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It wasn't until Libby Phelps was an adult, a twenty-five year old, that she escaped the Westboro Baptist Church. She is the granddaughter of its founder, Fred Phelps, and when she left, the church and its values were all she'd known. She didn't tell her family she was leaving. It happened in just a few minutes; she ran into her house, grabbed a bag, and fled. No goodbyes.

Based in Topeka, Kansas, the Westboro Baptist Church community is one the country's most notorious evangelical groups. Its members are known for their boisterous picketing—their zealous members with anti-military, anti-Semitic, and anti-gay signs—"Thank God for Dead Soldiers," "God Hates Jews," or "Thank God for 9/11"—and their notorious catchphrase "God hates fags."

The church makes headlines in news across the country. You've driven past its picketers or seen them on TV. It has seventy members and ninety percent of them are part of Libby's family. They picket concerts, football games, other churches, and, most notoriously, the funerals of servicemen and victims of hate crimes. For its members, to question its rules is to risk going to hell—where worms eat at your body and fire shoots out of your eyeballs.

In *Girl on a Wire*, Libby is candid about her experience and what's happened since her escape. On *Anderson Cooper Live*, she was confronted by the mother of a soldier whose funeral had been picketed, and had to respond. Despite it all, she cares for her family. Her grandfather's sermons were fear mongering, but she loves him. This unusual memoir presents a rare, inside look into a notorious cult, and is an astonishing story of strength, bravery, and determination.

## Girl on a Wire: Walking the Line Between Faith and Freedom in the Westboro Baptist Church Details

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# **From Reader Review Girl on a Wire: Walking the Line Between Faith and Freedom in the Westboro Baptist Church for online ebook**

## **Cori says**

An interesting look into the workings and family experiences of the Westboro Baptist Church, written by one of the family members who left the church. It's a quick easy read, and particularly interesting if you've ever seen them picketing.

When I worked at the local newspaper, there was often a WBC "news release" waiting on the fax machine in the evenings, and they were so convoluted and ridiculous that you couldn't possibly take them seriously. After reading this book and seeing a quote from an email written by Shirley Phelps-Roper, I'm no longer surprised the releases looked like they did.

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## **Laura says**

Having seen the Louis Theroux documentary some years ago which focused on the infamous Westboro Baptist Church, located in Kansas, USA, I was both horrified and fascinated by the church's extremist views and how they focused on spreading hate and intolerance.

The church's founder, the authors grandfather, is somewhat idolised throughout this book, whereas the authors aunt Shirley (perhaps the most recognisable face from the WBC) is described as a wicked witch. The author writes from her earliest memories right through she detached herself from the church and her family a few years ago.

The book confirms what many suspect about the WBC, and it's no less shocking. A lot has been written about the church, Shirley in particular revels in the media focus, but it was intriguing to read from someone with insider knowledge.

The author describes her journey very personally and accepts how her behaviours have impacted others. It was pleasing to read she teaches her own children tolerance, love and understanding. When she wrote she has absolutely no objection to anyone regardless of their sexuality or gender identity, I believe her. She only hopes that young members of the church continue to leave in their droves and the church becomes disbanded. I would agree with that sentiment.

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## **Linda says**

Although reading about this group makes me very sad, it is important to understand what they are thinking and believing.

If you live in Topeka, you need to read this book.

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## Nefertari says

This is an amazing remembrance of a woman who pulled herself out of a cult and found her own direction in life. She's very open about the motives of those in charge and her own feelings towards the people that her church was screaming and picketing against. She expresses great regret, and offers no apologies for her conduct. She does note, however, that she loves her family, no matter what. It's a wonderful exploration of the human capacity for change and sympathy to fellow human beings.

