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Confessions Of A Pagan Nun: A Novel



Synopsis

Cloistered in a stone cell at the monastery of Saint Brigit, a sixth-century Irish nun secretly records the memories of her Pagan youth, interrupting her assigned task of transcribing Augustine and Patrick. She also writes of her fiercely independent mother, whose skill with healing plants and inner strength she inherited. She writes of her druid teacher, the brusque but magnetic Giannon, who first introduced her to the mysteries of written language. But disturbing events at the cloister keep intervening. As the monastery is rent by vague and fantastic accusations, Gwynneve's words become the one force that can save her from annihilation.

Book Information

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Shambhala; 60512th edition (September 10, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1570629137

ISBN-13: 978-1570629136

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.5 x 7.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

Confessions of a Pagan Nun is a thought-provoking and breath-taking book. Horsley's style is poetic and simple and both her story and her characters are engaging. She masterfully recreates a time when Paganism was the predominant religion and Christianity was struggling to gain acceptance. Gwynneve, the narrator of the story, is a nun living in a monastery of Saint Brigit in Ireland during the sixth century. Along side her work transcribing the writings of Saint Patrick and Saint Augustine, Gwynneve tells the story of her Pagan childhood and her life in the monastery, where events are beginning to unfold that threaten Gwynneve and force her to define her beliefs. The language of the novel is beautiful and filled with rich imagery. When recounting the death of her mother, Gwynneve says "Soon my mother began to shed blood through her mouth. Death was surely just outside our door, drawn by the smell of her blood." The first-person narrative creates

intimacy between Gwynneve and the reader, as Gwynneve discusses the power struggle between the Old Religion and the new. "Rather than seeing a contest between druid and Christian, I see a kinship between stone chapel and stone circle. One encloses and protects the spirit; the other exposes it and joins it with the elements." She goes on to address what she believes is an illogical desire of Christianity to denounce other religions. "Even now I do not understand a jealous God, for if He made all things, than any form of worship that protects His creations and is not destructive or cruel to them must please Him." Gwynneve also recounts how the Christians stole and reshaped Pagan rituals and places of worship. "Now they make the ancient wells and standing stones into Christian relics, attributing their power to saints," says Gwynneve. "I do not quarrel with this practice, for I believe that which is sacred does not care by what name it is called. But I often wish that I did not know history so well so that I could believe in the Christian rendition of our landscape. Knowledge often spoils devotion." Horsley's novel is a splendid mix of fiction, philosophy and history. *Confessions* is an enjoyable and an enlightening read.

This small book was a quick read, and gave an interesting look into what life might have been like in the times when druids and monks met on the same ground. I certainly enjoyed the perspective used by this author to bring the reader into the main character's descriptive memory. The only reason I did not rate this book higher was due to its predictable storyline. Everything that happens after one significant turning point with our heroine's mentor is obvious before it occurs. The ending is bittersweet, but again, unsurprising and blunt. The reader can wager a guess to the ending after the third or fourth chapter. Still, all in all, a good book with heart. I'd recommend it, especially to anyone interested in the Celtic life of a woman in the early conversion times.

Spoiler alert: *CONFESSIONS OF A PAGAN NUN* is a brilliant novelette, guaranteed to break your heart! I have to warn you so that you can brace yourself to handle the inevitable, tragic ending. The author, however, does leave a miniscule possibility for us to imagine that Gwynneve, the gallant heroine, did not suffer all that much in the end; so feel free to augment the finale with your own imagination. Kate Horsley's writing is multi-faceted: lyrical yet often no-nonsense, albeit on occasion hard to read because of the bevy of Gaelic words and expressions, yet her knowledge of the era (6th Century) and locales and terrain (County Kildare, Ireland) is strong, and her insights into the character of Gwynneve, the Druid turned a nun, are illuminating. Once you enter Gwynneve's thoughts, you get to be part of her flesh, and page after page, you suffer from the cold and the dampness, shiver as goosebumps appear along your arms, run down the back of your neck, your

feet trouble you as if they were about to disintegrate into the mulchy earth full of rotting leaves, and your eyes... burn from the smoke of that one waxen candle lighting the parchment in front of you. Thankfully, Gwynneve does experience moments of happiness. And of course, there are those short-lived Irish summers, "when the wind is green," and you, the reader, may feel as tempted as our heroine to pause in your work and "stand outside on the hill and see the valley and the waves of hills beyond." Raised in a village of fishermen and pigkeepers during the time of Ireland's transition from Paganism to Christianity, she is blessed with the love of Murrynn, her wonderfully drawn, strong-hearted, vibrant mother (Murrynn deserves a novel of her own!), and later on with the love of handsome Giannon, her Druid teacher, reluctant lover, a very complex, tormented man who seems tempted by Christianity to foresake his druidic soul. Gwynneve is deeply romantic yet level-headed, learns quickly, retains what she learns, suffers the tragic loss of her beloved mother, then gets separated from her equally beloved teacher, in time bridges the gap between Paganism and Christianity, and still manages to retain her remarkably clear sight of how things truly are: "... I wonder if she (Sister Ailenn) has taken her thoughts from St. Paul and St. Augustine, who connect self-disgust with righteousness. Self-hatred seems to me an evil thing in itself rather than an antidote to evil. If we practice self-hatred, then the sacrifice we make of ourselves and our lives is not sacred, for it is then a gift of something we hate rather than of something that he have nurtured and loved." *CONFESSIONS OF A PAGAN NUN*, despite its brevity, shows well the clear-eyed observations of a young woman who, while caught in the relentless machinery of the fast-approaching dark era, continues to think independently, and of course, pays the price. "... I had thought that the love of Christ would make us kinder and less likely to smash skulls. But now I see that we will be asked to smash skulls for Christ." This part from the Epilogue, written by "Giannon, the Mute," is still haunting me: "... I have news that should be known.... In her own death, Gwynneve was not false... and as she sat down on the stones around the well, she addressed the abbot gently, saying, "I wish I could live more." I like to repeat that you should brace yourself before you read this novel; but when you finish it, offer a little prayer for Gwynneve's soul. Although she died fifteen centuries ago, she returns to life each time one of us reads her story, and thus her wish of being allowed to live, is granted. Slainte, Gwynneve!

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