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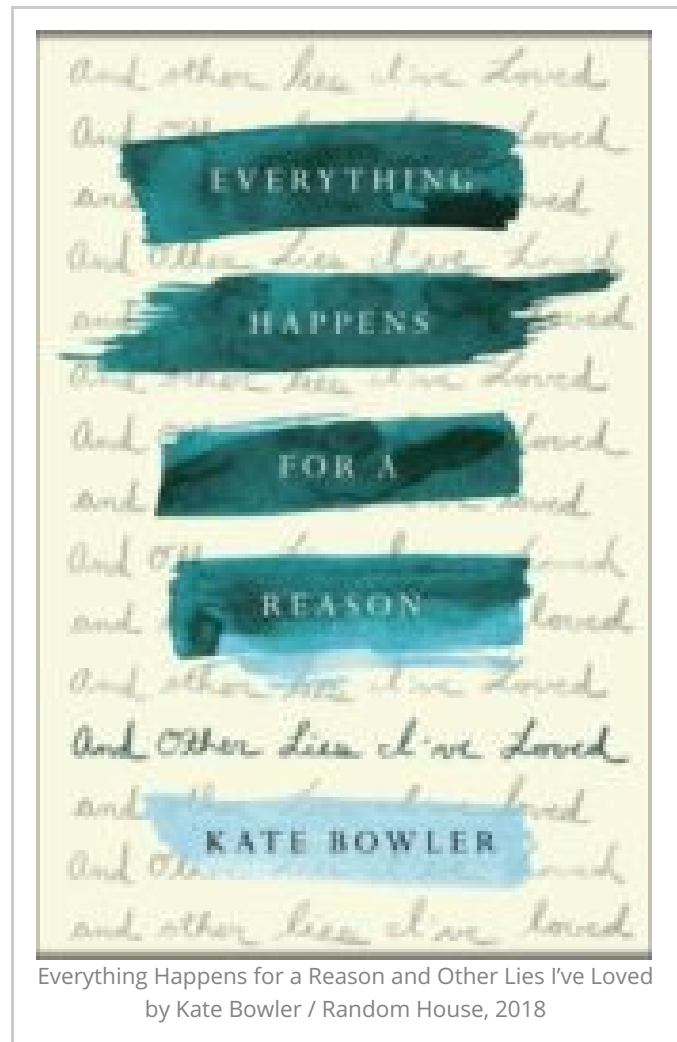
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June 1, 2018

By Melanie Springer Mock

At first glance, Kate Bowler appears to be experiencing the life nearly every author longs for. Her book, *Everything Happens For a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, landed on the New York Times bestseller list. She was featured on NBC's The Today Show, and her newly-launched podcast includes guests like beloved actor Alan Alda. Bowler has become an A-list speaker at Christian conferences while continuing her roles as a seminary professor at Duke and a mother to her toddler-aged son. In many ways, Bowler's life seems almost enviable, except for this: A Stage-IV colon cancer diagnosis.



Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved
by Kate Bowler / Random House, 2018

In many ways, Bowler's life seems almost enviable, except for this: A Stage-IV colon cancer diagnosis.

Everything Happens For a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved narrates the aftermath of Bowler's diagnosis, reflecting on what it means to live well despite the specter of death. The memoir, by turns funny, thoughtful, meditative, and sobering, asks important questions about how we understand God in the midst of suffering and pain, especially when those facile mythologies we often turn to—*everything happens for a reason, it's all part of God's plan, God is teaching me something*—provide insufficient comfort for those who are hurting.

Ironically, it is these very mythologies that Bowler deconstructs in her first book, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, published in 2013. In what was essentially her doctoral dissertation, Bowler traces the “name it and claim it” theology which has its roots in the 19th century, and which continues to inform evangelical Christianity. *Blessed* includes a number of interviews with contemporary proponents of the prosperity gospel, leaders and lay people alike, who voice the sensibility that so long as one lives righteously, she will be awarded not only in the after-life of heaven, but right now on earth as well.

Although Bowler had distanced herself from the ideologies explored in *Blessed*, she realizes, post cancer diagnosis, that she has also internalized some of the fundamental messages of the prosperity gospel. *Everything Happens for a Reason* not only tells the story of her diagnosis and treatment, then, but also explores Bowler’s reckoning with the “other lies” she’s loved. It is through this reckoning that Bowler—and, by extension, her readers—dive deep into theodicy in a way that is at once challenging but also inviting, asking us to interrogate what we really believe about “God’s plan” for our lives and about the real nature of God’s love.

