



Held and Free: Coming Out of Your Story

Meagan M. O’Nan

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Held and Free is an introspective memoir about the transformative power of living openly.

Meagan M. O’Nan’s memoir *Held and Free* is about choosing authentic self-discovery and the challenging yet rewarding path to self-acceptance.

The book opens on O’Nan coming out to her family. She faced the immediate Southern and religious nuances of her parents’ responses. Then she followed her brother’s advice to leave Mississippi. Following this scene, the book looks back on O’Nan’s upbringing and relationship with religion, leading up to her discovery of her sexual orientation and experiences with communal rejection.

Anecdotes from O’Nan’s youth and adulthood run parallel to one another. When she was young, O’Nan related to Jesus because he was crucified for being “different”; as an adult, she navigated backlash from her religious community for being “different.” Tidbits about Mississippi’s oppressive history further contextualize her experiences with being othered, though they also place O’Nan outside of her own story, centering other voices who know the categorizations she speaks of.

The book is structured in three sections with ambiguous titles, starting with “Own” and concluding with “Connect.” This threefold separation demonstrates a distinction between O’Nan’s early and present concept of self. Indeed, this conflict is central to the book: her youth is framed by her decision to mask her sexual orientation to appear “saved” to her religious community. She became a spiritual leader for various Christian organizations and participated in mission trips aiming to “get souls for the Lord.”

The years that followed these experiences are detailed at a gradual rate, matching her exhaustion from misguided messages of self-worth and the erasure of her authentic selfhood. The final half of the book is the most removed from O’Nan’s early experiences, covering her nascent public speaking and storytelling efforts on LGBTQIA+ matters. Her eventual return to Mississippi marks her choice to acknowledge her past emotional trauma and secure a newfound sense of belonging and self-love.

While the book’s coverage of O’Nan’s spiritual and relational experiences is vibrant at first, it is stifled by repetitive endings that draw out O’Nan’s analysis of her developing selfhood. Still, the prose is poignant and honest, filtered through evidence of O’Nan’s unresolved traumas translating into her adulthood. There are touching insights—O’Nan notes in a letter to her mother that she interpreted her family’s fear as rejection—that help the narrative arrive at its thematic conclusion. As the book advances, a solicitous tone is interwoven, eliciting an external accessibility to the hope she acquired along the way.

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BROOKE SHANNON (September 8, 2023)

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