

**On**[**Everything is Perfect When You're a Liar**](http://edelweiss.abovethetreeline.com/ProductDetailPage.aspx?sequence=1&&sku=0062102222)**by Kelly Oxford**

            It's a good thing Oxford won me early, with her big-spectacle-magnified, cartoon eyes and her precocious, naive sensibility. Else I might not have been able to stick with her as the vicissitudes of life cured her in fairly short order of a predilection for telling the truth. Sure, I enjoyed the cognitive dissonance of knowing more than she did when, at seven, she came across potsmoking and just thought of it as “not smoke, but something like smoke,” but when the author threw a masturbating monkey and a stolen, potentially loaded pistol in with her seven-year-old self for good measure, cute gave way to dismaying and I might have hit a comfort wall right there and bowed out – if it weren't, as I say, for having been conned into caring about her right from the start.

            I wind up glad I've stuck around when, at fourteen, like the insufferable yet irresistible Augusten Burroughs, the girl has her run in with modeling, and the author really hits her stride. Oxford the teen  sheds her glasses like her childhood innocence, and the lying begins. She's one of ours at this point, though, and doing us proud. Only our Oxford could claim a nonexistent bladder condition while she pees her pants in public and have the presence of mind to gurgle “stommm-ach fluuuuuuu” while in the process of puking on a bicycling Chinese man. These foul feats aside, some interesting writing emerges amid the coming-of-age drama, concerning what it means to be oneself, or to feel one cannot be.

            By now, roughly a third of the way into the book, it is to be suspected that Oxford has sloughed off those readers who don't have the stomach to hang, and has effectively desensitized the remaining audience to the disgusting. As such, we can only chuckle predictably as porn enters the picture. Without getting into any of the cheap-shot details, let's say the higher grade humor arises from where Oxford's sympathies lie. In this, as in other parts of the book, she sides with the antihero, the perp, and does so in an endearing timbre which does not feel feigned. But of course we're aware we can't really trust her. We're on our own in sorting morality out of this fine mess. Celebrities and drugs, roadtrips and more drugs, all very madcap and sordid, and then what Oxford's calls her 'terrible horrible' - a scam most despicable to be sure... And which structurally serves as a turning point in the book - a last childish act of her own before she meets the man who will father her children...

            As Oxford begins to write about her adulthood, it is clear that she's making difficult choices about where to allow herself to linger. She gives over twenty pages to her stint as a personal assistant to a TV producer, but a mere single page to acing her coursework in technical college as a young mother (lots of fertile ground left fallow there). Then we see why: she had to leave room for her on-the-job experiences working with head injury cases and the elderly. These are emotionally genuine, deeply moving passages of the book. So much so that we almost wonder whether we're reading the same story.  Where are the cutting quips? The lies? It would appear that Oxford the woman may have regained some truthfulness. Ultimately, though, the sense that arises is one of range. Like a vocal artist who can hit high and swing low, here is an author who can made us coo as well as cringe, and a person who harbors real compassion above and beyond her piercing wit.

            Lest we become lulled into a false sense of security by her more earnest writing, Oxford proceeds directly to giving herself an enema, talking about her adorable, shitty kids some, and  exercising vigorously preparatory to what seems to be set up as the book's grand flourish - meeting David Copperfield. The encounter speaks well to Oxford's having arrived as a celeb. Sharing the stage with D.C. is powerfully rendered, with bladder-bursting suspense, and the narrative gives way afterward to some real Vegas grotesque behavior, but this chapter does not in my overall view deliver the knockout punch it might, which leaves me feeling as the book draws to a close (in Disneyland), that Oxford has won by keeping her gloves up and her feet moving the whole twelve rounds. T.K.O.

Eugene Uttley 1/2/13

[This book available for sale beginning April 2, 2013]



**On**[**Wild Goose Chase**](http://edelweiss.abovethetreeline.com/ProductDetailPage.aspx?sequence=2&group=search&keywords=)**by Mark Batterson**

In elaborating his title metaphor, drawn from Celtic Christian origins, Batterson is quick to point out the subtle yet crucial difference between a Wild Goose chase (a pointless endeavor) and the act of *chasing* the Wild Goose, by which he means seeking to know the Holy Spirit. Chasing the Goose, he says, allows God to work His plan for you, and is an adventuresome undertaking that can take you to new and rewarding places. He warns the reader that the adventure may be “unnerving or disorienting” – a warning which proves apt when he goes on to challenge institutionalized Christianity in a few ways, including what he calls *inverted Christianity,* in which the misguided wish for God to serve their purposes, instead of the other way around. He also holds a dim view of *cut and paste* Christianity, the practice of taking some parts of scripture and leaving others. But taking it all in is arguably, as warned, disorienting. And in the stories he tells about remarkable characters, both biblical figures and modern day people, who have taken great risks in the service of good, there too are unnerving moments - leaps of faith with potentially disastrous consequences.

