

**Listening
for God in
Contemporary
Fiction**

**THE
EMMAUS
READERS**

**Edited by
Susan M. Felch
and
Gary D. Schmidt**



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The Emmaus Readers: Listening for God in Contemporary Fiction

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*For Janet and Harold Foos and for the Chase Street Gang,
who share their love and lives and their delight in reading.*

—S. M. F.



*For Ed and Cindy de Jong, and for Stan and Holly Haan,
and for Galen and Thelma Meyer, and for Anne, with thanks
for all the ways in which you show how to see with spiritual eyes.*

—G. D. S.

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Introduction

I have three books on the desk beside me as I am writing this introduction. Really. There they sit.

The first is one you may never have heard of: *The Little World of Don Camillo*, by Giovanni Guareschi. Written soon after World War II, it is set in a tiny town in the valley of the Po River, where Don Camillo is the local parish priest and Peppone is the local Communist mayor. As you may imagine, there is a continuous sparring between them, a sparring of which Christ, to whom Don Camillo speaks on the crucifix above the altar, sometimes approves and sometimes disapproves. At first comic, the sparring becomes more and more serious—particularly after the mischievous Don Camillo has Peppone's son sing before the bishop. In fact, toward the close of the novel, Don Camillo is almost assassinated—a possibility which terrifies not Don Camillo, but Peppone, who is, in many ways, as close a friend as a parish priest is likely to have.

In the last scene, Peppone comes to visit Don Camillo—secretly. Don Camillo is repainting the animals for the Nativity set, and instinctively Peppone sits down and begins to help. He paints the figure of the Holy Infant. Don Camillo sits on the other side of the table, a bright light between them, and by the end of their talk, Don Camillo has laid his finger on the ass and identified it as Peppone, who has laid his own finger on the ox and identified it as Don Camillo. Then, in perfect understanding, they sit and listen as silence comes over their world, and it is the silence of peace.

Thirty-five years have gone by since I first read that scene. Thirty-five years, and I remember the chill that went through me, the sense that something true and noble and real and deeply

spiritual, almost numinous, had been spoken. So when I found the novel in a used bookshop—a lousy dog-eared, coverless reprint for a couple of bucks—I bought it with the sense that I had found something beyond price.

The second book on the desk is *Inherit the Wind* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, a first edition and first printing, which I also found in a used bookshop and which really was almost beyond price. I hadn't been looking for it particularly, but as soon as I saw it on the shelf, the final scene leapt back to me as though I had just finished the play. The drama is a fictionalized account of the Scopes Monkey Trials, in which Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan debated the merits of a Tennessee law against the teaching of evolution. When the trial is over, Henry Drummond—the character who represents Darrow—is confronted by E.K. Hornbeck, who scoffs at the unthinking way Christians have dismissed Charles Darwin. Drummond, however, refuses Hornbeck's easy cynicism.

Left alone in the courtroom, he notices Rachel Brown's copy of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. He picks it up and walks to the judge's bench, where he also picks up the Bible sitting there. And then—and I remember reading this as vividly as if I had read it this morning—he holds the two, balances them thoughtfully, half-smiles, and slaps them together. Quietly he leaves the courtroom, crosses the street, and exits the stage through an empty town square—the two stories side by side in his briefcase.

The third is an early edition of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. According to the penciled inscription written on the map, right by the Lonely Mountain where Smaug rules, the book was given to Betsy from Mummy and Daddy for Christmas, 1949. I wonder how she could bear to have lost it. I rescued this from a bookshop in Salem, Massachusetts, a shop which specialized in Wiccan books and paraphernalia and yet which had, sitting in its front

window when I walked by, this slight green book which I had not looked at since I was in junior high.

Seven years have gone by since I bought it, and this is the first summer where, when I pick it up, it does not still reek of the incense that wafted over it while in Salem. When I read its closing lines, as Bilbo comes to understand that perhaps he, even he, might have had a hand in the prophecies of the old songs coming true, I am glad I bought it, because I remember the thrill I felt that first time, when it suddenly seemed altogether possible that, in fact, even a small boy might play some sort of role in the grand game.

Stories matter. In a world where language is manipulated to make the glitzy seem golden, stories matter. In a world where language is contorted to make power seem benign, to make aggression seem like peace, to make self-interest seem like altruism, stories matter. In a world where language can be redefined to make it seem that reality itself is only an infinitely adjustable name, stories matter.

Stories matter. They can speak truth. When a parish priest and a Communist mayor find peace while painting Nativity figures, when Henry Drummond holds two approaches to the realities of this world and slaps them together, when Bilbo Baggins recognizes that even a tiny hobbit might play a large role in the universe—or, to put it in other words, when readers learn these truths: that love is of God; that the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and that while we consider the vastness of all the works of God's fingers, we can know that God is mindful of even the smallest individual—we know that stories matter, and that they speak truth.

