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Book reviews: "Christmas Critics"

Nancy Dallavalle

Fairfield University, ndallavalle@fairfield.edu

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Nancy Dallavalle

The sense of disjointedness seems particularly stark this year. The celebration of the Christmas season, the feast of the church's maternal face, should invite us to a sense of possibility and hope, but women are also discouraged, exasperated by the continual sense that their voices will always be secondary in the church. Yet women continue to struggle to bring the gospel to fruition.

Often this struggle is worked out in conversation, as exemplified by a new reader edited by Susan Abraham and Elena Procario-Foley, **Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology: Shoulder to Shoulder** (Fortress, \$29, 272 pp.). Focusing on the scholarly interplay among feminist theologians, the collection's essays discuss the understanding of the human person, the significance of Jesus Christ, and the possibility of a renewed vision of the church. In a collegial and readable manner, the authors offer individual essays but also engage one another in three lively roundtable discussions.

Of particular value is Rosemary Carbine's treatment of the public face of the church after *Gaudium et spes*, arguing in particular for a sacramental understanding of women's work. Susan Abraham makes creative use of Roger Haight's theology of the symbol and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's notion of the *ekklesia* of women to propose a re-imagined catholicity based on justice. Overall, the effect is one of welcome coherence, as the writers share many presuppositions and dialogue partners. This discussion would be stronger, however, if it pushed outward a bit more; conversation among friends can too easily devolve from healthy consensus to merely a new decorum. We need a few raw edges.

These are found in an important book by Tina Beattie, **New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory** (Routledge, \$43.95, 224 pp.). An extended discussion and critique of the gendered theological vision of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Beattie's 2006 work evaluates the ways

von Balthasar's retrieval of masculine and feminine symbols for divine action (and interaction) have influenced Catholic theology. Beattie charges that, in von Balthasar's hands, the use of gendered metaphor, especially the nuptial metaphor that uses "bridegroom and bride" language to describe the relationship of Christ and the church, becomes too easily reified, no longer metaphor. Beattie fights for the sacramental depth of sexual difference, utilizing the insights of psychoanalytic feminism as a critical tool and the work of liturgists and ritual theorists for constructive insights. One way to do this, she suggests, would be through "a recognition of the maternal priesthood alongside the masculine theology of the priesthood." Her goal is a theology that moves past its focus on death or suffering or sacrifice, and toward a sense of life-giving fecundity that is also part of the tradition. Beattie doesn't fully answer the questions she raises, but neither does she flinch from them.

The *Called to Holiness* series from Saint Anthony Messenger Press invites women to see themselves as theologians, with editor Elizabeth Dreyer's own volume, **Making Sense of God** (Saint Anthony Messenger, \$11.95, 105 pp.), setting the tone. Exploring the "many faces of God," this short book (each in the series is around a hundred pages) presents the building blocks for a women's spirituality informed by the Christian tradition. Emphasizing theology as lived experience, Dreyer tucks her own command of scholarly literature into the background, the better to highlight her insistence that theology and spirituality are a single pursuit, and a compellingly human one. Her discussion of the asceticism of everyday life is typical, in that it seems striking at first—*someone actually understands my life!*—and then becomes a quiet tug—*so how shall I live?*

Women's literature at its best is attentive to the particularity of experience, a particularity that can and should inform more theological work. This attentiveness can be gentle, as we find in Elizabeth Enright's lyrical novels for children and

young adults. Her four-book series, originally published in 1941, opens with **The Saturdays** (Square Fish, \$7.99, 192 pp.), featuring the New York City of the mid-twentieth century as the playground for the four Melendy children, ages six to fifteen. Only distantly supervised by a busy father and kindly housekeeper, the siblings pool their allowances every week so that, in rotation, each one might have a grand Saturday adventure: a trip to the opera, to an art gallery, to a beauty parlor or—if you're a very determined six-year-old—to the circus, after which you get lost and must be delivered home *by a police officer on a horse*. What could be better?

Nostalgia of a different sort is found in Maxine Kumin's **Where I Live: New and Selected Poems 1990–2010** (W. W. Norton, \$29.95, 235 pp.), in which the range and rage of an intelligent and articulate woman who will not look away from the world is on full display. I recalled my own days of minivan driving, with NPR in one ear and middle-school gossip in the other, as I read her account of life as a parent during the turbulence of the 1960s: "I went where I was called to go. / I clapped, I comforted. / I kept my eyes on Huntley and Brinkley."

Even then, however, the news alone was not adequate to the life of a woman's mind. In a poem appropriate to the season of Advent, Kumin leaves her (and our) fascination with the news for more reflective territory. Ambling with her horse through the woods, she comes upon a clearing, and catches sight of an escaping doe. In this moment, a moment of utter stillness laced with vivid movement, in the rustle of beings all around her, she finds a word, "a word I am searching for."

Its sound is o-shaped and unencumbered,
the see-through color of river,
airy as the topmost evergreen fingers
and soft as pine duff underfoot
where the doe lies down out of sight;
take me in, tell me the word. ■

Nancy Dallavalle is chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Connecticut.

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