



Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement

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There's a new youth movement afoot in this country. It's a counterculture fusion of politics and pop, and it's taking over a high school near you. Like the waves that came before it, it's got passion, music, and anti-authority posturing, but more than anything else, this one has God. So what does it mean when today's youth counterculture has a mindset more akin to Jerry Falwell's than Abbie Hoffman's?

In *RIGHTEOUS: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement*, Lauren Sandler, a dynamic young journalist, reports from this junction of Evangelicalism and youth culture, traveling across the country to investigate the alternative Christian explosion. Using the grassroots modus operandi of the 1960s, these religious kids – part of the “Disciple Generation” as Sandler calls it – turn an antiauthoritarian sneer toward liberalism, feminism, pacifism, and every other hallmark of that era’s counterculture. And they’re engaging their peers with startling success, fusing pop culture, politics, and religion as they preach from the pulpit of the skate park, bar, and rock concert. Secular, liberal, and practically the embodiment of everything Evangelicalism deems unholy, Sandler travels with skateboard missionaries, hangs out with the tattooed members of a postpunk Seattle megachurch that has evolved into a self-sufficient community, camps out with a rock’n’roll antiabortion group, and gets to know the rap preachers who are merging hip-hop’s love of money with old-fashioned bible-beating fundamentalism. Much more than a mere observer, she connects with these young people on an intimate level, and the candor with which they reveal themselves to her is truly astonishing.

Illuminating, often troubling, and unapologetically frank, *RIGHTEOUS* introduces a bold new voice into the ongoing debate over religion in American life. And it is the first in-depth front-line exploration of the country’s new moral majority – dressed up in punk-rock garb – and what its influence could mean for the future of America. **BACKCOVER: Advanced Praise:**

“Lauren Sandler obliterates the naïve and complacent hope that keeps most secularists and religious moderates sleeping peacefully each night—the hope that, in 21st century America, the young know better than to adopt the lunatic religious certainties of a prior age. The young do not know better. In their schools, skate-parks, rock concerts, and in the ranks of our nation’s military, our children are gleefully preparing a bright future of ignorance and religious fascism for us all. If you have any doubt that there is a culture war that must be waged and won by secularists in America, read this book.”

—Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*

“It is no easy thing to enter into the world of the young evangelicals, to feel deeply their alienation, to breathe their air and share their electric conviction that they are the rising counterculture against an empty world. Lauren Sandler has done it, and done it with an effervescence and honesty that make her travels in Disciple America jump off the page.”

—Todd Gitlin, Professor of Journalism and Sociology, Columbia University, and author of *The Intellectuals and the Flag*

“At once controversial, critical, blasphemous and compassionate, Righteous offers a compelling journey into a growing youth subculture typically dismissed by urban intellectuals. Sandler has written a provocative and illuminating portrait of young people desperately seeking meaning, community and love in an empty, often terrifying social landscape. Evangelical youth—the Disciple Generation— are a generation rising, and we do

need to pay attention.”

—Dr. Donna Gaines, sociologist and author of *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids and A Misfit's Manifesto: The Spiritual Journey of a Rock & Roll Heart*

“Lauren Sandler has traveled among the believers and returned with a story that alarms, informs, and enlightens. She reveals the rise of a fundamentalist-style youth movement that has replaced faith with closed-minded certainty and is frighteningly cult-like. Read this book and you will understand this Disciple Generation and the challenge it poses to a civil society.”

—Michael D'Antonio, former Newsday religion writer and author of *Fall From Grace* and *Heaven on Earth*

“*Righteous* is a lively, probing account of today's fresh, sometimes bizarre sub- cultures of American evangelism. Both the term 'alternative' and 'evangelical' will mean something new to you after this book. Sandler's conclusions are important: These kids have been forgotten by their original social worlds, by secular organizations and even by Left-Liberal causes. In a cold new world, getting saved can now seem like a young American's only source of community and warmth.”

