



Surprised by Oxford

Carolyn Weber

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A "girl-meets-God" style memoir of an agnostic who, through her surprising opportunity to study at Oxford, comes to a dynamic personal faith in God.

Carolyn Weber arrives for graduate study at Oxford University as a feminist from a loving but broken family, suspicious of men and intellectually hostile to all things religious. As she grapples with her God-shaped void alongside the friends, classmates, and professors she meets, she tackles big questions in search of love and a life that matters.

This savvy, beautifully written, credible account of Christian conversion follows the calendar and events of the school year as it entertains, informs, and promises to engage even the most skeptical and unlikely reader.

Surprised by Oxford Details

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From Reader Review Surprised by Oxford for online ebook

Kris says

Incredibly powerful. Incredibly moving. Highly personal and uncomfortably profound.

This book is about an English Major who studied in Oxford and became a Christian through her studies and conversations... Being a Christian English Major who studied at Oxford for a term, this book was highly personal and highly impactful for me. It was a long read, but still somehow a quick read. I kept wanting to find some passages tedious by nature, but then I found myself re-reading certain sentences and passages to savor the words on my tongue... to search for the layers of meaning Weber included, and find my own as well. So many times I was called up within Weber's fluid discussions, as she plumbs the depths of the great questions people are so afraid to tackle nowadays. Really I would, and should, have sat down and devoured the book in one long sitting.

Yes, it's a memoir, but it's much more than that. Weber knows how to write. She knows what the takeaway is for all the situations she includes. She doesn't get bogged down with details, but creates living portraits out of the people and ideas she's engaged with. Every time I went back to it, I found something new: a family dilemma to be wrestled with, a literary treasure to be admired and modeled, a philosophical question that had slipped in and fuddled everything up. And she knew that. Weber is real and gritty and stubborn, and knows her reader is the same.

To point out a flaw, I did notice that a lot of the secondary characters moved in and out of the narrative with little introduction or backstory. But this can hardly be a fault, considering Weber discusses so many different points in her life. There's bound to be a lot of names that have little detail behind them. But she still makes it work.

If nothing else, read this book for the bits of literature she includes. Not only are Weber's words meaningful, but the quotes and references she brings in are worth a look. I found lots of quotes to add to my collection.

"The conditions just right to create the imagination for reality."

Melanie says

I am not going to lie, when I saw that the memoir I had agreed to read [Surprised by Oxford] by Carolyn Weber was well over 400 pages, I was a little disappointed in having chosen this title to review. Thankfully, this book is a beautiful narrative filled with poetry and quotes from classic literature, deep and intriguing questions about meaning faith and God, and even a little bit of love and friendship thrown in for good measure. This is not a boring 400+ pages filled with an author droning on about herself, but rather a combination of stories from many different Christian academics covering various attributes of faith and God. I have never read a memoir that is less about the individual author but yet so personal.

Carolyn is a young woman who receives a scholarship to do graduate work at Oxford University. She has grown up without much of a religious background, but cannot help but search for and question meaning and faith, despite being surrounded by academics that do not always approve of these questions. I enjoyed

reading her memoir, as she does not gloss over the hard questions of what being a Christian means and sometimes costs. It is not simple, and definitely not canned. While you will find classic Christian responses to faith, you will not find emotionally driven pat answers or promises of the easy “golden ticket” to faith. Carolyn is open minded and liberal in her ability to love and accept others. In fact, I think this book will frustrate many close-minded Christians, as she supports her friend who had an abortion, is buddies with a gay classmate and even quotes a professor’s religious profanity. This classic Christian, yet open-minded ability to love on her part is going to make this book offensive to many who read it! Both Christians and non-Christians will find something to offend within this memoir, but I found it to be thoughtful and provocative, and more importantly, grounded in a deep truth and honesty that transcends any of the offenses.