In his *Apology for Poetry*, written during the Renaissance, Sir Philip Sidney argued that truth can come through history—the recitation of fact—and it can come through philosophy—the discussion of abstract truth. But, he argued, these are only brass worlds. Beautiful, but still only brass. The work of the poet—by which

Sidney would have included the teller of stories—is a golden world, because in creating story, the poet creates an entire world, an aesthetically beautiful world, by which the writer can speak true things, enabling readers such as ourselves to understand more fully, more deeply, and passionately than we might have understood were we confronted with only brass.

But gold in books, like gold under ground, is not easily or lightly found.

Sidney spoke to a culture which he assumed would read with spiritual eyes. It was a world that began with the assumption that everything was responding to the spiritual, and that to live was to respond to the spiritual. How could you look at the moon, which waxes and wanes, and not see beyond to the fixed realm of the eternal stars, and know that something deeply spiritual was being spoken? How could you look at the slug, and not see how far beneath you it seems, and how far above it you are, and how far above you are the orders of angels, and God himself?

But Sidney's assumption is long gone in our culture, and we no longer read easily with spiritual eyes. It may not occur to us. Or we may lack the inclination. Or we may simply have lost the vocabulary with which to think about spiritual insights. Or we may not recognize them when they appear in ways that are unfamiliar, embedded, say, in a work of fiction. Or we may have simply bought into the notion that fiction is only storytelling, and telling a story is telling something that is not true. So why read with spiritual eyes, when the thing you are reading is, by definition, not true?

Because the definition is wrong. Because story matters. Because those feelings, that sense that something very real and true had been spoken when I turned the pages of *The Little World of Don Camillo* and *Inherit the Wind* and *The Hobbit* or when you turned the pages of books that you remember and felt what I felt—what

E.M. Forster called the “queer prickings of delight”—come in moments when we recognize that we have been confronted spiritually, and we will not be the same again.

In the summer of 2006, nine friends gathered to see what might be gained by purposefully and explicitly reading a set of novels through spiritual eyes. And so the Emmaus Readers were born as a group of fellow Christians, spiritual seekers all of us, teaching and working at Calvin College, who felt drawn to the questions of how faith might affect the ways to read and understand fiction. The nine of us met together for a year—once a month during the summer and every two weeks during the school year—to talk about the twelve novels we’d selected, grappling and wrestling with what they might say to us; listening, as the first two disciples on the road to Emmaus listened, for the often surprising spiritual insights that come from paying close attention to stories. Although not every writer shared our faith commitments, we recognized the truths that each brought to light, and we learned to push beyond our immediate likes and dislikes to the deeper satisfactions a well-crafted tale provides.

For this volume, the Emmaus Readers have gathered together twelve contemporary works of fiction. They span various genres—historical fiction, science fiction, realism, mystery, thriller, a saint’s life, a graphic novel, a contemporary western, fantasy. They span various countries—the United States, Great Britain, Canada. They span various religious traditions—Anglican, Catholic, Jewish, Presbyterian, and—if this is a tradition—agnosticism. And they span very different ways of approaching the task of creating the golden world.

These works of fiction are united, however, in this: each of the novels wants to confront its readers with questions that are deeply spiritual in nature. They ask to be read with spiritual eyes. To ignore these confrontations is to cheapen the read, to not enter

fully into the golden world the novelists have formulated. To ignore Mr. Ives' confrontation with the sacred vision in the midst of spiritual doubt; to not take seriously Reuben Land's claim that he has been there and is going back—make of it what you will; to not struggle with an assassin's penitence and with his son's guilt; to pass over the shriveling of Dottie's spirit through its insistence on its own way; to cheapen Father Emilio Sandoz' pain by missing its spiritual dimension—well, all of this is possible, but you as reader would not have been confronted with the spiritual issues that loom in these books. You have missed the golden world.

The guides and discussions and questions in this volume are meant to prompt and to prod. They are not meant to suggest that these are the only ways of reading these books, that here are the right answers, or that all that needs to be said has been said. They are guides to thinking about these novels with spiritual eyes—meaning that they try to draw out the ways in which writers are confronting readers with the deepest matters of the spirit. The synopsis for each book will give you an overview of the novel, perhaps before you've even picked it up, and the page numbers refer to the editions that are listed in the bibliography. But the section titled "Considering the Novel" assumes that you have read it for yourself and invites you into a conversation about the ending—as well as the beginning and middle—of the novel. These discussions, then, are not substitutes for reading the works themselves; that would be confusing the pick and shovel for the gold. They are, instead, the musings of a group of readers like yourself, who have come together now for a couple of years, trying to mine the deep gold of these golden worlds.

