



Atheists in America

Melanie E. Brewster (Editor)

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This collection features more than two dozen narratives by atheists from different backgrounds across the United States. Ranging in age, race, sexual orientation, and religious upbringing, these individuals address deconversion, community building, parenting, and romantic relationships, providing a nuanced look at living without a god in a predominantly Christian nation.

These narratives illuminate the complexities and consequences for nonbelievers in the United States. Stepping away from religious belief can have serious social and existential ramifications, forcing atheists to discover new ways to live meaningfully without a religious community. Yet shedding the constraints of a formal belief system can also be a freeing experience. Ultimately, this volume shows that claiming an atheist identity is anything but an act isolated from the other dimensions of the self. Upending common social, political, and psychological assumptions about atheists, this collection helps carve out a more accepted space for this minority within American society.

Atheists in America Details

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From Reader Review Atheists in America for online ebook

April (The Steadfast Reader) says

Review originally appears here: <http://www.thesteadfastreader.com/201...>

The writing in the forward and introduction to the chapters is a little clunky. That being said, most of the essays were well written and thoughtful. This would be an excellent read for all American theists who wish to understand their atheistic neighbors and friends that are hiding in plain sight.

I would hope that a volume like this would be widely read by evangelicals and theists wanting to gain a greater understanding of who the atheist community is and maybe, just maybe, we could all learn to get along. I would recommend this book to atheists as well. There are essays by minorities and other marginalized groups that are often discounted by 'mainstream' atheists. It is these sections that I would guide the atheist and humanist to.

Each section consists of three or four short essays from atheists, often describing their 'de-conversion' experience, sometimes telling of their childhood, and too often describing heartbreaking loss that 'coming out' as atheists had caused them in their personal, professional, and social lives. The essays at the beginning are the weakest in the collection. This book does not have to be read in order and a reader might feel more comfortable spreading out the collection over time.

Each narrative is different but most describe a sense of freedom upon recognizing that they no longer 'bought into' whatever myths they had been raised with. There are a few stories from people who were raised without religion and their stories are compelling as well. While they never risked the loss of love and respect from family members or close-knit church groups there were other hurdles to be overcome. In the essay 'It's Complicated' by Ethan Sahker, who was raised without religion he had to overcome his own prejudices and rigidity to find a compatible partner.

There are some essays that come across as smug or pedantic, but I didn't find the tone in any of the essays to be up to par with Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. May I even go as far to say that many of the essays were more sincere and less legalistic than many recent apologetics? (Yes, it's my blog, I'm going that far.) There were essays that echo my own feelings about being an atheist, though none of the stories were exactly like my own.

Ultimately this is a book about what it is to be an individual, theistic or not our worldview shapes a part of who all humans are.

If you're an atheist, you definitely should read this. If you're a theist looking for a better understanding of those of us with a different worldview, or just looking to get out of your comfort zone, this is a decent choice. (Spoiler: No one is mad at god or particularly rebellious.)

Andrea Sirois says

I was interested in this book as I've always been really skeptical about higher beings, other religions, Etc.

Being raised Catholic kind of put this book into a really good perspective for me. The writers in this book come from all religious backgrounds. Some even just describe their upbringing being atheist from the time they were born, as their parents were also atheists.

The book is split up into eight different sections, going from "Leaving Faith" to "Atheism and Aging". The first couple pages of the book also define atheism and how it's different from humanism amongst other categories that atheism could get mixed in and confused with. It gives you a better outlook on the basics of atheism. It brings up the "new" atheist movement and issues within the LGBTQ community as well.

"They assume that I'm immoral and don't see me as a real person anymore, playing with my kids, helping our neighbors 2 year-old get sand out of his shoe, or momentarily diverting the spray of hose water from our newly planted grass to our neighbor's strawberry patch that also needed a drink. They don't see me visit pleasantly with the store clerk wearing a cross necklace or put on my sons' ties on Sunday mornings. These are not moral behaviors of which only theists are capable; these are simply little acts of human kindness that theists and atheists alike perform every day."

This is one of my favorite passages in this book as it truly describes how atheists are. We are not evil. We are just people like anyone else with their own beliefs or rather non-beliefs. Atheism is such a taboo subject when it really shouldn't be. The writers in this book definitely put everything into a better perspective for people who believe atheists are all evil.

