

**Timothy Michael Kurek, *The Cross in the Closet* (Tacoma, WA: BlueHead, 2012)**

Timothy Kurek was raised as an uber-conservative Christian. But when he came to see that his attitude to homosexuals was one of hatred rather than love, he hatched a plan to go “undercover,” coming out as gay and living with that identity for a year. *The Cross in the Closet* is Kurek’s account of that experience.

The book is a form of autobiographical travelogue recounting Kurek’s personal journey. It is a difficult book to review. Does one offer a summary of the storyline? Or one’s own equally autobiographical account of the reading experience? Neither is of much help to a potential reader. So I instead want to offer a few comments which may help the reader approach the book with some clear idea of what Kurek’s story can realistically be expected to achieve.

One initially confusing narrative element is “the Pharisee”, an internal dialogue partner who represents Kurek’s worst religious impulses. Initially, the Pharisee seems to appear as a real flesh and blood character in the narrative. As the story progresses, he fades until he eventually vanishes. “The Pharisee” plays an important role as a symbol of Kurek’s self-perceived religious bigotry, but making him too real at the outset makes for unnecessary confusion.

Throughout the book, Kurek makes effective use of digressions to flesh out the significance of particular episodes. These, as with other breaks in the narrative, are clearly marked out in the formatting of the text so the reader is clearly aware of the transition. The result is often powerful, such as when he recounts his memory of Todd, a gay co-worker Kurek had mercilessly bullied when in his teens. They serve to contrast Kurek’s differing states of mind at different periods and so highlight that this book is fundamentally an account of Kurek’s own transformative journey. It is, as I said, a form of autobiographical travelogue.

If online comment is any indication, many readers had misunderstood the strongly autobiographical nature of the work. Jeff Pearce writing for [The Toronto Star](#) is scathing, using terms such as “self-satisfied” and “revolting egotism”. But surely that’s always the way with autobiography? When a person writes about themselves, it’s hardly possible to avoid some sort of egocentricity. In any case, there is a curious anomaly in Pearce’s criticism. His major issue is that he sees Kurek’s entire undercover approach as invalid: “if [Kurek] genuinely cared for gay people, even gay Christians, he’d shut up, shelve his sanctimony and let them speak for themselves.” But he misses a fundamental point: without the experience of going undercover, Kurek simply wouldn’t have had any interest in listening. That’s the entire point of the story.

I want to press this point just a little. Kurek was motivated to undertake his project as a consequence of failing to properly support a friend who had been totally rejected by her family after coming out as a lesbian. Kurek regarded his response as reprehensible. “This,” Pearce writes, “is somehow a major revelation to him. It isn’t for the majority of us, that is unless we’re lacking the most basic human empathy.” Well, okay, let’s talk about empathy for a moment. Has Pearce stopped, even for a moment, to ask where Kurek was coming from in all of this? Given the number of times people say, “you’d have to experience it to understand” is it any wonder Kurek tries to do just that? Sure, Pearce is right that the experiences of gays and lesbians are readily available in print. But Kurek’s entire point is that he wasn’t interested and that it took a journey as an “insider” to learn that “basic human empathy” which, it seems to me, Pearce himself fails to show toward Kurek. I might extend that comment, in fact, to cover the Christian community at large. Regardless of how Pearce thinks it

should be, the fact is many Christians are seeking clarity on the question of homosexuality and they are more likely to give Kurek a hearing than any gay or lesbian author. That may be wrong on Pearce's view, but it's the world we live in. Indeed, if we think about it for a moment, "going undercover" was actually Kurek's way of listening to the experiences of a marginalized group. The method might raise eyebrows, but it is not clear that Kurek deserves such strong criticism.

Kurek makes clear that his experience is not identical to that of gay men: "This is not a book about being gay. I am fundamentally unqualified to write that book. Instead this is a book about the label of gay and how the consequences of that label shaped and changed my life." Again, "my life." As stated the book is autobiography and Kurek isn't pretending the story is about anybody other than himself: "this is a book about prejudice: specifically, *my* prejudice." Pearce might have saved us the moral outrage about egocentricity. But so too might we have been spared the objection raised by S. E. Smith writing for [xojane](#): "He took a fieldtrip to gayland and it may have been informative and interesting, but I'm hesitant to say that he truly knows what it's like to be gay, and that's often how his story is being told." Well, sorry, but Kurek can't be held responsible for the reader's failure to heed the clear disclaimer provided at the very outset (does it need to be said that books have introductory remarks for a reason?). And, in any case, if living as gay means one "can't truly know" then what does that say about Pearce's insistence that it's really just a matter of "the most basic human empathy"? If living as gay hardly helps, how could reading books about homosexual experience be superior, as Pearce insists? The point, ultimately, is that the intersection of religious belief and sexual identity is a highly personal and highly complex area. By expressing his voice in print Kurek has done more than most to engage with the issues. To complain that he is ego-centric, or that his voice is not that of a truly gay-man seems to me to negate the very idea of empathy and dialogue which Pearce and Smith want to advance.

I want to raise one more matter. In a very important comment on Kurek's book, Kathy (no second name) writing for [Canyon Walker Connections](#) suggests that Kurek is in danger of reinforcing stereotypes with his portrayal of Angela. While this is a fair complaint, two points have to be stressed. First, more than once Kurek points out that the LGBT (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transsexual) community is by no means monolithic. Kurek tells us, in effect, "don't assume all LGBT folk are like this." Second, the story actually makes clear that even prior to later trauma and abuse "I [Angela] had always wanted to grow up and be a beautiful woman. The idea of growing up a man felt foreign and wrong." The careful reader could not, as Kathy fears, form the conclusion that Angela's sexual identity was a consequence of later trauma. Again, the problem lies with a reviewer too careless to hear what Kurek actually has to say. A not inconsiderable irony.

Ultimately, this is a book not by the LGBT community for the LGBT community, but by a Christian for Christians. And here it is critical to keep in mind that the focus of this book is Kurek and his interior life. It is not a work of biblical exegesis, theology, or ethics and must not be confused as such. Amy Spreeman writing for [Stand Up for the Truth](#) takes what seems to me the most commendable approach when she "approached this book with an open mind *and* an open Bible." Now *The Cross in the Closet* doesn't seek to ask whether homosexuality is biblical but it does challenge us to ask whether our attitudes to homosexuals are biblical. As Kurek says, this is a book about prejudice and, as all Christians should know, it's entirely possible to have the right opinion on a matter whilst being utterly devoid of love.

All this is to say that it is important to keep in mind what *The Cross in the Closet* can, and cannot, achieve. It is not a work of biblical exegesis or moral theology, much less a definitive assessment of human sexuality. It is, rather, an autobiographical travelogue which recounts one man's journey through an alien world. In doing so, it challenges not so much one's preconceptions about homosexuality, regardless of what buttons it may push on this subject, but rather one's preconceptions about homosexuals. It is a book about people in all of their manifold variety. And whilst the book's focus is on one particular person, Kurek himself, it asks us to consider other people besides. People who, regardless of our biblical and moral outlook, are people beloved of God and for

whom Christ died. Kurek has done us a great service in giving a human face to the people at the centre of a most significant biblical, social and moral issue

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