We're glad you've joined us.

Under the Mercy, we hope you'll never be the same.

It Is Well with My Soul

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

It is well, with my soul,
It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

—*Horatio G. Spafford, 1873*

PART ONE

**“When Sorrows Like
Sea Billows Roll”**

“When Sorrows Like Sea Billows Roll”

In the beginning of his somewhat grim novel, *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy pictures the young Jude longing for the heavenly city—here defined as the small town of Christminster. He waits in a path, clutching a grammar, despairing because he cannot understand it, and believing that because he cannot understand it, he must be unworthy of a town such as Christminster. Hardy writes that if someone had come along just then, as if in answer to Jude’s deepest longings, all might have been well. “But,” Hardy writes, “nobody did come, because nobody does.” No one is listening at all.

This notion—that nobody comes, that nobody is listening, that God himself does not respond to our pleas—this is a notion that contemporary novelists explore as well, as they craft characters who grieve in a world that is filled with brokenness, loneliness, pain, and cruelty. The search for an other, the search for a community, the search for God—all these echo characters’ searches for meaning and fulfillment—searches which are often desperate, and which take on the tonalities of hopelessness. The characters in Ron Hansen’s *Mariette in Ecstasy*, P.D. James’s *The Children of Men*, and Mary Doria Russell’s *The Sparrow* and *The Children of God* all ask the kinds of questions that Hardy raises, all looking for ways to feel that there is more than the self—that there is God’s hand, that there is meaning and beauty and love, despite all the evidence of this broken world. How does one understand what seems to be a call from God, Hansen and Russell both ask, when that call can be accompanied by utter loss and abandonment? How does one think about hope in a world where there seems to be no reason at all to hope? asks P.D. James. Is there joy? Is there love? Is there meaning?

MARIETTE IN ECSTASY

Ron Hansen

(1991)

Synopsis ■ When Mariette Baptiste enters the Couvent de Notre-Dame des Afflictions in New York at age seventeen in order to join the Sisters of the Crucifixion, she is welcomed already as someone who is bright, pretty, devout, and admirable. Though her father disagrees with her decision to join the convent—having already given one daughter to the sisters—Mariette enters gladly, and almost immediately her decision seems to be confirmed by a series of religious ecstasies that become the talk of the convent. As the months go by, these ecstasies become more intense, more frequent, and are joined by the presence of the stigmata, the wounds of Christ on Mariette’s hands, feet, and side—their first presentation appearing on the day after her sister’s death. The sisters become bitterly divided over Mariette’s presence, some believing her to be saintly, some believing that the signs are fraudulent, some accusing her of theatricals, some of being self-deluded. But even the criticism seems to confirm Mariette’s sense that she would be scorned and abandoned—a prophecy which comes true when her father, who is a physician, examines the wounds in the presence of her religious superiors and pronounces them a trick. Though her superiors will not say that the presentations and ecstasies are fraudulent, Mariette is, in the end, sent away from the convent because the sisters consider her an overwhelmingly disruptive force to their tranquility.

■ Ron Hansen (b. 1947), a native of Omaha, Nebraska, and a veteran of the Vietnam War, began his writing career by authoring westerns—*Desperadoes* (1979) and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (1983)—and a collection of short fiction about his home state, *Nebraska* (1989), which earned the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award in Literature. But in 1991, he turned sharply away from that genre and wrote *Mariette in Ecstasy*, basing his novel on the life of Thérèse of Lisieux (1872–97), and examining in his prose the spiritual life of characters in strikingly lyrical and profound ways. He combined these interests in his next novel, *Atticus* (1996), an unsettling retelling of the story of the prodigal son, which became a finalist for the National Book Award. His recent collection, *A Stay Against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction* (2001), explores this turning and his own understanding of the role of his Catholic faith in his writing. Having as a student taken his MFA from the University of Iowa, he is now a teacher of writing as the Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ Professor of the Arts and Humanities at Santa Clara University.

■ Considering the Novel

Mariette in Ecstasy begins with a series of poetic, haunting, and evocative images that seem to function as the opening shots of a film: they establish setting, and they slowly direct the reader's eye to details of the natural world first—"Wallowing beetles in green pond water" (3), then to suggestions of the human presence in that world—"Wooden reaper. Walking plow. Hayrick" (3), then to more concrete and immediate evidence of that presence—"Tallow candles in red glass jars shudder on a high altar" (4), and then, finally, to the characters who will inhabit the story—"Sister Sabine is in a jean apron as she strolls toward the

milking barn” (5). Set in the present tense, the details are very immediate, very real, very specific, and Hansen returns to such listings throughout the novel, as if to suggest to the reader that the contemplative and perhaps mystical lives of the Sisters of the Crucifixion, whose prayers and purposes seem so otherworldly, are in fact rooted in the very present and immediate world. The beautiful concrete images of the world—the garden, the sunlight, the hayfields, the night sky, the timothy grass—suggest a way of grasping the world itself, in all its beauty and concreteness. There is the contemplation of Christ’s crucifixion, and there are the Guernsey cows to be milked. There are the psalms to be recited, and there are the white sheets and undergarments to be hung. The mundane is placed beside the sacred—though the lyrical writing elevates even the mundane toward exceptional beauty. Is this a metaphor for what the sacred may do to the mundane as well?

