



Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays

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In the Bible Belt, it's common to see bumper stickers that claim One Man + One Woman = Marriage, church billboards that command one to "Get right with Jesus," letters to the editor comparing gay marriage to marrying one's dog, and nightly news about homophobic attacks from the Family Foundation. While some areas of the United States have made tremendous progress in securing rights for gay people, Bible Belt states lag behind. Not only do most Bible Belt gays lack domestic partner benefits, lesbians and gay men can still be fired from some places of employment in many regions of the Bible Belt for being a homosexual.

In *Pray the Gay Away*, Bernadette Barton argues that conventions of small town life, rules which govern Southern manners, and the power wielded by Christian institutions serve as a foundation for both passive and active homophobia in the Bible Belt. She explores how conservative Christian ideology reproduces homophobic attitudes and shares how Bible Belt gays negotiate these attitudes in their daily lives. Drawing on the remarkable stories of Bible Belt gays, Barton brings to the fore their thoughts, experiences and hard-won insights to explore the front lines of our national culture war over marriage, family, hate crimes, and equal rights. *Pray the Gay Away* illuminates their lives as both foot soldiers and casualties in the battle for gay rights.

Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays Details

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Korri says

Barton, herself a lesbian living in the Bible Belt, has written an engaging, highly readable text that is compassionate both to queer folks and to those who would condemn them. She doesn't demonize evangelicals or fundamentalists but instead attempts to explain the social and cultural ideas that undergird Christian homophobia. Barton extends Foucault's idea of the prison panopticon to the Bible Belt, arguing that the ubiquity of Christian symbols and churches, 'personalism' (be polite, don't offend, don't argue even if you disagree, don't contradict authority figures) in close-knit families and communities, and the negative messages about homosexuality preached and espoused by some Christians lead to Bible Belt gays feeling that they are constantly under surveillance and must regulate or adjust their behavior to conform. This panopticon forces many gay people into what Barton calls the 'toxic closet', where they must collude in their own oppression to keep up appearances and avoid losing family, community, church, and divine love in one fell swoop. The stories of those who have come out are harrowing. But after examining ex-gay ministries and the Creation Museum, Barton concludes with upbeat excerpts from her interviews. Despite the physical and spiritual violence they faced, the gay and lesbian people with whom she spoke felt that their experiences with oppression helped make them more open-minded, compassionate, sensitive to injustice, and, in some cases, closer to God.

Sarah says

I knew this would be an emotional read for me – and I was right. It stirred up all kinds of emotions – anger at the way some of the people were treated by their families and their churches, sorrow, fear, and sympathy, but it also gave me a sense that I am not alone in having been hurt by bad church environments and judgmental people. That made me feel some comfort. At other times, though, this book was very hard to read. It was very well researched and well-written, covering many different aspects of living in as a gay person in a religious area of the country. I found myself underlining passages, able to relate so much.

Danielle says

This book reads like it is a sociology book, which is not surprising given that the author is in fact a sociology professor. This is not at all a problem for me because I was a sociology minor and find that a large majority of non-fiction books that I enjoy belong in a similar category. I only mention it because the book is written in a more academic fashion than your casual reader might appreciate.

The content of the book is based on sociological research via interviews with a number of gays living in the Bible Belt. Barton comes at the issue of what it's like to be gay living in areas where people are prone to be homophobic from a variety of perspectives. It's essentially distilling the stories of people's lives into broad themes.

I thought it was a really well written book examining what is sadly a really complicated subject for many.

Candy Wood says

Considering that part of the motivation for this sociological study was a homophobic comment by a neighbor, I'm impressed with the care Bernadette Barton takes to avoid demonizing evangelicals like that neighbor. Her interviews document the struggles of many gays and lesbians, mostly in Kentucky, to affirm their own identity in the atmosphere of hatred fostered by many churches. As a participant-observer, she explored the methods of the "ex-gay" movement and concludes that those methods are not very effective. She describes a college class field trip to the Creation Museum in Petersburg, KY, as a chilling example of narrow-mindedness that discourages independent thinking whether about the origin of human life or about the sinfulness of same-sex relationships. Barton argues that by casting gay men and women out, fundamentalist congregations lose the positive contribution those people could make as well as harming them. The whole book is thus a guide to knowledge and understanding, and very readable to a non-specialist.

Christina Miskey says

This was a hard book to get through, mainly because of the depressing topic. I had to take several breaks. But I am glad to have read it. The author provides a well researched and thorough account of the experiences of Bible Belt gays, and I think it's an important read for those that are looking to understand the struggles those living in this area face. The author tries to present a logical and well reasoned discussion about conservative Christians, and approaches the topic both from a personal and an academic perspective.

Stephen Cranney says

This book had a lot of promise but ultimately was a little disappointing. It was an opportunity to take a nuanced look at the paradoxes and complexities facing Bible Belt gays, but ultimately the whole book could be boiled down to "look at how mean these people are." Occasionally there were signs that she was going to take the former approach (e.g. her point that her LGBT NYC friends overreacted when they thought that they would be physically assaulted in Kansas, or her citing the study that showed that southerners were more likely than NYC people to confront a homonegative waitress berating a gay couple), but they would get buried pretty quickly.

The stories highlighted didn't seem representative, and it seemed like the most sensational ones were emphasized for effect. This certainly made for interesting/entertaining reading, but I got the sense that she was almost trying to project a stereotype of the South. This sense I had wasn't helped by the digression into the Creation Museum, which is a completely separate issue and seemed like an attempt to lump all southern silliness together.

