

Christian writer upsets bookstores by using the word 'vagina'

By Ruth Graham, Slate

The word vagina has caused trouble for a lot of women this year, from Michigan state Rep. Lisa Brown to Naomi Wolf. And now, perhaps, for a prominent evangelical writer who refused to remove the word from her new book about women and the Bible.

Rachel Held Evans' upcoming book "A Year of Biblical Womanhood" tracks her yearlong attempt to follow all of the Bible's instructions for women, from making her own clothes to "submitting" to her husband. (I wrote about the project last year for Slate.) Now one of the biggest Christian bookstore chains in the country, LifeWay, has opted not to carry the book, and Evans is speaking out about the "chokehold" that the Southern Baptist-owned business wields over Christian writers.

The story begins in March, when Evans mentioned on her blog that her editor had suggested she remove the word vagina from the book's manuscript to appease strict Christian bookstore content standards. "If Christian bookstores stuck to their own ridiculous standards, they wouldn't be able carry the freaking Bible," she wrote, adding that, despite her annoyance, she had acquiesced to the request because, hey, no author wants to risk losing sales. Her publisher told her they expected 40 percent of her book's total sales to come from Christian bookstores; LifeWay is one of the biggest sellers, with 160 stores in 26 states and a robust online business, and its standards are considered the strictest.

Her readers were outraged. Someone started a petition on Amazon called "Put the word 'vagina' back into Rachel's book!"

Another fan made “Team Vagina” T-shirts. Other Christian authors came forward with their own stories of having had to purge books of mentions of champagne, and scandalous phrases like “darn it.” Readers cheekily dubbed the debacle “Vaginagate,” a name Evans quickly embraced.

With such a public outpouring, the Tennessee-based writer ultimately decided to leave the word vagina in her book and face the consequences. Though Evans makes many conservatives unhappy when she writes things like “I learned to be a feminist from Jesus,” or when she challenges popular church leaders and theologians, she considers herself a member of the group, not an outsider, and is an increasingly prominent voice in the evangelical community. And so she felt that she could probably afford to take such a risk. In October, *Christianity Today* named her one of its “50 Women to Watch,” an honor she shares with the likes of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marilynne Robinson and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Her book has already received plenty of attention, and between 80,000 and 100,000 readers visit her blog monthly.

What’s oddest about this whole dustup is how uncontroversial Evans’ book is. For most readers, “A Year of Biblical Womanhood” won’t prompt any pearl-clutching. Its author is a devout Christian, the large Christian publisher Thomas Nelson is publishing it, and Evans calls its content “super-PG”—no bad words, and “not even that aggressively egalitarian or feminist.” There are actually two vaginas in the book: One is an anatomical reference to a woman raped in the Congo, which no one in the publishing process had a problem with. The troublesome instance is from a passage about a 16-year-old Evans signing an abstinence pledge card at a youth rally at church, where, she writes, she signed “my promise to God and my vagina.” That kind of cheeky reference stuck out to editors trying to conform to LifeWay’s unwritten standards. (Evans goes out of her way to say that her editors are not the problem here; they’re trying to sell books, she says, and none

of them delights in the bowdlerizing that comes with the job.)

About a month ago, Evans met with her team at Thomas Nelson and received the bad news: LifeWay had opted not to carry the book in its 160 stores, despite the fact that it had sold her 2010 memoir, “Evolving in Monkey Town” (in which she reaffirms her faith after wrestling with the fundamentalism of her youth), and that every other major Christian bookstore will carry the new book. She says she was told privately by someone in leadership at LifeWay that “vagina” was not the main issue, but he declined to tell her more.

“I don’t know if they were more offended by my vagina or my brain,” she says with a laugh. “The only thing I know is that my editor said, if you leave this word in, there’s a good chance LifeWay won’t carry it.”

It’s possible, in fact, that this is about her brain – or at least what makes it from her brain to her mouth. Evans proudly identifies as evangelical, but not everyone will allow her that label. Last week, well-known pastor John Piper’s website hosted a harsh review of “Womanhood”, accusing the book of “question[ing] the validity of the Bible.” And author and theologian Denny Burk devoted a detailed blog post to why Evans doesn’t qualify as an evangelical. Her offenses include insufficient deference to the concept of Biblical inerrancy – the notion that the Bible is completely free of error – and her willingness to serve communion to gay churchgoers.

And Evans has taken on LifeWay directly in the recent past. When the chain abruptly removed DVDs of the 2009 movie “The Blind Side” from its stores this past summer because of “street language and racial slurs,” she wrote a fiery post about the power that LifeWay wields over every step in the publishing process: Christian publishers need to place their books there to reach their audience, so editors pressure writers to meet the LifeWay standard. Evangelical biographer Eric Metaxas told Religion Dispatches this summer that his

editor asked him to remove the phrase “a total crapshoot” in deference to bookstores that would object to the gambling term.

“Writers adjust our content to fit this very sanitized, very strict conservative mold, which means we’re not producing the best writing or the best books we can produce,” Evans says. “Everyone bends over backward to meet these demands.”

But no one knows precisely what those demands are. And Evans sees a difference between the leeway afforded to male and female authors. She rattles off several recent books written by men that include less-than-clinical usages of boobs and testicles. LifeWay carries powerful pastor Mark Driscoll’s recent advice book *Real Marriage*, which includes approving descriptions of anal sex, role playing, and sex toys within a conservative theological framework. (Driscoll wrote the book with his wife, Grace.)

“We select resource that are consistent with the expectations of our customers based on several issues, including things like alignment with evangelical beliefs, LifeWay’s values and vision, and past sales by an author,” Martin King, LifeWay’s director of communications, told me. He declined to define “values and vision,” but said LifeWay is guided by the Southern Baptist statement of faith.

King dismissed the notion that LifeWay intends to act as a moral guide for the publishing industry. “I would expect authors to write what they feel led to write, and then see if there’s an audience,” he said. “As Ms. Evans pointed out [online], there are a lot of places to sell books, and LifeWay is not the only outlet.” King also added that Evans’ first book did not sell well for the chain in 2010, though her profile has risen considerably since then.

Evans says she hoped for a different ending to this story: She imagined triumphing over LifeWay’s constraints and empowering

other authors to write freely. Instead, she finds herself alienated, again, from a community she loves and writes for. "I often hear from evangelical leaders, 'Oh we're really eager to have more female leaders,' " she says. "I want to say, 'This is my voice. This is what it sounds like.'"