The novel’s opening also firmly suggests the intense ordering of this world. Hansen begins with a “Directoire des Religieuses du Couvent de Notre-Dame des Afflictions,” and so lists each of the sisters and the one postulant, her age, and her responsibilities, as though the entire community can be rigorously ordered and defined. This is immediately followed by “The Winter Life of the Sisters of the Crucifixion,” presenting the daily schedule of the sisters, whose lives are planned very closely—again, a rigorous ordering. And the story itself continues this pattern, as much of the text is divided according to the days of the saints, tying all of the sisters’ activities tightly to the liturgical calendar. This is a world, Hansen suggests, where there is little surprise, little spontaneity; all is order and expectation. Hansen shows a practical group, a highly organized social entity.

Even the most intense acts of spiritual devotion find their rhythm within the ordering of the mundane and the sacred. Mother

Saint-Raphaël prunes the roses, but she also takes the thorns and fastens them around herself so that they will pierce and infect her skin—and so bring her into union with the suffering of Christ. But Mariette’s entrance into the novel quickly disturbs all of this rigorous order and mangles all of the expectations of this social entity. She seems to disturb and undercut the sisters’ spirituality by leaving the immediate world around her and becoming insensible to it, entering mystical spheres that the other sisters seem unable to reach. She pits the immediate world of the senses against a mystical union with Christ. Mother Saint-Raphaël “winces and shuts her eyes” (6) when she tightens the rose prunings, closing off sight but not pain, but Mariette seems entirely absent from her body in a mystical and otherworldly ecstasy. Hansen poses the same question to the reader that the convent asks itself: is Mariette’s spirituality a stronger, more authentic experience?

Certainly the sisters embrace a spirituality that focuses on the body and on their unity with Christ’s suffering; this spirituality affirms the value of physical suffering as a spiritual discipline and as a way of identifying with Christ. Mother Céline delights, for example, in the presence of the tumor that will eventually kill her. (Thérèse of Lisieux died from “galloping tuberculosis,” an acute state that affects the entire body, leading to great physical suffering; Thérèse called this a “martyrdom”—by which she meant a giving of the self completely to God.) But there is a sense of balance among the sisters as well. There is the ordinary work to do, and there are the stolen moments of gossip and laughter, and there is food to be eaten—albeit in silence. But Mariette’s arrival at the convent changes this balance between the spiritual impulse toward suffering and the spiritual discipline of living in the ordinary world; Mariette institutes a spectacular spirituality, and if the lives of the sisters had before been situated midway on a continuum between the mystical and the ordinary—both

of which are a part of their spiritual lives—their lives are now pushed dramatically, almost chaotically toward the mystical.

Mariette brings with her an ecstatic devotional life that seems to have no place in the disciplined, liturgically ordered schedule of the other sisters' devotional lives. A schedule highlighted by the rigors of sleeplessness and silence and cold and penitence seems to have no place for accepting the surprise that Mariette brings, and so it is not long before Mariette is seen as an enormously disruptive influence on the life of the convent. Eventually, her presence will even test the faith of her Mother Superior, who cannot understand why God would bring such a problem into their world, and who finds herself moved to hate Mariette and to feel jealousy over the quality of Mariette's religious vocation. Why, in a cloistered life which is chastened by obedience, would God introduce disorder?

Hansen refuses to create a narrative that shows an easy answer to this question, but he does direct readers quite forcefully to the sisters' responses to Mariette. Here we see a community of contemplatives who are separated out of the world in order to serve Christ dutifully and fully—yet they are still forced to confront the very real presence of the sinful soul. Some of the sisters are authentically moved by Mariette's devotion. One sees Mariette as the highlight of her religious vocation; another speaks of Mariette as "a sacrament." Others are vexed by envy, either of the quality of her devotion, or by the ways in which she is regarded by others in the community, or, perhaps, by the intimacy of her relationship with Christ. Some are moved toward real hatred, seeing in Mariette impulses that they themselves have fought against, and some even see Mariette as a deliberate trickster whose goal is attention, a special setting apart that might cause dissension in the community. Some are moved to vile accusations—even against Henri Marriott, the priest who serves

the community—while others are moved to affirmation: “Oh, what a happiness to have had such a blessed woman amongst us! I, for one, can affirm that the whole time Mariette has been here, never once has the tiniest trouble arisen in the sisterhood on her account, nor did I ever notice any defect in her, I say no defect, not even smallest” (142)—though, as Mariette herself reminds the sisters, the first syllable of her name means “flaw” (15).