In fact, even though I have been a Christian for quite some time, I learned new ideas that have already transformed the way I look at life and God. If you cannot stomach reading a book of this length, please at least consider checking it out from the library and reading Chapter 10 – “Does Love Justify All.” In this chapter, Carolyn shares her memories of being privileged to sit at the high table with some of the leading politicians and scientists of the day. At this table the subject of faith and science comes up and the discussion that ensues from some very intelligent minds was life changing for me. A scientist noted for his expertise in time, space, speed, sound, and light was asked about what he thought of the relationship between spirituality and science. Everyone assumed that as a noted scientist, he obviously was not a Christian, but it later comes out that he definitely believes in the God of the Bible. Before answering completely his thoughts on the subject he points to the noted heart surgeon Dr. Ingham who was also sitting at the table and asks what he thinks about spirituality given that he literally holds life and death in his hands so often. Dr Ingham responds to the question of faith and science saying :“I’ve come to the conclusion that God is sovereign, even over science, and that I cannot pretend to fully know His ways. They really are mysterious, as the saying goes. And they are not of the mind of men, no matter how hard we try to wrap our minds about these ways. When I see death, I know it is wrong... really, really wrong. In-my-gut wrong... it was not meant to be. It was not meant for us. We were not built for it. Everything in my body, at a cellular level, let alone a metaphysical one, twists against it. Not just my death, but the death of every living thing.”(p. 126)

This was revolutionary for me. You see, I have always sort of thought that the opposite force from God was Satan. But that gives the devil way too much credit. No, the opposite of God, who is Life, is Death. And God had a plan through Jesus to defeat the death we brought upon ourselves and bring life again. The older I get, the more pain death brings as I lose more people that I have loved. We just accept death as inevitable, but it wasn’t intended to be. Thankfully God has fixed our mistake! The “Good News” is actually great news! 2 Timothy 1:10 ...Our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Romans 6:9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.”

I have heard much of that before, but I have always thought of it in terms of good conquering evil, or holiness vs. sin. I think it is that, but much more! It is life vs. death both in this world and the kingdom to come. To put it simply, because of sin we are all dying, and stuck in death, only through Christ Jesus can we find life, meaning and ultimately happiness!

When asked that night what the greatest force in the world is, scientist Dr. Sterling said it was Love. “There is nothing more powerful, more radical, more transformational than love. No other source or substance or force... Often folks like to dismiss it as a mere emotion, but it is far more than that. It can’t be circumscribed by our desires or dictated by the whim of our moods. Not the Great Love of the Universe, as I like to call it. Not the Love that set everything in motion, keeps it in motion, which moves through all things and yet bulldozes nothing, not even our will. Try it. Just try it and you’ll see. If you love that Great Love first,

because It loved you first, and then love yourself as you have been loved, and then love others from that love... Wow! Bam! Life without that kind of faith—that's death. Therein lies the great metaphor,... Life without faith is death. For life, as it was intended to be is love." (P. 129)

There are many quotes I would love to repeat from this book, but I will leave you with two: my favorite is "No matter what culture tells us, faith is not the opposite of reason." (P. 147) this intelligent and thoughtful book is proof that you can be very educated and thoughtful, but also trust in Christ. Lastly "I don't know how anyone can live, let alone die, without faith... it grounds our identity in a world that vies to define us by a million worthless things." (p. 390) This memoir was a wonderful, poetic, thoughtful read and I highly recommend it.

Anne Bogel says

I'd give this one 3.5 stars if I could. I wanted to love this book; I'm afraid it may be the victim of my high expectations. My major complaint (and it's a big one) is that the LENGTHY soliloquies in the mouth of a major character just didn't ring true for me. This is memoir: it needs to feel real. But people just don't talk like this character does in the book.

Unless they do at Oxford, of course.

But I doubt it.

Rick Nau says

Five stars for this wonderful book. You can read my review at <http://www.dancingpenbooks.com/la-wri...> ; or read it here:

It was a summer ago that I read Carolyn Weber's *Surprised by Oxford*. I was working on a novel, an attempt to resurrect a story that lingered in the distant past. I needed something to inspire me, to move me forward, to push me out of the rut I was stuck in.

