

Rooted in Love: Navigating Belonging and Faith

Nathan Kitchen. *The Boughs of Love: Navigating the Queer Latter-day Saint Experience During an Ongoing Restoration*. Draper, UT: By Common Consent Press. 443 pp. Paperback: \$16.95. ISBN: 9781961471153

Reviewed by Ben Schilaty

I was hesitant when I was asked to write a review of Nathan Kitchen's memoir *The Boughs of Love: Navigating the Queer Latter-day Saint Experience During an Ongoing Restoration*. I consider Nathan to be a friend. Over the years he has checked in on me, defended me, and critiqued me when he felt it was necessary. Nathan has been an overwhelmingly positive influence in my life. I had already purchased his book when I was asked to write this review but had yet to crack it open. I accepted because I have followed his journey for years and knew he would have important things to say.

True to the title, Kitchen uses the motif of trees throughout the book. In his childhood and at pivotal moments throughout his life, trees are present as representations of the love of his family and those close to him. As a reader, I enjoyed noticing new trees spring up at times of profound love throughout the book.

Kitchen's thesis—that the Church's dominant narrative about queer people is harmful and unsustainable and that support communities like Affirmation provide hope and save lives—is found throughout the book. He frames his memoir in terms of generations, time periods that delineate different approaches the Church has taken in dealing with its queer members. Kitchen identifies himself as one of the last of the generation that was counseled by Church leaders to marry a woman, have kids, and never talk about his orientation. Kitchen explains, "The modern church abandoned my generation when the deep flaws and

real failure of using straight marriage and straight spouses as a chronic conversion therapy for homosexual people manifested great harm in the ensuing years” (45). Feeling abandoned and misunderstood by his church community, Kitchen found refuge in Affirmation, the longest running support organization for LGBTQ Mormons, their families, and friends.

This book is part personal memoir and part history of Kitchen’s time with Affirmation. His description of the events that took place while he was a member of the board and later as president offer a fascinating behind the scenes look at an organization on the frontlines of offering community to queer Latter-day Saints. From internal disputes, to responding to the pandemic, to touring a newly renovated temple with an apostle, Kitchen takes readers on a detailed journey of striving to create spaces of belonging for queer Latter-day Saints. While I found the stories of his personal life to be the most engaging, the stories of Affirmation were very compelling. Kitchen offers a unique and detailed view of what has been happening in queer Latter-day Saint spaces over the last decade.

I don’t want to spoil any of the big moments of the book, but Kitchen defies expectations by continuing to be a believer in the Restoration. Through many painful experiences and deep disagreements with Church teachings and policies, he repeatedly demonstrates that he believes in God, family, and the power of love. With touching imagery, Kitchen recounts having dinner with his kids and his boyfriend. As he watched them chat, connect, and break bread together, he wondered if heaven could be like this. With tears in his eyes, he snapped a picture of the scene. He wrote, “I spoke aloud to God and asked that somehow, someday, we would all stand together under the boughs of eternal love” (160).

Kitchen’s continued belief in the goodness of God is evident in his reaction to receiving a letter that his resignation from the Church had been officially processed. The letter from the Church included what he called “the Loving Heavenly Father Clause.” After stating that his

sealing to his children and former spouse had been canceled, the letter explained, “Such blessings, including your eternal family relationships, will be determined by our wise and loving Heavenly Father after we have completed our mortal probation” (364–65). Kitchen then affirms, “Despite what the institutional church does to queer people, queer families, and families with queer children, God is the final decider of our eternal family relationships” (365). In a moment that could have been dominated by feelings of pain and rejection, Kitchen found a testimony that God is loving, kind, and eternally aware of him and his family. In passages like these throughout the book, Kitchen offers his hard-earned wisdom, as well as reflective and poignant writing.

While the memoir is rich and wise, it is important to note that the book is too long. Kitchen said in 443 pages what could have been more succinctly and powerfully conveyed in just 300. Many writers adopt the philosophy “show, don’t tell.” Throughout his memoir Kitchen both shows *and* tells. The experiences he shares are engaging and illustrative, but the telling parts are often redundant and reduce the power of the narrative.

The Boughs of Love is beautifully written and insightful. It is an important contribution to the growing library of LGBTQ Latter-day Saint stories. As I read, I continually felt the importance of support communities like Affirmation and the life-saving work done by so many queer Latter-day Saints. Creating spaces of refuge and belonging is essential because as Kitchen succinctly states: “Wherever the Church is, queer people are also” (197).

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