

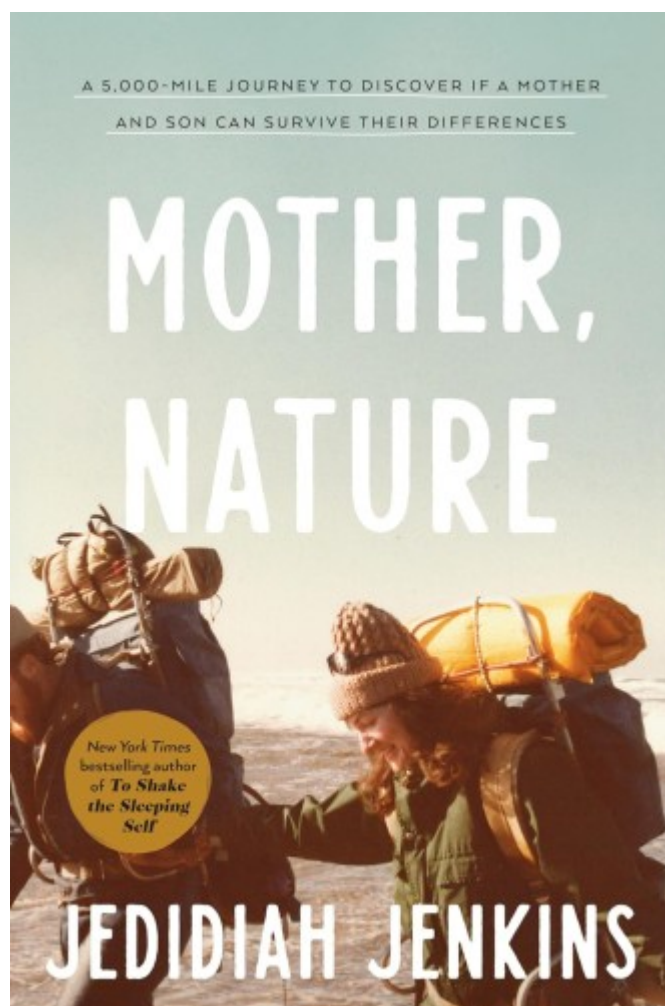
A mother-son road trip across the divide

Jedidiah Jenkins recounts a long drive with his conservative mother—and his attempt to navigate their complicated relationship.

by [Virginia Monroe](#) in the [April 2025](#) issue

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In Review



Mother, Nature

A 5,000-Mile Journey to Discover if a Mother and Son Can Survive Their Differences

By Jedidiah Jenkins

Convergent Books

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Is it possible to have real, authentic relationships across political party lines? In his third book, Jedidiah Jenkins explores this question by taking readers on a road trip with his mother. Jenkins (a gay man and a former evangelical) and his mom, Barbara (a devout conservative Christian), drive from Louisiana to the Oregon coast, retracing the famous walk Barbara took with her former husband Peter (Jedidiah's father) in the 1970s.

Mother, Nature offers readers only a bit of Jenkins's coming-out story, which he tells more fully in his first memoir, *To Shake the Sleeping Self*. Because he wanted to be seen as a good Christian, Jenkins struggled for years with his sexuality, even attempting conversion therapy. Over many years, Jenkins came to accept himself, to believe that he was created in God's image just as he is.

I listened to the audio version of *Mother, Nature* in my car as I navigated a dark and rainy Washington winter. Hearing Jenkins tell his story, I thought about the questions that so often run on a loop in my brain: How can I exist in this divided world while maintaining both my humanity and the humanity of those whose values differ greatly from mine? How can I be my authentic self in relationship with them? Is it even possible? Jenkins brilliantly articulates this tension throughout the book.

After more than a decade of tiptoeing around the topic of his queerness with his mother, Jenkins decides to bring it up on their road trip. Specifically, he wants to ask her if, when he eventually marries a man, she will come to the wedding. In his mind, he tells readers, he's already resolved not to invite her, to have a quick wedding without many people there. At the same time, he knows that's not what he will do. "I want her there," he writes, "crying because she's moved by love. Crying that her baby boy found a man who loves him right. Crying at how proud she is. I want that more than anything." He doesn't know how to get to that point with her because she believes that being gay is a sin. She loves him unconditionally but prays for his deliverance from same-sex attraction.

The bulk of the book is mostly peaceful. Readers follow the two on their road trip, getting to know them as they know each other. Jenkins and his mother rarely speak

of their disagreements. He learns new things about her every single day, like how she loves to watch videos of baby elephants each night before bed. They bond over true crime podcasts, good food, shady hotels, and more.

It's not until they reach Bend, Oregon, near the end of their journey, that Jenkins broaches the subject of sexuality with his mother. A few years earlier, the two of them had exchanged heated emails about their disagreements. He'd explained his perspective on faith and sexuality, and she'd responded with, "You've given me a lot to think about. I love you, Jeddypoo." Now, as they make their way to the Oregon coast, Jenkins brings up that email thread, asking if she remembers the conversation. She tells him that she remembers it. Jenkins says, "When and if I ever fall in love and get married, to a man. . . . I've always wondered, would my mom come to the wedding? I wouldn't want her to come reluctantly."

He goes on, before she has a chance to answer: "I mean, I've been planning for over a decade to not have you there. And that's fine. It really is. I have completely compartmentalized my life. That's fine. There's lots of parts to life. You go to Republican rallies, and I don't need to hear all about it." His words spill out, the air thickens, and his ears start to throb. "But . . . would you come, would you want to come? Or would you feel too conflicted and feel like you're endorsing something that you don't believe in?"

The tender vulnerability of this moment is palpable. His mom offers a heartfelt and honest reply which, in my opinion, is good but not good enough. In the discussion that follows, Jenkins notes that there are three pillars every child wants from their parents: to be loved, to be liked, and to be approved of. It's obvious that his mom likes and loves him ("You're bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. . . . There's nothing that you could do that would stop my love for you"). The question of approval is trickier, and readers are left to wonder how Jenkins and his mom will negotiate it while maintaining the "wonderful friendship" they share.

Jenkins's storytelling allows readers to share all the bits and pieces that make up this friendship. We laugh along with the two of them the whole way from Nashville to Oregon. We feel the love they share throughout the book. We experience Jenkins's pain as he imagines not having a relationship with her. "I want my mother in my life. And I will fight for that. And I will let it be a middle thing. Not quite full, but not lost. A love that limps."

Jenkins is vulnerable in *Mother, Nature* in a way I haven't seen him be vulnerable before. Readers see him as a child yearning for his mother's approval, trying to find a way through the pain and the love. And we are left to discern for ourselves how to have relationships with the people in our lives whose core values are different from ours. How do we do it? Is it possible only with family, or can we do it with friends too? I'm not yet sure how to answer these questions. One thing I am sure of, though, is that while Jenkins and his mother have some profoundly different views of the world, they love each other a whole lot. That leaves me feeling more hopeful than I did when I started reading.