

TRUE BELIEVERS

by Kurt Andersen (2012)

I have not read the author before but was looking forward to this book based on various reviews I had read. His narrator is Karen Hollander, a very fit 64-year-old, insulin-dependent diabetic woman, who is an eminent, left-leaning jurist with an impressive CV. Karen is divorced with overachieving children she worries she neglected during her ascent through the legal ranks. Now she is devoted to a bright, intelligent 17-year-old granddaughter Waverly, who shares similar political views to her grandmother. We learn Karen has recently declined nomination to the US Supreme Court because of a well buried event in her past likely to be uncovered during the relentless investigation that follows such a nomination.

Karen has written several books in the past and is now preparing a memoir, in which she plans to tell all. Much of "True Believers" involves detailed descriptions of a sixties upbringing in northern Illinois and spent in close association with two male friends, Alex and Chuck, with the three traced from elementary school to their freeman year at Harvard. Alex is now a world famous artists and film-maker. Eventually we discover Chuck was killed during the political turmoil of 1968 but I will not spoil things by revealing any more of the plot than that.

Andersen had me engaged very quickly. The plot construction and development was also good although there was a tendency to ramble and I felt less well engaged by page 100 than I had been on page 2. The insights into American sixties zeitgeist are reputed to be excellent although I did not find kids just about to enter high school playing elaborate James Bond-style games involving fake pistols that make realistic noises and fireworks simulating explosions particularly credible. Professional reviewers have waxed lyrical about Andersen's wit and satire but I was not convinced, possibly because I'm not American. The complete absence of diabetic complications in someone insulin dependent for more than 40 years also seemed a little far fetched to this medical reviewer, but I am no Endocrinologist.

With all the early Ian Fleming allusions, it is inevitable that "True Believers" develops into a taut, thriller-like, page-turner culminating in the incriminating events of 1968. For some reason I do not understand, the author then gives us another three or four chapters of somewhat cloying late life love story that I did not think added anything worthwhile. I also had considerable trouble understanding Karen and what motivated her.

This book is well worth reading but I can't help feeling it could have been better, even if only for the omission of the last few chapters.

Four stars out of five

Reviewed by Rob Hitchens
January 2013

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