Bowler begins her memoir with the diagnosis that would forever disrupt her life’s trajectory. After losing thirty pounds and experiencing three months’ worth of debilitating but fleeting pain in her stomach, and after countless tests that prove inconclusive, Bowler meets with a gastrointestinal specialist who, at Bowler’s insistence, schedules a CT scan. The scan shows cancer everywhere in her abdomen, and Bowler is summoned to the hospital, to more tests, to surgery, to a completely different outcome than the one she had imagined.

This is not Bowler’s first medical crisis, something she outlines in her memoir: when working on her dissertation, years earlier, her hands stop functioning, making it impossible for her to write and requiring that she dictate long sections of her research. Some doctors diagnose her disability as psychosomatic; at least one suggests surgery. While preparing for an operation that promises to return functionality to her hands, she discovers she is pregnant, a pregnancy that ends in miscarriage. After that, a visit to a physical therapist who practices Postural Restoration helps heal her hands, but issues with infertility introduce an entire new set of challenges for her and her husband, Toban. She finally becomes pregnant—a miraculous moment she likens to the luck of winning a Bingo game—but the pregnancy is difficult and painful. Though she carries her son to term, Bowler also experiences 37 hours of excruciating labor and then a C-section before her son, Zach, enters the world.

A little over one year later, a reprieve of time she recounts as blissful, Bowler is diagnosed with Stage IV cancer. Emergency surgery follows, and she is thrown into a maelstrom of recovery, treatments, and the existential despair that can accompany news that you might die before you turn 35. Yet Bowler narrates the moments immediately following surgery not by focusing solely on the grim details, but by tracing a cycle of hope and grief, love and loss.

Indeed, these moments of meditation make Bowler's book stunning, elevating her story from a simplistic tale about "battling cancer" to a beautiful reflection on how we understand suffering, God's presence in our pain, and whether everything *does* happen for a reason. (Spoiler alert: It doesn't.) Having spent her professional career studying the prosperity gospel, Bowler explores those theological tenets she had disavowed within the context of her illness; she finds them wanting, but also a surprising part of her thought processes.

She considers the possibility of her death, for example, and wonders at the word "surrender"—whether she should surrender to the idea of death, to "letting go and sinking into the arms of God;" whether that surrender should involve making plans for her funeral; or whether that surrender is akin to what prosperity gospel proponents would see as defeat. Believers of the prosperity gospel "write books with titles like *Deal With It!* to remind readers that there is nothing so difficult that God cannot accomplish it, and that you, sir or ma'am, had better get cracking," Bowler writes. "There are no setbacks, just setups. There are no trials, just tests of character. Tragedies are simply opportunities to claim a bigger better miracle." While Bowler recognizes in her diagnosis that she has "almost no choice but to surrender," she also recognizes the sweet comfort that can come with a name-it-and-claim-it attitude: the sense of control over a situation that seems uncontrollable, even when that sense is only a chimera.

Turns out, this longing to find meaning in seemingly meaningless tragedies and to exert control over a life-course we cannot control is a universal one, which Bowler discovers in a resounding way after publishing a story about her diagnosis in *The New York Times*. Following the article's publication, Bowler receives thousands of letters from readers who want to share their painful stories, to know they are not alone, to express their fears. "It feels as though the world has cracked open, and it bleeds and bleeds," Bowler writes. "Strangers pour out their fury at every stage of their own grief. Depression settles on the pages like a fog." Some people offer reassurance that Bowler's illness has some reason, that it is part of God's great plan, that her terminal diagnosis is "just a consequence for your sin."

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Bowler's journey through illness and treatment and reading a thousand strangers' emails does not direct her to some noble proclamation about the beauty of suffering or about God's miraculous healing power. What she *can* affirm is the presence of love she continues to feel, and the depth of that feeling is what sustains her, even when her diagnosis seems bleak. Within her memoir there are yet moments of great hope, most notably when she discovers she is in the three percent of people diagnosed with colon cancer whose variation of the disorder makes new treatment modalities possible. Bowler says she has "magic cancer," one that responds to the clinical trials she is invited to enter. Her magic cancer cannot be cured—she is still considered to have a terminal illness—and every three months she must undergo scans to measure the progression of her disorder.

So she lives with uncertainty. She makes plans, “crumbs scattered on the ground . . . leaving a trail for Zach and Toban, so, whichever way the path turns, all they will find is love.” *Everything Happens for a Reason* is a celebration of that love—of God’s love for us, and our love for each other. Bowler’s memoir bears witness to the tension that life can be beautiful and hard, both. What exists in the beautiful and the hard is “the presence of an unbidden God,” the only real certainty we can cling to.

Melanie Springer Mock is a Professor of English at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon. She is also the author or co-author of five books including, most recently, Worthy: Finding Yourself in a World Expecting Someone Else (Herald Press, 2018). Her essays and reviews have appeared in The Nation, Christianity Today, The Chronicle of Higher Education, and Mennonite World Review, among other places.