

Bridging the Divide



Book Reviews

White Picket Fences: Turning Toward Love in a World Divided by Privilege
By Amy Julia Becker
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Audio CD \$19.98 213 pp.

Reviewed by Jane Bailey

Author Amy Julia Becker is clearly a woman of privilege by almost any definition of privilege that you care to use. Her schooling pedigree includes graduation from Princeton University and Princeton Theological Seminary. She is the wife of a boarding-school headmaster and lives with her loving family in a beautiful home set in a bucolic New England town. Becker is a well-educated, well-traveled, well-published white woman who knows what it means to live behind the white picket fence of privilege. Her book *White Picket Fences: Turning Toward Love in a World Divided by Privilege* invites us to walk through an open gate into her privileged world and examine flaws that aren't always visible on the surface. Becker reminds us that no one and nothing is perfect, even behind manicured lawns.

The author opens by readily admitting the breadth of her privilege, which draws the reader into an implicit conversation about its meaning. In what unique ways are each of us privileged? This begs the question, who then is not privileged? The author's upbringing in the idyllic southern town of Edenton, North Carolina, with her African American babysitter, gardener, and housekeeper, sets up the quintessential narrative of the haves and the have-nots. Becker asks the central social justice-themed question of the

book: If I'm privileged, and that hurts the people who aren't, what can we all do about it? What, indeed, is God asking us to do? And how, personally, do I prepare myself to help, offer answers?

Becker's struggle to reconcile her privileged world with that of the unprivileged becomes our struggle as we walk with her through a childhood and adolescence focused on grueling achievement. The self-inflicted pressure to succeed dims the glow of a privileged education.

As we breathe a sigh of relief when the brass ring of a budding family life is on the horizon, the author's first child is born with Down syndrome, knocking Becker off her pedestal of privilege. Her earlier book, *A Good and Perfect Gift: Faith, Expectations, and a Little Girl Named Penny* (Bethany, 2011), beautifully narrates the difficult walk from the valley of crushed expectations to the heights of acceptance. That book was named one of the top 10 religion books of 2011 by *Publishers Weekly*. Penny plays prominently in *White Picket Fences* as the gift she is . . . and the privilege she adds to her family.

We voyeuristically listen and watch as the Becker family shares the privileged joys of great literature. The author's joy is brought up short, however, when she discovers the dearth of multicultural literature on their bookshelves. That pivotal discovery moves the narrative from a simple question of the meaning of privilege to the heart of social justice: How do we take off the blinders of our privilege? Can we begin with a simple expansion of our bookshelves to open our eyes to the diversity of the world? Is that enough?

The answer is a resounding "No! That is not enough!" and we move toward the meat of the book: the revelation that privilege, with its imbalance of wealth, power, education, social standing, or opportunity, requires sacrifice to balance the scales of justice. We are faced with the chal-

lenge: As a person of privilege, what is there for me to say? More important, what is there for me to do?

The author looks to the bible for conceptions of identity that allow for diversity without division. She concludes, "Love draws the vulnerable out of suffering and draws the powerful out of isolation." Therein is the bridge across the privilege divide. We have walked with Becker behind the fence of privilege and found our common flawed humanity, privileged and unprivileged, can be healed by love. Becker argues that it is love that opens channels of communication across iniquitable social boundaries, quells

our fear, and overcomes our anger in the fight for social justice. It is love that brings the privileged out of their gated communities to begin the real work—the action work.

We are not provided with a to-do list. There is no neat way to assuage privilege-guilt, though the author suggests we begin with prayer: "Prayer is not a way to avoid action, but it is an acknowledgment of the futility of action without God's help." We also have the Church's teachings on social justice, exemplified by the words of Pope Benedict XVI in his 2005 encyclical *Deus caritas est*: "[T]o say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbor . . . closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God."

The strength of the book is in the questions we are forced to confront. The book is an excellent means for faith-based book clubs to explore social justice from a Christian perspective. Reading *White Picket Fences*, like prayer, serves as a "catalytic act" calling us to action. It stirs us to ask what the other side of privilege says, to read the new shelf of books by underrepresented voices such as the Beckers have added to their library, and to truly begin to listen to one another. Amy Julia Becker leaves it to us to write the coda of action, one reader at a time. And write we must.

