

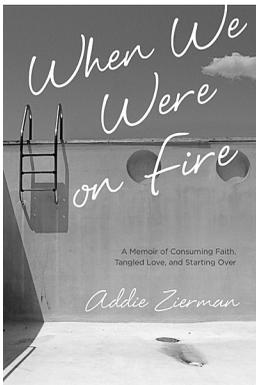
True Confessions from a Child of Consumer Christianity

*When We Were on Fire:
A Memoir of Consuming Faith,
Tangled Love, and Starting Over*

Addie Zierman.

Paperback: Convergent Books, 2013

Review by Brad Fruhauff



Part One of Addie Zierman's new memoir is called "Obsession," and it is an apt description of how many of my friends and I quickly came to feel about this book. We have seen the powerful memoirs describing the traumas of life and the self-destructive attempts to cope. We have seen (on the shelves,

at least) the memoirs of the unabashedly hedonist and debauched, celebrating their contempt for "bourgeois morality." But we have not seen the memoir that speaks right from the heart of evangelical Christianity—and that witnesses to the damage it wrought in so many of our young lives.

Zierman grew up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago and attended a large public high school and a large, suburban, evangelical church. Her story takes place during the explosion of evangelical consumer culture in the 1990s, a time when being Christian meant wearing branded bracelets and verses on your T-shirts, listening to Christian alternatives to mainstream music, and

attending large youth rallies where the music was loud, the messages were urgent, and someone usually got sent home sick from eating only candy for two days. The way Zierman tells it, she bought in heart and soul. She gave herself over to this movement that sought to use the weapons of commodification against a sinful culture, swapping out one set of consumable idols for another. Subsequently, she fell—and fell hard; Parts Two and Three are called "Disillusion" and "Rebellion." However, it is primarily because of what happens in Part Four, "Redemption," that Zierman gains the maturity and perspective to tell her story in such a vital and authentic way.

Zierman's great gift, here, is giving shape to her experience. She describes how a generation of Christian youths were taught to see the world in absolutes: good/evil, moral/immoral, Christian/secular, Kingdom/world, purity/impurity. To step on the wrong side of these dichotomies was to find yourself in a world of shame and social approbation until you confessed and made a vow before God and the community (or a couple friends) that you would never, never sin again. Zierman holds this world up to us as it was experienced by one who was the object of this message (rather than the ones who crafted it), and it is a story every bit as full of shame and abuse and self-destruction as a "secular" memoir might be, only here it is other Christians causing it all at the very moments that they are proclaiming the freedom and love of the gospel message.

My obsession with Zierman's story owed in part to its familiarity with my own. I, too, grew up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. I, too, attended a large public high school. I, too, attended a large, suburban, evangelical church (the largest, at the time). I stood with a handful of fellow Christians around our school flagpole and prayed for renewal. I may have worn a W.W.J.D. bracelet for a period, and had just the one Christian T-shirt, bought at a youth rally when the enthusiasm of the event created some kind of association between T-shirts and breastplates of righteousness. I combed the CD racks of

Christian bookstores looking for music that was tolerable enough that I didn't feel entirely left out of 1990s youth culture. I even identified with her earnest high school boyfriend, whose attempt to live the missional (which is to say, missionary) life that everyone said he was supposed to led him to say and do ignorant, hurtful things to the adolescent Zierman. I appreciated her confusion at finding that God always seemed to will that she feel badly about herself and about her own desires. It was hard to grow up Christian in those days; the world was burning and we felt we had to gird our loins and seek out the shortest path to suffering we could find. Suffering (for purity) was how you knew you were following "God's will."

"Suffering," of course, is relative, but it would be too self-righteous to object that Zierman's (and my) personal struggles are "first-world problems." Suffering is also absolute; the existence of more thorough or comprehensive suffering elsewhere does not negate its significance for us. The point is not to compare suffering but to witness to it.

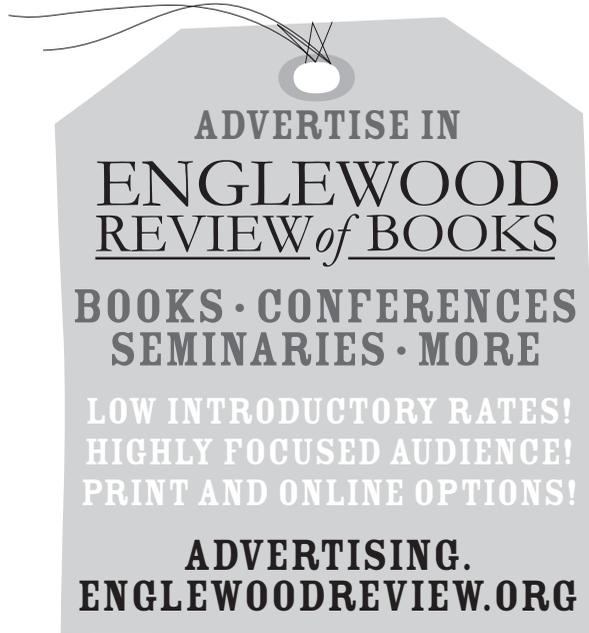
And, in fact, there are so many of us who had some experience like Zierman's and for whom this book will provide a sense of recognition and even catharsis. And Zierman (daringly, but successfully) writes perhaps as much as 1/3 to 1/2 of the book in second person, inviting the reader's identification with her story (while also suggesting her own difficulty in rehearsing her traumas). I certainly want to know how many of my colleagues and students will still resonate with this brand of Christian childhood, whether we have learned anything along the way.

But I don't think one has to have been that close to evangelicalism to appreciate the value of this book. For all that I was affected by in evangelical culture, I also kept it at arm's length. Whatever the reason, I always suspected my peers' hyper-emotional spirituality, and thought the excitement for our corny clothing and mediocre music must be a form of false consciousness or groupthink. Zierman would say it even more strongly: it was cultic. Zierman's account of how she survived this damaging

indoctrination and came out the other side with a stronger, more mature, but less absolute faith simply makes good reading.

When We Were on Fire is far from an exposé of evangelical youth culture and is certainly not a list of reasons to feel self-righteous. One cannot read the book without despairing of this wrong-headed approach to spreading the faith, but one continues reading because of the compassion Zierman has for herself and the people of her past and for the frankness with which she describes her brokenness and her fraught search for a faith that can make her whole.

Brad Fruhauff is editor-in-chief of *Relief: A Christian Literary Expression* and teaches English at Trinity International University. His poems, stories, and reviews have appeared in *Rock & Sling*, *Catapult*, and *The Burnside Writers Collective*.



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