

Words for conversion: An interview with Mary Karr

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

Mary Karr has won a Guggenheim Fellowship for her poetry as well as the Pushcart Prize for her poetry and essays. She teaches at Syracuse University and lives in New York City.

In recent years you have tried to find a language to talk about faith and religious conversion. What has that experience been like?

It's very hard to talk about. We sound like idiots, we really do. The other day I said to my son, who is actually very prayerful, "God's got his hand on you." He said, "I know, Mom, but when you say it like that, geez, I feel like I'm in a cult."

The challenge for me was writing for a secular audience. The people who know don't need to be convinced, and the people who don't know are the ones that I am more worried about. There were a lot of things that happened to me along the way that I consider very miraculous that didn't make the cut. They sounded too haphazard.

How has your spiritual life changed since your conversion?

When I went into the church I didn't have any sense of Christ. But I noticed that everybody that I thought was really cool seemed to be big into Jesus. The people who actually sponsored Salvadoran refugees, who had prison ministries—they all seemed to have a strong sense of Jesus. I decided to do the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius to gain a better understanding of Christ. The exercises follow the life of Christ through the liturgical calendar, and when I started, I thought at least I will read the New Testament closely.

What responses to your conversion have you received?

Last year some people were making fun of me for being Catholic. One of the guys said, "Oh, I was almost a religion major in college; I read a lot about religion." I said, "Somebody who has read about religion and never practiced it is like somebody who has been watching porn and thinks he knows about sex. Why don't you try praying every day for 30 days and see if your life gets any better? Just try that. What does that cost you? What do you lose if you try that?"

What do you lose?

You give up control. The Buddhists would call it ego. When you turn to God, you give up that house of cards that you call a belief system. In that house of cards, you understand how the world works. It is comprehensible to you and you have some sense of agency in it.

Have your literary interests changed with your conversion?

Interestingly enough, I've always been interested in Graham Greene and Flannery O'Connor. I always loved Gerard Manley Hopkins as well as George Herbert and the other metaphysical poets, just because they are so great—how could you not love them? Maybe God's been trying to get at me that way for decades, and I am such a chatterhead I had to go to the brink of madness before I would say uncle.

Was *Lit* the hardest of your three memoirs to write?

Absolutely. Because in it I am the asshole. Before, I could say, “Oh well, I was 17—I was an idiot.” But you get to be a certain age and people expect you not to drive into shit when you are drunk. Checking into the Mental Marriott is not a particularly stellar performance. It’s not what you want your kid to have in his scrapbook.