

Kate Bowler faces off against cancer and bad theology

Bowler's memoir honestly confronts the pervasive idea that we get what we deserve.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Everything Happens for a Reason

And Other Lies I've Loved

By Kate Bowler
Random House

Kate Bowler's memoir of faith in the face of a terminal cancer diagnosis has some exquisite and deeply moving prose, and she can also be funny. Though sometimes her humor is a bit too thin, a hair too forced, her laughter is more complicated than mere whistling in the dark. She knows there is bleak humor at the heart of her story.

A historian who teaches at Duke Divinity School, Bowler has focused her studies on the prosperity gospel. Her receiving a diagnosis of stage IV colon cancer at age 35 is not quite as ironic as a prosperity preacher dying young (a theological minefield of a scenario she's encountered in her research), but it nonetheless makes for a case study far too close for comfort. She writes: "In a spiritual world in which healing is a divine right, illness is a symptom of unconfessed sin—a symptom of a lack of forgiveness, unfaithfulness, unexamined attitudes, or careless words. A suffering believer is a puzzle to be solved. What had caused this to happen?"

Bowler had been the suffering believer before, having experienced temporary disability and infertility during her doctoral work. Although she attended a prosperity gospel church primarily as a researcher, she was prayed for by the members of the community when she showed up for worship with arms too weak to hold a hymnal. Even as she tried to solve the puzzle of prosperity Christianity, prosperity Christians were trying to solve her. Bowler's discovery that she is dying far more actively than the typical young mother presents a far more baffling puzzle to prosperity-minded people of faith.

And as it turns out, the prosperity gospel is more pervasive than we might like to think. It's not just strip mall preachers and television healers who believe that God will rain blessings upon the deserving and that praying for restored health, a baby, or a cherry-red convertible is the first step to claiming those good gifts. The tentacles of the prosperity gospel are everywhere, tangled up with equally ubiquitous secular cultural promises. "Fairness is one of the most compelling claims of the American Dream, a vision of success propelled by hard work, determination, and maybe the occasional pair of bootstraps," the Canadian author notes.

Wherever I have lived in North America, I have been sold a story about an unlimited horizon and the personal characteristics that are required to waltz toward it. . . . In this world, I deserve what I get. I earn my keep and

keep my share. In a world of fair, nothing clung to can ever slip away.

As Bowler clings to her life—and everything and everyone she loves—she is inundated with prosperity-laced interpretations of her diagnosis. Some of the well-meaning interpretations are even her own, shaped as she is by the same culture.

That factor adds the insult to injury—or debacle to disease, as the case may be. Bowler is immune to all the things that are supposed to make a person feel better in the midst of suffering. Even the lies she's loved are still lies, and she's simply too smart to suspend her suspicions. A friend who read and raved over this book confessed to me that it's really wrecked her encouragement game: all the earnest optimism she used to dole out over breakfasts with friends is suddenly revealed to have the nutritive value of a smear of grape jelly. What does faith look like to one who can't be fooled by empty calories?

Bowler doesn't give easy answers, but she reveals great faithfulness in the valley of the shadow of death. Indeed, it is precisely because she doesn't give easy answers that her resilience, courage, and unstinting honesty are so revelatory. The honesty is perhaps the most critical. I've long been convinced that God wants our honesty more than anything; a heartfelt messy prayer is more pleasing to God than a gussied-up prayer bereft of sincerity. Bowler confesses that her diagnosis has left her not only frantic with grief over all that shall not be but also filled with rage.

So filled with rage, in fact, that in between immunotherapy drug treatments, she takes up cursing—about everything from cancer to cold coffee. The church's failure to make space for grief and uncertainty infuriates Bowler nearly as much as people complaining about the indignities of old age (“a fucking privilege,” she hisses at her mother-in-law). “Everyone is trying to Easter the crap out of my Lent,” she laments to friends. It never works to skip Good Friday. Even Jesus couldn't successfully pass on the cup of suffering.

Kate Bowler is still dying. Kate Bowler is still living. This is the terrible paradox of mortality, a paradox that neither poetry nor prosperity can unravel. In the end—of the book and, one presumes, of her life—she doesn't want to keep wrestling with unanswerable questions and bad theology and false hopes. She just wants to hold her beloved husband and her beloved son as tightly as she can.