



Immanuel

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Matthew McNaught

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At what point does faith turn into tyranny? In *Immanuel*, winner of the inaugural Fitzcarraldo Editions Essay Prize, Matthew McNaught explores his upbringing in an evangelical Christian community in Winchester. As he moved away from the faith of his childhood in the early 2000s, a group of his church friends were pursuing it to its more radical fringes. They moved to Nigeria to join a community of international disciples serving TB Joshua, a charismatic millionaire pastor whose purported gifts of healing and prophecy attracted vast crowds to his Lagos ministry, the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN). Years later, a number of these friends left SCOAN with accounts of violence, sexual abuse, sleep deprivation and public shaming. In reconnecting with his old friends, McNaught realized that their journey into this cult-like community was directly connected to the teachings and tendencies of the church of their childhood. Yet speaking to them awakened a yearning for this church that, despite everything, he couldn't shake off. Was the church's descent into hubris and division separable from the fellowship and mutual sustenance of its early years? Was it possible to find community and connection without dogma and tribalism? Blending essay, memoir and reportage, *Immanuel* is an exceptional debut about community, doubt, and the place of faith in the twenty-first century.

'Acknowledging the attractions of communal worship while being alert to its profound awkwardness is one of the things that Matthew McNaught does very well in Immanuel. The book is in part an account of his own experience growing up in Immanuel, a Christian community founded in Southampton in the 1970s. But it is also a journalistic investigation into the Synagogue Church of All Nations – or SCOAN – a Nigerian megachurch.... McNaught writes well about the social pressures of collective worship and the ways these have intensified in the age of the internet. He and his friends had a term for feeling compelled to appear slain in the spirit: the "courtesy drop".... But despite all the fakery, despite the abuse and the charlatanism of SCOAN, McNaught is sensitive to the fact that charismatic churches appeal to values that lie beyond the reach of capitalism and contemporary politics.'

Jon Day, London Review of Books

'Matthew McNaught is a strong and welcome new voice in essayism, clear-sighted and hugely empathetic. In this deeply affecting account of his own spiritual journey, he weaves in and out of the byways of religious belief once known as "enthusiasm", charting the body-shaking, mind-breaking experiences of friends and strangers alike. By turns cynical, doubtful, wounded and yearning, his words give astonishing shape to the space that only faith can fill.'

Marina Benjamin, author of *Insomnia*

Matthew McNaught

Matthew McNaught has written for the Guardian Long Reads and n+1. He lives in Southampton, where he works in mental health. He won the inaugural Fitzcarraldo Editions Essay Prize for Immanuel, his first book.