

Review from Quill & Quire October 2013

And Then There Were Nuns: Adventures in a Cloistered Life
Jane Christmas; \$19.95 paper 978-1-55365-799-6, 304 pp., 5½ x 8½,
Greystone Books, Aug. Reviewed from advance reading copy

Jane Christmas has always felt drawn to religious life. The quiet, simple existence of cloistered nuns holds great appeal, and after two failed marriages, she decides to enter a convent to find out if she really has what it takes to join their ranks. Her timing, however, is less than ideal: just as she comes to her decision, her long-term partner, Colin, proposes. But with Christmas determined to pursue her monastic quest, the couple decides to sideline their engagement, and Christmas embarks on a journey to four convents (one in Canada and three in the U.K.) to find out if she's "nun material."

Although the heart of Christmas's story involves her need to choose between the convent and Colin, her memoir tackles more than the opposition of divine and secular love. Christmas admits that she's never been one to play by the rules and always fights for what she believes in. Following the regimented life of a nun is a challenge, but even harder for her is coming to terms with the Church of England's wishy-washy stance on female clergy. The requirement for silence and simplicity is one thing, Christmas thinks, but anti-feminism is a whole different matter. Christmas's struggle to balance her faith with concerns about institutionalized religion is educational and inspiring.

Complementing the author's realizations about herself and her religion are the insights she offers into monastic life. Leaving no priory stone unturned, Christmas throws open the convent's doors and showcases the reality of a modern nun's life. The sisters she meets along the way make up a powerful and diverse set of secondary characters. Christmas yearns for some of these women to break out of their shells and share more of their stories with her, and it's a shame they don't, because such stories would make these characters even richer, and add still more vibrancy to Christmas's engaging memoir.

– *Suzanne Gardner, a reviewer in Toronto.*