—Alissa Quart, author of *Hothouse Kids: The Dilemma of the Gifted Child*

“*Righteous* is the most adroit and fascinating examination of a great national ill, the muddling of faith and politics, the secular and the divine.”

—Brad Land, author of *Goat*

Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement Details

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From Reader Review Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement for online ebook

JulieK says

A kind of anthropological look at what the author calls the "disciple generation" - young Christians from their mid-teens to mid-thirties. She looks some at clean-cut kids at places like Patrick Henry College (where a large proportion of the students serve as GOP interns in DC), but has a special fascination with tattooed hipster Christians who run skateboard ministries and play in rock bands. Mars Hill Church in Seattle gets a focused look.

To me, the author's most interesting point was that evangelical Christianity is the only thing out there right now for kids/young people who are looking for meaning and community. The acceptance and intense emotional experiences are very appealing to teenagers who are feeling lost or hurt or without direction and just want to belong somewhere. Secular/liberal groups don't really offer an equivalent alternative, which she argues has huge consequences for the future direction of the country.

Kate says

oh man. this book was so fascinating. discussion group needed on this one. it's about the evangelical christian youth movement in this country and man those folks have their shit together. we need to figure out how we can effectively face off against this growing movement of well-organized, super-motivated activists for all that is wrong in the world. the writing is pretty engaging, but veers a little too much into the judgemental at times, in my opinion. she does a really good job, though, of providing in-depth insight into these folks and their motivations as opposed to painting one dimensional pictures of horned beasts.

Kieran says

I am going to be thinking and talking about this book for a while, and not just because it has bizarre family relevance for me right now. From the first chapter I wasn't sure how I was going to like it because it sings with a little too much bombast, but it grew on me. Sandler explores Evangelical Christian youth culture across a number of apparent sub-communities: Rock for Life pro-lifers who are co-opting 60s counterculture with very different goals; Mars Hill Seattleites with 21st century tattoos and piercings and 19th century gender roles; skateboarders who skate for Christ; hip-hop stars and the pastors who lead them; youthful progeny of Evangelical celebs like Billy Graham and James Dobson; three-piece suit types and students attending fringe Christian universities with automatic internships on Capitol Hill; Air Force cadets who believe that God has given them the mission opportunity of all eternity in Iraq; and others. What unites them? They all believe that the Last Days are upon us, and they all voted for George Bush in the last election.

This book was eye-opening in a number of ways, good and bad. Highly recommended to most of my Bookreads pals.

Christina says

Lauren Sandler writes about rocking pro-lifers, skater missionaries, tattooed theologians, sons of televangelists, college students who try to live up to all the meanings of the word "disciple," scientists who believe in intelligent design, military missionaries and Young Republicans with clarity and a touch of wit. The writing is excellent. And the story-telling is truly brilliant.

As someone who went to a Christian college, I know she's telling the truth about evangelical youths.

But as a secular someone who is intimately familiar with the evangelical movement and has several evangelical friends, I struggle with Sandler's main premises.

Sandler writes about the evangelical movement with an "us versus them" perspective. She couches everything in terms of secularism versus evangelicism, those with reason versus those lacking it, those with self-confidence and self-esteem versus those lacking it, the strong versus the weak. And she says evangelicals started it. She says young evangelicals spend most of their time railing against the media and the feminist movement and everything else that represents modernity. She says they're preparing for a philosophical war with the secular elements of society (atheists, agnostics, Mormons, Catholics, i.e. anyone who is not main-stream Protestant). She talks about how they look forward to the Second Coming of Christ, and how they're doing everything they can to bring about the end of the world.

I'm not really sure what war she's talking about. Grove City is an evangelical college (though I probably wouldn't have gone there had I known that when I applied). A good majority of my friends and roommates there were evangelicals. They had a rough idea of where I stood philosophically and they never tried to convert me. Yes, they have different (perhaps, closer) friendships with their other evangelical friends than they do with me. But that's completely understandable - different values and ideas always make for different relationships.

