a cakewalk, nor is it for the faint of heart.

And yet, for the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who have embraced

polyamory, it can be a wondrous and unanticipated voyage into uncharted emotional territory.



How people discover, practise, and stick with polyamory is as varied as the individuals involved in the relationships. Some feel they were always polyamorous, that it's just ingrained in their fabric. Others may not feel as if something is missing from their monogamous relationships, but crave variety or feel unhappy within the limits of monogamy. Some thrive by developing deep emotional connections with a number of people; it's just their nature. Others like the autonomy. And some people just fall in love with more than one person at a time. There's no right or wrong reason. And that's what's so remarkable — that polyamory is responsive and fluid.

Damien, a thirty-eight-year-old man from Northern Ontario, said he and his wife have always had elements of non-monogamy within their relationship, even before they got married. He ponders whether his parents — immigrants from Croatia — and their more liberal European views had something to do with it. But even at a young age, non-monogamy didn't seem like a big deal to him. "I definitely think it's in my DNA. I think that the reason I've always felt this way, in addition to the nature versus nurture thing, is monogamy never made any sense to me. No matter how in love you are with somebody, the reality is that you're still physically capable of responding to somebody you're attracted to."

For him, when he sees his wife with other men, it's a turn-on. "It's very arousing for ... my wife to see me with other women or to listen in the next room, and my biggest fetish — if it is a fetish — is seeing her with other men or hearing about it after," he said. "I find it intoxicating to the point where I look like I'm in shock and awe. For her, it's the stud thing. She likes knowing I can do that and other women want me as much as she does."

John, a thirty-eight-year-old man from Montreal, and his wife of fifteen years have explored open relationships outside their marriage. "When we got married, we realized our sexual needs were never going to be met," he said. "We decided we would leave ourselves the option for other relationship[s]. She's asexual and we knew that was going to cause a problem in the future, and we realized we were getting married really young. We didn't know it as poly; we knew it as open relationships."

His wife started on her journey six years ago when a mutual friend asked her out. After a discussion with her husband, they both were open to her pursuing the connection. "I was trying to egg her on a bit," John said, "to go spend more

time with the guy, and she was, and after a while, we had a conversation about that — it's your relationship, your speed, you can do what you want. I wanted her to be happy, and she was when she was out with him. And that was great.”

Jasna, who is from Toronto, asserted her view in a post called “Bigger Picture of Polyamory” on the blog *Medium*. In her seven-plus years of being open to multiple relationships, friends have often asked whether she believes ethical non-monogamy is a personality trait, or if it's something that's a trait of the relationship.

“While my answer has always stayed the same — that for me, it's very much a personality trait — I've realized recently that this answer doesn't really paint the whole picture. It's actually a small part of a much larger life philosophy, which has slowly been showing itself to me in recent years.”

She likes exploring the mystery and the possibilities of how a friendship might develop by removing expectations of what it should or shouldn't be. “It's not that I'm poly because I want to be in multiple relationships. It's just that, as I go through my life and discover the friendships and connections that naturally arise, there just isn't a place for monogamy to comfortably fit into,” she wrote. “And I don't mean to suggest, at all, that you can't form beautiful and authentic friendships and relationships while monogamous. I have nothing against monogamy at all. It just doesn't fit for me.

“I carry this label of ‘polyamorous’ as a badge, as something integral to who I am as a person — and it is, in the sense that it is inextricable from me. But the focus is all wrong. It's not about romance. It's not about physicality. It's not, in the end, about polyamory at all. It's about human connection in whatever shape it may take.”

Eva Dusome from Toronto was sick of “riding the relationship escalator” — and polyamory enabled her to finally climb off. Relationship anarchy — tailoring a relationship to your values and those of your partner/partners — is Dusome's preferred model. That includes stepping off the relationship escalator, a set of prescribed, progressive milestones — such as cohabitation, then marriage, and then children — that demonstrate the “correct” approach to relationships, the one that gets society's seal of approval.

“Polyamory allows me to do that, but I do also believe people could be monogamous and a relationship anarchist,” she said. “I have never believed in relationship hierarchy. I understand that there are people we resonate with more, who we're connected to, and we make priorities based on that, but I'm really fluid with those priorities. I really enjoy friendships and partnerships with people who also enjoy that fluidity.”

When Dusome, forty, first heard of “open relationships” in 2007, it was

through the married person she fell in love with, who informed her he was in such an arrangement. “I was riding the relationship escalator with a fourth person. One of those [relationships had been] a ten-year marriage. I started to really question things,” she said. “It goes back to attitudes in our society where people are okay with cheating — and not talking about alternatives to monogamy with their partners in ethical ways. Most people aren’t interested in challenging some of those uncomfortable feelings.”

Dusome’s journey into polyamory also connected her to the asexual community, which taught her about intimacy levels and how romantic attraction can be completely different from sexual attraction. “Being sexual with someone is not the same as being physical with someone. Sitting and cuddling with someone on the couch, both of us deciding it’s not going to get sexual, but still enjoying it being sensual — holding their hand or caressing their hair, or even holding them during a bad time. That’s still taboo in friendship level connections. And I just don’t see those lines. As long as it’s all consensual ... It’s a great opportunity for exploration. I enjoy having passionate friendships and celebrating them.”



In addition to navigating the increased emotional and logistical demands of polyamory, non-monogamous folks also need to contend with the outside world’s view of non-monogamy, which is often negative and heavily coloured by misconceptions.

“I give them a year ...”

“It’ll never work ...”

“You’re crazy ...”

These are some of the typical disheartening responses non-monogamous people hear when they come out to family and friends or broach the topic with strangers. Imagine starting a relationship and feeling the pressure of external forces already betting on its demise or dismissing it as illegitimate or wrong.

If you’re a woman, you may be called promiscuous or a slut for wanting more than one relationship; if you’re a guy, you may be labelled as someone who can’t commit. Or vice versa. And if you’re LGBTQ, non-binary, or a person of colour, there are even more assumptions made about you (see Chapter 8).

On the commitment issue, in fact, it’s quite the opposite, said Craig Smith from London, Ontario, who once had two partners before one took off with a biker and the other split after their relationship broke down. “We’re all about commitment, but many monogamous people think ‘They’re doing something

that I don't even believe is real; therefore, they must have ulterior motives.' So they think we're lazy or sluts, because it's easier to rationalize away that we exist and we have legitimate lifestyles, that we're happy, and, in many cases, are successful."

People incorrectly associate polyamory with unhappy relationships; however, a 2018 University of Guelph study has revealed people in open — or non-monogamous — relationships are as happy as their coupled-up counterparts.

"We found people in consensual, non-monogamous relationships experience the same levels of relationship satisfaction, psychological well-being and sexual satisfaction as those in monogamous relationships," said Jessica Wood, a Ph.D. student in applied social psychology and lead author of the study. "This debunks societal views of monogamy as being the ideal relationship structure."

People may call polyamory an excuse to cheat. Occasionally, companies will even try to cash in on that — not realizing or flat out ignoring the fact that cheating is the antithesis of the concept of polyamory.

In the summer of 2015, Ashley Madison — a Toronto-based dating site for married people who want to have affairs — was warned by hackers that it must shut down or risk its sensitive customer data being publicly released. When the site's owners refused, emails, names, homes addresses, sexual fantasies, and credit card information were revealed in a massive data dump. The impact of the hack was significant, both because of Ashley Madison's controversial premise ("Life is short. Have an affair.") and because of its supposed financial success. Parent company Avid Life Media boasted about its \$1 billion net worth and \$115 million in revenue from 2014 — but, much like the premise of the business model, it wasn't being upfront and honest with its numbers, either.

A second data dump included emails from Avid Life Media CEO Noel Biderman, which contradicted his public statement that he was not having affairs of his own.

He subsequently stepped down from his position, but not before thirty-two million Ashley Madison users were affected.

The shockwave of the released information spread worldwide. Husbands and wives found out in a very public way that their spouses had been lying and cheating on them. At a press conference, Toronto police spoke of "two unconfirmed reports of suicides" associated with the data leak.

Avid Life Media rebranded itself as Ruby, and in July 2016 — a year after the hack — debuted an ad campaign geared toward a new audience of threesomes. The Ashley Madison website now features a "polyamory dating" page with the definition of polyamorous ("love many") and dating ("testing the waters").

In a three-minute spot titled “Poly,” a couple at a party gazes flirtatiously at a single woman in the room and decides whether to bring her into the fold.

In a *Mashable* interview, Ruby’s new president, James Millership, denied that the site encouraged infidelity. According to reporter Patrick Kulp, he instead “talked at length about ‘open-minded experiences’ and ‘exploring moments’ — a much more public relations–friendly, positive way to talk about cheating and open relationships.”

While Ashley Madison drew attention to problems with the construct of monogamy, its proposed solution of cheating — via a paid hookup website — was unhelpful, and poly people, who were already contending with the portrayal of polyamory as an excuse for infidelity, responded with a collective eye roll.

The media didn’t buy it, either.

“It’s all very sensitive, but unless Ashley Madison is a regular dating site now (which ... good luck), it feels desperate,” Angela Chen wrote on *Gizmodo*. “If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck and is on Ashley Madison like a duck, it probably is a duck, even if it’s a duck trying to *find its moment*.”

Eva Dusome said she still hears about people who say they’re polyamorous, but that their partner doesn’t know. “You’re *not* polyamorous,” she said. “I try to have empathy for people who say things like that — but I challenge them as well. If you can lie to somebody who you live and are entrenched with, who you say you love with all your heart, why would I trust you? Because you are going to lie, you have no loyalty to me. So you should stop being a liar.”

Dusome said she’s overheard people in her own life trying to limit their partners from socializing with her for fear that “they might get an idea.” It’s unfortunately common to encounter insecure people who worry their partner might leave them for a polyamorous person. “They say some really fucked-up shit,” Dusome said. “‘Don’t bring your multiple partners to my party because I don’t want you to give my wife ideas.’ People are tolerant [of the idea of poly], but they’re not really accepting of it. And then some people are not even tolerant of it because it really challenges their own life.... From weddings to parties, you’re only still allowed to have a plus one, even though somebody knows about my multiple partners, they’re still going to send me one. I tend to default to bringing no one — but it’s a societal way of enforcing couple privilege.”

Polyamorous musicians Cass King & The Next Right Thing decided to combat that stigma with a 2018 Valentine’s Day event called Alt-V: Valentine’s for the Rest of Us, which was inclusive of non-monogamous people. “Celebrating Valentine’s Day or New Year’s or any sexy holiday is always a kind of a negotiation. It’s really just a dance ... not a swinger’s club,” King told Vancouver’s *Metro News*.

Another gross assumption about polyamorous people is that it's all about sex. And while sex can be a big part of the relationship — as in monogamous relationships — it doesn't have to be. As one Montreal polyamorous man puts it, "It's about the friendships, the relationships, the intimacy ... the connection."

"How do you have sex?" As someone in a three-way relationship, this question follows me everywhere," wrote Redfern Jon Barrett in his essay "Polyamory and the Social Politics of Sleep." "It doesn't bother me so much because of its reductive or intrusive nature (though of course, it is both those things). Rather, it bothers me because, while most people tie polyamory to sex, for me it's most closely tethered to the act of sleep."

There's an assumption that polyamory means you're getting laid often, with different people, meaning a higher risk of developing a sexually transmitted infection (which is what *Big Bang Theory's* Mayim Bialik inferred in her rant about open relationships). Newsflash: poly people tend to play it safe. Very safe. With every new partner, there tends to be a sex bureaucracy, whereby each partner is bound by agreements and boundaries to which all partners must agree. Blood tests are the norm. For poly people in closed structures, they can negotiate and agree on "fluid bonding" — an agreement between partners in a relationship to practise unprotected sex (a similar reference was uttered in the '90s cult classic movie *Demolition Man*).

"We generally don't like to use condoms, so for that reason, we have a closed group of people, most of whom are in long-term relationships or married," said Damien (from Northern Ontario), who added that he is very much in love with his wife. "If we were to welcome someone else into the group, they would have to be tested. There would have to be trust. STIs are a concern."

Fear of judgment is a big reason why polyamorists tend to not be "out" to family, friends, co-workers, and bosses. There's also the fear of retribution.

Josée, a woman with a husband and boyfriend in Ottawa, told some of her family members. "My dad had figured it out and was cool with it — only I know what makes me happy," she said. "My husband's mom and aunt — that did not go well. There was a misunderstanding about what we were saying [resulting] in some alienation among the family members."

As well, she's worried about how her sister-in-law would handle it. She's concerned she might cut off access to her nephew, she said. "I don't think that would happen, but it's kind of there in the background. She's a Catholic girl."

In her professional life, a couple of co-workers know she's polyamorous, as well as her new boss, who seems curious about it. "If people actually listen to what we say or look at what we post, they could easily figure it out. So we don't hide it, but we don't advertise it," she said.

Rhonda Balzarini, a lecturer at Western University in Ontario, is undertaking a study to examine how romantic secrecy versus acceptance from friends, family, and society at large affects commitment processes and the proportion of time spent on sex over the course of a year involving both primary and secondary partners (or co-primary and no primary partners).

“Previous research suggests secrecy is linked to elevated reports of physical and psychological distress and has actually linked experiences of marginalization in other sexual minority groups to poorer health outcomes and higher prevalence of mental disorders,” she said. She’ll also look at whether “individuals who report more social support are buffered against the negative outcomes affiliated with a lack of public acceptance and high romantic secrecy.”

Samantha Fraser, a life coach in Toronto who organizes the Playground sexuality conference, said that over the eleven years she’s been out as polyamorous, she’s had friends come and go in her life. “One of my friends said to me, ‘Why would you put us through the torture of your wedding if you were just going to throw away your marriage?’ I didn’t realize my wedding was *torture*. She moved to Alberta not long after that, and we haven’t spoken since.” An ex-boss also made her job very unpleasant and pressured her to quit because of her lifestyle.

In 2006, she was the only poly person in her circle of friends, which has since grown into a small network of poly people. “We were definitely the freaks at the time. I always liked to use myself as an example [in the media]; that’s why I’ve always been so open about it,” she said. “That [openness] is what I fought for, but I went through an identity crisis. I was so used to being one of the only ones. Then all of sudden, this younger generation came up and said, ‘We’re poly! We can tell everybody!’ — with some exceptions.”



There are some traits that will help a person be more successful in polyamorous relationships. It’s important to know these before diving in.

In a 1976 study of polyamorous people, psychologist Jacquelyn J. Knapp suggested they tend to possess the following traits: “Individualistic, an academic achiever, creative, non-conforming, stimulated by complexity and chaos, inventive, relatively unconventional and indifferent to what others [say], concerned about his/her own personal values and ethical systems, and willing to take risks to explore possibilities.”

Definitely add good communication skills, Type A time-management skills, emotional resilience, and the ability to take responsibility for your own shit to

the list.

But even armed with those characteristics, polyamory comes with its own set of challenges, which can be specific and unique to each relationship.

A lot of people, overwhelmed at the beginning of road, ask, “Where do I even begin?”

Psychologist Dr. Oren Amitay and others agree that in order to flourish, poly relationships require two basic things: honesty and respect. The respect component is supposed to be a given in any type of relationship, though surprisingly, it may not be present in all relationships. Some people use what they call “polyamory” as an excuse to cheat — they are the kind of partner who lies, is not upfront about their intentions, and breaks rules. That’s not polyamory.

And then, there’s the honesty thing. You’d think honesty in a relationship — any relationship, including a monogamous one — would be a given. But Dr. Amitay contends that total and utter honesty only works within the context of poly relationships. The reason, he maintains, is that when there are only two people in an equation, the assumption is that you’re supposed to be together with no other intimate outside relationships factored in.

“When someone develops any kind of feelings for or attraction to another person, it violates that assumption and would make the partner jealous and/or insecure if it were shared.... If you do say such things in a monogamous relationship, your partner will likely become anxious and resentful every time you step out the door. With open relationships, there are usually going to be other people involved in some manner. In order to maintain respect for each other, you have to feel your partner is not going to transgress any of these established rules or boundaries, even though there are many possible ways transgressions inadvertently pop up in open relationships. The only way to counter it is if you both feel confident your partner will always be honest with you about any interactions and the feelings and intentions that may go along with them.”

Dr. Amitay has a point. I made that mistake with an ex with whom I was in a monogamous relationship. One day, I remember asking him, “Have you ever thought about having other partners? What do you think about maybe us opening up?” I could see the look on his face immediately turn into panic. His scratched his beard and furrowed his brow. “No, I haven’t,” he replied. “I only want *you*.”

Inevitably, that idea was shot down. But the unease that arose from that conversation remained.



Dr. Jess O'Reilly, a Toronto sex therapist, said one in five adults have tried being in a consensually non-monogamous relationship at some point in their lives. There's a misconception that open relationships and polyamory unions don't have rules. On the contrary, she said, there are actually more rules, limits, and expectations than in monogamous relationships.

The key is communication — you need to be able to talk about issues as they arise as well as your desires and needs. “Even in monogamous relationships, one of the biggest mistakes we make is that we assume that my definition of monogamy is the same as your definition of monogamy when, in fact, that's not the case,” Dr. O'Reilly said. “There are people who believe that porn is a form of cheating. There are people who believe you should never flirt with anyone else or fantasize about anyone else. The bottom line is, you have to talk to your partner about what your boundaries and expectations are. I think people in consensual non-monogamous relationships do a lot more talking. The joke is: They're never really having sex. They're always talking about it.”

But even for those who go rule crazy, you can never have enough boundaries to cover the scenarios you'll encounter, Dr. O'Reilly said. “What you can foresee — based on your relationship history and the foundation you've cultivated as a couple — is how you and your partner treat each other in high intensity situations. And if you're loving, supportive and treat each other well, you're probably going to move forward accordingly when [problems] arise.”

Sometimes, you need a public service announcement to find your way.

Samantha Fraser, keynote speaker at the 2013 PolyCon in British Columbia, addressed several issues in her talk “How Not to Be a Poly Elite Douchenozzle,” such as “what it means ... when people say there's just one way to be poly or when they get into relationships with people and use polyamory as an excuse for asshole behaviour.... Some people say: ‘I'm going to go out and see whoever I please and I'll do what I want and it doesn't really matter what you think because this is what non-monogamy is to me.’ Maybe that would work for some people if they had agreed to it, but I've seen a lot of people and relationships get crushed because of that behaviour.”

Fraser said she came out as poly when she was twenty-six — over a decade ago — but at the time, that still felt *too young* to be taking on critiques from the world. Now, she's noticed more people are discovering and identifying as polyamorous much younger. But some still haven't had the emotional training of being in regular relationships. The definition of polyamory has expanded and people enter into it with different expectations than their partners.

Some dive into polyamory presuming it's going to be an easy ride. “It's a hundred percent the opposite of that and requires a lot of hard work. [They]

generally end up hurting themselves or others,” she said.

Eve Rickert, co-author of *More Than Two*, said when she first learned of polyamory in the late '90s, there seemed to be only one way to go about polyamory and that was to have a hierarchy — meaning a primary partner with a pecking order of partners thereafter. Those primary couples were able to have “veto power” on people they didn’t want their partner to get involved with. The veto also extended to boundaries. “Couples make rules about what their other relationships are going to look like. Some of that stuff really started to feel icky. Like, these are real people and I don’t want to be putting these kinds of restrictions on them,” she said.

Poly relationships can be anything you want them to be, whether it’s having a hierarchy or not. There are no hard and fast rules about what they should look like because they’re all so damn different — wonderfully so. It’s the people involved who decide what’s best for them.

“Sometimes, I hear people talk about how evolved [polyamory] is and how much better [they] are at communicating, and I don’t think that’s necessarily the case. I think they make more of an effort to communicate, but there are toxic relationships in any form,” said Dr. O’Reilly.

The sex therapist, however, warns you can’t force someone — or your relationship, for that matter — to be polyamorous with an iron fist, especially if your partner is coming from a monogamous background. “I get this on my Instagram, on my Twitter — ‘How do I convince my partner to be in an open relationship?’ and the bottom line is you don’t. You can’t convince somebody,” she said. “You can negotiate and tell them what you want. But if you absolutely want an open relationship and if your partner is a monogamist, you’re not going to be compatible unless you’re really willing to make compromises.”

Craig Smith from London, who was in a V relationship, compared the friction of a monogamous person and polyamorous person trying to make a relationship run smoothly to that of a religious battle between an atheist and Catholic married couple. “When two people fundamentally see the world in a different way, they’re going to clash. That’s not to say it’s impossible,” he said. “It comes down to how important their beliefs are and how much their practice in association with those beliefs impact[s] their relationship. When it comes to mono/poly, their beliefs *are* the relationship, and so the things that bother their partner are going to come up more often compared to an atheist and Catholic. The atheist ignores the fact that the Catholic is at church and the Catholic just tries not to think about their partner burning in hell when they die.... But with polyamory, the monogamous person is always aware that the polyamorous person *isn’t* monogamous. Even if the polyamorous person isn’t seeing anyone

else, it's still going to be this nagging feeling.”



External forces aside, there are unique challenges within relationships with more than one partner.

Many poly people may say that time management is a big issue — that the amount of love may flow free, but time as a resource is finite. “People use the analogy of children,” said Dr. Amitay. “You don’t stop having children because you’re afraid you’re going to run out of love for them; love can be infinite. People tend to get tripped up by finite resources: emotional and psychological reserves, money and time.”

Being polyamorous can be a plus and a minus when it comes to coordinating social situations. Some people swear by iCal and Google Calendar. Or they find other means.

Mike, a thirty-six-year-old man from the Toronto area, spent two years in a “tribe” involving two other men and five women. Surprisingly, managing the schedules of eight people wasn’t terribly daunting. The group would devise a plan to meet at one partner’s house in the evenings; those who wanted to go on dates or be social could do so, and those who didn’t would Netflix and chill. “Everybody would head to the apartment and we’d have discussions about what we wanted to do tonight,” he said. “If someone wanted to go dancing, then anybody who wanted to go, that would be their date. It worked out really well. At the end of the night, you’d go back to your nesting partner. The best way I can describe the tribe is it was a collection of people who happened to come across each other in the perfect moments in their lives.”

Mike’s tribe did eventually separate after someone broke a concrete rule — if you were going to be with somebody new, your partner[s] would need to know and be okay with it. No one would be allowed to move into any of the apartments without an open democracy and discussion. “I literally came home from a business trip to someone tangential to the group living on our couch,” he said. “And it turned out that that person was an incredibly jealous person and couldn’t handle other women being in the apartment. Everything really fell apart at that point.... When you bring somebody into the dynamic and it’s kind of a forced process, this leads to friction. Whenever you create an environment where there are a lot of personalities mixing with each other, a lot of hurt feelings can develop very quickly. If needs and wants aren’t communicated properly and resolved quickly, that will make any relationship fall apart.”

In poly relationships, it can be tricky to not feel as though “special things” in

one relationship must be shared commodities all the time.

During an appearance in Toronto, U.S. sex columnist Dan Savage read aloud an anonymous question from the crowd during his Q&A: “I’m poly and don’t want my husband to cum in his partner. How do I handle this?”

“You can hold some things in reserve by mutual consent,” answered Savage. “This is so emotionally significant that I want this just for us’ and the other person agrees to that, even if they don’t feel the same ... maybe your insecurity or how that thing feels to you, that is a way of honouring the privacy of that central bond if it’s a hierarchical poly relationship.”

Some people who are involved in long-distance relationships find they may have trouble cultivating the time it takes to form deeper intimacy with their partners. If you have partners across the country or beyond, trying to see them may prove costly and difficult. If you have partners in closer proximity, juggling trying to spend quality time with them, along with work, family, friends, and “me” time, can also lead to feeling emotionally stretched to the limit — also known as being “polysaturated.”

Metamours — your partner’s partners — can also weigh on a poly relationship, especially if you don’t get along with them. For some in consensual non-monogamous relationships, and especially for newbies to poly, jealousy can be an issue; it’s probably the topic most often asked about by people who are curious about polyamory. These are big issues. For those reasons, they deserve their own chapters in this book (see Chapters 6 and 10).



When an opportunity to purchase a house in Toronto presented itself, Samantha Fraser took it because her boyfriend of three years was moving in with her and her husband.

“At the moment, no one is really dating anyone else. I have a chronic pain issue, so that puts a damper on things,” she said. “One of the things I tell people whenever they ask, ‘How is it going, living together?’ — my mum, especially, who was nervous about us living together — I say, ‘It’s fine.’ And when I say it, I mean it in the real sense of what *fine* means, which is ‘good.’ There are still issues with sex logistics, because they are both introverts who don’t get out of the house much, so it’s a bit challenging to find alone time or date nights.”

Because each poly situation is different — just as relationships are unique because of the people involved, their personalities, the baggage they bring, and the circumstances — the challenges in these relationships can really vary.

For some polycules, jealousy “ain’t no thang,” but maybe hierarchy — where

there are primary and secondary partners — could be a touchy subject. Some people hate unicorn hunters — the term for couples seeking someone, usually a bisexual woman, to be brought in as a third without allowing her to form outside relationships — and some adore being hunted. (More on that in Chapter 11.)

If you live in a city where there are networks of poly support groups, you may have a somewhat easier time connecting with like-minded people, especially with the Internet. However, instant messaging and swiping left and right aren't substitutes for face-to-face connection. That's what Cloud Edwards found.

The twenty-eight-year-old Nelson, B.C., resident lives a distant eight hundred kilometres east of Vancouver. He and his wife have been poly for about a year. Edwards said he's always known poly has fit his identity, as he always found himself attracted to a number of different people.

While his wife was initially reluctant, she dipped her toe in and discovered that she was attracting more partners than her husband. At any given time, their combined numbers of partners varied from zero to sixteen. "She has a long-term partner and another boyfriend and more casual friends with benefits," he explained. "I don't have a girlfriend. It's the paradigm."

"I'm just trapped in this small town," he added. "But getting rejected because I'm poly is really shitty." Because of a small-town mentality where gossip travels quickly, it's not like they can be out and date freely.

Some poly people who are "full," or not looking for more partners, may encounter those on the prowl who assume they are actively available. Other poly people who are looking may face the pitfall of not finding anyone willing to date them.

Jacob, thirty, from Toronto, said he has been looking for another partner for a while. His husband is very supportive, but tends to be more monogamous. He said while there is no shortage of casual sex opportunities, he recently emotionally clicked with this dude off Grindr. It was the first time he could see another person as a potential long-term partner. "I'd say the challenge from the outset is that in the early phases of dating someone single, and especially in my case, when this person was single and not necessarily poly-identifying, it's hard to be able to give them a vision of what the relationship will look like later on down the line and how that relationship will work in tandem with your current relationship, since you're still getting to know each other," he said. "There becomes a kind of imbalance in which the single party involved may want to avoid getting too close for risk of ending up alone; whereas in my case, I might end up broken-hearted, but still partnered."

Jacob said the people he dates continue to look for a primary partner who is

also single because, ultimately, they think being a secondary partner is too hard, especially for those who want certain things out of a relationship — such as cohabitation — which he can't offer with his live-in relationship.

And once, when things were getting more serious and Jacob was about to tell the other guy he was developing feelings, that guy confessed he'd been seeing someone else, and that he wanted to be in a relationship with that person — because they also identified as monogamous.

Jacob said he would never stop him — after all, he can't offer him things like marriage. But he still feels frustrated that he's never gotten *far* enough to develop a foundation with another partner, because people don't want to get involved with someone they view as only having short-term potential. “I still feel like you can't help who you fall for,” he said. “Maybe even if there is a spark or a connection, and the person says pretty quickly they're not sure they can handle poly emotionally, it might be time to step down then, so you don't get incredibly hurt later.”

Jacob has come to appreciate that every connection isn't necessarily about building forever relationships and accepting that some are fleeting is fine. “Sometimes, you get literally one night with someone when you cross paths somewhere in the world,” he mused. “That connection is still special — but not every connection can become something long term.”

Aaron, a thirty-three-year-old from Toronto, said he also struggled deeply with finding other partners to date. Being a stay-at-home/work-from-home dad, he didn't have much of a social life and resorted to social media and dating sites. “I was shocked at the level of vitriol I experienced from people who assumed I was either lying about my non-monogamous status in order to be unfaithful or that I was a terrible father for seeking external relationships outside my family (despite my partner doing the same and not being judged for it),” he said.

Aaron said his ex-partner policed the people he dated, resulting in limited polyamorous experiences. Those he did have were tainted “by guilt and shame.”

“She also tended to write and rewrite our ‘rules’ when it suited her, leaving me feeling very unstable and taken advantage of. When my partner ended our relationship, I decided I wouldn't be interested in non-monogamy as I had come to perceive it.”

Then, he met his current partner. As things progressed, she expressed a need for non-monogamy. “My relationship [with her] has always been orders of magnitude stronger, so I was okay with her exploring outside of our relationship, though I still didn't go after it myself with any kind of gusto,” he said. “I was fine with her going to sex clubs and sleeping with people, but eventually she met someone she actually wanted to date, and that's when things became difficult for

me.”

She’s been working hard to mitigate Aaron’s insecurity, treating him and his son as her main priority, but he still finds it challenging to get over the baggage of his ex’s treatment while struggling with severe clinical depression. He fears being replaced or abandoned, causing his son to lose another person from his life because dad can’t hack a non-monogamous lifestyle. That leads to anxiety, which then puts a burden on her.

He describes a scene from the 2000 film *High Fidelity*, where John Cusack’s character torments himself by graphically imagining his ex having coitus with Ian, her new beau — Tim Robbins with a Steven Seagal ponytail — in all kinds of orgasmic positions. “No woman in the history of the world is having better sex than the sex you are having with Ian ... in my head,” Cusack says.

In Aaron’s case, the insecurity relates not to the physical lovemaking, but to the fear that he doesn’t and will never measure up to this new guy.

The obstacle of working through his emotional baggage leads him to another roadblock — jealousy.

6

“Love’s Refraction”: Jealousy and Compersion

Love may be blind but jealousy has 20-20 vision.

— Anonymous

ERIC NAGLER OFTEN PLAYED a number of different instruments on *The Elephant Show*, the popular Canadian children’s television program featuring hosts Sharon, Lois & Bram. He transformed garbage cans into drums while kids around him played the spoons, or he sang songs to them while playing the banjo. But while his persona was the happy-go-lucky bushy-bearded beatnik musician on TV, for many years he struggled with his own demons — namely jealousy.

“I was so jealous, I realized I couldn’t really have a meaningful relationship without coming to grips with it,” said Nagler, now in his mid-seventies. “I would have considerable reactions when a partner would be intimate, especially sexually, with someone else. It came up as fear, anger, blame and shame and a great deal of guilt, because I was as promiscuous as my partners were.”

While in an open marriage in the 1980s, Nagler found himself reflecting on the hypocrisy of it all — *what right did he have to impose his jealousy upon others, when he, too, had other loves in his life?* But logic didn’t shield him from those negative feelings of jealousy.

Looking for help, he signed up for group therapy using psychodrama. In therapy, Nagler asked two people to play the role of his wife and her lover. The first session, he tried to verbally express his anger, but didn’t feel he had “the right” to. The therapist then set up a Naugahyde pillow and handed him a plastic bat to pound it with. After being presented with the task, he collapsed “because the guilt and anger were cancelling each other out.”

By the third week, Nagler discovered he was able to yell and pound out his feelings. The following week something groundbreaking took place. The same routine unfolded. He chose someone to play his wife and another person to play her lover. They were coached to speak as their characters would, and Nagler would get into it so much that he actually could see the characters come alive in their roles. “But suddenly, instead of seeing my wife and her lover, I saw my

mother and father,” he said with a pause. “Very weird, indeed.”

It wasn’t quite an out-of-body experience, but Nagler said he was finally able to look objectively at his paranoia about his wife and her lover. An unexpected feeling washed over him. “In that moment, for that moment, I was free of jealousy,” he said. “And I could see that my wife’s relationship with her lover had nothing to do with our relationship.”



Stranger in a Strange Land author Robert A. Heinlein characterized jealousy as “a disease.” “Love is a healthy condition. The immature mind often mistakes one for the other, or assumes that the greater the love, the greater the jealousy — in fact, they are almost incompatible; one emotion hardly leaves room for the other.”

Jealousy and *envy* are often used interchangeably, but there are some nuanced differences. Merriam-Webster’s definition of *jealous* is “hostile toward a rival or one believed to enjoy an advantage,” while *envy* is “painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage.” However, jealousy carries the particular sense of zealous vigilance and tends to be used exclusively to describe feelings of protectiveness of one’s own advantages or attachments.

Neither a polyamorous nor a monogamous relationship structure will preclude you from feeling jealous. But people in non-monogamous relationships have to willingly deal with it head-on. It just comes with the territory. When they experience jealousy, it can feel overpowering and, at times, all-consuming. For others, it’s an intense blip and then it dissipates.

So often, jealousy is a feeling, a response in humans. But digging to the root of why we feel that way requires exploration and a willingness to look within ourselves.

Dr. Oren Amitay said jealousy is not a learned behaviour, but innate and rooted in human insecurity. “It drives us to be alert to threats that we are going to lose something [or someone] important to us,” he said. “How people react to that real or imagined threat is critical; evolutionarily speaking, different ways of reacting can be beneficial or adaptive. In the modern world, there is obviously no one way of doing it right — it is entirely dependent on the personality, resources, and options of the other person, as well as the people [whispering in] in their ear.”

Amitay said the most common manifestation of jealousy is for a person to be over-controlling, which can be done either directly and obviously or more

“discreetly” (though this is usually obvious to those not directly involved). A common example is checking in on a partner frequently under the guise of concern or a desire to be with them. More passive aggressive ways include sulking, withdrawing, or playing a weak role that engenders sympathy and gets their partner to pay attention to them. “Although it draws the other person in, it also builds great resentment within them and, even if they are not fully aware of this resentment or are not sure exactly where it comes from, it does build and eventually can drive them away,” said Amitay.

“Statistically speaking, the general population does have a reason to be jealous or on guard because many people will, in fact, cheat. Although most cheaters believe they are pretty stealthy, their partners often realize that they are behaving differently, whether they have already cheated or are on the path toward possibly doing it.”

For her book *Love’s Refraction*, Jillian Deri interviewed twenty-two queer, polyamorous women in British Columbia while she was a sociology instructor at Simon Fraser University in order to find out how they handled multiple relationships and tackled jealousy.

Some women said jealousy felt like a maddening sting when their lovers were with other partners or when they felt their relationships were being threatened, perhaps by someone a little too similar to themselves.

“Most of the time, I just feel like I am so full of love or whatever that it’s fine, but when I’m jealous I just get tunnel vision and I’m crazy because I’m very obsessive,” wrote one woman.

Another said jealousy made her feel physically sick. One woman described her feelings thusly: “Someone else is driving the bus, which then makes me angry. Or a variety of other people are driving the bus but I am not anywhere close to the wheel.”

Deri, looking back at her work, said it was an enlightening study that delved into a section of the population where there was little research. “They tell you about the worst of it, but sometimes, even when someone else is driving the bus, it’s often a temporary thing,” she said. “People often learned how to get a handle on it. Some people don’t stay poly for life, but this does not invalidate their experience with poly. There is a social bias in society that devalues non-monogamous relationships as well as relationships that are not ‘until death do us part’ vows.”

Quantity of time spent in a relationship is really not the best measure. Instead, it makes sense to consider depth of connections, intimacy, and joy, Deri believes.

And yet, as Deri’s study points out, despite occasions of jealousy, these

women persisted with polyamory. One reason for such persistence is the sex — which counters the fallacy that polyamory among women is only based on emotional affairs. Some even turn the green-eyed monster on its head by wrestling it into sexual fantasy. “Sometimes, jealousy can be a good thing and women eroticize the jealousy,” said Deri.

She found it interesting that jealousy could be a tool to tell us what we want or a signal that we’re in a bad relationship or a way to learn more about ourselves. For example, since the root of jealousy depends on the person, you can trace it back to your own insecurities. If you’re insecure about beauty, your partner’s hot new companion can trigger extreme jealousy.

During her research, Deri observed that jealousy often reared its ugly head at more stressful times in a person’s life. If they were overwhelmed or anxious about the relationship, then the impact of jealousy was more intense. If everything was great, they had the confidence to manage it better.

However, women in her study who really dug down and worked through insecurities often felt closer to their partners. “The centrality of jealousy is really important for poly and how much can be done — and the flexibility to rework that emotion,” she said. “For people who tend to be very jealous, poly will be very hard. And jealousy can be just as hard for some monogamous people. But what’s different about jealous[ies] in polyamory is they’re *known* factors, not the unknown. In monogamy, it’s about these assumptions [of our partners finding attraction elsewhere].”



When Craig Smith’s partners left him, jealousy was an issue he didn’t struggle with.

Smith, forty-seven, was in a V polyamorous relationship with two women. They all nested together in London, Ontario. One girlfriend seemed to change overnight and took off with a biker, leaving him and his other partner bewildered, he said. About ten months later, Smith’s other girlfriend left. While the breakup was messy, his ability to separate their one-on-one relationship from other relationships allowed jealousy to stay out of the picture.

“I felt frightened, abandoned, betrayed. But it was never about her or her other partners,” he said. “It was a devastating experience for me. I don’t do alone well. I have abandonment issues and insecurities when it comes to relationships. Most poly people still struggle with jealousy. I’m a rarity.”

For most of his life, this wasn’t the case. He said he was once extremely jealous and at nineteen had stalked his first girlfriend. He called himself a

“monogamous fundamentalist” and believed in “all that Disney garbage” — how one person would complete him and he would live happily ever after once he found her. “I had a sudden and earth-shattering realization that you don’t own people. And when there’s no ownership, there’s no jealousy. There’s no conflict,” he said.