I can't remember how I found the book. Not at a bookstore. Almost all of them had long since closed their doors. The days of browsing the shelves were over. Instead, I was tapping around on my iPad, not really knowing what I would find, when I stumbled upon it. I read a few of the reader comments, then noticed that I could download the prologue for free.

It was a stunner, grabbed my attention immediately. A young college student (the author-Carolyn Weber) is walking with her professor, pitching him her idea for a feminist interpretation of a John Donne sonnet about God. His reaction? Twofold. There is a short version, which I'll not give away, and a long, which is this:

Anything not done in submission to God, anything not done to the glory of God, is doomed to failure, frailty and futility. This is the unholy trinity we humans fear most.

Her reaction? She's blown away. Her brilliant analysis is so far off base she's afraid she's going to flunk the class.

So begins the memoir of an agnostic running the gauntlet of academia, one of the last places on earth you'd think you'd find God. But everywhere she turns, he's there, surrounding her with his love, speaking to her through teachers, fellow students, books, paintings, etchings on paving stones, the Oxford crest (Dominus Illuminatio Mea-The Lord Is My Light), even a coffee mug.

This is an incredible story—required reading for anyone considering a life-major in agnosticism. Written in a snappy, self-effacing (though not always), off-the-cuff, sometimes irreverent style (did I just think of Joan Rivers?), you never know what or who's lurking around the next bend.

Though the subject—the nature of God and our relationship to him—is huge, Caro (the author's nickname) tackles it head on, showering us along the way with her delightful humor, wit, and wisdom. One minute she's talking about the pervasiveness of sin, the next minute a Buck's Fizz is going up her nose. One day she's enthralled by a painting of Christ, another day she's lost on the streets of London, dragging a suitcase full of shoes behind her. She's not intimidated by an eminent Oxford professor who puts her on the spot about the existence of absolute truth, yet she's thrown into a tizzy by a gorgeous rival in stiletto heels (whom she calls Miss Georgia).

In spite of her agnosticism, Caro falls for a Christian, a handsome American she (a Canadian) names TDH (why do I keep thinking of him as Hugh Grant—he's British), who bears a striking resemblance to the original James Bond. One stormy night he presents the gospel to her, plain and clear, patiently answering each of her questions.

“So what is faith?” she asks, not sure if she wants to know the answer. TDH replies:

Faith is simply belief in the gift of eternal life, made possible by Christ's resurrection. This gift of grace is yours for the taking. We just have to accept it.

Wherever Caro goes, God is always there, answering her questions, spoken and unspoken. At a dinner she overhears a fascinating conversation between a waiter and a brilliant scientist.

I wondered if you could tell me what you consider to be the strongest force in the universe.

Love . . . Life without faith is death. For life, as it was intended to be, is love. Start loving and you'll really start living. There is no other force comparable to that.

Which leads us to the heart of the memoir, one of light and of love. For above all this story is about Christ's love for us, told from the heart of a wounded soul who discovers (with great surprise) Christ's deep and tender love for her.

Behold! My servant whom I uphold,
My Elect one in whom my soul delights!
I have put my spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.
He will not cry out, nor raise His voice,
Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.
A bruised reed He will not break,

And a smoking flax He will not quench.

Isaiah 42: 1-3

Toward the end of her story Caro puts several questions to a fellow Oxford student, hoping that he'll follow her down the new path she has taken with Christ:

Don't you ever wonder what it's all for? Don't you think you'll get to the end of your life, look back on it, and regardless of what you've built for yourself—if you're lucky enough to have even achieved that—it won't seem quite enough? Haven't you ever had a strange, 'What is it all for?' feeling as you flip through an obituary? What about when it's yours?

She is, of course, asking us the same questions, hoping that we will look with her beyond the stark, material world into the eternal heart of God.

I can't recommend this book highly enough (as I've said, I've read it twice). It's not just a memoir, it's a guide for living, overflowing with wonderful, wisdom-filled advice. Whether you're a college student, a college-bound senior, or anyone else who who wants to be able to judge wisely between the truths and the lies you'll be presented with in life, you've got to read Carolyn Weber's *Surprised By Oxford*.

