

Fiction

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|Review|

The gospel according to John

Barry Unsworth on an eloquent if unquestioning account of awaiting Christ's return

Barry Unsworth

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John, son of Zebedee, was one of the first apostles to be called. Now centenarian, blinded by the searing light of his vision of the last days, he is in exile on the island of Patmos, waiting for the second coming, which he believes to be imminent. His small and devoted band of disciples wait with him, first on Patmos and then, when the exile is lifted, at Ephesus, where he goes to preach and to die. Through the long years of hardship not the slightest sign has come to him. As he waits, he goes over events distant in time but vividly present to his mind. He remembers the summons, the person of Jesus, the ministry, the passion. As time passes, some of the younger disciples grow restless and rebellious; one of them, Matthias, foments this feeling and heads a breakaway heretical faction.

Niall Williams, whose previous novels include the acclaimed *Four Letters of Love* and *Boy in the World*, says that he began by wondering about the saint's life and then tried to imagine it. This is the usual route that fiction takes, but John cannot be imagined beyond a certain point because his life is authenticated in the biblical account of it, which is not in any way questioned in the novel. What is imagined - and rendered with great force and conviction - is the inner life of the apostle, his travails of soul as he waits for Jesus to return. He remembers how he dropped the nets and followed; he remembers the amazing impact of the messianic personality; the grief as he stood with the others below the crucified form. He also remembers, with the same clarity and authorial validation, the changing of the water into wine, the feeding of the 5,000, the raising of Lazarus. And with this we have changed terrain - we have crossed over from the dramatic to the miraculous.

Among those who might read this book there will be a good number in the same situation as myself, heirs to Christian sensibility but without belief in

the doctrine, impressed by the dramatic but more than sceptical of the miraculous. For the purposes of the novel, John is not required to recall the miracles; the story is wonderful enough without them. Obviously the author chose to make him do so. But in matters such as this, the reader too should have some choice, and here he is given none. There is an exact coincidence of viewpoint between the character who remembers and the person who provides him with the words. There is no element of sorely needed questioning, no space for the doubt that forms so large a part of human rationality. Might not the saint's memories be confused? After all, he is 100 years old. The rebel disciple, Matthias, might have provided a counter-voice. He does suggest at one point that this might not be the same John who was once in the presence of Jesus, but he is discounted from the start, portrayed as manipulative, cold-hearted, hungry for power; deeply wicked, in fact. It is difficult to believe that he could ever have had the fervour and devotion to follow John in the first place. He undergoes no course of disaffection or disappointment, there is no process of scrutiny.

It is a pity about these stumbling blocks, because there is much to admire in the novel. Narrative tension is kept up, not so much by John, who is motionless and silent most of the time, but by the intrigues and misadventures of the disciples. Particularly prone to accident is Papias, the youngest, on whose strong arm John leans when he goes forth from his cave. There is a wonderfully well realised scene, grotesque and tragic, when the young man, fired by Christian zeal, goes to offer consolation to a woman who has recently lost her husband and children and is possessed by a wish for death; he finds himself, with appalling consequences, confused between his concern for her soul and the unacknowledged lure of her body. The depiction of Ephesus at the end of the first century AD is brilliantly done, with half-baked cults of every kind proliferating, and false prophets mingling with unscrupulous traders. Matthias reappears, now with his own message and his own following, and we are given a shrewd and subtle examination of the role of spectacle in the quest for power.

The writing is unfailingly resourceful and strong, able to range from the physical realities of poverty and deprivation to the exaltation of religious faith and the poignancies of memory. And the novel as a whole constitutes an eloquent and moving statement of the power of love and the belief that it will triumph in the end.

Barry Unsworth's latest novel is *The Ruby in Her Navel* (Penguin).

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