

‘Losing A Child Made Me Question My Whole Life’

Carys Bray, 37, was once one of only a handful of Mormons living in the UK. But after family tragedy struck, she left the church and forged a new life as a writer

People ask me if my childhood was weird, but to me it seemed very ordinary. I went to school, along with my four siblings, took swimming lessons, learnt to play the violin – and on Sundays we would spend three hours at church.

Oh, and we couldn’t drink tea or coffee or alcohol, or go out with our knees or shoulders showing. No swearing and absolutely no sex before marriage. We had to keep the Sabbath holy, so no homework on Sundays. Instead we’d engage in ‘reverent’ activities such as playing board games in our best clothes, or listening to tabernacle choirs on the record player.

Being a Mormon made me feel special

I did feel different, being brought up Mormon, but I felt special. Mormons are taught that we alone follow the truth and the right way of doing things, and that made me feel important.

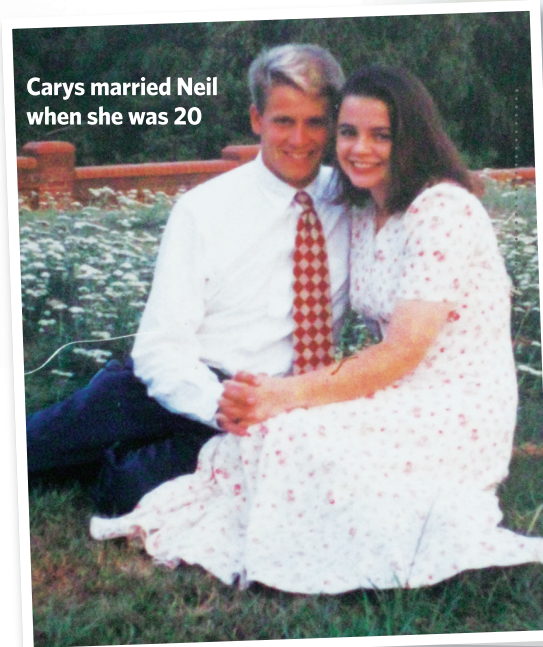
‘I began to feel really uncomfortable about trying to shoehorn my four children into a particular way of life’

Of course, even as a child, there were times that I had doubts – particularly as a teenager, when the gap between me and my non-Mormon school friends started to open up. But Mormons say that you should put your doubts ‘on the shelf’ and focus on the good things – all part of what I later came to see as the church’s relentless optimism. So when Mum read to us every night from the Bible or the Book of Mormon, I really believed that all those miracles were possible.

I always knew I was expected to get married and start having children young – it’s considered to be the most important thing a Mormon woman can do. While I was encouraged to do well at school, it was with the proviso that I ‘might need

it’ if something happened to my husband and I was left supporting the kids.

I’d known Neil through the church since we were children. When he turned 19 he went off to do his Mormon mission – all Mormon boys go away for two years and can be sent anywhere. One of Neil’s brothers got sent to



Carys married Neil when she was 20

Arizona and another to South Africa, but Neil drew the short straw with the very un-exotic Glasgow! When he came back, aged 21, I realised we really liked each other and that he’d want to get married – that’s what Mormon boys do after their mission. Although I was nervous, I was also a bit of a perfectionist so I decided to do the good Mormon thing. We married just 10 days after my 20th birthday. Eighteen months later, I had my first child.

The first crack in my faith appeared after my second child died, when I was 23. The birth seemed totally normal – I’d even been able to have her at the midwife unit rather than the hospital. She looked fine after she was born, except she was

really sleepy. After about 20 minutes the midwives started to look concerned. They took her from me and were sort of slapping her to try and get a reaction, but there was nothing. Suddenly I heard sirens, and I realised they were coming for us. I could hear them running down the corridor with the portable incubator to take my daughter away to the hospital. By the time I arrived there, they told me she was blind. Later that week we found out that she had a rare metabolic disease – nothing in her body worked properly.