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## Rebecca McNutt says

I've never liked the Westboro Baptist Church. First of all, any Baptist Christian I've ever talked to isn't anything like this small group of hatemongers. The funeral picketing, the blatant mockery of just about everything you can think of, the way parents will cut off their own children, this is nothing I can imagine a loving God would want. I'm pretty tolerant but the last straw for me was when these Westboro congregates *celebrated* (I kid you not) the September 11th Attacks and the deaths of 3,000 people. I don't want to get into details about why celebrating 9/11 annoys me so much, that stuff is better left to rest. I just don't believe a loving God would want something so heinous to happen, and would certainly not want followers to celebrate it. It's about time a book like this was written. Whether you're religious or not, I think it's important to know the difference between religious values and hate speech, because the Westboro Baptist Church gives other Christians an unfair reputation.

Written by an ex-Westboro member who made the difficult decision to leave everything she knew behind, *Girl on a Wire* offers a look into a childhood of confusion and threats, an insider's reflection on her own grandfather's original construct of a church which claims to follow the Bible as it was intended, yet which breaks its own rules, guilt-trips its followers and functions much more like a cult than a true house of worship. Libby Phelps seems torn between a deep respect for God but also deep disgust for the Westboro Church's actions, especially Phelps's own mother, Shirley. The woman is literally described as a wicked witch, and taught her children that God was something to fear, not trust in. I can only guess what sort of mixed signals such things would send, especially to a young child. Phelps also spends much time in her book going over the way her family and the Westboro Church treated the gay community. While some Baptists I've met don't support gay marriage or intimate gay relationships, the Westboro Church pickets the funerals for U.S. soldiers, even fellow Christian soldiers, for fighting for the rights of an "evil" country, because apparently since the USA has legalized gay marriage that means a soldier's funeral deserves to be desecrated.

I found it interesting that Libby's own family makes up most of Westboro's members. Her grandfather is credited as the man who got this church set up as the way it's known today, and Libby was immersed in it straight from birth, expected to picket and protest from a very young age and not knowing any other way to behave. This made it all the more difficult to leave, especially since the church cut her off. While *Girl on a Wire* can be a bit disjointed sometimes, it evokes both a sense of personal regret and a strange sort of twisted nostalgia mixed with conflicting feelings of love for the author's family and anger at what she was made to do. I would like to read more about Libby Phelps in the future to learn how her upbringing and experiences have affected her faith, her life at the present time and if her family has made any attempt to reach out to her or not. A shocking but hopeful first-hand account of how hatred and bullying should never taint religious values and one woman's life changing for the better.

**\*To anybody reading this review, if you're planning to read this book, I just thought I should point out that there is a lot of explicit language and references to hate speech/discrimination. And though I myself am agnostic, I'll also point out again that the Westboro Church is not what Christians are about. So please don't judge others of faith by the actions of this particular group. Most Christians do not share hate speech or interrupt funerals for soldiers or any of the other despicable acts this book refers to.**

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### **J.T. says**

Reading this for a journalistic comic for an anthology on American Cults. It's a first-hand account of growing up in the Westboro Baptist Church (you know, the ones who picket military funerals and hold inflammatory signs that say things like "God Hates Fags!"). The author details her relationship with the church's founder (her grandfather), Fred Phelps and with the rest of the congregation (who are primarily family by blood or marriage).

It's not the best written book (I'd give it closer to 3.5 stars were that an option), but it does a good job of showing how someone can be blinded to the damage they're doing through a combination of trust and fear. It also shows that although they are doing monstrous things, the WBC are not one-dimensional monsters. Libby's "journey" (ugh, I hate that term) ends in redemption after leaving the church and opening her heart to those she formerly believed were hellbound.

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### **Kayo says**

After watching the new all these years about the Phelps family, its nice to hear some good come out of it. Interesting!

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### **Matt Graupman says**

Just a heads up: by necessity, this review is gonna contain some awful slurs. Sorry.

Even if you don't know the Westboro Baptist Church by name, chances are you've heard about their antics in the news over the past few years. Founded by Fred Phelps, the Kansas-based ultra-fundamentalist church has gained notoriety for its practice of picketing, specifically the funerals of soldiers killed in combat, as well as gay-friendly businesses, with signs proclaiming "God Loves Dead Soldiers," "Turn Or Burn," and - perhaps most famously - "God Hates Fags." Yeah, those guys. They're reprehensible, hateful maniacs who believe the world has embraced some shadowy homosexual agenda, inviting the wrath of their displeased God. What always bugged me most about the WBC, though, was an idea I just couldn't wrap my brain around: how does a person become so indoctrinated and spiteful? How does that happen? In "Girl On A Wire: Walking The Line Between Faith And Freedom In The Westboro Baptist Church," former WBC member Libby Phelps (with help from reporter Sara Stewart) describes growing up in the country's most notorious church and her harrowing, heartbreaking escape.

