

## Q & A



### **Rebecca Sue**

*A Sister's Reflections on Disability, Faith, and Love*

September 16, 2025 | \$25.99, 240 pages, hardcover | 978-1-5140-1140-9

## An Interview with Kathleen Norris about *Rebecca Sue*

### **How was the writing experience for *Rebecca Sue* different than writing your previous books?**

**Kathleen Norris:** Writing *Rebecca Sue* took me deeper into my family story than anything I've ever done. This may be one reason it took me so long to accept that this was a book I needed to write. Telling my sister's story meant telling my own, sorting through childhood memories, and acknowledging my self-absorbed adolescent self.

### **Tell us a little about *Rebecca Sue*.**

**Kathleen:** Rebecca, born when I was five years old, suffered *perinatal hypoxia*, a lack of oxygen during birth that had caused brain damage. She was intelligent enough to know what had happened to her, which gave her a lifelong burden of regret. But her disability in no way defined her. She developed a strong, assertive personality, with a good dose of narcissism that protected her when she was called "slow" or "stupid." As a young woman she struggled with being bipolar, but the great joy of writing *Rebecca Sue* was recognizing that I was telling a story about the transforming power of love. My sister matured into a person of faith who, as she shed her protective shell of anger, realized that for people to love her all she had to do was to be herself.

### **What was *Rebecca Sue's* most profound impact on your family?**

**Kathleen:** As a child I treated Becky normally; that is, I regarded her as my little sister who often annoyed me. But I admired her persistence: when she was a toddler and learning to crawl proved too difficult for her, she took to scooting like a little rocket around the house. We all marveled at how fast she could get where she wanted to go.

My older brother and I knew that Becky was different, slower to learn things than we were, and that she often lacked common sense. Our parents didn't need to remind us that this meant we needed to look after her. We didn't think of this as a burden, but a necessity.

It was years before I discovered that my parents suffered from guilt over the circumstances of Becky's birth. My mother regretted that she had not spoken up when she felt she was being overmedicated during labor, and my father regretted that he and mom had used a U.S. Navy hospital for the birth. He felt that the medical errors that caused Becky's brain damage were less likely to occur in a private hospital.

But Becky was one of us; our family was the place where she knew she belonged.

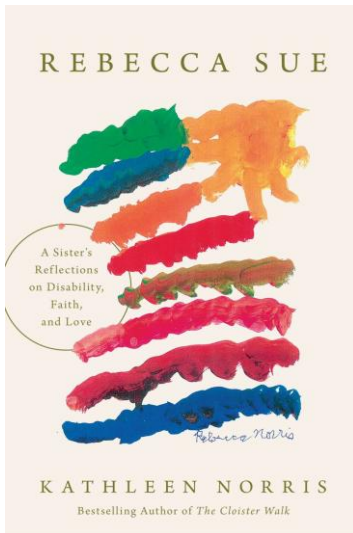


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#### **What two or three lessons do you hope readers learn from your sister?**

**Kathleen:** I hope that people will pay attention to what my sister says. I tried to include many quotes from conversations with her, to give readers an idea of who she was.

I hope that reading about my sister will remind people not to discount or ignore what “differently abled” people can offer. What she said often reflected her lack of the social filters that most of us employ as we learn to navigate the world. Becky’s honesty may have been naive, but it can also help us to reflect on the dishonesty of many of the social niceties we use to protect ourselves.

I’ve come to see Becky’s story as that of the holy fool, the person labeled as insignificant, who unwittingly exposes the folly of the world that’s assumed to be “normal.”

#### **What do you hope readers learn about faith and disability through this book?**

**Kathleen:** I hope readers will take away a sense of Becky’s firm faith in God—and especially angels—that helped get her through some of the roughest times of her life, when her bipolar disorder caused her to behave recklessly. When I think of the danger Becky put herself in as a young woman, the idea that angels were protecting her doesn’t seem at all far-fetched.

I also hope readers will take away a sense of how Becky’s intelligence so often countered her disability. Towards the end of her life she developed a kind of peace with that, and I believe this increased sense of a God who had always loved and cared for her.

#### **How did you know you had to write *Rebecca Sue*?**

**Kathleen:** When Rebecca told me, “You should write a book about me, so I can be famous like you,” I recognized it as a call. It’s been an honor to explore my relationship with my sister and try to present her in all her complexity.