Deann Harris says

Loved this - got to hear Carolyn Weber at the Festival of Faith & Writing at Calvin College, April 2014...intrigued by her presence, character, content of her speech. Compelled to get this book and could NOT put it down. Her story of coming to faith in Christ, navigating tricky waters of family/friend relationships, her thinking process while attending Oxford, her wit and brilliant literary references were all pieces of a delightful puzzle well put together by the Providence of God. Our book club read it and equally loved it; several have re-read it already, so taken with the contents. Enjoy!

Silvia Cachia says

I read this book many years ago, and I still remember the author leading us, readers, through her life through books. I do share that joy of reading to understand life, to live better. Books are part of who we are.

Loraena says

I loved this book. More specifically, I wanted to live in it. I didn't want it to end. This world where people read and quote poetry to each other for fun and drop classic literary references as if they were pop culture - I want to live there. Atmospherically, I felt so at home in Caro's head and related to the way she creates large metaphors in her mind. It felt familiar.

The story itself is just really good and is very well told. She walks the reader through her spiritual journey to Christianity and it is so engaging. The questions she asks and the emotional walls she finds herself up against

ring very true. There were definitely a few places where I got the feeling that the theological truths she was articulating were likely hindsight additions from having grown to a more mature understanding - unlikely to have been fully and clearly formed at the time of the events.

I wish I could find more books like this. Artistic, intelligent, honest, and sensitive while also theologically robust and full of truths about redemption without being obtusely didactic.

Can't wait to read her other books.

Linda Joy says

This is perhaps one of the greatest books I have ever spent my time reading. Wow. A must read. "Books come alive not only when read, but when shared." Pg. 238

J says

First, a disclaimer: I am atheistic/skeptical and therefore read the book and its contents critically - which is not the same as reading it without an open mind. Of course, if you're looking for a preaching to the choir then I suggest the five star reviews.

My expectation from this book was an insight into belief in god, and good (not necessarily rational) reasons for that belief. I also love a good story and value good writing above all other properties of a book.

I would like to say what it is about the text that I enjoyed. It was highly readable, it offered some beautiful imagery, the writing was at times lovely (but always skillful) and the snippets of classic literature provided an excellent context to her chapters. Also, her honesty and warmth shined through her writing; despite not agreeing with her at the best of times, I felt that I could always relate to her writing.

To criticise an author whom you enjoyed is never an easy thing, but I'll give it a go. What I did not like was her alien way of presenting her thoughts; they were put in such a way that seemed deeply unnatural for someone who is wrestling with difficult questions. Let me explain, for someone struggling with these issues, their biases or the inevitabilities shouldn't be so transparent. Her thoughts were skewed to make her objections seem less plausible, there was virtually no internal debate, it was a stream-of-consciousness that never was: she made straw men of her own thoughts (I say that they're straw men, as she's far too intelligent to have not believed for the reasons she did).

Also, the dialogue was far below the standard of the rest of the book; it was broken and pretentious in the best bits. Understandably she had a topos in mind, so the dialogue would naturally progress to that each time; the thing is, the progression was unnatural. The book was too long, many things could have been compressed or left out - most of it was just her rebelling against some doctrine and then she suddenly knew that even though she can't rebut the objection: it doesn't matter because she's happy. The characters were very one-dimensional, only she herself seemed like a real person; the rest were either bonkers, tiresomely pious or naive skeptics. The constant defence of some doctrines detracted heavily from what could have been a more personal and intimate read. That being said, I felt like there were many tokens and contrived scenes to make the Christian experience more normal: the nights at the pub, the parties, the gay roommate that everyone is fine with and the apparent friendliness of all Christians. Honesty about one's worldview would be

appreciated and is far more appropriate for a memoir - it would be miraculous (pun intended) that her life intersected with only wonderful Christians. I mean, if we're going to perpetuate stereotypes, the least the author could have done is contrived a secular character that is impressively good and virtuous. As it stands, her story is skewed so dramatically as to imply (to my mind, at least) that secular people will always pale in comparison to the glories of god's people. My main issue is the rose-coloured glasses she's wearing throughout the book: her inability to remember (or imagine) a time when she didn't think that the sun shone from Christians' anuses.

