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Not My Idea of Heaven

Lindsey Rosa

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The Taylor-Symington-Hale Brethren have given rise to a distinct sub-genre of the misery memoir. Not that Lindsey Rosa would want her experience to be seen through the lens of ‘misery’. Her story won a BBC competition which was awarded by a panel of well-known writers, and she had a special edition of the TV series, ‘My Story’ devoted to her in September 2010 in a programme entitled ‘Overcoming Adversity: The Cult that nearly Killed Me’. Now, in the book under review, her story is published in the Harper True series. Lindsey’s motives in telling her story were positive, for she is reported as saying that she ‘decided to enter the competition to inspire parents to act in their children’s best interests, as a response to her own childhood which was governed by the strict rules of her parents’ separatist religion.’¹ Her discretion too is admirable. She writes under a *nom de plume* and gives pseudonyms to all the protagonists in her life. Only the initiated would know which religious group she was brought up in, as she only refers to it as ‘the Fellowship’.

Lindsey was raised by parents who were shut up and then withdrawn from because her elder brother had fitted a radio to his car (it is possible there were additional causes of conflict which her parents kept from her). Her parents were determined to be re-admitted to fellowship, and so continued to adhere to the Exclusive way of life. Her sense of self destroyed, as she entered adolescence Lindsey turned to controlling the one thing that was within her own power—her weight. She developed anorexia, and, it is apparent, was on the way to death when she was admitted to a clinic for eating disorders in Norfolk. Undergoing counselling, she decided to make a break from her family and live her own life. It is at this point a tussle begins: in Lindsey between love for her family and her longing for

1. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/norfolk/hi/people_and_places/religion_and_ethics/newsid_9028000/9028497.stm> [accessed August 2011].

the pleasures she feels she has missed; in her parents between their daughter and their desire to return to the Exclusives. When they are re-admitted they go their separate ways. Lindsey with her partner and the two children she has with him, and her parents into their old familiar world.

Lindsey's story shows the Taylor-Symington-Hale connexion as devoid of an understanding of grace. There is no sense that forgiveness is a necessary outworking of Christian love, or that other humans have to be accepted with all their foibles and weaknesses—and sinfulness. When under the new regime of Bruce Hale there is an attempt to win the withdrawn-from back, Lindsey's sister sends her a Bible. But she posts it back by return of post. 'It was their rule book,' she writes, 'the book that told them to reject me. It made me feel sick.' It is checklist Christianity.

'I don't believe in Heaven, God or the Devil any more,' Lindsey writes towards the end of her story. She admits to feeling greater peace and a greater sense of self-worth than she ever knew before. It is a sobering thought—and not just for its historians—how warped the Brethren movement can become when it loses its evangelical heart. It is to be hoped that the wellbeing it denied Lindsey is hers.

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