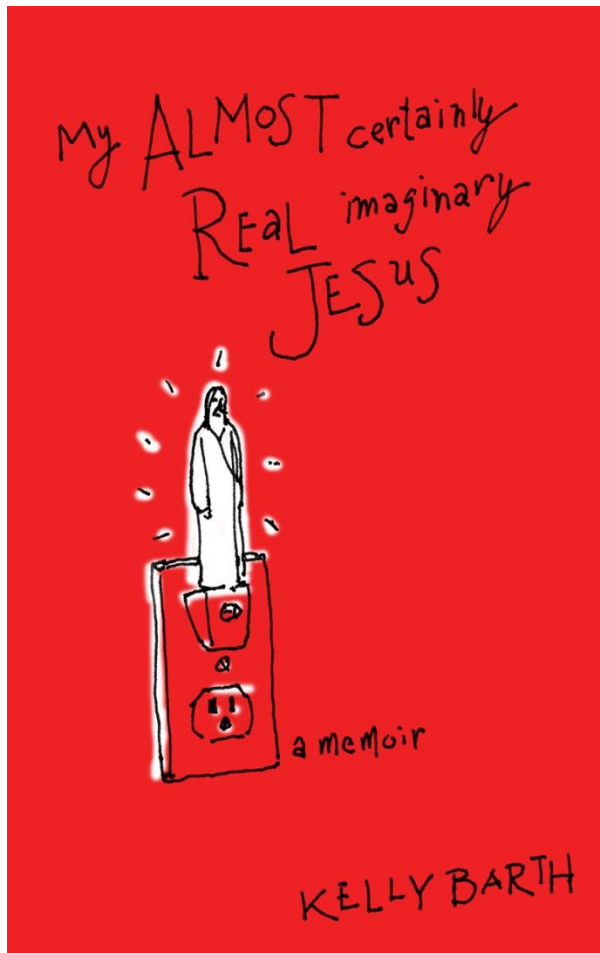


Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



30 / Kelly Barth, author, Lawrence, Kansas

On a Tuesday in November 2012, I bought a copy of a newly published book in one of the last book lovers' bookstores, the Raven Bookstore in Lawrence, Kansas. Not because its title attracted me. Rather because a friend had written the book and, whatever she'd have written, I should buy a copy to support her. The title was enough to make me think I would never open the book, and when still at the cash register I was already selecting someone to send it to as a birthday present. 'My Almost Certainly Real Imaginary Jesus'—I couldn't believe someone could come up with a title like this and expect to sell more than seven copies. I knew the author a little, though, and she was so nice, and so smart... so, what was going on? And this title... rather intriguing, yes? I opened the book, back home after I had opened my first beer of the day expecting I would need its support.

I don't think I, ever, made it past page 7 of a book in which on each page Jesus was mentioned twice, or more, even up to seven times. Although educated by Jesuits in elementary school and high school, I

don't believe I made it through page 7 of the bible either, whether the Old or the New Testament. Therefore, I myself have no recollection of any tormenting times because of religion other than that I was forced to attend Holy Mass each day, at the time six days a week, before school, not to mention the seventh day when I was supposed to rest—that's what the bible said, didn't it? My church attendance came to an end immediately after graduation and I have never looked back. Until that Tuesday in November, 2012, when I laid my hands on this memoir written by Kelly Barth.

I did not count the times the name of Jesus is mentioned, but I guess at least 690 times on her 230 pages—while the story unfolds of a searching fundamentalist Christian becoming a thinking ex-fundamentalist Christian who has to fight against endless fundamentalist endeavors including a few quite low tricks to turn her into an ex-lesbian. She knew she was different at age four and after thirty-something years of exhausting battle made it to the altar to get married to her buddy-for-life, Lisa. I finished Kelly's memoir in two fast sittings and sent her an admiring note on Friday morning, sixty hours after I had bought the book. I was hooked from page 1. What a life—and what a writer. I believe Kelly needed ten years to finish her book, and these must have been hard years during which she had to go through everything she had encountered over and over again. You wouldn't guess this, because the book reads so easily—as if it was written in about the same 60 hours I needed before I told her I had read it. The sentences flow like the Kaw River in a wet year. The tone is light and bright. Never had I this much fun while reading about Jesus, about religious fundamentalist thought and behavior, and about tormenting sexuality.

Old Lawrence, where Kelly and her Lisa (Grossman, the painter I wrote about earlier) live not far from its liveliest street, Massachusetts, isn't the worst town to reside if you have to live in the state of Kansas. On Massachusetts I find one of my favorite microbreweries, Free State, behind the restaurant of the same name. I can find black Belgian-style beer there that is being served in the right glass, at the right temperature, and with the perfect top of creamy foam—one glass is enough to make me feel more than happy. Free State's top seller is the sweeter Ad Astra, which means To the Stars (words taken from the Kansas state motto); nowadays, it is sold in six packs all over the Midwest.

Nearby are the lively Lawrence Art Institute, a well-equipped second-hand bookstore, more good restaurants, a great bakery, and the Raven Bookstore—one of the last privately owned small booksellers not only in town but of eastern Kansas. This is where one can find Kelly, whose earlier work has been published in anthologies and literary journals such as the 'Coal City Review' and 'Muse & Stone', on most Thursday evenings. During the day, she teaches writing on-line from her house under the trees. Yet since her book was published, Kelly had to travel often--still has, all over the United States--to read for a large and diverse public; it is not just the LGBT scene that is attending; the book's funny excellence is widely recognized and talked about, and the good news apparently travels far and ahead. New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Santa Fe, Dallas, Chicago... even *Matfield Green!*

Ton Haak, May 2013