“We love all of our family and we can do this without conflict, but when it comes to romantic love, suddenly there’s this set of rules and limitations, just because we’re told they’re there. That’s all bullshit. When I had that realization, my capacity to experience jealousy disappeared ... and my capacity to experience love and empathy went through the roof.”

Ultimately, he understands he’s responsible for holding his own happiness. “If you’re unhappy in your relationship, that’s not on your partner or partners,” he said. “Don’t put the burden on them to do something about it. If you feel like your needs aren’t being met — you’re polyamorous! — go find someone else to fulfil those needs that aren’t being met by your partner.”

He pauses. “I hate camping. I hate the outdoors. Can’t stand it.” But his partners love the shit out of campfires and trees. “In monogamy, you have to do things with them you hate and they have to do things with you they hate. They think that’s a positive for monogamy, that it’s showing commitment; it’s sacrifice. Why? Why are you being miserable for the person you love? How does that benefit anybody?”

“My partners go camping with their other boyfriends. If I had to go, I would just bring the whole experience down because I’d be miserable the entire time. Here, no one resents anyone, no one feels obligated, and no one feels ignored because everyone is getting what they need in one relationship or another.”

Smith said short of having an epiphany — which you can’t artificially produce — the only way to deal with indoctrinated belief is to “keep reaffirming what is real over and over again. Over time, it sinks in. That’s all you can do.”

Damien, the Northern Ontario man who loves hearing about his wife with other men, reaffirmed that because he was raised in an environment where non-monogamy was natural, his jealousy meter tends to be very low. That is, unless he’s in the kitchen.

“I would be more inclined to be jealous if my wife preferred someone else’s cooking over mine,” he said. “That is something I would be jealous about, but it wouldn’t be something that would be a troubling point in our relationship or something we’d argue over. But yeah, that would bother me more than her saying, ‘Wow, that person is really good in bed.’”

A few days after our interview, he sent a follow-up message. He finally beat his wife’s lover — a chef — with a rustic Italian recipe. “If nothing else, the red

wine should help square me up with him, lol,” he wrote. “He is amazing, I can’t compete. He has been cooking professionally since he was sixteen and is now around fifty years old.”

The negative outward reaction to jealousy can be exacerbated if a person has abandonment issues, a poor self-concept, or low self-esteem, which translates to feeling less deserving of love than others. That person would feel more vulnerable to losing somebody because they never believed someone could ever truly love them, explained Dr. Oren Amitay.

Many people aren’t able to deal with jealousy properly because they haven’t learned how to deal with conflict or other difficult situations in a healthy or productive manner, he says. “In talking with your partner, it goes back to how much is the problem originating on your end and how much is it on their end? Acknowledge your own issues first and then share what they are doing that is problematic,” he said.

Amitay said that, while psychologically, you can repress feelings of jealousy and even convince yourself you’re immune to that emotion, there’s no shame in feeling jealous — and admitting it.

Nagler’s self-forgiveness for his own jealousy propelled him to help others. Using his Michigan Sexology Institute certificate and his work through the Human Awareness Institute, he opened a poly-friendly jealousy counselling practice in 2013 in Shelburne, Ontario, after researching jealousy — especially his own — for half his life.

Couples — monogamous or not — approach him for help dealing with jealousy issues, but the brunt of his work focuses on one-on-one therapy. He said progress is made in less than six months or not at all. “Because our culture tells us jealousy is something to be ashamed of, most people deny that they are jealous,” he said. “The first step is to acknowledge you’re jealous. This isn’t about fault and there’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

The client has two choices — exploring what their jealousy is about or rearranging their relationships so they’re not triggered.

“We’re not responsible for the trigger that comes up. It’s a reflex,” he said. “We have an opportunity to become responsible for what happens after that. It’s about learning the skills and tools of choice.”

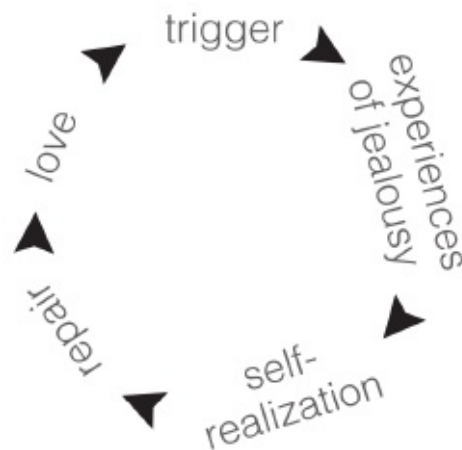
Nagler said jealous people tend to be the best rationalizers — “I can have a fear and make it your fault, no matter what” — but the fact is, the trigger comes from some early experience they’re not in touch with. It isn’t about the present relationship.

Nagler became aware that his past anxiety about abandonment and fear of death played a big role in his jealousy. “My father going shopping and leaving

me in the car quite safely, with my brother, would cause me to panic. I thought he would never return. Those kinds of memories came back to me,” he said. “In the final [therapy session], I was lying down on a mat and re-enacting an infant temper tantrum about abandonment. I saw a black cloud descending on me. I was paralyzed in fear and it looked like death to me. That’s how deeply I got into it.

“After going through the pain, the defensiveness, the blame, all that crap, we eventually come to a place of self-realization that it’s about us. We come back and say, ‘I’m sorry’ and then we do some repair, some apology, and come back to love,” he said.

The jealousy cycle, according to Nagler, looks like this:



“The one thing they must realize is: ‘It’s about me,’” he explained. “It’s a very hard thing to do because the jealousy is so strong and there’s so much blame. It’s so easy for it not to be about ‘me.’ The secret is not to try to do away with jealousy, but simply to speed up the cycle. It helps to realize it’s a condition. You get triggered. You’re not in control of the trigger. You can take a breath, and you have some choices after, but it’s a very difficult process. If you had a broken arm, no one would be blaming you. But when [we’re] jealous, society blames us. Or society blames the other person.”

Nagler’s second marriage, which lasted a decade until 1976, included numerous episodes of cheating, including with his best friend’s wife. Going forward, he wanted to be honest with his partners and vice versa.

His third marriage was non-monogamous. “My [second] wife gradually became more and more jealous and more intolerant of my non-monogamous lifestyle,” he said, even though she had partners of her own. “Toward the end, she was drinking heavily and the relationship collapsed from her jealousy and my intolerance of it.”

Nagler's third marriage came after a thirty-year friendship. They tied the knot in 2016. She also struggled with jealousy, but this time, the couple created space for her to tell the truth about how she was feeling. This required Nagler to be responsible for his own jealousy. "I decided if I'm going to stay with her, I'm going to love her. I released my need to change her jealousy and that's helped our relationship considerably," he said. "If she were to tell me she's had an experience with somebody and I were to go into blame, pain, or shame, she'd be less likely to tell me next time. For me, love is not so much an amount, not an emotion, not a relationship. Love is a room. A space where I can be myself and the other person can be themselves."

Even with all the work he's done, Nagler still feels the uncomfortable pangs of jealousy from time to time. The triggers don't go away, but they have diminished significantly. "The cycle lasts a couple of minutes. The most powerful thing is noticing when I'm afraid and [acknowledging] it's okay for me to feel it," he said. "It gives me an opportunity to take a deep breath, which helps expel some of the adrenaline. Then I get to a point that it's 'about me' and it's okay to be afraid, but it also means I'm not blaming her; I can see her and my jealousy isn't about her. If I do say something that requires repair, I'll apologize for it and I'm back to feeling in love."

Dr. Amitay has advice for poly people: get ready to feel insecure and find ways to handle that. "In an open relationship, no matter how secure you are, [jealousy] could potentially lead to insecurity," he said. "You're exposing yourself to insecurity all the time because it seems that our caveman DNA is programmed to be attuned to signs of 'cheating' and to do something drastic about it. Evolution is designed to help us pass on our genes with 'healthy' partners, and when our partner is with someone else, that can interfere with such a process. We may consciously be able to withstand or fight against such evolutionary pressures, but our caveman wiring or unconscious feelings can still be triggered."

Jealousy is a common topic that comes up on online polyamory group discussions. The consensus seems to be that the best way to manage those feelings are to be reassured by your partner(s) and to take responsibility for your feelings, acknowledging and accepting that they exist.

Similarly, during a Curious Minds talk in Toronto in 2017, U.S. sex columnist Dan Savage suggested that talking to your partner helps big time as soon as jealous feelings start to bubble up. He's been with his hubby for more than two decades, but they opened up the relationship — on his partner's request — after being monogamous for five years. They call themselves "monogamish," an expression Savage trademarked to indicate they are exclusive with each other,

with some flexibility for agreed-upon one-off encounters.

“Jealousy isn’t something that disqualifies people from being in a monogamous relationship,” Savage said. “It’s how you process and handle the jealousy, how you talk about it, how you demonstrate how *you* [as a primary partner] come first — whether you’re monogamous or non-monogamous — is what qualifies you to be in a long-term, satisfying relationship in the first place.”

Speaking from his experience, jealousy wasn’t “a disaster.” Instead, it acted as a signal for him and his partner to check in and talk with each other in order to “process and diffuse.”

“What we haven’t experienced is the feeling of ‘he cheated on me’ or ‘this will be destroyed,’” Savage said. “We demonstrate our love and commitment with something other than our dicks. We [society] talk about sexual fidelity like it’s the single most important way of demonstrating love and commitment. People betray their lovers and spouses not just with their genitals, but by being cruel, neglectful, contemptuous, withholding. And yet, we hold up monogamy successfully executed as the gold stamp by which we judge success in relationships.”

Ontario couple Rosemary and Chris, a pair of married college sweethearts, at one point decided to explore polyamory together. They’d been married for four years and have now been poly for five. After dating in their twenties, they wanted to continue exploring into their marriage.

Rosemary, thirty, found herself having crushes on others and expressed them openly to Chris. When Rosemary first started seeing another guy, her husband was jealous. “It kind of manifested in different ways,” she recalled. “It wasn’t so much feeling jealousy; it was feeling left out.”

In order to prevent emotional time bombs from exploding, she makes sure to put in dedicated couple time before spending time with another partner, and more one-on-one time when she returns, to make it “easier to re-establish a bond.”

“People think if you’re in a poly relationship, you have to be consumed with jealousy or have [the relationship] be super tumultuous,” said Rosemary, who is currently dating a woman in the U.S.

These days, jealousy is a non-issue. “The more we talked about it, the more it faded away. It’s not like he owns me, or controls me. It’s not like me only being with him exclusively would make him happy, so why do it?” she said.

Sunny Drake, a Toronto theatre performer and producer, wrote a blog post called “The Green-Eyed Monster” about navigating his own jealousy because he found “trying to push it underground” only made it worse, so “I invited the monster to a cup of tea.... When I started to just sit and really listen to the

jealousy monster, the things that came out of those gaping jaws were not more rules or more blaming. They were bellows of much deeper things, which I'd left unaddressed in my life," he said.

Drake imagined the taunts that the other lover was better, that his partner didn't have time for him, or that he was unlovable, resulting in the suspicion that jealousy created: *Something's wrong here, you're being fucked over — they get all the attention and dates.*

"Learn to feel valuable and worthy beyond sex. Maybe they are a more experienced/skillful fuck than you. And here's the liberating thing: WHO CARES? That doesn't make you less valuable or worthy as a person. It can be very freeing to not have to be the best in bed," he wrote.

It's not all *poly-agony*, though. There is a place where the feeling of jealousy curves into one with more light.



There is an opposite of *jealousy* — something Kerista, a polyfidelitous commune in San Francisco, identified and christened *compersion*. You can't find it in the dictionary, but it essentially means feeling joy for your partners when they're experiencing joy in a sexual or romantic encounter, even though you aren't the cause of it.

But you can't force compersion to happen.

"Polyamorists try to re-craft their approach to love, relationships, sexuality, and emotions in ways that minimize instances of jealousy," said Jillian Deri, whose book title, *Love's Refraction*, is a nod to that. "We think of jealousy and compersion as opposites, but in some ways, they're not."

They can happen simultaneously. Jealousy can play an important role without necessarily becoming compersion by guiding people to seek what they are lacking, said Deri.

John David "Hobbes" Hickey, who lives in Montreal, said one of his partners is experiencing "new relationship energy" (NRE) after a first date with a new guy. New relationship energy is powerful stuff — like, the Stilton cheese of love, the honeymoon phase. It involves huge doses of dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin, the latter being the hormone released during orgasm and when you first fall in love. You feel warm and fuzzy twenty-four/seven.

While he's struggling with some jealousy surrounding that, he is also able, at the same time, to feel compersion.

"We had gone to this party; a guy I met — he's poly as well — was introduced to my partner," said Hickey. "They went on a date and they're going

to start seeing each other. She's experiencing NRE and it's super cute to watch. But if I'm being honest, I do feel a certain amount of — I don't know if it's jealousy — but it's fear, insecurity that maybe they'll bond better than she and I bond. I don't know — he could be more available, they could be more compatible. Part of me is afraid maybe, at some point, she'll tell me she'll want to focus on him. The feeling is there. It's not an overwhelming feeling for me, but it is there.”

Hickey recognized his feelings were part of the process. He talked to his partner about them, and she reassured him she doesn't believe that what he fears — the shift — is going to happen. “We're just going to keep an eye on it,” he said. “Talk about it early. I struggle with depression, and if I don't talk about these things openly and get some feedback from people, my insecurities blow out of proportion.”

He also sees the silver lining of reaping the emotional benefits of NRE. “If you have solid relationships with your partners, if you're open and you're honest with your communication and you're on cloud nine with that new-relationship drug, that happiness can trickle down to all your relationships and renew your enthusiasm for them.”

Nagler said when people can genuinely and organically feel compersion for their partner and partner's partner, the blame and shame gets stripped away and then love can bubble up. It sounds very granola, but it's a real thing. It can even happen when your heart is breaking.

There is also the notion of “affective contagion,” which applies to how polyamorists might feel joy or pain as their lovers experience joy or pain. “I'm losing a lover right now, and I'm in a very painful place around it,” said Nagler. “It's because we don't have a lot of time together. She lives in Michigan and we're both busy and she wants somebody more permanent. She wants somebody she can go to the movies with. She's found this person, and this person is jealous and won't be with her if she stays with me. If she tells me that she's going to lie to him — that's her decision. I'm not going to blame or shame her and say, ‘Poly people don't do that.’ Maybe she's not poly, but she would, in that instance, be non-monogamous.

“I want my lover to be filled with joy,” he added, “and if that means she's going to go back to monogamy and live with a person who's jealous, then so be it ... I want to make a space for her. And it's not me who decides who she is. When you get to that place of acceptance, then there's joy and love everywhere, even in the pain of separation.”

Reflecting on his recent breakup, Craig Smith said he also feels that sense of empathy and compersion — or at least variants of the feeling. “The fact of the

matter is, if our relationship was making her miserable, then she needed to go,” he said. “The fact that the breakup made me miserable, well, that’s just unfortunate collateral damage. Take responsibility for your love and your life and your relationships and your happiness. It sounds superficial coming from a guy who is lonely and miserable at the moment, but trust me,” he said, “I was happy in my relationships.”

According to U.S. therapist Esther Perel’s book *The State of Affairs*, jealousy in women tends to revolve around the emotional rather than the physical. “The classic map has men anchoring it in the risk of uncertainty about paternity, and in women in the loss of commitment and resources to care for children. Hence, popular theory holds that women’s jealousy is primarily emotional, whereas men’s is sexual,” Perel wrote.

For Aaron, the single dad from Toronto who compared himself to John Cusack in *High Fidelity*, his experience is the opposite of Perel’s argument. “I fear he’s a better partner than I am, that he does more for her, that she’s happier with him,” he said. “It hasn’t been easy for me to communicate those feelings to my partner, because I equate being emotionally vulnerable with weakness, and I don’t want to ruin her good time with concerns and insecurities that a big part of me feels are petty.”

Aaron said his girlfriend has been open with him about her new relationship, going so far as to discuss her own insecurities. “At first, I felt voyeuristic and controlling when she spoke this candidly, but over time I found it helpful in understanding. We are all just people and there’s no such thing as a knight in shining armour,” he said. “I am not perfect, neither is he, neither is she. That’s deeply helpful.”

(By the way, a little FYI: Nagler said Sharon, Lois, and Bram were not polyamorous, despite assumptions to the contrary. “They’re typical, ordinary people,” said Nagler. “If you want to ask about their sexual relationship, you can ask them.... It was a *ménage à TV studio*.” The more you know. Cue the *Canadian Heritage Minute* music.)

Alicia Bunyan-Sampson

ONTARIO

I've always been a fan of issues around race and racialism, and I've loved playing with it. People act as though it isn't an issue, but it's a recurring theme in our lives globally.

— Trevor Noah

ALICIA BUNYAN-SAMPSON isn't turned off by polyamory.

But she's tired of the racism found in some of the poly communities and the perception of what it means to be a black woman who is seeking more than one love at a time.

When she was about eighteen, she began exploring dating sites and was immediately sent a private message with the subject "Seeking ebony." Her heart sank.

"A white couple wanted me to form a triad, because on my profile, they thought I was smart and black girls on the site didn't seem to come across as smart, so they 'had to have me.' That was the exact wording," said Bunyan-Sampson, a writer and director in Toronto. She started keeping track of these interactions in her blog, *Diary of a Polyamorous Black Girl*.

Her exploration into non-monogamy began in elementary school, when she knew she liked boys — "all of them" — but she was often told, in many ways, "that you had to pick one," she said. "When I got into high school, I quietly talked to a lot of different boys, but I didn't know what polyamory was," she said. "I didn't see any representation of multiple relationships and there was something wrong with me for wanting that, for desiring that."

It wasn't until she entered college that she learned there was a name for what she had been feeling all these years — *polyamory* — and from there, she started exploring what the concept meant to her. In the beginning, it was trial and error.

“I think what I was searching online was more swinging than polyamory at the time,” she said. “When I went on [a dating] site and found multiple partnerships a ‘thing,’ I was excited to find the space. But as soon as I found the space, I felt like a sex object for a white couple. And I was like, ‘Is *this* what polyamory is?’ Now, I don’t engage with people who aren’t black, Indigenous, or people of colour [POC].”

Her experiences with couple privilege and how black women, specifically, were being fetishized as objects turned her off polyamory altogether for a while, she admitted.

Several years passed before she met some people who introduced her to Oasis Aqualounge on the fringe of Toronto’s gay village. “They didn’t tell me it was a sex lounge, but they would have their polyamorous event and [said] I should go check it out,” she said. And there, she found the fetishism and stereotypes were the same.

She began to see that black men wanted sexually free women or they didn’t want black women at all. “I think black women are the bottom of the barrel when it comes to relationships,” she said. “I don’t think anybody wants to engage with us because black women are so heavily sexualized. I think in terms of polyamory for the black community, it’s a complicated conversation as black people have been oppressed — how we love and how we’re allowed to show our love.”

Bunyan-Sampson’s forthcoming book *No Filter: Diary of a Polyamorous Black Girl* delves into her choice to live an honest life, but the places her journey takes her don’t always guarantee honesty. In one situation, a man she falls in love with and becomes entangled with often lies to her under the guise of ethical non-monogamy. “I learned that when something doesn’t feel right, it’s probably not right. When someone lies to you, you don’t wait, you don’t ask questions: you leave. You can’t be polyamorous and be a liar. I was in a relationship with someone who was a liar and who used polyamory as a way to facilitate his lies,” she wrote in one of her blog entries. “Polyamory is about honesty, and he was dishonest from the start. Because I saw the dishonesty and allowed it to continue, I think I indirectly told him that I was okay with that behaviour so he got really crafty with it and began emotionally abusing me in a way I’d never even heard of before.”

Meanwhile, her search for a poly partner of the same race has been difficult. She describes herself as an introvert with social anxiety, so meeting people is difficult for her. And then there are her parents and friends, who think she’s only in it for the sex. She has supportive friends, but their support is limited to private settings and hushed tones.

“One of the main things I’m writing about in my book is how my mom is against me being poly, and so is my dad.” But she argues that her parents’ marriage is also atypical, “because they’ve been married for thirty-something years and they’ve lived separately.... You can love in this [non-traditional] way and your relationship can function. They’ve shown me that it can work.

“Culturally, it seems to be very unacceptable,” said Bunyan-Sampson. “A friend of mine, when I told her I was poly, she told me, ‘Oh, so you like sharing dick.’ And that’s how friends see me — that I’m just sharing dick with other women.”

After she wrote the diary, Bunyan-Sampson got a lot of letters from black people saying they felt the same way she did but they didn’t believe there was any space for those feelings. A lot of young black girls seem curious about the concept, but being polyamorous in and of itself means the privilege of having access to information about polyamory, and people of colour may not have that.

“It’s going to take a long time, if at all, for black people to feel safe to engage in it,” she said. “White people in general, in this society, have the privilege to move through any space they want. There is a lot of restrictions on black people and people of colour that white people don’t have, and I think, especially, when it comes to love and how to love, it’s more acceptable.”

And then there is the backlash from the black community.

When she engaged in one particular black Toronto community support group, Bunyan-Sampson said she was attacked and berated for “ruining the black family” and for “promoting promiscuity to young black women.”

“Black women are like, ‘Oh, my god, this is amazing’ and black men are offended,” she noted. “I’ve heard, ‘That’s what white people do.’ ‘We don’t do that’ is a common response to polyamory.”

Mainstream media doesn’t show any inclusive portrayals of challenges people of colour face, she said. “When we look at black culture and POC culture, we can see a lot of poly life. But it just doesn’t look the way white poly life looks,” she said. “There’s a show called *Married and Dating*. I remember watching it, and it’s like, ‘Do they have jobs?’ Another couple moves into their back-house thing [coach house] and it’s cool and everything, but I don’t think it’s feasible for the average person. A lot of black people will see that and that’s their poly representation and it’s not realistic.”

Coming from a counselling and social work background, Bunyan-Sampson hopes race will be an issue that is more frequently discussed in the poly world. The conversations about people of colour within poly communities are few and far between, and she’s “found a lot of racial stuff going on,” she said. “When you have black people, Indigenous people, POC trying to engage in the group,

they become a fetish. Or if they raise concerns, they're not received very well. People are like, 'Let's just be poly and love each other. Forget about all this race talk.'"

8

Visible and Invisible Minorities: Underrepresented Communities Within Polyamory

What an extraordinary thing it can be, love, how it will not be defined by gender, by sexuality, by race, by religion, by anything. It's something else. It's something other.

— Eddie Redmayne

POLYAMORY IS PERCEIVED as white and privileged.

By and large, when you see polyamory portrayed in popular media, it's generally white people — one man and two women — with enough financial resources or power to be able to pursue multiple relationships. Not only does that stereotype infuse itself into pop culture — it also seeps into academia. Take, for example, the following studies about polyamory.

In 2011, U.S. professors Elisabeth Sheff and Corie Hammers looked at the race and class backgrounds of polyamorists involved in thirty-six different sociological studies. They found that just 10.8 percent of respondents, on average, were people of colour, while 76.8 percent were of middle-class status or higher and 78 percent had at least some college education.

A Canadian study — the first of its kind — called “Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada” by the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family and released in December 2017 garnered similar results. It found that respondents aged thirty-five to fifty-four tended to have higher incomes than respondents eighteen to thirty-four, with 41.2 percent of older respondents earning between \$50,000 and \$99,000 a year.

“The interesting part about this for me is the difference between the demographic and income characteristics of our respondents compared to those of the general Canadian population,” said the report's author, John-Paul Boyd. “Respondents tended to be younger, better educated, and have higher incomes than Canadians as a whole.”

Respondents who had obtained a university degree or higher level of education were more likely to say they were in a polyamorous relationship (73.6

percent), according to the survey.

The vast majority of respondents described their ethnicity as Caucasian or European (90.2 percent). The most common other ethnic identities reported by respondents were Métis (1.7 percent), African-Canadian (0.8 percent), Chinese (0.8 percent), and First Nations (0.6 percent).

“I realized that, by and large, they were wealthy white people. I suppose that in a way, when one has not had to spend one’s life fighting for basic human equality, as might be the case as someone who is transgender, of another colour, an immigrant to Canada, who is suffering from another marker that subjects them to discrimination — it’s the luxury of the absence of that kind of discrimination,” said Boyd. “This was a relatively privileged group of people who had the luxury of choosing alternative lifestyles. I know I’m making a gross generalization, but that’s what surveys give you.”

But just as polyamory can feature infinitely varied relationship structures, it also attracts people from massively diverse backgrounds.

In the previous chapter, we heard Alicia Bunyan-Sampson describe her uphill battles as a black polyamorous woman. Similar sentiments are expressed across people of colour (POC) in general, and they fall through the cracks as one of several underrepresented segments within polyamorous communities.



Joey, a Chinese-Canadian living in Toronto, identifies as non-binary, uses he/them pronouns, and practises polyamory and ethical non-monogamy in various relationship dynamics. Joey said the non-monogamous community, especially the intersection of kinky polyamorous people, are, by and large, white. There’s a clear lack of representation of POC, which leads to “white fragility,” where white people avoid dealing with issues of intersectionality (how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society).

“There are a multitude of racial issues that colonialism and systemic oppression [have] caused, like many masculine Chinese people [being] highly desexualized, and the conversation on that paradigm shift is only happening now,” Joey told me.

“Talking about [these issues] to white people is difficult and tiring. Because the polyamory community is so white, an overwhelming amount of conversations need to happen to create communities where Chinese POC feel safe to explore. These conversations are complex, difficult, and [it] take[s] a lot of time for white people to self-criticize and make necessary changes.”

Joey has noticed there aren't a lot of people of colour in poly communities. Part of that also has to do with cultural history: "Chinese families can be conservative and religious, due to colonization and 'honouring traditions,' so a familial support network usually isn't there — or if it is, it's pretty negative most of the time. Growing up in those environments, many of us don't have the opportunity to talk about or explore different lifestyle choices, or even be exposed to the idea of them without judgment."

Add that to inherent racism and Chinese cultural expectations ascribing value to certain careers, such as being a doctor or lawyer, and then going in a totally different direction. "There's typically a lot more pressure for certain paths, and a lot less support and validity for anything else," said Joey, adding that this paradigm doesn't necessarily reflect reality for all POC. "Poly is also expensive and quite privileged. It takes a lot of communication, and time, and if you're meeting new people, money to go out."

POC by and large score lower on all of those bases, with the younger counterparts "working minimum wage and saddled by Millennial debt; [it's] kinda hard to do anything else when you're just trying to survive."

That being said, there has been a slow growth of people of colour in poly communities, because more of them have been talking about their unique and specific problems, said Joey. "We create dialogues on race, on dating, on our cultures. We try to make safer spaces where POC can meet others like them — grassroots movements, workshops, meet-ups — and actively take up space."

"Having a community that is receptive ... will let more people of colour be receptive to that community as well. This will require the current white polyamorous community to be open to new narratives, to do the emotional labour in order to recognize the differences POC have in living under systemic oppression, and to understand that polyamory is extremely political for many POC."

Joey points to the closed Facebook group Toronto Non-Monogamous BIPOC (black, Indigenous, people of colour). The group is reserved for people who fall under those categories to "discuss polyamorous life and plan events," according to the page's description.

Millie, an administrator for Toronto Non-Monogamous BIPOC, was inspired to create the group after joining the Poly Dating Zone on Facebook a year before. She noticed the racial demographic — based in Toronto, a city that thrives on diversity — was unimpressively narrow: "You have something that, ratio-wise, is so unrepresentative of one of the most multicultural cities in the world. I was quite shocked about that and wondered, 'What's up with this?'"

In December 2016, she created a Facebook mixer event, and immediately 160

people of colour signed up; sixty ended up attending. “Clearly, there’s a need to have this space and to have these conversations. People asked us to create a Facebook page for people of colour, because a lot of people aren’t comfortable being in the mainstream polyamory community,” she said.

Some of the conversations focus on feeling alienated in one’s own ethnic community. People discuss other ways to love and other paradigms for non-monogamy and polyamory outside of the Western household lens, about barriers to entry when it comes to a person’s colour, which carries with it all kinds of issues, such as policing, access to social housing, and relationships. “For the polyamory community, there’s an amount of privilege that comes when you enter the group. It can be very upper-middle class, educated, white, and there are meeting rooms and places [where] people don’t feel welcomed or can’t afford,” Millie said. This, she pointed out, is in addition to the issue of white people not understanding POC. “My anchor partner is white and we discuss ... the issues that come with that [white privilege]. I want them to actually feel encouraged and supported, more upbeat and empowered, even.”

Millie said POC can build communities by creating safe spaces and strategizing how to target and combat racism in the mainstream polyamory community.

They’re working on an allyship workshop geared toward helping white people in the polyamory community understand what to work on when dating people of colour and how to be better allies to those people. But white people also need to assume responsibility and look up resources in order to educate themselves, Millie explained.

One of the biggest issues poly people of colour face is alienation. Millie said it’s easier to find safe spaces in downtown Toronto for people with non-traditional relationships, but it’s harder to reach out to people who live outside the downtown core. “A lot of people we work with have tough schedules. They have two, three jobs and are going to school. And they’re trying to figure out how to do polyamory and are feeling very alone in knowing how to juggle all this. How do you breach that alienation and try to help them?” she said. “[POC are from] so many different cultures. Somebody from a Muslim background has to go through [different] barriers and challenges than somebody who’s black and atheist has to face. There’s no one-size-fits-all.”

Right now, she told me, there are 180 people in the group, but a lot of people who are private about their lives and haven’t come out may total another forty (these people haven’t joined the online group but do show up to events). Millie said she isn’t terribly optimistic there will be a sea change soon when it comes to resolving challenges within POC poly communities. But she hopes more of these

conversations will continue, especially because non-monogamy is rooted in many different cultural backgrounds.

“I think people of colour and different cultures have been looked down upon by Western-centric civilizations. [Non-monogamy] has existed in so many cultures and communities around the world — only now, it’s a cool thing, whereas before, it was considered degenerate or uncivilized,” she explained. “I love coming to meetings and seeing how somebody who is, maybe, Muslim, will meet someone who is Muslim, polyamorous, and from their country of origin for the first time in their lives. And it’s that sense of relief and ‘Oh my god, finally! I can talk to somebody in person who understands where I’m coming from.’ Even just talking to somebody who can relate to you can be a solution.”

Kevin Patterson, who leads the Polydelphia group in Philadelphia, said finding representation for people of colour within polyamory is very challenging. In his keynote speech at the 2018 Toronto sexuality conference Playground, he recalled feeling relief that there were polyamory communities where he and his wife Antoinette fit in. But Patterson soon realized the colour of his skin made him an outsider. “It was ten minutes into my first polyamory event when I got hit with my first racial micro-aggression,” he said. “It’s a big deal in that the event was a big Valentine’s Day mixer. It was three years ago now [in 2015] and people still talk about it. But my reason for talking about it is, there were dozens of people there, and there were seven people of colour. Then, you ask, ‘How many white people were there?’ and nobody knows, because there’s a sea of them.”

Of those seven, four never came back to events in that community. One came back only when Patterson became part of that group’s leadership, and the other two were he and his wife. “All the representation is white, all the books we love were written primarily by white women,” he said. “*Ethical Slut, More Than Two* — and they’re all good books. What you have to understand is, if you have a problem in these spaces, the people who are causing the problems are the same people that you’ve got to go to to fix those problems. If I say, ‘I got fetishized,’ they might say it’s complimentary. ‘Big black cock — aren’t you happy about that?’ or ‘They want to taste the chocolate.’ It ain’t okay. They don’t know that.”

Patterson said there is danger in having events in areas of the city where people of colour may not feel welcome or safe — and if the event or space is prohibitively expensive, they won’t come — and that might be another barrier. He wants to bring the issue of race and polyamory to the forefront with his book, *Love’s Not Color Blind: Race and Representation in Polyamorous and Other Alternative Communities*, as well as Poly Role Models, a project to further destigmatize consensual non-monogamous relationships, particularly those

involving people of colour. “You gotta talk about these issues while wearing a clever T-shirt [it says “I’m rooting for everybody black”] and a smile on your face, because if you don’t, there’s already this pre-established narrative of the angry black man that will override any message you deliver,” he said. “Basically, you’ve got to find a way to rock the boat while still staying on the boat. And if this sounds exhausting, it’s only because it *is* exhausting.”

A trickle of TV series and films has begun projecting the intersectionality of black people and polyamory. But that doesn’t mean they’re accurate. Spike Lee’s series *She’s Gotta Have It*, which revisits his 1986 movie of the same name, debuted on Netflix in December 2017. The show revolves around Nola Darling, a “polyamorous pansexual.” While the first wave of reviews praised the show’s feminist intent, its would-be biggest fans — black/queer/poly women — seemed to take a more critical tone, especially concerning the finale, where Nola brings her three men home for Thanksgiving dinner but doesn’t disclose to them the fact that they’ll be meeting each other.

“Darling never asks them if they want to meet or gave them a choice in the matter.... That ironclad selfishness ... is framed as a revolutionary step forward for sex-positive black women. In some respects it is, but it also leaves no room for her partners’ desires and wishes,” wrote Evette Dionne in *BitchMedia*.

Even the show’s creator, Spike Lee, was quoted in *Vice* saying, “I have no idea what the word *polyamory* means. What is it? Polly wants a cracker? What are you talking about?”

Another example is *195 Lewis*, a 13-episode dramedy series (streamable at 195lewis.com) about a group of black queer women in Brooklyn who live through the ups and downs of poly.

There are also several documentaries that have addressed the subject.

Amazon Prime has picked up the twenty-seven-minute documentary *Poly Love*, which, according to its promo, “approaches polyamory from the intimate point of view of an Afro-American family who decided to live an authentic life without denying the option of diversity in their love and family.”

In March 2018, the *Atlantic*’s website featured a short film by Maria Rosa Badia, called *Real Talk About Open Relationships*, which depicts three interracial couples who speak honestly about open relationships in a brief, but tidy summary about the basics of polyamory.

In 2004, American filmmaker Susan Kaplan followed the lives of a triad living in Manhattan. The two men, Sam Cagnina and Steven Margolin, were looking for a woman to be in a relationship with the two of them, and they found their friend Samantha Singh, originally from Toronto, to consensually join them. The filmmaker followed this closed triad — who formed so long before

mainstream polyamory coverage that they referred to themselves as “trinogamous” — for eight years. The relationship ended up falling apart after one partner decided to leave the poly family, forcing the trio — and the audience — to learn that even unconventional relationships are not immune to communication breakdowns and bitterness stemming from a jilted ex. *Three of Hearts* debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival that same year. In the film, it’s documented that Samantha Singh’s immediate family (who are of Indian background) knew of the relationship, but not her other relatives or parents’ friends. “It was early in the festival, and before we got there, a review came out with their picture on the front page of the Toronto newspaper, with a great review, but telling their whole story,” Kaplan revealed in a 2011 interview on *Stranger than Fiction*, a documentary film review website. “I told Samantha that she really should show her family this movie. She said ‘No, I really want them to see it in the theater with a thousand people.’ Her father was furious that he was outed in such a public way. He wasn’t going to come — in fact, he was going to sue us for exposing something he felt was very private.”

Kaplan said she felt nervous about going to Toronto to premiere her film, but said Singh’s family ended up attending. “So much healing went on at that screening because at the end of the movie her parents applauded and gave us all big hugs and said, ‘I finally understand my daughter,’” Kaplan said. “He invited us to a big Indian brunch at his house, and it was very healing for everybody involved.”



Indigenous people within poly also tend to be underrepresented.

Kim TallBear, who runs the website *Critical Polyamorist* and is a professor at the University of Alberta, said she applies her principles of polyamory as best as she can within the existing “English-speaking, settler world.”

“Indigenous people have to use imperfect language for translation. We have to use English to think Indigenous world views, which were developed in different languages,” she explained from her office in Edmonton, Alberta. “Calling it *polyamory* and having to work within that social structure is kind of like, ‘Oh well, one more thing that’s an imperfect translation of what I really want to do....’ It’s better than what was forced on us, which was faith-based state-sanctioned marriage, lifelong heterosexual monogamy — even though polyamory still has some of that baggage.”

The *Critical Polyamorist* website was launched in October 2013 as “an experiment” for TallBear to engage in conversations, using social media, with

other polyamorists who felt not only “socially challenged in the broader monogamist culture” but also “culturally challenged within our rather homogenous polyamorist communities.”

So many of the principles of polyamory — or at least as much as the Western world allows for — can be seen in Indigenous family structures. “I can’t practise in this society the kind of non-monogamy my ancestors practised. That was a different society in a different world with different rules,” she explained. “‘Polyamory’ is what is available to me. It’s about building an extended family and a set of social relations that are mutually sustainable. My project is not about simply throwing off sexual monogamy and sexual repression — it’s about building extended relations.”

She described the reduction in broken families when there was that support network. She came from a culture in which the *tiospaye*, loosely translated as “extended family,” was the fundamental unit of kinship. The couple is not central in that. “When the couple became central, if you look at histories of marriages in the United States, not only was that imposed on Indigenous people, it was imposed on immigrants [and] formerly enslaved people. There was a need to make the nuclear family the building block of the nation in the U.S. and Canada,” she said. “I was raised by my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mom. Who cares if my dad was gone by the time I was three; I had aunts and uncles and a big extended family. I realized that settlers were telling us our families were broken, and ours probably work better than theirs do. It doesn’t mean we don’t have hardship, it doesn’t mean people don’t lose their jobs or break up, but if you’ve got an extended family, you can weather those hardships better.”