Traci says

As someone who considers herself "non-religious" - definitely agnostic, bordering on atheist - this was a very interesting read. It's a collection of vignettes from people across America who identify as atheist or non-religious and how they've handled the situations that arise at work, in their communities, with friends, and of course, with family. Some were raised with religion, which they later left, and some were raised with none. Most interesting, I think, were the few that weren't raised with religion, found it as teens/young adults, then later left after various events.

The author often uses the phrase "coming out" when discussing people who have revealed their atheism to others, and at first, I chalked that up to her background; her short bio says she focuses her research on "marginalized groups" such as the LGBTQ community. However, the further into the stories I read, the more I realized it's very much the correct term, one can choose to either remain mum and act as if one still believes ("in the closet"), can choose to say nothing but also not really explain oneself ("don't ask, don't tell"), or can choose to inform friends and family that one doesn't/no longer believes in any sort of deity ("come out"). And truly, in America, it's a very scary thing to think about letting someone know that you don't believe in a god, especially the Christian God, as so many believe that the USA is a "Christian nation".

I guess I would fall into the not-raised-with-religion category, although we did attend church a few times in my early, early youth - at my request. I had found one of my dad's old Lutheran Catechism books, and became rather enthralled with it, which meant we needed to go to church. That didn't last long because 1) it meant waking early on Sunday morning and getting dressed up to go to said church and 2) after 2-3 sermons, I just didn't understand what the point was. I realize I was under the age of ten, and some will say I didn't go enough to get good instruction, or that my parents didn't do their part, but trust me, none of that would have changed anything. I have a great respect for the natural world, but I don't believe that one divine being is responsible for its creation. I don't know what happens when we die, but I don't believe it's Heaven that awaits us (much as I wish to believe there's an afterlife, and that all my prior pets will be waiting for me). I do believe in being good and kind towards others, not because of a future reward but because it's just the right thing to do. Guess I'm a Humanist if anything?

In any case, this is a very good book, and I will definitely be recommending it to others.

George says

ENTERTAINING AND ENLIGHTENING.

"A primary goal of humanism is to be intentional and thoughtful when enacting values and goals."—page 44

Common wisdom to the contrary notwithstanding, perhaps all atheists in America really aren't CURBs (Commie, Un-American, Rat Bastards—an acronym I borrowed from another goodreads review). Some probably are. I'd speculate, though, that many, perhaps most, might be quiet, sincere, and well-meaning folks doing their very best to live 'intentional and thoughtful' lives.

Books that focus on marginalized minorities often offer up insightful and illuminating perspectives on peoples, cultures, conditions and experiences; and sometime help to mitigate the taint of 'otherness'. ATHEISTS IN AMERICA, edited by Melanie E. Brewster—a collection of twenty-seven personal essays about becoming, being, and/or identifying as, nontheistic—superlatively does all of the above and more.

Recommendation: In all quarters of humanity there are people who esteem curiosity at least as highly as superstition. Those are the people most likely to find ATHEISTS IN AMERICA an entertaining, enjoyable, and enriching read. Others, too, might also find it interesting, informative, and illuminating.

"In the United States, one cannot legitimately claim patriotism, humanity, or morality without also claiming a religious belief."—page 255

iBook edition, 915 pages (I.e. iPad screens)

Lance says

An interesting collection of "testimonies" from non-believers of all walks of life in America. This book isn't essential reading, but it's good for seeing how non-belief manifests in many aspects of life, with sections focusing on leaving faith, queer atheists, romantic relationships with theists, family and parenting, community, work, and aging.

As a white cishet male, I was able to relate more directly with some of the testimonies better than to others, but that's largely the point of the book. My demographic is extremely well represented in atheist culture (see the recent special on Atheism on CNN, where all but one atheist interviewed was a white man, as a representative sample), so stories of atheists I can relate with are already all over my bookshelf. Bringing the perspectives of the elderly, gays, African Americans, and other minority groups to the attention of the atheist world was a big part of Melanie Brewster's goal in editing this collection.

In general, I think Brewster and the authors did well, though one of the chapters seemed poorly written to me (though that was labelled as "A Contrarian Life Story," so maybe the contrarian resisted editing advice. That chapter aside, I thought this was an easy read showing the variety of experience of Atheists in America today.