Jane Bailey, Ed.D., is a freelance writer who lives in Litchfield, Connecticut. She is a retired dean of education and university provost. Jane enjoys writing creative nonfiction where she explores matters of the heart. In the interest of full disclosure, Dr. Bailey serves on the book-launch team for *White Picket Fences*.

The Highest Gift

Rambam's Ladder: A Meditation on Generosity and Why It Is Necessary to Give

By Julie Salamon
Workman Publishing
Company, Inc., 2003

Reviewed by Valerie Kent

One of my not-so-secret pleasures is checking out other people's personal libraries. I always find something there that intrigues me and makes me want to borrow it. One amazing coincidence was finding a copy of a book written by a high school classmate of mine in England in the library of the man from Connecticut I later married. I knew that this writer, Alan Coren, was a very good student who had gone on to become the editor of the satirical magazine *Punch*, but I did not know he had written a humorous book that would travel across the Atlantic and end up where it did.

Anyway, I digress. What I want to write about is a book I found in the wall of bookcases belonging to my brother and sister-in-law when I went home to visit them this summer. They must have kept every book they had ever bought for their two children throughout the past 20-plus years. The shelves also contained their own their reading choices, many of which were best sellers. Tucked away among the fiction, I found this little gem of a book called

Rambam's Ladder. I read it avidly every night in bed when I couldn't sleep and I brought it home with me to America.

The title had immediately caught my eye, since I vaguely knew that Rambam was another name for Maimonides, the Jewish scholar, mystic, and physician of the 12th century. I also knew that, among many other writings, he had constructed a "ladder of giving" with eight levels as a kind of stairway to heaven (although Jews don't believe in heaven—let's say a stairway to achieving righteousness). The lowest level of the ladder was giving money reluctantly and the highest level was giving someone the gift of self-reliance. In between there were various levels ranging from giving the proper amount, which included a discussion on tithing (i.e., one-tenth of one's income); to give only after being asked to do so; to give before being asked but in such a way that the recipient feels a sense of shame for needing help; to give to a good cause but making sure you get the appropriate recognition; to give a personal gift to someone you know without revealing who you are; and the next-to-last step, to give to someone not known to you without revealing your identity.

Some of these steps may seem like splitting hairs—Maimonides was an expert in that. Even though he was kept

very busy in his profession as a physician, he spent much of his life studying the Torah and explicating it to his fellow Jews, with all the many intricacies of fulfilling the law and the commandments. One of his most famous books was called *The Guide for the Perplexed*. In a biography of Maimonides by the writer Sherwin B. Nuland, he was described as a "renaissance man" centuries before the Renaissance. He knew many languages, among them Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew. He had lived in Spain, Morocco, and Egypt, where he was the physician to a sultan. He was very familiar with other religions, particularly Islam, having masqueraded as a Muslim when his family lived in Spain.

Reading *Rambam's Ladder* was an eye-opener to me. Though I did not consider myself a particularly generous person, I felt that I gave according to my means. I had a kind of conscience-satisfying regimen for giving. Every month I would send \$50 to a different worthy cause and feel that that was my contribution to the needs of the world. Of course, if I had really thought about it, it certainly wasn't tithing! Now, I don't even do that. In the spirit of anonymity, I will refrain from saying what I do give, but rest assured, it is definitely not "generous." In fact, lately, I myself have been on the receiving end of gen-

erosity, without even asking for help.

This book challenged me to rethink the subject of giving. The author interviews many people involved in the profession of philanthropy: millionaires, heads of foundations, fundraisers, people who receive recognition, people who prefer to keep their wealth quiet in case they get inundated with requests. Having worked in this area myself at various times, it brought back memories, not always pleasant, of an uneasy feeling about cultivating people with wealth in the hope of a donation. The author also explores her own feelings toward personal encounters she has had with needy people and her conflicted reaction to them at times.

Money is a difficult subject for many people to come to terms with. Sometimes we never seem to have enough, other times we have money to spare and can't wait to spend it or give it away. For those of us uneasy about our giving habits, I recommend Julie Salamon's book as a first step in understanding their own mixed feelings on this topic.

Valerie Kent is a part-time writer/editor/proofreader, who worked at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut, for 26 years before retiring in 1997. She has been an Episcopalian, a Billy Graham convert, a Congregationalist, and a Jew, in that order. One thing she has not been is a Catholic.