TallBear aspires to live as an example for other Indigenous people curious about open non-monogamy. She’s sensitive to the fact that it might be a difficult topic for a lot of other Indigenous people to consider, given the sexual shaming that was “a main tool of colonization implemented in large part through residential schools and forced conversion to Christianity.

“The structure is there to force us into monogamy at every turn, and those of us who can resist it have to work very hard at it and we tend to have some privileges that allow us to do it,” she said. “I’m a professor. I have had friends and partners who have worked for public schools, who work for state governments, who work for corporations who have ethics clauses — they do not feel free to be out as non-monogamists.”



Another cluster of underrepresented people within poly are those who identify as queer, trans, or non-binary (NB).

Dr. Ruth Neustifter — who identifies as queer and non-binary and uses the pronouns *they*, *them* and *their* — has two nesting partners in Guelph, Ontario, in a V. There's Blue, who has been there since 2000, and Rabbit, who met Neustifter in 2015. “As queers, we have our queer family. Some are sexual with one or more of us; some are not sexual with any of us. We have close bonds, do holidays together, and support each other a great deal,” they said.

“My poly circles are pretty queer and generally I'm not the only non-binary person around at social events. Because I inhabit very queer social spaces and leather circles often, I have a lot of peer and social support. I give and receive a lot of love and support in these groups.”

Neustifter's cisgender (cis), heterosexual (het) monogamous friends and family are also largely supportive and their nesting partners' parents have been very welcoming of them and of their lives together. Neustifter's own parents had a more complicated reaction, mainly to the poly issue. They are in limited contact now.

Eva Dusome, the lead organizer of Polyamory Toronto, said as a queer, mixed-race person in the community, she has looked into a number of issues within the group, like race, gender, and sexuality. She kept hearing about prejudices against bisexual men and, with willing community members, decided to do a more in-depth analysis of guys into guys and women.

“You have a lot of bi men [who] are being misrepresented as straight, because a bisexual man isn't necessarily welcome in our communities,” she said. “That is very prominent in the swing community as well. ‘They have bathhouses for that’ is often a line I'll hear — yeah, well, maybe sometimes a bi man wants to be with his partners of all genders at the same time. Bathhouses aren't generally welcoming of women, trans, and non-binary folks.”

Queer polyamorous people are often incorrectly seen as promiscuous instead of as preferring multiple loving relationships, Dusome explained. “As a cis, straight-looking person, I'm often mistaken unless I out myself,” she said. “When I out myself as a queer, non-binary Métis person, I'm investing in people being able to live their authentic lives. Queer people have had to do non-monogamy for years for survival because they couldn't necessarily pair up safely or get married. None of these things were legalized nor legitimized. We've been doing non-monogamy in a lot of these outer spheres for centuries.”

Robin Bauer — a trans man who co-produced the first international academic conference on polyamory in Germany in 2005 — said, “gay men have been practising non-monogamy from the get-go and consider heterosexuals to be

Johnny-come-latelies.”

Marie-Claire, a femme trans woman in the Ottawa area, said being trans and poly has put her more into a fetish category than anything else. “In a few words, the poly community seem to treat trans people as novelty items in my experience, which makes dating poly people rather difficult, even while being pansexual and being open to dating couples,” she said. “There seems to be a hesitation from people — mostly from cis people — about connecting with me, especially publicly. I’ve had so many men privately message me inquiring about ‘discreet encounters’ as if it would be shameful for people to know they are attracted to me. They want sex but not a relationship. I’ve noticed that many women want to be my friend, like I’m some hot token trans friend, but not a valid partnership option. All of the people I’m currently involved with have a primary partner that isn’t me.”

She said most people with whom she’s been able to connect — either physically or emotionally — were comfortable doing so tentatively. However, they gave her the impression that they were able to open up to her only because they already had a stable relationship from which to explore. “[It’s] as if the only people comfortable enough to ‘try me out’ are the ones who won’t be seen as ‘my partners,’” she explained. “This does seem to change after we’ve been involved for a while, but the initial perception I get is usually consistent with that. I’ve had way too many experiences where people seem genuinely interested in me but disappear when the dating scenario gets to the point of actually meeting in person. Or, at that point, it turns into a Trans 101 talk/education session and there seems to be no romantic interest.”

In November of 2017, American sex columnist Dan Savage addressed a letter-writer’s question about whether the *P* in polyamory should be added to the end of LGBTQ or if polyamory should fall under the *Q* — for “queer.” He said polyamory isn’t a sexual identity, but rather a relationship model. The man got a lot of heat, but he kind of lives for that.

However, the controversial debate continues to pop up sporadically in online poly discussions. “While we commonly think of sexual orientation in terms of the gender we’re attracted to, some in the non-monogamy community say the practice should be considered a ‘relationship orientation,’ recognized in the same way as one’s sexual or gender orientation,” wrote Neil McArthur, a sexuality and philosophy researcher at the University of Manitoba, in *Vice*. “In other words, they seek the same social acceptance and legal protections we increasingly grant gays, lesbians, and trans people.”

Atlantic columnist Andrew Sullivan wrote: “I believe that someone’s sexual orientation is a deeper issue than the number of people they want to express that

orientation with.”

Many in the queer community say cis-het people who are polyamorous want to take up space they haven't yet worked for instead of creating their own. They say if you have the privilege and aren't "queer," you shouldn't label yourself as such. "The question of whether poly [an abbreviation of *polyamorous* preferred by some] people should be considered queer or added to the LGBTQ+ umbrella unfortunately pops up quite often in online poly communities. At this point, it's pretty tiring," said a woman named Jane whom I corresponded with.

Matt, another person who threw his two cents into the debate, said there should be more flexibility from the queer community to work together with polyamorous people, especially as they face a number of legal challenges similar to those that gays and lesbians have historically experienced: "It's an echo chamber of the same discussions which excluded bi and trans people from the gay community for years. Without empathy and understanding, these discussions can lead many parties to claim they are the bigger victim of oppression, which then excludes those who are less victimized and trumps anything they may say, even though they are still victims. We need empathy, a lot of work, and a lot less ego," he suggests.



Autistic people, people who struggle with mental health issues, and people with disabilities also don't see themselves well reflected in the poly community.

Toronto couple Sam and Grace designed their love how they wanted it to look, beyond any borders of their physical disabilities or the norms of society around heterosexual relationships.

Sam, fifty, met his wife Grace, also fifty, through a mutual friend nearly twenty-five years ago, after he moved from Northern Ontario to Toronto. He phoned her and she picked up the receiver, even though it meant interrupting her favourite TV show at the time, *Wings*. They dated for four years before they got married, and the two say their marriage is full of happiness, intimacy, trust, and love.

"I knew something was different about how we experience love, but at first I didn't know just how different," said Sam. "Whenever I would look at another woman out on the street, Grace was never jealous. There was never a smack on the shoulder saying, 'What are you doing?' And I thought, cool — I've met somebody that isn't jealous. Not that I was ever testing that, but it was just nice knowing she felt secure."

Sam has spina bifida — Latin for "split spine." "Something happened in the

first four weeks of my mom's pregnancy for me that my spine didn't form properly. The bones kind of split open and there was a lesion and a big gap, covered by a scar. In my situation, I'm paralyzed from the waist down," he explained.

Grace has cerebral palsy, a condition that inhibits her ability to move in a coordinated way and causes muscle tightness, weakness, and spasticity, mostly in her legs and feet. Both she and Sam use wheelchairs to help their mobility.

"I had the same experience as Grace growing up. I had a handful of dates, not even. I had a little more nerve in university, probably fuelled by alcohol," he said.

Grace grew up in a small Ontario town and could "count on one hand" the number of dates in her youth, let alone sexual encounters. "I think our shared experience really helped to develop the depth of the trust and understanding. We really did come from that same experience."

The immediate and deep feelings of comfort and intimacy made it so that very soon after they met, Grace could admit to Sam that she was also attracted to women and began to identify as pansexual. They came to polyamory through the exploration of their feelings of trust and sharing their desires.

"We were fans of *Big Love*. I know it was fictional television and was about polygamy and not polyamory, but it showed a healthy family. They had a true bond and a supportive way of loving each other. I really liked that," said Grace.

One of the things that made it easier for them to embark on polyamory, Grace said, is the nature in which she and Sam are intimate; the risk is not there for pregnancy and there's a lower risk of STIs.

Sam clarified, "Nothing below my waist works, but my hands, fingers, lips, teeth, tongue work — and our imagination. We've adapted our sex life to use what I have. So, that meant that we had much less fear of any physical consequences of delving into polyamory."

They became involved with their friend, Daisy, and the three of them took a trip to New York City. They were on a path together in Central Park — Daisy and Grace in their wheelchairs and Sam behind them taking photographs.

"Would you ever have a threesome?" Grace recalled Daisy asking. "We often travel single file, one behind the other. 'I want to have this conversation. But you can't whisper,' I said to her. Her response was like, 'Who cares who is going to hear?' I wasn't sure what would transpire."

It wasn't until the trio returned to Toronto that they had an open and frank discussion about the possibility of the three of them having a relationship together.

"We realized it's a do-it-yourself relationship, but we were all trying to

navigate the parameters of what this was going to be,” said Grace.

Daisy spent weekends with the couple; however, their relationship with her has transformed over the six months they’ve been together. The three of them are still emotionally intimate, but the physical only goes as far as cuddling. Daisy also realized she didn’t wish to be sexual with women, which Grace supports.

Sam said he’s met another partner, May, since joining Polyamory Toronto and several Facebook groups. Their relationship is still in its early days.

May, the first able-bodied partner Sam has dated, continues to cope with an acquired brain injury from an accident and has learned so much about dealing with stress and other issues, which she has passed on to Sam. “I’ve been a beneficiary of her incredible support, love, knowledge, and education,” said Sam. “She’s younger than me, but an old soul and is willing to teach me. It’s a new relationship, but it’s really been an incredible one.”

The poly community has also been very welcoming, he added, but there are still some challenges. Few resources exist locally and online when it comes to polyamory and disability. He references a poly speed-dating event last year. “I was interested in getting out there and dating, and it would have been the perfect event for me to go [to], but it was in a non-accessible location, so I couldn’t,” he said. “That could be isolating, but that’s not their fault. I’ve found the community very open.”

Grace said because of her disability, she struggles with having enough energy, and therefore would hesitate to take on another partner — though she added she’s open to it. “Neither of us needs any home supports, like a personal care worker. We manage our household ourselves,” she said. “But after a full day of work and then managing the household, I feel like if I was going to be able to expand between Sam and I, I’d want to be able to give myself fully, and I don’t think I have that right now.”

They are, however, daydreaming of the possibility of having a co-parenting role if they were to meet the right people who have kids, as having children is off the table because of their disabilities. Poly has opened the potential not just for more opportunities, but for different forms of love for them.

Grace is also curious about having sexual intercourse, provided she finds a person she can trust. “One of the things Sam and I talked about [was] because of his disability, he’s unable to sustain an erection. This means that, in many ways, I consider myself still a virgin and still haven’t had the traditional intercourse,” she said. “I haven’t had it up to this point at the age of fifty — I’m not sure if it’s something that’s necessary to have or seek. I don’t feel like my love life is missing. True intimacy is so much more than the physical act.”

Sam said that many conversations about the physical act of having sex have to happen with any new partners before it takes place — they can't just “jump” into the sack. “We needed to have some conversations before Grace and I had sex, just because of our disabilities,” he said. “I wanted to know how her body worked, so I could give her pleasure in the best way and not hurt her. Same with my body.”



Wayne, a forty-six-year-old man from the Toronto area, said he's been open to loving more than one person at a time since he was in his twenties, but tried “singular love” for eight years when he was diagnosed with severe flatfoot deformity and complex regional pain syndrome — a long-term condition that worsens over time, often accompanied by pain, sensitivity, and swelling.

“After surgery, it was a seven-year train wreck,” he said. “I can walk and even run, but being sick makes it very hard to enter into a relationship of any kind. I also find it very hard to find poly partnerships. My ultimate goal would be to live with two women where all three of us could have a relationship but also come and go [as] we please. It seems like the best fit for me with my medical problems.”

Wayne has resisted long-term partnerships since his marriage ended because he was worried about them not working out, adding to the stress of already dealing with a disability. And while those who are already in supportive poly families may reap the rewards of having multiple caregivers, Wayne feels that new partners may not want to take on the stress and responsibility of that role.

In her blog post “Poly and Crippled: When Your Other Partner Is Your Disability,” Reena K. Belford from Ottawa writes about how managing her physical and mental illness already feels like a full-time job. “When your main focus each day is the struggle of getting out of bed, showering (maybe), finding ways to deal with intractable pain, etc., the acts of communication and caring for the emotional and physical needs of another person seem insurmountable. And quite frankly, like work.”

Sometimes, metamours can help with those kinds of obligations, but other times, the weight of a metamour's illness can sabotage relationships. “Whether it is due to disability or some other life change, it's tremendously important to take the emotional time to process and if necessary, withdraw,” Belford said.



What happens when the health issues are not physical, but mental or cognitive?

On a number of polyamory discussion boards, members ask about being autistic or having mental health challenges, such as borderline personality disorder (BPD).

“I have BPD. I am also poly,” wrote one user. “Not going to sugar-coat it, it does make it harder. Thankfully my [partner] is amazingly patient with me when I have a freak-out over something stupid. Poly has really helped me by forcing me to deal with emotions I would usually just try to wall up.”

An admin of a poly discussion group said she felt people on the autism spectrum as well as the “especially sensitive type[s]” are both highly represented in the poly community compared to the overall population.

“My partners and I get into fights over [some behaviours], but it isn’t because of me being autistic. It is from them failing to communicate effectively (read: direct and concise). It is improving, though,” one person said.

“I have been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, as have my partners. As to whether or not I think that affects our relationship in any way, it’s really hard to tell,” another wrote. “I would say it really depends on how you draw the line between what is merely a personality trait, and what is a result of a mental/social condition, provided you even believe these conditions exist, and I have met people who don’t. What I do know is that we have a lot in common, and that we seem to understand one another a lot better than most people.”

Liane from Toronto struggles with anxiety and an eating disorder. Those issues intersect with polyamory whenever she starts dating someone new and commits to the process of “coming out” about her mental health. “It can be challenging due to shame and stigma,” said the thirty-one-year-old. “My eating disorder can affect how I feel about my body, and in turn, how I feel about going on dates, being physical with new people, *etc.* My partners sometimes, accidentally, say things that trigger body image issues, and I have to set a lot of boundaries. Because I date multiple people, this process can be tiring.”

She said her anxiety affects her experiences in polyamory in a more pervasive way.

“I can get anxious when my partners date new people — when I feel like I could be replaced — or when I’m in conflict with my partners, and those thoughts can be all-consuming,” she explained. “I see and hear people talking more often about mental health issues, even within the polyamory community, on dating profiles, in Facebook groups, *etc.* That being said, I’ve never seen any real, open public discussions about the challenges polyam people with mental health issues face.”

Empathy goes a long way, she feels. That’s why she started an Etsy store

online called With Love Compassion Cards. It focuses on mental health cards; most recently, she introduced two polyamory-themed ones to her lineup. There's "You are one of my significant others," with three cartoon brown otters embracing, and "Non-monogamoose," with four moose, their antlers entwined to form multiple hearts. She's sold around 1,500 cards since 2016.

"People with mental health issues are also not recognized by the greeting card industry. I figured, why stop there?" she said. "A lot of poly people probably feel excluded, too. I wanted to put out a message to non-monogamous people that their relationships deserve to be recognized."

9

Johnathon Hooper

ONTARIO

Age does not protect you from love. But love, to some extent, protects you from age.

— Jeanne Moreau

JOHNATHON HOOPER HAD TO LEARN to be a widow before he could become polyamorous.

Originally from County Durham, U.K., he married his wife Anne in 1973 in a church in Bideford, near Devon. It was hot that August 11 for England, the picturesque scenery akin to a Bob Ross oil painting with rolling hills and a tidal river.

He had met Anne three years earlier at a friend's party in Hull; she was raised in Africa by English-born parents, and he was immediately interested in her stories. She taught elementary school but had put her career on hold to raise their two sons. (They later had two more.) The family arrived in Canada in 1980 and settled in Ottawa.

"She was a wonderful combination of sophisticated, down-to-earth, fun-loving and intensely ambitious. She was someone who could happily paint a house or a mural. She was a lovable soul," said Hooper.

In Canada, Anne was diagnosed with blood cancer and died in 1989. Finding himself now living on his own again, he forged his way through mourning and raising their kids but missed the intimacy of a romantic relationship. "I had a thirst for sexual exploration, but I also missed the enjoyment of having a companion. When I lost my wife, I lost my best friend. Since then, I've always wanted a woman's company a lot more than I wanted the sexual pleasures in life," he confided.

"I never stopped loving her. I still miss her. It was mind-blowing when I fell

in love again, but I didn't lose the feelings for Anne. That's when I knew, technically, you can love more than one person."

For Hooper, relationships are not just about sexual connections. There are intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and economic components. "I could be monogamous sexually, but I couldn't take that one relationship to become the exclusive female companionship in my life."

In 1997, he was working in New Hampshire while dating a younger woman who lived in Ontario; she knew he was involved with other women. "[It] wasn't a big secret, it was a 'don't ask, don't tell' grey zone," he said.

That is, until she put her foot down and demanded he stay "faithful" to only her. He said he couldn't. "She was upset and dumped me two years into the relationship. I thought we could still be friends," he said. "One day, she wanted to come see me. She had a boyfriend, but she didn't want to tell him. She was in cheat mode and I wasn't."

From that point, Hooper vowed to be "open" with himself — open to see others and to discuss it with his partner or partners.

"I was practising polyamory even before I knew there was a name for it," he said.

At sixty-five, Hooper, now a permanent Canadian resident living in Toronto, would categorize himself as solo poly — that is, polyamorous but not interested in a nesting partner for now. In the past, he's been in an open relationship, open marriage, and "adult group situations."

"That doesn't mean to say that's my choice in life [solo poly], it's just where I am right now. If it were up to me, I would have three live-in girlfriends and be this big ego guy." He paused.

"Look," he said, laughing. "That was a joke."

Unlike some in the solo poly community, he doesn't have a problem with unicorn hunting — couples looking for their third — because "there's nothing wrong with hunting for what you're looking for."

"Is it a problem to ask the universe for what you want? I think there is if you're asking for something criminal or morally reprehensible. It's not what you're looking for, but how you go about it, too," he said.

Hooper is also inclined to believe that an attraction toward polyamory itself isn't a genetic inclination, but that genes may play some role. "In Britain, if your parents voted Labour [party], you voted Labour. I think that human culture includes a degree of conformity toward social norms, and some people are more willing to buck the trend line. Perhaps that inclination to fight to be who you want to be is the genetic trait. Even in quite recent history, it can be quite dangerous to be outed." In 2002, Hooper met a married woman in a town near

Toronto. Her husband, who ran a geological-engineering consultancy company, knew all about the exchange, but she was the one who identified as poly in the couple.

“Even though he had Parkinson’s and an operation and couldn’t speak properly, he was an incredibly clever guy — also an asshole, sometimes — but I got along with him,” said Hooper. “He wanted me to come live with them, help them with his business, be the other boyfriend. But I didn’t want my future so dictated by someone else, so they found someone else. She had told her husband she wasn’t going to be monogamous before they got together. He liked his freedom, too, and the idea that he could be married and have sex elsewhere.”

The wife ended up hooking up with another guy, but her husband and her new partner ended up having a falling out and “became arch enemies,” Hooper told me.

“I’d go over there and help take care of [her husband] for a few days,” he said. “[He] became a better friend. She and her boyfriend would go away and take a break for a while. I lived with them a couple times, so I became one of her three men.”

Her husband died when he was seventy years old.

“We used to go play bridge together,” he said. “His ego was still intact — if I ever criticized his plays, I would get an earful. I think the need to have another male in the house stemmed from the fact he couldn’t do it all on his own anymore. He was more of an economic member of the household than a penis provider, but he was still an integral and much-loved member of the household. There can still be love when the sex has gone away.”

As Hooper continued on his own polyamory journey, he read more literature and research about non-monogamy and realized the vow to being open to himself also meant making sure anyone who he is involved with is “at choice,” an expression that means his potential partner knows he is polyamorous and not looking to be restricted to a monogamous courtship, so she can make an informed decision whether to continue.

Recently, he met a woman online and went to have coffee with her. He was a bit taken aback when she expected to come home with him. During the short cab ride to his apartment, Hooper hurriedly tried to explain the concept of polyamory to her before the fare was up. He wasn’t planning a hookup, it wasn’t his thing, but he felt that he needed to have an open conversation about what was going on even if it just turned out to be a one-off.

“It’s a journey and discovery about yourself. You should think about your behaviour and be ethical,” he said. “There are lots of selfish people out there.”

While he feels “polysaturated” — having maximized the amount of time and

emotional work he has available for other partners and for self-care — he’s still open to meeting new people. Right now, he’s looking for a hiking partner with benefits. “I’m looking for that woman who wants to get on the trails and have sex,” he said.

“*Actually* on the trails?” I asked.

“Both.” He chuckles. “If it’s raining, probably not.”

Hooper sees his one partner, Mia, once or twice a week. When her partner goes away, he sees her more frequently. “I have [another] girlfriend, who will come and stay for a few days. She’s my age and really deteriorated, yet, she can still enjoy sex. [In another scenario,] I came across someone who is more intellectually attractive, and then discovered she wanted to try some kink but never had anyone to do it with.”

Hooper’s train of thought is interrupted as he gets a new message on his phone. It’s Mia.

“She says, ‘Might not get to you tonight. Too much traffic. May have your reading glasses, will drop them off, also your keys,’” he reads aloud.

And that’s the heart of poly — normal life.



Hooper is a member of the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association and a former member of Polyamory Toronto. He describes himself as an activist. When new people joined Polyamory Toronto, he would often do a Poly 101 session on ethical non-monogamy — a crash course to also proactively warn newbies of some people’s intention to use poly as an excuse to cheat.

“If someone can’t actually define it, then we can’t figure out if they’re abusing it. All the definitions in poly are very subjective outside of the definition of multiple adult relationships with consent from all,” he explained. “There’s nothing in Webster’s that says what it is. I don’t even think polyamory is fully understood within the poly community.”

The point, he said, is that while polyamorous people or those in open relationships are still navigating their way through the who, what, where, why, and how, there are still ways you could be doing poly wrong, including lying by omission.

“That gets you what you want without being truthful,” he said. “There’s no road map and it’s not simple. The simplest rule I can offer is to make sure that people are *at choice*. This means that there is sufficient disclosure about your social and sexual situation.”

A lot of non-monogamous people just aren’t “out” because of judgment from

society and risk to career, family, and community. In fact, when he tried to start a Durham Region polyamory group — the area an hour east of Toronto — he found more people ended up going to Toronto-based groups rather than the one more conveniently located to them. “They don’t want to do it in their hometown. Even if they’re ‘out,’ they don’t want to be out so publicly. It’s safer in bigger cities.”

When Hooper left Polyamory Toronto, he said it was for two main reasons. First, he found it very queer-centric and that straight couples or newbies sometimes got attitude. “I wanted a group that’s more accepting,” a place where, if some was struggling to find the “right words,” they wouldn’t be called out for it. Instead, they might be helped: “You say, ‘Let’s go for coffee’ or ‘Maybe you need a bit of orientation, so you know what you’re saying, because it’s bothering people.’” (For Polyamory Toronto’s part, lead organizer Eva Dusome countered that while they do actively push for people to be aware of their privileges, they also take the time to educate their community members. “I frequently say you’re allowed to have all the preferences you want in the world, but [we] can look at why they can be problematic.” Race is one example. “When we’re talking about race — because race is a big part of the system — we are talking about white privilege.” Eva said that, unfortunately, some members can’t get behind some of those conversations because of their own bias.)

The second reason for his departure, Hooper admitted, was that he just wants to meet people his own age. “I’m sixty-five. I want to meet women over forty. Poly Toronto — their average age is getting younger and younger,” he said. “At pub events, there may be a few people I want to talk to over forty, but the chance I do, I’m edged out of a conversation by a younger guy who thinks he can get this old fart out of the way.”

With other friends, he formed a consensual non-monogamy (CNM) group for mature open souls to meet up, hang out, and hook up if they so wish, called SO-Poly — Slightly Older Poly of Southern Ontario, for people forty and over.

Hooper believes there is an ever-growing group of seniors who are, at the very least, curious about polyamory. “Two or three times, when I’ve been forthright, the other person says, ‘It’s not for me, but I like your honesty.’ They might not be polyamorous themselves but could be quite comfortable with a polyamorous man as long as they feel at choice.”

One of Hooper’s friends also identifies as poly, coming to that realization after deciding he was done cheating on his partners.

His friend has seen his fair share of judgment. When he changed his status to “open relationship” on Facebook, he got pushback from his boss, who wasn’t comfortable with that. He changed it to “separated” and that was accepted.

“Look, there’s judgment within our community. Why shouldn’t there be judgment outside of it?” Hooper reasoned. “Mono people think that just because you’re not mono, you’re a sex maniac, or you’re available.”

When the friend’s relationship ended, the friend and his ex-partner shifted to a platonic and caring relationship and incorporated new partners into their lives. Hooper calls this “transitioning” — an “advanced poly concept” when the relationship transforms into something new, breathing new life into the options of separation or divorce, he said. Subtracting romance from a relationship doesn’t mean cutting that person out of your life.

“Transition allows [for] a state of mind of moving toward a place where you’ll all be happy,” he explained.

In fact, all four people and two of their kids travelled to Mont Tremblant, Que., for a ski vacation. “I think that they’re best friends,” he said.

As for transitions in his own life — about a quarter of Hooper’s exes don’t speak to him after they break up, “because it didn’t work out the way they wanted it to.... The other three quarters, we still chat. Some now, for over thirty years. If you have some honesty about who you are and when things change, and you’re honest about when things change, there’s still some trust. And trust is a foundation of relationships that last. [It’s] not the only thing, but when you lose trust, it’s amazing how quickly that relationship will disappear.”

10

Metamours and Hinges

If you really want to get along with somebody, let them be themselves.

— Willie Nelson

TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST, I was a little nervous — but also excited — for my two partners to meet for the first time as part of a polyamorous family.

I remember it was the second week in December at the height of the Christmas shopping season. Toronto’s Nathan Phillips Square was decorated for the holidays, with oversized silver balls perched atop its outdoor tree. That day, the square was also full of cabbies, who were protesting against Uber outside City Hall.

I was sent on assignment to cover the protest. Adam was with me, taking pictures for the paper.

It was also Charlie’s first day at college, a week after he had moved to Canada from the U.K. None of us had any experience with navigating polyamory. We were making shit up as we went along, despite reading a few books and articles about how to function as a V and how metamours — the partners of partners — can get along.

Adam initially thought it best his relationship with Charlie be a “business-type” one — kind of like a colleague you respect and work with, but not a BFF. The two of them agreed they would meet for dinner after Charlie had settled into his new home.

Funny about timing.

As Adam was clicking away on his camera while cabbies argued with suspected Uber drivers, I got a text from Charlie. He needed to head to City Hall to get his social insurance number. He was already on his way, and I told him to stop by and say hi.

Right at the corner of Bay and Queen Streets, my two loves officially intersected, now as presumed allies in a polyamorous relationship. They had crossed paths before, but there was a lot of pain involved up until this meeting.

And oh, my heart. It's hard to explain that first twinge of how that felt for me. But I do remember feeling overcome with joy.

Their dinner out — just the two of them — came days within that meeting outside City Hall, at a restaurant called Terroni in midtown.

I made sure to tell them I would stay out of it, so their relationship could grow organically without intrusion or “helicoptering” from me.

Charlie came home hours later, elated about their “date” with a big smile on his face. He gushed about the conversation he had with Adam and how natural it felt. They learned about each other's lives and bonded.

I felt a buzz from my phone. Adam. “Wonderful night!” he wrote.

Not sure if I was feeling compersion — but it sure was something along those lines.

Now every time Adam salivates over burrata — an Italian soft cheese his “meta” loves to eat — it reminds him of Charlie.

“Although I was aware that in order for any of this to work, Adam and I would have to get on, any pressure I had placed on myself dissipated the moment we sat down,” Charlie told me. “I credit Adam with making me feel welcome and relaxed in my new city, as well as us both just enjoying the meal — despite the music being way too loud.”

They spoke loosely of future plans and an unknown road ahead but were both willing to communicate with each other and me, if and when any feelings arose, and they still do.

Adam said that as the older person in the group, he was somewhat unsure about polyamory — something he had never considered or understood. But he immediately respected Charlie for who he was, both on his own and as the “other partner.”

“The fact that we meshed so well bode positively for the whole relationship. Jealousy is a natural and very human experience. I think when compassionate and committed people learn about compersion, they embrace it and, through learning, accept and cherish it,” Adam explained.

Charlie said his relationship with Adam continues to evolve. As with any relationship, there were no guarantees that they would end up feeling the way they do about each other. “[It's] not without its ups and downs — but through it all, we have and continue to grow, respect, and trust each other. In the end, all three of us still enjoy the simplest of pleasures, like spending Sunday nights together, watching a good film, and sharing a meal,” he said. “I trust his judgment and often request his feedback, which I greatly appreciate. The most surprising thing is how natural it all feels. I can't really imagine our lives any differently. Nor would I want to.”

While Adam had more rigid ideas about how the relationship would be defined at the beginning of our poly journey, over time, that has morphed into something softer.

A couple of months after that dinner, with the three of us on the way up to my parents' place, Adam proposed something out of the blue.

"Hey, I've come up with a nickname for each other. Tell me what you think," he asked Charlie.

"What about 'Co'? — As in, co-partners?"

The nickname stuck.

They now affectionately call each other Co & Co.

We're all family together — including Adam's grown son, who was shocked the first time when we told him our plans for all this, but who — along with his girlfriend — has been just unwaveringly supportive of all of us. (We're now "The Fab 5.")

"One interesting thing Charlie and I do when we greet, it's usually with a brief kiss on the lips," said Adam. "Not something I have done with any other male. The polite peck is a way of signifying our unique relationship — and to people who see it. My son commented on it and I explained it to him and he was fine. No tongue, though."

Recently, our polyfidelitous arrangement opened up to the possibility of Adam exploring a relationship with a rekindled childhood friend of his. At first, I was jealous, but gave myself time to digest and process, eventually meeting her in person. She's lovely. At this time, I was working on the jealousy chapter of this book, and some of the sound advice from interviewees kept me grounded. I was and am willing to support whatever their relationship becomes, especially as he is retired and has much more time on his hands. Unfortunately, the pursuit didn't amount to much. Adam said she couldn't "wrap her head around the poly thing." It's too bad — I was looking forward to being a metamour and forming an extended emotional network, and I will continue to support him if he chooses to form new connections. The same goes for Charlie.



Sara, a woman in her thirties from the Toronto area, knows all about growing pains when it comes to her metamour.

Sara is married to Dan, but also has another lifelong partner, George, whom she said is cut from the same polyamorous cloth. George's partner, Katie, identifies more as monogamous, but is becoming more polyamorous by dating new people.

“She’s actually made a lot of progress recently,” said Sara. “I’ll be totally honest — we rub each other the wrong way. Her reaction to me is to see me as a threat because I’m younger, I’m skinnier. I’m a little bit more outgoing, so her self-esteem is really affected by me. That’s not something I wanted to have happen, because I’m not here to replace her. I’m here in addition to her. He’s not going to leave her for me — that kind of defeats the purpose of being in a poly relationship.”

Sara and Dan have been married for fifteen years. Though non-monogamy had always been a future plan, it became tangible when Sara had extreme anxiety following the death of her mother a few years ago. Following the death, in 2015 she signed up for an account on FetLife, a fetish/BDSM/kink community; that’s where she met George. When she was interviewed for this book, she and George had celebrated their first anniversary. George and Katie live just up the street from Sara and Dan.

Sara adopts the “we’re all in this together” mentality in order to unite herself, Katie, and George. It’s a work in progress. “She’s trying and kudos to her,” she said. “We’re very patient whenever she has struggles. We work with her. And that’s fine. I made a lifetime commitment to this man and we want to all be happy and we want [her] to be included in that.”

Jealousy is an ongoing issue for the individual relationships. George gets jealous that Dan and Sara are nesting partners and have a history, while Dan is jealous because George and Sara have a different kind of passion that he never really had with her.

However, while Sara has found that communication has been a big problem between her and her metamour, Katie, there have been significant improvements over time.

George’s brush with health problems has brought the two women together, if only in miniscule increments. “He had a stroke when I was there,” Sara said. “Not understanding it was a stroke at the time, he went back to work three days later and didn’t take time to heal. Nobody ordered an MRI, nobody really investigated it. We didn’t find out until a month later. Like, ‘Holy shit, you should have taken time off work.’”

Then, as he was recovering that April, he had another one — again while Sara was with him. “We have this running joke about people being around me during strokes,” she said. “My friend actually made up a waiver for people to sign that I keep in my wallet. Creating happiness — one stroke at a time.”

Katie then became the breadwinner. Since Sara wasn’t working, she transformed into George’s full-time caregiver (he had lost his licence and couldn’t stand up for more than five minutes at a time). But that new role didn’t

sit well with Katie, Sara said. “She had to learn to let go of things she couldn’t control and that was very difficult. We all recognize that.”

“Communication is the key here, and her and I both suck at it,” Sara went on to explain. “But we’re getting better. She has to take responsibility for her own attitude and behaviour, and a lot of that really came to light when I entered the picture. I’m not a homewrecker; I don’t need to split them up. I don’t need to be the only person in his life to make him happy. She fulfills needs of his that I can’t. So, having her in his life is a positive, beneficial thing for me.”

Through this period, she and Katie split up the duties of running the household. George and Katie also had two kids from a previous marriage to look after, both of whom Sara was happy to take care of while George was recovering and Katie was at work.

“That was a big turning point in our relationship. Katie said something along the lines of, ‘You stepped up, you were there, you really are there for us,’” she said.

All their initial relationships — Katie with George and Dan with Sara — have flourished and benefitted as poly came into their lives.

“George’s relationship with Katie has come leaps and bounds because they’ve had to take an objective look at their lives,” said Sara. “It’s the same thing with Dan and me. We communicate a lot better — that’s something we’ve had to practise.”

“The novelty of having two spouses is great, but once the honeymoon period is over — you have to recognize that it’s work. Am I really fully in this? Is this actually what I want? Is it worth it?” she added. “George is worth it to me. He brings a lot of positive things to my life; I bring a lot of positive things to his life. The stability we have in our lives is from the support we get from each other.”

Sara’s two partners — well, they’re not quite bros, not quite husbands. “They call each other ‘brusbands’ — like brother husbands,” she told me.



Josie Quinn’s metamour story revolves around Christmas Eve.

Her husband, Cameron, was sitting next to her on the couch, each of them on their laptops reading articles and catching up on social media feeds. The kids, too.

It was just before 5:00 p.m. when a Facebook live video popped up on her feed. It was her metamour, and even though there was no sound on the video, Quinn could see she was upset.

“I nudged my husband, pointed to the video, and grabbed earbuds. We began to listen. My meta, Emma, was sharing how it was a tough moment since her separation; the first [holiday] without her kids.”

Although things were going well with the separation and the kids were adjusting and thriving, Quinn suggested Emma come over and stay the night.

She gave the kids a heads-up that Emma was coming.

“I knew I was going to offer my spot in bed to my metamour, so she and Cam could get their snuggles in and she wouldn’t have to wake alone on that first, hard Christmas morning,” she recalled. “I wanted to let our kids know before they went to bed that I may not be in my usual spot, in case there were any middle-of-the-night visits from either of them. I said either Emma would be in the bed with their dad and I would sleep in a spare bed, or Emma would be in the guest room and I would be in my bed. Either way, Emma would be there in the morning. They said okay.”

Emma arrived and brought her Nintendo Switch. The family played for an hour together before the kids were tucked in.

“I offered my bed to Emma. I slept content, knowing everyone was where they needed to be at that moment in time,” Quinn said.



But what happens when you flat-out don’t like your metamours?

“I practise total honesty, so if I don’t like someone my partner is dating, I’ll tell her that I don’t want to participate in activities with them,” said one person in an online group. “If I find that person to be problematic or make me feel unsafe, I’ll tell my partner that they are welcome to date whomever they want, but that it may impact my involvement, because I won’t violate my own personal boundaries for the sake of a metamour. We talk, compromise, reach agreements, and move forward.”

Another person wrote that they’d been on both sides of this. “Sometimes the situation isn’t resolvable, but often a conversation about what the problems are can be helpful rather than invoking a ‘veto’ or other ultimatum. It can also be helpful to try to see the metamour through your partner’s eyes in order to understand what it is they like/love/value about that person. When we see the ways our [metamour makes our partner] happy, it’s easier to move toward a state of compersion.”



People in the middle of a V — we call them the “hinge” or “pivot” — have a unique job of balancing the two sides and can benefit from the metamour relationship between their partners.

Vicki from Ottawa is the hinge in a V with her husband and her girlfriend, and while both her partners get along, they are more introverted by nature. “I’m kind of like, ‘Guys, you’re not bonding. Bond.’ They’re very selective about who they let in. Neither one of them have any super close friends they can connect with. If something’s bothering them, it’s me they come to.”

