

What readers have said about *The Brethren Years*

“It has been fascinating to read this account of a teenager navigating life within such an insular and strict religious community. Kate’s perspective, shaped by her experience of moving in and out of the sect, adds a layer of insight that is often difficult for outsiders to fully understand. This book helps explain why people remain in what can be a highly controlling and restrictive environment.” — OW

“Meeting 11-year-old Kate, as I did when her teacher, I was impressed with her intelligence, her wide-ranging talents particularly musically, her sensitivity and what a fine, well-liked girl she was. But I was very disturbed by the incredible social restrictions she had to live under.

When I met up with her again some years later and heard her story I was horrified. But she had survived and was overcoming all the negative experiences she had endured. I suggested she write her story, if for no other reason than it being cathartic for her. She now has the courage to make this public and I’m sure those who read it will be stunned. I am also sure that she will be a revelation to others who have also suffered similarly. It’s a blockbuster.” — NT

“I cried, indeed wept. I laughed. I felt hurt for you. I felt understanding at your reactions in those early days of loneliness, distress and yearning. I felt anger at what you endured at the hands of the EB’s, such hurtful, blind cruelty and harassment.” — JS

“I couldn’t put this down and read the first ten chapters in one sitting. As I was reading, my emotions were going up and down. As you read *Exclusive Legacy*, have the tissues ready.” — CC

EXCLUSIVE LEGACY

The Brethren Years

EXCLUSIVE
LEGACY

The Brethren Years

1959-1988

KATE SCARLETT

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by Kate Scarlett

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*Dedicated to my mother, a remarkable and honourable
woman who endured much heartache and suffering
at the hands of the Exclusive Brethren Church.*

She was truly one of a kind.

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Acknowledgements

Several long-suffering friends and family members agreed to look over my manuscript as it progressed. Alas, it was a constantly moving feast, where I'd no sooner passed on some chapters when I made significant changes, and their version became obsolete. My daughter, for example, got three different versions of *The Single Parent Years* and in the end decided she would wait it out! (Hasn't it been said that it's a woman's prerogative to change her mind?) I am truly grateful for all the input and apologise if I have unintentionally left anyone out.

Grateful thanks to the following people:

My brother Steve, who having only come out of the Exclusive Brethren (EB) Church in recent years, was able to advise and provide me with technical info about the Exclusive Brethren workings for *The Brethren Years* that I couldn't remember with clarity. It has been wonderful to co-collaborate and enjoy a relationship with you again after nearly 40 years of separation.

My precious daughter Joanna, for having to re-live some of the trauma she went through as a child when reading the draft of *The Brethren Years*. That took courage. Big hug.

My talented, creative son Nick, who designed the three book covers for me. The finished product exceeded my expectations.

My good friend Anne, who grew up in Bristol, UK, not far from the main Brethren meeting room but with no idea that they existed until reading my script. From the perspective of one who knew nothing about the EBs, she offered valuable suggestions for *The Brethren Years* – including explaining Brethren and Kiwi terminology more clearly for the uninitiated ones.

My best friends from high school, Annette and Kathy, who willingly cast their eyes over the chapters relating to school and the reconnections many years down the track. Kathy (Kate), I know you were emotionally impacted when reading *The Brethren Years*. You grew up with me and probably knew me better than anyone

else, even though we had lost 30 years in the middle. My experiences after our final school parting came as a shock to you.

Mum's cousin Jean, who critiqued the Rellies chapter in *The Single Parent Years* and pointed out some embarrassing errors (e.g. someone who grows up in Zambia is not a South African. Eek).

My lovely daughter-in-law Kim, for her excellent proofreading and practical suggestions for all three books. As a busy young mum of three lively children, this was a big ask. I am so grateful for your understanding in some of the stickier portions.

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To Carolyn, who wrote me such a lovely letter after reading the drafts of *The Brethren Years* and *The Single Parent Years*, and then again at the end of *The Adventurous Years*. Thank you for your empathy. It meant a great deal to this first-time author.

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My friend Nick from church who obligingly drew up a floor plan of the main brethren hall in Auckland based on a (very) rough sketch from me, a photo that was a bit obscure, and some assistance from Steve's excellent memory.

