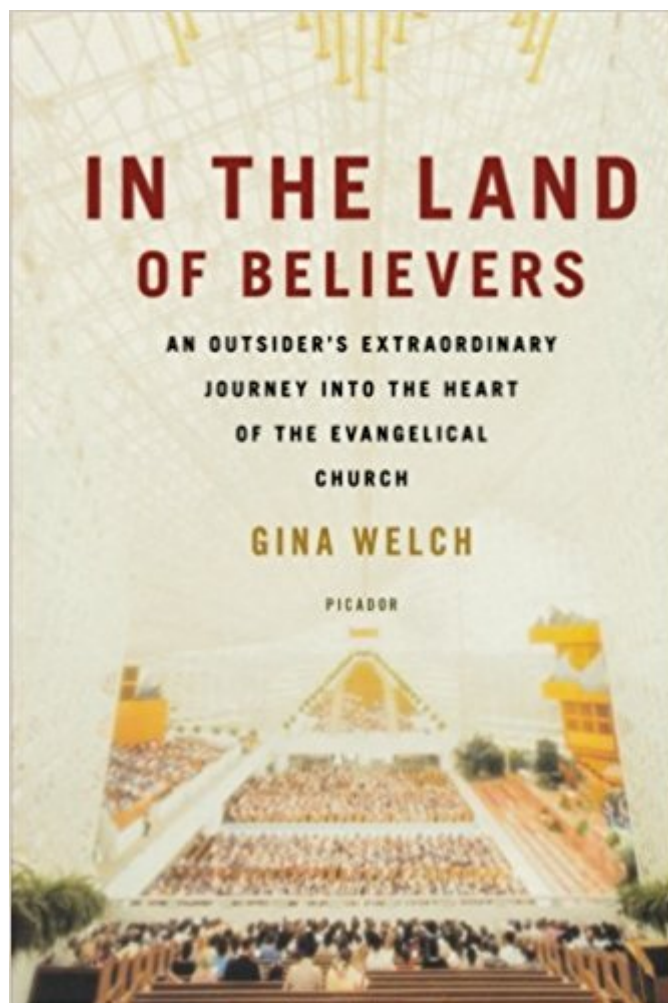




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In The Land Of Believers: An Outsider's Extraordinary Journey Into The Heart Of The Evangelical Church



Synopsis

Ever since evangelical Christians rose to national prominence, mainstream America has tracked their every move with a nervous eye. But in spite of this vigilance, our understanding hasn't gone beyond the caricatures. Aiming to find out more, Gina Welch, a young secular Jew from Berkeley, joined Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church. Over the course of nearly two years, Welch immersed herself in the life and language of the devout. Alive to the meaning behind the music and the mind behind the slogans, Welch recognized the allure of evangelicalism, even for the godless, realizing that the congregation met needs and answered questions she didn't know she had.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A secular Jew raised by a single mother in Berkeley, Welch became an outsider in a strange land when in 2002 she moved for graduate school to the heart of the Bible Belt near Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. She saw everything around her ironically, treated the South as a joke • and her time there as a kind of elaborate performance art project. • Then something miraculous happened. The jaded Californian began to like Virginia. She'd arrived to a Virginia on the verge of a demographic shift as a new, progressive population burgeoned. But she also grew to like the Old South's manners, easygoing nature, and friendliness. She got serious, cast aside her cynicism, and sought to know her evangelical neighbors as people. • Why did they think as they did? Why were they so determined to convert non-Christian America? • She went undercover • to attend Falwell's church. The

resultant portrayal of evangelicals as she sees them and of how she transcended the popular media caricatures of them constitute an insightful, frequently funny book. --June Sawyers --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

• œExcellent prose with a laudable purpose: to promote understanding of evangelical Christians...
An engaging, personal look at one variant of Christian fundamentalism. • • Library Journal • An
engaging, personal look at one variant of Christian fundamentalism. • • Library Journal • An
amazing narrative journey into the heart of the evangelical movement. • • Washington Life
magazine • Memorable... A genuinely inquisitive memoir about the complicated nature of religious
belief. • • Kirkus Reviews • Welch is a combination of thoughtful, funny, self-deprecating, and a
skilled stylist....I am pleased I accompanied her on her journey. • • The Charlotte
Observer • With compassion, wit, and verve, Gina Welch has gone where few secular liberals
have dared to go--the late Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church--and emerged with a
compelling story that transcends stereotypes and builds common ground. Both sides of the Great
American Culture War should read this refreshing call for a cease-fire. • • Kevin Roose, author of
The Unlikely Disciple • Gina Welch's story of her immersion in Jerry Falwell's Evangelical church
is riveting. Welch is a fair, compassionate, very smart writer--and one of the most arresting narrators
I've encountered in a half-century of reading. • • John Casey, author of Spartina

Overall I was glad I read the book but it was an excruciating read with the author providing way too much detail about mundane things. And those metaphors!! just wait until you they start getting thrown at you. After reading the book I think I understand the evangelicals better. The people she dealt with in the church were really good and decent people. I grew up in a Disciples of Christ church and the hymns that moved her were the same ones we sang.

