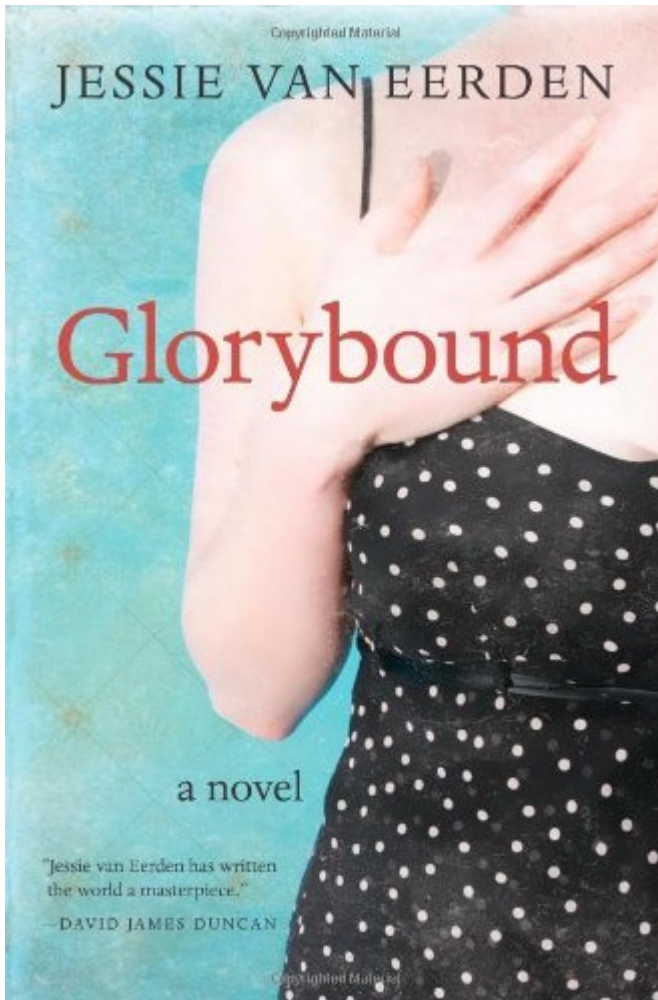


An ear for faith

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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In Review



Glorybound

by Jessie van Eerden

WordFarm

Glorybound takes place in a dying West Virginia town amidst people who are snake-handlers and prophets, to whom biblical language is as natural as breathing, and

who cast their lives into exaggerated dramas.

Two sisters, Aimee and Crystal Lemley, have taken different vows in response to their father's abandonment of their family and their mother's subsequent emotional withdrawal. Based on their interpretation of God's messages to them, Crystal has vowed silence, and Aimee has vowed chastity. When an Americorps volunteer comes to Cuzzert to teach GED classes and begins to work with the Lemleys' imprisoned father, the sense they have tried to make of the world begins to unravel.

For all its engagement with the margins of American Christianity—young women who think they are prophets, young men trying to prove something by handling snakes, doomsdayers trying to convince the world of their special knowledge—the book avoids slipping into vaudeville. This is because van Eerden has an exquisite ear for the language of religion. She knows religion's power to create and exploit meaning, but she also knows its explanatory limits. She explores the territory of belief as it attempts to map onto experience, and she seems to trust her strange characters to work out answers to impossible questions—and then to have those answers challenged by life itself.

Each of the characters longs for what seems impossible in Cuzzert's stifling environment: to know and be known without judgment. This is a fundamental desire at the heart of all their choices, even as they close themselves off from relationship and retreat into various defenses. Something, mysteriously, is at work on them, despite them, something that will not let despair and isolation be the final word.

Ultimately, *Glorybound* is a comedy, in the classic sense, like much of the work of Clyde Edgerton, Lee Smith, and other contemporary Southern writers with an openness to Christianity's oddities and a love for the people who populate it. Van Eerden succeeds not in talking about mystery or human response to it, not in making her characters mouthpieces for various worldviews, but in that very basic thing to fiction writing: what Eudora Welty called "making feeling felt."