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Even amidst the pain, author manages to show kindness

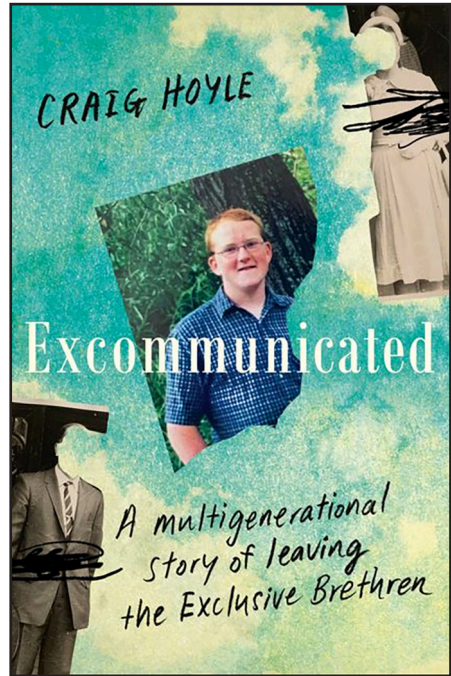
Excommunicated. A multigenerational story of leaving the Exclusive Brethren, by Craig Hoyle. Auckland: Harper Collins, 2023. 327 pages. ISBN 9871775542018

IN THIS deeply personal memoir, *Sunday Star Times* journalist Craig Hoyle turns his lens on his own family and the destructive effects upon them of their religion.

Growing up in an Exclusive Brethren family meant closeness and warmth, but it also meant strict discipline, public prayers every day, and not really having schoolfriends for young Craig. It also meant there were family members nobody talked about because they had transgressed increasingly arbitrary sets of rules, or called out high-handed or incompetent leadership.

It was an upbringing that imbued in Hoyle a deep sense of personal guilt for such crimes as secretly bringing a schoolmate home to play, but as he grew older it became increasingly clear that he was in danger of joining the shunned and excluded. Craig was gay.

With apparently unflinching honesty, Hoyle examines all his quirky and



talented family, those who stayed with the Brethren and those who left, and why

A Protestant Christian cult founded in the UK in the early 19th century, the Exclusive Brethren had always been a tightly managed community, but through the later 20th century became subject to leaders who closed their flock off from the wider world with increasingly strict prohibitions on mixing with others, engaging with technology and even reading the news. They also encouraged alcohol consumption on the grounds that it facilitated honest communication.

The effects of these diktats could be heartbreaking. Those excluded lost husbands or wives, brothers and sisters. Children grew up without one or the other of their parents, without particular aunts and uncles, or with

grandparents living but dead to them.

Deep hostilities eroded trust. In a sect as small as the Brethren, community is face to face. Everybody knows your name. Everybody knows your face. Conformity was all. And the word of the Man Of God, the Brethren's leader, is absolute.

But young Craig had heard whispers that the church's leaders were far from perfect. Hoyle goes into some detail about the alcoholism and the sexual misbehaviour of some at the top of the Brethren's leadership.

Much of this he only learned properly after he left the church and began investigating it properly, but some was already apparent to the teenage Craig as he struggled, and failed, to reconcile his sexuality with the church that represented all that was familiar and safe to him, whether it was comfortable or not.

It says much about the confidence of the church's point of view that it was their attempts to erase Hoyle's sexual 'deviancy' through bullying and prescription drugs that finally drove him from the church. He wasn't the first one to go.

Outside the church, he had unexpected support from relatives he had been taught to fear, because they had also been excommunicated.

This is very much a book about community. It's about Hoyle's family, those happy within the church, those guilt-broken by the church's demands, and those free of the Brethren. It's about the Brethren themselves, of course (Craig Hoyle: life after excommunication, 2023).

I was struck by Hoyle's continued respect for much of what he was brought up with. Although his childhood was experienced as one of relative isolation and deprivation, he has many happy memories.

His parents were desperately unhappy, and the health problems they suffered, both physical and mental, created terrible problems for their children, but Hoyle now has the distance to be objective, and in that objectivity, kind.

Craig Hoyle went on to work for *60 Minutes* in Australia, TV3 and Radio Live in New Zealand and as chief news director for the *Sunday Star-Times*.

Reference

Craig Hoyle: life after excommunication. (2023, November 15). RNZ *Nine to Noon*. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoon/audiod/2018915445/craig-hoyle-life-after-excommunication>