



# Higher Ground: A Memoir of Salvation Found and Lost

Written by Carolyn S. Briggs

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Published by mckeonandassociates

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# Higher Ground: A Memoir of Salvation Found and Lost

By Carolyn S. Briggs

## Higher Ground Agency

A riveting memoir of one woman's immersion into fundamentalist faith, and her decision twenty years later to leave it all behind. Beautifully written and powerfully told, this memoir is a fascinating look at the nature of faith, and the inspiring story of one woman's struggle to find her place in the world. Originally published as *This Dark World*, this book has been adapted into the screenplay *Higher Ground*, now a film directed by and starring Vera Farmiga. Carolyn Briggs grew up with modest means in the Iowa Heartland. Pregnant at seventeen and married to her musician boyfriend, by the age of eighteen she found herself with little hope for the future. Until an unexpected encounter with the Divine. Soon she had immersed herself into a close-knit and patriarchal New Testament church. But as Carolyn began to realize that her religion left little room for what she wanted out of life—as a mother, as a wife, as an intellectually curious woman—cracks began to appear in her all-encompassing sense of faith, and slowly she began to question the religion that had given her hope.

I read this book after watching the movie. I enjoyed the movie but wanted to get a little more insight into the author's feelings. Books usually give you a much better understanding of the characters, and this book did not disappoint me. The author is a very talented writer; it doesn't surprise me that she is now an English professor. From the movie you got a sense of a "Yearning-For-Zion types" complete with prairie dresses and long braided hair. The book gave you a feeling of long-haired hippies. I read this book after watching the movie. I enjoyed the movie but wanted to get a little more insight into the author's feelings. Books usually give you a much better understanding of the characters, and this book did not disappoint me. The author is a very talented writer; it doesn't surprise me that she is now an English professor. From the movie you got a sense of a "Yearning-For-Zion types" complete with prairie dresses and long braided hair. The book gave you a feeling of long-haired hippies from the 70s and 80s who became religious fanatics.

I was amazed at the fanaticism/devotion of their faith "carrying their Bibles with them everywhere they went, memorizing and quoting scriptures, praying constantly, and having their whole life, 24-7, revolving around Jesus. At one place in the book the author compares her religion to a cult, but she states that "there was no sinister element, no mind control, there was just love." It might not have been sinister, but there surely was mind control in my opinion. They were purging their children's toys of sinister elements that could allow the devil into their homes - doing away with Smurfs, cabbage patch dolls, not allowing her teenage daughter to read certain books like *Catcher in the Rye*. When they were contemplating a job move to Arkansas, rather than just making a decision, they had to get the approval of their church elders. Would their new church be good enough for them? Would it be too liberal? An interesting comment she made was that "everyone in the South went to church on Sunday, but they did whatever they wanted the rest of the week."

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I do agree with some of the other reviewers that leaving her church in the end of the book seemed rushed. As devoted as she was, this had to have been a long and agonizing process for her. I would have liked to have read her opinion of speaking in tongues after she left her church, and it was odd to me that some of the female members spoke in tongues, yet the male members frowned on the practice.

I felt sorry for her husband, whom she couldn't seem to love. I can see where it would be very difficult for someone who is not as zealous in their beliefs to be married to a person who is constantly praying and quoting scripture, but they seemed equal in their fanaticism throughout most of the book. To me her husband came across as being a very kind, caring husband.

I'm sure that Carolyn Briggs is a very intelligent person, yet she was drawn into a Fundamentalist religion that tried to completely control her. I enjoyed the book, and appreciate that she was able to share her innermost feelings about a decision which I'm certain caused her a lot of anguish. I'm sure she has not lost her faith, but rather is just looking for something that is easier to live with.

...more

## Higher Ground Alistair Grant

I liked the movie, and I was surprised at how different - how much more subtle - the book is.

This is a wonderful memoir about the power and punishment of evangelical Christianity. In my circles, it's rare to read the positive truth of belonging and love and worthiness that comes with connection to a like-minded group of people - yet also to read about the struggles and ultimate damage that such belonging can do. In this quiet, lovely book, Carolyn Briggs tells us her life story, unflinchingly and honestly. I liked the movie, and I was surprised at how different - how much more subtle - the book is.