Certainly a central focus in the novel is Hansen’s exploration of the community dynamics of the Sisters of the Crucifixion. Here is a sisterhood devoted to contemplation of the sufferings of Christ and to cultivating a desire to share mystically in those sufferings. But, shows Hansen, even nuns cannot leave their sinful nature behind them. “We don’t hurry; we don’t worry; we try not to wrestle too much with our inner torments and petty irritations” (67), Sister Saint-Denis tells Mariette (this immediately after Mariette has imagined Sister Saint-Denis playing the role of Santa Claus). But the whole novel is filled with tales of inner torments and petty irritations that are hidden behind innocuous requests for penance for such sins as being too loud while walking in the hallways and shutting doors. When Sister Dominique confesses to poor attention in her late-night devotions, her sin is immediately trumped by Sister Saint-Léon. As Sister Dominique acidly points out: “[Y]ou have undervalued even my sins” (86). Hansen tells us no more about this apparently bitter relationship, but it stands as an emblem of the hidden tensions that mark the relationships in the community—tensions which are heightened when the community begins to divide in its responses to Mariette’s presence.

While it is these vast differences that cause the Mother Superior to question why God would bring Mariette to the convent, the reader sees a very human set of responses to the exceptional and the extraordinary, responses ranging from joy at God’s gifts to envy at what seems to be God’s slights. “She is who I was meant

to be,” laments one sister, and the reader is led to the question, Can God provide the calling yet not provide the gifts and skills to fulfill that calling? Mother Saint-Raphaël, as she is about to dismiss Mariette from the convent, assures her, “God sometimes wants our desire for a religious vocation but not the deed itself” (174)—a cold comfort to the forlorn Mariette and a hard saying to any Christian. It also suggests Mother Saint-Raphaël’s sense of compromise; in the end, she believes in the miracles that swirl around Mariette, but she must act as though she does not for the larger peace of the community. One senses the spiritual harm of such a compromise.

Hansen does not allow the reader simply to observe the responses of the sisters; the reader, too, is called to make a judgment about Mariette’s ecstasies and presentations. Are the ecstasies and stigmata actually given to her? Or has she, in the words of Mother Saint-Raphaël, “helped the experience”? There is evidence on both sides. Mariette does move into authentic ecstasies, and the witnesses of these moments affirm that her mystical experiences are genuine. During these experiences, she is tested with pins and forks and flames—and she never fails the test. The bleeding from the stigmatic wounds is abnormally contained. When she is interviewed about these experiences, the Mother Superior begins with a question designed to irritate Mariette toward confession, but she passes that test as well. There is real blood, and there are real wounds as large as pennies, and there are witnesses to both. There are signs—and witnesses—that Mariette does battle with demons. One contemplative and ecstatic scene is entirely within Mariette’s own consciousness, and Hansen suggests no sign of her dissembling—unless she is utterly unconscious of it herself. And there is the external evidence of her blood on a handkerchief belonging to Father Marriott, blood which scents his entire room with the powerful smell of lilies; there are two witnesses

to this miracle. Both Father Marriott, who has been inclined to believe her, and Mother Saint-Raphaël, who has been inclined to disbelieve her, affirm the truth of the experience, even though it can never be proven: “God gives us just enough to seek Him, and never enough to fully find him. To do more would inhibit our freedom, and our freedom is very dear to God” (174).

But there is, on the other hand, evidence as well that Mariette’s presentations are, as some of the sisters claim, fraudulent. As Hansen directs the reader’s eye to various concrete and seemingly mundane details around the convent, he points out scissors that Mariette holds, sharp wires, and a loose nail in a plank in the floor of her cell—instruments that could be used to fake the stigmata. When she first comes to the convent, she listens to readings from Julian of Norwich that speak of an intimacy and identification with Christ in his suffering—an identification for which, Mariette admits, she herself prays. Has this passage suggested the presentations to her? There is a vial of dried blood which, under certain conditions, becomes liquid again, and a reference to a waterproofing agent that might protect simulated wounds from washings. Before the stigmata appear, Mariette has been studying the phenomenon in church history and theology, almost as if preparing herself to stage the event. The very public nature of Mariette’s ecstasies makes it seem that they are almost staged, awaiting the proper audience, which is always available, and which provides a witness and indeed a persona for Mariette. It is a persona that sets her apart.

