

The shepherds and the sheep

by [Caroline J. Simon](#) in the [July 15, 1998](#) issue

By Marele Day, *Lambs of God*. (Riverhead, 330 pp.)

When Father Ignatius, shoes polished and cell phone in hand, stumbles into what he thinks is an abandoned monastery, he finds “three hermit nuns, the perfect image of mystic Christianity.” He thinks he is there to scout the place for resale and development; they see him as a lost sheep who needs to be brought into their fold.

Iphigenia, Margarita and Carla are the remnant of a cloister passed over by the official church--represented by Ignatius. For years they have carried on the *opus Dei*, the daily rhythm of prayer, on their island habitat. Shearing Day and Digging Day have taken their place alongside Ash Wednesday and Epiphany in the holy, sustaining rituals of their community.

Lambs of God can be read on a variety of levels. Marele Day is known in her native Australia as the author of crime fiction, and there are mystery elements in this novel. It is also about a war between the sexes and a struggle between the primitive Christianity personified by the earth-mother nuns and the institutional, pragmatic and technological church of the priest. Day's richly descriptive prose and comic eye keep all this from getting unbearably heavy.

He was running his hand over the face of the Virgin Mary. Our Blessed Lady who had, like a miracle, sprouted vegetation from the accumulation of leaf mold and bird droppings on her head. A halo of green vines, in emulation of her Son's crowns of thorns. He pulled at it, to clear the profane from the sacred. The vine had taken root in the statue. He tried again but it did not yield. He yanked more firmly and this time pulled away not only the vine but the top of the statue's head, all in one piece. His attempts to restore Our Lady to a more civilized, dignified state had resulted in a grotesque clumsy scalping. He looked with horror at the growth in his hand as if it was living flesh, and quickly replaced it, tamping it down as best he could.

Simply funny? A whimsical rebuke of the inquisitional spirit too often abroad within the institutional church? The choice is yours.

At times the symbolism gets a bit obvious. The cell phone with the dead battery; the priest's broken-down car; repeated descriptions of Ignatius's flaccid penis--the point about the impotence of technological pragmatism is hard to miss.

But this is a quibble about what is otherwise a fine, satisfying and complex book. The title points to one major theme--a play with role-reversal in the metaphor of sheep and shepherd. The sisters spend much of their time tending their sheep, whom they call "Agnus Sisters" and view as members of their community. But the shepherdesses are also sheep. The day after Shearing Day is Haircutting Day; the sisters' own "fleece" is spun along with the sheep's into the yarn that they use for their knitting. Their homespun garments give them, to Ignatius's eye, a disturbing, ovine appearance.

Such role-reversals are deeply biblical: we are the sheep of God's pasture, yet Peter, a sheep who had gone astray through his denial of Jesus, is gently told, "Feed my sheep"; Jesus is the good shepherd, yet he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

In the sisters' world, the lines between "them" and "us" blur. Whether the "them" be sheep or wandering priests, all are included in their sacramental life. "Lamb of God, oh blessed lamb of God, meek and mild, stand in the light and let the servants of God unclthe thee. Shed the old that the new may be blessed and sanctified in the Lord's name," they chant as they herd those in their care toward sheering. The novel invites us to ponder what old ways or selves it would be good to shed.

The intertwining themes of weaving and storytelling remind us that what is shed need not be totally discarded. The old can be transformed into new garments and new ways. As the sisters knit, they tell tales, tales that weave ancient myths and fairytales with the stories of their own lives. At first Ignatius protests that they have to tell these stories correctly.

"No, no," he protested, "she pricks her finger on the spindle and falls asleep for a hundred years, after which she is woken by the kiss of a handsome prince."

They looked at him, taken aback.

Margarita put down her work and waved a needle at him. "Have you seen a spindle? No sharper than this knitting needle. Devil's own job drawing blood with that!"

Ironically, the pragmatist is the rigid traditionalist about how stories should go. Ignatius's rigidity makes him a slow learner. He moves from viewing the three hermit nuns as easily manipulated women to seeing them as crones with fearful powers. But as Ignatius gradually learns the difference between traditionalism and the living tradition of which both the nuns and he are members, these women are revealed as his gracious Fates, spinning new possibilities for him.

Film rights for *Lambs of God* have been optioned by Fox 2000, and for some readers the novel's depiction of religious life may seem too Hollywoodish. Others may suspect that the book is more Jungian than Christian. But most readers will affirm its central message: We each make crucial choices which become woven into our destinies, yet our choices are not the whole story. Our lives have a life of their own; they are out of our hands. Best give them into the hands of the Good Shepherd.