

The Evolution of the Gospels

Tammy Oberhausen

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In Tammy Oberhausen's piercing, entertaining historical novel *The Evolution of the Gospels*, a religious Kentucky family spends decades performing together.

In the 1970s, the Holliman patriarch, Garland, is inspired by his daughters' perfect harmonizing to form the Gospels. He tells them that they're singing for the glory of God—not themselves. They comply, though they bristle over postponing their own desires. Only one daughter, Jeannie, aspires to stardom.

As the gingham-clad troupe gains notice, their hypocrisies surface: Junior, an eventual prodigal around whom a prophecy roils, drinks and smokes; one daughter yearns to break free; another is curious about a handsome nonbeliever. The family's occupation reveals itself, in time, to be based more on following absorbed ideas than on enlivening faith.

Told most from Jeannie's perspective, this humorous novel focuses on the Holliman family's dedication to their craft. They sport beehive hairdos, endure straitlaced road trips, and stir up congregations with their music. But quiet fractures form, driving the siblings apart. Soon, only Jeannie remains dedicated to the Gospels.

Fringe permutations of Christianity are lampooned throughout in a knowing but humanizing way, from the 1980s' "name it and claim it" prosperity gospel and televangelism to people who mask their own misbehaviors while making note of "backsliding" in others. Secondary characters, including skeptical bystanders and genuine believers, lend perspective to Jeannie, who sheds her naivete in time. When she's disillusioned after a startling loss, her attempts to pull her family away from a harmful preacher result in heartbreaking reconsiderations of loyalty and her own provincial hometown.

In the poignant novel *The Evolution of the Gospels*, a daughter's faith is deconstructed but not extinguished as she works to glorify God.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2024)

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