Before recounting the extraordinary life choices of the individuals who are the meat of this book, Batterson takes us briefly to the Gallapagos islands, a locale he likens to Eden, where the abundance and variety of wild animals causes him to speculate about how challenging it must have been for Adam to follow God's command that he name them. Visiting a zoo after this trip, he is struck by the difference between the animals he saw in the wild and the caged animals on display. Gingerly, he brings this observation to his thinking on Christianity, proposing that maybe the church has a way of turning us into caged birds, removing the danger and challenge from our lives. To some extent, Batterson welcomes danger, even to*be* dangerous (to the Enemy). And the modern-day heroes he shows us do put themselves in harm's way in pursuit of ending injustice and human suffering. These are not caged birds, but wild goose-chasers!

Batterson identifies six types of cages to be avoided: responsibility, routine, assumptions, guilt, failure, and fear. He speaks out strongly against complacency in general, and he goes on to give some counsel on how to fight it. He wants us not to grow bored by allowing our daily responsibilities to supercede our obligation to follow the passion that God has given us. He states that he hopes reading his book will not be a casual experience, but will inspire us to action, to take chances, maybe even change our lives. This *is* an inspiring book. Yet if we all took the author's advice and followed God-ordained passions rather than pursuing a humble, responsible, routine career, I have to wonder who would keep the homefires burning, so to speak: do the simple if sometimes boring work that needs to be done. As in so many areas of life, it behooves one to seek balance. And if Batterson seems sometimes to be overbalanced on the side of adventure, perhaps he is just compensating for a day and age in which most of us are leaning fairly heavily the other way.

Within his framework of six cages, Batterson displays people whose lives stand as examples of overcoming the confining forces he warns against. The first of these practices *responsible irresponsibility*. The author is quite fond of such seemingly paradoxical language. He also talks about *successful failures*. And in addressing the second cage, routine, he says that the Holy Spirit both comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Growing accustomed to such turns of phrase, we are not surprised when, addressing his third cage, assumptions, he points out the dual nature of God, being at once Most High and Most Nigh. Personally, I find Batterson's penchant for conflating what might be considered mutually exclusive concepts to be stimulating. Meanwhile, his many stories of heroic people flesh out the narrative and keep it moving along.

A skillful writer and motivator, Batterson keeps us a little off balance. Some of his admonitions are just what we expect from a pastor, and some are not. He reminds us not to point the finger of blame or judgment at our neighbors. He tells us that we are surrounded by miracles. These are pretty standard-issue assertions. But then he uses modern and sometimes scientific terms and metaphors, and throws in a dash of self-deprecating humor, mentioning, for example, picking up his dog's poop. Through it all, his crux exhortation to chase the Wild Goose rings clearly. He says that there is a time to pray, and then there is a time to stop praying and take action. Christianity, he says, is not a noun, but a verb. And an action verb at that. He tells us not to wait for a sign from God before acting, but to act first. God, he says, will sanctify our expectations. Simultaneously, yet somehow without seeming to contradict himself, he advises against rushing things. “Hurry,” he writes, “kills everything from compassion to creativity.” Don't wait around too long but don't make too much haste. Pace is important to Batterson, and in the cadence of his writing and his variations of voice, as well as the gist of his advice, there is a certain... syncopation.

Act spontaneously! Pray imaginitvely! Wade in! Throw down your staff! Everywhere in this book, Batterson challenges us to take chances and to challenge ourselves. Peppered throughout the text and arranged neatly at sections' ends are lists of questions for the reader, which I found a welcome aid in cementing concepts in mind and bringing Batterson's arguments home to my own circumstances and life. I could imagine responding to these questions in a small group environment, and indeed I think this book is designed to lend itself well to a study group or book club.

Three cages remain: guilt, failure, and fear. In offering means of escaping the fetters these emotions bind us with, Batterson writes of learning better to forgive oneself, of recognizing the transforming power present when things don't go our way or according to our plans, and of directing our natural trepidation into proper, productive channels such as fearing missed opportunities instead of fearing failure. As he continues to illustrate his points with examples of human heroism, we come to the unlikely story of a man named Mike Foster passing out bibles at a pornography convention in Las Vegas. The daring of the man! Batterson goes on to discuss the difference between dumb courage and smart courage, and I am impressed by a sense as the book draws to a close that this author has displayed a daring of his own, has taken some calculated risks with his prose and maybe even flown by the seat of his pants a little. The Wild Goose, he writes, is eternally elusive. It will not let us down. In the same spirit, I will say that with this brave, intelligent book, Batterson does not let his readers down.

Eugene Uttley 12/26/2012