



TITLE INFORMATION

WHEN A CATHOLIC GETS A LUTHERAN PREGNANT

Jennifer Radtke

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BOOK REVIEW

A memoir of love and family set in a small town in Minnesota.

Radtke movingly memorializes her brother Todd, who had an intellectual disability. Todd could occasionally be violent, but in general he was a gentle, almost entirely nonverbal person. He was born in 1963 and failed to reach the standard childhood developmental milestones as he grew. Todd was sent to an institution in South Dakota while still a child, then moved to a group home. Lamenting his absence from their family's life, "misunderstood, thrown away, and secluded," the author describes Todd as "a beautiful soul...all six of us siblings who came after him owed our lives to him." Radtke goes on to discuss growing up with her brothers and sisters in the 1970s and '80s in a poor family ruled by a violent, alcoholic father. In mostly brief, fast-paced chapters, she evokes the atmosphere of the time, complete with mentions of hand-me-downs, garage sales, rotary phones, and Pac-Man. Radtke recounts moving away from home, going to college (she attended Southwest State University—much to her own surprise, since she grew up thinking of herself as "dumber than a box of rocks"), having a child with her boyfriend, Kevin, meeting her husband, Blaine, and starting a family with him. The author conveys her personal history with genuine depth and feeling. She looks unflinchingly at the alcoholic deterioration of her father, but the strongest strand of the narrative is her powerful relationship with Todd, whose unexpected death sent a shock wave through her whole family and inspires her best writing (reflecting on his body at the funeral home, she notes that it's "his first night alone since he was born"). All of her reminiscences feel genuine and touching, but it's the material about the "thrown away" Todd that makes the story truly stand out.

A heartfelt account of life and love.