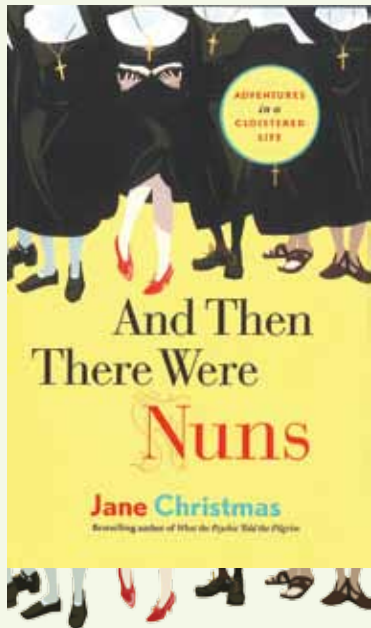


TO BE OR NOT TO BE—HABIT FORMING, THAT IS


AND THEN THERE WERE NUNS
Adventures in a Cloistered Life

By Jane Christmas

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BY ANA WATTS

When I started reading this book, I was wary. I had read enough extravagant navel-gazing memoirs in *Eat, Pray, Love* to make myself nauseated. (Sorry, Elizabeth Gilbert.) My concern was for naught. Jane Christmas, with her cheerful, generous name, reached deep inside herself and four religious communities and produced a miracle—an honest, forthright, deeply moving and occasionally funny memoir about the search for her place of spiritual belonging.

And Then There Were Nuns is touted as “irreverent.” Clearly, whoever wrote that had never seen or read *The Littlest Angel*—the “gospel truth” story of the little boy angel who introduced muddy footprints to heaven and sent joy to the Baby Jesus on earth. At 57, Jane Christmas has had plenty of time to get lots of mud on her designer shoes. When she began her quest to see if she was “convent material,” she had three grown children, two ex-husbands “and a fi-an-cé in a pear tree!” There are

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those who think that’s too much mud for a convent, let alone heaven.

Nevertheless, she spent a year and a half living the religious life, much of it in northern England and on the Isle of Wight, where she trod the same paths walked by the saints who brought Christianity to the dramatic shores of the North Sea—St. Hilda the Wise, the Venerable Bede and St. Cuthbert the Hermit.

It was an effort for her to pack away her colourful wardrobe and don muted nun-colours, to let the colour grow out of her hair and give up makeup. Her strong opinions were denied with even more difficulty. She struggled with prayer—its efficacy, its power (or

lack thereof) in her, its centrality in the life of the religious. In their chapel stalls, rooms, the convent corridors and gardens—whether they were walking, eating or sipping tea, the sisters prayed. They prayed because it worked, and they knew it worked because they had the letters and emails to prove it. And somewhere, about the middle of the book, when the routine and the people finally felt familiar and things were looking good, Jane confesses to having a festering secret she has kept buried too long.

Jane Christmas is a complicated woman—a thoroughly modern Millie, of course, not about to stand for the exclusion of anyone from the church, and also a died-in-the-wool BCPer who considers Gregorian chant the only authentic church music. She is an accomplished writer, careful researcher and deep thinker. And she has the heart of a lion. I’m glad she was courageous enough to share her story.

ANA WATTS is the editor of the *New Brunswick Anglican*.