

12-21-2017

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Recommended Citation

Mock, Melanie Springer, "Kitchen-Sink Enlightenment: A Review of “Grace for Amateurs”" (2017). *Faculty Publications - Department of English*. 98.

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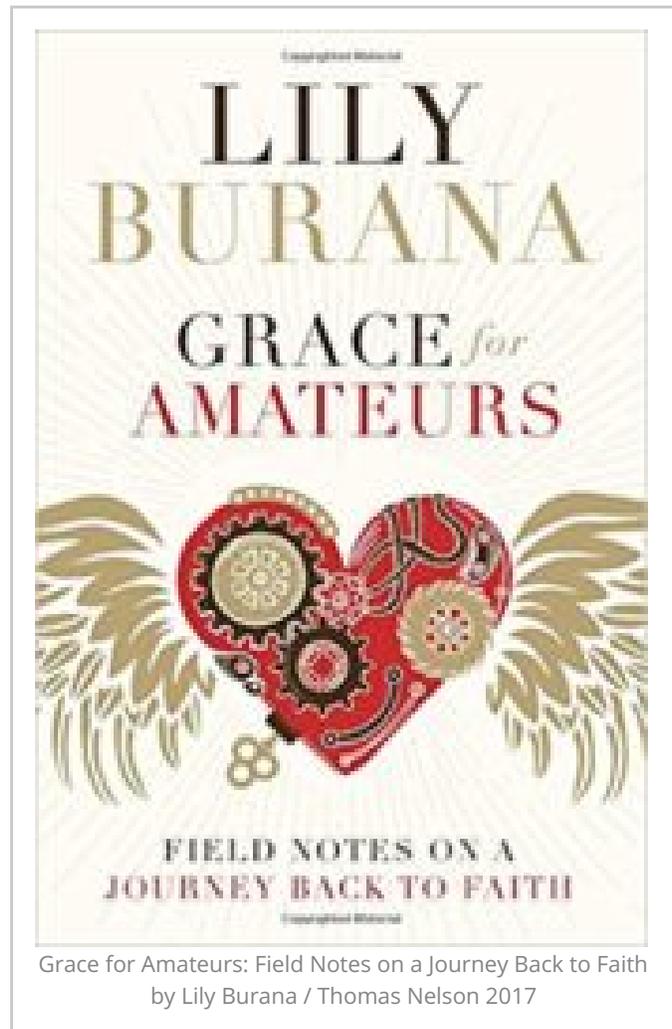
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December 21, 2017

By Melanie Springer Mock

Here’s an honest admission: Several times while reading [Lily Burana’s](#) new book *Grace for Amateurs: Field Notes on a Journey Back to Faith*, I consulted the copyright page, confirming again that *Grace for Amateurs* was really published by Thomas Nelson, the notoriously evangelical (and, in my mind, notoriously traditional) press. After all, it wasn’t that long ago that [Thomas Nelson](#) asked another writer to remove the word “vagina” from her book, well aware that Christian readers would balk at language so closely associated with women and S-E-X. Would this same publisher be willing to support a memoir as edgy and progressive as Burana’s?

Happily, the answer is yes, because *Grace for Amateurs* is an amazing book about an amazing grace that has both challenged and shaped Burana’s life. In this collection of essays, Burana explores her struggle with depression and suicidal ideation; her journey away from, and back to, the church; her identity as a stepmother and mother; and the complex grief of losing her own mother, whose mental illness often challenged healthy relationships. The theme of grace thrums throughout each essay in *Grace for Amateurs*, an ever-present reminder that despite our brokenness, our sadness, our longing, God’s grace endures; often through others, in what Burana calls “the asylum of compassion and care...God’s grace in action.”



The theme of grace thrums throughout each essay in *Grace for Amateurs*, an ever-present reminder that despite our brokenness, our sadness, our longing, God's grace endures; often through others, in what Burana calls "the asylum of compassion and care...God's grace in action."

Burana isn't your typical Christian writer, and *Grace for Amateurs* is not your typical Christian book. She cut her writer's teeth working as a journalist for punk rock and alternative 'zines, and her first book, *Strip City: A Stripper's Farewell Journey Across America*, explores stripper culture from a first-person perspective. In that 2003 memoir, Burana revisits and contends with her earlier career in adult entertainment by traveling across the United States, stripping. *Strip City* made a number of best-of-year book lists, and Burana has subsequently written two other books, as well as landing bylines in publications like *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Glamour*, and *The New York Times*.

