Lutheran Laestadianism is a reformist, revivalist movement from the 1850s in Scandinavia with roughly 100,000 members worldwide (85,000 or so of its members living in Finland). It is at heart a fundamentalist religion, differing from other Lutheran denominations because of its theological tenant espousing forgiveness of all sins for its members through ritualized means. Members of the Laestadian faith have an extremely conservative lifestyle, which includes prohibitions ranging from no Halloween to no birth control.

Through the form of a memoir, this thesis attempts to portray one Lutheran Laestadian family and the paradoxical beauty and oppression of their lives. The memoir traces the lives of two sisters in the family who are confronted with the choice to stay within the church or leave. The contrasting decisions of the sisters allow the reader to experience the intense difficulty inherent in such a choice, as well as the validity of each choice. Rather than suggest a solution to the dilemmas such a restrictive religion provokes, this memoir seeks not to resolve, but to retain the tensions.

The memoir follows a modular, rather than linear, structure. Brief sections ("crots" or modules) are assembled in an associative pattern: moments from within the church’s actual sanctuary are juxtaposed next to moments from non-religious settings, mimicking the church’s control over both the quotidian and crucial. This structure works impressionistically, rather than argumentatively, illuminating the complexity (and utter interdependence) of family and religious life. The structure also allows the passage of time to be nonlinear, and for variable lengths of scenes, permitting a paragraph the poignancy of pages.

Reading that influenced the writing of this work includes: James Baldwin’s Notes of a Native Son and Go Tell it on the Mountain, Joan Didion’s Slouching Towards Bethlehem and Play it As It Lays, Jane Brox’s Here and Nowhere Else, and Pearl Abraham’s The Romance Reader. Jo Ann Beard’s The Boys of My Youth heavily informed the structural choice of a modular design.