

# Christian writer Rachel Held Evans dies at age 37

May 5, 2019

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Rachel Held Evans, a popular progressive Christian writer and speaker, died May 4 at age 37 after a brief illness.

Evans had been in a medically induced coma for several weeks and never returned to an alert state.

Her husband, Dan, informed followers and supporters of his wife's death on her website.

"This entire experience is surreal. I keep hoping it's a nightmare from which I'll awake. I feel like I'm telling someone else's story," her husband Dan Evans wrote in [an update on Evan's blog](#).

"I cannot express how much the support means to me and our kids. To everyone who has prayed, called, texted, driven, flown, given of themselves physically and financially to help ease this burden: Thank you. We are privileged. Rachel's presence in this world was a gift to us all and her work will long survive her."

## Hospitalized for flu complications

[On April 14, Evans, who was particularly gifted at using social media to connect with her readers, tweeted](#) that she had been admitted to the hospital with a "flu + UTI combo and a severe allergic reaction" to antibiotics, asking for prayer and—with the characteristic humor she often used to defuse difficult conversations—lamenting she would miss "Game of Thrones."

Later, [in an update on her website](#), Dan Evans, said that she began having “unexpected symptoms” while receiving treatment for an infection and that doctors found her brain was experiencing constant seizures. Doctors had placed her in a medically induced coma while working to determine the cause and treatment, he said.

## Influential writer



(Courtesy photo by  
Maki Evans)

Evans is best known for her popular blog and best-selling books, including New York Times best-seller *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, *Searching for Sunday* and, [most recently, \*Inspired\*](#). She also served on President Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

In her books and blog posts, she wrote openly about her faith journey, which led her from Bryan College—a conservative evangelical school known for promoting belief in a literal, six-day creation—to [the mainline Episcopal Church](#). Along the way, she chronicled her faith, doubt, honest questions and evolving beliefs with a sense of humor.

That didn’t come without controversy, including pushback from more conservative Christians over *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, which celebrated an egalitarian view of women’s roles in both marriage and the church.

But in her writing, she rarely lapsed into us-versus-them arguments, instead presenting a vision of the church as a place with room for everyone.

# Influential encourager

[A number of women](#) said during an online prayer vigil they would not have pursued ministry if not for Evans, and others said the only reason they had hung onto faith amid doubt was because of Evans.

Fellow writers praised Evans for sharing the considerable platform she has built, both on her blog and at “Why Christian?” and “Evolving Faith,” the conferences she co-founded for evolving or progressive Christians who aren’t sure where they belong on the spiritual landscape.

The news of Evans’ hospitalization had been met with an outpouring of support from readers, writers and Christian leaders, both [conservative](#) and progressive.

## Upbringing in evangelicalism

Evans was raised in a nondenominational, evangelical Christian family in Dayton, Tenn.—the home, she liked to point out, of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, the watershed case about teaching evolution in schools that caused many conservative Christians to feel alienated from the American mainstream.

She joked about the prizes she won as a kid for having all the answers when it came to Christianity, such as the time she won the “Best Christian Attitude Award.”

But as a student at Bryan, Evans began asking tough questions about her faith, like why God would send people to hell, which she wrote about in her first book. *Evolving in Monkey Town* was published in 2010 and later re-released as *Faith Unraveled*.

Evans brought her sense of humor to those questions in 2012’s *A Year of*

*Biblical Womanhood*, in which she took the Bible's instructions for women to hilarious extremes and shared what she learned from women of diverse faiths, including Amish and Jewish women.

## Move away from evangelicalism

When she was growing up, the word “evangelical” had seemed synonymous to her with “real” or “authentic,” she [told Religion News Service](#) several years ago. She finally abandoned the label in 2014, after a number of evangelical Christians canceled sponsorships for children in need after the charity World Vision announced it would employ people in same-sex marriages. (World Vision later reversed that decision.)

That incident “confirmed what I’d been suspecting for a while—that my values were simply out of line with the evangelical culture’s values,” she said. “And by then, I’d just grown weary of fighting for a label that no longer fit.”

She wrote about her subsequent journey away from church and what kept leading her back in 2015’s *Searching for Sunday*, and about rediscovering a love for Scripture in 2018’s *Inspired*.

She worshipped with her family at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland, Tenn.

“Death is a part of life,” Evans wrote this year in a Facebook post at the beginning of Lent, the solemn time of penance and fasting many Christians observe leading up to Easter.

“My prayer for you this season is that you make time to celebrate that reality, and to grieve that reality, and that you will know you are not alone. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”