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The first 3/4 of the book, in which she grows up, joins the church, and begins to question, are rich and revealing. The final chapters, in which she allows herself to question and begin to move on, seem a bit rushed - as if she assumes that this is familiar territory for the reader. I imagine she is right, but I wish she treated her emergence from the church with the same emotional depth and richness as she describes what it felt like to pray in her prayer language, or to attend a healing service in the midst of a difficult pregnancy. There are glimpses - such as when she visits Ireland and tastes a new world of possibility - but it felt almost rushed to the end.

I wish I could get more atheists and anti-church people to read this, because in the world I live in now, it is too easy to dismiss evangelical Christianity as primitive or simplistic. Instead, as Carolyn Briggs shows us, it is rich, deep, comforting, and even beautiful even as it can be crushing, punishing, vindictive, and deadening. ...more

I'm so grateful for This Dark World (Higher Ground). I think she got the title right the first time. After you leave the world of faith, the word is indeed dark. Uncertain. Alone. You can't return to your 'brethren' because they're not going to get it, and you can't talk to unbelievers for the same reason. And if you try, you're certain to sound like a gasping, stuttering idiot to both camps. Most of all, you can't talk to God, your Stalwart, all-knowing, all-encompassing, trusted Standby. Suddenly, there is no meaning anywhere. There's no special message that God is trying to get across. A fortune cookie is just a bit of paper with a cookie wrapped around it. But what sticks in your heart, what pours the salt in is, you were always alone. You believed

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yourself right into this relationship that you manufactured in your head. Ever present is the fear and the guilt that I hope at some point goes away.

Thank you Carolyn Briggs, I hope I get to meet you someday. You'd get it. I'm sure you would. Higher Ground: A Memoir of Salvation Found and Lost ...more

## Higher Ground Academy

For those that have read this book and seen the movie.

I think the author left a lot out of why she left the faith, (or church) I got that she was unsatisfied in her marriage and it seemed she was going on a prodigal daughter journey at the end. I think also what comes across is she misses the certainty of belonging. Whether its to her husband or church. I do think she married really young and a lot of the memoir described how she just went straight from school to being married.

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If she could connect back to God, He can forgive anything should she repent, but what is it that she won't repent? I felt for the first husband in this book.

It also seemed like she was sharing her testimony to her unbelieving friends she made after she went to university, but they continued to mock her. There are some things about the hippie Jesus fundamental community that are misguided (eg rapture teaching) but seeing as she's hungry for wisdom I think the memoir actually made a decent apology for faith. It was sad that she had grieved the Holy Spirit --she could no longer speak in tongues.

The movie was slightly different from the book. I like its honesty as much as it tried to capture what she lost in taking a different path. ...more

I was prompted to read this book after seeing Vera Farmiga's movie Higher Ground, which she directed (her directorial debut) and starred in (the movie was based on this book). However, this was an unusual instance of the movie's being more satisfying than the book. The book has an emotional flatness to it that felt repressive--I guess that's what being a born-again Christian for so many years will do to you... I would have liked more about her life with her current husband, who is a shadowy figure. I was prompted to read this book after seeing Vera Farmiga's movie Higher Ground, which she directed (her directorial debut) and starred in (the movie was based on this book). However, this was an unusual instance of the movie's being more satisfying than the book. The book has an emotional flatness to it that felt repressive--I guess that's what being a born-again Christian for so many years will do to you... I would have liked more about her life with her current husband, who is a shadowy figure and where the book ends. Still, it was a compelling read, as the reader endures her struggles to "submit" to being an obedient wife and faithful church member. It is painful to read her descriptions of the unsatisfying

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sexual relations she had with her husband and the "crushes" she develops on others, including her eroticization of her relationship with Jesus. A window into a life that I knew little about. ...more

## Higher Ground After School Program

I felt her story as told in the book was unbalanced. So much time is give to her over zealous years in an unbalanced church. Not enough time given to the wrestling within Carolyn with the extreme teachings and experience she went through in those years. And then how she views them now after leaving them behind.

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The FAQs on her site warped up the book nicely.

<http://www.carolynsbriggs.com/faq.html>

Where are you with your faith right now?

A: I could not live in a world without God. And this God I felt her story as told in the book was unbalanced. So much time is give to her over zealous years in an unbalanced church. Not enough time given to the wrestling within Carolyn with the extreme teachings and experience she went through in those years. And then how she views them now after leaving them behind.

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Where are you with your faith right now?