For more from Dr. Brewster and her research on atheism, I recommend viewing her talk from Skepticon 7:

Why is Psychology Silent When it Comes to Atheism?

Mills College Library says

211.80973 A866 2014

Sara Marks says

I expected something a bit more academic, especially considering it's an academic press and an academic author. This is less research and more stories. I would have appreciated these stories be more diverse. I know it may be difficult, but I felt the stories were overwhelmingly from people who had been raised in Christian traditions. I don't know how well this broke the stereotype of the older, white, male atheist.

Kel Munger says

The title might lead readers to think this is a history of atheism in the United States; instead, it's a collection of 27 essays by Americans who identify as atheists, detailing how they came to understand themselves as nonbelievers and what happened when they told other people that they didn't believe in God.

That might not seem like much of a premise for a collection of personal essays, but more than a superficial look at these stories makes clear what polls consistently show: Atheists aren't very well understood or very well-liked in America.

It's rare for an atheist to experience a "de-conversion" without some sort of ramifications, and the more profoundly religious that person's family and cultural background, the greater the impact. But just living in a particularly religious area—as the essays "User Error: Coming Out Atheist in Utah" by James Mouritsen and "An Atheist in the Bible Belt" by Brittany Friedel make clear—adds a great deal of pressure to those who live skeptical, agnostic or atheist lives.

Another powerful point from these essays is the diversity in the atheist and nonbeliever community. Far from the usual straight white guys (think of the "Four Horsemen" of the "New Atheism"—the late Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris), these essays reflect the experiences of women, people of color, and LGBT folks. ...

(Full review on Lit/Rant: <http://litrant.tumblr.com/post/105916...>)

Max says

Atheists in the US are an under-researched bunch, and this book gives them a voice. It's important to hear from atheists in their own words (and to learn that most people's reasons for being atheists are just terrible as most people's reasons for being theists). However, my major issue with this book (other than the casual ableism of more than one subject who considers religious faith a disability or mental illness) is the uncritical appropriation of LGBT experiences, both on the part of the subjects and of the researchers. In the conclusion,

the researchers acknowledge that coming out as non-religious simply doesn't carry the same risk of violence as coming out LGBT does, and this reality makes me feel that it is a little trivializing for atheists to appropriate the LGBT coming-out framework wholesale.

Lauren says

4.5 stars.

I was provided a free copy of this ebook in exchange for an honest review, courtesy of Netgalley and the publisher.

Out of all the Christian and other religious books out there, atheist books are astonishingly rare. Maybe because it's such a taboo topic, for some reason. The writing was decent- parts were pretty hardcore academic-style, though.

I think this book did what it was intended to do: portray atheists as NORMAL PEOPLE.

Over the years I have been accused of being immoral just because I am an atheist. I have had people claim I am only an atheist so I can do wicked things. I have been told that I am possessed by the devil or that I hate God. Of course, none of these ideas makes any sense. I think many people don't know an atheist that is "out of the closet". Just as people thought they didn't know any gays in the 1970s and 1980s, now people think they don't know any atheists. Perhaps I have at least allowed my coworkers to see that atheists are just normal people, like everyone else.

There's not really much to say about this perspective collection other than I'm always glad when a book supporting equal representation, respect and understanding of anyone comes into the market. I strongly recommend that people who have a stigma or hatred of atheists read this, because I think it will give so insight as to what the REAL atheist agenda is- that is to say, there is none. You made the whole thing up. I hope this will one day help people see nonreligious people as good, moral, ethical people even though they don't believe in any sort of God.

Katie says

I really enjoyed this book. As an athiest, I found it informative and comforting hearing the experiences of others. However, I recommend this book to theists as well to better understand athiest family, friends, and coworkers.

Nicholas Fortugno says

An excellent examination of the diversity of experience and identity among those who live outside of religious belief. Dr. Brewster has collected stories from atheists representing a broad range of ages, ethnicities, and identities, and while the book makes clear that "coming out" as atheist can often be a painful or ostracizing experience, the range of voices gives a variety of strategies for dealing with life when faced with a world not yet ready to accept non-belief. But most important, the books clearly shows how a rich and

fulfilling can be led, including work, love, family, and growing old, all without the crutch of a traditional religious framework.
