

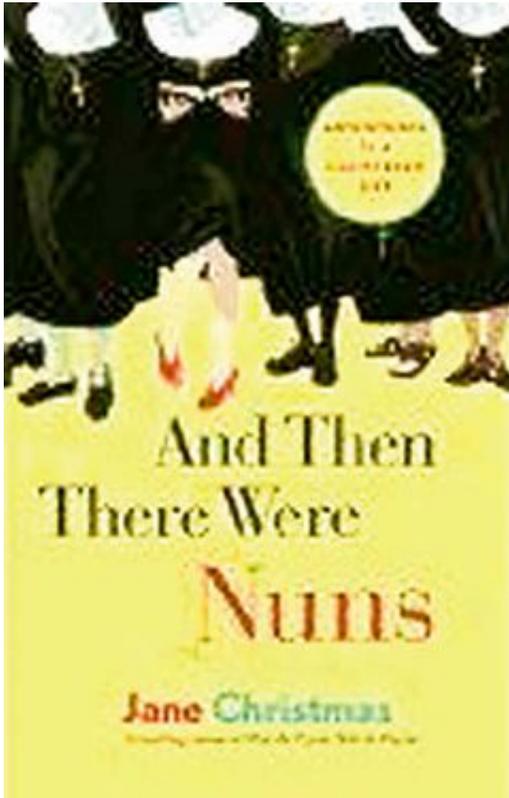
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Get thee to a nunnery!

Memoir describes twice-divorced author's attraction to cloistered life

Reviewed by: **Vanessa Warne**

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Jane Christmas is blessed with two gifts: an ability to make her own life interesting and the good fortune to be fascinated by the results.

Christmas, a Canadian living in London, is the author of a number of successful memoirs, among them *Incontinent on the Continent*, an account of her travels in Europe with her elderly mother.

In her most recent book, Christmas shares a new adventure with readers: a year spent visiting religious communities and wondering whether she should become a nun. The results are mixed.

In need of a break from office politics and tipsy lunches, Christmas decides to explore her lifelong fascination with religious vocation. Anxious to discover whether her attraction to a cloistered existence is a sign that she should abandon secular life, she stays at four religious communities, one in Canada and three in the United Kingdom.

Christmas, raised Anglican, is primarily concerned with the underappreciated role of women in the Anglican Church, but she includes two Catholic institutions in her travel plans: a convent and a monastery.

The subject matter is serious but Christmas's handling of it is more often than not humorous. A twice-divorced mother in her mid-50s, she recognizes that her path to the nunnery is likely to strike some as rather unconventional. There are aspects of her self-deprecating self-portrayal as a formerly Spanx-sporting aspiring devout that are genuinely charming.

She seems delighted to have to sort out the relationship between her penchant for bright nail polish and her desire to become a nun.

While there's a lot of humour in the mix, the book contains its

And Then There Were Nuns

Adventures

in a Cloistered Life

By Jane Christmas

Greystone, 293 pages, \$20



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(MATTHIAS RIETSCHER / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS ARCHIVES)

fair share of serious material. In the course of the memoir, Christmas recounts a rape from early in her adult life and, by revisiting this trauma, tries to free herself from its corrosive effect on her life. She does so with moving candour.

While Christmas writes warmly and engagingly about the hardworking women and men she meets, it's hard to join her in her seemingly constant state of surprise about people who have chosen to live cloistered lives.

She reveals to her readers that some nuns swear, that some have lived with men, and that some know the names of television celebrities. It's not exactly shocking stuff; it's nowhere near as astonishing as Christmas makes it out to be.

Christmas is even more surprised by her own attraction to life as a nun. Her too-ready refrain is a version of the book's oft-repeated central question: "What the hell was I doing there?"

She delights in the difficult choices she has to make: between a third marriage or a vow of celibacy, between living in a condo or a convent.

Unfortunately, Christmas chooses to structure her story around her decision-making process. She writes in the past tense but repeatedly wonders aloud if she will choose life on the inside or the outside of the nunnery walls -- something very much settled in reality and rather obvious to readers who've taken a quick peek at the back of the book.

The suspense isn't anywhere near as unbearable as Christmas's efforts to drum it up.

While there is interesting material in this book, it feels increasingly disingenuous with each chapter. It feels, to be frank, like a prolonged performance of indecisiveness by a woman invested in the kookiness of a manufactured situation.

University of Manitoba English professor Vanessa Warne recently spent a week in a nunnery in Paris, where she became adept at, but disinclined toward, breakfasting in silence.

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