My intermediate school teacher, Ngaire Thomson, from 1971, who always believed I had the potential for better things, and who encouraged me to write my story.

My eagle-eyed proofreader, Odette Wards, and Alan and his team at CopyPress, Nelson.

My supportive and long-suffering husband, Graeme, who cut me slack when I was on a writing roll and therefore not adhering to the timetable for meals or bedtime! And when I was plagued by doubts and felt like throwing in the towel, you encouraged me to stick with it. Thank you for understanding, even though you found my complicated background and the baggage that came with it difficult to comprehend at times. Congratulations: you now have a Diploma in EB terminology. You are one in a million.

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Preface

You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending — C.S.Lewis

Over the years, numerous people encouraged me to write my story, but I initially balked at the idea. I had no desire to be publicly vilified, but going by other examples of ex-Exclusive Brethren (EBs) publishing their stories in the past – and the ensuing reaction from certain quarters – this could not be ruled out. I was also loath to embarrass my children because I knew I'd be writing about experiences I'd never shared with anyone before and that some might find hard to swallow. I feared being rejected and judged all over again, and as a person who values privacy, the thought of putting my complicated, messy life out there for scrutiny was a little overwhelming.

So, why write my story now? Well, as a tale of redemption and triumph against a backdrop of legalistic indoctrination and spiritual abuse, I somehow felt it needed to be told. A story of despair mingled with hope, where beauty emerged from the ashes. My desire is that someone out there walking/having walked a similar path will read it and be encouraged. Even if it impacts just *one* person, it will have been worth it. It has (largely) been a cathartic exercise, although I admit I had my moments in some of the stickier parts.

Memory is a funny thing. It's somewhat selective, and even two members of the same family can recall the same events quite differently. That's not to say one version is wrong – just viewed from a different perspective, perhaps. I am finding, too, that recollection becomes increasingly (and annoyingly) fickle with age. The details of events that impacted us personally (painful or otherwise) may now be smudged. And if facts aren't preserved in the form of photographs and written accounts, they lose clarity over time. Happily, I was a prolific letter writer in my adult years and kept a diary as a young teenager and during the early days of single motherhood. Much of the account is based on these. My main problem was in knowing what to include and what to throw away. What you read is but a fraction. A handful of family members still in contact also provided details I had overlooked, or clarification and correction where needed.

This is not intended to be an in-depth breakdown of the theology and history of the formerly named Exclusive Brethren Church (now called the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church). It is simply a story about an ordinary girl who was raised in this sect (now considered to be a cult) and the lasting impact on her life. It is a memoir; a detailed and intimate account of a lengthy journey to a town named True Faith somewhere in the state of Freedom; a somewhat turbulent trip where the luggage comprised an oversized suitcase packed with hefty challenges (not the least of which was raising five children on my own). And where, along the narrow winding path, the forbidding landscape gradually morphed into one a little less rocky, with undulating green pastures, a loving shepherd, and just enough rocks for the joyous babbling brooks to keep their song.

It has been 40 years since I was excommunicated. Nevertheless, you will note that the EB thread ebbs and flows throughout the story right to the end. This is my legacy, and by default, that of my children. This dark grey thread was initially the prevailing colour in the tapestry of my life, interwoven with the more colourful threads of music, my passion for cross-stitch, and a keen sense of humour. But then a solid golden thread emerged. While the darker thread was still evident, it was now eclipsed by the bright golden thread of my newly found Christian faith.

Note: The names of several people have been changed or omitted entirely to respect their privacy. I have also done my best to be as discreet as possible with regard to sensitive issues involving my children. What you do read, is with their permission.

From Ruth Myers' *31 DAYS OF PRAISE*

EXTRACT FROM DAY 11:

Thank You, my gracious and sovereign God, that You have been with me and carried me from the day of my birth until today... that You have known my whole life, from beginning to end, since before I was born... and that You wrote in Your book all the days that You ordained for me before one of them came to be.

Thank You that in Your gracious plan to bless and use me, You've allowed me to go through hard times... How glad I am that you're so good at reaching down and making something beautiful out of even the worst situations!

