



When a Catholic Gets a Lutheran Pregnant

Jennifer Radtke

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Jennifer Radtke's memoir of life in rural South Dakota is a raw portrait of how she overcame hardships to become a teacher of special needs students.

Despite the title, Radtke spends little time describing the dynamic between her Catholic father and Lutheran mother. Instead, she says she wrote this book to preserve the memory of her oldest brother, Todd, who was born in 1963 with cerebral palsy, partial blindness and other disabilities, and who died in 2013 in the group home where he lived most of his adulthood.

Radtke gained purpose and passion as a young adult by taking responsibility for Todd, bringing him regularly to family gatherings and ensuring he was well cared-for. She describes her guilt that her family institutionalized him as a child (at experts' recommendations) and the unrelenting grief she felt after his death.

Above all, intentionally or not, Radtke exposes the secrets of children raised amid poverty, alcoholism and violence. With remarkable restraint, she describes incidents where her drunken father's "persistent volatility" instilled terror in her and her siblings, sometimes culminating with the arrival of a police officer who shared a cup of coffee with her father and left. A teacher who noticed her bruises never asked if her father beat her.

Radtke's skill is in recalling vivid details that show us (not just tell us about) her life: the recipe for White Lightning her grandpa made to supplement the farm's income; grandma's brave face in welcoming her pregnant Protestant daughter-in-law to the family, then calling her by the wrong name; her father skillfully skinning the deer he shot and curing it on racks in the basement.

The author is less forthcoming about any inner work she completed, or how she has apparently managed to succeed professionally and personally, including eventually forgiving her father. Such insights would have deepened the narrative.

Yet, even if readers are left with greater appreciation of Radtke's anguish than her triumphs, this is a highly engaging account of a difficult life.

Also available in hardcover and ebook.