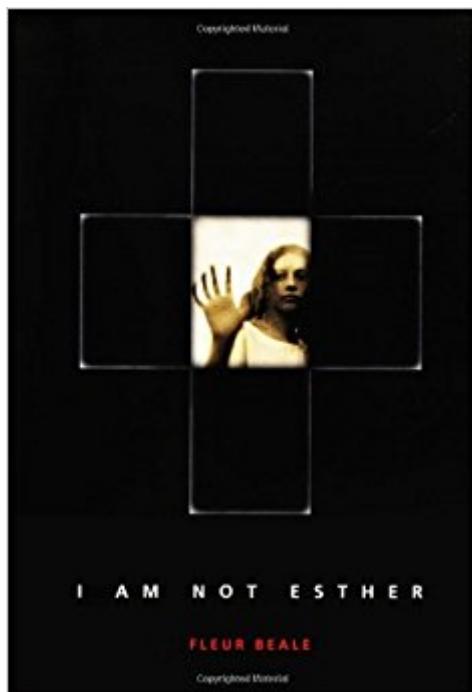


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# I Am Not Esther



## **Synopsis**

Imagine that your mother tells you that she is going away. She is leaving you with relatives whom you have never heard of-and they are members of a strict religious cult. Your name is changed to a biblical one, Esther, and you are forced to follow the severe set of social standards set by the cult. You don't know where your mother is, and you are beginning to lose your own identity.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Sort of a Handmaid's Tale for the junior high set, New Zealander Beal's engrossing novel peers into the restricted world of the Children of the Faith, a rigidly traditional (and fictional) Christian sect. Resourceful Kirby has never known any family aside from her impractical mother, Ellen. When Ellen abruptly makes plans to fulfill her lifelong dream of working with refugees in Africa, she sends Kirby to her long-estranged brother, the strict and pious Caleb, and his wife and children. Renamed Esther ("The women of our faith all have biblical names. As do the men," explains soberly clad Aunt Naomi), Kirby chafes at the restrictions forced on her by her newfound kin: they dictate her style of dress and hair, forbid slang and even contractions, and resolutely discourage any ambitions aside from an early marriage and plenty of children. Angry and confused though she is, Kirby becomes attached to her newfound cousins, in particular the vulnerable five-year-old Maggie (Magdalene) and teenage Daniel, who is himself struggling to reconcile his interest in becoming a doctor with the community's mores. Though several plot twists seem to exist mostly to serve the novel's decidedly anti-fundamentalist stance (only dissenter Kirby, for example, has the courage to defy her uncle and get her ailing pregnant aunt the help she needs), this tale still has more than enough power to chill.

Grade 7-10-Kirby, 14, comes home from school to find her usually good-natured "dizzy flake" of a mom crying. The mystery deepens when her mother announces her intention to leave New Zealand almost immediately to work as a nurse in Africa, and ships the teen off to live with an uncle she's never met. Caleb and his family are members of a sect called the Fellowship of the Children of the Faith, and their house has no mirrors, no TV, no radio, no newspapers, and virtually nothing to read but the Bible. Her uncle renames her "Esther" and though she is by turns feisty and irreverent, she quickly learns that everyone suffers when she breaks the rules because discipline consists mostly of grueling prayer sessions that all family members are required to attend. Beginning to find her place among the six siblings, Kirby cannot understand why no one will talk about another sister, Miriam, who died just four weeks earlier. She enjoys increasingly unguarded conversations with her cousin Daniel, who secretly wishes to continue his education and become a doctor, but is horrified by the rigidity and brutality of this male-dominated fundamentalist society. The author builds tension well, introducing layers of conflict, revealing elements of the plot realistically and plausibly. The climax shocks and the resolution feels right. While understanding the comfort and peace that some believers feel, in the end it is clear to Kirby that such strict beliefs limit people, dictating too much of what can't be done instead of allowing personal initiative and creativity to flourish. Joel Shoemaker, Southeast Junior High School, Iowa City, IA

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Kirby is more of a parent to her mother than the other way around, despite the fact that she is just a child. So when her mother decides to send Kirby away to live with her religious extended family, Kirby is mystified. She knows nothing of this family, other than her mother's estrangement. When Kirby arrives at the fundamentalist family's home, they rename her Esther, and send her into a spiraling identity crisis. Attempting to make her conform to their strict rules and ways, Kirby fights them, and attempts to open their eyes to the larger world out there. While this book is aimed at young adult readers, as an adult reader I still found the book to be pretty engaging. Kirby/Esther is an incredibly complex character. Her identity struggle is not limited to her time with her religious family; on the contrary, her identity is the parental figure in her relationship with her mother has stunted her development from the start. When her uncle forces the persona of Esther upon her, that merely intensifies her struggle. The book reminded me of fundamentalist cult-like sects who have gained notoriety in the past few years. It makes one wonder what it is like to be born and raised with an environment like that as their reality. I like the fact that the story focuses on Kirby rebelling

against it because she knows there is more to life than this one religion. I also like the fact that she turns out to not be the only rebel. While the story takes some sad turns, I am glad the end of the book takes time to further explore Kirby's relationship with her mother. The book is certainly appropriate for young adult readers, but makes for an interesting, albeit fast, read for adults as well. This book is from my personal library, all opinions are honest and original.

Is she Esther? Her new family tells her she is. Or is she Kirby? That's the name and the identity she has grown up with. Who is she, really? Kirby's mother disappears and Kirby is sent to live with her uncle and his family. The family is part of a dogmatic fundamentalist religious group. Men make all decisions. There are no tvs, no movies, and no books. Women must marry at sixteen and must dress in clothing that conceals. Rules, rules, rules. But there are also the consolations of strong, supportive family ties and of prayer. Kirby is confused. She desperately wants to leave; at the same time, she desperately loves this new family. And where is her mother? A well-written, thoughtful book with a serious look at the difficulties and strengths of following the dictates of a group.

I finally bought the book again and read it all in one go, just like before. Something about it really cemented itself in my mind and it was probably even better the second time around, now that I'm older.

Interesting insight into a parallel world potentially just over the fence. This very readable account of a young woman's struggle to retain and then rediscover her identity is a very interesting read and has inspired me to learn more about some of the women from varying cultural perspectives whom come into contact with as part of my working life.

This was disturbing that we still have "cults" like this in our world. A must read for those who are interested in religious-based cults who call themselves "religious organizations and churches". Frightening.

A thought provoking well written book. Great for teenagers and adults alike.

Very deep and gripping, you'll be thinking about what happened long after you finish the book. Definitely recommend to anyone

I really enjoyed reading this book and getting an understanding about how strong people can influence others and it was interesting to see how the characters evolved.

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