

BEHIND THE BOOK - VATICAN WALTZ

It's easy to believe in the existence of the evil end of the human spectrum: we have evidence for it every day in the news. But it's a little harder to believe in the notion that saints, enlightened beings, or true holy ones roam the earth. There's no proof in the modern world. If such people exist, and I believe they do, then they never, or almost never, make headlines. They pass their days in disguise, often in the most ordinary roles, living quiet, I would say 'secret' lives, giving, helping, rescuing, and balancing out the evil ones.

Without such people, where would we be?

From a technical standpoint, it's not very difficult to portray the evil ones in fiction. I've done it countless times, from Richie Mowlen in *Leaving Losapas*, to Xavier and Chelsea Eddie Crevine in *Revere Beach Boulevard* and *The Return*, to Malov in *A Russian Requiem*, and the Dentist in *Fidel's Last Days*.

It's much more challenging to depict a believable saint. I tried to do that in *Vatican Waltz* and it took me several attempts. At first, I set the book in Miami Beach (a place we spent some happy Februaries when the girls were young). The woman was single, middle-aged, Hispanic. I worked and worked on it, finally submitted it to the people at Algonquin. They rejected it, so I worked on it some more, moved the book to Revere, Massachusetts, a place I know better, changed the woman to a younger, Italian American girl from my own neighborhood, submitted it to Crown. They accepted it right away and published it in 2013 and it received three starred pre-publication reviews (out of four) [Editor's note: VW received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus* and *Library Journal*] and was named by *Publisher's Weekly* as one of the five best books on religious subjects for that year.

The messy business-end of the story is that the book was 'orphaned', meaning that the editor who bought it, Shaye Areheart, was fired before it went into production. The reviews and *PW* accolade meant little to the newly arrived powers at Crown - they'd fired her; they associated me with her; there was no one there to promote or defend the book. It went into a second printing and then, despite continuing demand, they did not do a third printing and, worse, have never brought *Vatican Waltz* out in paperback.

But I am at peace with the novel itself. Cynthia Piantedosi is an extremely quiet young woman, utterly devout, and completely unpretentious. She cares for her elder father, prays for hours every day, has visions she cannot explain, but otherwise lives a fairly ordinary life. Ultimately, these visions pull her out of her timidity. She believes God is telling her she must devote herself to the cause of having women ordained as priests in the Catholic Church, and this 'mission' carries her from Revere to the halls of the Vatican and beyond.

There is a twist, of course, and an element of suspense. I'm sure some of the ideas - however respectfully presented - are bothersome to more conservative Catholics, and I know that the provocative ending upset some of my own Catholic-raised family members. But it seems to me that saints, real saints, the true holy ones, are never going to act according to anyone else's idea

of holiness. There is always a radical element to what they do and say, and that's true with Cynthia, though in a quiet and non-violent way. As for the ending, well, I wouldn't change it. Some readers love it, some don't.

Mainly, *Vatican Waltz* is a story about the interior world, and the challenge was to find events in the exterior world that mirrored that hidden part of life, that field in which holiness grows. My standard for judging my own novels isn't how many copies they sell, but the answer to this question: did I do what I set out to do? In this case, I feel I did. The lack of support from Crown bothers me, of course, but it's a familiar story among novelists these days. I'm at peace with Cynthia's exploits and adventures, and-this is not always true - I had some say in the cover design, and really like it.