In one section—immediately before the “Mass of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary”—Mariette actually participates in a staged “playlet,” performing the part of the Beloved from the *Song of Songs*; here, and elsewhere, sensuousness is at the heart of her spirituality. Though some of the Sisters feel that the sensuality of the playlet is inappropriate, Mariette shows no sense

of this: “Let my Beloved come into his garden, let him taste its precious fruits” (83). Her use of the *Song of Songs’s* images links erotic desire with a spiritual love of Christ, a link which is made explicit when she acts out the role of the abandoned lover who yearns to tell her bridegroom that she is “sick with love” (85), following which she kneels in homage to Christ on the cross. The linkage of love for Christ with erotic imagery appears frequently to describe Mariette’s spirituality; even in her childhood play with the younger Annie, she is encouraged to give herself wholly to Jesus, a request that she accepts by saying, “Yes, I told her; yes and yes a hundred times” (74). And the book is bracketed by scenes of Mariette admiring her own body in the mirror, noting that even this physical beauty she will give to Christ (9, 178). This kind of imagery is connected to no other character, and at times it clearly disturbs the other sisters, despite the scriptural connections. “We shouldn’t be doing this,” says Sister Philomène of the playlet, and she is troubled when Sister Hermance nudges her “with gusto” (83) during the acting. Later, when Mariette describes her ecstasies in explicitly sexual terms—“When he tells me to sleep, I do so at once, and he holds me. And I share in him as if he’s inside me. And he is” (168)—Mother Saint-Raphaël’s response is to slap Mariette “harshly.”

More disturbing is the suggestion that the line between religious ecstasy and madness may be very fine indeed. When she first reveals the wounds of the stigmata to Father Marriott, Mariette has come barefoot from the church across the wintry path. She walks “faltingly” (112), leaving blood with every step. “She holds out her blood-painted hands like a present and she smiles crazily as she says, ‘Oh, look at what Jesus has done to me!’” (112). Has Mariette’s devotion at this point moved her toward what we might call a clinical insanity? Or is what might appear to be insanity to an outside observer an entrance into an extreme

spirituality? Mariette herself wonders this; in one of her letters, she complains that Jesus has withdrawn from her, leaving her barren. “The sheer insanity of love has never been worse than this” (75), she writes. But Mariette is certainly not speaking here of clinical illness, and Sister Catherine, who listens to this letter read aloud, refuses to accept the notion that Mariette is insane: “She is passionate. . . . She is *not* hysterical” (75). But neither Sister Catherine nor Ron Hansen gives any indication how the distinctions between authentic passion and clinical hysteria are to be drawn—perhaps in Mariette, these are positions on a continuum. One way to read the presentations and ecstasies is to define them as authentic, Hansen suggests; another way may be to define them as religious madness—and Hansen allows for this possibility, too. But Hansen—who is always asking readers to understand why they may be responding as they do—also hints that readers might be inclined to lean toward a more rational, clinical explanation of Mariette’s spirituality because the rational is the safe alternative to choose; to say otherwise—to say that what seems madness is indeed legitimate and real spiritual communion—is almost frightening, and we readers might prefer to stand with the sisters in a safe and controlled spirituality.

It may be, as well, that Mariette is working out the effects of abuse, as there are several suggestions in the novel that her father may have sexually assaulted her. She is certainly more than a little fearful of him, and the demonic rape scene, which Mariette first interprets as a nighttime dream, and then not as a dream, may be a re-enactment of a real scene or scenes with her father. When she tends to her sister in her father’s presence, Mariette “feels his eyes like hands. Enjoying her. She knows their slow travel and caress” (97). These are only hints, but if such were the case, then Mariette could well be turning her spiritual—and sexual—response toward a purer source, and, at the same time, seeking the convent as a

safe place from her father, and a place within which to exercise this other purer love.

So Hansen provides the reader with several alternatives in evaluating Mariette: she may be sincere but deluded, or she may be sincere and dissimulating, or she may be sincere and the signs and presentations all authentic. Perhaps all of these are in part true. Or perhaps Mariette comes to the convent with the humble recognition that she is a flawed person on a spiritual journey. Her name, she tells Sister Agnès, is “Mar-iette, like a flaw” (15). Is it her real sense of her own humble spiritual state that drives and goads her toward what she sees as a more perfect spiritual state—a spiritual state which makes some of the sisters envious or suspicious?

But however the reader understands Mariette and her motivations, and however the reader interprets the reality of the signs that are associated with her, clearly Mariette is a young woman who wants to love Christ. The manifestations of that love may be complicated, and the responses toward her manifestations may be complicated, but the complications do not negate the real belief, the real yearning that Mariette exhibits. Her desire seems quite real and pure—even if that purity is fractured by the complications of the real world. Perhaps, suggests Hansen, pure desire may be real, but in the crucible of the world, pure desire for God cannot be enacted purely. “Don’t try to be exceptional; simply be a good nun” (31), the Reverend Mother tells Mariette. But in advancing this formula, has the Reverend Mother assured Mariette of a mediocre, easy, familiar, and rather plain spiritual life? Is this enough? Mariette suggests that it is not.

