

**“Jesus calls heaven an ‘upside-down kingdom’ . . .
[Christian school] was more like a funhouse mirror.”**

Dear Reader,

When I started writing what would become this book, *Jesusland*, I thought I was simply exploring a part of my childhood that had long lived in my head but that I rarely thought or talked about: Christian pop culture.

When my family moved back to Canada from secular Eastern Europe in the late 1990s, I was introduced to a strange new world of Christian music, movies, novels, TV, even stand-up comedy. In the evangelical Christian elementary school I began attending, these were commonplace. My friends listened to Christian girl groups like Point of Grace and Superchick. In the school library, I read issues of *Brio*, the Christian girl’s magazine. In school assemblies, we watched gory excerpts from *The Passion of the Christ*.

As an adult, my reminiscences about these religious versions of pop culture, and the subculture surrounding them, seemed like an odd dream. Had I really gotten makeup tips from a magazine-style Bible? Did I really listen to rap music about not having sex before marriage? So I set out to re-examine this Christian pop culture of the early 2000s. When religion crashes into capitalism, the results can be messy, from pop stars wearing purity rings to multi-million dollar creationism theme parks.

In my own life, I felt that tension acutely. My adolescence took place in this space where all my regular teenage worries about my body, my belief systems, and my identity were loaded with the extra existential moral weight of having to be a “good Christian” or face an eternity of fire and brimstone. For a long time, I didn’t fully understand how that pressure had warped my relationships with my body and my own self, for example, or what fears and anxieties I’d absorbed about death, punishment, and the end of the world. I didn’t quite see the line from those fears to the pop songs about “sexual purity” I’d listened to, or the books about being “left behind” in the End Times I’d read.

But writing this book has shown me that these strange artefacts of Christian pop culture are not so innocent: in many cases, they were only the glossy veneer covering some much more sinister political forces. I’ve attempted to probe beyond the weirdness to the ideas and ideologies that underpin it.

While the subject of my book is the early 2000s, it’s become more relevant than ever. With the rise of right-wing Christian nationalism in Canada and the U.S., the conservative Christian culture of two decades ago has a lot to teach us about where these movements came from, and where they might be going.

I hope that as you read this book, you can see both the seriousness and silliness of this strange output of religious fundamentalism. Whether you grew up rocking a WWJD bracelet or you’re just curious about how someone can do stand-up comedy about God, I invite you to join me in my joyride through the mirror world of evangelical Christianity and the books, movies, music, and TV that spread its message.

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