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Dedicated To God: An Oral History Of Cloistered Nuns (Oxford Oral History Series)



Dedicated to God

An Oral History of Cloistered Nuns

Abbie Reese



Synopsis

As a subculture, cloistered monastic nuns live hidden from public view by choice. Once a woman joins the cloister and makes final vows, she is almost never seen and her voice is not heard; her story is essentially nonexistent in the historical record and collective, public history. From interviews conducted over six years, Abbie Reese tells the stories of the Poor Clare Colettine Order, a cloistered contemplative order at the Corpus Christi Monastery in Rockford, Illinois. Seldom leaving their 25,000-square-foot gated enclosure, members of this community embrace an extreme version of poverty and anonymity—a separation that enables them to withdraw from the world to devote their lives to prayer. This removal, they contend, allows them to have a greater impact on humanity than if they maintained direct contact with loved ones and strangers. *Dedicated to God* explores individual and cultural identity through oral history interviews with several generations of nuns, focusing on the origins and life stories of the women who have chosen to become members of one of the strictest religious orders. But the narrative is also one of a collective memory and struggle against extinction and modernity, a determination to create community within the framework of ancient rules. The author's stunning photographs of their dual worlds, religious and quotidian, add texture to the narrative. This artistic and ethnographic work highlights the countercultural values and dedication of individuals who, at incredible personal cost, live for love of God and humanity, out of faith in what cannot be seen, and with the belief that they will be rewarded in the afterlife.

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Customer Reviews

Reese is not Catholic. But that did not stop her from spending seven years documenting the devotion of the Poor Clare Colettine Order nuns of the Corpus Christi Monastery in Rockford, Illinois. Personal accounts and black-and-white photos reveal a restricted existence that is both unsettling and rewarding beyond measure. From behind steel grillwork that one young visitor describes as “the Jesus cage,” the nuns open up, revealing ordinary and sometimes privileged past lives. As novitiates, they must commit to living in a 25,000-square-foot enclosure and accepting only limited contact with family members. Reese portrays their difficult path: while the rest of the world sleeps, these women keep watch on the world, awakening at midnight for the first of seven daily prayers. A fascinating read, this book lifts the veil of mystery surrounding women who forsake contact with the outside world to become brides of Christ. --Susan DeGrane

"That is another one of monasticism's surprises: where the world expects sorrow, the cloistered feel joy. Reese's attentiveness and patience allows that joy to reveal itself."--The New Yorker

"A fascinating read, this book lifts the veil of mystery surrounding women who forsake contact with the outside world to become brides of Christ."--Booklist

"[A] fascinating peek into a life that is often misunderstood and rarely subject to this type of scrutiny"--Library Journal

"Through Reese's narrative and photographs, and the nuns' oral histories, we are allowed a rare opportunity to encounter the members of this enclosed order of contemplative nuns, glimpsing their individual pasts and observing their collective and individual present...[T]his book tells important stories that explain experiences and lend meaning to the diversity of religious life."--Oral History Journal

"Reese does do an excellent job of presenting the nuns as individuals. They are not fetishized or turned into fringe caricatures with clichéd beliefs. Even when she has a chance to poke a hole in their convictions with contradicting opinions held by fellow nuns, she does not dispel their faith. Instead she withholds judgment, allowing room for the flexibility of their personal beliefs. Each nun gets the chance to express herself as she continues to explore and understand herself in her journey inwards and towards God."--Bookslut

"Reese's narrative, based on six years of meticulous interviews, allows us to hear cloistered nuns' own voices and see their (interior and exterior) lives in all of their complexity. Reese explores the Poor Clare Colettines' resolve not to be 'erased from the landscape' but instead to serve as the 'agents of change' that they are. This is a new and fresh view of the cloistered life, a welcome contribution to the growing body of literature on the lives of women religious."--Debra Campbell, author of *Graceful Exits: Catholic Women and the Art of Departure*

"The interviews in this book are informative, revealing, and thought provoking...Those who are truly

fascinated with American nuns...will find much to like about this book."--The Historian" In the monastic world of secrecy, silence, and submission, the oral histories of the Poor Clare nuns in the cloistered contemplative order at the Corpus Christi Monastery offer us a look at a small group of women who embrace countercultural values at great personal cost for the benefit of others. In so doing, they live day to day as brides of Christ, bringing before God, the needs of others in their own community and around the world. It is a sacrifice that few understand and even fewer appreciate...And Reese helps the reader to see clearly what that cost looks like and feels like from the perspective of the women themselves."--Oral History Forum d'histoire orale

I have two friends who went into religious life. I have known them for many years and it just baffled me why they would choose that life. I picked up this book to help me understand what could have happened to have them make such a strange decision. I'm not sure how the author managed to get this group to talk to her, but it's an incredible opportunity to hear from the nuns first-hand what their lives have been like before and after joining. They all traveled different paths and their stories are vivid and full of life here. I'm glad I found this book because it showed me that I was the close-minded one. These people aren't going into religious life to get away from society. They are doing the thing that they believe helps society the most. Hopefully you'll find it as eye-opening as I did.

An absolutely fascinating ethnographic study of these women. I learned so much!! I will say that the book 1) talks in circles. It would be better organized if you talked about each sister once and got her entire story out before jumping to the next. There's a lot of bouncing back and forth here 2) repeats a lot of information a lot (see what I did there?). You don't need to reiterate the fact that the nuns are allowed to talk only during the recreation hour. You've said that once. I read it. I understood it. By the fourth repetition of that info, I start to get mad (not really). But I'm so glad that Reese undertook this exploration and then shared it with the rest of us. I have truly been blessed by their stories. God Bless the Poor Clares!

Abbie Reese gives us a rare glimpse into the subculture of cloistered nuns. The Sisters' stories are as unique as the individuals themselves. Anyone who has ever wondered what makes a woman choose this life will find this book both interesting & enlightening. I particularly liked the fact that Abbie, despite the fact that she is not Catholic, came across as respectful and appreciative of what must have seemed completely foreign to her. I loved the photos & would have liked to have seen

some of the Sisters at prayer & other liturgical celebrations.

Loved the personal life histories of the sisters. Surprised by how many of the sisters had been in active communities before entering the Poor Clares. Will reread this book, not for the biographies, but for the clear and practical spirituality it contains. My only complaint was frequent repetition of material in different areas of the book--especially material from the prioress and Sr Deo Gratias.

What a wonderful insight into the lives of cloistered nuns. I never realized how completely independent they were and how up to date on events surrounding them. The simplicity of their lives and their complete and total devotion to God is inspiring and I would gladly recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more on the subject.

A very good example of the use of oral history. Abie has interviewed cloistered nuns to hear their history and reasons for dedicating their lives to God in a silent, closed environment. In the day noise and communication with the world, this gives an insight into a silent world, dedicated not to self enrichment, and what's good for me, to what can I do for God and neighbor. It makes for interesting and thoughtful reading.

This was an easy read. It was very enlightening to know about the sacrifices that these cloistered nuns gave up to enter into this community. As it was a collection of interviews, at times the writing was disjointed. The photographs depicted the lives of the nuns very well. I would encourage any religious person to read this book.

As a young woman I really wanted to become a nun but my family talked me out of it. I really enjoyed her writing style and she gave me a peek into the dedication the nuns had to God.

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