

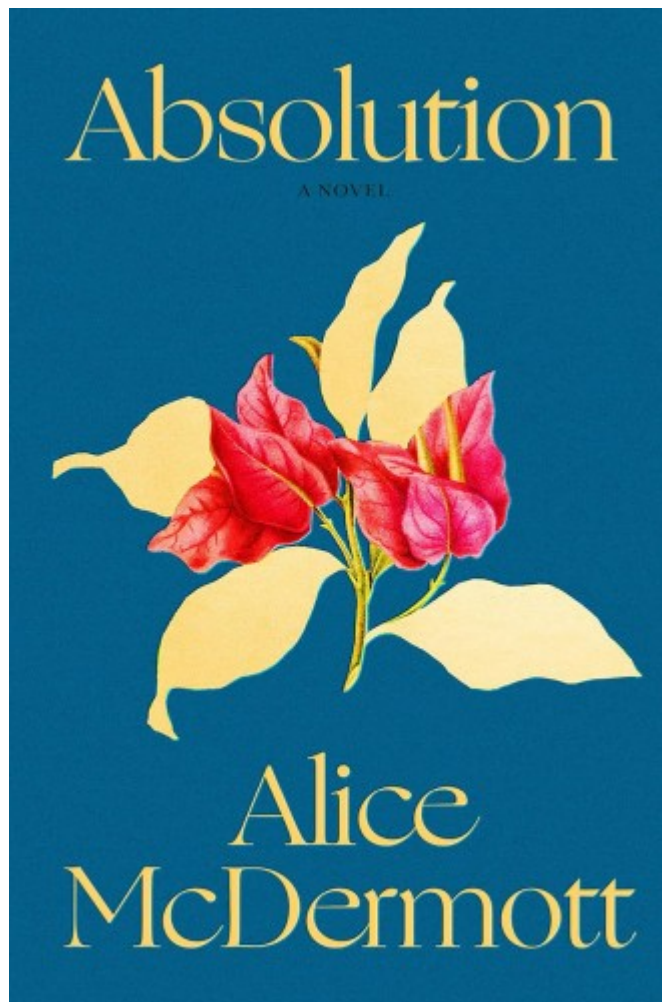
Alice McDermott's tale of American Catholics in Vietnam

What is the kindest, least condescending help that privileged Christians can offer to the wider world?

by [David Crowe](#) in the [November 2023](#) issue

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In Review



Absolution

A Novel

By Alice McDermott

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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Absolution, the latest in Alice McDermott's uninterrupted series of delightfully smart and entertaining novels, poses a question that seems out of keeping with our current national preoccupations: What kind of woman followed her husband to Vietnam in 1963 to support President Kennedy's alliance with South Vietnam and President Ngo Dinh Diem?

McDermott's answer: a Catholic woman. Or rather, a Catholic woman trained to honor and obey the institutional patriarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and the ethical patriarchy of midcentury American marriages.

McDermott is well aware that French colonialism planted Catholicism in South Asian soil, that in the mid-1950s hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese Catholics fled Ho Chi Minh's northern territories in favor of Catholic Saigon, that Kennedy and Diem founded their democratic hopes in Catholic notions of freedom and dignity, that throughout the Vietnam War the South Vietnamese officers were almost exclusively Catholics, and that early American political and military advisers to Vietnam were so thoroughly Catholic that they joked that the C in CIA stood for "Catholic."

In *Absolution*, McDermott's male American characters bring to Vietnam an informed and passionate dedication to the domino theory of international relations and a sincere hope that Vietnam will embrace and enjoy Western democratic freedoms, especially freedom of religion. These men, employed by oil companies, the CIA, and the American armed services, are unfailingly kind and loving to their wives but regard them as "helpmeets," a word McDermott ironizes thoughtfully in this tale. Her women, all wives, bring a similar faith and hope to Saigon, but they also bring with them a newly flowering frustration. Partly informed by Betty Friedan's new book, *The Feminine Mystique*, they are becoming frustrated with their limited roles as helpmeets rather than independent thinkers and workers.

Coincidentally, in this year of the smash hit *Barbie* movie, the novel's children carry Barbie dolls with them into anticommunist Saigon. The Barbie doll is a brand-new American product that's already become a symbol of American women's

opportunities and burdens. The American expatriate girls in Saigon hope that their aunts and grandmothers in America will send them the Barbie outfits for vocations available to bourgeois American women. McDermott's list includes "nurse, stewardess, plantation belle, sorority girl, nightclub singer in a sultry gown, and bride." In a half-hearted nod to modern changes, the Mattel catalog also offers a tweed suit meant to dress the "Career Girl." A Barbie doll launches the narrative arc that animates this compelling novel.

Absolution is composed as letters from Patricia, now finishing out a long life in a nursing home, to a younger woman named Rainey, who was a Barbie-holding little girl when they first met in Saigon some 60 years before. (We also read some of Rainey's replies, which recount her adult rejection of her parents' religion and patriotic worldview.)