In *Grace for Amateurs*, Burana's significant skills as a writer are on full display. Her prose style is, for lack of a better descriptor, just lovely—and I often simply luxuriated in her finely crafted sentences, her beautiful language approximating so well thoughts and feelings I have had, but which I cannot quite articulate. In the tradition of authors like Anne Lamott, Burana's writing is full of razor-sharp wit and is searing in its honesty, but also warm and thoughtful and compassionate; like Lamott, her language creates a kind of intimacy that makes you feel like you've become close friends: or could be, if there wasn't so much print and paper separating you.

Although the book does not necessarily follow a linear narrative trajectory, the essays in *Grace for Amateurs* are loosely arranged in chronological order, which allows readers to experience Burana's spiritual awakening alongside her journey toward becoming more healthy and whole. Early essays limn the paralyzing darkness Burana felt when in the depths of her depression and anxiety, as well the trauma she experienced as a child, when the strong elixir of neglectful parents and sexual assault stoked even more darkness, even more despair. In these early essays, though, Burana orients the reader toward grace and mercy, reminding us that through God's love for us—and our love for each other—we can emerge from trauma "a radiant whole."

As a reader, I connected most with later essays in this collection: in particular, those that narrated her experiences as a stepmother to two boys, aged 10 and 8 when she married their father; and then as a mother to a daughter Burana had with her husband, Mike. These essays boldly affirm the complexity that accompanies the stepparent role and the careful tightrope walk that can come with helping to raise children who also have other parents, living somewhere else. Burana describes so well the paradoxes that can come with this work, affirming that "The spiritual lesson of stepmothering is adaptability—honoring the primal loyalty between mother and child while being true to your own strange and needy self."

In subsequent essays, Burana describes the difficult birth of her daughter, the folding of this new life into an already-made family of two older brothers, and the ways parenting a newborn sparked intense anxiety about her child, recognizing that every moment demanded choices that could have significant consequences for her girl. Burana's confessions as a new mom strike me as substantially different than what I would term the "new mama confessionals" that are ubiquitous online and in social media, where mothers seem to compete to be either the best moms (my kid is already sleeping through the night!) or the ones with the most challenging lives (my kid won't ever sleep, at all!). Instead, as elsewhere in *Grace for Amateurs*, Burana's beautiful prose enhances her thoughtful reflection on the role grace plays in our lives. The parenting essays call readers to a different perspective, one that acknowledges the power of parenting in community, and asks for our presence with those who struggle through their darkest hours.

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The last essays in *Grace for Amateurs* turn to the death of Burana's mother, and the writer's attempts to reconcile a difficult childhood and the challenges that can come with loving someone whose mental illness complicates relationships. Burana's compassion for her mother is clear, and her authentic confessions about her paradoxical impulses are easily relatable. For those who have experienced a loss of a parent, and the subsequent necessity of winnowing through a lifetime's accumulation of stuff, Burana's story will no doubt be familiar; but here, too, she focuses on grace for herself and others, and on the ways painful experiences can be a refining fire, making us stronger and better than we ever thought possible.

"I'm a long way from being able to pray all my cares away," Burana writes in the book's final essay. "Until then, it's meds and meditation, clouds, sun, sweet, bitter, and salt, combined with the daily exercises of kitchen-sink enlightenment: finding the sacred in the ordinary, and beauty in the dark. Faith is a muscle, and through the basic rituals of belief, I get a little stronger every day." *Grace for Amateurs* provides inspiration for exercising this faith muscle, a beautiful reminder that though many of us are amateurs at extending grace, with time and practice we can—and will—get better.

Melanie Springer Mock is a Professor of English at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon. She is also the author or co-author of four books including, most recently, If Eve Only Knew: Freeing Yourself from Biblical Womanhood and Becoming All God Means for You to Be (Chalice Press, 2015); a fifth book is forthcoming from Herald Press. Her essays and reviews have appeared in The Nation, Christianity Today, The Chronicle of Higher Education, and Mennonite World Review, among other places.