Vicki, on the other hand, is an extrovert and doesn’t like time alone. One of the benefits of her situation is that it’s rare she ever has to be alone, while her partners can have the freedom to pursue their own interests without feeling obligated to spend time with her or feel guilty when they’re out or busy. “My husband and I raised three kids and we were always busy together as a family,” she said. “And he didn’t have a chance to do all the things he wanted to do, which were physical activities. He’s now joined a gym and joined two different sports leagues and is doing the things he really enjoys. If it were just the two of us, because I didn’t like being alone, he might not have scheduled himself so much and held back, thinking that he needed to make himself more available to me. For him, it’s being more active. For me, it’s more time with my girl. Everybody wins.”

Vicki said watching from the middle, she feels deeply loved, “so sincerely.”

“One morning, I can’t remember what it was, whether it was traffic or bad weather,” she recalled, “I get a text twice in a row that says, ‘Be careful on your way to work.’ I was like, *How perfect is my life?*”

Vicki’s partners, as metamours, both like to watch football and hockey together, and all three of them will go to the movies, see a burlesque show, or check out a jazz club.

But just because Vicki wants her partners to be close doesn’t mean it’s a given. Regardless, she feels it’s her duty to actively make sure they’re all enjoying each other’s company. “I have a cottage in Quebec that we all enjoy in summertime. We cohabituate well together,” she said. “She and I do groceries; he does some of the cleaning around the house. They’re both very flexible and easy to get along with. I see a relationship beginning to take shape between them, but it’s on their own timelines. They know it’s something that I would like to see happen, but you can’t force it.”

Sometimes, there can be pressure to take care of both her partners. “I remember, in the beginning especially, when she left her job and home in Montreal and moved into our big family home in the country, that was a difficult time. There was a lot of juggling to make sure everyone was happy. I remember

that my therapist said, ‘It’s not your job to make everyone happy.’ Yeah, but it kind of is, a little bit. I kept driving myself nuts trying to make everyone happy. When you love someone, you want to ensure they are happy and comfortable.”



Farther east, in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Susan described her husband, fifty-six-year-old Tom, and her fifty-year-old boyfriend Harry as two gender extremes on a wide spectrum. She tends to gravitate toward very alpha males, very feminine females, androgyny, and fluidity. “Harry falls into the category of very feminine male androgyny. Tom is very much the alpha male — ‘I can hunt a deer, bring it home, butcher it, put it in the freezer, and fix the car when I’m done.’”

Take those two very different personalities and put them under one roof. Susan, forty-eight, said they’ve been a real complement to one another. “In 2012, Tom’s back gave out — he had a degenerative back disease for about twenty-five years — and it had deteriorated enough that his doctor advised him that it was time to take long-term disability and start planning for surgery. But him having to adjust [to] not being at the office full-time, being in a state of continual recovery and agony, has been pretty trying.”

That’s when Harry stepped in and stepped up.

“One of the nice things about having Harry in the relationship and in the household is that [Tom] has companionship, someone who can help him do things around the home without having to rely on me a hundred percent of the time,” Susan told me.

“I’m self-employed and there are times when I have to travel for work, and Harry is there to help. The built-in support is invaluable — I swear I would have gone crazy ages ago without Harry.”

She acknowledges she’s lucky to be in her position as the hinge. “I’m sitting back and watching this — I’ve got the easy part. It’s the guys having to learn to navigate the relationship with each other that probably was the hard thing, especially in the early years.”

No one sets out to be the mortar between someone’s brick, but that’s just what metamours and hinges can evolve to. They become the glue that cements the foundation of a polyamorous relationship and without a firm connection between these elements, the Jenga tower begins to tip. “A metamour is just like you,” writes DeWayne Lehman, author of *Polyamory: It’s Not Complicated*. “They care about the person that you care about. And they can be an invaluable resource when you work together. They can be a friend that you can confide in.

... You are on the same team.”

You don't get to pick your metamours. But also remember, they don't get to pick you, either.

Solo, Swing, BDSM, Anarchy ... and Getting Off the Escalator

I don't want to get married — I've been there and done that. So, I know what I'm talking about when I say that. Everybody has a different path — find out your path! And if you want to do it, don't let people make you feel inadequate because you wanted to do something that's different.

— Loni Love, comedian and actress

POLYAMORY MEANS MULTIPLE LOVES, but it doesn't mean you can't be alone.

“We're free agents. Like 007. That's what we're called.”

S.J., a thirty-six-year-old pansexual woman living in Edmonton, Alberta, said she has been doing solo poly in her relationships for a long time, she just didn't know there was a name for it. But she quite fancies the allure of being a James Bond-type in poly.

A friend introduced her to polyamory when she was eighteen; in her twenties, she took a vow of celibacy. Then she was in a long-term relationship for seven years and married for four of those. But it wasn't until she was divorced and spent a year navigating the breakup that she discovered “solo poly.”

Solo poly means you can still have a number of relationships with multiple people, but you don't want to move in with them and don't want to share finances. But S.J. will happily share her heart and time.

“People usually get mixed up between solo and single. I'm not single. I have one partner and I'm dating other people, too. I don't do casual. And that confuses people, too,” she said. “Some people in poly relationships get defensive, especially when people want a closed triad and they're doing the one-penis policy. I find (solo poly) very similar to celibacy ... but it's a very intentional way of living. I don't separate the love from my friends and my partners. I was always okay with being sexually monogamous, but emotionally? No. That's a big thing with poly — I don't want to mimic monogamy in that

way.”

S.J. told me she always felt strongest while single. She could still date and say, “I don’t want to marry you,” but that doesn’t mean she’s not committed to loving deeply despite not wanting a nesting partner. “It fits my life perfectly. I’m excited that I’ve found a word for it. I can still date and fall in love and be in relationships of different types, but there’s this other option. My autonomy is very important. It’s okay to live your life for you.”

We’ve all heard the expression, “Is this relationship going anywhere?”

S.J. said she is committed to not riding the relationship escalator (discussed in Chapter 5). Amy Gahran, author of *Off the Relationship Escalator*, describes this as the “default set of societal expectations for intimate relationships. Partners follow a progressive set of steps, each with a clear goal.... The goal at the top of the ‘escalator’ is to achieve a permanently monogamous ... cohabitating marriage.”

The house, two-door garage (maybe even white picket fence), and kids are all usually part of that goal. What’s the gold-medal reward at the top of the escalator? Staying together “until death do us part.” So, the best-case scenario is that you get to spend many years together, but then your partner dies and you’re alone — or relegated to ride the escalator again. *Wheee*.

And if you fail at any stage in the ascent, it’s game over. Start at the bottom of the escalator and climb up again. It actually resembles a game of Snakes and Ladders.

“A lot of us prefer a committed relationship, but a different type,” S.J. explained. “I’m off the escalator, but I still want commitment, caring, love, and everything else.”

But identifying as solo poly comes with the pitfall of being pigeonholed as a potential target by so-called unicorn hunters — a couple looking for a woman, usually, to service them without allowing her to form outside relationships, especially with other men. S.J. didn’t realize the risk until she put herself out there on dating sites as a bi and pansexual woman.

According to the *Urban Dictionary*, unicorn hunters “often believe a bisexual third partner will prevent jealous feelings on the part of either of the original members of the dyad, because of the mistaken assumption that one will not get jealous if one gets to do all the same things as the other, and no one ever experiences anything, apart from the other half of the primary couple.”

The concept was referenced in the Netflix series *Easy*. In one episode, married couple Tom and Lucy “swipe right” on Tinder when they come across their friend Annie’s dating profile. They end up in a ménage à trois — interrupted frequently by taking turns to check on the couple’s newborn baby —

only for Tom and Lucy to finish having sex while Annie soothes their child upstairs. The couple snuggle in bed following the tryst and Annie goes home alone, doomed to lie in bed, perusing the Tinder app again.

Unicorn hunters expect the woman to be single and give up existing and future partners in order to love and have sex with the couple equally.

Usually tied to the concept of the unicorn is the one-penis policy (OPP) — where the only penis that the unicorn can use is the one in the triad. The unicorn is not allowed to seek other men outside the relationship.

S.J. tends to get private messages from hunters when she tries to meet someone online. One week, she received fifteen or sixteen, a common occurrence from others in the solo poly community. “Unicorn hunting originally came from two things — mythical, in the sense that it’s an idealized fantasy, and swingers.”

Part of the “unicorn ideal” is a woman who would be with a couple and care and want them both equally and have sex with them.

“Some people latch on to that idea. I do know people who are [in healthy relationships] and use those titles. Unicorn hunters and fidelity — those are actually polygamy, and the bad polygamy.”

The messages she usually receives include: “Oh, will you be our third?” or “Join our closed triad.” That’s when red flags go up and she starts her vetting process for unicorn hunters — usually a hetero couple (contact likely initiated by the man) seeking “the special third to complete their family.”

“I would say that ninety percent of the women were not even bi; they’re just trying to please their husbands. It was really creepy,” she said. “It’s not a bad idea, but it was always the approach. And the one-penis policy and all that. Some start poly because their relationships start sucking. So, they’re in a couple and it’s not working out. They want to add somebody to spice it up.”

She’s not afraid to give them the finger for that idea.

Zoe Duff in Victoria, B.C., offered a dissenting point of view. She began her poly life as a unicorn, and so did one of her male partners. “In my experience, [straight] couples seek a third to balance [the] sex drive of either the man or the woman, because one of them is bi, or because he wants her to be bi so he can watch. The latter is the least common,” she explained. “Some of us actually prefer sex and romance with two other people at the same time. I understand that this is not empowering to everyone, but it is to some. If you chase all the unicorn hunters out of all of the poly groups, where will I and people like me find dates? Be respectful regardless of your personal preferences, please.” She also said that when people in forums jump on others for talking about unpopular things, they alienate those people and lose the opportunity to educate them.

S.J. is childfree by choice, which stands in contrast to a lot of the couples that contact her. “I find a lot of hunters have a lot of kids. I’ve been approached for this twice — to be a live-in nanny sex person. No, I’m not kidding,” she said through gritted teeth. “They’re actually a T-shape — two against one. Like, you’re a marital aid. People say, ‘We want someone that’s going to respect our marriage’ — that means hierarchy pitfalls. The best way for it to work is organically. That means you meet one, then you form a relationship with the other. But the ones who chase after you make it really awkward because they just tell you what they want. So, I went solo and I fell in love [with being solo poly].”

She makes it a personal rule not to get involved with people who have a veto rule — rules that would ban her from getting intimate with other men or cause an inequity in the relationship as a whole. She believes it comes from insecurities — “not always, but guys are trying to make it safe for themselves. They like the idea of women wanting them. If it was really poly, and they really wanted to share and grow, which is what poly is about, why can’t their partners share and grow with someone else? I seem to scare them because I won’t care for them the same way. I don’t want those things or don’t need them. It scares lots of people to put away the Disney ideals of what love is and to say I am happy solo.”

S.J. now has a boyfriend, but they are still happily living apart. “I’m still trying to figure out what to call him,” she said, giggling. “But yes, I have a boyfriend and he has a nesting primary partner and her kids. I was dating a girl for a while, but now we’re just friends. In addition to my boyfriend, I’ve also started dating another guy.”

S.J. dates lots of different types of people. Some have nesting partners and kids, which is fine, since S.J., an introvert at heart, needs a lot of time by herself. She considers her friends as her family and vice versa. Sometimes, she finds it easier talking to non-poly people “because if you take ‘poly’ out of it, it just looks like I’m dating around.”

She hopes if anyone is confused by solo poly, they will ask questions and not make assumptions as “we all have our individual ways of doing things.” But she’s not going to put her life on pause because of ignorance. She’s been told to get married and have kids, “because that’s what you do.”

“That’s not intentional [living]; that’s going with society’s rules, and I do not want to live that way. Just living together until you die maybe made sense when we [lived to] forty, but now we have other options. Shouldn’t we have access to all of them?” she said.

“Poly makes me face issues head-on, go through and figure things out for

myself. It's not always perfect, but it works better for me. There's no other way I'd choose to live."

You don't have to be solo poly in order to get off the relationship escalator. Some people not only want to halt the motor but smash the staircase and pave their own path.

Rich Mitchinson, who lives northwest of Edmonton, would describe himself as a relationship anarchist — someone who resists rules and hierarchies found in more traditional relationships. "It doesn't necessarily have to be used in polyamorous relationships, depending on how you look at it," he said. "It's about not owning anybody, not having contracts for relationships outside of health and safety. Having a primary is generally pretty common for people, especially when first opening up, because it mimics that same kind of safety people are looking for when they're going for a monogamous relationship. I don't really like this idea, because it's doesn't feel very good to be considered a secondary partner."

A benefit to relationship anarchy (RA) is that one can customize what their relationships will look like based on the values of everyone involved — it's not following what society tells them a partnership should look like, with the milestones of the "escalator."

Mitchinson, thirty-one, said when contracts are made with a predetermined view of what the relationship will look like, it restricts the fluidity of human emotion and sexuality. Even though some people who practise relationship anarchy don't necessarily see a romantic relationship as having more weight than a friendship, Mitchinson finds his most intimate relationships to hold more value than most of his friendships.

But what's key in RA is allowing relationships to breathe and develop organically as they are, without pressure to conform to societal norms. "We look at all our relationships as having value and being of different substance," he said. "RA enables one to give space for those relationships to be as they are without expectations. Relationship anarchy is not placing boundaries on a partner to limit their ability to connect with others. It's how you treat your general friends."

He's always felt he was polyamorous by nature, but was also insecure if his partner had other partners, so he stayed in a monogamous relationship. He and his partner eventually opened up their relationship, but then split after a few months — not because of non-monogamy, but because there were already problems bubbling up to the surface, he said. "After that, I realized I didn't like the idea of hierarchies, any level of ownership, or taking on any external boundaries other than ones that are of health and safety," he said, adding that even when it comes to health and safety issues, it's more about having

conversations about those practices than it is about setting restrictions.

“There aren’t many instances where I would apply a veto — because that comes down to ownership,” he said.

While swinging and kink are separate categories from polyamory and tend to be more focused on sex, they still fall under the big umbrella of non-traditional, and some have arrived at poly via these communities.

In Chapter 10, we met Sara from the Toronto area, whose partner had a stroke. She would call herself polyandrous — a woman with two men. All she ever wanted was a “cat and two husbands.”

She got her wish.

“I’m part of the kink community, and that’s where we’ve really found that poly is a lot more accepted. It’s where the biggest community of poly people exist, so it’s easier to date within the community,” she said.

She met her legal husband, Dan, when she was nineteen and coming out of an abusive upbringing. There was always an understanding that one day, they would both be non-monogamous. When her mother was diagnosed with stage-four cancer and later died in 2014, Sara suffered complete mental and physical exhaustion from being her caregiver. It also affected her relationship with her husband, and they knew they had to rebuild — but in a different direction: one where she could fulfil her own needs, instead of everyone else’s, for a change.

The following year, she signed up for an account on FetLife, and that’s where she met her partner George, first online and then in person at a Halloween kinky bar party in 2016.

She went on to explain: “Junk needs to be covered. Tits are fair game. They have a dungeon set up on the main floor. It’s a wild and crazy fun time. I was dressed as a nun with my tits out. It basically started out, ‘My God, you’re fabulous. May I please touch your tits?’ And I said, ‘Sure!’ So, we exchanged phone numbers and made a coffee date a week after, and we’ve kind of been inseparable ever since.”

Sara said FetLife has been her saving grace — “where Stella got her groove back,” she told me, laughing. As someone who struggled with self-esteem and body issues, it helped re-establish her confidence as “a bigger girl,” as she describes herself. “I kind of decided, ‘Fuck it!’ I’m going to be me. I’m your BBW (big, beautiful woman). I love every square inch, every fat cell, every scar, varicose vein. It’s mine and therefore that makes it better than everyone else’s. The validation I got [from the FetLife community] was wonderful. It’s Facebook for perverts. There are swingers, people who are just there to look, exhibitionists. It’s mostly domination/submission and BDSM.”

Because there’s no relationship handbook for polyamory, joining BDSM

communities became worth its weight in gold in support alone and in education, as well as personal growth, Sara added. “As a victim of abuse — I was basically raised to be Norman Bates,” she said, tongue-in-cheek. “Training to be a dominant has probably been the best therapy on earth because it teaches me what I can tolerate, what I can’t, and the ability to say no to what I don’t like. Hand-in-hand, poly and kink have been a huge relationship saver. I don’t think BDSM would have just been enough.”

Her experience has also created a more honest threshold for choosing partners willing to be transparent. She quotes Mark Twain: “‘Always tell the truth. There’s much less to remember.’”



Josée and her husband of fifteen years began their poly journey with swinging. The Ottawa couple became polyamorous in 2014; her husband is in a two-year relationship with another woman, and Josée has had a boyfriend for a little over a year now.

Like Sara, they discovered an extended poly community through FetLife.

They found getting into the swinging community — playing with people — difficult because they were both shy. “It wasn’t very fulfilling and we found we were looking for something other than just casual sex — more people to do things with, to share a life. When we found the poly group on FetLife, we went, ‘Oh! There is more!’” she said.

Because they opened their relationship from swinging, Josée and her hubby had been talking about issues from the beginning, including jealousy and setting healthy boundaries. “On our honeymoon, I ended up asking him if I should expect him to want variety. He did nothing to suggest that question whatsoever, but you know, in movies and TV shows, you often see men getting bored and cheating on women,” she said. “But that got us talking about possibilities. He ended up looking and finding some swinger groups in Ottawa and we ended up going to an info session and it’s been a really awesome path.”

They approached non-monogamy in baby steps and didn’t really find it led to any negativity in their relationship. “We started swinging together at first ... the general rule was we’d try something, check back with each other, and if we didn’t like it, we wouldn’t do it again,” she told me. “I found that after sixteen years with my husband, I still love him and we’re still awesome together, but the passion and intimacy tend to fade after all that time. The house takes priority and even though we have a lot in common, there’s another side of me that wasn’t getting addressed much. It was nice to find another partner who could fulfill that

need. The alleviation of guilt has been huge.”



Ying Ying runs a company where open love meets the open skies.

The thirtysomething Vancouver woman founded S.O.P. — Swinger, Open, Poly — Lifestyle Productions in 2015 with a vision of fun, unique, and sensual getaways and vacations for swingers — or anyone who wants to get away and have an adventure — with other like-minded people.

She didn’t want to just throw a great party; she wanted to tie in an educational element to her “takeover” trips — a concept where the venues at the destinations are privately and exclusively reserved for those members in her group — where attendees can be comfortable exploring new things and expanding their knowledge and experiences.

She’s created a niche for herself catering to the needs of those wishing to travel for sexy adventures. Now, she heads up one of the only hedonistic travel company in Canada.

Ying Ying was born in Singapore to “traditional” Asian parents but she always felt “something was wrong with monogamy and that monogamy was not right for her.” She didn’t know how to articulate her feelings until she came across *The Ethical Slut* by Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy when she was twenty-three.

However, her beliefs solidified in her teens after her parents moved the whole family to Canada. She spent her childhood in Singapore, but in her teen years she immersed in North American culture — a whole different peripheral — and developed a mish-mash of Eastern and Western values systems. In high school, she realized that her top three life goals were a penthouse apartment, a cool car, and a fulfilling job, instead of the typical relationship escalator of “marriage, kids, and house with white picket fence.”

“I want to create a lifestyle getaway, with educational seminars and workshops, for people to meet new people and learn about different relationships — this is where the polyamory comes in,” she explained.

“The word *lifestyle* tends to mean different things to different people,” she said. “It’s for anyone who’s not monogamous, who is open to new experiences and willing to push their boundaries, whether it’s their relationship or learning about new things. Even if you are monogamous, but you’re open-minded and non-judgmental, and you want to learn more about non-monogamy, you’re welcome to attend.”

“I believe relationships can be on a spectrum. You can be a swinger one day,

then the next month, you can change your mind and become a little more poly,” she said. “No one is really set in stone. The vacations are open to everyone, regardless if you’re single, a couple, a triad, a quad, or more.”

The trips grew in popularity, and Ying Ying’s travel groups have since explored parts of Western Canada and expanded to Costa Rica and Panama. Europe is the next destination; they will pack their bags for France in 2019, heading to Paris, Bordeaux and Cape D’Agde — a nudist village, “which is popular with swingers in the summer,” Ying Ying says. Then it’s off to Greece in 2020.

During the “takeovers” she organizes, she offers a “safe space” to those new to non-monogamy by tying in an educational element. Attendees can choose to participate in daytime seminars and workshops, “playrooms,” parties in the evenings, or hang out at the hot tub or lounge. The seminars have tackled topical issues including consent, polyamory, biases in the non-monogamy lifestyle, squirting, bondage, and spanking.

Race, pansexuality, and consent are hot-button topics in the lifestyle.

“One of the key house rules we have is that ‘no’ means ‘no,’ only ‘yes’ means ‘yes,’ and make sure you get enthusiastic consent on everything ... or else you’re kicked out,” she said.

Ying Ying also mentioned that one of the misconceptions in the swinging community is that all men are straight and all women are bi, and she wants to talk about the bias towards bi men: how bi women are accepted, even welcome, but bi men are shunned. She noticed women are frequently assumed to be bi or at least bi-curious within swinging communities, while it’s considered outrageous or taboo for bi men to participate.

“Bi men tend to feel like outcasts ... because it’s so frowned upon by the swinging community,” she said. “Personally, I identify as a straight female, and in the lifestyle, it was awkward for me at first, because I didn’t want to lead anyone on. It was great to hear there were other females who feel the same way and, conversely, males who feel shunned when they came out as bisexual and were rejected by other men they were interested in or by the community in general.”

Ying Ying says she rarely identifies as a swinger anymore. She was single in her early years of participation, and there is always a debate on whether single people can be swingers. She said at this point in her life, she sees herself more as a solo polyamorist. “I am a person who enjoys labels. I like knowing where the boundaries are,” she said. “My current partner — he doesn’t like labels at all. I think he’s more of a relationship anarchy kind of person as opposed to a poly person. You can ‘swing’ from one side to the other at any point in your life, and

in between swinging and poly, there's a thousand different labels for you to choose from."



Samantha Fraser, the main organizer of Playground in Toronto, said she created the conference in 2011 because nothing local existed that brought the kink, fetish, BDSM, and non-monogamous communities together.

She came out as poly in 2006 when she was twenty-six, and in 2013 wrote the book *Not Your Mother's Playground* as a realistic guide to honest, happy, and healthy open relationships.

In the past couple of years, Playground partnered with Polyamory Toronto, and there has been an increase in non-monogamy content in seminars, though Fraser said, "I don't want it to be 'the poly conference,' because I still want to include vanilla people and monogamous people and all those people who don't fit under all these monikers."

But the reasons why the kink, swingers, and poly communities seem to have intersected are harder to explain. "For myself, discovering polyamory meant I discovered kink. I wonder if it's because communities that could be considered 'the fringe of society' are going to band together a lot more," she said. "It's why you'll often find more nerds and geeks in the poly and kink communities. These are people who have sort of been used to being on the outside to begin with. Perhaps less so in the swinging communities, where you'll definitely see more 'mainstream' people. I know some folks who are polyamorous who have tried kink because it just felt like that natural extension, but have then realized, 'Oh, that's not for me.' But these communities often stand side by side with each other."

NTPP (Nerdy Toronto Poly Posse) is a Facebook group where poly people come together over their broad passions of video games, books, comics, and math, amongst other things.

The seed was planted in founder Laura's head when she and her husband met a group of poly people while they were honeymooning in Seattle in August 2013.

They told them about the NSPP (Nerdy Seattle Poly Posse group). Similar groups were littered throughout different states all over the U.S. The Nerdy Poly Posse concept grew through Facebook pages that represented poly communities in different cities.

The Toronto chapter began the following month, headed by Laura and her husband. She said the group was really a way to mix nerd culture with sex

positivity “and find other people who also spoke our language.... We wanted to make a community that was less about hooking up and more about meeting friends,” she said. “There are a lot of introverted people who are in the group who will tend to go out on a limb — we hear a lot of ‘I’m not really great with strangers and crowds.’ NTPP gives them a space to introduce themselves beforehand and connect physically at the event.”

As of June 2017, there were 1,100 NTPP members. Laura said groups like NTPP hope to “normalize” poly communities online and face to face.

FACTBOX — PSA ON UNICORN HUNTING

A PSA for Unicorn Hunters! For those of us who enjoy playing with couples, here are some things I wish you would keep in mind:

1. I’m HUMAN. Unicorn hunting sounds really icky and violent.
2. The risk is ALL mine. If anything goes wrong between us, I mean ANYTHING — she gets insecure, he loses his “momentum,” indigestion, I tell a joke you don’t find funny, you name it — I’m the one who pays. It’ll be “Okay, party’s over, please get dressed and get out” and no matter how I feel, I get to drive home in tears while you two do self-care and cuddle.
3. Couple Privilege. Yes, I know your relationship is the centre of your lives. It is not the centre of MINE. If protecting the “sanctity” of your relationship supersedes my physical health, my safety, my feelings, and my time, it’s obvious y’all don’t want a lover. Y’all want a sex toy. Please check out Babes in Toyland for an inanimate object and leave the actual human beings alone.
4. One Penis Policy. Hahahahahahaha! You’re hilarious, bro.
5. Babysitting and house chores. No, I will not watch Chad Jr. and Becky Marie while you have date night. I know for a fact you will NOT pay me for that time. You want me to help clean up before we have a date? Sure! Then I expect YOU BOTH to come over and help me paint or help me move. Not holding my breath.
6. Ghosting. Eventually you two will meet someone cuter, hotter, or less intimidating to the wife, at which point, I will be expected to have the good manners to just disappear. My hurt feelings will be proof that I’m crazy, my anger will be proof I’m a bitch, and the fact that I had sex

with you will be used against me.

7. Offended by this? If y'all can't behave courteously, that's not on me. Maybe look into why these simple boundaries feel unreasonable, and be honest: do you really want to be poly? If you want the sex but hate having to care for another person, maybe poly is not for you. Figure this out before you pull another person into your drama.

— Leni Hester

Source: Hester, Leni. "Guest Post: A PSA For #UnicornHunters." *The Journal Of The InnKeeper* (blog), February 8, 2018. joreth.livejournal.com/386333.html.

Finally, there's something Vancouver *More Than Two* co-author Eve Rickert calls the Relationship Choice Movement, which aims for "a better understanding of poly and poly styles, but hasn't really caught on," she said. "Some people are rejecting the word *polyamory* completely and calling themselves multi-linking or just non-monogamous," she said. "They felt there were some cultural norms in polyamorous communities they didn't want to be identified with. I don't know if it's really caught on yet, and I don't know if it will."

That movement has sprouted an accessible multi-linking online convention created by those frustrated by being unable to travel to events because of distance, money, or chronic illness. According to the *Polyamory on Purpose* website, the group "wanted this con to be welcoming to everyone who is or wants to be intimately connected to more than one person. We decided to come up with a term that defined us by what we are. Having many connections or relationships. Romantic, a-romantic, kinky, sexual, asexual, platonic life-bonded, temporary or lifelong, if you intimately connect, however you choose to define those connections, with many people, there is room for you in the multi-linking umbrella."

12

Erin

SASKATCHEWAN

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

— T.S. Eliot

ERIN COULDN'T FIND A COMMUNITY in Saskatchewan, so she created her own.

Initially, she created a Yahoo! Group called Poly Regina in 2005. It morphed into Poly Saskatchewan, which, in its abbreviated form, became the PolySask group on Facebook, now a couple hundred members strong.

“I think the challenges in Saskatchewan is — like other things — the communities definitely exist here, but they're more hidden,” she said. “It's hard to get a sense of how big those communities are. It just feels like we're a decade or two behind in certain social aspects.”

Erin, who is in her forties, said the Prairies tend to have a conservative bias, and living in Saskatchewan as a polyamorous queer woman is challenging. On top of that, the distance between other poly communities is much greater.

“If you look at election results, it's always a sea of blue with a few little blips [for Liberal or New Democratic Party votes]. And those little blips are Regina and Saskatoon,” she explained.

“It's isolated. To get anywhere, you have to add an extra couple hundred bucks just to fly anywhere from Regina.”

Erin is married with a child of her own, as well as step kids. She lives with her husband in Regina and they're in a polyamorous relationship. Her journey into consensual non-monogamy came when she was in a relationship with her first girlfriend and Erin came across the word *polyamory*. “When I met her, she

was poly, and it was a case of either I'm going to accept this part of you or not. And that was my introduction to it," she recalled.

Erin spent some time figuring out which parts of polyamory worked best for her, and she began incorporating some of those elements into other relationships before she got married. She had a number of relationships and "let them be what they were going to be without putting certain boxes around them."

"I don't like the term *non-monogamous* because it encapsulates too much other stuff. I find that as soon as people hear *polyamorous*, they're like, 'Ohhh, you're swingers.' No, we're not. It's fine if that's your thing, but it bugs me when people think it's all about the sex," she confided. "Over time, it was a lot of soul searching and figuring out what was important to [my husband and I] and working through those things. It's taken a very long evolution over time."

Erin's marriage wasn't the starting point of polyamory for her. The idea of multiple loves and connections was already a part of her. However, when some people start, they sometimes adopt the concept of one-penis policy, which she felt was arbitrary.

For her, polyamory isn't about having access to different genders. "It's more about the core need to feel fulfilled by being autonomous," she said. "It's not about collecting a man and a woman, it's about people. And if anything, my [attraction] is toward people who I find very gender-middle or androgynous. So, it's almost irrelevant to me, this idea of having 'both.'"

One of the core values of her marriage to her husband has always been to do what they can to keep each other's hearts alive and to keep them engaged with life. "That is the thing that keeps us going with each other. I've seen lots of relationships I thought were going to last a really long time — both mono and poly — not survive," she told me. Through all the hard stuff, the "fear, anxiety and doubt," they remind themselves: "If we get through this, this is what will help us contribute to our relationship as independent whole people. We find our own strength and excitement in life and in ourselves this way."

Her husband was open to the idea of polyamory, and together, they gradually explored the idea. "He had the familiarity with the concept, even though he hadn't put it into practice," she said. "When we decided to get married, we discussed, 'What am I going to need out of this?' I needed to know that the door is open to me dating other people. At the time, he had some specifics on what he needed."

And so, they drew lines in the sand.

But Erin started to feel the boundaries they had set were chafing. "I'd eventually have to say, 'I'm drowning in this.'" But he would sometimes have new experiences that would bring more new relationship energy into their

dynamic. Then those boundaries would become more fluid. In the big picture, there has been much more joy than discomfort. She explained that they've had "more interest and energy" for each other by growing connections with others and have become "much stronger together for it."

Erin said she and her husband use terms like *primary* and *non-primary*, but they have a less hierarchical approach to them. "I talk about my primary partner as an anchor partner. This is the person I've chosen to build a life with. We have a house and a family and finances and that kind of stuff. We're each other's home base. And that is of significant importance," she said.

"It's more about us having a certain logistical and family-oriented priority with each other. It's not about telling a third person that they're causing problems and to go away. I think we've also recognized that in order to have healthy relationships, we can't have emotional vetoes." Though, she swiftly added, vetoes may work for others.

But while boundaries and what came from them felt intense, she never felt the need to leave polyamory and go with a standard monogamy template — mainly because the concept of polyamory is in her core. "It wasn't all crisis," she said. "It's that delicate dance of respecting what you have, and [boundaries] you agreed to, but acknowledging you're going to change as people."

Erin said most poly people she knows figured out non-monogamy was what they needed only after they were already in a committed long-term relationship. But her daughter "just kind of got it, that there were people who were special to us in certain kinds of ways."

Her daughter was playing with the video game *The Sims*, where she had ten boyfriends. Erin told her that in a newer version of the game, there is a way to turn off the jealousy feature of the characters.

"Because that's like in real life, too," Erin said, laughing. "Some people aren't jealous. It led to an interesting conversation about us and our family."

Erin continues to foster other relationships across Canada. She's recently met a local partner and is excited to figure out how to integrate these important relationships together.

"One of the things I love about polyamory is there [are] a lot of grey areas between what is considered friends, lovers, partners, family, and life," she said. "I have various people in my life who are on that gradient. By not trying to have one person be your everything, it gives room for those relationships to be what they are."

The Right and the Fight to Love, Legally: How Canadian Laws Impact Poly People

A world where it is safe to love is a world where it is safe to live.

— Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio, author of *Plural Loves*

“A CANADIAN IS A CANADIAN IS A CANADIAN.”

These words have become synonymous with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who uttered them during a showdown with former PM Stephen Harper during a July 2015 town hall meeting over stripping citizenship from terrorists.

The phrase has been more recently tied to the Liberal Trudeau government’s image of a more open and accepting immigration system in the face of U.S. president Donald Trump’s travel ban. But the fine print is a different story. The Canadian government remains empowered to revoke citizenship from those who have been rubber-stamped through fraud or misrepresentation.

To become a Canadian citizen through Citizenship and Immigration Canada, you must be monogamous.

Yes, really.

Trudeau’s father Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who also served as prime minister, made a famous assertion of his own in 1967: “There is no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation.” The elder Trudeau’s comment was made in the House of Commons regarding the decriminalization of homosexuality.

While immigration and gay rights in Canada seem like a far cry from each other, they intersect in the legal treatment of polyamorous people.

Under section 293 of Canada’s Criminal Code, polyamorists were lumped in with polygamists and treated as criminals because they shared their homes with more than one partner, even though they were adults involved in consensual, loving, committed relationships.

That was Zoe Duff’s main motivation for participating in the creation of the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association (CPAA), bravely and voluntarily putting herself under public scrutiny. The newly formed CPAA became an “interested party” in the landmark British Columbia Supreme Court case in 2011

that challenged Section 293 of the Criminal Code of Canada, which forbids polygamy.

Duff and her two partners, Danny and Jayson, were among the five polyamorous families who provided evidence to the court. “You were outing yourself for possibly being charged under the law and even going to prison,” she said. “It was a very scary place to be, but you were part of history, which was amazing.”

The historic case went before Chief Justice Robert Bauman on November 22, 2010. The closing arguments began on March 28 the following year and lasted ten days in court.

Bauman’s decision — released almost exactly a year from the time proceedings began — followed forty-two days of legal arguments from a number of groups interested in the constitutionality of Section 293, including the CPAA, the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, and REAL Women of Canada.

The case was sparked by the 2009 failed prosecution of two leaders of a Mormon sect in Bountiful, British Columbia — Winston Blackmore and James Oler.

The Bountiful polygamy charges were dropped at the time, in part due to concerns over the law’s constitutional status. In his ruling, Bauman upheld the current polygamy laws while narrowing their scope and letting polyamorous relationships be, outside the scope of multiple marriages. “I have concluded that this case is essentially about harm; more specifically, Parliament’s reasoned apprehension of harm arising out of the practice of polygamy. This includes harm to women, to children, to society, and to the institution of monogamous marriage,” Bauman said in his decision.

He found women in polygamous marriages faced higher instances of physical and sexual abuse, died younger, and were more prone to suffer from mental illness. Kids in those households, he said, were more likely to be abused and neglected and suffered from a slew of emotional and behavioural problems.

“This isn’t just a religious right, it’s our right to freely associate,” Blackmore told the *Canadian Press* following the decision. Blackmore, in the past, has admitted that he had at least a dozen wives and about one hundred children.

On the polyamorists’ side — they considered Bauman’s ruling, overall, a win.

In her book, *Love Alternatively Expressed*, Zoe Duff said the judge’s decision “managed to give someone something, nobody everything, and rallied the troops from the sideline groups that stood by and said it had no impact on them. That is

a victory for Canadians in general and a step forward in the process of having judicial and social change.”

While Section 293 infringed on various charter rights, Bauman weighed that preventing harm to children took priority. He also interpreted the terms *conjugal union* and *marriage* as meaning those where a “sanctioning event” had occurred officiated by an authority and recognized by the community of an organized religion, and recognized these as the starting point of a “marriage,” whether or not it is by law recognized as a binding form of marriage.

“Polyamorous relationships he saw as ones where no such event was an essential belief for the relationship to exist and that common law unions were not included in the conjugal union by virtue of his interpretation,” wrote Duff in her book.

“He did not agree that marriage should fall under the charter definitions for freedom of expression either. And that means what? That means that the triad household in which I live is excluded and perfectly legal, but a similar family who has had [for example] a Wiccan handfasting, complete with a priest who is licensed under B.C. law to perform weddings, would likely be considered in violation of the law, whether they are polygynous (one man with several wives), polyandrous (one woman with several husbands) or several people of same gender. The licensed official would be in violation, and any guests would also be implicated in the offence.”

Duff said she appreciated the clarification. “I’ve been saying for years that this law includes a lot more people than the FLDS families at Bountiful.... It is about painting a whole lot of people in families who are healthy and empowering households with a wide brush.” However, if the intent of not striking down Section 293 is based on keeping women, who might be forced into polygamous unions, and children safe, then it’s worth the fight.

Following the victory, the CPAA unveiled a T-shirt to spread the good news. On the fabric, the message in plum capital letters reads “POLYAMORY: LEGAL IN CANADA SINCE 2011*” with the disclaimer, “*some restrictions apply. Not to be taken with vows or ceremonies. Ask your lawyer if polyamory might be right for you.”

They also received enough donations to launch the first-ever PolyCon, a convention on all things poly. And unexpectedly, the Canadian media has shown an interest covering it.

John Ince, the lawyer who represented the CPAA in the case, issued a statement two weeks after the decision addressed to the Canadian polyamory community that sparked backlash. “Given the fact that marriage is so bound up with monogamy, I believe very few people in the polyamorous community

would want to use the language and trappings of marriage for their commitment ceremonies,” he said.