Zane Carey says

A brilliant touching book that really informed me, a new englander, the situation of Bible Belt gays. I haven't dealt with 90% of what happened in these books, and this inspires me to teach others the risk of spirituality vs. gay dilemma. Also, even though I am not gay, in my transgender life I have experienced the 'dont ask dont tell' situation and seeing this is words, articulated by someone else, makes me feel only more kinship to the lgbt+ community.

Emma Sea says

On the one hand, Barton gives us solid research, good writing - if firmly academic in style - and thick, rich data.

On the other hand, *unrelenting misery to read*. *head desk*

I thought this would have been improved by some discussion of Terror Management Theory. Fundamentalist Christians react so strongly to homosexuality because it threatens their internal cohesion as subjects. Admittedly, knowing that that doesn't help when you've been kicked out and disowned. Man, humans can really suck.

1-star because really, not a pleasant read, and didn't throw any new light on the topic. More like, "Hey, you know all those terrible stories about Christian homophobia in America? They're all true, and here, have a dump truck more examples because you were looking way too happy today."

Miller Sherling says

So interesting! I'd give it a 5 for topic and importance, a 3 for editing, so there's your average. Does good job moving between anecdotes and theory/analysis. Anecdote near end almost made me cry from recognizing this particular quality I love in Southerners, or maybe sometimes love. Did really good job articulating something I'm only just starting to understand from thinking hard about racism and white privilege, in which you see that white people make race, and their discomfort around it, the problem of the racial other and expect it to be fixed by the other. Likewise, homophobia works by having heterosexuals always treat problems of closeted-ness or coming out or their own discomfort be a problem "caused by" the homosexuals. She explains this far better than I. :-)

Ryan says

This was a fascinating book. It was not quite what I had expected; the presentation is much more scientific than I would have imagined. However, I do not intend that as a criticism. Rather, it gives the book added credibility. I found it very interesting to read about the psychological and cultural underpinnings of conservative Christianity's hatred of homosexuals and the struggles and triumphs of Bible Belt gays and lesbians in the face of culturally and politically sanctioned oppression. The author is more fair than I would have been; she carefully humanizes people who would rather their children be murderers than homosexuals, placing this clearly irrational belief into its context. A whole book could be written on the psychological dysfunction inherent in a group of people who unquestioningly follow religious authority without exercising any critical thinking skills, to the point of disowning (or exorcising) their own gay children, and cling to a literal reading of the Bible to the point of denying science and anything else that conflicts with this medieval worldview, retreating from an evolving society in the process; this work focuses upon the consequences of that belief system to gays and lesbians, and as such it succeeds in illustrating the immense obstacles faced by openly gay and lesbian citizens of the Bible Belt. Their often heroic stories make for inspirational reading.

Natalie says

I grew up Pentecostal, so it was hard to read such an elegant breakdown of my childhood religious culture. The black and white mindset she describes is so on the nose. This book is a valuable tool for any progressive who really wants to understand WHY conservative Christians think the way they do. If you really want to change their hearts, you have to understand the way they live and think. Talking to them like a fellow progressive doesn't work. I gave her four stars (4.5 if I could) because of an omission I thought was critical considering the subject matter: What about pray away the gay camps? Those places that the religious right sign away their children to where they are left with "counselors" who antagonize them night and day. She mentions ex-gay ministries but I was very surprised there wasn't even a throwaway line about these places. They're in the news every so often.

Kiwi says

I did quite enjoy this book, really. I opened it expecting it to be quite academic and found it to be so; I thus didn't find that disappointing (and was accustomed to it) but could understand why others would find it a bit duller than expected. I'll admit I wasn't all too impressed with her sampling method--the snowball survey, how many couples she chose, the spread of diversity--and wouldn't take much from it scientifically as a study, although I did enjoy the anecdotes and statistics. The scene it set was very gloomy and realistic; I was grateful for the hopeful end.

Honestly, it was nice reading such a new factual book. I'm so used to reading old ones that seeing things referenced from within a year ago was quite refreshing!

Some great lines and ideas in this book, too, as much from those interviewed as from Bernadette herself. I may have to look into her other book; I've always been quite interested in the lives of sex workers and strippers (meant only with authentic curiosity and not negative judgement).

Peacegal says

This book caught my eye when it came in on Interlibrary Loan. What must it be like to live in a microcosm in which everything from billboards to bumper stickers proclaim you are a filthy sinner who doesn't have the same rights as everyone else? Barton gives us a peek into the lives of gay people who live, work, and love in the American Bible Belt.

The section of the book I found most thought provoking was a devastating rebuke to the common homophobic rant, "I don't care what they do, but why do they have to FLAUNT it?" In reality, straight people flaunt their orientation constantly--we just don't notice it, because it's as much a part of our atmosphere as oxygen. Every engagement announcement, every wedding ring, every statement that begins with "My husband" or "My girlfriend"...flaunts the straight orientation. I hadn't thought of it that way, and if you are straight, I bet you hadn't either. Eye-opening.

Rebecca Herman says

This was a good book, yet maddening and sad that some Christians are the way they are on this topic. I wish the author had reported more about the Christian churches out there that are welcoming and affirming of LGBT people. I'm happy to be a part of the United Church of Christ and the Alliance of Baptists, two types of churches that are open and affirming towards LGBT people. The book talks about the importance of hearing the personal stories of LGBT people and I believe that is true.

Ashley says

An interesting but tough read. As someone born and raised in Kentucky, I was initially a bit embarrassed at the reactions of some of the people mentioned in this book--they definitely fit the "hillbilly" stereotype that people from Kentucky are often subject to. However, the book was honest; nothing written seemed made up or embellished to reinforce those stereotypes.

It also made me recognize some of my privilege. As a Black woman I am on the low end when it comes to privilege, but being a straight Christian does have inherent undeserved privilege that I need to actively work to dismantle.