Her little jibe at the postmodernists was also amusing (the dreaded Professor who doesn't like Milton). It's amazing how meaningless everything (except her religion, naturally) seems to her; how postmodern!

I found an ode to Christianity, written by a convert. She lays down every criticism she can think of on ways of life that are not hers (it's established that she's incapable of changing her frame-of-reference), these were leveled based on her anecdotal experience which I found intensely obscured by her new beliefs. That said, I do like her and was interested in what she had to say. I think perhaps her mistake lay in trying to write a memoir-apologetic; kind of like the 'X great Christian found Atheism' type of books. She just does not make for a balanced read, which would be great if she wasn't trying to be defensive and anticipate objections by the reader all the time - I want the story as it was, not how it IS to the writer now. I suppose some would say I'm asking the impossible of her, but perhaps if some effort towards this was made obvious, then I wouldn't be so disappointed.

Jennifer says

Carolyn Weber truly has a way with words and has produced a beautiful memoir of her conversion to Christianity while attending Oxford University. I admire her thoughtfulness, eye for the symbolic, and the depth of her writing. However, I was really plagued with doubts about the truthfulness of her account. Several things nagged at me: she recalls past conversations with a clarity that is truly stunning (down to the tiniest facial expressions and quoted word perfect), every person she talks to (and there are lots in this book) is outstandingly eloquent (maybe everyone in Oxford talks like that?), nearly every conversation somehow magically ties in symbolically with something in the surroundings, and every person in this book is larger than life - exceedingly beautiful, incredibly intelligent, etc. I want to believe that everything is true in this book, but it just isn't passing the smell test entirely with me. Maybe it's supposed to be more creative nonfiction or fiction based on fact? There were some other details of the story that bothered me content-wise (mentions of sexual misconduct that I didn't want to know about). I came into this book with pretty high expectations and was ultimately left unsatisfied.

Kwesi ??? says

There are times that a person will ask for his faith to God. Asking God's existence, the problem's that he is currently into, or why God did not stop evilness in the world. A normal person can't answer why God created everyone equal and why evil lurks in the earth. Maybe soon, we will be like *Carolyn Weber*, the girl who meets God in Oxford and how her life change.

Surprised by Oxford by Carolyn Weber, is a four-hundred-page full of questions and answers about God. Ways on how she manages to overcome her own problems and created a life full of wisdom. Like anyone of us, *Carolyn Weber* also experiences a life without God but there is a right time and a right place to discover

love.

Carolyn Weber went to Oxford to attend college. Bringing her religious doubt and loving broken family memories. She became one of those students who met a person or people and change her life. Step by step, the darkness that surrounds her become more visible and the picture can now be seen, her future that embarrasses God fully in the end of her journey; professor, colleagues, family, books and friends that will cherish her questions with true answer from God's people.

It's hard to judge a book especially if the book talks about its religious journey in life. Everyone have its own interpretation of each passages, how to overcome it, her own point of view in life and anything under the sun. But the most interesting part of the book is when *Carolyn Weber* asked herself is God is a woman. This kind of issue also appears in *The Shack* written by *William P. Young*. Issues like this are usually discussed in Theology subjects and one of the interesting debates that you might join in.

Life is a cycle and sometimes we stumble in the middle of process, God lifts us and everything will change our life forever. How far can our faith reach or how far can our understanding answer every question we ask every day. The answer only lies in the Bible, the most creative non-fiction ever writing according to *Carolyn Weber*. I wish I can study to Oxford someday.

Special thanks to *BookSneeze* and to the publisher for sharing a free copy of the book.

Review posted on **Old-Fashioned Reader** .

