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Flunking Sainthood

Jana Riess on the Fun of Spiritual Failure
by Jana Riess

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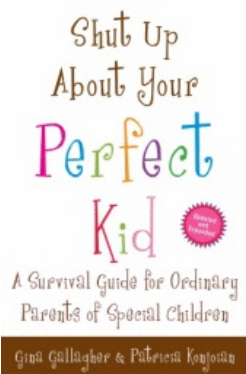
September 2010 Archives

Wednesday September 8, 2010

Categories: Getting published, Interviews

From Self-Publishing to Random House: "Shut Up About Your Perfect Kid" Finds a Following

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Last month, Random House's Three Rivers imprint released *Shut Up About Your Perfect Kid: A Survival Guide for Ordinary Parents of Special Kids* by Patricia (Patty) Konjoian, whose daughter has bipolar disorder, and her sister Gina Gallagher, whose daughter has Asperger's. Both moms wanted to write about the lighter side of raising less-than-perfect kids in a society that increasingly requires perfection. Their road to Random House came by way of self-publishing, lots of speaking engagements, and one very lucky break.

(P.S. Catch Patty and her daughter tomorrow on CNN's In Session program at 12:30 EST.)

Flunking Sainthood: Why did you write this book?

Konjoian: My sister Gina and I, even though our daughters had different diagnoses, were both experiencing similar things, the loss of the perfect dream. Our kids were struggling, and it seemed like we were both among people that were bragging about different things that their kids could do. Both of us were just trying to get our kids through the day. One thing that has sustained us both through the process has been humor, and the book reflects that.

FS: You chose to self-publish the first edition even though you had some interest from an agent. Why?

Konjoian: It was going to take 18 months to 2 years [to publish traditionally]. And we didn't want to wait that long because our parents were getting older and we wanted to do this within their lifetime. Our attorney had suggested that we forgo the agent and just self-publish. We did that; the book came out in 2006. We both took out home equity loans and started eating a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and we hired a PR firm, Newman Communications. They were excellent. They got us in newspapers and radio stations all over the country as well as Canada. Then they got us a few local TV gigs - three in the Boston area and one in Connecticut.

FS: What else did you do to build an author platform?

Konjoian: What we didn't anticipate when we wrote the book was that we would launch a speaking career. We kept hearing as we were first trying to get published, "Oh, you don't have credentials," and "You don't have a platform." Early on after self-publishing, we received a call from a mental health organization asking us if we could be the keynote speakers for their annual dinner. Gina and I were stunned. We were not prepared to be speakers, but we wanted to do it. This annual dinner was in front of about 250 people, and it was at that time that we realized that this "movement of imperfection" [the book's original subtitle] was way beyond Gina and me. It was about all the parents, and all the kids who felt isolated.

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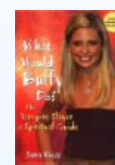
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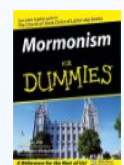
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What Would Buffy Do?



Mormonism for Dummies

FS: How did the book get picked up by Random House?

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posted by [Jana Riess](#) @11:26am [Permalink](#) [Email This](#) [Share](#)

Tuesday September 7, 2010

Categories: Cultural commentary, Islam

Islamophobia After 9/11: Enough, Already!

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You know how on [Facebook](#), you sometimes overhear other people's conversations that you wish you hadn't? Well, this one came up on my Facebook news feed because one of my friends (the last and only sane individual in this conversation) left a comment. I have retained the punctuation and spelling of the original conversation participants while withholding their names.

Original Poster: I recently received a warning about the politically incorrect

term, "Towel Heads." I have been advised that the Islamic terrorists that who hate our guts and want to kill us do not like to be called "Towel Heads".

Original Poster cont: The items they wear on their heads are not towels but in fact are little folded sheets. Therefore, being the sensitive, politically correct person that I am, I will now respectfully refer to these terrorists as..."Little Sheet Heads." Thank you for your support and compliance on this delicate matter. (1 "Like")

First Respondent: I'll call the bastards whatever i want. How about "shit heads"? (1 "Like")

Second Respondent: Now that's the way to start a morning.

Third Respondent: I like sheet heads. It sounds like you're speaking in an accent. (2 "Like")

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Monday September 6, 2010

Categories: [Mormonism](#)

Guest Blogger Matt Bowman on the Metaphysics of Mormon Sacrament Meetings

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The Metaphysics of Mormon Sacrament Meetings, by Matt Bowman



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About the Author

Jana Riess

Jana Riess is the author of *Flunking Sainthood*, a winsome account of one year of spiritual failure.

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Smackdown of 2010 seems to me a dispute about how precisely we should understand worship and what worship is supposed to accomplish. Beyond any sort of commentary on the content of the discussion, I'm pleased that it's taking place at all. It's the sort of discussion that Mormons infrequently have; we spend a great deal of time saying we should do things and very little - beyond generalities about pleasing God or cultivating character - about exactly why.