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## Five-Time *New York Times* Bestselling Author Kathleen Norris

"Kathleen Norris has always written with embodied, honest, human faith. In *Rebecca Sue*, Norris brings her insight into the human condition to her relationship with her disabled younger sister. The result is an invitation for all readers to discover their own humanity and to glimpse the hidden hand of God in all things."

—Amy Julia Becker, author of *To Be Made Well* and *A Good and Perfect Gift*

**Kathleen Norris** is the award-winning poet, writer, and author of *The New York Times* bestsellers *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, *The Cloister Walk*, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, *The Virgin of Bennington*, and *Acedia & Me*. Exploring the spiritual life, her work is at once intimate and historical, rich in poetry and meditations, brimming with exasperation and reverence, deeply grounded in both nature and spirit, sometimes funny, and often provocative.

Her first book, a volume of poetry entitled *Falling Off*, was published in 1971. Several years later she and her husband, the poet David Dwyer, moved from New York City to her mother's hometown of Lemmon, South Dakota, and the house where her mother had been raised. They remained there for twenty-five years. The move was the inspiration for the first of her nonfiction books, the award-winning bestseller *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. It was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and was selected as one of the best books of the year by *Library Journal*.

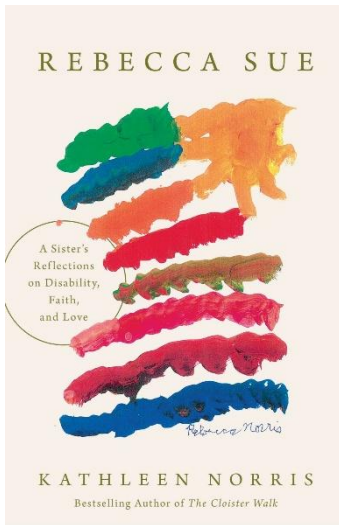
She's the author of six other poetry books and chapbooks, including *The Middle of the World*, *Little Girls in Church*, and *Journey: New And Selected Poems 1969-1989*.

In Lemmon, she joined the Presbyterian Church, where her grandparents had been members for sixty years. When the church was between full-time pastors, members called on her to fill in, commenting, "You're a writer, you can preach." In 1987 she became an oblate, or associate, of a Benedictine monastery, Assumption Abbey in North Dakota. Subsequently, she spent two years in residence at the Ecumenical (now Collegeville) Institute at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Her next book, *The Cloister Walk*, is structured as a diary of her monastic experience interspersed with meditations on virgin saints, Emily Dickinson, celibacy, loneliness, monogamy, and Ephrem of Syria, a hymnist of the early church. Some reviewers have compared her portrait of the world of the monastics to the writings of Thomas Merton. Her book *Amazing Grace* continues her theme that the spiritual world is rooted in the chaos of daily life. In this book, she sheds light on the very difficult theological concepts such as grace, repentance, dogma, and faith. Her intention is to tell stories about these religious concepts by grounding them in the world in which we live.



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Her book *The Virgin of Bennington* is a continuous narrative in which she shares the period of her life before *Dakota*. From her sheltered youth to her entrée into the New York art world, she describes the internal and external journey of an artistic young woman trying to find a place for herself amid the cultural tumult of the 1960s and 70s. Her book *Acedia & Me* is a study of acedia, the ancient word for the spiritual side of sloth that was first eloquently described by Christian monks in the fourth century. Her most recent writing includes weekly essays in an e-newsletter, *SoulTelegram: Movies and Meaning*, and a 2024 book on film and spirituality, written with Gareth Higgins, titled *A Whole Life in Twelve Movies*.

Kathleen Norris is the recipient of grants from the Bush and Guggenheim Foundations.

Norris says *Rebecca Sue* is her most personal book: "Becky taught me a lot about intelligence, and the many forms it can take. As I grew older, I realized that Becky and I shared a number of traits: physical awkwardness, fear of crowds, a dislike of escalators, and more importantly, the desire to write in order to make sense of things."

Widowed in 2003, Kathleen Norris divides her time between South Dakota and Honolulu, Hawaii, where she's a member of an Episcopal church founded by Hawaii's Queen Emma and King Kamehameha IV, the Cathedral of St. Andrew. She travels to the mainland regularly to speak to students, medical professionals, social workers, and chaplains at colleges and universities, as well as churches and teaching hospitals. For many years she was the poetry editor of *Spirituality & Health* magazine. She also serves as an editorial advisor to *Give Us This Day*.



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