

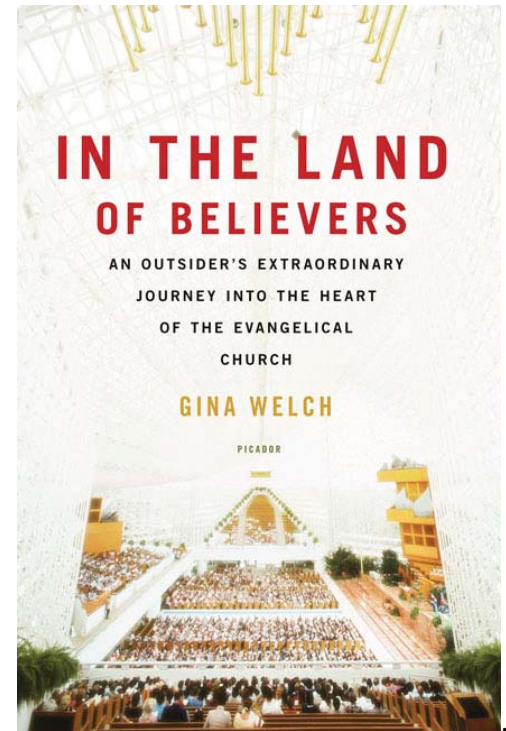
READING GROUP GUIDE

In the Land of Believers

**An Outsider's Extraordinary Journey
into the Heart of the Evangelical Church**

by Gina Welch

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *In the Land of Believers* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *In the Land of Believers*.

About the Book

Ever since evangelical Christians rose to national prominence, mainstream America has tracked their every move with a nervous eye. But in spite of this vigilance, our understanding hasn't gone beyond the caricatures. Aiming to find out more, Gina Welch, a young secular Jew from Berkeley, joined Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church. Over the course of nearly two years, Welch immersed herself in the life and language of the devout. Alive to the meaning behind the music and the mind behind the slogans, Welch recognized the allure of evangelicalism, even for the godless, realizing that the congregation met needs and answered questions she didn't know she had.

About the Author

Gina Welch, a 2001 graduate of Yale University, teaches English at George Washington University. Her writing has previously appeared in *Meridian*, *Time Out New York*, and *Playboy*. This is her first book.

Discussion Questions

1. What were your impressions of conservative evangelical Christians before beginning to read *In the Land of Believers*? How about your impressions of people with backgrounds like Gina's? Were there aspects of her initial characterizations about life and people at Thomas Road that you disagreed with? How would you characterize her interactions with Lacey and Woody?
2. How does the church's move to a larger facility represent other shifts occurring in the church? In what ways does Thomas Road serve to replace traditional community?
3. How does music contribute to life at Thomas Road?
4. What were some of the initial barriers to connection Gina found at Thomas Road? What did they reveal about her background and character, and how did she end up transcending those barriers? Which obstacles to connection remained in place throughout her experience at Thomas Road?
5. Gina describes a feeling she often experienced at church as Feeling X, a sense that something was communicating with the "ear of the heart." Have you ever experienced a similar feeling? What do you think precipitates it?
6. How did the church grieve Jerry Falwell's death? Were there characteristics of their mourning that felt new to you? How did the church seem to change after Falwell died?
7. How is prayer a part of life at Thomas Road? How is it a part of each believer's "personal relationship" with God? How are personal desires funneled through prayer?
8. How does Gina's perspective on the purpose of the Great Commission--the Christian drive to win souls--change over the course of her time undercover? Do you agree with her changing perception of the motivation to evangelize?
9. What are some of the different ways Thomas Road goes about enticing its members into giving money? Are there problems inherent in these methods, or are they a necessary part of running a large church?
10. What is the basis for evangelical happiness, according to Gina? What lessons do you think she learned about happiness from evangelicals, and what aspects of their happiness could she not appropriate? Why?

11. In “Closeted and Fearful,” Gina writes, “gay rights [are] inexorably civil rights: to stand against them was to stand against the natural passage of time.” Do you believe that’s true? Do you agree that exposure breeds tolerance, and that if evangelical Christians had more real-life experience with gays and lesbians their attitudes on homosexuality would shift?
12. How does Gina’s relationship with Alice affect her understanding of evangelical life? How does it impact her feeling about writing a book undercover?
13. How does Ray package his conversion story differently for the group at the Anchorage Rescue Mission and Anchorage Baptist Temple? What do those differences suggest?
14. What were the differences between evangelizing to children and evangelizing to the homeless on the mission to Alaska? What aspects of the Gospel message were emphasized? How did you feel reading the scenes where the group witnessed to children? What were your early experiences with religion like? What feelings did they bring up for you?
15. At the Vacation Bible School, what did you think of the message of Marvin Jubb? What would you have done with Clara had you been in Gina’s position?
16. How does the wildlife and wilderness imagery in Alaska serve as a metaphor or motif in the book for interacting with the mysteries of life?
17. Why did Gina leave church when she did? How might you have handled departure differently?
18. How do you think the Alice and Ray perceived Gina in the end? Were you surprised by their response to the news of who she really was?
19. Most people don’t have the luxury of going undercover to better understand people profoundly different from them. Is it possible to transcend these differences in our daily lives, or does it take unrealistic circumstances to truly connect?

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