I praise You that the things that happened in my past, both enjoyable and painful, are raw materials for blessings, both in my life and in the lives of others. So, I thank You for the specific family into which I was born and the opportunities You did or did not provide. And thank You for the things in my past that appear to be limitations, hindrances, bad breaks... the wounds of old hurts, the unmet emotional needs, the mistakes or neglect of other people – even their cruelty to me, their abuse.

How comforting to know that in all my distresses You were distressed. And how comforting to know that in the present, day by day, You feel with me any pain, confusion, inner bondage, or struggles that stem from my past. Thank You that all these seeming disadvantages are a backdrop for the special, unfolding plan You have in mind for me... and that if my past still handicaps me, You are able to lead me to the kind of help I need.

I'm so grateful that all my past circumstances were permitted by You to make me see my need of You and prepare my heart for Your Word.....to draw me to Yourself, and to work out Your good purposes for my life. All my days had Your touch of love and wisdom, whether or not I can yet fully see it.

In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried. Isaiah 53:4

Scripture References (by paragraph)

1. Is. 46:3; 46:9,10; Ps 139:16; Is 63:9, 53:4
2. 1 Cor. 10:13; 1 Pet. 5:9; Gen. 37, 50:17–20
3. 1 Thess. 5:18
4. Is. 63:9, 53:4
5. Deut. 8:3; Ps. 66:6–12; 1 Tim. 6:15 (Phillipps)

Prologue

JUNE 2020

**Murray Halberg Retirement Village in Auckland
Secure Dementia Unit**

The room is spacious, ultra-modern and comfortable, and from what I've been told, costs an eyewatering amount. It's also very impersonal, possibly because the extensive family photo board from the previous establishment is missing. A part of me is curious about its absence, but largely I am relieved as I do not want the unwelcome and hurtful reminder that the photos of me are excluded.

My mother sits in an upright chair opposite us, clutching a cup of tea and a biscuit. It's a fine bone china cup with a saucer (no mugs in this swanky establishment!), and the near-brimming cup is tilted at a precarious angle. She is so intent on gazing at me that she is oblivious. Graeme comes to the rescue before it spills.

'She has lost a lot of ground since you last saw her,' my youngest sister's WhatsApp message read, *'and mostly doesn't recognise any of us anymore.'*

It's not my imagination, though; my mother is alert and maintaining eye contact and smiling at me lovingly. Her long hair is flowing freely, and her large brown eyes are wide and clear. She looks well and happy, and a lot more youthful than the 83 years on her clock.

'It's Kathleen, isn't it?' she asks.

'Yes, Mum, it is,' I reply.

'You were *such* a beautiful pianist,' she says.

I'm gratified she remembers! This is going far better than we'd anticipated. It seems we had come on a good day.

'We had *such* a lot of trouble with Kathleen when she was a child,' she continues confidently. 'My mother said it was because we didn't smack her enough.'

Oh. I have been put on the back foot and can't think of a suitable response. I almost feel as if I *have* been smacked suddenly. Truth be told, I want to laugh, but it's not really a situation for laughter, and I dare not look at Graeme.

'Does Kathleen have a family?'

'Yes, Mum, I have five children and nine grandchildren.'

'Well, I never!' she says wonderingly. 'Five children! Fancy that!'

The brief connection is lost, and I feel bereft. For an all too fleeting moment, I had my real mother back. Now she has reverted to being a confused stranger again.

We continue the stilted conversation, repeating things over and over, including the fact that Kathleen has five children.

A male nurse comes in with some tablets.

'Time to take your pills, Anna,' he says kindly.

Mum ignores him at first as she is still looking at me, but in a slightly confused way now, as if she knows she has seen me before but can't quite remember where.

'Come along, Anna,' he coaxes.

We help him out by saying it's time we went anyway and stand up to make our farewells.

Mum suddenly looks very forlorn.

'I'm lost,' she says sadly.

I embrace her and she performs her trademark rapid *kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss* on my neck which used to embarrass me so much when I was younger.

The tears threaten, but I swallow them fiercely. *I will not cry. Not here. Not*