What I didn't realize about the WBC is that it's made up almost entirely of the Phelps family, about 90% or so; Libby was raised to believe that her family - and her family alone - were God's chosen few and it was

their duty to berate and badger the “sinners” of the outside world into embracing the WBC and, in turn, eternal salvation. I know it sounds crazy to any normal person but Libby had never known anything different. From a very young age, that was just her life. As much as her activities were focused around the WBC and its mission, she also paints a portrait of a relatively typical childhood: swimming with her cousins, sleepovers with her grandparents, playing sports in school, etc. Even her vile hate-spewing grandfather, Fred Phelps, sometimes comes off as a kindly, attentive old man. It’s crazy. Not once do you ever feel sympathy for him or his disgusting church, but “Girl On A Wire” makes it very clear that Libby didn’t know any better because she was sheltered by a sophisticated system of shame, misinformation, and straight-up brainwashing. It’s no secret that Libby, like a lot of her siblings and younger cousins, have rejected the church and the older generation’s beliefs as they’ve grown up and learned to think for themselves. I found it surprisingly heartbreaking, however, when Libby describes her hectic, spontaneous escape because not only was she leaving the WBC, but she was leaving behind the only world she had ever known and, as a result, a lot of her family (she hasn’t spoken to her parents in eight years and they’ve never met their grandchildren). The most fascinating part of “Girl On A Wire” is Libby’s struggle to assimilate into normal society, learning things that most adolescents take for granted and navigating obstacles like finding a new religion, reaching out to the communities that she spent her life offending, and building a family of her own.

It may seem strange to describe someone who spent a lot of their childhood joyfully holding a “God Hates Fags” sign as a hero, but Libby Phelps is a heroic figure. It takes a lot of guts to abandon everything that has defined a person’s life up to that point, to start over, and to actively atone for past mistakes. Nowadays, Libby spends her time working with Equality House, the rainbow-painted charity that sits across the street from the WBC chapel, and she travels the country speaking about her experiences. It’s become a cliché in our divided times but it’s true: love conquers hate. Libby Phelps is proof. With bravery, compassion, respect, and an open mind, Libby Phelps allowed love to conquer her hate and “Girl On A Wire” shows that she’s determined to not let her story be the only one of its kind.

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## **Megan says**

Interesting book. I appreciate a more first hand insight on Westboro Baptist Church. The first part of the book just made me sad- for Libby Phelps hearing the trauma she endured and, of course, for all the people she and her family inflicted trauma upon.

I have to agree with previous reviewers that the book feels disjointed, especially at the end. The last couple chapters skip around in time which breaks from the chronological narrative previously established. I was surprised that there was no mention of the death of her grandfather but then it came pages later.

The end in particular felt forced to me. It seems very much that Mrs. Phelps is trying to prove that she has turned 180 degrees from her earlier beliefs and actions. While that’s great, the way this is presented feels disingenuous. She discusses her friend who’s gay and her work with Equality House and the NoH8 campaign but with no real honesty as to the hard conversations that this most assuredly happened. I think in the end what is missing is real emotion. There are hints occasionally of real honesty and vulnerability in this memoir, but it never actually happens. Given the insistence, Libby Phelps tells us during her youth, that one always remains joyful I am not that surprised but am disappointed that her co-writer Sara Stewart didn’t do a better job.

I don’t know if I’d recommend this book or not. It is a page turner. It is interesting. It is informative. I admire Mrs. Phelps for sharing her story. That’s brave. It just that in the telling there’s a lack genuineness and

authenticity.