Rating: *Surprised by Oxford: A Memoir* by Carolyn Weber, **2 Sweets**

Challenges:

Book #331 for 2011

Claire says

Great book! I became quickly immersed in Carolyn's conversion and was delighted to read about her experiences in Oxford. Although her writing gets a bit overdrawn at times, it is a pleasant, easy read, and loaded with apt quotations from some good poems. Like a kitten in yarn, she gets very wrapped up in similes and metaphors which felt a little forced.

But her transformation from an unbelieving academic to an authentic Christian scholar was honest and quite inspiring. Her friendships at school, the difficulty of confiding her beliefs in her closest friends and family, and her sweet memories of professors all struck a chord with me. And it felt good to traverse her steps of the conversion experience - belief, reading the Scriptures, baptism - almost like taking those steps over again.

Jamie says

How do you criticize someone's personal faith journey? It's impossible. This book did not have the depth to serve as anything more to me than an interesting look at just that: an individual and personal faith journey. I was frustrated by the struggle between unbelieving and Christianity: should it not be unbelieving and simply believing? After all, all religions are right and all religions are wrong: "any idea of Him we have He must in

His mercy shatter."

It would have been far more compelling if (as I'd hoped) Weber investigated many different faiths and found a spiritual home but instead she is awakened to Christianity by (surprise, surprise) a tall, dark, and handsome man, who (of course) she later marries. And if this man had been a tall, dark, and handsome Hindu? Muslim? We don't see the bigger faith journey of simply recognizing something bigger than yourself because the focus is always on Christianity as the saving Grace and not on the Grace itself.

But a nice story is still a nice story.

I wouldn't recommend this book, overall, but those who are searching will find comfort in it and those who love literature will delight in the references throughout.

Douglas Bond says

Surprised by Oxford, Carolyn Weber's memoir--O my goodness, I've been loving this read. Powerful and imaginatively crafted spiritual autobiography of a recent work of the Hound of Heaven in a devoutly devoted irreligious secularist feminist, hater of everything about God Bible, Jesus, faith and grace, graduate student in literature, surrounded by Christians (dead and alive ones) at Oxford.

Amy says

I love Surprised by Oxford for so many reasons.

I love this book because of *Oxford*. On more than one occasion, I shouted to whomever happened to be closest, "St. Ebbes! That's my church!" or "New College! That my college!" Yet on an even deeper level than passing references to places I know, Caro's experience as a abroad student resounded with me. I understand getting lost, being confused by the strange pronunciations of names, even the wonder of the tutorial system. I understood *Oxford* and her love for it resonated for me.

I love this book because of Wordsworth, Lewis and the many other writers she quotes. Caro is friends with them all. Her love of learning and *thinking* is so evident. I ate it up and realized I was starving for more. She provides quotes at the beginning of chapters, references throughout her conversations, sometimes poems within the prose. Although I am not an English major, I readily understood her love for her subject because it reminded me of the giddy, reckless joy I felt when I was at Oxford studying political philosophy. This book reflects not only a scholar's heart, but a lover of learning's heart for academia.

Most of all I love this book for Caro's conversion experience. Although so different from my own, her journey to faith filled me with joy and understanding. I like that it followed through from her first blissful moments after surrendering to the often frustrating reality of the Christian life afterwards. It isn't easy. Caro is honest, vulnerable, and unafraid to express her love for God and because of that, this book *breathes*. It questions and answers and leaves unanswered, leaving many ideas for the reader to wrestle with in its wake. In some ways, it feels like a literary mentor because so much of what it deals with are things everyone wonders and needs to be reminded of...or at least I do.

Surprised by Oxford is thick, 400 odd pages, but worth every moment. It is worth re-reading. Highlighting.

Enjoying. Perhaps for some this is a sit-down-and-read-in-a-day sort of book but for me it took three separate occasions, separated by months, to finish. I needed to digest it to move on and yet I suspect I barely skimmed the surface of what I will get out of it in the future. There is so much!

I love this book because it reawakens my love of learning. It fills me with hope. I suspect I have found a life-long friend.

PS I STRONGLY recommend Kris's review of this book! Check it out!

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>
