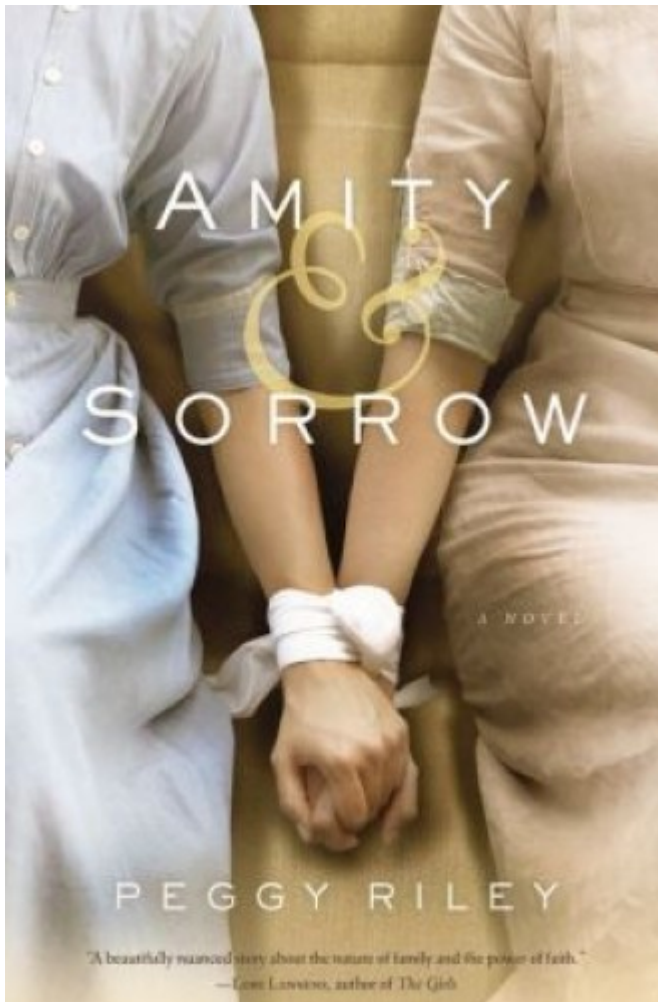


Amity and Sorrow, by Peggy Riley

reviewed by [Janet Potter](#) in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Amity and Sorrow: A Novel

By Peggy Riley

Little Brown

Amaranth is the first of Zachariah's 50 wives, who live together with their children in a compound hidden in the mountains. When she married Zachariah, she was adrift and he was irresistible. Over the years Amaranth has remained steadfast as he

leaves for months at a time and comes back with new wives—untethered young women in need of a family. The women and children live and work and worship together, and they listen to Zachariah preach about the end of the world.

But the community is cracking. The wives are growing suspicious of each other. Zachariah has been disappearing into the basement for hours with needles and vials, and sometimes with one of his daughters. Their ideals of acceptance and equality and love are also disappearing. Police officers start to sit in their cars at the edge of the property, trying to catch someone who will answer their questions.

Then one night someone starts a fire, and there are gunshots. Amaranth gets in a car with her two daughters, Amity and Sorrow, and starts driving. They drive for four days without stopping, until an exhausted Amaranth crashes the car. At a nearby gas station, they meet Bradley, the station's owner, who helps them clean up and gives them a place to stay on his porch. (They won't allow themselves to enter a strange man's house.)

For the bulk of *Amity and Sorrow*, Amaranth and her daughters remain at Bradley's home in limbo. They have no car, no money, and no previous connection with the world outside their compound. Amaranth tries to make herself useful to Bradley so he will let them stay, and Amity and Sorrow start a tenuous relationship with the real world.

Zachariah had raised Sorrow, his oldest child, as an oracle. He believed, and taught her to believe, that she is a prophet, and she wants to return to him. Amaranth can't make her understand why they had to leave her father. Amaranth and Sorrow's brittle relationship, with Amity stuck between them, keeps all three women distant from one another.

Although they have all escaped the same situation, each of them understands it differently, and their individual processes of moving on move them away from one another. Amity, the younger daughter, was naively happy at the compound, and she is equally amenable to life in Oklahoma. She befriends a farmhand, nicknamed Dust, and Bradley's father, who begins teaching her how to read. Amity slowly awakens to the breadth of what she's been missing.

Sorrow, on the other hand, bitterly resents every minute they stay away from her father, and she attempts to contact him or God (there's not much difference in her mind) by sending signs. These signs tend to involve setting things on fire. Convinced

of her unique role in Zachariah's compound, she rejects a world in which she isn't special. And the more Amity and Amaranth take to their new life, the more Sorrow closes herself off from them.

The intricacies of the mother-daughter relationships are drawn against the background of a long, slow Oklahoma summer. Bradley, Dust and Amaranth work long hours on the farm in the hope of bringing in a good fall crop, a process that parallels the women's new beginning. "Life is just seeds," Bradley says. "You know, you plant in the dirt you're given. It's all you've got. You water, you tend, and sometimes seeds don't take. Sometimes it all goes away from you."

Throughout the summer, Amaranth looks back at the choices that led her to the compound and kept her there, and she wonders how the situation got away from her. As the narrative switches back and forth between the present and the past, Riley shows how a zealous faith shaped the lives of Amaranth and her daughters. She is at her best in showing, with the sparest details, how Amaranth and Amity are psychologically and emotionally pulled apart when that faith crumbles, and how they rebuild themselves without it. There is less depth and more sensationalism in Riley's portrayal of Sorrow's increasingly disturbing devotion to her father's religion; it can sometimes feel like an intrusion into an otherwise subtle character study, although it is useful in giving the novel its momentum.

However their relationship to Zachariah's religion is changing, each woman is still defined by it. As Amaranth's relationship with Bradley deepens, she tries to explain her connection to the compound:

She wonders how to help him see what it was, not how it ended. How it began, who she was before it started, and who she became because of it. How each wife was brought back to life and given hope, the God-shaped want in them filled in a spinning circle, by the family she chose. "I have known such rare love," she tells him, cautiously.

Amity and Sorrow were surrounded by that love throughout their childhood, but they were also surrounded by much else that they didn't understand. The dual influences of their past life in the compound, mirrored in their two names, struggle for prominence in their future, just as the sisters struggle with which aspects of their childhood to denounce and which to hold to. Through these two girls and their mother, Riley examines how the same faith can be experienced in different ways

and affect each person in a family differently.

Riley skillfully interweaves images of seeds with the stories of Bradley and the women. Seeds are made to grow, Bradley believes, and there's no miracle in their doing so. But Amaranth recognizes that where a seed is planted, and how it's tended, can determine what becomes of it. She gave birth to her daughters in a community that started in love but became one she didn't want them to grow up in. She got them out, but she doesn't know if she did so in time. She doesn't know whether they spent too much time there to be able to grow anywhere else.