Fast-forward to 2018. Ince, who still resides in Vancouver, contemplates how the decision has impacted poly communities across the country. “It hasn’t had a huge impact, to my knowledge. You might find individual cases where there has been some application. It’s not as though poly people who cohabitated were being harassed under this law,” he said. “Poly people are relationally unconventional and haven’t wanted to embrace formal marriages.”

The Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family published a study in December 2017 called “Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada,” which found almost 70 percent of the 480 people who submitted data agreed that Canada’s anti-polygamy law has negatively affected the public perception of polyamorous relationships. Nearly the same number said they weren’t dissuaded from pursuing polyamorous relationships, despite the existing anti-polygamy law, and only 6.7 percent of people said the prohibition had prevented them pursuing these types of relationships. About 19 percent agreed it had stopped them from being openly involved in these unions.

“The takeaway from these numbers for me is that the polygamy law has not prevented most respondents from being openly involved in polyamorous relationships, but it certainly has had a chilling effect,” said the report’s author, John-Paul Boyd.

Ince said the Supreme Court challenge put consensual non-monogamy in the public eye, with extensive media coverage, from local newspapers to national CBC reporting to international outlets such as the *New York Times*.

People were finally hearing about poly relationships that didn’t include those who identified as polygamists. The case helped distinguish polyamorists from the Mormon sects in Bountiful and in Utah, as well as those portrayed in TV shows like *Sister Wives* and *Big Love*.

“For many people, this was the first time they’d ever heard of the polyamory concept,” said Ince. “One reading of this relatively ancient law — passed in the Parliament of Canada in the 1890s — was that even roommates couldn’t cohabitate and certainly sexual partners couldn’t. That interpretation had never been enforced in a polyamorous situation. Polyamorists were a serious problem to the government case — to prohibit the fundamentalist Mormons from conducting polygamous marriages yet allow polyamorists to carry on as they’ve always been, which is informally cohabitating.”

The judge basically threaded the eye of the legal needle and concluded that the law prohibited formal marriage ceremonies, but not polyamorous cohabitation or celebrations that did not purport to be marriages, Ince said. But a

closer look at Section 293 in the Criminal Code shows the law is broad enough that even entering anything resembling a wedding ceremony may be criminalized.

293 (1) Everyone who

- (a) practises or enters into or in any manner agrees or consents to practise or enter into
 - (i) any form of polygamy, or
 - (ii) any kind of conjugal union with more than one person at the same time, whether or not it is by law recognized as a binding form of marriage, or
- (b) celebrates, assists or is a party to a rite, ceremony, contract or consent that purports to sanction a relationship mentioned in subparagraph (a) (i) or (ii), is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years.

Evidence in case of polygamy

(2) Where an accused is charged with an offence under this section, no averment or proof of the method by which the alleged relationship was entered into, agreed to or consented to is necessary in the indictment or on the trial of the accused, nor is it necessary on the trial to prove that the persons who are alleged to have entered into the relationship had or intended to have sexual intercourse.

Paragraph 1036 of the reasons for 2011 Supreme Court judgment states: “Properly interpreted, s. 293(1)(a) prohibits practicing or entering into a ‘marriage’ with more than one person at the same time, whether sanctioned by civil, religious or other means, and whether or not it is by law recognized as a binding form of marriage.”

However, paragraph 1037 follows that up with: “The offence is not directed at multi-party, unmarried relationships or common law cohabitation, but is directed at both polygyny and polyandry. It is also directed at multi-party same sex marriages” (B.C. Supreme Court, 2011).

Opponents of same-sex marriage often use polyamorous relationships to fuel their arguments. According to “Consensual Nonmonogamy: Psychological Well-Being and Relationship Quality Correlates,” a Brock University study, “social conservatives often argue that the legalization of same-sex marriage is wrong

because of a ‘slippery slope’ that would lead to the legalization of other non-traditional marriages such as those between multiple consenting adults.” When Rick Santorum was campaigning for the Republican Party presidential nomination in 2012 and speaking about his objection to marriage equality, he said, “So everybody has the right to be happy? So, if you’re not happy unless you’re married to five other people, is that okay?”

It would have been tedious and expensive to raise the funds (up to \$10,000) for the CPAA to challenge the court case, and they couldn’t afford to do it again to clarify Bauman’s position on “sanctioned events” as it pertains to polyamory, even though Duff said she’d like to. Those roadblocks leave that population of people who want multiple marriages based on egalitarian values in limbo.

“If you find somebody who feels they need to prosecute, they’ll attempt that,” said Duff. “If you leave yourself open, you’re going to have to take it to the Supreme Court to fight it. Do you really want to do that? There are days when I’d like to take my guys and go to Vegas and get married twice with Elvis and Spock, but I think, for a lot of people, it’s just not a big deal.”

Ince suggests there are some ways around it. He’s not giving legal advice, but in his personal opinion as someone with a constitutional law background, there are things people who want to risk having polyamorous ceremonies can do to avoid prosecution.

First off, don’t call it a wedding — or, even better, formally disavow that the celebration is a form of marriage. Getting an “official” who can legally conduct marriages to preside at a ceremony increases your risk of criminalization. But go nuts with the flowers, cake, and rings. “That clearly could be done, in my opinion, in a poly situation, but when you call it a *wedding* or a *marriage*, that’s crossing a line,” he said. “Exactly where you cross the line from *allowed* to *prohibited* is ambiguous, and the only way it would truly be clarified is when there is a polyamorous case that comes before the courts. Like in many areas of law, people have to live with some degree of uncertainty. It’s not just about polyamory — uncertainty is all through our legal system.”

Ince said he produced a show in 2003 at the Vancouver sex shop he co-owns called The Art of Loving, which includes an erotic art gallery. A professor at Emily Carr University of Art + Design presented his erotic artworks, which depicted simultaneous oral sex. On opening night, an exhibitionist couple performed that same act in front of an audience as part of the creation of a new work of art. The artist painted their bodies and then draped a canvas over them, creating a two-dimensional artwork from the three-dimensional live act.

This event might have been widely ignored, except that a journalist learned that it was about to occur and wrote about it. The story appeared on the front

page of the *Globe and Mail*, quoting the police as saying, “If this goes ahead, we’re going to charge them with committing an indecent act.”

“It went viral,” said Ince. “We went ahead with the show, even with this unprecedented threat. The police would later get castigated by civil liberties organizations for threatening to shut down a legitimate art performance. The police conduct was Stalinesque in some ways.”

The point is, if criminal charges weren’t laid in the context of an explicit public sex act for the sake of art, the chances of consenting adults who wish to defy the anti-polygamy law and have a commitment ceremony getting hit with the same iron fist is unlikely.

Ince, like Trudeau Sr., believes there is “no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation,” and consenting adults in polyamorous relationships who may risk formalizing their relationships, in all likelihood, would not be have prosecutors chasing them down out of the blue. But it is still a risk. “Nobody is going to come after you. Prosecutors don’t wake up in the morning and say, ‘Geez, I want to find people who are celebrating their love in a polyamorous way and go after them under this ancient provision in the Criminal Code.’”

Some polycules have gone as far as publicly posting — but still keeping it on the down-low — that they are crowdfunding their wedding. In one case, one group asked family, friends, and fans to contribute and invited them as guests on the big day.

The groom said while he’s always been willing to marry again, he hasn’t been legally allowed to do so with other partners because of “various anti-polygamy and bigamy laws.”

Josée from Ottawa mused that her husband’s girlfriend has made comments about never getting married because they can’t. “I’ve said, ‘You guys can have a commitment ceremony, you guys can have a ring, and I’m cool with that.’ She’s already written it off and I told them not to. The laws can change. You never know.”

About nine months later, things changed.

“My husband gave his other partner a commitment ring and they are having a ceremony next September,” she said. “My husband and his girlfriend rented a house together in February. He and I are downsizing ours in order to clean up finances to make room for them. My boyfriend and I are planning to buy a place together, hopefully next year, in 2019. Instead of all living in the same house, we’re looking to potentially get a triplex or something similar and live separately, together.”

Guelph, Ontario-based celebrant Christine Lafazanos is open to performing non-legal polyamorous ceremonies, despite the murky grey zones the laws

dictate. To date, she has been present at two separate ceremonies of a polycule and wants to create “a safe space” for those in alternative relationship styles. “I’m less focused on the legal structures — I want to adhere to the law, I have obligations to the folks I’m registered through to perform legal marriages. It’s more important for me to help guide people through those transitions and milestones in their lives and so I approach it from that heart-based view,” she said. “Someone saying, ‘These are important connections in my life because of A, B, C’ — I want to support them in doing that, no hesitation. Especially because I, myself, am in a polyamorous relationship, and I totally get it. I get really upset by the discrimination that exists and know many people in wonderful and loving relationships that involve more than two people and see the discrimination legally that can happen, and how that can affect people, and how that can be complicated. Whatever I can do to support people’s expression of their authentic self and their identity feels like an honour to me.”

However, polyamorous people who want Canadian churches to back them shouldn’t hold their breath, according to Rev. Brent Hawkes. Hawkes, a Toronto LGBTQ rights activist in his mid-sixties, was the first openly gay pastor (he has since retired) who officiated Canada’s first same-sex marriages in 2001 at Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in Toronto, four years before they became legal in the country. He used a legal loophole: the ancient Christian tradition of publishing the bans of marriage.

“I don’t know of any church that supports polyamory,” Hawkes said. “Our international denomination had a motion many years ago to approve it by changing the bylaws, but it did not pass. However, I wouldn’t be surprised that if it were reintroduced, it would pass today. I doubt that any other denomination would approve it, but I think there is more openness.”

While he felt there “seems to be no groundswell for support” for polyamorous marriage in the eyes of most church denominations, he remarked his former church — the Metropolitan Community Church in Toronto — would be more supportive. “Our international denomination has a moderator who is currently in a three-way relationship,” he said, referring to Rev. Elder Rachelle Brown in Chicago, who met married couple Michelle Jestes and Dama Elkins-Jestes in 2010 and claims she found soulmates in the two women. The “couple of three” reside in a Chicago suburb and said they are committed to raising their child, Ayden.

“Back in the early 2000s when I was coming out as a lesbian, I did not know anyone that would be considered polyamorous. It has been a journey — one that MCC allowed space for me to discover and live in,” Brown told the *Windy City Times* in December 2017. “Some congregants say nothing; others begin to talk

more openly about their own relationships, both monogamous and non-monogamous. We are fully committed and in sacred covenant to each other, honoring the complexity of the relationships we represent. I personally believe it is the most authentic and loving way for me to be in relationship, while aware that it is not possible or even advisable for others.”

Aside from the monumental issue of marriage, Duff said the CPAA has heard many other challenges from people surrounding wills and power of attorney, with immigration and child custody among the more pressing issues. “Judges aren’t buying that polyamory is a problem [in custody cases],” she said. “But it’s coming up as the alleged reason why one spouse shouldn’t have the kids. Most family courts are on the ball, ahead of the federal law. We don’t have pension rights. Immigration is huge.”

Eve Rickert, the co-author of *More Than Two*, said the problem goes beyond the fact that poly residents can’t sponsor multiple partners. In fact, it’s written in the OP2 Processing Members of the Family Class manual that Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) officers evaluate valid marriages based on whether or not they’re monogamous. By mandating these laws, consensually non-monogamous applicants are discriminated against.

“They do not consider a non-monogamous relationship to be a marriage for the purposes of immigration,” she explained. “Even if you are only married to one person and living with one person, if you have other partners, it’s not a marriage. I’ve heard some people have been able to go through the immigration just fine, but the fact that it’s hanging over your head [is stressful.]”

Many polyamorous people have applied on their own merits through the Federal Skilled Workers Program to gain entry. According to immigration lawyers, you have to disclose you are not monogamous — even if the application or officer doesn’t officially ask you for it. For those who don’t, they risk being seen as withholding pertinent information and may have their application denied and/or risk being deported without an opportunity to reapply for five years.

When pressed if monogamy is necessary to prove whether a relationship is “real” or not, the CIC didn’t provide a clear answer. “A spouse is defined as a legal marriage partner,” said spokesperson Lindsay Wemp. “A common-law partner is a person who has been living with another person in a conjugal relationship for at least one year.... The intent is to uphold the integrity of the immigration system, which includes preventing fraud, such as citizenship and permanent residency fraud.”

The federal Liberal government can now no longer strip the citizenship of individuals identified as terrorists, but it remains empowered under the

Citizenship Act to revoke the citizenship of individuals who have become citizens through fraud or misrepresentation — and that includes not disclosing that you have more than one romantic partner. But people also risk being denied entry by not having a “real” relationship if they come forward to disclose being in a non-monogamous relationship.

Regardless, some will attempt to go down the spousal route and hope they will sneak by.

“It’s beyond me why this information is any of the government’s business, and we’re not clear on exactly what they want to know and why,” said one man who is sponsoring his Aussie common-law partner using the spousal route.

The frustrations don’t end there.



The Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family in Calgary wanted to know more about how poly people across the country identify and live their lives.

In June 2016, the institute began its study of perceptions of polyamory across Canada. Its initial report, from April 2017, focused on the ways family law impacts people in polyamorous relationships and provided a rough initial analysis of the survey data. The second report from December of the same year (“Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada,” referenced earlier in this chapter), delved into the social, demographics and attitudinal questions more deeply. The institute pointed out the important implications for law and policy in the coming decades “as the meaning of *family* continues to evolve.”

The legislation on family law is of critical importance to people entering and leaving family relationships in general, said the study’s author, John-Paul Boyd. For those entering a relationship, it helps them anticipate the potential legal entanglements that may result from their relationship, including the consequences of having children and registering property in joint or sole tenancy. For those leaving a relationship, it sets entitlement parameters and obligations on important issues such as the parenting arrangements for children after separation, child support, spousal support, and the division of property and interests in property.

“The extent to which such legislation applies to the people involved in a polyamorous relationship may be a determining factor in an individual’s decision to enter or exit such a relationship,” Boyd said.

That raises a whole boatload of other social problems — how poly parents manage social benefits like CPP, Old Age Security, Employment Insurance

payments, and any payments that are geared to household income, not to mention extended health and dental care.

“As a society, we haven’t wrapped our heads around the idea that families come in more than just two,” Boyd said. “Especially when you love all of your partners and do not like being forced to choose among them.”

The study found that while Statistics Canada doesn’t track the number of Canadians who are polyamorous or engaged in polyamorous relationships, the researchers collected 480 valid responses to their polyamory survey in seven weeks, which circulated primarily through social media.

More than two-thirds of respondents (69.5 percent) said they were currently in a polyamorous relationship, and those who weren’t right now, but who had been within the past five years, tallied up to 11.7 percent. More than four-fifths of respondents saw the number of people who identify as poly increasing (82.4 percent) as well as perceiving an increase in the number of people openly involved in polyamorous relationships (80.9 percent).

“I’m trying to examine these families and trying to see how they fit into our preconceptions of family law, which are all essentially based on *Leave It to Beaver*,” said Boyd.

He admits the survey was initially flawed, in the sense that many non-monogamous folks were pigeonholed into choosing a family dynamic, which included polyfidelitous triads or quads living together. Polyamorist structures are as varied as their partners — including solo polyamorists and relationship anarchists or larger polycules. According to Boyd, the way the study was conducted “limited our ability to measure the nature and variety of respondents’ relationships, and left a number of respondents feeling excluded from the survey and ‘othered.’ It failed to capture the real diversity of polyamorous relationships. We received a lot of feedback from respondents saying that our questions failed to reflect their realities.” Boyd fed those responses into the follow-up report. “With the benefit of hindsight, I now realize that polyamorists are so diverse and occupying such an incredibly broad social and political spectrum that I was really quite naive going into it. How I think of it now is: The white picket fence polyamorists — *Leave It to Beaver* + + — and the anarchists.”

Based on the four provinces with the highest number of respondents, Quebecers (84.8 percent) and British Columbians (81.6 percent) were more likely to be in a CNM relationship at the time of the survey than respondents living in Alberta (58.8 percent) and Ontario (55.7 percent).

More than two-fifths of respondents who are or who had been in such relationships have kids living in their homes, either full or part time.

Indeed, all of the legislation concerning families and family breakdown in

Canada is built on explicit or implicit assumptions that the number of adults in a family is two, Boyd said. He references the federal Divorce Act as an example, which defines *spouse* as “either of two persons who are married to each other,” while the Civil Marriage Act provides that marriage is “the lawful union of two persons to the exclusion of all others.” British Columbia’s Family Law Act is less direct, he said, as its definition of spouse can include multiple concurrent unmarried partners, and, in dividing property following separation, provides that “each spouse has a right to an undivided half interest in all family property,” which is contradictory, given there can technically be more than one spouse.

Boyd said that while “one day, there will be a challenge to the limitation of marriage to dyadic relationships,” he doesn’t see that as having the same “pressing urgency that same sex marriage did.” But he is convinced “that dyadic families have a lot to learn from people in those relationships about the ability to have conversations about difficult issues, the ability to take a grown-up approach to relationships, and women’s equality.”

But Boyd was surprised that, without legislation that protects families outside the nuclear model, less than half of poly people surveyed had signed emergency agreements, including wills. “Doing things like emergency authorizations is practical, it’s useful, and it’s a minimally invasive way of addressing the problem, because authorizations are things you and your partners can sign and don’t have to involve a lawyer or judge’s seal of approval,” he said.



The responsibilities of people involved in long-term committed families tend to be complicated, especially when those responsibilities must intersect with people outside the family, government services, and the law.

In 2015, a family from Vancouver was the first to have three parental names on a birth certificate. The following year, the Ontario government passed the All Families Are Equal Act, which allows up to four people to be recognized as parents of a child without court order — the first time since 1978 that the province’s parentage laws have been updated. Though it’s meant for surrogacy and sperm or egg donors, it could benefit poly parents.

“That’s interesting from a poly perspective, because it allows for the creation of poly families in a way, but that’s a bit of a backdoor way of doing it, because there’s still no legal recognition for multiple partnerships and I don’t know if that’s ever going to be a thing,” said new mom Rosemary.

“I’m all for love. I’m not for breaking down couples. But I am all for getting the government out of our bedrooms,” added Eva Dusome, the lead organizer of

Polyamory Toronto.

Sometimes, however, polyamory used as the “harm card” can arise during messy divorce proceedings.

Poly parents likely breathed a collective sigh of relief when not one, but three British Columbia judges decided in separate judgments — dating from June 2013 to February 2016 — that a polyamorous Nanaimo man was fit to be a father, making this the first Canadian law case to focus on the legitimacy of polyamory and parental rights.

The mother tried to make a case that under the anti-polygamy law of the Criminal Code, polyamorous families were intrinsically harmful to women and children, and accused the father of inflicting emotional pain on his kids.

The judges — two on the provincial level, one in the Supreme Court — didn’t buy it.

In fact, one judge found the relationship structure irrelevant to proving the fitness of a parent and noted that his other relationships were valuable for the kids.

On February 23 of that year, the final ruling maintained the father — named Paul — would continue sharing equal custody time with the mother of his children. Some legal experts argued this could serve as an important guide or a precedent for how Canadian family courts handle polyamorous households.

The forty-two-year-old father said he had been polyamorous with two women for a number of years when one of the relationships — with Sarah — was breaking down. He and Sarah already had a little girl and she was five months pregnant with their second child.

“The main issue of contention was mobility,” said Paul. “She wanted to move back to Alberta with our daughter and was just going to go. I got a court order to prevent that. When she was prevented from leaving without telling me, shit kind of hit the fan.”

In the first court case in 2012, Sarah brought up the abuse in Bountiful, B.C., to put weight on her case that Paul wasn’t a fit father.

“I’ve been with Clara, my one partner, for twenty-five years, and then I was in another polyamorous relationship with Theresa, and when that one ended, I started this one with Sarah,” Paul said. “But since then, I’ve rekindled the relationship with Theresa. It was hard because from a legal perspective, they were attached to these kids. We had two older sons as well. The accusations that went on became very personal and aggressive.”

Paul said the judge had recognized that Clara was like a mother to the children, and that relationship was important.

Because the kids were so young, the courts ordered an interview to learn

about the climate at home. The judges relied heavily on the report of the children's perspective. But Paul said the family justice counsellor who prepared the report in the second trial wrote a "massively scathing review" and the judge said she was "clearly prejudiced even before she started this report." Paul pointed out that his older son has been in a poly family for twenty-five years, 'but she was making all these judgments about how screwed up they were going to be.'

"The issue of whether or not the parties' polyamorous relationship and the children's ongoing exposure to [Paul's] polyamorous lifestyle may impact their best interests is one to be decided on the evidence," said Madam Justice Margot Fleming in her ruling at the Supreme Court. Judge Ronald Lampson concluded that "there is no evidence that being raised in a polyamorous family has had a negative effect. The evidence is that both boys are well-adjusted and happy and have good friends who sometimes stay over."

Paul's four kids now still get to spend half their time together as a family at home. Surprisingly, despite a brutally drawn-out court history, Paul and the mother of his two younger children remain civil as co-parents. "There's peace between the two of us. It was a scary thing to go through that," Paul said. "You're under a microscope, you start second-guessing everything you're doing. A judge said this isn't harming them — in fact, it looks like they're thriving. And that was a real relief to hear that, especially when all your dirty laundry is aired in court."

While provincial court cases often have little power to set legal precedent, it doesn't make the ruling insignificant. John-Paul Boyd told *Xtra* that he predicts judges will likely be guided by the example. "Here are these beautiful trial decisions where the judges don't descend into any moral opprobrium. It makes me so proud to be Canadian," Boyd said following the decisions.

Paul said he's thankful his court battle provides a sense of some relief for other poly families. He knows another triad who are living in secret because of the legal repercussions about being out. "'What if our kid goes to school and tells people he's got moms and a dad and they get reported?' They were all freaked out," he said. "When we got the result, they said, 'We feel so relieved that they didn't come down that way on you.'"

Most recently, in April 2018, in the first decision of its kind in Canada, the Supreme Court in Newfoundland and Labrador (Family Division) recognized three unmarried adults as the first legal parents of a child born within what they labelled as their "polyamorous family."

Justice Robert Fowler found that the two male partners and the mother of the child have been together since 2015. Two years later, a child was born from their

union. None of the partners are married and “while the identity of the mother is clear, the biological father is unknown,” the decision states.

The three adults took their case to court after the government refused to designate them all as parents, indicating the Vital Statistics Act allows only two parents on the child’s birth certificate.

In his ruling, the judge said that the child “has been born into what is believed to be a stable and loving family relationship which, although outside the traditional family model, provides a safe and nurturing environment...I can find nothing to disparage that relationship from the best interests of the child’s point of view.... To deny this child the dual paternal parentage would not be in his best interests. It must be remembered that this is about the best interests of the child and not the best interests of the parents.”



In December 2017, the lawyer who represented Bountiful sect leader Winston Blackmore said his client believed he couldn’t be prosecuted for polygamy after the RCMP powered ahead with its investigation.

The sixty-year-old Blackmore, a former bishop in the fundamentalist community, was found guilty earlier that year of one count of polygamy after the court heard he married two dozen women, including three who were fifteen years old at the time. His co-accused, James Oler, was found guilty of having five wives. Blackmore was said to have fathered more than 145 children from his multiple marriages.

Blackmore’s legal counsel argued that because his client’s marriages occurred before the 2011 Supreme Court reference case, they were not illegal, but special prosecutor Peter Wilson said Blackmore was always at risk of prosecution, even though Canada’s polygamy laws have been constitutionally vague in the past.

Then, in March 2018, a B.C. Supreme Court judge ruled Canada’s polygamy laws are constitutional. She tossed out the men’s claim that the polygamy law violated their charter rights, stating Blackmore and Oler considered their lifestyles above the law when they continued to marry women in the region. “Mr. Blackmore’s conduct, in regards to his plural marriages, has always been governed by one thing: his religious and priesthood duties,” Justice Sheri Ann Donegan said in her decision.

A CBC story at the time stated that “both men are the first in modern Canadian history to be convicted of polygamy. They will now be sentenced barring further appeals, although there is no precedent in Canadian law.”

“The wheels of justice are grinding on,” said Ince. “Strategically, in our case, all of our witnesses were women having multiple male partners, not men having multiple female partners. We wanted to show that poly is not an example of the classic polygamy model.”

Ince believes egalitarian polyamorous marriages may follow the legal trajectory that led to same-sex marriage — in small steps. The first cases involved equality of pension benefits and custody rights.

“As a result of constitutional interpretations, courts applied pension laws in a new way. As poly becomes more mainstream, similar arguments are going to be made,” he said. “After the courts have granted poly people rights for pensions, custody and access, maybe even immigration, then they might decide it’s time to let polyamorists get married. But that’s some ways away.”

FACTBOX — POLYAMORY IN CANADA, BY THE NUMBERS

The Survey on Polyamorous Relationships and Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada was loosely based on a survey the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association conducted of its members in 2010.

Those who are or had recently been in a poly relationship [81.2 percent] say there are three people in their relationship (51.6 percent). Small numbers of respondents said there are two people in their relationship (19.1 percent), four people (13 percent), or more than five people (11.2 percent), the initial survey found, said Boyd, adding these figures came about due to flawed drafting of the questions.

More than two-fifths of respondents who are, or had recently been, in a polyamorous relationship (41.9 percent) said there are children living in their households either full or part time.

Almost fourth-fifths of respondents said the members of their relationship do not all live in the same household (79 percent).

Most people surveyed are twenty-five to thirty-four years old (42.3 percent). Of those surveyed, 59.4 percent reported their gender as female and 30.8 percent as male, with 9.8 percent describing their gender in other terms, including genderqueer, gender fluid and transgender.

Almost all respondents said they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “everyone in a polyamorous relationship should be treated

equally regardless of gender or gender identity” at 94.6 percent. Similar reactions were documented to the notions that all people in poly relationships have the responsibility to be honest and forthright with one another (98.4 percent) and that they have the right to leave the relationship if and when they choose (92.9 percent).

Source: The Survey on Polyamorous Relationships and Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada

The CPAA plans on building up their case when it comes to issues that shadow the polyamory community in Canada and is expanding its work beyond families to include those who are solo poly.

Boyd presented the findings of his polyamory study at the 2017 Law Society of Upper Canada’s family law summit in front of 472 lawyers, with an added 650 online. “I stopped in the middle of my presentation. ‘Out of curiosity, how many of you know somebody who’s in a poly relationship?’ And I’m not kidding, a third of the room put up their hands,” he said. “Polyamory isn’t a religious thing happening in the backwoods of Bountiful or Utah. The people I’ve met in these relationships were the white-picket fencers, but they all considered themselves in serious, persisting, loving relationships. And that’s the definition of *family* for me.”

14

John David “Hobbes” Hickey

QUEBEC

The best thing to hold onto in life is each other.

— Audrey Hepburn

There are two topics that irk the founder of Polyamory Canada the most on his Facebook group — the one-penis policy and unicorn hunters. (For more discussion of these concepts, see Chapter 11.)

The one-penis policy (OPP) is a rule, generally established by the guy, where the women share a single male partner. The women can be with other women, but no other dudes. And in an arm’s-length category, unicorn hunting is a term that describes hetero couples looking for a third, usually bisexual woman, to “add to the family.”

“With the OPP, it’s misogyny, it’s patriarchy in relationship,” an incensed John David “Hobbes” Hickey told me when I spoke with him over Skype. “The guy gets to be involved with multiple people, but he doesn’t deal with his own insecurities and limits the freedom of the people he’s involved with. It’s poly, but I don’t think it’s ethical or sustainable.”

Hickey, a forty-eight-year-old Quebec City native who lives in Montreal, began the Polyamory Canada Facebook group in December 2013 after finding that many resources surrounding non-monogamy were U.S. based. He started his own forum to connect with other Canadians.

As the group grew to over 1,300 members across the country, he started noticing couples coming onto the Facebook page, fishing for that magical unicorn. “We talk about how the other person [the unicorn] is in a horribly disadvantaged position. That person has to be in love with both,” he said.

He noticed that in the Facebook group, couples would either go, “‘Wow, thanks for the information,’ or ‘Wow, there’s so much hate in this group.’ And

they leave, because not everyone is super diplomatic about it,” said Hickey. “Some people are frustrated by the question. Or some people will be in the middle. Once all that calms down, two weeks later, another couple comes in and says, ‘Hi ... we’re a couple looking for our unicorn’ and the whole thing starts over again.”

Both OPP and unicorn hunting are mentioned in the group’s guidelines, which also limits dating-profile ads, forbids nudity, and encourages respectful conversation. “Most people try to be gentle [with unicorn-hunting inquiries,]” Hickey told me.

But some people fly off the handle “because they’re just tired of seeing it. In the early days of the group, I would try to address it every time it came up. I had a list of links for them to read. I would talk about couple privilege and how, in my opinion ... they’re looking for a product and they’re ignoring the person.”

However, he said, chuckling: “We don’t hear a lot from the ones being hunted. I imagine it’s because they’re very busy.”

Polyamory Canada started as a group of a couple dozen in its humble beginnings. The guideline for admin approval is stringent — the person has to live in the Great White North, and if they don’t, they have to justify why they want to join the group. Hickey sees it as a support network rather than a place that focuses on sex. It’s more about the connection, friendship, and relationship aspects. “I try to run it as a strictly Canadian group. There are tons of polyamory resources on Facebook, so I can afford to be choosy about who comes in. There wasn’t anything at the time that was just Canadian. I wanted to speak with local poly people who lived in this culture.”

Like many others, initially Hickey didn’t know there was a word for what he felt. “‘Lecherous swine, afraid of commitment’ — I thought that was the medical term, because that’s what I was hearing when I would talk about this idea that you could love multiple people at the same time. They said, ‘Well, you’re just being selfish,’” Hickey recalled. “It seemed perfectly natural to me. For a long time, I struggled with that idea and wasn’t getting support in my network, so I figured, maybe they’re right and maybe there’s something wrong with me.”

He told me that in 2003, he went to a pagan festival near Ottawa where he met a woman named Monica, and they fell for each other. When she told him she was polyamorous, he was surprised, and said, “Excuse me?”

He was in a monogamous relationship at that point. When Monica explained the concept of polyamory to him, he was intrigued. He went back to his partner, explained his meeting with this new mystery woman, and said he wanted to push their relationship into a polyamorous model. At first, she was not interested.

While still with his partner, Hickey and Monica became a “poly platonic”

couple with no sexual intimacy, but they were good friends.

Somewhere along the way, his partner became more open to the idea of non-monogamy and he was able to move to a more intimate level with Monica. Since then, he's met many people, mostly in the pagan community, who are polyamorous. "I continue to fall for people who live far away," he said, chuckling. "I am currently seeing three women.... I live in Montreal, I have one partner in Ottawa, I have one partner in eastern Quebec, and I recently met a woman who is moving to a small town just outside of Toronto."

His matches have taken place in person, at pagan events, at social circles, and even at a steampunk festival. "In pagan circles, polyamory seems to be more prevalent because sexual relationships are handled differently within that spiritual context," he said.

Despite his tendency — as he puts it — to fall in love with women outside his area code, he must still deal with common poly conundrums, such as time management and polysaturation. "Oddly, the fact that they're all far away makes it easier. We can't see each other as much as we want to, so we have to make plans. If I end up with too many partners, that's a lot of travelling time and time away from home. If they lived in the same city as me, it would be even worse because we'd have easier access to each other and the scheduling would be much tighter."

His partners are seeing other people, as well. Hickey doesn't have a primary or a hierarchical situation: it's sprinkled with a bit of solo poly and relationship anarchy.

Montreal has an active poly community, he informed me. Language barriers aren't so much an issue, as the city is quite bilingual, for the most part. Despite that, he still has to deal with many public misconceptions of polyamory and often gets the brush-off that polyamorous people are obsessed with sex. "Oh, you're polyamorous? You must be sex-crazed.' And my usual response is 'No, my sex drive is kind of average.' For me, it's all about connection. Sex is nice, but it's not the point. If it's only about that, then I get bored very quickly. Polyamory takes time and nurturing like any healthy relationship. It's supposed to have multiple layers to add to your life. Sex is just one of many layers."

While he concurs that some relationships may have shorter lifespans, that doesn't mean the lifestyle in itself is unsound. He's tired of fielding questions about when he will pick one of his partners, or being told that if he doesn't, they will get fed up and leave him to die alone.

"Everybody dies alone!" he cried, exasperated. "If someone is not happy with me, I would rather they leave than be forced to stay in this relationship because they made some sort of commitment thirty years ago that they're no longer

happy with. It's better to end the relationship than to cling to this person for fear of being alone.

"I had a friend who I'd been attracted to, and she admitted to me that she loves me and cares about me, but she could never be with me because she's monogamous. 'Can't you just try being monogamous?' she said. While I do love this person, I know myself well enough to know that if I feel stuck in this monogamous relationship model, I'm going to get resentful and I'm going to make poor relationship choices."

He pointed out that nobody simply has one friend. You go with some friends to hockey games, and you have other friends you hang out with in the library or go to the pub with. You love them all, but in different ways. "In my opinion, romantic love is no different."

He admits that "there's a strong possibility [a relationship] could end. If you're faced with multiple people all the time, there is a chance you're going to end some relationships that aren't going well to focus on other relationships that are going better. There is something ephemeral about the way we, as polyamorous people, run our relationships. We are more aware that some loves are not forever. We get to continue to enjoy NRE — that drug in the beginning of every relationship."

But if a poly person does split up with one of their partners, they often don't receive support. "I was commiserating about this to my friend, and she more or less told me, 'I don't have a lot of sympathy for you because that relationship ended, but you still have all these people.'" Hickey said. "This relationship had ended and I'm experiencing grief. I'm not just going to unplug [a relationship] from over here and plug [another] into this spot. There's a whole denial of the grief and separation and mourning of the end of the relationship. This friend who had said this to me went through a really long dry spell — she's monogamous. So, the fact I had multiple partners — she had no sympathy for me."

Hickey said there's a perception that when you have multiple partners, "they seem to only exist to service your needs, to the exclusion of their humanity."

Humanity and compassion seem to be not only what he craves from his close circle of friends, but what he also expects from members of his online community.

Many on the Facebook group join because they not only crave connection with others like them but seek answers unique to their relationship structures and want to share experiences.

"When I talk about polyamory to guys, they think it's the greatest thing because they can have multiple girlfriends. But when their girlfriends want to see other people, they cry 'No, no. I'm the only guy,'" Hickey said. "They can

see other women if they want, but I would never be able to deal with them seeing other men.' My response is, 'All right, man. Then polyamory isn't for you.'"

Hickey recently read a story that posed the question, "Why do guys get so bent out of shape when they see two guys kiss, but not when two women kiss?"

"Men are taught to see themselves as the consumer, the predator, and they are taught to see women as consumed," he theorized. "It's not a threat to the guy if the 'consumed' are consuming each other. The moment the woman decides she's going to be the consumer, then it puts the guy at a disadvantage and that's why he gets upset."

It Takes a Village: Polyamorous Families

I looked up my family tree and found out I was the sap.

— Rodney Dangerfield

We believed in our idea — a family park where parents and children could have fun — together.

— Walt Disney

WE EXPECTED A little picture of our little bean, something we could put on our fridge when we walked out of the ultrasound clinic. At an estimated twelve weeks pregnant, this was my first scan. We were both thirty-four at the time. The Clearblue Easy test flashed “Pregnant” like I had won a prize on *The Price Is Right*. I actually breathed a sigh of relief. We had beaten the odds by getting pregnant just before thirty-five — when everything starts to go downhill (so the stats say).

But what I’ve learned since is that a hundred — or is it a million? — things can go wrong between trying to conceive and a positive result. And even if you get a positive result, you’re not out of the woods yet.

Miscarriage is nothing extraordinary — and yet, it certainly feels that way when you are going through it.

But my situation was indeed unique, as I’m polyamorous. There was Charlie, the father-to-be, and my other life partner, Adam.

One of the big issues in deciding to pursue consensual non-monogamy was my desire for a child. A year after Charlie moved to Canada from the U.K., we started trying to make a baby, with Adam’s emotional support.

The ultrasound technician rudely told Charlie and I to immediately go see our midwife. “You have to go to your midwife. I can’t answer anything. Go now.”

Having never been pregnant before, we thought it odd, but didn’t know any better. We arrived at our midwives’ office in Toronto’s Regent Park, only to be told the paperwork hadn’t come through and that, normally, ultrasound technicians don’t tell patients to rush in. We waited an hour before Jodi came in

to look at our file.

She led us into her office and gave us the bad news. Even though we were twelve weeks in, our baby had died four weeks earlier. She had just stopped growing. I'm not even sure it was a "she" as it was too early to tell, but it felt like a girl to us. And a Chinese acupuncturist had told us that it was, so we went with that.

We were completely blindsided by the diagnosis. I hadn't had the usual miscarriage symptoms — spotting, cramping, bleeding. There hadn't been any indication there was something wrong. There still wasn't. My symptoms had begun to taper off at nine weeks, but I read that was totally normal on a few pregnancy forums. Normal is different for everyone.

My hair was still thick from the hCG pregnancy hormones as they pumped through my blood, and my belly was hard and starting to protrude.

"We call it a 'missed miscarriage,' when the body doesn't clue in the baby has stopped growing," Jodi explained.

Charlie and I had felt we were in the safe zone — or at least the safe-ish zone — and had started to tell a few people of our baby bump. We left the ultrasound office completely shell-shocked.

They say miscarriage isn't so much grief for the present, but for the future.

I had pictured our future with her many times.

When Charlie was in London, he told me he'd had a dream about picking up our little girl from school with a stop-off to the dry cleaners. He saw her, half Chinese, with little pigtails.

For me, I pictured him carrying her as I walked toward them down the aisle at our wedding. She would have been two months old.