A couple things worth acknowledging up front, also. One is that a lot of people seem to find the contemporary Mormon sacrament meetings fulfilling and meaningful. Though short of a poll of some kind generalizations about why are probably speculation, there's some sort of religious satisfaction to be derived from the way Mormons worship now. Another is that despite this in a hundred and eighty years of public preaching, nobody's ever really had much good to say about the quality of the oratory of the Mormon pulpit; Davis Bitton famously cited a non-Mormon observer baffled by the "strange ramblings" in Brigham Young's Tabernacle; as one who has admitted boredom in sacrament meeting, then, Jana stands in a noble genealogy that includes Mark Twain.

A useful way to think about Christian worship in general is as a microcosm of what a particular form of Christianity imagines the history of salvation to be. For Jana salvation is the story of an active God, present and manifest in human history; [she thus hopes for worship which emphasizes and celebrates the presence of the divine](#) - in spiritual manifestation, singing understood in terms of praise, and, as she says, focus upon God, rather than the spiritual development of the congregants. This is in line with a lot of other Christians; it's the heart of the Catholic Mass, for instance, which is a dramatic recapitulation of Christ's death for the benefit of the awestruck audience. Unfortunately for Jana's sake, there has been very little history of this in Mormon worship; though in the early twentieth century Bach crept into the sacrament meetings, he was firmly driven out by [J. Reuben Clark](#) shortly thereafter.

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posted by [Jana Riess](#) @11:43am [Permalink](#) [Email This](#) [Share](#)

Friday September 3, 2010

Categories: [Bible](#), [Gospel Doctrine](#), [Twible](#)

The "Big Picture" of the Old Testament: This Week in the Twible (2 Kings 5-11)



Recently at my church, the regular adult Sunday School teacher was on vacation and the assigned substitute was ill. I offered to substitute and was handed a lesson plan just before I walked in to class. Obviously, there wasn't a lot of time to prepare, so I had to wing it by primarily giving an overview of kingship in the Old Testament. Thank God for the [Twible](#)!

I say that not because I actually taught from the Twible (which would likely have resulted in the

recruitment of Teacher #3) but because going through the whole Bible has taught me more about "the big picture" than I ever expected. It's not like I was a neophyte to the Bible; I've been a Christian for many years and even went to seminary to study to be a pastor. But I'd never read the Bible cover to cover; I'd simply replayed its greatest hits.

Apart from creation, there are **three great themes in the Old Testament**, themes that reverberate through all the books and all the centuries:

- 1) Exodus
- 2) Nation-building

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Mom, humanitarian,
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I'm Kelly Lineback
And I'm a Mormon.

3) Exile

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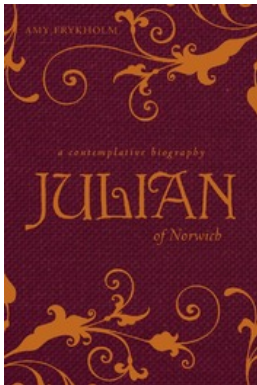
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Thursday September 2, 2010

Categories: [Christianity](#), [Interviews](#)

Who Was Julian of Norwich? A Q&A with Author Amy Frykholm

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The only thing I knew about [Julian of Norwich](#) before reading Amy Frykholm's [excellent new "contemplative biography"](#) of her was that she was the saint who said "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." My friend Kelly likes to quote that when I'm particularly stressed out, and I find it comforting.

It turns out that I'm not the only one in the dark about this medieval saint. In this interview, *Christian Century* correspondent [Amy Frykholm](#) explodes some of the pervasive myths about Julian and helps us to understand Julian's theology and visions.

Flunking Sainthood: I don't know much about Julian, but I had always heard she was an aristocratic nun. You say that might not have been the case at all.

Frykholm: Right. In fact, I think the evidence points away from it. No one knows for sure, but there was an enormous explosion of lay writing in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Lay people were taking on greater roles in the church and claiming their own spirituality. So there's no reason to presume she was a nun. But there's also the fact that Julian never mentions a convent, a religious order, or anything monastic in her book. Another reason was that she wrote this book for laypeople. Most books written by women in this period were for sisters or make a great deal of mention of convent life. She's very clear that she's writing for laypeople.

FS: So she probably wasn't a nun, but you're saying she was not gentility either?

Frykholm: I think that the demands on a noblewoman, and the separation between nobility and the people, would have provided a significant barrier for her to overcome. But we can imagine her as a parish elite, a merchant class or upper-middle class person of the time. She would have been someone who went to church with everybody else, rather than nobility who would have sat separately or even had their own church. Also, Julian received only one bequest from a nobleperson, and she situated herself at Saint Julians, a semi-industrial area where her neighbors were a tanner and a slaughterhouse. Noblewomen of the time would have situated themselves in much nicer places.

FS: So what is this book that Julian is famous for?

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