My baby’s death changed everything

The night before she died, a premature baby was brought into the intensive care unit. Her

mother looked as terrified as I did. And suddenly it seemed absurd, and almost obscene, for me to expect some kind of divine intervention for my child. Why was I arbitrarily more entitled to a miracle than this other poor woman and her baby?

I tried to soldier on like a good Mormon, but my grief was the beginning of the end. Like dominoes falling, it triggered a chain of doubts and dilemmas within me. I went on to have three more children and, as the four of them grew up, I was amazed at how different they all were to each other, and to their dad and me. And I began to feel really uncomfortable about trying to shoehorn them into a particular way of life.

I tried to tell my husband that I wanted to bring our children

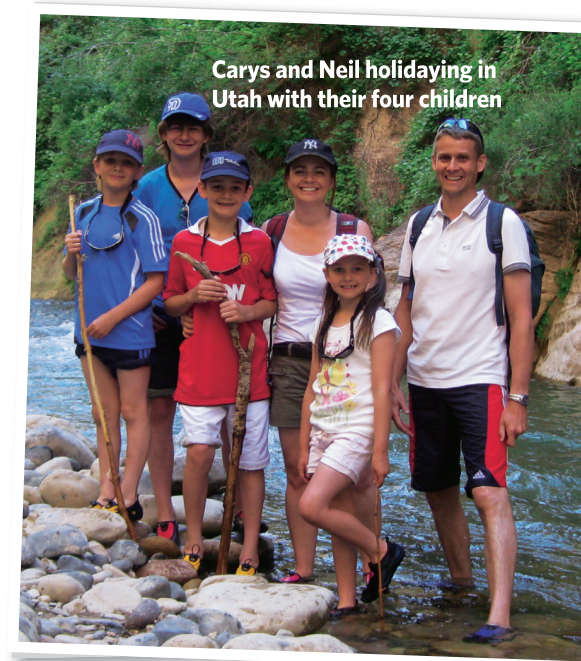
up in a more liberal environment, but he didn’t want to hear it. Mormons are meant to be good missionaries, very certain in their beliefs and spreading the word – people just don’t speak out publicly about having doubts. It was a very lonely time.

Eventually Neil agreed to talk about it because he wanted to help me overcome my doubts. Our friends were Mormon, our family was Mormon, our life centred on the church... even if there were niggles, it seemed as though there was much more to be gained by staying. But it didn’t work like that: once Neil started thinking about it properly, it all started to unravel for him, too.

Breaking away from the church

In 2009, we made the decision to stop going to church. Some members of the community thought they must have upset us, and came to our door with flowers. When we explained, they were much more understanding than we’d expected. But we still dreaded telling our parents. Mormonism is all about fraternity: if you stop going to church it’s like you’re saying, ‘I don’t want to be part of this family any more’. It was so horrible to disappoint them; to hear how upset and worried they were for us. They still fear for our ‘eternal salvation’, but they gradually came to accept our decision and, in a strange way, my relationship with my dad is better now that I can openly disagree with him and say what I think.

My Mormon friends thought I’d go completely wild. I got a message from one saying, ‘It’s so weird to think of you out clubbing every night.’ I emailed back to say, ‘Yeah, that would be really weird because I’ve got four



Carys and Neil holidaying in Utah with their four children

kids and I do their homework with them every night!’

But we did suddenly have a lot more time on our hands and I started wondering what I was going to do with the rest of my life. Neil, freed from his church duties, started coaching two local football teams. And I enrolled on a Masters degree in creative writing. It was in the university coffee shop during my MA that I tried coffee for the first time, and couldn’t help thinking, ‘Yuck, what was all the fuss about?’ The first time I tried wine I almost gagged!

When I came to write my novel – about a Mormon family divided by the death of a child – I drew on themes of doubt, faith and miracles. I was interested in the different ways people grieve, and how religion is so helpful to some and for others, not at all.

I hadn’t left the church, I don’t think I would have found my calling as a writer. But I would never, ever have met my husband unless we’d both been Mormons. And it’s nice to have had my kids young – I feel like I still have a whole new life ahead of me.

❖ **A Song For Issy Bradley by Carys Bray (£12.99, Hutchinson) is out now**