I thought about so many things: the stroller we had planned to buy at a Black Friday sale, the change table, decorating her nursery, our midwives. I was looking forward to regular checkups with them and delivering at Sunnybrook Hospital with them by my side. I couldn't wait to figure out how to breastfeed for the first time, however clumsy and petrified I was. We were going to tell our close friends in person later that month, on my birthday. I even survived covering a story for the paper I work for about a nauseating poutine-eating contest when all smells — let alone visuals — made me want to hurl.

All these life plans. Just stopped. Just like that.

It sounds cliché, but she felt like our tiny miracle, conceived on the third try. We had beaten the odds of conceiving before everything shifted into the "high-risk pregnancy" zone of being thirty-five-plus. The timing would have been perfect. But that's what you get with parenthood and life, I guess. Plans change, and a lot of things are not in your control.

Growing up in a turbulent household, I was always unsure if I would be good with kids. Even during interviews with children for work, I found myself to be awkward. I never knew how to talk to them. I was uncertain about my maternal instincts and skills. But as my brief pregnancy progressed — dealing with round-the-clock nausea, fatigue, and food aversions — and as I started to picture what it would be like to be a new mom, going on new adventures with Lily, as I'd imagined naming her, I became excited. I became attached. More than I could have ever imagined.

The pain of losing her so soon and so abruptly was heartbreaking. We told our parents. Charlie's seemed more sympathetic than mine, but maybe, what with them being Chinese parents, it was their own way of showing care.

"You've got to get to the hospital and scrape it out," my dad instructed.

My mom kind of blamed it on me. Or maybe she was more concerned about the optics. "Why did you tell people? Next time, don't tell people until you're eight months pregnant."

I wasn't expecting support from my parents, but Jesus, I thought they would have had more empathy — or sympathy — than they did.

But a surprising thing that shone through during one of the darkest times of my life was how being in a polyamorous relationship helped me — helped us. Though, I'm not going to lie, it was sometimes complicated. I was upset at points while grieving because neither of my partners — being men — could fathom what it felt like as a woman to lose a child. How could they? I wanted them to understand. I came around to see how different everyone's experiences were, and how their grief varied in shades and intensities.

It was all part of the grieving. In times of trauma, I'm always one to be rational and make sure the logistics are taken care of. We opted for the misoprostol route — a drug that induces miscarriage. You take it vaginally, at home. I took the first dose at 7:00 p.m. and proceeded to lie in bed with a hot-water bottle while binge-watching *Black Mirror* on Netflix. My friend Maryam kept Charlie and I company and brought us bubble tea, which was a really thoughtful gesture we both appreciated. The cramps began at eleven, shortly after she left. They became intense, and soon the blood and clots flowed. I was forewarned by a friend who had been through the process to be prepared for the sheer amount of blood. There was tons, more than I had ever before seen or expelled.

It was less traumatic than I predicted and surprisingly more cathartic. Around 2:30 a.m., the sac came out. We just knew. I don't want to be too graphic here, but we decided what was right for us would be to wrap her in a onesie we had purchased for her that read, "Home is Canada."

Holding her between us, Charlie and I both broke down, wailing our pain into the night. This would be the only time we would get to hold our little girl. We buried her in a peace lily plant that we keep in our apartment. Is that morbid or beautiful? Maybe both? It seemed to be the most respectful move we could have given our embryo.

The bleeding and cramping tapered off around seven in the morning, when I took the second dose, and I believed the worst of it was over. There was a moment when I was mad at Adam for not being there as the miscarriage happened at my and Charlie's home — and he lived across town. It would have been a shared experience for the three of us to grieve and form a stronger bond together.

A couple of days later, Adam asked, thoughtfully and sympathetically, “Did Charlie want me there? I thought it should be a private moment for the two of you.” I hadn't considered that. So, I asked Charlie and he said, “I think I was glad it was just us, privately.”

It made me take a step back to recognize that in polyamory, you can still have private moments with each partner without the other partner(s) feeling left out.

As I recovered, I no longer felt pregnant and depression set in. Week after week, nurses drew my blood to check my hCG levels. They weren't going down, indicating there was still tissue stuck in me. Pissed off, I realized we needed a night out to distract us. I took Charlie to his first-ever Medieval Times Dinner and Tournament to see actors dressed up as armoured knights duke it out in a sandy pit on horseback. The same night, we came home and he inserted two more doses of misoprostol into my vagina.

I stayed up most of the night, expecting the same Bates Motel horror scene, but nothing happened. Not a speck of blood.

The next morning, Charlie had to go to work. I thumbed the online listings for an abortion clinic that was open on weekends. I found one and Adam took me. The D&C (dilation and curettage) procedure was fairly quick, but traumatizing. Following the procedure, as I sat in a La-Z-Boy recliner with other, younger, women around — who hadn't wanted to be pregnant — I felt like I was the only one in the room who was crying because I wanted to be. During the weeks that followed, I felt my best defence against spiralling down into madness was to seek out bereavement groups and forums in person and online. I stopped watching episodes of *Black Mirror*, and instead watched Ali Wong's comedy special where she talked about getting her “miscarriage bike”; it made me feel better.

As a journalist, I have never been afraid of being open with my experiences. I posted much of my miscarriage experience on Facebook. I was surprised to be

met with a flurry of private messages from friends — men and women — who admitted they had gone through losses of their own. Talking about my experience was what reconnected me to some friends I had lost touch with across the globe, friends who are undergoing IVF (in vitro fertilization) as we speak, or are contemplating freezing their eggs, or who have been told they're a candidate for early menopause.

I found reassurance and validation in their stories. They were not ashamed. But many hadn't advertised their experiences when it happened to them either. I felt the burden of sadness become lighter knowing that sharing openly helped them.

Meanwhile, Charlie was still processing his grief, and so I asked Adam if he could take me to a Pregnancy and Infant Loss (PAIL) Network meeting. I thought connecting with a support group would be a good thing.

Fourteen of us sat around a rectangular table in a rented church hall. Adam listened to other women talk about their stillbirths and miscarriages, and he felt compelled to speak about his own mother's miscarriage many years ago, and how there was a hint of melancholy when she would speak about it.

Surprising himself, he delved into how he wasn't so supportive during his late wife's miscarriage, but he understood now, through supporting me, why miscarriage was so complex.

Unexpectedly, he started crying. In the grand scheme of things, Adam was close enough to feel sorrow for Charlie's and my loss, but also removed enough to support us both. It was a surprising bonus of polyamory I hadn't thought of.

I was glad to have gone to a support session, but I ultimately allowed myself to heal on my own terms and gave myself the time and space I needed to feel like me again.

Charlie and I recently went through a second miscarriage. This time, it was an ectopic pregnancy after our first intrauterine insemination (IUI) cycle in November. My blood test after the two-week wait was neither a zero for "not pregnant" nor a five for "pregnant," but a murky and inconclusive three. A few days later, I had what seemed to be a period, but had unusual cramping.

What actually — thankfully — saved my bacon this time around was the Kindara basal thermometer I'd been using every morning for fourteen-plus cycles. If I hadn't noticed the elevated readings (36.5°C and above), I would have carried on with my day, and quite possibly, my right tube would have burst.

The doctor asked me to come back as my hCG was now at a hundred.

"Your embryo was dumb," explained my doctor, in the most awesome way possible. "It went down a one-way street. Namely your right tube."

Two injections of Methotrexate to the sides, a painful weekend, and three

weekly morning blood work sessions later, I was back to zero and ready to start again.

Adam drove me to the fertility clinic every morning for a week to have my blood drawn leading up to the Methotrexate shots and for the weeks after my second miscarriage was diagnosed.

My emotional experience this time around was certainly different. When you go through a second miscarriage, it's almost like, "This ain't my first rodeo."

And fifty-two days later, I'm back to beginning again. *We're* back to beginning. And it's actually fine. The peace lily is blooming flowers again — I'm taking it as a sign. We have all learned something from the losses, and in that sense, there have been some gains. We've learned that each of us can grieve and support each other in our own ways. Whether it's me holding Adam's hand as emotion takes over him while he tells his mom's story or drives me to the clinics, there's more love for me when I'm self-doubting my fertility. In Charlie's case, he has his Co to give him the respect and space he needs when it comes time to grieve.

In late April 2018, Charlie and I got our positive pregnancy test. The three of us were cautiously optimistic. By six weeks in, I started feeling sharp cramps and saw some spotting. I dreaded that we were headed for another miscarriage. When Charlie, Adam and I went to the emergency ultrasound together, we were in for quite an emotional shock.

The technician turned the screen and pointed. "There's your baby's heartbeat."

I burst into tears from sheer relief and saw both my partners tearing up. Fourteen weeks — a trimester — later, and it's so far, so good. Hopefully, I'll be able to carry this little one into when this book is released. She's so much a product of the expansive love that poly has brought into our lives and I know she'll have just as much love to give us.

Whatever the outcome, though, I know my partners and I will have each other's backs.



Amanda was lucky enough to be supported by her partners through her pregnancy.

The digital pictures are dim. In the photograph, a purple light bathes the living room and the four people in it. Four people and a caramel-coloured cat, curled up fast asleep on the couch.

Thirty-year-old Amanda is in the middle. To her right is her boyfriend and to

her left is her girlfriend, April. And the three of them have just witnessed the beginning of a new life after six hours of labour. It was 1:18 a.m. Resting on Amanda's chest is her newborn bundle of joy — her daughter, Lilith, shortly after her home birth in Edmonton. Her fourth child.

During her pregnancy, Amanda experienced not only what it was like to be the pivot between her common-law partner and her girlfriend, she also got to share the ups and downs of hormones, morning sickness, food aversions, and cravings with her girlfriend, who also was expecting.

The joys of polyamory and pregnancy!

“My girlfriend ended up getting pregnant just after me, and she lives over an hour away, so supporting each other was difficult, as we both were having difficult pregnancies,” Amanda explained. “Distance made it so we couldn't be there in person for each other, which was really hard.”

As timing would have it, Amanda's girlfriend April's emergency C-section came a month early, on January 14, 2017, and fell on Amanda's son's fifth birthday, so Amanda ended up missing the birth. But April had been there when Lilith arrived into the world three months earlier, on October 4, 2016.

“I look back in awe and wish I could relive it,” cooed Amanda. “I had my hubby, girlfriend, and my best friend all there to support me. It was so amazing to have my home filled with so much love and support. Two of the best midwives were also there just rooting me on.”

Amanda recalled her girlfriend arriving shortly after her water broke and immediately jumping in to support mode by rubbing Amanda's shoulders and “sharing space” with her. “I felt so loved, I felt strong and powerful. Their quiet support and trust in me to know what I was doing was the best thing and all I needed,” she said. “We did not know if our baby was a boy or girl, so we were all surprised to see she was a girl, and sharing that moment was so special. Sharing these special moments and kisses with both of my loves was so meaningful and intimate, the most perfect labour and birth I could have asked for.”

Amanda said she always felt that monogamy was out of place for her and she wanted to share her heart with people she connected with.

She hadn't intended to get pregnant again for at least a couple more years. When she broke the news of the pregnancy to her girlfriend in January 2016, she was touched by her support and thoughtfulness. “When I got a picture message from her with [her] positive test, I was ecstatic, and I think I texted back something like, ‘OMG YES!! BABY. I KNEW IT <3!’” commented Amanda.

And although the timing didn't work out for Amanda to be at April's delivery, Amanda's son and April's little girl will celebrate their shared birthday

at countless future parties, together as a family. “Hopefully, it will bring us all together,” Amanda said. “That would be so special.”

Their pregnancies overlapping was definitely a shared experience between the two women, Amanda said. “She was coming to phases of pregnancy just as I was leaving them, so it was really great being able to talk through stuff like that and support her that way,” she said. “Even when it was just ‘Hey, I know what you’re going through.’”



Sometimes, when a pregnancy is unplanned, poly can become more of a challenge.

Aaron, a thirty-three-year-old Toronto dad, said his first experience in a structured non-monogamous relationship was with the mother of his child. “Our child was a surprise and unplanned, and becoming a father changed what I wanted out of our relationship,” he said. “I was hoping for an exclusive relationship while we built our family, but six months after giving birth, my son’s mother expressed a need to return to non-monogamy.”

What followed, he said, was an extremely tumultuous two years in which he struggled with being suddenly much more invested in the family than in dating outside people — a priority his partner didn’t wholly share. “It caused tremendous stress on our relationship because I was working from home and we lived in a fairly remote area, so I often found myself relegated to [stay-at-home dad] when my partner went out after work,” he confided. “She expressed a need to ‘get away’ from the household and, while I am deeply grateful for the time it gave me with my child, I found her motivations for non-monogamy frustrating and at times hurtful.”

Despite the stresses that families can experience, polyamory does not affect the rate of divorce, according to the little data that exists, said U.S. psychologist Deborah Anapol in a 2012 article in *Psychology Today*. However, it’s possible that growing up in a poly family can have unexpected benefits for children. “The priority put on openness, honesty, and emotional literacy can foster an environment where children develop a tendency for higher emotional intelligence. It also helped children feel connected to their parents in way they did not witness among their peers,” wrote Elisabeth Sheff and Mark Goldfeder in their study “Children of Polyamorous Families: A First Empirical Look.”

Michelle Desrosiers, a thirty-nine-year-old Kitchener, Ontario, mom of two, said her two boys — aged nine and seven — have been raised in a poly household since they were very young kids. Even though she is separated from

their father, the two remain united as co-parents. “There was never any coming out with them. We had been non-monogamous for seven years [prior], so pretty much, their conscious existence has been a different type of family. So, this is all they’ve known,” she said. “To them, it seems to make sense. They don’t bat an eye at it. They haven’t run into any bullying per se, or pressure or judgment from other kids, which are kind of a concern of parents who are in polyamorous relationships — how people will treat their children if they knew.”

She said there’s often the perception — and misconception — from adults that polyamory hurts or confuses children. But Desrosiers argues that this belief underestimates kids, adding they may be able to understand things better than adults do. Regardless, she makes sure to check in with her kids every so often to make sure they understand what’s going on and are okay with it — and they always are, she said. “The way they look at it — it means you get to love more people. They get excited when I meet someone new and bring them over. They take their Nerf guns out and shoot them. They think it’s fabulous that there [are] more people.

“Another concern people have is when things don’t work out. So, you are continually dating people. I don’t ascribe to the concept that things are forever. But again, I don’t make an issue out of it. ‘Here’s somebody that mommy knows. If they come around, cool’; if they stop, they might have questions, but they don’t. [If] I make a big deal out of it, they’ll make a big deal out of it. I just make it simple.”

Desrosiers said with polyamory and parenting, exes dating new people isn’t a big deal — whereas, in monogamous separations and divorces, people get jealous. “It was a non-issue when we were together, so it’s still a non-issue when we’re apart. And we don’t have to worry about introducing kids to partners.”

She recalled a time when one of her sons came home from kindergarten and told her he wanted to be friends with this girl in his class, Sophie, but that his best friend also wanted to be friends with her, too. “Mainstream culture shows that you fight over the girl, and may the best man win, and I explained to him, ‘You don’t have to choose. You can ask her to be friends with you both.’ And the light bulb went off,” she said. “He comes back the next day, and he asked Sophie if she would ‘be friends with both of us, so we all got to hang out. I got to keep my best friend, I got to hang out with Sophie, we were all so happy.’ If those messages from the start are reinforced, then they’ll get it.”

Whether they choose to be monogamous or polyamorous, she believes her sons will let go of the whole ownership idea. “Even if you’re monogamous, you’re two people choosing to be with each other, not owning each other. That’s a free choice,” she added.

Her boys have always been around adults and kids in the poly community, whether at potlucks or just hanging out, doing different events — a benefit of growing up with poly parents, Desrosiers told me. “They are so surrounded by love and friendship, it’s not isolating at all, which can easily happen through divorce or monogamy ... because you feel ‘my partner was everything’ and the kids are used to that.”

Such was also the case for Benedict Smith, a man from London, England, who wrote an essay for *Vice* in 2015 detailing what it was like to be raised in a polyamorous household.

As a kid, he lived with his dad, his mom, her partner, and, for a while, her mom’s partner’s partner. But it was never complicated. “I was raised by an interconnected network of grownups whose relationships weren’t exclusive but remained committed for years, even decades,” Smith wrote.

He said he never resented having more people around. They all went on boat holidays together. “Having more adults around the house meant there was more love and support, and more adults to look after us. Dad and James didn’t get jealous or resent each other, far from the alpha-male antler clattering you might expect. They were good friends.”

Some in their church circles did not understand, even going as far as forbidding their children from playing with him, or conflating polyamory with child abuse and calling social services. “I remember sitting on the living room floor with my Robot Wars toys, Hypno-Disc in one hand, Sir Killalot in the other, trying to convince them that my parents weren’t hurting me.” However, Smith said growing up in a poly household had a remarkable effect on him into adulthood. It shaped his personality.

While he doesn’t consider himself poly now, in his twenties, he is open to having either multiple partners or just one. “I lived with people who were straight, gay, bi, trans, writers, scientists, psychologists, adoptees, Bermudians, Hong Kongers, people of wealth, and benefits claimants. Maturing in that melting pot really cultivated and broadened my world view and helped me become the guy I am today. Good parents are good parents, whether there are one or two or three or four of them. Fortunately, mine were incredible.”



Unfortunately, teachers or poly people who work in sectors involving child care are often reluctant to come out because they’re afraid of being fired. Many parents still fear coming out to their communities, friends, and families, worried that people might alert the Children’s Aid Society (CAS).

Sara from the Toronto area — the woman who met her partner George while wearing the nun outfit — said when it comes to her partner’s kid, they don’t want his mom to know about their poly relationship for fear of losing custody. “One call to [Children’s Aid], they lose their kids. Because that is what happens with CAS. They don’t see it as anything that could be considered healthy,” she said. “For all the talk that it takes a village to raise a child, when you actually have a village raising a child, they consider it unhealthy. The last thing we want to do is give anyone ammunition.”

Other than taking that risk into consideration, Sara’s time with her “stepson” is valued family time. And because she’s closer in age to him than his parents are, she can be both a parental figure when need be and a friend he can talk to.

“We play video games, we play board games, we have dinner. I have made him so many home-cooked meals, it’s not funny. ‘You don’t need to call me mom. You can think of me as a cool, fun auntie if you want, or just Sara.’” she told him. “I’m another adult he can talk to. Because, let’s face it, there’s some things you can’t talk to with your parents when you’re a teenager.”

In a *Huffington Post* story, a staffer at the Ontario branch of the Adoption Council of Canada said they welcomed people from all walks of life as adoptive parents, including those who are single, in same-sex relationships, and those who already have children, and the process doesn’t discriminate against age, race, sexual orientation, or religion. “[Agencies] are looking for solid families and single people who can open their hearts,” Laura Eggertson, the director of the branch, told the media outlet. However, she noted that the Children’s Aid Society ultimately makes the final call whether parents are fit to adopt or not.

Though a spokesperson from the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies couldn’t be reached for comment, Zoe Duff, the coordinator of the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association (CPAA), said she and her two partners were granted restricted foster home status in British Columbia for her granddaughter in 2014. Restricted foster home status means a child is placed in a foster home with a family member, neighbour, or close family friend instead of a standard foster home placement. Unlike regular foster homes, the caregivers likely had a relationship with the child before they entered into foster care. “They come and interview you at the house and check to see if there are fire extinguishers,” she told me. “They were more worried about the fire extinguishers than who slept where — as long as she had a crib to sleep in and her own room.”

Sometimes, however, polyamory can be used as the harmful card during messy divorce proceedings.

One Manitoba man explained that at age sixteen, his daughter made the

choice to move in with him and his poly family because she was in constant conflict with her mother. The custody dispute never got as far as court, but both mother and father attended preliminary hearings where each party had the opportunity to submit a statement to support their position. “Her opening statement was that I lived in a polygamous relationship,” he said. “I believe the choice to use *polygamy* instead of *polyamory* was deliberate, but in spite of the inflammatory language, the judge completely disregarded the statement, choosing instead to focus on my daughter’s choice. She was at the age where the courts let them make a lot of decisions for themselves.”

In her research paper “What About the Children?! Children in Polyamorous Families: Stigma, Myths, and Realities,” Jacki Yovanoff wrote that “the media, by and large, reflect society’s perceptions of CNM, and plays into the moral panic regarding the effects of non-heteronormative relationships on children, and even the thinking that children should not be exposed to sexuality at all.

“Parallels can be drawn to children raised in gay and lesbian families,” she continued, “where the stress comes mainly from negative comments from friends or schoolmates, and the stigma many people hold. The fact that CNM is used as a ‘slippery slope argument’ against rights for LGBTQ communities suggests ‘an extremely high level of antipathy toward CNM’ [according to Terri D. Conley study, *The Fewer the Merrier?: Assessing Stigma Surrounding Consensually Non-Monogamous Romantic Relationships*]... Polyamory may not necessarily be better for raising healthy children, but there are reasons to think polyamory is at least as good as our ‘ideal’ of monogamy.”

In 2016, Michelle Desrosiers spoke on a panel at the Playground conference in Toronto about polyamory and parenting. She was among four others, all of whom were at different stages of letting their kids in on their lifestyle. One man talked about coming out to his younger kids. Another came out to his grown children as bisexual and poly. And another person who had a kink/poly dynamic wasn’t out. Desrosiers was the only parent who had told her kids from the start about her multiple partners. “One of panelists’ biggest fears was the religious aspect of it. So, they came from a highly religious, Catholic family background, so their fears had to do with disownership,” she said. “It’s not just the logistical or career aspects when it comes to coming out and polyamory — it’s the family, being concerned what the family would think.”

Desrosiers said she and her now ex-husband told their families they were poly in 2013. The response was what she expected: bewilderment. The effects were lasting, though the situation has gotten better over the past five years.

But probably the most surprising thing is how her relationship with her mom strengthened. “She’s gone from ‘can’t wrap my head around it’ and now she’s

been quite an advocate of it. She says, ‘Whatever makes my daughter happy,’” Desrosiers said with pride evident in her voice.

Her mother, who is in a monogamous marriage, even showed up to the Playground panel and watched her speak. “She sat in the second row and we were getting ready and there was a triad in the front row and they turned around and said, ‘Are you her mother?’ and she said yeah. And they just started talking to her, they started crying, they started sharing their story with her,” she said.

During the panel, her mother stood up and began speaking about her own journey. She explained that some family members on her ex-husband’s side took “coming out” pretty hard. And she did, too, at first. “She couldn’t really grasp that this was something that existed, like, it was just something that I did. Since there’s no visibility involved with the community, it’s very underground, so to speak,” she said. “To be there, surrounded by all these people who have kids, who have families, and are just your everyday people. That inspired her. She saw things in a whole new light and was like, ‘I get it.’ That gave a lot of people hope.”

Now her mom sends her texts:

*Who are you seeing now?
Hot date tonight? Ooooh!
I’m just going to live vicariously through you.*

Desrosiers laughed.



Parent Liz Borden, who is completing her master’s degree in Women and Gender Studies, noticed a lack of children’s literature that depicted polyamorous families during an assignment for class in 2017.

She went to the Halifax public library and asked for anything that came close and was handed books on blended families or single-parent families. Nothing showed more than two adults, save a few limited titles: *Raf and the Robots*, by Sarah J. Corner, portrays Raf, a young writer who lives with three adults and two other kids; *Six Dinner Sid*, by Inga Moore, is the tale of Sid the cat, who belongs to six different families who don’t mind sharing him; in *Else-Marie and Her Seven Little Daddies* by Cate Tiernan, a young girl is worried the other kids in her playgroup might not be accepting of her seven toy doll-sized fathers; “The Little House that Ran Away from Home,” a comic strip by Claude Ponti in *Strange Stories for Strange Kids* (eds. Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly),

shows a cartoon house that marries two other houses and appears to have a happy triad.

But none of those stories, despite alluding to it, explicitly state polyamory as a main theme. So, Borden decided to create her own poly picture book for kids.

She sat down with her twenty-two-year-old son, James, and asked him to jot down all the poignant stories he remembered growing up in an intentional polyamorous home, and together, they came up with the concept of *One, Two, Three, More Love*.

“We had pets ... when he was younger,” she said. “We had three cats and a dog that are also featured in the book. One of the cats, Spot, got sick, and we had to bring him to a veterinarian. We’re all at the vet, ten of us together, standing as a family and making preparations to say goodbye. It was this sad, loving, letting-go moment, and we’re all surrounding him and loving and caring of each other. He remembered that.”

One of the partners arrived at the vet and gave everyone an “Apache tear,” black obsidian-based stones that became tokens of how the family came together to grieve a loss, Borden told me.

The upcoming book will follow a young boy around the age of ten or twelve, using flashback storytelling of the everyday activities he did with all the adults in his life, including board games night, bonfires in the backyard, meal times, and canoeing on the lake.

“Adults were always peers for my son,” Borden said. “They were all there to support and encourage him. That’s how James talked about them. I think the takeaway [of the book] will be what family meant to my son and the emphasis is on intentional family, caring and love. It doesn’t matter what your family looks like, love is what keeps the family together.”

One of Borden’s life partners, Rachel, is illustrating the book. They’re hoping a Canadian publisher will sign on and the book will soon be readily available in public libraries, schools, specialty bookstores, and family resource centres across the country.

The main audience for *One, Two, Three, More Love* will be LGBTQ, non-traditional, and multi-partnered, polyamorous families with young children. But it’s not just for children, she maintains. “The intention is to contribute to this huge task of representing family diversity in children’s books and picture books and to make that gap currently between what Canadian families look like and the mainstream — the status-quo — a little smaller,” said Borden. “It’s for anybody who wants to see themselves represented in pictures.”

Kids in polyamorous families may not have to wait for picture books in order to feel included. In Northern Ontario, Polywood is an annual camping excursion

near Eganville open to polyamorous campers and their families.

Born out of a pagan festival, the camp began in 2013 and puts on a Poly 101 panel, which serves as an education session about polyamory and healthy relationships in general. “We deliberately chose a place outside of a city so that those still in the poly closet could attend without fear of being outed,” said the organizers. “We chose to make it a family-friendly event to give poly families and children of poly families a safe space to see others like them where they can share stories, experiences, and ask questions of those in their community. Our hope was that we could foster communication in an uninhibited manner.”

Desrosiers said more and more people going into poly are thinking of having or already have kids, so she has created a poly parents’ group on Facebook. “I think it’s going to be more important than ever to have that network,” she said. “I went over to a [friend’s] place last week, the kids played ... I cuddled up next to him, had a cry, and felt good about that. You sometimes miss that in ‘the other world,’ because society dictates it’s unacceptable to go over to another person’s home if they’re married and cuddle up with them.”

It just goes to show, polyamory is about the family we can create, not necessarily the one we are born into.

16

Bryde MacLean and Jeremie Saunders: Turning Halifax On, One Podcast at a Time

NOVA SCOTIA

To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly modern intellect.

— Oscar Wilde

TO THE PODCASTING COMMUNITY, Jeremie Saunders is known as Sickboy.

Not the heroin-shooting Scotsman in Danny Boyle’s ’90s classic film *Trainspotting*, but a guy from Halifax who shares his stories about his ongoing battle with cystic fibrosis on a podcast with that name.

When the *Sickboy* podcast made its debut in September 2015, it began with an on-air conversation with his wife, Bryde MacLean, about thriving in the face of mortality. During the chat, she became intrigued with the idea of perhaps opening up their marriage — or, at least, discussing the possibility.

“He made a joke about — ‘I’ve only got ten years [to live]’ — and that kind of got my brain turning because when we got married, Jeremie was twenty-three and I was twenty-seven, and I had a little more [sexual/romantic] experience,” said MacLean, now thirty-three.

“I was feeling weird that Jeremie might die in ten years and odds are I might live another forty or fifty years ... we should probably talk about this polyamorous thing or this open-relationship thing — the best qualities of each other, we should share them with other people.”

The couple went for it but didn’t keep it hush. They spoke to friends about it and people wanted them to dish about what it was like to be in an open relationship.

On February 15, 2017, they decided to open the dialogue to the Internet with

a new podcast called *Turn Me On* ([turnmeon podcast.com](http://turnmeonpodcast.com)).

Before, though, they had to test-run their open relationship and figure out how it would work.

While the *Sickboy* podcast was starting to pick up momentum, MacLean and Saunders were living in different provinces. She landed her first professional performing role, which required her to be in Prince Edward Island for five months. They saw each other three or four times during that period. Still, they wanted to try the open thing, and strongly believed there was a direct link between that and tapping into their creativity and sexuality.

The distance of 321 kilometres between them seemed to provide the reassurance they required to dip their toes into non-monogamy.

“It seemed a lot of things I was afraid of experiencing in an open relationship — like jealousy, feeling those difficult feelings — seemed to be easier if I was a province away. It wouldn’t be in my face, or I wasn’t going to be sitting at home, wondering if Jeremie was going to be coming home that night or not,” said MacLean.

They negotiated boundaries. It started with basic things such as flirting with other people and building comfort levels with one another. Flirting became an incremental step to kissing.

“There wasn’t much time to dwell on, ‘I wonder what they’re doing right now and who they’re doing it with,’” said Saunders. “It was this nice intro to managing feelings and managing expectations as to how this process might go.”

They checked in with each other every step of the way, sharing a Google Doc that worked as a contract and listed all the rules they’d agreed to, such as letting each other know (preferably) before anything happened with anyone else.

“But if not, then definitely within twenty-four hours,” she said. “No making out with the same person twice, so there was no potential for attachment. These rules were being revamped every day. As soon as one of us had an experience, then [we altered] our guidelines. And that’s been ongoing.”

When it came time to build the *Turn Me On* podcast together, Saunders and MacLean would hit the record button and have a forty-minute conversations that were educational, funny, and engaging because they were really learning a lot about each other. But then, they hadn’t factored in the intense feelings about learning *too* much.

“Those conversations would always end up with one of us turning off the record button and being like, ‘Fuck this! I don’t want to talk about this!’” he said. “One particular instance I remember is I had asked Bryde what was the best orgasm she ever had and she revealed that —”

MacLean interjected, “I just answered honestly!”

“It was someone that wasn’t me, and I couldn’t swallow that pill in that moment,” Saunders continued. “We did that three times and it ended up in a couple’s quarrel.”

But they found their stride when they moderated conversations with somebody else.

“It was almost like having a third person in the room made it much harder and a little embarrassing to have a disagreement,” he said.

Each Wednesday, *Turn Me On* unfolded with a mutual check-in with MacLean and Saunders about their relationship currently before starting a conversation with a stranger.

“We opened up our marriage and people wanted to know *everything* that came with that territory,” said MacLean. “We became unofficial sex therapists to all our friends.”

Some podcast topics included talking to a friend about being single and using Tinder. They interviewed a professional camgirl (webcam performer), a sex educator at the local sex store about “butt play,” and a woman who is the curator of a fully user-submitted porn site called *Make Love, Not Porn*.

“I had a lot of interest in talking to people about the things that turn them on that I’m not aware of,” said Saunders. “Talking to a sex worker who was a dominatrix ... [about] who her clients were and what they were requesting — that stuff just blew my mind.”

And of course, listeners wanted to know the juicy stuff about their lives.

Both Saunders and MacLean each have another partner. What is unique is that their partners are, by definition, in exclusive relationships with them. Saunders has a girlfriend, but only sees her, other than his wife. It’s not ideal to him, but he accepts it. MacLean has a boyfriend, who also identifies as monogamous and their relationship is exclusive.

“Technically, they’re polyamorous because they’re dating us, but they’re not interested in seeing anybody else. Currently, she’s not comfortable with me seeing anyone else,” said Saunders.

Saunders said his parents have accepted his girlfriend “as one of their own” and she’s invited to family gatherings. The four of them as an extended quad get along well.

But being polysaturated is also a problem Saunders and MacLean are experiencing. Both say they don’t want to take on another full-time relationship, with all their responsibilities and dedication. “Oh my god. I don’t know why I got into this ... so much work,” MacLean said. “My newish boyfriend has all these feelings. It’s not a traditional relationship and he really wrestles with what the future looks like ... it’s a lot of work, but it’s worth it.”

If Saunders could still be sexually open, he would. “I’m just super horny all the time, I’m just into the idea of sex being fully open, but I know that if that’s going to work in this relationship I’m currently in [with his girlfriend], then there’s gotta be some work that goes into it.”

Since they began doing the podcast together, the couple has not only learned more about sex and plenty about each other, but also invigorated their own personal growth. “Silly things that I would have been self-conscious about before this whole thing started — like, dick envy, or some other guy that she’s been with — now, I can’t believe there was even a point of my life that I was ever worried about [that],” said Saunders.

“We were having a conversation and Bryde reveals she was having anal with a guy outside near a lake and they got caught. I was like, ‘This lake? OMG, that’s so funny. That’s the same lake [my girlfriend] and I were banging at a month ago.’ That’s a conversation that would never have gone down a month ago. It’s made us more malleable and capable of being communicative.”

Two years before their adventures into poly, Saunders was more rigid. That’s changed.

“I’m really proud about that,” he said.

MacLean said having the conversions in front of an audience and guests on the show also holds them accountable. Now, there’s no hitting the stop button. “Having these conversations [has] allowed me to be nothing but authentic,” she said. “I can’t lie. It’s also very freeing because I didn’t grow up freely talking about affection or love or relationships or sex, certainly. Now I’m much more comfortable with those conversations privately, because I’m having them publicly.”

MacLean said she struggled with monogamy throughout her teens and twenties and always carried a lot of guilt and fear that she would repeat cheating. She didn’t feel remorseful about the act itself but felt bad about hurting the person.

Now, she has a framework. “I investigate things like, ‘What is monogamy?’ and ‘What is a marriage?’ and create definitions that work a little better for me.”

She’s had to face her own insecurities point-blank, especially as her husband developed his relationship with his girlfriend. “It made me feel really fearful that we lost something,” she confided. “Now, it’s like, ‘We’re not done evolving.’ I’m learning things about myself every day, about our relationship, and I think that’s why we’re here.”

As long as MacLean continues to evolve, she feels “there’s still fuel coming from our relationship. We want to be open to whatever that may be. It makes me feel like running away, but I don’t,” she said. “The benefit comes from after

those times when I go, ‘Well, we are closer than ever, but in a way I don’t know how to define right yet.’”

Saunders also struggled with his own fears of losing his wife when her relationship with her boyfriend deepened. Occasionally, he would catch wind of MacLean’s boyfriend’s insecurities about the relationship and begin to wonder, “What does that mean for me? How much sway does he have over what we’ve created, what we’ve built? That was scary, but you have to start to look at it from a different world view. If there are feelings or insecurities, see if there are reasons why you feel that way. If the reasons aren’t within the reality of what’s going on, I need to step back and allow myself to see it for what it is — this great thing Bryde can have with someone else.”

But just like his wife, he doesn’t run away from the unique challenges polyamory presents. The benefits outweigh them. “I live with a chronic and fatal illness, so sometimes I get really sick and require a lot of care, and it is without a doubt exhausting,” he said. “To go through that with Bryde x amount of years ago and then fast-forward to now, and to go through that with Bryde and with also [my partner] there — seeing that it gives Bryde a chance to step back and catch a breath, and for them to connect and support each other when I don’t have the capacity to give any support. It’s just this really beautiful gift to have. Never would I [have] thought my wife would be helping with issues with my girlfriend. There’s a support system that didn’t exist before then.”

As of November 2017, the pair had recorded forty hour-long episodes of *Turn Me On* and have no intention of stopping. While the bulk of their listenership is in the United States and Canada, mail arrives from all over the world thanking them for creating a dialogue about sex and polyamory.

MacLean is still a bit taken aback by the attention to their poly life and frank talk about different kinds of sex. “It blows my mind that people are into it.”

Reporting on Love: How the Media Covers Polyamory

The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses.

— Malcolm X

Social change happens when deeply felt private experiences are given public legitimacy.

— Source unknown (sometimes attributed to Gandhi)

ALAN M., NOW IN HIS SIXTIES and based out of the Boston area, was a tall, blond-haired, skinny teenager when he discovered polyamory, two decades before the word existed. He had a girlfriend at a summer science program he attended. She was a gung-ho fan of the sci-fi novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

“I’d been a straight-arrow, Boy Scout, all-American teenager, and this turned me into a radical, free-love utopian visionary. And this was when I was seventeen,” he said. “Here I am at sixty-six, and I’ve never looked back.”

Alan is very impressed with the level of maturity within the current polyamory movement — which seems to contrast with behaviour stemming from the 1960s’ free-love movement — including “much talk of ethical behaviour, responsibility, feminism. This was a female-led movement.”

In 2005, he launched the *Polyamory in the News* blog, tracking articles on polyamory in the media. For over a decade, he has been providing commentary on both negative and positive reporting on poly issues as well as non-monogamous-themed pop culture.

When he started the site, the word *polyamory* was not well known, he said. “People could parse the word if they knew the Latin and Greek root, but they often assumed it meant just screwing around. But people in the poly movement were doing a very good job of correcting this and saying, ‘Yes, sex can be really cool, but this is something more, and something different.’”

Alan had seen others try to track media attention to polyamory but fail to

keep it up. He saw a need to fill and felt a responsibility in taking the project on. “I’m a lot more hopeful that ten years from now, poly folks are going to feel a lot easier about being out, because the word won’t be misconstrued as being about something scummy.”

He said before *polyamory* made its debut in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2006, “newspapers were kind of loath to use the word because they didn’t know what it meant.”

