

# Cultural Daily

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## Book Review: *Belief Is Its Own Kind of Truth, Maybe*

Jeff Martin · Thursday, January 21st, 2016

“When my real mother dies, I go looking for another one.” So begins *Belief Is Its Own Kind of Truth, Maybe*, author Lori Jakiela’s third memoir, which chronicles Jakiela’s tumultuous search for her birthmother. This search, and the sense of seeking, serves as the narrative’s prime engine, and as Jakiela encounters her new family, for better or worse, the story’s loaded with momentum and artful suspense. While there are plenty of plot movements, the author’s deft ability to weave together a complex tapestry of stories showcase her skillful literary craftsmanship. And then there’s her voice.

So much depends on a memoirist’s voice, and Jakiela creates intimacy with the reader through humor and an awareness of her own fallibility. *Belief* reads less like a memoirist’s confession of past events, and more like an examination of the confusion that comes with discovery, and like an examination of our motives to discover. For example, Catholic Charities asks why Jakiela wishes to seek her birthparents. Jakiela, a mother herself, says “I’d like a medical history.” A medical history is practical. A set of genetic facts to pass on to her own children. Simple. But Lori Jakiela realizes (along with her readers) how much more she desires.

She wants experiences with her birth family beyond reports and records. She wants to eat food, drink beer, trade stories. She needs stories to make sense of things. She wants to learn what kind of love, if any, existed when she was put up for adoption, and what kind of love, if any, may still exist. And as Jakiela enters the world of this new complicated family—as a new daughter and new sister—tensions mount in her existing life. She’s already a mother, wife, teacher, writer. I must point out that a key and endearing feature of her personality on the page is her compassion. She’s wildly compassionate for the other characters in the book, and she wrestles with herself when her own compassion wanes. She knows how hard this life stuff can be. “Motherhood,” Jakiela writes, “is a conflicted state, not clear or simple at all. Very few mothers are monsters. Joan Crawford, maybe.” Her voice is funny and sad, wounded and tough. Above all, it’s honest. Jakiela has a gift for insight on matters grave and gritty, such as the many raw spots surrounding adoption. Jakiela also displays an ability to riff funny on, say, Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, nuns and pills, Joan Jett and jukeboxes and big hair. No matter what the content, Jakiela’s prose is precise, concise, exact, rhythmic, clear and musical.

*Belief* is a big story. Huge. This story contains multiple narrative threads and shifting locales and complex timelines. Here’s the thing: Jakiela’s plotting and sense of structure is natural and masterful. It’s a testament to her storytelling skill that she can bring the reader with her on this journey—she challenges us, sure, but she never loses or confuses us. About halfway into the book, Jakiela layers in sections that imagine the lives of her mother and aunt, based on scant records culled from Catholic Charities. I can compare this somewhat to Dave Eggers’ imaginative shifts in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. This move, in Jakiela’s hands, enlivens the story

and characters without distracting or tricking readers. In *Belief*, Jakiela creates a sympathetic and imagined story to account for her birthmother's (known as Marie) pregnancy experience. Jakiela's imagination is at work to perhaps help her make sense of Marie, to perhaps to help her find a way to understand, or forgive, in a way that the facts simply will not allow. The imaginative sections are absolutely arresting in terms of characterization and emotional punch. But these sections also tie into a larger theme, which speaks to our tricks of invention, or the stories we tell ourselves.

Characters in *Belief* tell stories that might be factually inaccurate, but these stories nevertheless hold tremendous truth. For example, Jakiela's "real" mother (the one that raised her), Bertie Jakiela, had created Hollywood meet-cute scenarios surrounding her courtship with Jakiela's "real" father (the one that raised her). She stuck to those stories. She needed those stories. Lori Jakiela examines the secret pain that give rise to these stories. She examines why we *tell* those stories. She examines why we want to *hear* those stories. *Belief Is Its Own Kind of Truth, Maybe* invites us to consider ways in which our own stories, and our *revisions* of our own stories, might serve as our best teachers.

(Read excerpt of *Belief Is Its Own Kind of Truth, Maybe* [here](#).)

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