

When a Catholic Gets a Lutheran Pregnant

Jennifer Radtke

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When a Catholic Gets a Lutheran Pregnant is an empathetic memoir about family contradictions and how love persists amid damage.

Anchored by a formative sibling relationship, Jennifer Radtke's unvarnished memoir *When a Catholic Gets a Lutheran Pregnant* is about family dysfunction, caregiving, and loss.

Radtke's brother, Todd, who died unexpectedly in 2013, is at the center of this text, which covers his troubled birth, early diagnosis with an intellectual disability, and years of institutionalization, or "prison sentence." Indeed, Radtke recalls seeing Todd press his face against the institution's fence while they drove away. This is documented alongside the story of Radtke's maturation: She grew up in a South Dakota farming community, where she navigated her own learning disabilities, facing academic insecurity and relationship chaos. Later, she married twice (first to an abusive alcoholic) and became a mother and a disabilities advocate.

Narrated with stark directness, the book documents the family's poverty with clarity. It covers Radtke's father's alcoholism and violence alongside Todd's systemic mistreatment. It also moves toward the catharsis of Radtke assuming the role of Todd's legal guardian.

Throughout, other people are fleshed out with nuance and care: Radtke's father is both a terrifying and a sometimes tender presence; her first husband is introduced as someone whose childhood trauma manifested in alcoholism and abuse; and Todd is established as someone who valued privacy, resisted help when humiliated, and taught his family much. Sensory details also abound, as of the state hospital's smell of human waste masked by overpowering sterility. At one point, Todd is seen with purple-hued skin, his mouth slack and his arms dangling from a gurney; a scab on Radtke's knee from a truck accident and an opossum hissing in her garage are other tactile touchpoints. Beyond such standout images, the prose is accessible if straightforward, marked by Midwestern colloquialisms and bits of humor in the midst of difficulties.

There's also an editorial quality to the text, which raises questions about the shortcomings of institutional care facilities in the 1960s, speaks to the long reach of childhood trauma, and covers grief with care. Here, grief is an ongoing process: Indeed, Radtke recalls losing Todd "over and over again" through her memories, sensory triggers, and seeming signs, as with quarters appearing in unexpected places. Personal senses of failing and resentments are also troubled through, with the book moving toward a closing, satisfying sense of layered personal growth.

An inquisitive memoir, *When a Catholic Gets a Lutheran Pregnant* is about being a sister, a caregiver, and a witness.

JOHN M. MURRAY (May 1, 2026)

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