Alan’s grandparents lived in southern Ontario, so he has roots in Canada, and noted the Canadian media overall has been more responsible in its reporting on poly issues than our neighbours to the south. “[Canada is] a little more thoughtful. The stories seem to be more aimed at intelligent readers and the whole outlook seems a trace more civilized than down here. I think it’s part of the culture. Maybe Canada, being one-seventh the size of the United States, just is a little more cohesive, and it can be assumed that people understand things better.”

Alan said the British Columbia Supreme Court test case, in which polyamorists fought to separate themselves legally from polygamists, seemed to dominate the polyamory-related headlines in 2011 across the country. “The polyamory aspect of the case was really a minor side issue compared to the fundamentalist Mormons, [and] the way that was handled by the founding of the CPAA, and to the degree the rest of the country paid attention to this modernistic, non-exploitative exception to the polygamy stereotype, I thought that did a lot of public education.”

As recent as 2010 — as the CPAA was preparing to test the country’s anti-polygamy law — the Green Party had voted down a proposal that would have committed the environmental party to repeal the law.

The vast majority of members voted against the motion, with 82 percent against and 18 percent in favour. The motion called for the party to push to decriminalize polyamorous relationships, where people are intimately involved and living with more than one partner, according to the *Toronto Sun*.

Several Green members argued that polyamorous relationships are impossible to sell to voters, and the motion could mean losing support at a time when they had hit record numbers in the previous election, Alan said. “Others in the Green Party thought this was going to be a terrible distraction and would make them a laughingstock, and indeed, that’s what happened. This controversy came up at the Green Party convention, and that was the one thing Canadian media seemed to cover about the convention, never mind all about the environment and economic policy. It hijacked their national convention, or at least the public’s attention to it. There were a lot of feelings that this was not

ready for prime time in electoral politics. And I would agree with that.”

Following the 2011 Supreme Court challenge outcome, Green Party leader Elizabeth May noted that while the decision acknowledges there’s an infringement on charter rights, it’s considered reasonable, in the general social fabric, that polyamorous people can’t get married, but still “be assured [the law] is not affecting them.”

In contrast, in the early 2000s, the leading American magazines of “the intellectual conservative think-tank crowd” went on a campaign to make polyamory the new face of evil, Alan told me. “They thought that after gay marriage, polygamy was coming, and polyamory was the camel’s nose under the tent — an attempt to bring in legalized polygamy. The right wing has tried to demonize the idea of multi-love relationships, but it just didn’t take hold.”

In 2007, a San Francisco activist named Pepper Mint — his legal name — had been a leader in sex positive and non-monogamy communities in California for years. In one of his many essays, titled “The Strange Credibility of Polyamory,” he wrote, “Media outlets interview poly people and actually present with a positive spin. Talk show audiences are incredibly hostile to poly guests, but the talk show hosts are usually on our side.”

Alan agreed that the perception of polyamory seems to be hitting a cultural tipping point “where media expect that people know the word and the ideas behind it, with zero explanation.” However, media outlets oftentimes continue to use the annoying picture of three pairs of feet, usually white, poking out from under a bedsheet — which further stigmatizes polyamory as only being about sex. (But Alan noted that there is a still “a certain legitimacy there, the legitimacy of being recognized by the culture at large.”)

There is another problem with images like these: they are polynormative.

In 2013, Toronto queer sex educator Andrea Zanin wrote about polynormativity on her *Sex Geek* blog. Polynormativity is a clear set of so-called poly norms that the media overwhelmingly showcases, which is “as similar to traditional monogamy as possible, because it’s the least threatening to the dominant social order.” According to Zanin, the four facets of polynormativity are that polyamory starts with a couple; that it is hierarchical; that it requires a lot of rules; and that it is by default heterosexual(ish). “Perhaps it might work well, maayyybe, for some people,” she wrote, “but it comes with a host of problems for everyone involved, most notably for those who are in the least empowered place within the relationship structure, but also in more subtle and insidious ways for those who are in the more privileged place within the structure.”

Zanin added that because of this overwhelming slant in media representation,

a lot of folks who are new to poly are operating at a great disadvantage. “At best, there’s a brief mention that some people do some other sorts of poly, over there, and we don’t really understand them, or maybe those forms are way too complicated for us to summarize in a 1,000-word article. (Triads! Quads! Families! Ws and Xs and Greek alphabets and constellations and ecosystems! It’s all so scary. Also, math is hard.) But most of the time, ‘other’ kinds of poly aren’t mentioned at all.”

Such articles are looking to present a fantasy of conventionally good-looking people having delightful, transgressive sex while remaining firmly within the boundaries of a conventional couple-based relationship.

“That fantasy sells things. It does the rest of us no favours,” she said.

In the May 11, 2017, issue of its Sunday magazine, the *New York Times* (*NYT*), one of the leading media outlets in the United States, devoted space on its front cover to non-monogamy. The magazine asked, “Is an open marriage a happier marriage?” and within its pages followed a few couples who had decided to open up their relationships.

A reporter profiled a few polycules in the northeast over the course of a year, focusing on one central couple — Elizabeth and Daniel — who opened up their relationship when their marriage hit the rocks. Their sex drives seemed incompatible, yet they wanted to stay married. The feature put the spotlight on non-monogamy (a positive), but also was met with much criticism with its portrayal.

“For what it was, I thought it was a very thoughtful and good piece of journalism. May not have been a good piece of propaganda for us, but that’s not their job,” said Alan. “For concepts of ethical non-monogamy, a lot of [poly] people had problems with it, because these were couples who — several of them — had come through cheating on their partner, or by laying down an ultimatum: ‘I’m having an affair and you can accept it or not. I’m doing it anyway.’ On the other hand, the *NYT* was dealing with real people in the real world and this is the rocky way a lot of people come to the idea of open relationships,” he added. “As a newspaper, you can’t fault them. They also came under criticism for racial tokenism and writing about middle-and upper-middle-class people who were very much the stereotype of *NYT* subscribers, but heck, that’s their bread and butter.”

Kevin Patterson, the founder of Poly Role Models and author of the book *Love’s Not Color Blind*, criticized the publication at a 2018 talk at the Playground sexuality conference in Toronto. He and his wife, Antoinette, were featured in the magazine story.

“The whole article was fucking boring,” he said. “It was 13,000 words and

most of it was about this sad couple — sad couples are important, too — but the crux was about unsatisfying marriages that were opening up to save *those* unsatisfying marriages. That is an important conversation to have, except these are the same conversations we always have.”

Patterson said the reporter from the *NYT* spoke to him and Antoinette for several hours and photographed what seemed to be a hundred frames of the two caressing and looking joyous. But only a couple of quotes and a picture of them appearing on the verge of a divorce were printed. Patterson is sitting on a bed, bowing down, eyes to the ground, and kissing his wife’s hand, while she, standing up, faces the camera with a solemn expression. The vignette closing in on the couple, along with the muted tones of the photograph, add to the ominous vibe.

“My marriage is not unhappy. It looked so different on day one than it does now and that’s an amazing thing,” he said. “Me and my wife and my partner and her partner, we find all these new ways to realign ourselves around each other.”

Patterson said the *NYT* wanted to write the story with the unhappy-couple bias, but that’s not what they got. Instead, he said, “they got me fucking it up with all this happiness I’m surrounded by.... And then say, ‘Yeah, we got black folks in there....’ They used our black faces, but not any of our black words.... If anyone is looking for resources [for people of colour], you are not going to find them by looking at my sad face in the story.”

An irate Patterson subsequently sent a picture of himself and his wife embracing with huge smiles on their faces to show a much more positive representation of their relationship to the *New York Times*, as well as other media outlets, including the *Philadelphia Daily News*, who went to publish an article about them.

“There were people that didn’t notice the tokenization there [in *NYT*],” he said. “There’s a gay couple in that same article, and they had two lines. And they were sad in their photo, too.... In the month and a half [since] we published that article [in the *Daily News*], we added four hundred new people [to Poly Role Models]. Four hundred people *IS* a polyamory group. And two-thirds of these people were people of colour. [That was just] by being able to tell our story.

“The *New York Times*, with far more circulation, got this shit wrong. *Philadelphia Daily News*, that had the circulation of a bunch of convenience stores in the area, brought hundreds of people into our community,” he added.

A Texas couple interviewed for the *NYT* story agreed to be interviewed for NBC’s *Today* show around Valentine’s Day 2018. Zaeli Kane, who was part of the couple, said while her criticisms aren’t personally directed to the journalists she, her husband Joe, and their partners spoke to for the story, she’s disappointed

with mainstream coverage of non-monogamous people, “which does not care what non-monogamous people want to talk about, and it approaches our expertise with a loaded skepticism made of monogamous projections.

“The frustrating part is, because monogamy is the dominant world view, it is not treated as a lens through which the media is looking, but rather as ‘how things are.’ This not only results in posing the same, ultimately anecdotal questions over and over — Who sleeps where? How do you schedule it? — but it misses the opportunity to discover *what* non-monogamy means to those who practise it. The problem with missing this point is it enables media to convey monogamy as the core or ‘real’ relationship type and polyamory as, at best, a club sandwich of monogamist couplehoods, or, in the case of throuples and so on, as pure perversion. It makes it impossible to see my life choices as anything other than a rebellion against monogamy, when really, I’m just in love with a different, but equally valid, philosophy.”

She said that in the *NYT* piece, affairs and sex were placed in the forefront. When Kane was introduced to the reporter, they barely shook hands before she was asked, “What’s the difference between sex with Blake and sex with Joe?”

“Reporters don’t seem to think non-monogamous people deserve the same conversational foreplay as our monogamous counterparts,” she said. “How often do they feel entitled to open a conversation with a conventional couple about their relationship by diving straight into their bed and taking notes on their utmost nudity? I’m happy to discuss it, but that doesn’t mean I’m here to kiss and tell straight out of the gate for the whole world. Why not build trust and become intimate before you expect my intimate details?”

The American-based Polyamory Media Association (PMA) formed in 2008 to help media outlets find polyamorous sources for interviews, talk shows, and documentaries. They also helped polyamorous people prepare for media coverage, including how to make sure everyone is treated fairly.

Joreth Innkeeper, the association’s director, said that “in the early days, the media was all about sensationalizing a new and vulnerable group. Several well-meaning but inexperienced polys went on TV hoping to clear up misconceptions, only to be torn apart by TV talk show hosts, and some local discussion groups had their meetings infiltrated with hidden cameras to do exposés on the local news.”

She said that polys needed a place where they could get trained on how to screen a media event request and how to handle these events so that their words weren’t taken out of context and they weren’t steamrolled. They also needed a central clearinghouse of trained spokespeople willing to talk to the media, rather than having the media constantly pester private groups with requests. The

association specialized in pre-screening media requests, in an effort to protect the community. The group is still semi-active.

But, according to Innkeeper, “with bloggers and op-eds now dominating our news cycle, this sort of approach is less relevant.” The group’s website reads, “in 2013, we decided that the poly community and the media were ready to work together on their own. More poly folk were becoming media savvy and more and more media were becoming aware of polyamory and poly communities and so did not need to come here to find respondents.”

Innkeeper still helps polyamorists get comfortable in front of a camera and runs training programs throughout the U.S. if she is contacted, but it’s a side project. She’s also available to give lectures and basic workshops at conferences and discussion groups about media training.

The training is still necessary, she said. Naive polys sometimes still accept media requests, out of a combination of unfettered optimism to share their stories and clear up misconceptions and perhaps a bit of excitement around a small measure of fame. While neither of those is necessarily a bad thing, the naïveté that comes with a lack of training can end up doing both the individual and the community more harm than good.

“The media and any sort of activism, including polyactivism, has this kind of sibling-like co-operative/combatative relationship,” Innkeeper observed. “We need to learn how to work together so that both sides get something positive out of the arrangement, even when each side is primarily looking out for their own side. That’s where organizations like PMA come in.”



It seems media coverage, whether subtle or overt, continues to expand beyond the religious-based portrayals of *Big Love* and *Sister Wives*.

Even in animation, Tina Belcher, the teen character on the show *Bob’s Burgers*, fell in love with two boys and tried to pitch the idea of a multi-person relationship. “Give it a chance. Let’s put the ‘try’ in ‘triangle,’” she proposes. In another scene in a Little League baseball dugout, she ponders, “Is it possible to be in love with twenty-five people at once?”

Lisa Simpson was seen holding two women’s hands — much to brother Bart’s dismay — in a flash-forward montage of future family photos in a December 2011 *Simpsons* couch gag from the “Holidays of Future Passed” episode.

Multi-love even bubbled up in the soap industry. In 2017, British high-end soap company Lush unveiled bath oil in a heart-shaped container called

“Polyamorous,” made from shea butter, orange oil, and sandalwood. The soap is dotted with mini hearts, which dissolve in water, spreading the *amour*.

In the beginning of 2018, people took to Twitter to mourn the loss of Thomas, a blind, bisexual goose in New Zealand involved in what appeared to be a polyamorous triad with two swans before dying at the age of forty. The bird segregated himself from other geese years ago, according to media reports, and coupled with a male black swan named Henry. They were lifelong mates for twenty-four years. “Even when Henry fell for another swan, called Henrietta, most would have ended the relationship — not Thomas,” said an article in the *Mirror* (U.K.). “Instead, he stayed by Henry’s side and even helped raise the pair’s cygnets until Henry died in 2009.”

Around the same time, BBC Two aired a one-hour documentary called *Love Unlimited*, profiling polyamorous people in Scotland. The *Guardian* followed it up with an op-ed from the mother of one of the subjects, who is transgender. The BBC also gave a nod to Erika Kapin’s Open Photo Project, “which uses photography, audio and text to present the beautiful, complex lives of consensually non-monogamous people.”

Emily Hao is a Toronto-based filmmaker who is hoping to draw more awareness to the emerging polyamorous culture in Canada. She’s currently in the introductory stages of her documentary, which she hopes will capture folks from all kinds of social circles, age groups, and relationship structures to see what love, sex, attachments, and communication looks like in different forms.

“The inspiration for the film is how often people surprise me when I talk to them about non-monogamy. Everybody knows someone or is that someone who practises non-monogamy in an ethical way,” she explained. “It exists so widely outside of the established ‘polyamory’ community, but I felt there isn’t enough to highlight just how many people practise this model. My general principle in life is to be rid of assumptions and to cultivate open minds, so I just want to provide exposure, get the general audience to think about ‘Hey, why is monogamy the default?’”

Hao said the release of the still-untitled film will depend on how interviews, production, and editing go, but she’s hopeful it will debut by 2020.



Alan, a soon-to-be retired science editor from *Polyamory in the News*, uses the online Google Translate service in order to access the meat and potatoes of stories written in foreign languages. *Polyamory in the News* has more than 1,400 posts, with over 380 posts left in draft mode.

Some of the most notable stories in his decade-long crusade of article-posting have come from scientific sources; for example, in 2006, sci-fi geek writer Annalee Newitz, who is poly, wrote a first-of-its-kind story about polyamory for *New Scientist* magazine. The article was a “breakthrough, a really well-researched piece that tried to find things out in terms of numbers, types of relationships, what was really happening in the movement,” said Alan.

Another one of Alan’s more in-depth posts concerned the short-lived box office shelf life of *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, an interpretation of the life of Wonder Woman creator William Moulton Marston and his polyamorous triad, released in 2017. Angela Robinson’s biopic centres around Professor Marston, who also created the first lie detector test using blood pressure in 1913. He was married to Elizabeth Marston. The couple became involved with his student Olive Byrne.

The film received nearly all positive reviews, some even raves, according to Alan. The publicity teams behind the film at Sony Pictures even gave out pairs of tickets to poly group members in Vancouver to promote the film, but later rescinded the offer and handed out single tickets after realizing the concept of “pairs” doesn’t work when promoting a poly-romance movie.

While a Sony rep stood awkwardly beside her, someone from the Vancouver poly community was quoted by *Xtra* as saying, “We are going to see if this movie plays into the stereotypes that we are all so used to, or if it expands on poly as a new form of relationship.”

Despite the positive reviews, the movie didn’t stay very long in cinemas.

“Polyfolks are telling of literally crying at finally seeing such a straightforward representation of what they’re about,” Alan wrote on *Polyamory in the News*. “But when we saw the movie late Thursday night at a suburban multiplex, we and a group of three were the only people in the seats. Other folks tell of poor attendance where they saw it.”

The box office result from opening weekend was disappointing — even for an arty indie biopic — at \$736,883. The film was predicted to result in a \$2 million to \$3 million opening weekend, but it shows that good reviews don’t necessarily mean good attendance, Alan noted.

Meanwhile, controversy hit behind the scenes when Christie Marston, the granddaughter of William and Elizabeth, ignited a campaign against the movie and Robinson for bending the historic details for the sake of a story. “Christie seems most upset that the movie portrays Elizabeth and Olive as being in a bisexual relationship — which they apparently were, as Noah Berlatsky makes clear again in an article yesterday in *The Verge*,” Alan wrote. “Christie Marston, now elderly, was not yet born at the time of the events. She was close to her

grandmother in adulthood (Elizabeth lived to one hundred), but her grandmother did not talk to her about her sex life. Though she did say elsewhere, of those early days in the household, that there was ‘lovemaking for all.’ Christie seems to say that descendants have a right to prevent upsetting portrayals of their forebears, even when there’s persuasive evidence.”

Alan said that through more mainstream films, such as *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, and media coverage of polyamorous stories, “we’re already seeing the diminishing of ‘Wow, look at these weird people’ stories — the freak show approach that was more common for the media to do when this was newer. They understand us better now.”



The Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family’s “Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada” survey found almost three-quarters — or 72.6 percent — of those surveyed agreed public acceptance of polyamorous relationships is increasing.

Zoe Duff of the CPAA said she believes media perception is also improving; however, there will always be critics and trolls in online forums who will be at the ready to bash polyamory. “You’re still going to have a fraction of the people who find the whole thing disgusting,” she explained. “There will always be people who are fundamentally inclined to tell everyone else how to live their lives. That’s human nature. But for the most part, we’re going to be able to do what we want to do, provided we don’t cause a stink about it — demanding equal rights and opportunities as monogamous people. Then, it suddenly becomes a *problem*.”

Alan is also hopeful. “[It’s] the percolation of what Elisabeth Sheff calls, ‘the polyamorous possibility’ — knowing that this is a relationship option that some people actually do, and make work, and are happy with. Knowing this raises the possibility that it might even be right for you. The idea that multi-love relationships aren’t totally foreign to human nature, and can be incredibly fulfilling for all the people involved, has gotten out into the world. Ever since 1968, I’ve wanted to do this — to spread that knowledge.”

Cory and Kendra and Amber: Escaping the North

YUKON AND NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Isolation is aloneness that feels forced upon you, like a punishment. Solitude is aloneness you choose and embrace. I think great things can come out of solitude, out of going to a place where all is quiet except the beating of your heart.

— Jeanne Marie Laskas, writer, journalist, and professor

CORY AND KENDRA

Cory and Kendra say they are survivors of the North.

Even though Whitehorse, Yukon, is where they first met and developed a long-standing platonic friendship, it was also the site of abusive, toxic behaviour and isolation, far from anything even resembling a supportive environment for polyamorous people.

“There’s no community there ... none,” said Cory, forty-two. “The only community there is a community of hate, bigotry, misogyny. Four years ago, we embarked on this polyamorous lifestyle and we’re still dealing with it from Whitehorse. We’re still under attack; we’re told we’re mentally ill and terrible human beings.”

In early 2018, the couple moved to a remote island in British Columbia and got married. Their escape has galvanized them to write a book about their relationship.

They met each other in 2010 in the Indigenous community. Cory had moved to Whitehorse, a rural city of around 25,000, around 2008 to work as a Red Seal electrician “Kendra walked through the door, and being the beautiful woman that she is, decided to take me into the bathroom and gave me a hand massage. And

that's how it all started," he recalled, chuckling.

But they didn't start dating right away. For four years, they remained platonic friends and would go for sushi and lament about science, literature, art, and politics. They both identified as feminists and were avid readers.

At that time, Cory, who identifies as bisexual, was in an abusive relationship with another woman. Kendra was also involved in a similarly abusive relationship, which left her with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), she said. In 2014, Cory said he called Kendra for help; she picked him up and drove him straight to a hotel room. "We cried and held each other for fifteen hours straight," he said.

They were both in monogamous relationships and decided to leave them for each other. Not only was the abuse unhealthy, Cory said, but they felt restricted by monogamy's limitations. It pushed them to think outside the box. "We love each other, we love *love*," he said. "We're not going to put any borders or restrictions on our relationship. We started living this lifestyle and it was not received well at all. We had death threats. Literally, I've had people tell me they were going to shoot me."

Cory said it was "the white social scene" that deserted him after he came out as poly.

Kendra, twenty-seven, said monogamy had never felt right to either of them. "I dabbled in swinging and other forms of non-monogamy, but none of that ever seemed to fit," she said. "By the time we decided to venture on a relationship of our own, we were both in incredibly bad places, mentally."

Kendra said they found comfort in the idea of loving each other without the need to control each other, and together built their own idea of what love and a relationship could be like. This led them to discover the term *polyamory*. "It felt like a weight being lifted, to discover that these ideas and communities existed, that there were others out there, and that this was possible. It felt like a light at the end of the tunnel. But it was the beginning of a very dark few years."

They each sent a letter to their ex, declaring they were polyamorous and were no longer interested in continuing their relationships with them. Those letters were photographed and posted on social media. Kendra claims one of the exes made a fake profile of her online. "She'd write things about me like, 'I am a prostitute' and 'My daughter has been taken from me' [which was untrue]. Obviously, those posts, in a far fucking northern community, have a pretty substantial impact.... The next small town is 2,500 kilometres away. It's a very isolated existence."

Kendra dealt with the stresses of being a target in unhealthy ways. "Drugs and alcohol," she said. "Very toxic ... the coping methods for any issue in [the

Whitehorse] community is drugs and alcohol.”

Add mental health problems to the equation, and you had a cocktail for a downward spiral. “It almost sounds superficial, but it was an extreme part of the whole story with mental illness. It goes unchecked in our [Northern] communities,” Kendra explained. “We can talk about polyamory and the struggles of it, but while you’re talking about that, you have to talk drugs and alcohol, and while you’re talking about that, you have to talk about mental illness. It’s hard to tell one story without telling several.”

She scornfully laughs when I ask if she received any support from family and friends. “Everyone’s idea about [polyamory] was it doesn’t exist. That I was a whore,” she said. “[We were] tied to a community [Whitehorse] that has no support for that kind of identity ... a community that’s so far north that these kinds of ideas don’t even exist. The effects of abuse and mental illness are compounded in the North, and for us, substance abuse became a form of self-medication in the face of inadequate mental illness support, which further complicated and exacerbated things.”

Cory agreed. “It’s really brutal, what we went through. It’s hard to talk about. Being a bisexual man in a territory is not received well. But even worse is being a beautiful woman who is a feminist, freethinker,” he said. “I think she’s struggled more than I have.”

Cory described himself as a “fairly decent-sized man” and he would at times reverse gender roles. “I sexualized men all the time, objectified them, to let them know what it feels like,” he told me. “Being in the North and polyamorous or anything that isn’t heterosexual is pretty much a nightmare.”

Because of the threatening environment, the couple packed their bags and got out of Dodge. They only stayed in Whitehorse as a couple for a few weeks. “We escaped the North, finally. It took years and we travelled,” Cory said.

But more complications arose even after they settled in Ontario.

They ended up introducing another man — Cory’s childhood friend — into their relationship, which Cory calls “our original triad.”

“Cory’s friend decided he wanted to join us on this adventure, and we decided we wanted him. He quit his job and gave notice on his place,” Kendra recalled. “However, while [the friend and I] were packing, about a day before we were supposed to meet Cory, Cory backed out. This left both his friend and I devastated. I had left my life for this and now felt ostracized from the community [in Whitehorse] I had left, so I moved to Vancouver.”

During this time, Cory said that he and his ex were going to rekindle their relationship. “I chickened out because I had another son being born. I ran away from Kendra and ended up going back to my ex, who I already had a child with,”

he said.

Meanwhile, Cory's childhood friend left for Saskatoon and Kendra took a year to recover from the heartbreak, eventually moving back to Whitehorse. Because of the heartbreak, she fell into a deep depression, phasing in and out of drug addiction while coping with "the crushing reality of losing the first path that made sense to me."

"Given that that was my first exposure to it, and there was no poly community to lean on, that ideology seems unattainable and distant," she said. She was hired for a government job, but the depression worsened. She was eventually put on long-term disability because of her C-PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

While she was in Whitehorse, Cory contacted her and apologized. She was furious, at first, to even hear from him. However, it had been a few years since she had felt a spark and zest for life again. Knowing she wasn't insane, and that polyamory, per se, hadn't failed her, she began to trust her own judgment again.

About a month after he contacted her, she decided to try and pursue polyamory again.

"I met a woman online who lives in Michigan with her husband and their three kids. I decided to go there. I moved there for about four months, until I needed to move back over the Canadian border while we figured out complications with citizenship," she said.

But one of the partners became controlling. Kendra ended it, as she wouldn't tolerate any more abuse.

After that experience, when she moved in Ontario, she met a man. "He seemed extremely interested in polyamory, and him and I became involved," she said.

Meanwhile, Cory was already in Ontario rebuilding his life.

Eventually, Cory visited Kendra and her new partner, and the three decided to try to be a triad. Cory also began dating a woman who worked as a hairdresser in Toronto.

"We tried to allow that relationship to develop, but it was very stressful, as I don't think she properly understood the dynamic," explained Kendra. "The stress caused us all to be very on edge. My trust in Cory was still basically non-existent, and at the first sign of him, real or perceived on my part, not being fully committed, I asked him to leave. I stayed with this other man for a couple of months, until it was clear he, too, was not actually on board with polyamory."

Over a short period, three triads — a lot to handle.

Cory explained, "The hairdresser ended up admitting herself into a mental institution and Kendra [and her partner] kicked me out of the relationship, so I

left Ontario for British Columbia for work and to spend some time back in the Yukon with my boys.”

Some time passed.

Kendra eventually found her way to where Cory was living — in Vancouver. They realized they needed to find *home* and start a new life with as little drama as possible and rebuild themselves as a couple. They wanted to put down stable roots together, so Kendra proposed to Cory and, vowing to learn from their history and not make the same mistakes again, the couple began “looking for a place to feel accepted.” They found open arms on a remote British Columbia island in early 2018.

“We eventually got married on LSD by a drive-by marriage guy in a van,” he said.

During their vows, both decided to give monogamy another try, given their poor experiences with polyamory.

“We had a lot of grief for a long time, a lot of bad partners, and this caused a lot of pain between us,” Cory explained. “At the end of the day, she and I love each other, and we decided to try something different. Keep strange people out of our lives for a bit.”

Kendra said this was the key part of their journey — finally discovering a place of acceptance after coming from scorched earth. “We were immediately accepted and embraced by the community. Almost instantly, the depression and anxiety felt surmountable and the healing began,” she said. “Both of us have always been successful and financially stable — we are now the most broke either of us have ever been, but we have never been happier or more mentally stable. Acceptance and community are everything.”

And while the couple is embarking on a new chapter, Cory still feels pangs of regret.

“If the Yukon hadn’t have spit us out, things would have worked out much differently,” he said. “Me leaving our original triad to go back to my ex — that was a horrible mistake. We were both devastated.”

Since they’ve settled into a remote part of B.C., the couple took pen to paper and plotted their memoirs.

“It’s a novel of mental illness, a novel about love, polyamory,” he said.

“That’s the best thing for us right now. I’m not saying that’s the end of poly, but that’s our story for a bit.”

AMBER

Amber, a sixty-year-old woman who lived on another remote island in British Columbia, spent a year in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, before deciding it wasn't for her.

Before her current partner, Mark, whom she has been with since 1997, she was with her ex-husband in a monogamous marriage, also for about twenty years. But she had always thought non-monogamy made more sense.

“I didn't think of the husband and wife and white picket fence. I didn't want to get married. I thought, instead, it would be cool to have a baby of every race. Not that I did — I only ended up with [a Chinese baby] because my husband is Chinese,” she said.

“Monogamy has never been in my head, but I didn't know what polyamory was. A friend of mine in the pagan community told me about it in the late '90s, early 2000s. And it was like, ‘Wow, there's actually a community of people who think like I do?’”

In 2011, she travelled to Yellowknife alone for a year for an adventure “with the aurora borealis.” Mark agreed to look after things at home. She met a boyfriend, a dom, and was with him for five months in the northern city.

“I did play with others as well, but they were more of a swing situation. I didn't find people who were into polyamory, per se, but I found a swing and BDSM group up there. For a city, it's a pretty small town and everybody is scared to let anybody know what you do. It's very secretive,” she explained.

“It's twenty thousand people. I did have an Inuit boyfriend for the last few months I was up there, but he did not understand poly; he did not want anything to do with poly.”

The BDSM and swinging community in itself was very underground in Yellowknife, where inquiring minds would gather discreetly in a pub and speak in hushed tones.

“One thing that I found is they're very religious,” Amber said. “Like I said, I had an Inuit boyfriend, and when he found out my daughter was gay — oh, my god. His priest or minister in his Anglican church, because I told him I was poly, [the response was] I was ‘the daughter of Satan’ and ‘you've got to save her soul.’ They're just too religious,” she said.

Her decision to leave was based on her negative experience.

“Pretty well all my polyamorous activity happened in Vancouver, before Yellowknife ... So that was tied up to poly for me,” she explained. “Then I went into swing, because it's kind of complicated, poly — swing is much easier.”

In 2002, while she was living on that remote B.C. island, she found like-minded polyamorous people online at Vanpoly. She wound up at a party through the group and became captivated by a man — her first “dom” [dominant]. That

adventure lasted for two years while she was his “slave.” The second year, she lived with him, his wife, and her boyfriend in Vancouver — and another housemate, who ended up being her boyfriend also. “The worst part was the commuting, living two separate lives in two different places. Half of the week on the island, and the other half in Vancouver. It’s the hardest form of poly there is,” she said. “It’s funny how we’re given challenges we don’t really want. But in the end, it’s good for the soul.”

Without getting too much into the gritty details, Amber said their poly family ended up breaking apart and people went in different directions. As far as she was concerned, it was “sad and unnecessary and heartbreaking,” but that’s the way it was. “It kind of soured me on poly for a while, which is why Mark and I turned to swing,” she said.

“One thing that I love about being poly, and swing, for that matter, is that you can be truly open and honest with all of your partners. There’s never a reason to lie. It’s the main foundation of poly, yet sometimes some people forget this and lie anyway. I found it rather disconcerting.”

Amber said she’s experienced “the good, bad and downright ugly” when it comes to poly, but she looks back on all her experiences — and anticipates her future — with warm fondness.

“We had meetings where we’d sit down with a chart and everything. Every Saturday night, we’d invite people and there’d be this big puppy pile of people, a movie or talking. It was fun for me because I was in my forties and he was in his twenties. I got to live the whole twenties party thing — it was awesome.”

At this point, she and Mark are happy to see what the future holds on the island. It’s just the two of them, but they still have friends they used to be involved with in their lives and things are “totally open.”

“I have to say that I’ve been blessed when it comes to a poly partner like Mark. It may have taken him a few months to take a shine to the lifestyle in the beginning, but once he did, he took to it like a fish in water,” she said. “He’s open-minded and doesn’t have a jealous bone in his body. I can’t say how much that helps in a poly relationship. He’s also happy to let me have complete freedom, which is top priority to me considering my penchant for frequently heading off for new adventures.”

Eve Rickert and Franklin Veaux

BRITISH COLUMBIA

You'll need courage because polyamorous relationships can be scary. Loving other people without a script is scary. Allowing the people you love to make their own choices without controlling them is scary. The kind of courage we're talking about involves being willing to let go of guarantees — and love and trust your partners anyway.

— Franklin Veaux and Eve Rickert, *More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory*

WHEN EVE RICKERT SAT DOWN with her partner and co-author Franklin Veaux to pen their bestselling polyamory guide *More Than Two*, she expected it to take much longer than it did.

But when she started to put her relationship experiences down on paper, the pages filled up quickly. They wrote the first draft of the book in six weeks, and a second draft was completed in three weeks. It was released in 2014.

“The ideas that became *More Than Two* had been baking in our heads for — in Franklin's case, decades; in my case, six or seven years,” Rickert, a Vancouver resident, explained. “It just fell out on the page. The book wanted to be written.”

More Than Two is often regarded as one of the several “bibles” that poly people — new, experienced, or curious — turn to for wisdom, direction, and information. It joins other resources such as *Sex at Dawn* (Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá), *Opening Up* (Tristan Taormino), *Designer Relationships* (Mark A. Michaels and Patricia Johnson), *The Ethical Slut* (Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton), *Polyamory in the 21st Century* (Deborah Anapol), and *Redefining Our Relationships* (Wendy-O Matik).

“We’ve been doing a lot of touring, leading workshops, which I would consider activism,” Rickert said. “We pre-sold maybe three hundred copies through the crowdfunding campaign. Our first print run was three thousand copies, which we thought was ambitious. Just the way it’s taken off and its popularity is beyond anything we expected.”

As of early 2018, *More Than Two* has sold about fifty-five thousand copies.

Veaux wants to make it clear that despite the two of them writing a book about polyamory, they aren’t experts on the subject, simply because *there are no experts* on the subject. In fact, they explicitly state that in the pages of their book.

“We’ve ended up doing a lot of media, we’ve been interviewed on radio, we’ve done magazine and newspaper interviews, and everyone’s said, ‘these poly experts, Franklin and Eve’ and it’s like, ‘No, you didn’t read the book,’” he said at Playground in February 2018, during a talk about the things he learned while writing a book on polyamory.

“I’ve been doing it a long time, which means I’ve screwed up a lot. I’ve gotten a lot of things wrong, and in fact, I’ve written a book about how I got a lot of things wrong: *The Game Changer*. I’m in a position where I know how to do things wrong, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I know how to do things right.”

Veaux said he’s never been in a monogamous relationship in his entire life. He took two dates to his senior prom, which “raised a few eyebrows.”

“To me, it feels like a part of my identity that’s almost like a sexual orientation, that’s something I can’t change,” he said. “I’ve spoken to a lot of people who are less obligate polyamorous and more facultative polyamorous — so they can be in a polyamorous or monogamous relationship and it works for them, which is awesome. I’ve been writing on polyamory online since 1994, and my ideas have evolved over time.”

Rickert considers her first poly experience to have been during her formative high school years.

“When I look back through my relationship history, I never placed a high value on monogamy. I never really strived for it ... I never really contemplated it,” she said.

At the end of her university studies in the ’90s, a couple of her friends moved to Portland and opened up their relationships. That’s when she first learned that polyamory is “a word and a concept.”

There’s the story she tells in *More Than Two*: She met a guy — whom she refers to as Peter in the book. They entered a monogamous relationship, and like most people, they didn’t talk about it and just assumed, by default, they were monogamous. “We did that for about four years, then decided to open up the

relationship. Even though I had friends who were polyamorous and I knew what polyamory was, I didn't really consider it as an option for our relationship at first," she said.

They had read about swinging in Dan Savage's book *Skipping Towards Gomorrah*, borrowed from her mother. They signed up for a swingers party and both realized they weren't into the casual sex thing.

"I think that I'm demisexual," Rickert muses, explaining it's on the asexuality spectrum, where one is capable of strong sexual attraction and interest once one has developed a strong emotional connection to someone.

She and Peter got married twice. Their first, legally binding, marriage was in 2000. They wanted to live together; he was Canadian, and she, American.

"Eight years later, we said, 'We've been living together and everyone considers us married because we're legally married, so let's get *married*.' We had a ceremony in 2010," she said. "We were separated [in 2015], although we still live together, because we live in Vancouver and housing here is out of control. It creates a very strong incentive to have amicable breakups."

Rickert and Veaux met in person in 2012 when she was at a conference in Portland, Oregon, and saw him tweeting about a science lecture nearby. They met up for a drink before the lecture and ended up on a date together a couple of weeks after that.

"I already knew Franklin's values matched my own, because I'd been reading [his stuff] for so long," she said. "We bonded pretty quickly." As of early 2018, they both reside in Vancouver.

At one point in 2017, Veaux had three long-distance partners, two in Florida and one in the U.K. His originally local Portland partner is now long distance, now that he lives in Canada. One of his Florida partners moved to Canada, and his U.K. partner is still in the U.K. He sees the U.K. partner once a year and his Portland partner once every two months.

But since then, their polycule has experienced a lot of shifts and changes, and Veaux is currently in the process of renegotiating all of his relationships and setting new boundaries — it's not even really clear at the moment how many partners he has.

In *More Than Two*, Rickert described becoming close friends with another one of Peter's partners, Clio. And speaking of other partners — Peter and Veaux get along, creating a respectful metamour bond.

"Peter is very neat, Franklin is very messy, and I'm somewhere in the middle. Stereotyping, but I have noticed that men who are metamours tend not to invest very much in emotional labour with each other. Men tend to rely on the women to maintain the social bonds between male metamours," said Rickert.

The emotional labour is something that Veaux has realized he needs to play a more conscious and active role in. “My own polycule is a bit of a fustercluck,” he said. “I’ve been working on unclucking it over the past several months with only modest success.”

Veaux said he feels a baseline emotional state of happiness most of the time, and that can be a “pain in the ass” with people who are in a relationship with him because it deflects responsibility of a decision onto the partners rather than him. For example, if he’s happy eating “whatever” all the time, his partners have to do the emotional work of figuring out what to make in the kitchen or whether to dine out. It also removes his agency from the decision-making process.

