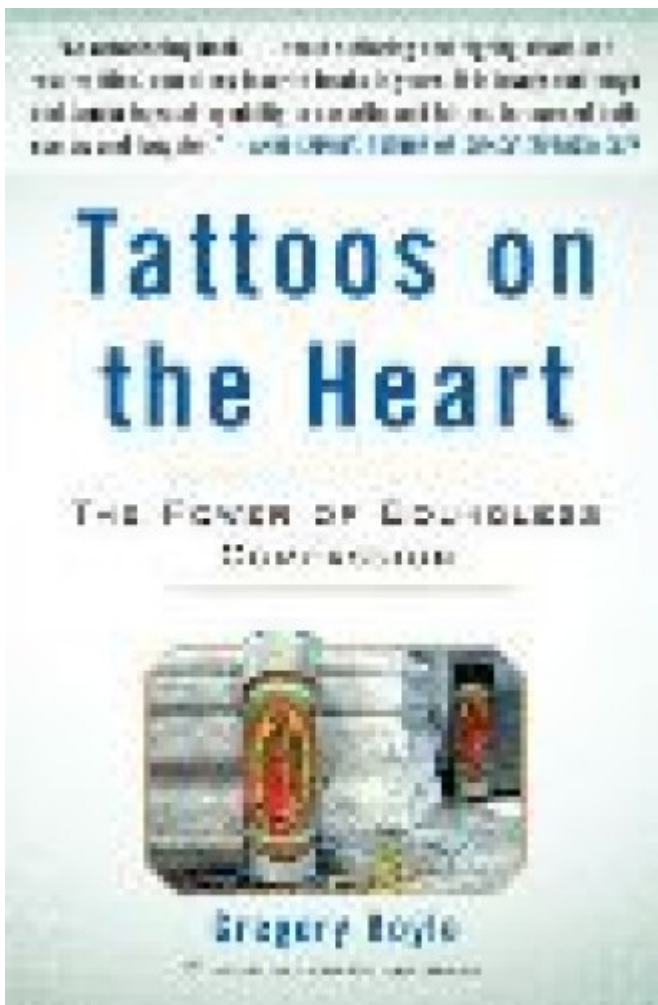


Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion

reviewed by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion

Gregory Boyle

Free Press

Having buried close to 200 young people who were killed in gang violence, Gregory Boyle could be pardoned for a lot: despair, cynicism, or at least unremarkable prose. But Boyle requires no such absolution. Jesuit priest and founder of Homeboy Ministries, which is considered the largest gang intervention program in the country, Boyle has managed to write a memoir of his work that is incandescent, always hope-filled and often hilarious. And there is despair here, yes; when one is a friend to gang members, “an exclusive club of young people who plan their funerals and not their futures,” there must be.

Boyle reproduces for his readers, as much as is possible in print, his recurring and agonizing experience of just getting to know “homies,” or of knowing and loving them for a long time, only to learn that they’ve been gunned down. Yet he somehow maintains an exuberant voice that celebrates the strength, compassion and humanity of people often demonized as the drug-dealing, crime-committing embodiment of all evil. “There can be no doubt that the homies returned me to myself,” Boyle writes in his introduction. “I’ve learned, with their patient guidance, to worship Christ as He lives in them.”

This statement and countless others like it are testaments to Boyle’s skills as a writer, compassion as a friend, and liberation theology-informed perspectives as a priest. He paints his subjects with such loving strokes that we are not surprised in the least when a young man named Fabian visits an enemy gang member who is undergoing chemo in the hospital, bringing videos to help him pass the time, or when two brothers work peacefully with members of the gang that shot their younger brother, or when imprisoned gang member Rigo sobs as he talks about his mother taking seven buses to visit him in prison. A reader no longer keeps track of which homies still belong to gangs and which ones have left. It’s not that Boyle deemphasizes conversion; he simply highlights charity and goodness wherever they are found.

Homeboy Industries, which Boyle calls the United Nations of gangs, serves as an employment agency, counseling center and tattoo-removal service, as well as in various other social service capacities in Los Angeles County, home to some 86,000 gang members in 1,100 gangs. Members of rival gangs who have not necessarily renounced their gang membership or loyalties work side by side on painting crews, in bakeries and at other tasks. “When enemies work with one another, a valuable ‘disconnect’ is created on the streets,” writes Boyle. “It forces a fellow active gang

member to ask the employed homie, 'How can you work with that guy?' Answering that question will be awkward, clumsy, and always require courage, but the question itself jostles the status quo."

Boyle intersperses his narratives about gang members and his work with them with theological and spiritual reflections from a variety of theologians, poets and other writers. At times Boyle's vignettes seem a little too loosely connected. He admits in his preface that this may be the case, calling his stories "the bricks around which, I hope, in this book, to slather some thematic mortar that can hold them together." For the most part, however, readers won't mind if the mortar doesn't always feel thick enough; the bricks are just so darn readable.

Boyle's book teems with aphorisms: "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a covenant between equals." "The Beatitudes is not a spirituality, after all. It's a geography. It tells us where to stand." His banter with his gangster friends and his descriptions of them are also unforgettable, as in the scene where he boards a plane with two homies who have never flown before: "Takeoff . . . transforms these two big gangsters into old ladies on a roller coaster. . . . There is great sighing and clutching and rapid signs of the cross."

But therein lies the danger of such a vivid, quotable book. Readers may be tempted to render Boyle's subjects into church newsletter anecdotes or stimulating dinner conversation. How can one resist turning burly gang members who weep and cross themselves into ciphers for some truth?

Through more than 25 years of friendship, service and simple presence in the poorest parish in the Los Angeles Diocese, Boyle has, in some sense, earned a right to tell the stories of the homies he loves. Representation lies at the core of his book's purpose. "If there is a fundamental challenge within these stories," he writes, "it is simply to change our lurking suspicion that some lives matter less than other lives." By introducing book-buying, highly educated readers to people we may never otherwise encounter, Boyle aspires to "broaden the parameters of our kinship."

And hopefully that's what will happen. Hopefully the next time Boyle's readers converse or vote or preach about poverty, we will, in his words, "stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it." But readers should be cognizant that an alternate response to this book—packaging the lives of Boyle's subjects into sermon-ready sketches of a gang-banging Other—does

violence to the very humanity Boyle underscores.

The difference between retelling and appropriation is in the eye of the beholder, of course, and some may argue that Boyle is guilty of the second. *Tattoos on the Heart* is one more title in a literature in which service and ministry professionals write about the people with whom they work. Filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha writes (in *Woman, Native, Other*) about the field of anthropology: it is “mainly a conversation of ‘us’ with ‘us’ about ‘them.’” Minh-ha’s charge rubs uncomfortably close to the genre of “helping” literature: “‘Them’ is only admitted among ‘us,’ the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by an ‘us.’”

Thus I wanted a caveat from Boyle, some caution to “us” to treat with care the stories of the “them” to whom we’ve been introduced. But Boyle offers no such warning, either because his belief in kinship supersedes his concerns regarding us-ness and them-ness, or simply because his ebullient spirit precludes such authorial heavy-handedness.

Instead, Boyle has released a book about the lives and deaths of his friends into the hands of his readers, trusting us to treat them with the same care with which we honor the sacred whenever we encounter it. Perhaps a reverent read begins with simply recognizing the Christ we find in these pages: the incarcerated Other, the One with tattoos. The Christ we visited, or didn’t.