A: I could not live in a world without God. And this God is big enough to contain my doubts. Tobias Wolff says doubt is part of faith. Doubt and faith can co-exist; each informs the other. My faith infuses my doubt and my doubt infuses my faith. What else can I do but keep seeking God? Tolstoy advised a life of seeking God because that assures a life with God ...more

What I like about this book is that it describes well the attractive, positive side of the kind of church that Carolyn and her husband belonged to, and not just the constricting, judgmental aspect of it. Too often descriptions of fundamentalist churches treat them like dysfunctional weirdos of a power trip. In her memoir, Carolyn shows the joy, support and sense of sharing and community that her church offered her, and the comfort of black and white answers to life's questions. I agree with othe What I like about this book is that it describes well the attractive, positive side of the kind of church that Carolyn and her husband belonged to, and not just the constricting, judgmental aspect of it. Too often descriptions of fundamentalist churches treat them like dysfunctional weirdos of a power trip. In her memoir, Carolyn shows the joy, support and sense of sharing and community that her church offered her, and the comfort of black and white answers to life's questions. I agree with other readers that the period of withdrawal seems to be treated fairly swiftly, but I wonder if this is to give a sense of a speeding-up of events once she took the decision. I would have liked to have learned more about what happened next,

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and I am sorry that the book doesn't indicate that she continues to be a Christian. ...more

## Higher Ground Album

I'm not sure what I thought this book would be about, but it turned out to be about one woman's experience as a born again Christian. I ploughed right through it as it was fascinating to read her accounts of what she was taught in a somewhat nonjudgmental way. The end was a little too short considering the change that the story took. I'd recommend this with the caveat that if reading about Jesus makes you squirmish, you will probably not enjoy this book.

I enjoyed the subject matter more than the actual writing. This was a memoir written by a woman who was formally a fundamentalist Christian and her movement away from her faith. I felt that a lot was lacking and found I had many questions at the end, such as what happened to her family and what her faith looks like now. I don't know who I'd recommend this to. It made for a really interesting book club.

## Higher Ground Aaa

I read this book to find my own story. It is extremely well written. It is obvious she is an English professor now. I was reminded of many things I had forgotten. It all rang true. I was hoping there would be more on what happened to her afterwards and how she became a college professor. Maybe the next book?

3.5

Very interesting. Made me uncomfortable in lots of spots. Helped me to understand some people. Reminded me of old things. I enjoyed the first 1/3 the best and the 2/3 a lot. Last portion left me feeling a little dry and it turns out that, according to an article, the ending sound different than it was in her real life. Good discussion for Book Club, for sure.

## Higher Ground Aaron Watson Lyrics

A wonderful memoir of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage and disillusioned with her fundamentalist life. She makes painful choices - painful for her and nearly everyone in her life. She had the courage to follow her dreams and land on her feet. Poignant and compelling.

I happened upon this book while prowling the stacks at a new used-books store in town. Given my own history with religion (and particularly the seven years I spent in an extreme evangelical church), I knew I needed to read it. Given that large chunks of my PTSD are religion-based, I know I couldn't have handled reading this book even a couple years ago...but now I'm strong enough and far enough removed from the religious abuse I experienced. Briggs's story, both the salvation found and the salvation lost, feels soooo familiar and hard...but she is able to write sympathetically about her years in the fold. (I can't. The wounds are too painful, even decades later.) I think it's important to make the appeal of fundamentalism clear, so that outsiders may feel empathetic rather than just judgmental. She succeeds in doing so. ...more

## Higher Ground Aaron Watson

I actually watched the movie adaptation of this book prior to reading it. I was intrigued by the author's story and read a little bit more about her on the internet after watching the movie. The book and subsequent movie are about the author's faith and experiences as a fundamentalist Christian before she ultimately decides to leave the Church. In the stuff I read outside of the book she was talking about how she has never really been fully able to let go of her faith. Ultimately what I was looking for in reading this book was to hear her talk more about that. I was thinking that the book may have more about that part of her life than the movie did. However the book wound up being a fairly faithful adaptation of the book. There are very few instances where I would recommend watching a movie instead of reading the book that it is based on, but this one of them. There is no real reason to both watch the movie and read the book in this case because aside from a few plot liberties and the conflating of secondary characters from the book into one more primary character in the movie they really are much the same. I thought the movie was so lovely that I really do think in this instance that it's worth watching, in which case reading the book is a little superfluous. If Carolyn S. Briggs ever decided to write another book about her feelings about faith and God post where this book leaves off I would definitely read it. ...more

This review has been hidden because it contains spoilers. To view it, [click here](#).