As for the end of the world, I wouldn't say that evangelicals are consciously trying to bring it about. But they're certainly not trying anything to postpone it. I know very few evangelicals who think that global warming and pollution are problems. I know very few evangelicals who clean up after themselves at restaurants or in public parks. Who knows if global warming is inherent in nature or caused by man? What does it matter? It's not going to hurt anybody to limit their consumption of goods and cut back on the amount of waste they create. So why not?

Andrew says

I read this like 5 years ago and I can't get over how alien a culture America's evangelical christianity is for me. There are regions of our country that are like completely different worlds speaking completely different languages that I was never exposed to growing up. The very idea of an evangelical, alternative youth culture is even more mind-bogglingly insane to me... and yet it was my girlfriend's entire world and culture growing up and she turned out a perfectly relatable and rational and lovely human being. When I was reading this I would call her afterwards with the most recent passage I couldn't get over or happened to blow my mind and she would respond with "yup." That was her life and she was completely immersed in it for years. I have

spent a lot of time just trying to understand what that world was like in contrast to my own. Christian Punk Rock? Absurd! But it is a thing and it makes sense when you realize that what defines a musical sub-culture doesn't even always match between two people who grew up down the street from one another... let alone in entirely different regions of a given city or state or damn-big-country. Loud aggressive music will appeal to certain kids, regardless of their perceptions of culture and societal norms. Same goes for skateboarding, tattoos, rebellion, silly haircuts and "sticking it to the man." Different groups from the same culture are especially interesting in their controlled vocabularies and terminology usage. We use the same words as these other people, but to us and them they mean completely different things. And on this basis communication between groups cannot help but break down predictably and repeatedly. Apply this to more complicated concepts and you're asking for even more trouble with misunderstandings based on assumed cultural perceptions and ideas taken for granted and you begin to understand the mess our country is in today.

I don't think I will ever find this subject NOT fascinating/terrifying/bizarre.

Kelly says

This is a scary and engrossing look at the current evangelical youth movement. Did you know punk rock skateboarders had their own church? I remembered this book while Monica Goodling, a graduate of Regents University, was testifying on the Alberto Gonzales debacle. Sandler doesn't mention Regents, a Christian university established by Pat Robertson where Goodling received her JD, but she does mention Patrick Henry College with the mission preparing "Christian men and women who will lead our nation and shape our culture with timeless biblical values and fidelity to the spirit of the American founding" (direct from the Patrick Henry College website). Basically, getting a bunch of evangelicals into government positions. Sandler looks at disparate evangelical movements across the country. I was especially fascinated to see how teenage rebellion/alternative culture has been co-opted by the Evangelicals and heavily tattooed and pierced youth attend rock festivals with shirts that proclaim, "She's a child, not a choice." Highly recommended.

Mary says

I probably shouldn't read this type of topical nonfiction. It relies fairly heavily on the idea that some ominous cultural or political activity is getting bigger and bigger and is about to threaten our Very Way of Life. But while I am a naturally anxious person, I'm totally on to these yahoos that need to make me believe that swine flu/homophobes/feminists/Republicans/immigrants/China/Muslims/etc. are about to bring about some sort of dystopian future. I get that there are threats in the world, and people with whom I completely disagree. And people with bombs and guns and stuff. But fear is counterproductive. It's not a good basis for a worldview. It does, however, sell lots of books and magazines.

The author of this book is talented -- she writes engagingly about the young evangelicals. She looks at many different parts of the whole: "alternative" ministries reaching out to pierced and tattooed types (I like to think of them as Bedazzled) with slang-filled but still very conservative messages; the home-schooled ultra-conservative politicos at Patrick Henry College who are looking to take over Washington; the evangelicals in the military that believe God brought about the Iraq and Afghan wars so that they can bring Christianity to the Middle East; the goth church in Texas run by Jim and Tammy Faye Baker's son; the folks trying to get "intelligent design" into the public school curriculum; Stephen Baldwin and the Extreme Tour; and many

more. And it's alarming stuff. She interviews many people along the way, and I found myself arguing in my head with many of them. How can you believe women are to be subservient? Why do you think other people must believe as you do? Why must this be a "Christian nation" -- there are people of all faiths here.