The two come together at a cocktail party at Rainey's parents' villa. Rainey's baby brother burps a full stomach of milk down the front of Patricia's silk cocktail dress, a mortifying mishap for a young wife, only a year out of college, on the day she's meeting the older and more sophisticated women who will be her companions during her Vietnamese sojourn. Patricia and young Rainey repair to a laundry and sewing room, where a Vietnamese house servant named Lily (actually Ly, we learn) expertly cleans the dress. While they all wait for the silk to dry, Ly spontaneously sews a miniature *áo dài*, the traditional Vietnamese woman's pants and long jacket, for Rainey's Barbie doll.

Ly's remark as she gives this bespoke outfit to Rainey is characteristic of McDermott's clever use of subtext: "To take home," she says. Since Ly directs this remark to a girl who is currently at home, we realize that Ly is also saying, *Go home. Home to America, where you belong.*

Where do well-meaning Christians belong? In a world beset by ideological conflict and oppression, economic and sexual exploitation, hunger, homelessness, and other evils, what is the kindest, least condescending help that privileged Christians can offer to the wider world?

Patricia has her own answer in 1963. She's spent a year teaching kindergarten in Harlem, and she's tried to be a Freedom Rider; now she joins her husband in another mission. "Do something for the disadvantaged," her conservative father says to her as she leaves for Harlem, "and get it out of your system." But she has other, more

compassionate ideas, based in radical theology. “Preferential treatment for the poor was not a matter of debate, or even nuance, to my mind,” she writes to Rainey. “It was rather, at that time, both an obligation and an inevitability. The Greater Good. We young Catholic women had only to determine what form of action that obligation would take.” The novel tests a variety of those forms of Christian action.

One is the mission of Patricia’s husband, Peter, who has “a deep and abiding, old-fashioned kind of faith. God become Man and the seven sacraments, transubstantiation, our infallible pope, and our immortal souls.” His favorite book tells of three schoolchildren in Fátima, Portugal, who meet Mother Mary in 1917 and learn that consecration to her sacred heart will lead to the defeat of Soviet atheism and materialism—including, Patricia notes, the Soviet practice of putting women to work outside the home. Peter “believed entirely in the promise of the apparition at Fátima, that Russia would be converted. He believed communism would be defeated, in Russia, in China, here in Vietnam, not merely by the superior military power of the West, not even by mankind’s own yearning to breathe free, but by the intercession of Mary.”

Patricia’s and her husband’s models of *caritas* collide in *Absolution*. So do those of Patricia and Rainey’s mother, Charlene, a dynamo of loving but sometimes misplaced charity. Charlene is an altruistic capitalist of great self-assurance. When, as the opening cocktail party winds down, she sees her daughter’s Barbie doll in a cute little *áo dài*, she realizes the potential for profit. The outfit will sell to every expat girl’s mother for \$5 a pop, she realizes. American officers will purchase them for their little sisters and nieces back home—perhaps also reserving one for themselves as a souvenir of tropical dalliances with Saigon’s sex workers. As ugly as such sales might seem, Charlene is determined to use the profits from Saigon Barbie sales to purchase trinkets and comforts for Vietnamese children in hospitals and orphanages. She hopes to save some orphans from the probable path of such sex work.

Watching Patricia reconcile herself to Charlene’s sometimes condescending and sometimes beautiful charity is *Absolution*’s central drama. The novel’s memorable crisis involves Patricia’s understandable but ultimately horrifying (to us and to her) overstepping of gospel love and care in Vietnam.

Absolution, like McDermott’s *The Ninth Hour* (2017), celebrates the typically selfless charitable work of Catholic women. Yet one of this novel’s pleasures is its

celebration of men's agapic love—not just love for their young wives or the Sacred Heart of Mary, but also for the world and its people, including children. One character, a young American conscientious objector trained as an Army medic, puts on wonderful puppet shows for hospitalized Vietnamese kids in 1963, then later appears as the loving father of an adult son with special needs. This deeply moving thread displays McDermott's light touch around issues of gender inequity and hypocrisy, male violence, Western imperialism, and bourgeois privilege. She likes to focus on our need to give and to receive love.

If this novel's themes remind us of Catholic convert Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, that is no accident. McDermott borrows one of her epigraphs from that classic 1955 novel, along with at least two key scenes: a frightening drive through enemy-controlled terrain after a visit to a rural medical mission and the aftermath of a Saigon terror bombing. Her versions of these events hold up nicely in comparison to Greene's. The allusions do not crib the older Catholic novel so much as they engage, in an homage, the same questions about proper Western and Christian involvement in Vietnam and other troubled lands.

In fact, McDermott does Greene one better by taking seriously the claims of Buddhism in American and Vietnamese faith life. She honors the sacrifice of Buddhist monks who immolated themselves on the streets of Saigon in resistance to oppressive Catholic hegemony, and she places a Buddha figurine into a scene in which Christian women baptize a miscarried fetus, an act which is heretical to their churches but not to the women.

McDermott's willingness to echo themes from a classic Christian novel of the French Vietnam war is yet another sign of her impressively literate imagination. *Absolution* deserves to be read with fascinated, loving interest for generations.