

Wearing God, by Lauren F. Winner

reviewed by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Wearing God

By Lauren Winner
HarperOne

Lauren F. Winner's *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God* is playful, serious, informative, devotional, and as important as it is gratifying. As a reader who has long been unable to resist Winner's engaging if

uneven oeuvre, I read it with the sort of joy one feels when watching someone utterly hit their stride.

Everyone has always liked to talk about Winner's youthfulness. Plenty of ink was spilled over the horror of a 26-year-old memoirist. But Winner is no longer notably young. She's written her way through more than a decade of life since "meeting God"—writing about sex and faith and divorce and doubt. Her work plots a religious life over time, the disarming girlishness of her early work giving way to the stark voice of *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*. It's only by looking at the whole shelf that you see the inevitability of *Wearing God*. Of course this is the book that follows the mid-faith crisis, just as the crisis followed the conversion.

In *Wearing God*, Winner's attention is fixed on the biblical images that have captured her fancy and yanked her out of the doldrums: God as clothing, as smell, as laboring woman, as flame. The essays showcase Winner's wry humor, geeky swagger, and capacity to research the heck out of any given topic. Just when you suspect one could not possibly peer any more closely at a particular image of the divine, she leans in further. It's as though she's inspecting the pixels on a screen or the points of a Seurat painting. Sometimes it's awkward to witness the exegesis of these metaphors. It feels like they're being exposed, their secrets revealed. Yet Winner's attention to exhaustive detail is rewarded: her more arcane musings often turn out her most astonishing wisdom.

As a young woman Winner fell in love with Jesus. Here she plumbs the Christian tradition not so much to defend as to redeem her spiritual trajectory. In the chapter on bread and wine she ponders the complexities of God as alcoholic beverage. Of Jan van Ruusbroec's concept of "spiritual inebriation," she writes:

It sounds like the excess of falling in love with your college sweetheart, only more so, and, as in Song of Songs, inebriation seems the right metaphor—perhaps the only metaphor. This is why Jesus is hymned not as grape juice but as wine: because He is dangerous and excessive. He is more than you need, and He is more than pleasure, and if you attend to Him, you will find so much more that you will be derailed completely. And you will think your heart might break. And then . . . He will withdraw and you will be miserable and sick until He returns.

Her relief that Jesus has returned is palpable throughout the book. Even on the other side of a season bereft of God's presence, she's still (or again) sweet for Jesus. She quotes Bernard of Clairvaux: "When thou writest, promise me nothing, unless I read Jesus in it. When thou conversest with me on religious themes, promise me nothing if I hear not Jesus' voice. Jesus—melody to the ear, gladness to the soul, honey to the taste." I imagine that this is the invitation to which the whole of *Wearing God* responds.

Some of the most moving passages are in the chapter that begins with the God of Isaiah 42, who bellows, "Now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant"—or, per Winner's startling yet powerful literalization, "God with a baby's head threatening to tear at God's vaginal flesh." Admitting that the profoundly vulnerable (if concurrently powerful) vision of a woman in the throes of a contraction unnerves her, Winner pairs this image with another occasion for agony in the Bible—the death of Jesus:

The Crucifixion has become so sanitized in my mind, so normalized and familiar, that thinking of it does not shock me or disturb me or really produce much reaction at all, because I, along with much of the church, have turned a bloody state punishment into nothing more or less than a tidy doctrine. Perhaps God as a woman in travail can remind me of God's vulnerability, and the centrality of that vulnerability for my relationship with that God.

Having recently heard the complaint that female theologians should quit already with the childbirth metaphors, I cheered at Winner's unapologetic embrace of feminine imagery.

It is also in this chapter that Winner most directly acknowledges her commitment to looking for God beyond her experience and privileged context, a thread that shows up in nearly every chapter. "In pursuing the Bible's images of God," she writes, "I have discovered a lot about my own biases. When the scriptures depict God doing something people do—such as nursing a baby—I automatically go to an image of a middle class white person's doing that same thing and reason backward from that picture to God. But I believe that God identifies most with the marginalized." This self-aware and principled perspective is undoubtedly what gives the book such weight. There is a temptation, when seeking images of God, to settle for a mirror. We see a resemblance—*imago Dei*, after all—but we need a lot more than a mirror if we're going to have a rich and vital relationship with God. We need images that comfort, images that challenge, images that confound and delight. *Wearing God* has

these in spades.