I really enjoyed the first part of this book - Briggs' entrance to and participation in a Fundamentalist church (cult?) or as they call it "Hippie New Testament church of Saints." Anyone familiar with orthodoxy, zealotry, conversion and the drunkenness of faith or interested in how one religion can pervade every corner of one's life (or why someone would want it to) will find this book relatable and interesting. Briggs has a great voice and brings to life her the characters and situations she was surrounded while she was "saved." The book ends abruptly and left me sad. It does indeed seem like salvation lost (as the title indicates) and not so that she was free of that world (as her secular coworkers thought of it.) I wish there was a follow up, as the end of the book just paints the portrait of a selfish woman-child who at 40 was finally having her teen rebellion phase. I'm sure it is more complicated than that, as the first half of the book would attest to Briggs being a deep and thoughtful person. But perhaps her guilt at leaving her faith and her husband prevents her from painting herself more favorably. ...more

## Higher Ground Address

Read this memoir after watching the movie last week, and this may be one of the only times when the movie is better than the book. Interestingly, Carolyn Briggs wrote the screenplay as well, so maybe she's just more talented at that genre. Also, I don't know if I'm just turning into a crank, but so much of what I've read lately seems so poorly edited. For example, for 250 pages, Briggs has the reader know in great detail that her family and those around them ate health foods religiously. Then all of a sudden, everyone in the book is eating Cheetos and green bean casserole and drinking pop, with no explanation. Some of her most interesting discussions, such as her consideration of home birth during her pregnancy, were dropped mid-stream and never picked back up. If I could pick up these discrepancies while reading on my couch in front of the football playoffs, how did paid editors miss them? ...more

It was interesting to read about someone going from secular, to fanatic, and back to secular. Carolyn really found a niche, for a time, in the world of a church that constantly questions your faith. While her disenfranchisement seemed organic, I would have like to have seen that more fleshed out. The book sleeve mentioned that she was questioning more, but I didn't get a feel for that as much as she seemed to feel that she wanted something more.

I also would have liked to have heard more about her relationship with her youngest daughter, which seemed tense. It was interesting to read about someone going from secular, to fanatic, and back to secular. Carolyn really found a niche, for a time, in the world of a church that constantly questions your faith. While her disenfranchisement seemed organic, I would have like to have seen that more fleshed out. The book sleeve mentioned that she was questioning more, but I didn't get a feel for that as much as she seemed to feel that she wanted something more.

I also would have liked to have heard more about her relationship with her youngest daughter, which seemed tense.

That said, it was an engrossing read, and a look in a world that I know I will never be involved in. ...more

## Higher Ground Acapella

I really enjoyed this book. I think it gives a pretty honest look into the world of fundamentalist Christianity. It is well written and thoughtful. I might have enjoyed more analysis, but I guess it is just a memoir and not a scholarly work... This is currently a movie that is out (only in select cities/theaters, it seems), directed by and starring Vera Farmiga called Higher Ground. I'm eager to see the movie adaptation.

Here's a quote that comes toward the end of the book to which I am particula I really enjoyed this book. I think it gives a pretty honest look into the world of fundamentalist Christianity. It is well written and thoughtful. I might have enjoyed more analysis, but I guess it is just a memoir and not a scholarly work... This is currently a movie that is out (only in select cities/theaters, it seems), directed by and starring Vera Farmiga called Higher Ground. I'm eager to see the movie adaptation.

Here's a quote that comes toward the end of the book to which I am particularly drawn: "I spent my days of apostasy listening for thunder and I would never have welcomed a bolt of lightening more than at that moment." ...more

I enjoyed this book and certainly, I think there are many of these experiences out there that people have gone through with the church and God that need to be told more often. I thought the book spent a little too much time in "the church years" and found that it caused the second half to lag a bit but I do understand how immersive that world is and can be hard to break free from. I'm certainly glad the author shared her story although I would have liked to hear more about her crisis of faith an I enjoyed this book and certainly, I think there are many of these experiences out there that people have gone through with the church and God that need to be told more often. I thought the book spent a little too much time in "the church years" and found that it caused the second half to lag a bit but I do understand how immersive that world is and can be hard to break free from. I'm certainly glad the author shared her story although I would have liked to hear more about her crisis of faith and how she came to terms with that. But still, a good read. ...more