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### **Ashley Gillan says**

I've always been fascinated by the Westboro Baptist Church - any extreme religious movement, really - and while I read "Banished" by Lauren Drain, we really hadn't heard too much from members of the Phelps family themselves. The people who were born and bred to build the church.

But that's changed now with this great memoir by Libby Phelps Alvarez, granddaughter of Fred Phelps, a prominent figure in just about every documentary major protest by the WBC prior to her defection in 2009. She left after being bullied by her fellow church members who were "concerned" about an innocent picture of her and her sister wearing a bikini in a vacation photo. In the book, she shares her memories and analysis of events from before the WBC began its picketing routine up through its protests of major, national tragedies. It's really a fascinating book.

I think this novel is the best glimpse we have yet into the inner-workings of the church and it's members. Libby answers pretty much all the burning questions spectators have about the group: Do they really believe what they're saying? What was Fred Phelps like around the people who were closest to him?

The journal-like writing style is a great way to convey the story, which shows not only Libby's growth, but the radicalization of the church itself and the brewing storm that continues to this day within it.

There are also so many insights, I think, into other fundamentalist movements out there (I'm looking at you, Duggars!) Phelps describes in plain language how these extreme churches and movements keep control over their adherents. It's really a very good analysis.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the WBC and it's inner-workings. It was very brave of Libby to write this book, and I applaud her for everything she's done to make amends for her years of picketing.

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### **Michael Lewyn says**

A short memoir about the author's life in the Westboro Baptist Church, a mini-cult founded by the author's grandfather. The church started pretty innocuously: her grandfather Fred Phelps, then a civil rights activist and moderate Democrat, decided to run a church out of his house. But in the 1990s he became radicalized, deciding that eternal damnation awaited gays and everyone who did not share his concerns about them. So he and his family spent their lives picketing all sorts of places, using extreme language in the hope that this would shock people into repentance.

The most interesting thing about this book was the impact of seemingly trivial matters: for example, Phelps started picketing gays after seeing one in a park near his house. Similarly, the author left the church not (at first) out of a grand ideological turn-about, but because she felt mistreated by her aunt, who was becoming more and more powerful within the family as her grandfather became older and mellow.

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## Beth says

It was interesting and horrifying to learn about what happened behind the scenes for Libby Phelps as she was growing up in the Westboro Baptist Church. As she says, she was brainwashed which is accurate. Given the kind of environment she grew up in, it is remarkable that she was able to escape and create such a new and different life for herself.

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## TJL says

Geez, this was a hard one.

Phelps does a great job of making you understand why and how her family is the way it is, and she does a great job embodying the problem of "regardless of how you see them and what they've done, they're still my family and I love them."

If anything, I took two major points away from this book:

1: Phelps and his clan were the OG trolls, and you should NEVER FEED THE GODDAMN TROLLS, PEOPLE. My God, Phelps's testimony here confirms that these people thrive off the fuss you make over them, SO STOP.

2: For the love of God, *leave the kids out of it*. They can't damn well help that they've been raised in that environment, and you coming at them in petty ways is only gonna push them deeper into the us-versus-them extremism. That a friggin' teacher was docking this girl's grades unfairly is insane to me- in what world do you think that will solve the problem?? Oh yeah, she'll REALLY see the error of her ways now that you're **literally doing everything her grandfather said you would do to her for being "faithful"**. That is some petty bullshit right here and it's being directed at a child who's basically been raised in a psychologically abusive environment. I do not cosign, shame on anyone who did it/does it, **you are not helping**.

It just riles me. You don't put this stuff on the kids. They don't have a choice- and by abusing them you're pushing them right into the arms of the people brainwashing them. This is not rocket-science.

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## Kathryn says

Enjoyed this story, partly because of the similarities to my own Fundamentalist upbringing, and the need to escape, and gradual enlightening. If you are unfamiliar with these kinds of people, this will give you some insight into what it's like to be raised with this kind of thinking, where being right is not only more important than being kind, it's the only thing.

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## Shawn Watt says

Read it cover to cover, barely stopping to put it down. Fascinating story of the complicated life of a woman who is someone from whom we could all learn, especially in light of so much hatred and divisiveness in

modern America. Must read!

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