“I have only just started becoming aware of being privileged in this particular way, which puts a burden on my partners,” he said, emphasizing that he is sometimes oblivious to these types of problems. “I benefit from a huge amount of emotional work my partners do, and that kind of reflects the normal social expectation, where [it’s] women who do the emotional work and men benefit from it. But it’s true, and it happens in my poly relationships, and I have not been aware of it in years. It’s been jarring.”

Veaux, fifty-two, said he was married in 2017 to his partner in Florida, whom he’s been with for 14 years, and being a husband and the weight of that word does change the way people see him — not only in society as how it legitimizes his relationship in the eyes of government, but also within polycules.

“It matters a lot,” he said. “There’s this naïveté I carried with me in my early days that polyamory is implicitly more egalitarian than monogamous relationships. It may be true but [privilege] absolutely affects polyamorous relationships.”

Without revealing too much detail about his own conflicts, Veaux said polycules develop with their own social dynamics, which can create tension when things go wrong.

“Since I am the central link [in some polycule conflicts], it’s easier for one of my partners to be angry at another of my partners than it is for that person to be angry with me [when] I was the one who screwed up,” he said. (When the person with the problem complains to someone other than the person directly involved, it’s a dysfunctional style, called *triangular communication*.)

“That can be a dynamic that [is] very hard to deal with in poly relationships that I don’t see a lot of people talk about. I wish I could go back in time and spend more time talking about that in *More Than Two*, the ways this could easily run off the rails because when it starts to snowball, it can escalate very rapidly.”

Veaux said he’s still trying to unpack all these dynamics in his own polycule and it’s still a work in progress. He hopes that by visiting an ex who was aware

of his habits in relationships, he will gain some insight he can use to dig deeper within himself.

“I’m still learning. I’m still not an expert,” he said. “I would like to be better at this. I think that being better at this is kind of like walking north; it’s always something you do, but you never really get there. You never get to a point where you’re great about relationships, and the best we can really hope for is to become *better* at relationships.”

Rickert said that in her observations, most people tend to get saturated at two or three full-time partners. It’s very hard to maintain meaningful relationships past two or three unless you’re living together. Beyond that, she has known people who have had four, five, or six partners.

But usually, several of those relationships are long distance or very casual or sporadic — “comet relationships,” she, a self-proclaimed science geek, gleefully called them.

“Comets are in this huge orbit, and once every decade, they pass by the Earth and people go, ‘Ooh, comet’ and they go away again,” she said. “A comet relationship is a partner who is in their own orbit, and you are in yours, and every now and then, you have a great experience together and they go away again. But there’s not really any expectations.”

When Rickert came to Vancouver, she was thrilled to find existing resources for polyamorists. One group had already been operating for about a decade, and there was a meetup group for polyamory she connected with. She began her activism in Canada around 2011, but doesn’t consider herself a pioneer.

“Franklin was for sure [a pioneer], but not in Canada, because he’s American,” she said. “When I came to polyamory, the norms of how you did polyamory were in a lot of ways really harmful. I experienced a lot of that harm directly in a lot of my relationships. There were very few people and no books that were addressing those norms that showed how they were harmful or offered alternatives.”

Hierarchy and veto power, for example, was a problem: “That you need to have a primary, [and] that couples make rules about what their other relationships are going to look like,” she said.

Rickert said she doesn’t think the book has changed the perspective of people who don’t identify as non-monogamous, and in fact, the public view of polyamory has remained “pretty stuck,” in her opinion. “If we reference the latest *New York Times* article [in 2017] — the one about the dysfunctional couple trying to open their relationship — that’s by and large how people see polyamory,” she said. “They see couples opening their relationship and [being] hierarchal, or they see it as triads — so, the *You Me Her* style of polyamory.”

She looks back through her years in polyamory and acknowledges that one of the mistakes she made early on was imagining that loving more people wasn't going to touch every area of her life. "My husband and I assumed early on that it was something we did in the bedroom, that it was a private thing and we weren't going to talk to other people about it. And coming out wasn't something we needed to do. When we became involved with other people who became more important to us, we realized we want them to be recognized for what they are in our lives. Social recognition is a really important part of many people's relationships, and I think there's a tendency among some polyamorous people, particularly those who are new to it or who have anxiety about losing their couple privilege or status as a couple, to not have their other relationships socially recognized."

Veaux said over the past five years or so, he's noticed that he's carried a lot of assumptions with him on what it is to be polyamorous, and that polyamorous relationships don't always hold up to scrutiny very well.

He naively thought polyamorous relationships would be more resistant to abuse than monogamous relationships, as abusers tend to want to isolate their victims from social outlets. In polyamorous relationships, you have multiple people involved, so you have multiple eyes on the situation, he said. "Seems good on paper — totally doesn't work that way. What I've learned is polyamorous relationships absolutely can be dysfunctional and abusive. And the pattern of how the abuse takes place is what's different."

He said readers approach him and say they broke up with their partners because they violated the proposed "Relationship Bill of Rights" outlined in their book, *More Than Two*. "It gave them the tools or insight that they were in a dysfunctional relationship and [the option] to get out of it. It also suggests the polyamory community really needs to get its shit together when it comes to dysfunctional relationships. That there is a lot more dysfunction and abuse in the poly scene than we really acknowledge. And that, I see as a problem going forward."

He also noted that people will weaponize what you write. "We have heard of cases where people are reading *More Than Two* and bringing it into their relationships. 'Well, you should do this thing because Eve and Franklin say so ...' That's not what we intended at all. This is a book for you. This is not a book for you to hit someone over the head with."

He predicts the poly movement, in the next five or ten years, is largely going to hinge on addressing how to stop dysfunction in polyamorous relationships. He has faith in Millennials to lead the way in addressing these issues. "The moment in poly history where *More Than Two* was created was when we started

becoming less naive and more aware of the social impact of polyamory. We wrote through a lens of ethics. There is always going to be that potential for people to completely come away with something radically different than what you intended to say.”

Rickert’s tone also remains optimistic about society’s general acceptance of polyamory, following the trailblazing of non-heterosexual relationships moving into the mainstream and more positive portrayals of LGBTQ people. “What needs to happen is more people need to come out. More people just need to live their lives and not try to hide things,” she said.

“[Society] will learn non-monogamous people walk amongst them and that we have healthy relationships and healthy families. And sometimes, unhealthy ones, just like everyone else.”

Poly or Mono — You Do *You*

When I tell her I feel like the other woman, she laughs, that's just learned sexist bullshit. We are all in charge of our own bodies and what we decide to do with them. We are all our own. I believed it when she said it, like she'd opened up a new valve that had been stuck. I felt unconfined and open-minded and totally confused. Intellectually, non-monogamy made complete sense; emotionally, it felt like sandpaper across my eyelids.

— Zoe Whittall, *Bottle Rocket Hearts*

I WAS ONCE AT A FRIEND'S PARTY, where I was chatting with a woman about Tinder. She was telling me about some dates she had gone on, and I brought up my current situation, which was that I had two partners.

Wide-eyed, she exclaimed, "Wow, that's some next-level shit."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"You must be so enlightened to do that."

Poly people often hear from others that practising non-monogamy is somehow better, and I — and many others in this book — would argue it's not. It's just different.

"I find there is an undercurrent in polyamorous culture that we're enlightened. I don't think I am, but some people who are poly think we're doing it right and monogamy is evil," said John David "Hobbes" Hickey, who runs the Polyamory Canada Facebook page. "This is a relationship model that works for some and doesn't work for others, and that's fine. What's important is you remain open-minded to try it, rather than fear it and stay away. If you decide this is not for you, there will be grief and pain when you have to break off your relationships, but at least then you'll know."

Yes, there are unique challenges that come with polyamory, just as there are with monogamy. And absolutely, poor communication is often exposed more quickly in polyamory because relationships tend to fall apart more easily when you can't talk things through out in the open, or express and negotiate your

needs outwardly.

But your relationship structure does not guarantee happiness.

You can try polyamory and discover it's just not your thing. And that's okay. *Really.*

Julie, a married woman from the Toronto area, was twenty-seven when she and her husband, Neil, decided to look into polyamory. They were twenty when they married and neither had much experience with other relationships. They were curious.

It was a five-year roller-coaster ride for them both. During that time, there was a traumatic incident, resentment, and eventually a split for Julie and Neil, before a return to their marriage with the realization that monogamy is the choice that works for them.

"I would not do it again, just because of the instability and the constant wondering, not sleeping at night from stress, and the horrible depression and anxiety that came about from the way it was done," said Julie, now thirty-three. "My experience may not be typical of everybody's experience; I really didn't handle it so well. But I'm grateful that he and I as a couple, and two separate people, have evolved as more of an interdependent relationship instead of a dependent one."

Julie discovered that her religious upbringing no longer fit with her adult life. She then started to question other facets of her life, including her sexuality and relationship structure. She started to see the walls in the box come down and the ability to step out beyond them.

In 2011, they were pregnant with their daughter, and Julie had found "evidence of him looking elsewhere." A year went by and chatter about opening up was put onto the back burner.

Then, an old crush who was single came back into her life. She talked to her husband about seeing this guy.

"[The crush] wasn't very transparent with me regarding his own intimate life and expectations. That was my first red flag, but I was too high on NRE to really notice," she said. "He was interested in intimacy and building some kind of a relationship, knowing that I was married, so everything on my end was completely transparent."

The crush and her husband met and got along well. He lived almost four hours away, which would allow Julie and her husband to keep their "family unit together" while having external relationships, which was what they both wanted.

"I stumbled across the understanding of polyamory, thankfully, by googling it," she said.

There was a lot of back and forth discussion between her and her husband

before she met with the crush for an intimate weekend.

It wasn't what she expected. "I had a lot of heartache from the experience and unfortunately, there was a rape involved," she said. "It took me six months to tell my husband what had exactly happened. It wasn't the kind of rape where 'she was left in the gutter to die' — it was the kind of rape that was very much non-consensual without protection, but I was not aware of it."

What happened to Julie was "stealthing," where the man pulls the condom off halfway through intercourse. "For my own personal safety, I would not have consented to that, had I known," she added. "I felt very violated. It took me a long time to understand why I was having those feelings. I enjoyed the intimate experience, but that part was definitely not consensual."

She cut off her friendship with that man and didn't see him again. She didn't report it to police because she had a hard time identifying and categorizing the experience. She spent the next few months processing and suffering in silence. And when she was finally ready to talk to her husband about the rape, he had found another partner.

"She seemed like a really good match for him as well," she said. "But due to my experience, I had a hard time and really needed to pull back the reins. Unfortunately, asking for that type of space really bothered him. I don't blame him. I had already 'gone first' and it was his turn. He wanted what he wanted and that really put a wedge between us."

Neil's partner Maritess also shared a connection with Julie, and the three of them formed an emotional triad — with sexual activity, but no intercourse — but Julie eventually realized another thing about herself.

"I learned that I'm not bisexual after that experience," she said. "I decided if they wanted to still see each other, that's their business, I didn't want to be a part of it. This huge conflict in our marriage played out."

With the stress and trauma on her shoulders, Julie approached Neil in the fall of 2016 and asked if it could just be the two of them to "hunker down" and work on their marriage. Maritess was sympathetic and told them to take the time they needed. Three months went by with Julie and Neil in a monogamous marriage again, "really working on trying to heal with everything that has transpired between us, and this woman, and me with this other guy," she said. The couple took a temporary separation so Neil could take the time he needed to explore his sexual curiosities.

"He had every chance to go be with somebody else during the temporary separation."

He said, "I want us," she recalled, but by saying so, he still hadn't met his needs.

She took him back after that mutually agreed-upon period of separation.

“Six months goes by, he said, ‘I’m sorry, I just have to do it.’ There was a lot of resentment between him and I over this. He had the chance during the temporary separation, and didn’t, and he still wanted to. Until we had a date night and he exploded and told me, ‘I’m not still over it.’”

They separated a second time. He needed to get that curiosity met “[to] understand the grass is not always greener. Different, yes, but not greener,” she said.

“We wanted to be as amicable as possible. We did the co-parenting thing. I told him, ‘It’s obvious that I’m in love with you, still, and obvious you’re still in love with me. You need space to go do what you need to do. And when you’re ready, we can mutually come back together.’”

Julie heard from him three months later.

“He took the time he needed and said, ‘Okay. I’m done. I know what I want and it’s definitely not that. [In general,] it’s normal to have curiosities and to look at people a certain way and develop [emotional and sexual] relationships’ — but he wanted the sexuality and the closeness with me. We have decided to continue on our marriage monogamously and go from there.”

While the couple struggled, they approached members in a Toronto polyamory community and were met with acceptance and support. Granted, they also chose people who weren’t dicks or overtly righteous about how “poly is better than being mono.”

“I didn’t reach out to the polyamorous judgy people,” she said. “I knew I needed that personal development in my life and that I had some jealousy issues to get through. I knew my husband wasn’t my property. His journey is very much his, and if he chooses to share it with me, then it’s ours to share together.”

They were even able to salvage and transition their relationship with Maritess. The three of them had explored their sexuality together, but because Neil didn’t have penetrative sex with another woman, he became resentful.

Maritess and Julie remain good friends, but with new boundaries — though Julie admits she doesn’t feel comfortable with Maritess being alone with her husband.

“Her and I understood from the get-go that we would not have a typical friendship after her and my husband were no longer interested in seeing one another,” Julie said. “I explained to her that was one of my boundaries — ‘I love you to pieces, you’re a wonderful person and a great friend ... but because of what happened, I cannot erase that ... I won’t be comfortable going out, the three of us, or you meeting my child or hanging with us.’”

Even those who have been polyamorous for a while might find there comes a

time when it doesn't fit with the stage of life they're at.

John Ince, the lawyer in the B.C. Supreme Court case who represented the CPAA (see Chapter 13) was polyamorous for decades — though, *fluid* would be his preferred way to describe it — but bowed out.

“Not anymore,” he explained. “I have been poly on and off for much of my life, even before the term was known.”

His experience included a period with two primary but not live-in partners. When that V ended in 2012, he was single for four years before he entered a monogamous relationship that fully satisfies his needs.

“While my poly experience was highly rewarding, it requires a degree of focus that, at sixty-five, I no longer want,” he said. “In the past, I've come out of poly and gone into a monogamous relationship, and when it ended, went back into poly. But given my age, I think the poly years are behind me.”

Toronto theatre actor Sunny Drake, a trans man, said it's not about pitting monogamy and non-monogamy against each other. He'd like to see support for myriad relationship models “from monogamy to sluttiness to asexuality to non-monogamy to polyamory,” he writes on his blog. “There are many similar relationship skills that we can build with each other, regardless of our relationship styles. Like how to be responsible when we cause harm (and we ALL hurt other people to varying degrees), sharing emotional labour, unpacking how bigger systems of power and oppression shape our relationships,” he said.



Cheating is not polyamory — but sometimes, people in monogamous relationships end up returning to their relationship with fresh eyes after an affair.

Adam Giambrone was an ambitious Toronto councillor and chair of the city's transit commission when he launched his campaign in February 2010 to become the city's youngest mayor. As the race was heating up, so was the *Toronto Star's* salacious exposé.

Reporter Linda Diebel broke the story of Kristen Lucas, a scorned lover of Giambrone, who revealed that they had carried on a year-long affair when she was nineteen. Giambrone, thirty-two at the time, had a long-time live-in partner, Sarah McQuarrie. When a news story mistakenly identified McQuarrie as his “wife,” Lucas came forward with details about their secret relationship.

In the days ahead, more lurid details came out, including alleged instances of sex on his City Hall office couch. Giambrone eventually confessed he'd had “intimate relations” with other women throughout most of 2009. He stood in front of throngs of media, his eyes heavy with dark circles from lack of sleep.

“The most painful lessons in life come from the mistakes you make yourself and then inflict on those around you,” Giambrone told the *Star*. I apologize to them for the hurt I have caused. I have broken my own moral code and offended the values I was raised with by my parents and my grandparents; those I have always tried to live by.”

Politicians around him called for his resignation from all his posts. He threw the towel in.

Fast-forward to a year and a month later — November 2011 — when Giambrone and McQuarrie got married.

“The former Toronto councillor and TTC chair wed Sarah McQuarrie, who stood by her man amid a well-publicized affair that forced the one-time mayoral hopeful to quit his 2010 election campaign,” read the *Toronto Star* story.

Before their nuptials, a politician friend of Giambrone reportedly said the couple was deeply in love. “It’s obviously a relationship that has endured and has gone through challenges ... and it shows they belong together,” the friend said.

While Giambrone was “unable to provide any comment,” for the book, his story serves as an example of someone who returned to monogamy, presumably of his own accord, perhaps with a different view of it following an affair. Or maybe their marriage became stronger or more flexible — if the people involved could forgive the trauma and fix the initial problems that led to the cheating. Conceivably, the very public saga may have led them to examine their communication skills and honestly evaluate their needs and desires.

In the end, he could now *actively choose* to love his wife, instead of treating monogamy as the default. And if so, bravo to them. Yet, there will always be judgmental people who cannot believe why or how guilty parties in affairs are — or can be — forgiven.

By the same token, when polyamorous relationships break down, they’re often unfairly scrutinized, said Drake. People gloat, “See? Non-monogamy doesn’t work.” He continued:

When the shit hits the fan in monogamous relationships, we might say ‘they were not compatible’ or ‘so-and-so was an asshole,’ but rarely do we blame the actual relationship model itself. Conversely, there can be a real pressure in some queer communities to be non-monogamous with an underlying idea that monogamy equals oppression, while non-monogamy equals radical. I don’t see anything inherently more radical about non-monogamous relationships. I’ve seen people do monogamous relationships in

deeply radical transformative ways and I've also seen people do non-monogamous relationships in very un-radical ways.

A person named Kimberlee on a polyamory discussion board echoed the same sentiment: "Monogamy is acceptable. Forcing people to be monogamous and making anything else out to be invalid and wrong, is not. Polyamory is acceptable. Forcing people to be polyamorous or claiming others are suppressing their polyamory and destined to cheat, is not. People seem to think it's always us against them, and they forget how to empathize and accept others. Just because you don't understand or agree with a lifestyle, it doesn't give you the right to change it. The universe, as far as we know, has no inherent moral code or system, no care or compassion, no fucks given.... It is not our job to decide everyone must live by our morals and our code, simply because their life and their mind are infinitely different from your own."

Kimberlee said it seems monogamous people are often put on the spot, choosing between either losing their relationship or suffering through it being open or poly. Many of these people love their partners and don't want to lose them, and therefore are coerced into either open relationships or polyamory.

"Why does the poly community in general usually insist that the monogamous person needs to do self-work instead of accepting that that person is just monogamous and needs monogamy in return? Doesn't 'no' mean 'no?'" she asked.

However, there is still a responsibility for mono and poly people involved in a relationship to take ownership of what they genuinely want and need. In a March 2018 *New York Times* Modern Love essay, author Debbie Weiss, a monogamous widow, recounted how she began dating a polyamorous man. "Howard wanted to move beyond the monogamous model he had been raised with; I wanted to replicate it," she wrote. "In my post-George [her husband] dating years, I had developed a protective shell over my heart. Allowing myself to love again would mean letting that shell crack and fall away, not maintaining it because my partner invited strangers to trample through our relationship. The whole thing seemed so avoidable."

By the end of the story, she discards him because he won't agree to what she wants, but for his part, he should have called off the relationship much earlier on. Poly/mono relationships *can* and *do* work — but when they don't, people shouldn't be afraid to face the truth and end it.



Allison, a woman in her mid-thirties from Windsor, Ontario, said she has an ongoing internal battle over whether she is “cut out” for polyamory. She’s been with one partner for a year and her husband for seven. She said she’s confused whether to stay with her partner or end it now to “save heartache ... I am in a non-romantic relationship with my husband at this point. If I move out, I can’t fathom continuing poly. Finding a partner is so difficult for me even without adding in ‘by the way, I have a boyfriend.’ I am feeling more like I need to be mono and hope I find a life partner,” she said.

Deep down, she’s troubled that she explored polyamory as a Band-Aid for a struggling marriage. “Now that the marriage is dissolving, I have had so many increased mono thoughts toward my boyfriend, who is so very much poly and married,” she said. “I am scared shitless that I’ll end up leaving both partners and it’s going to be emotionally catastrophic. My husband and I are great friends, but I am not meant to be his romantic lover. My boyfriend, it’s like he’s hung the moon and I swear I am supposed to be with him and I was made to love him. I just don’t think I can meet all my own personal needs by being mono-poly with him. It doesn’t help that my brain is constantly throwing out very mono and impossible scenarios. Us all living together is not an option.”



There are also people who say they couldn’t go back to being monogamous after discovering poly.

“I had a hard morning with my long-distance partner yesterday when it was time for him to drive home, and thoughts like this [monogamy] crossed my mind. But I think it was coming from a place of fear and not based in reality,” said Sean on one of the polyamory forums. “Yes, poly can be very difficult sometimes, but so far I’ve found that the rewards far outweigh the work. Just like in mono dating/relationships.”

Edward was in a monogamous marriage for eleven years and poly for four. Right when they opened up, they agreed that either of them could insist on going back to monogamy if they chose to. But after a couple of months, they agreed to take it off the table. “Polyamory for life,” he told me. “Now that I understand it and have tried it, I would not go back, no matter who I am with.”

Anna said, being a “fifty/fifty bisexual,” she’s had relationships with both men and women, and it feels like something is missing when she’s strictly monogamous. “Although I could be monogamous if my partner required it, I know a part of me would always be sad for not having that other part of my sexuality fulfilled.”

And some people, like Andrea — who has been in a long-term relationship, seven years of which were monogamous — are open to a number of relationship structures, whether they are open or closed, as long as they are flexible. “I can be monogamous, but I discovered that I am happier if I have the option to be non-monogamous or open,” she said. “Even if I am not sleeping with a lot of other people, the fact is I don’t like to feel guilty for looking at other people or having crushes or anything of the sort. Monogamous relationships often demand sole one hundred percent attached focus. Not for me, but of course I respect my friends for whom this style of relationship works.”

Lazlo, a fifty-seven-year-old man from Aylmer, Quebec, was married for seventeen years, twelve of which were polyamorous. “It was a really cool experience,” he said. The couple divorced three years ago and now live at opposite ends of the country. The distance may have caused the end of their marriage, but it has also allowed the relationship to transform into something else — namely, a deep love and friendship, which also includes visiting once in a while. They usually sleep naked, while spooning — and her current partner out in British Columbia is totally cool with that. “There’s this stupid perception out there that because you were poly once, you have to be ... forever,” said Lazlo. “I knew how I felt about her and her about me. There was just more acknowledgement and gratitude with what we shared and what we’re about to share.”

Lazlo and his ex-wife discovered polyamory through pagan circles in 1997, introduced by other couples who were into poly and swinging. “Neither of us had experienced it before. We were always looking outside the box,” he said. The concept of polyamory fit with the idea of exploration that defined their relationship — “sharing what we have ... with fluidity.”

Neither had nor wanted children when they were together — Lazlo even underwent a vasectomy to ensure that — and that did allow the couple the freedom to devote time to meeting new people and forming new relationships. His wife identified more as monogamous and he as polyamorous, but being poly allowed her to explore her sexuality with other women, he said.

Janelle, a monogamous woman who supports her poly friends, said she wants to encourage a society that accepts all relationship configurations. “I’ve tried poly, and the experience of it did not match the expectations. I discovered exactly how it is that poly does not meet my personal needs. I am actually monogamous — I’m not just a potential poly person who is still working on my feelings,” she said. “I think that some of you may find yourselves less frustrated and stuck, if you approach your conversations with openness to the idea that your monogamous-leaning partner may not simply be struggling to overcome

their issues, but may instead simply be monogamously oriented — and that’s okay. It does not make them less enlightened or less emotionally mature.”

Janelle thinks that it’s possible someone and their monogamy-preferring partner could potentially be fundamentally incompatible, no matter how much they love each other. “It’s not necessarily the case, and of course you will explore whether or not there are ways that poly could work for someone whose comfort level is still centred around monogamous expectations,” she said. “But I think it may be helpful to having conversations go in a more productive direction if it’s framed in a way that isn’t inherently better or worse. Poly can and does work. I bet that’s true for a whole lot of people, but not [for] everyone. And it’s worth considering.”

Toronto clinical psychologist Dr. Oren Amitay said it’s about being honest with yourself, knowing your needs and boundaries, and being able to negotiate them and get them met, regardless whether that’s with one person or more. “If you can find that balance whether it’s one person, two, three, or seven or more, great.”

Back in the Toronto area, Julie said she believes people already inherently know what’s right for them from the get-go, but understanding and articulating their identity, their needs, and their desires is still a process. Her and her husband’s journey through non-monogamy was based on personal development and curiosity, rather than just clear-cut black-and-white identities of polyamory and monogamy.

Their six-year-old daughter recently came home and said a girl kissed her in school and she liked it. (Cue Katy Perry.) “We’re going to give her the space to be who she is, and hey, if she comes home one day and says, ‘I’m in love with two people,’ we’re going to be like, ‘Good for you. Just make sure that’s what you want,’” said Julie.

“I do think society as a whole needs to smarten up and put on their big panties and get with the times. There’s no room surrounding the legality for polyamory, or children being brought up in polyamorous homes. Society could really benefit from more exposure, because we’re all different and our diversity is really a teaching opportunity,” she told me.

She hopes to see important issues such as consent take the spotlight in more poly communities. “There are some sneaky individuals who might take advantage,” she said. “After the #metoo movement, I noticed a lot of [sex assault survivors] coming out.”

From their experience, Julie and her husband learned improved communication, as well as how to keep an open mind, and now, for the time being, a monogamous relationship is the right path for them. “Polyamory in

itself might not be for everybody, but personal development is. If it wasn't for my husband looking elsewhere to begin with, I know I wouldn't have looked outside the box," she said, tearing up. "And I would have been happy in my monogamous little bubble, but we went through hell and back with personal development. And that's where I'm grateful — for the experience. Our experience shattered a lot of preconceived notions around the way relationships should be done."

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#loveislove

GLOSSARY*

Affective Contagion: The way in which polyamorists might feel joy or pain as their lovers experience joy or pain.

Ambiamory: Being able to be happy in either monogamous or polyamorous relationships.

BDSM: Abbreviation of Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), and Sadism and Masochism (SM) as a sexual practice.

Cheating: A violation of relationship rules. This can happen in any relationship style when boundaries or agreements are violated or broken.

Compersion: The joy one experiences at witnessing the pleasure a partner feels from another romantic and/or sexual relationship. Sometimes referred to as the “opposite of jealousy.”

Don’t ask, don’t tell: A policy where a person who is partnered is permitted to have additional sexual or romantic relationships on the condition that their partner does not know anything about those additional relationships and does not meet any of those other people.

Fluid bonding: Exchange of bodily fluids, such as barrier-free sexual intercourse and BDSM.

Hierarchical poly: A relationship style where a couple prioritize their relationship, while also having other romantic and/or sexual partners. They may refer to themselves as “primary partners.”

Metamour: A partner’s partner. A person your partner is dating, but whom you are not dating. (“My wife’s boyfriend is my metamour.”) **Monogamish:** Partners in a committed relationship agree they may participate in some level of sexual activity outside their relationship. Coined by sex columnist Dan Savage.

Monogamy: Relationship style where a person has one romantic/sexual partner at a time. It usually doesn’t refer to “lifetime monogamy” (one person and only

one person forever), but to describe a current relationship state.

Nesting partner/life partner/anchor partner: Less hierarchical ways of describing a partner that one may live with or have a long-term, committed relationship with.

New relationship energy (NRE): The euphoric and sometimes intense emotional feelings of a new relationship. A temporary altered state (sometimes referred to as the “honeymoon phase”).

Non-consensual non-monogamy: Also known as cheating.

One-penis policy: An arrangement within a polyamorous relationship in which a man is allowed to have multiple female partners, each of whom is allowed to have sex with other women but forbidden to have any other male partners.

Open relationship: A relationship in which those involved agree that each may have romantic and/or sexual relationships with others.

Pivot: In a V relationship, the person who has two partners; also called a hinge.

Polyamory: A term meaning “multiple loves.” A relationship style of having more than one romantic and/or sexual partner at a time.

Polycule: A romantic network. The term was coined because when it is put into a diagram, it may resemble a molecule.

Polyfidelity: A group consisting of more than two individuals, where the members do not seek outside romantic and/or sexual partners.

Polygamy: The state or practice of having multiple wedded spouses at the same time, regardless of the sex of those spouses.

Polysaturated: Describes the condition where one is not currently open to new relationships or new partners because of the number of existing partners, or because of time constraints that might make new relationships difficult.

Relationship anarchy (RA): The practice of forming relationships that are not bound by rules aside from what the people involved mutually agree on.

Relationship escalator: The assumed path relationships “should” take, including common milestones. For example: dating — engaged — cohabiting — married — kids.

Quad: Four people, sometimes comprising two couples, involved in a relationship together.

Serial monogamy: Having a series of monogamous relationships, one after another. A common practice in our society.

Solo Polyamory: Individuals who do not wish to have themselves entangled in all aspects of forming relationships, e.g., not wanting to live with partners.

Swinging: Style of consensual non-monogamy where sexual relations happen outside the established relationship. May look more like “friends with benefits” than “romantic” relationships. Many swinger-couples date together.

Telemour: A metamour’s partner. Your partner’s partner’s partner. (“My wife’s boyfriend’s girlfriend is my telemour.”)

Triad: Three people involved in a relationship together.

Unicorn: A bisexual female involved with a male/female couple.

V: A poly relationship involving three people, where one person is romantically or sexually involved with two partners who are not romantically or sexually involved with each other.

Veto: A relationship agreement that gives one person the power to end another person’s additional relationships, or in some cases to disallow specific activity.

* Adapted from Veaux, Franklin, *et al.* *More than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory* and DIY Relationships Facebook page. There are many more definitions in this great resource: morethantwo.com/polyglossary.html.

CANADIAN POLYAMORY RESOURCES

Here are a few resources in Canada, courtesy of the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association:

CANADA-WIDE

Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association: polyadvocacy.ca

Free Canada Polyamory Dating: [facebook.com/groups/CanadaPolyamoury](https://www.facebook.com/groups/CanadaPolyamoury)

More Than Two: morethantwo.com

Playground conference: playgroundconf.com

Poly-Geekery Canada: [facebook.com/groups/polygeek.Canada](https://www.facebook.com/groups/polygeek.Canada)

Polyamory Canada: [facebook.com/groups/640216776020222](https://www.facebook.com/groups/640216776020222)

Poly Friendly Professionals: <http://polyfriendly.org/index.php>

Polyamory LGBT Canada edition: [facebook.com/groups/1553917881492580](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1553917881492580)

ATLANTIC PROVINCES

Atlantic Canada Polyamory talk and chat: groups.yahoo.com/group/atlanticpoly

Halifax Polyamory: [facebook.com/groups/28952962104](https://www.facebook.com/groups/28952962104)

Nova Scotia Polyamory: [facebook.com/groups/172793782838783](https://www.facebook.com/groups/172793782838783)

One, Two, Three, More Love: [facebook.com/OneTwoThreeMoreLove](https://www.facebook.com/OneTwoThreeMoreLove)

Polyamory Halifax: fetlife.com/groups/26890

Polyamory in New Brunswick: fetlife.com/groups/58519

Polyamory Moncton: fetlife.com/groups/77381

Polyamory Newfoundland: groups.yahoo.com/group/polynfld

Polyamory/Non-Monogamy Support Group St. John's, NL:
<https://www.facebook.com/polynl/>

Turn Me On podcast: turnmeonpodcast.com

QUEBEC

Montreal Poly People: fetlife.com/groups/22535

Polyamory Group/Groupe de polyamoureux @ ALCC/CCVA – Montreal:
facebook.com/groups/141090245975654

Polyamour Montreal: www.meetup.com/Ethical-Non-monogamy-Montreal

Polyamour Montréal — Communauté: facebook.com/groups/polyamourMtl

Polyamour Québec: facebook.com/groups/677102515726030

Rencountres/Dating Polyamour:

facebook.com/groups/rencontres.polyamour.montreal

ONTARIO

DIY Relationships: facebook.com/diyrelationships

Ethical Open Ottawa: meetup.com/Ethical-Open-Ottawa

Guelph Polyamory Hangouts: facebook.com/polyhangouts

HAI (Human Awareness Institute) Ontario: Socials & Workshops on Love,
Sexuality, & Intimacy (poly run/friendly): meetup.com/HAIOntario or
facebook.com/HAIOntario

Infinite 8 Polybilities @ *Kind Space (LGBT non-profit with a poly program
and book club; Ottawa): kindspace.ca/polybilities or
facebook.com/kindspaceca

KW Poly Munch (Kitchener-Waterloo): fetlife.com/groups/66822

London Ontario Polyamory: facebook.com/groups/4146522761

London Polyamory: fetlife.com/groups/21095

Modern Love (Toronto): meetup.com/ModernLove

Nerdy Toronto Poly Posse: facebook.com/groups/nerdytorontopoly

North Bay Poly People: facebook.com/groups/1425692461064715

Not Your Mother's Playground

Ontario Polyamory, Ethical Non-monogamy & Relationship Anarchy Hub
(OPEN RAH): facebook.com/OPENRAH or fetlife.com/groups/112357

Ontario Polyamory: facebook.com/groups/OntarioPolyamory

Open Toronto (local non-monogamous links, including swingers clubs.):
opentoronto.ca

OPPN (parents' group): facebook.com/groups/144438526270996
Ottawa Valley Polyamory: facebook.com/groups/294708470983570
Poly Classifieds for Northern Ontario: facebook.com/groups/819602558118235
Poly Dating in Ontario: fetlife.com/groups/51577
Poly Dating Zone Toronto "add" page:
facebook.com/groups/950832358384950Poly in Toronto:
fetlife.com/groups/9548
Poly in Windsor: fetlife.com/groups/25220
Poly Ottawa: facebook.com/PolyOttawa
Polyamorous in Hamilton: fetlife.com/groups/51301
Polyamory group for Tobermory, Ontario (Open Group):
groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/PolyTobermory
Polyamory Niagara Network: facebook.com/groups/419266254782319
Polyamory Toronto: polyamorytoronto.ca; facebook.com/TorontoPolyamory;
Twitter [@polytoronto](https://twitter.com/polytoronto); meetup.com/PolyamoryToronto
Polywood Camping Group: facebook.com/groups/polywoodcamping
Sault Ste. Marie & Area Poly: facebook.com/groups/1400351470285464
SO-Poly (Southern Ontario's Slightly Older Poly Community): so-poly.ca
The Shareables: Poly in Ontario: fetlife.com/groups/100561
Toronto Non-Monogamous BIPOC: facebook.com/groups/365163777192801
Toronto Poly Personals: fetlife.com/groups/51643

MANITOBA

Manitoba Polyamorous Discussion: fetlife.com/groups/100652
Poly Winnipeg: facebook.com/PolyWinnipeg

SASKATCHEWAN

PolyRegina: fetlife.com/groups/34933
Polyamory Saskatchewan: facebook.com/Polyamory-Saskatchewan-1632420267045814
Poly Saskatoon (Saskatoon & area): facebook.com/groups/911762088955676 or
fetlife.com/groups/16554

ALBERTA

ALBERTA

Alberta Polyamory: fetlife.com/groups/36448

Calgary Poly: fetlife.com/groups/49781

North Peace Polyamory: fetlife.com/groups/73352 (Northern Alberta/Grande Prairie area; Northern B.C./Fort St. John area) Poly Calgary: facebook.com/pages/Poly-Calgary/460999460585444

Edmonton Polyamory Dating & Social Club: facebook.com/groups/764152030292778

Polyamory Edmonton Dating: fetlife.com/groups/79662

Polyamory Edmonton: twitter.com/polyedm

The Official Polyamory Edmonton Association: facebook.com/groups/polyamoryedmontonassociation

BRITISH COLUMBIA

BC Poly Parents: facebook.com/BCPolyParents

Comox Valley Poly 101: facebook.com/ComoxValleyPoly101

Converge (three-day convention about sexuality, relationships, activism): convergecon.ca

Kelowna Poly 101 (PK101) (Maintains a secret group; contact a Vancouver Poly 101group admin for details) Nanaimo Poly 101: facebook.com/nanaimopoly101

Okanagan Poly (Okanagan region): facebook.com/groups/306345916086408

Poly Dating Zone Vancouver: facebook.com/PolyDatingZoneVancouver

Polyamory on the Page – A Vancouver Book Club: facebook.com/groups/1254108118017736

Prince George Poly: fetlife.com/groups/61582

Tri-Cities Fraser Valley Poly: facebook.com/TricCitiesFraserValleyPoly

Van Isle Poly (Victoria & Vancouver Island): facebook.com/groups/2425112199

Vancouver B.C. Polyamorous Womxn: facebook.com/polywomxnvancouver

Vancouver Island Polyamory Community: fetlife.com/groups/14066

Vancouver Poly 101: facebook.com/VancouverPoly101 and fetlife.com/groups/35199

Vancouver Poly LGBTQ+ Group: facebook.com/VanPolyLGBTQ

Vancouver Polyamorous Men: facebook.com/groups/176824679035967

Vancouver Solo Polyamory: facebook.com/groups/VancouverSoloPoly
Vanpoly (Vancouver): vanpoly.ca or facebook.com/groups/vanpoly
Victoria B.C. Single, Open and/or Poly (SOAP): fetlife.com/groups/34068
Victoria Poly 101: victoriapoly101.blogspot.com and
facebook.com/pages/VictoriaPoly-101/118495178257698 and
fetlife.com/groups/68400

YUKON/NORTHWEST TERRITORIES/NUNAVUT

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