I think the author did a good job of showing how religion was of personal comfort to many of her subjects, while still decrying their political views. (She made no bones about being alarmed by the whole movement.) She notes that evangelism is clearly popular because so many young people are unclear about how to have meaning in their lives, feeling disconnected from their communities. But she wants her readers to be really freaked out and, basically, to create something similar on the left. She calls for the secular liberals to have their own versions of the Christian rock festivals, skate ministries, political colleges, and self-help books she describes here, only with life-affirming messages from the left wing. Oy.

I'd try something a bit more basic. How about public programs and educational institutions that support the health, safety, and growth of our citizens? How about some regulations that prevent Wall Street banks from putting our economy in the toilet? How about an economy that does not depend almost entirely on the consumption of consumer goods for its "health"? Fanaticism, fear, and intolerance are often born from insecurity, poverty, poor education, or economic instability. Maybe if our country did a better job of supporting its most vulnerable citizens and working toward fairness and justice, we'd all be a little less susceptible to the fear mongers.

Scot says

An NPR reporter who writes for the LA Times probes within the 21st century Evangelical youth movement in the USA, with character sketches and interviews of those caught up in this growing lifestyle. The tone is sometimes uneven, with the author at times perhaps a bit disparaging as she tries to present the range of inroads the evangelicals have made in the last generation, as they reach out to the marginalized or those in adolescence, using the latest effective marketing strategies of mass media and the dominant culture. She does recognize it is a need for community and structure (in a world that seems to be losing both) that drives these new converts, and generally respects their faith as a sincere commitment. Like her, I am troubled by how easily so many will dismiss facts, evidence, and critical thinking, seeing them as unnecessary and unimportant, and what is worse, dangerous--that is, if any should bring into question the literal reading of the Bible as inerrant fact (or at least, in the manner that their church leaders suggest it is). Don't think for yourself, but follow blindly on faith in return for feeling more accepted or comfortable--such approaches always make me nervous, and the fact so many millions of Americans are buying into this is troubling. The sections on the anti-abortion rock concerts, the Intelligent Design sophistry showdown in Dover, PA, and the skater boys outreach were not news to me, but the sections on Patrick Henry College, the New Life church serving the Air Force Academy, and the Mars Hill group in Seattle were--and they are all dedicated to using political power and influence to make others conform to their views on family and gender relationships. I found the whole faith system set up by Creflo Dollar, so popular in rap circles, preaching that Christianity is all about getting the most bling--to be vile, and I am absolutely startled by how many both go for it, and see no problem with it. And until I read this book, I had no idea Stephen Baldwin had a recent life outside of The Celebrity Apprentice. It turns out he has been an evangelical youth right-wing politics celeb for years!

Holly says

This was a fascinating book to read, from multiple perspectives. First, because I am very interested in the phenomenon of the Religious Right/Evangelical Christianity as a political force and as a group that is redefining the way our country acts, legislates, and is internationally perceived. Secondly, because I have some background with these perspectives myself, and have old friends and acquaintances who are closely involved in aspects of these movements.

Sandler does a good job of exploring and outlining the people and groups that are active in the movement without clearly identifying strong political biases. She does state her religious and political background, and at times points out her personal conflicts with a number of the commonly held beliefs of this demographic, but for the most part I found the book to be more educational than polemic.

If nothing else, I recommend this as a great insight into a growing movement that begs for an organized alternative.

