

When theology fails

After Ruth Everhart was raped, she had to rebuild her beliefs about God's will.

by [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Ruined

By Ruth Everhart
Tyndale

Ruth Everhart's memoir is prefaced by a publisher's note warning that the book may offend because it includes violent events and vulgar language. I confess that as I read this, I chuckled darkly. It seemed unnecessarily apologetic. As the back of the book reveals, it's the story of the night in Everhart's senior year of college when two armed assailants broke into her college apartment and raped her and her roommates at gunpoint. The least a reader can do, in response to the critical witness Everhart provides, is to shift uncomfortably in her seat.

As it happens, Everhart is a careful narrator. There is nothing salacious about her telling of the events of that night or the process of grief, fear, and reorientation that followed them. The experience of reading her story is difficult, but there are no unnecessary details: this is neither a true-crime novel nor a sensational tabloid report.

Though the statistics were different in 1978 when the crime was committed, the sexual violence Everhart reports was unusual even for that time. She and her apartment mates were "perfect victims." No one could have suggested that alcohol consumption or anything about their attire "contributed" to their assault: they were home, asleep. Everhart wore a long, flannel nightgown. This crime was also unusual in its randomness. A 2014 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the vast majority of victims of sexual assault know their rapist; rapes by strangers make up only 12.9 percent of those reported.

Also unusual is that the perpetrators were caught, tried, and convicted. Those attuned to American history may wonder if the police and court system's successes are related to the fact that the perpetrators were black men—"clowns" in the odd word choice of the women's ER doctor—and the victims were white Christian women.

Everhart would not think us cynical for wondering; she wonders herself. And it is her wondering—about race and guilt, shame and suffering, injustice and the goodness of God—that renders this book profoundly important.

Everhart grew up in the Dutch Reformed Church, as deeply situated in the theological universe of her community as a person can be. She was educated in Dutch Reformed schools, and her parents taught in those same schools. She wrote papers on Christian doctrine in high school; she has clear memories of pastors and sanctuaries from her earliest days. Theological questions and convictions shaped her

personal experience and community life. Her story is unusual in this sense as well.

Following the break-in and rape, she felt anger, shame, and fear. She also struggled mightily with the Calvinist faith of her childhood, which taught the absolute sovereignty of God. Nothing happens outside of God's will. So why, then, had her life been ruined? Why had she and her friends suffered so?

People have always been tempted to answer the questions of those who grieve with responses of blame: you must have done something. This was true in the time of Job, and it's still true today. Forty years ago, a traumatized Everhart wondered if there had been something in her past that rendered her marred, deserving of such divine retribution. Worse still was the stigma attached to the sexual nature of the crime: the housemates wondered at first if they should tell anyone, or if that would make it worse. Everyone would know of their ruination and might wonder, too, about their complicity.

Even more startling to Everhart was the conviction pervading the theological air she breathed that this violent rape must have been of God: all things are of God; all things can be used by God. A budding theologian, newly suffering, she could no longer accept this proposition.

Though many mainline Christians don't believe in God's sovereignty in that sense, our churches are not above victim-blaming: witness the tension around speaking of Michael Brown (or any number of others), the survivor in the Brock Turner case, or those who find themselves living in poverty. We're a lot more prone to works righteousness—or just blindness to our privilege—than we'd like to admit.

Indeed, this is the morally complex ground Everhart occupies: the "perfect" victims are assaulted by young black men. In telling the story with a vividness intended to locate readers in the moment, she uses dialect; she focuses on the details of her attackers which, as it happens, are some of those stereotypically associated with black men living in poor neighborhoods in the 1970s. Though she has an ear for dialogue and an eye for detail, one might ask: Does this depiction do more harm than good?

Ultimately, Everhart takes up the question of how this event made her fearful of racial difference in a reflexive way that challenged her more liberal sensibilities. And then she seeks reconciliation, joining a multiracial church and participating in other forms of justice work. She retrains herself so that her reflexes reflect the love of God

for all people, realizing that this must be a critical part of her healing.

Though the context of Everhart's rape and its racial dynamics are unusual, the fact of it is not. Approximately one in five American women will be raped or otherwise sexually assaulted in their lifetime; the risk is even higher within some demographics. This reality is reason enough for clergy to read this book: Everhart's reflection on the theological meaning of her suffering will surely assist them in ministering to survivors of sexual assault. The myriad ways in which police, doctors, professors, clergy, and campus pastors fail Everhart and her friends are instructive.

As a pastor, I return constantly to what Paul Tillich called "the riddle of inequality," which "our finite minds cannot solve." How is it that some have so much and others so little? How is it that suffering is so often compounded, and blessing appears to aggregate?

Everhart never solves the riddle, but she seeks and receives healing—perhaps, as Tillich suggests, through "the certainty of divine participations" which "gives us the courage to endure." The college student who angrily rejects Calvin eventually becomes a Presbyterian pastor.

Ruined is a triumph of meaning making over the disintegrating forces of violence and sin, even as it illumines our continued participation in rape culture and our continued need for work for racial justice. Everhart offers a prophetic word for all who encounter trauma, and a necessary pastoral one: *Remember that you are infinitely precious, no matter what happened to you.*