Into this mix Hansen places Father Henri Marriott, who is the first witness of the stigmata, and Dr. Baptiste. Father Marriott is an old priest who is coming to the end of his priesthood; he is tended by several of the sisters, who clean his house and

provide food and lay out his clothing for him. But in general he is outside their immediate community, not embroiled in the inner turmoils and petty irritations of their world; the stakes in terms of relationships are not nearly as high for him as for the sisters. He, like the reader, stands apart. He institutes the formal examination of Mariette's case to determine the veracity of her stigmata and he is convinced. The smell of the lilies has already proven to him the truthfulness of her experience, and his letters affirm his faith in Mariette. He is actually eager to believe. In his letters, Père Marriott admits the possibility that this is "all a phantasy" (148). But he insists that Mariette's character affirms the reality of her experience. The real difficulty for Father Marriott is Mariette's challenge to the conventional. "We are bored and dull and tired of each other, and we have such a yearning for some sign from God that this matters, that our prayers and good works are important to him" (148), he writes. For Père Marriott, Mariette is that longed-for sign, and when Dr. Baptiste scornfully claims that Mariette has duped them, Père Marriott insists that even the disappearance of the wounds is miraculous—a response that draws disdain from Dr. Baptiste, whose own faith in science leads him to consider those who believe in miracles as merely credulous. Hansen gives no further response from Père Marriott; Mariette apparently leaves the convent without ever having another word with or from him. In this silence, Hansen leaves open the equally strong possibilities that the priest will believe in the signs despite the evidence, or he will not believe and his faith that God affirms his work will be shattered.

Dr. Baptiste, the skeptic, is also outside the community, separated by a grill from his two daughters who have embraced the spiritual world of the sisters. Dr. Baptiste is always associated with his medical competence, but in addition, he is associated with the larger world by the many references to concrete details about his

person: the blood on his cuffs, medicinal scents, and his array of coats, which the narrator never fails to mention. The doctor dismisses Mariette's spiritual life as excessive and irrational: "She is always saying preposterous things; that's why we don't get along" (173), he announces. He is known as someone who always denies and explains away the miraculous, and so, when Mariette is brought to him for examination, she asks, "Are you trying to turn it into a disease?" (171)—which is exactly the kind of rational response she expects from her father, who is "as firm and practical as a clock" (173). She is not surprised, it seems, when the stigmata disappear in his presence; he, too, is not surprised, though for a different reason.

Hansen maintains a tight point of view and does not reveal to the reader many of Mariette's inner thoughts. When he does, he leaves the very strong possibility that Mariette does not herself realize that her thoughts may not be authentic. Perhaps Mariette is quite conscious of her role and is very carefully having the sisters see her in the way that she wants to be seen. Perhaps the spare voice of the novel suggests that readers, too, are seeing Mariette only as she wants to be seen. Then again it may be true that Mariette is absolutely authentic in all of her spiritual impulses—or as authentic as any one of us can be in this world. But the restraint that Hansen's narrator shows in revealing Mariette, prohibits any kind of single interpretation. Even at the end of the novel, are Mariette's sudden pains in a store, or with her French student, studied art, attempts to create and revel in a role? Or are they authentic spiritual signs that suggest the presence of Christ's love? Does she herself know the answer to this question? Perhaps Hansen asks us, Does it matter which answer is true, in terms of the way that Mariette herself lives?

It may be that Mariette's wounds and ecstasies are fraudulent; it may be that they are real; it may be some combination of the two.

But whatever the case, Mariette is a broken vessel that God uses anyway. Perhaps, Hansen suggests, saintliness is not about the quality of the person or the responses of the community around that person. Perhaps saintliness is about observing a quality of openness to the miraculous, an acceptance of God's evident hand. As she leaves, Mariette praises the sisters: "You let God use you" (175). Perhaps this is what defines the saintliness for which Mariette had prayed when she first came to the convent.

At the end of the novel, more than thirty years have passed since these events, and Sister Philomène, who had questioned the sensuousness of Mariette's spiritual life, is now the Reverend Mother and still in contact with Mariette, who has tended her father to his death and who now lives alone, the subject of stories and gossip. Although removed from the community, Mariette has continued to follow the liturgically oriented pattern of life of the Sisters of the Crucifixion. But the conclusion to the novel is Mariette's affirmation that the spiritual life was not meant to be completely ordered, completely patterned, completely predictable. Christ is wilder than that, she suggests in a letter to Mother Philomène, and Christ's refusal to do the expected is an encouragement to our own spiritual growth, which is accomplished not only within the context of Christ's strict ordinances, but also in the context of Christ's love: "We try to be formed and held and kept by him, but instead he offers us freedom. And now when I try to know his will, his kindness floods me, his great love overwhelms me, and I hear him whisper, Surprise me" (179). But how are readers to understand this call to surprise? What might it mean to surprise God? Is it possible to surprise an omniscient God? Is Christ, in calling for this, asking Mariette to do the impossible?