Tania says

i really wanted to like this book, but once again, the cross-over into pop culture lit has driven me crazy. sentences that begin with phrases like "I'd sacrifice a lamb to..." cloud the descriptions and interviews and make me not take the author seriously. i was mostly interested in the chapters about mars hill church, and true to my assumptions, it is a scary place. but i already knew that. every chapter seemed more or less a regurgitation and condemnation of the "sneaky deep" missional living and the anti-feminist stance of young evangelicals around the country. but i already knew that. i returned the book to the library without finishing it. too bad, because this topic is one that really interests (and concerns!) me.

Ketan Shah says

A journalist travels through America to examine the phenomenon of fundamentalist Christian Youth evangelism. Disturbing in many ways. Especially the chapters on their battle to have Creationism and Intelligent Design taught in schools, and the description of how some elements in the US military literally believe that they're fighting a holy war in the Middle East, to bring about the end times. I also found the section about attempts to combine Church and State in America through grooming of potential law makers in Christian colleges quite fascinating. Some interesting points are raised about Secular and Christian viewpoints of similar events. For those with an interest in mass communication it makes you think about the adoption of popular culture to spread a religious message. Well worth reading. If you enjoyed this, you might enjoy the movie, *Jesus Camp*. For investigative reporting of another variety, check out Bill Buford's *Among the Thugs*. You might also enjoy *The Big Bang, The Buddha, and the Baby Boom* by Wes Nisker.

Kelly says

You might not believe it but I am totally pro criticizing Christian culture... frankly I think it is ridiculous, but Sandler leaves behind objective journalism and has some sort of axe to grind that she just can't let go of. I want to hear an honest appraisal of the foolish Christian world from a genuine outsider. Sandler, however, seems to think there is nothing redeeming about faith no matter how raw or how accepting. No one Christian can be good, real, genuine... no one non-Christian can be wrong or closed minded. It is really too bad she didn't take this project on with more of the openmindedness she pretends to espouse. Tolerance here is on the side of the Christians who let her into their homes and lives.

On a redeeming note, there is no time at which we should stop really looking hard at a culture that preaches love but practices hate so often. There were so many good stories to tell, why Sandler couldn't focus on the legitimate critique, and give a little more I don't know.

Alex says

I picked up this book in a thrift shop knowing the perspective of the author. However, I thought that Sandler might offer some keen insights, or that I would pick up some things myself, on this thing we call youth ministry. That said, I was greatly disappointed. Sandler was up front and just wanted to show Evangelical Christianity in all its forms to be ridiculous and anti-rational - though specifically in the youth. She is correct about certain section of evangelicalism but wrongly sums them up into one and assumes that Christianity cannot be rational. Well, that's just too bad. If you are looking for an objective and intellectual assessment of Evangelical Christianity - and it's specific impact on American youth - this is not it.

L says

While Sandler can be a bit snarky, this book is eye-opening - it has more scope than Jesus Camp or Hell House, two staple documentaries designed to expose the lunacy of fundamentalists. It's a look into what young evangelicals are doing to convert others, and even more importantly, how they want to change this nation. A particularly shocking chapter on Patrick Henry College tops the rest of the book; I didn't quite understand why Sandler spent time deriding the "prosperity gospel" of Creflo Dollar, as young people don't seem central to the movement. Though she gets off-task a couple of times, Sandler does manage to pack in some interesting profiles of little-known pastors and second-generation denizens of the religious right. Overall, it reads like an entertaining (yet informative and somewhat scary) set of articles from Slate or Salon, and I'd recommend it to anyone interested in social issues and religion in the US.

Chris Crane says

I chose not to finish this book. Sandler, a self-proclaimed "unrepentant Jewish atheist" clearly is hostile to Christian faith and that perspective comes out in her, frankly, obnoxious tone and steals from what could have been a helpful examination of evangelical youth culture from a non-Christian perspective. However, she makes unqualified statements, straw men arguments, and simply untrue statements are found in numerous places. That is just not good writing. Although, maybe I shouldn't expect that much from a book endorsed by rapid "New Atheist" Sam Harris (although, I'll admit that's probably not fair to make such an assertion). Anyway, there are better books out there on American evangelicalism, so I'll spend my time reading those instead.
