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Book Review: Almost Everything: Notes on Hope

Ann Brunjes

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BOOK REVIEWS

Anne Lamott, *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018).

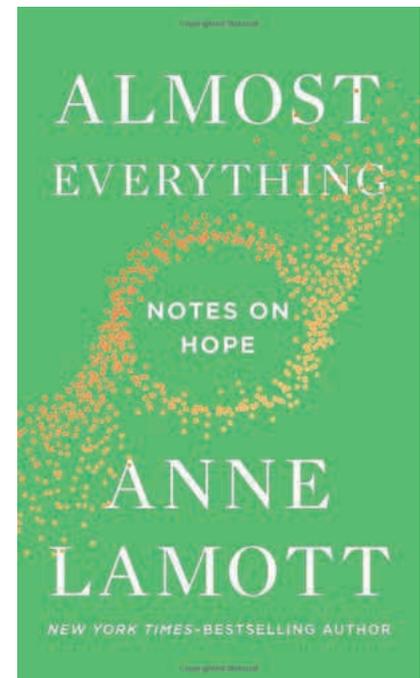
Ann Brunjes

I first encountered Anne LaMott when I was a graduate student. The book was *Bird by Bird* (1994), a funny and refreshingly useful exploration of the practice of writing. I immediately incorporated chapters of the book into my own writing pedagogy, and 20 years later, I still do. LaMott's distinctive voice, by turns self-deprecating and self-assured, is like that of a bossy, successful big sister, acutely aware of her own inclination to domineer but trying to tone it down so she can actually help you. This is evidently a voice readers find appealing: Lamott has had seven novels and ten works of nonfiction published in the last 38 years. *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope* (Penguin, 2018) can be grouped with most of Lamott's recent non-fiction work: vaguely spiritual and sort of self-help. The book seems intended as an emotional and spiritual pick-me-up for an audience challenged by life in the Trump-era United States.

I must confess up front: this book – the entire spiritually-tinged self-help genre – is not my cup of tea, though it is and always has been wildly popular with American readers. We Americans do love our self-help manuals. Whether we're charting a course for the after-life with Jonathan Edwards' 1740 "Personal Narrative" or shedding our soul-crushing stuff via Marie Kondo's *Life Changing Magic of Tidying-Up*, Americans possess a touching hopefulness that if we just do *it* right, whether "it" be picking up after ourselves or finding Jesus, we can arrive at nirvana on this worldly plane. On the one hand, this is a lovely quality. It is optimistic;

it is progressive; it is fundamental to some interpretations of what it means to be American. One might argue with equal vigor, however, that it is also deluded. Jefferson and the authors of the Declaration wanted to ensure the right to *pursue* happiness, not a right to *be* happy. But once you dangle happiness in front of most humans, we skip right over the journey and head straight for the thing itself: joy; fulfillment; contentment; lasting and rich internal peace, and hey how about a new Lexus, while we're at it? The self-help genre taps this rich vein of desire. It offers answers, of the practical, emotional, and spiritual varieties, and who doesn't want clarity and insight

in this cultural moment of information overload and near-constant rage? But – and this is important – books like *Almost Everything* aren't simply how-to manuals. Most have an overlay of the spiritual to exert serious oomph. Marie Kondo isn't simply showing you how to fold a fitted sheet; with that proper folding comes access to joy. Joy! If we were being encouraged to tidy up simply because, by some aesthetic standards (not mine, but that's another story), tidy is more beautiful than messy, we might dismiss the drive to tidy as shallow and insignificant. But isn't it worth color-coding your shirts if it's going to bring you joy? You bet it is.



In fairness, LaMott doesn't promise her readers perfect contentment; she focuses more on the journey and less on the outcome. The book contains "everything I know about almost everything, that I think applies to almost everyone, that might help you someday" (6). What she claims to know is mostly

modest and unobjectionable: pay attention to the natural world; accept the presence of a “higher power”; write and tell stories to make sense of the world; reject hatred; heal yourself; forgive your screwed-up family. In short:

It’s ridiculous how hard life is. Denial and avoidance are unsuccessful strategies, but truth and awareness mend. Writing, creation, and stories are food. (98)

alert – finds friendship with a neighbor who is dying of cancer, the two of them commit suicide, together. A sad story, indeed, and one might read it as a parable about the wages of atheism. As Lamott writes, “Kelly did not have to have a clue about what a higher power was, but she refused to doubt her atheism. She was a fundamentalist” (132). While a reader might dislike Lamott’s judgment, we are presumably reading a book titled “Almost Everything” to

It is disappointing that Lamott is weakest when writing about faith, which has sustained her through many dark days. I would have preferred a bracing defense of Christian belief as a path to true happiness to the book’s sneaky ecumenism. A self-help book without the courage of its own convictions does fall rather flat. And yet, for its kind, *Almost Everything* isn’t a bad book. I can happily recommend Chapter Five, “Don’t Let Them Get You to Hate Them,” to anyone desperate to navigate in a hopeful way the poisonous noise that passes for our current political discourse. At her best, Lamott comes across as a good soul who wants to help. For the sincere searcher looking to grow, this book might provide a gentle nudge on the long road toward self-improvement.

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LaMott delivers her truths – her self-help method, as it were – in easily digested bits, with no scolding, usually through stories about friends and family members. One leaves the book feeling comforted and encouraged, though hardly enlightened.

The book’s limpness is grounded in the intellectual flimsiness of the author’s philosophy. While LaMott isn’t shy about revealing her political leanings, her exploration of God is both dishonest and insulting. The heartbreaking story of her friend Kelly, an atheist who abandons AA because she couldn’t stomach “the God stuff,” is most problematic. Though Kelly – spoiler

learn what the author thinks, and it is unsurprising that Lamott, an avowed Christian, is dismayed by her friend’s rejection of a divine presence. But the story closes with a sleight-of-hand. Of Kelly’s death, she writes, “I was glad that Kelly was numb and not alone; that she was with a friend, the loving woman upstairs, which is another good name for God” (143). Kelly may not have known it, in other words, but she was in fact a believer. How insulting to Kelly, and how condescending to the reader. Should the reader conclude that we are all believers, even if we think we’re not? How convenient for the believers! And should we think suicide, as long as it’s done in the company of a good friend, is an affirmation of faith?



Ann Brunjes is Professor in the Department of English.