As someone who, like Gina, has held a deep skepticism of evangelical Christianity, this book was eye opening. Ultimately, I find myself in the same position as the author - not believing what they do, but more empathetic to their world view.

Insightful, thoughtful and appreciative but intelligently critical account of the sincere Religious Right by a progressive feminist investigative journalist.

well written. Her story pulled me through to the end. An added bonus - being from the region on

which the story is based and somewhat familiar in a circumspect way with Liberty, Falwell, Lynchburg etc. living in Roanoke. Curious where she stands now with her church friends.

While it is interesting to know an "outsider's" view, Welch crossed several moral and ethical lines to write this book. I found this book "okay" for at least three main reasons: because (1) she rambles on the minute details of trivial events that have little or nothing to do with the main idea of the book, and (2) she is unfair in the majority of her assessments and critiques - she condemns the Evangelicals for being narrow-minded about topics such as abortion or homosexuality (even uses demeaning words to do so), but in so doing she is just as narrow-minded and judgmental and presents her own personal opinions as right instead, and (3) she is biased and shallow with her judgments - no one can expect to enter a different culture or subculture and immediately understand the whats, whys, and hows: it takes years of study and research to begin to understand another culture. Anyone can find fault with anyone else if they look hard enough. You would think that such a "liberal" person would be a little more open to the way others think and live. Sadly, it appears that Welch found the opposite to be true - those hateful, "homophobes" (oh how I hate that word) were more accepting and loving.

Her perspective is refreshing even if flawed. There are things in Evangelical Christianity that need addressing. For example: It is wrong to say a person can "be saved" if his only goal is to "escape Hell". We are born again by the Holy Spirit to regain a personal relationship with the Father. While I don't agree with her motives....I applaud her ability to distinguish the genuine from the false. She entered this ruse with the intent of exposing the false and came away with an appreciation she totally didn't expect. So, you believers before you pass too hard a judgement on her realize it is the Holy Spirit that opens eyes and regenerates. The seed has been planted and watered. Leave the results to God. The concluding I received from Gina was when she said she so wanted to believe (because she missed the fellowship and singing) but just couldn't. I believe God is still molding that piece of clay and HIS will ultimately will be accomplished. Regardless, she has a perspective for us to heed.

The recent health care "debate" had both the blue team AND the red team stooping to lows of hysteria and vitriol, getting Americans riled up rather than taking advantage of an opportunity for understanding and education. So it is refreshing to see someone take the latter path, rather than the former, for a change. Gina Welch, raised in a secular household in California, moved to Virginia to

attend graduate school. Once here, she found herself in a rather different culture than what she was used to in California. She got interested in investigating the core of the differences in these belief/cultural/spiritual systems, and committed years of her life to this effort. In her new book, *In the Land of Believers: An Outsider's Extraordinary Journey into the Heart of the Evangelical Church*, Gina Welch details how she joined the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia (some say this is ground-zero of Evangelicalism) to learn more about the types of folks around her in her new Virginia home. Why Thomas Road Baptist Church? "Regionally, church membership was in the thousands and growing and Liberty University was fast becoming what the founder had hoped it would be: a Brigham Young University for Evangelicals." The founder, of course, being Jerry Falwell. Note, however, that the matter of Gina joining Thomas Road Baptist Church was not a trivial step. Says Gina: "I am a secular Jew raised by a single mother in Berkeley.... I cuss, I drink, and I am not a virgin." She realizes that the people she wants to learn about would not be forthcoming if they knew she was writing a book about them, so she invents a story about herself. This deception allows her to join the church and make friends there, but comes back to haunt her in the end. The book is mostly about her experiences of joining the church and developing relationships with people. But while in the church she witnesses several key events in the history of the Thomas Road Baptist Church, including the transition from the original church site to the new site (formerly the Ericsson cell phone plant) as well as the death of Jerry Falwell. Also, in her journey she herself becomes changed, and discovers flaws in the caricatures the media paints of "Christian America". There are actually real people behind those images: "And yet...against logic, as a liberal secular Jew, born to a Communist father, raised in Berkeley, educated in the Ivy League--I had been charmed by Jerry Falwell." Gina takes a fair look at the church and its members, and, I think, all sides--the pro, the con, and the indifferent--can learn something from her experiences. In the end, Gina has to deal with the deceptions she has committed, as well as the friendships she has created. The result, I think, is a valuable insight into a segment of society where, currently, at the interface with the rest of the world, there is some distrust and misunderstanding.

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