Perhaps surprise is one of the only gifts that God can give that he himself cannot have. If so, then the novel poses another

question about surprise: Are we prepared, Hansen asks the reader, for Christ's surprises, surprises that will comfort and discomfort us? Are we ready for God's inexplicable character to shatter all of our order and discipline, and for the fearful ways in which he might do this? And do we realize that God may do this shattering within the context of the mundane details of our immediate world, and that the mundane and the exceptional, the concrete and the spiritual, the common and the extraordinary—that all of these come from the same God?

■ Discussion Questions about the Novel

1. When Mariette first comes to the convent, Sister Hermance tells her that she has been praying for “consumption and an early death” (19), which seems to be the prayer of someone who has read too many romantic novels and saints' lives. When she asks Mariette what she has prayed for, Mariette replies, “I have been praying to be a great saint” (19). How are we to understand this prayer? Is it merely prideful, as Sister Hermance suggests? How are we to understand this in the context of her later prayer for humility (27)?
2. During Mariette's first interview with Mother Céline, her biological sister, Mother Céline insists, “We aren't meant to pine away and die here. We're meant to live in the heartening fullness of God” (30). In what ways do the sisters live in the “heartening fullness of God”? Is there evidence of such fullness? Is such fullness possible in the real world? If not, then isn't trying for it a vain and presumptuous thing?
3. In crafting his portrait of the Sisters of the Crucifixion, Hansen portrays a religious environment that, in its order and

rigor, seems in some ways to be ill-suited for the miraculous. How are we to evaluate this environment? Is such a context an important safeguard against spiritual excess? Or might such an environment hinder valid and perhaps even ecstatic spiritual expression? Is it possible to strike a balance between the two?

4. While Mariette's spirituality is expressed in very physical, even erotic terms, much of the spirituality shown by the sisters is expressed in ways that punish the body. Do these punishments represent a disdain for the body, a scorn for the things of the flesh? Or do these punishments represent more of an intentional mystical participation in the suffering of Christ? Are these responses inconsistent? Does suffering have spiritual value?
5. Mariette is spoken of several times as an excellent performer, and at times this is used as praise, at times as rebuke, at times as a warning. Is performance the antithesis of authentic experience? If Mariette is indeed performing, does this negate a genuine searching for God?
6. After hearing of Julian of Norwich, Mariette pens a letter in which she writes, "Christ has told me that soon he will put my faith to the proof and find out whether I truly love him and whether the offering of my heart which I so often have made to him is authentic" (43). How do you understand this claim? Is this something that Mariette longs for? If so, why? Is it problematic that Mariette is adopting spiritual motives and manifestations that Julian had expressed, manifestations that she wishes to apply to her own spiritual life? Does this remove the possibility that they are authentic?

7. Of the stigmata, Père Marriott tells Mariette, “I don’t believe it’s possible. I do believe it happened” (130). What might this seemingly contradictory response say about Père Marriott’s spiritual life? Might his response simply be interpreted as an act of faith, a claim that though the miraculous is impossible, it breaks into this world of ours? Or is something else at stake here for Père Marriott?

8. In the end, how are we as readers to respond to the appearance of the stigmata? In a 1998 essay entitled “Stigmata,” published in *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, Ron Hansen wrote that the stigmata is given to remind us: “If the fruits of stigmata are truly the esteem of the pious, the humiliation for the favored one, and hollow talk, confusion, hate, and envy, one may indeed wonder why God would grace the world with them. I do have some possible reasons for it. We are so far away from the Jesus of history that he can seem a fiction, a myth, the greatest story ever told, but no more. We have a hint of his reality, and the shame and agony of his Crucifixion, in those whom God has graced with stigmata. . . . Cynics may find in stigmata only wish fulfillment, illness, or fakery, but the faithful ought to find in them vibrant and disturbing symbols of Christ’s incarnation and his painful, redemptive death on the Cross.” Do you find Hansen’s reasons for stigmata compelling?

■ Other Books to Consider

—Georges Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*. Translated by Pamela Morris. New York: Macmillan, 1936.

A young, dedicated, and devout priest tenderly cares for his French parish, encountering ills, petty and large, among the parishioners to whom he is dedicated, even when those ills become vindictive.