

# And Then There Were Nuns: Jane Christmas explores the call of the convent

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Jane Christmas

**Photograph by:** Handout, Vancouver Sun

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Jane Christmas always wanted to become a nun. She embarked on a year-long adventure in four convents to decide whether she should transform her life and dedicate herself to God. *And Then There Were Nuns* is a documentation of her experience of asking universally relevant questions, such as how can one make peace with traumatic events of the past or what role does spirituality have in our modern lives.

**Q** Can you tell us about yourself?

**A** I'm a Canadian who has been living in England for the last two years. In Canada, I worked as a newspaper journalist, and later as a communications manager in the public sector. I've written four books in the last 11 years, each involving a journey. They aren't typical journeys; they are explorations of place and self. I believe we are changed by our journeys, and that we evolve in the midst of them when we discover something about ourselves or about our nature. I'm fascinated by places and what they stir within us.

**Q** What made you decide to spend a year in convents in Canada and the U.K.?

ASince my teens I have been drawn toward religious life. It never struck me as odd that I wanted to be a nun, but I never did pursue it. Instead, I took the conventional path into a career, marriage, and motherhood. Life is not always a straight line, however, and if you are lucky doors open at another point in time that allow you to satisfy a yearning. When my children were grown and launched I realized I could finally test a religious vocation. As an Anglican, the challenge was to find Anglican convents. They are rather rare in Canada! I went to one in Toronto, and it was such an amazing experience that I kept going. I went to the U.K. for brief stays at two Roman Catholic communities on the Isle of Wight, and then headed to an Anglican convent in North Yorkshire where I spent three months.

QYour other books, *Incontinent on the Continent*, *What the Psychic Told the Pilgrim*, and *The Pelee Project* are celebrated for their light touch and irreverent humour. Can readers expect the same from *And Then There Were Nuns*?

A I haven't lost my irreverence — how could I? — I'm a rebel at heart! Parts of the book will definitely curl some starched clerical collars. But there is also reverence. I wanted to know why I was drawn to faith, why it kept percolating within me. This book is different from my previous ones because it comes with a dark side, something I had not expected to deal with when I set out to discern a religious vocation. I hope readers enjoy the humour, but I also hope they learn about religious life in the 21st century, and about the primal urge of humans to encounter God. I also want the book to stir conversations inside and outside the Church about how the Church is messing about with faith and alienating people, particularly women and gays. I don't think God or Jesus have been too impressed.

QIn the book you discuss healing from a traumatic attack earlier in your life. What do you hope readers take from the book about the role of spirituality in healing from painful events?

A Writing about the rape — the attack took place 30 years ago — was the toughest part to write, let alone acknowledge. When the memory of it initially flared up during the course of my discernment period it threw me off balance. It was like reliving the attack itself, and I felt dirty and fraudulent. What's more, I didn't know how I would write about it, or whether I even wanted to write about it! The shame was still overwhelming. Spirituality won't necessarily heal you from the attack, and I was never under any illusions that it would miraculously heal me, but the convent gave me a safe place to confront the memory of the rape, and to listen to God speak to me about it.

QMore and more, people are reassessing their lives — especially in middle age — and focusing on a spiritual dimension. Why do you think this is? What do you think religion offers to these individuals?

A Middle age is one of the three stages of life in which people make dramatic change. Nowadays, the cohort being drawn to convents and to religious life are women in their 40s and 50s. They are single, divorced or widowed; mothers and grandmothers. With age comes wisdom, and once you get past the kid-in-a-candy-store consumer mentality you start looking for things you cannot buy. You see what an empty existence most of us lead, and how we've squandered our paycheques on so much crap. The treadmill of career and family doesn't offer the luxury of time to assess or process your existence as deeply as you would like. By middle age, a bell rings and it's like, "Hey, what the hell has happened to my life?"

QWhat were some of the surprising aspects of your year? How did expectations compare to your experiences?

AOh, so many expectations, and all of them turned upside down! I found that nuns and monks are as flawed and hapless as the rest of us. They aren't pious or saintly. Some of them like heavy metal music, and others use profanity. Some have suffered childhood abuse or domestic abuse; or they have faced heartbreaking tragedies. But they don't carry their sorrow as a constant burden; they have calibrated their pain as an offering to God. Their enlightened maturity enables them to see it as part of life, counter to Western society's belief that happiness is everything.

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