

The Good Men, by Charmaine Craig

reviewed by [Ann-Janine Morey](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

Set in 14th-century France during the time of the Inquisition against the heretics known as the Cathari, this is a story about love and obsession. Its passions finally achieve mature expression in an unlikely threesome: the sodomite cobbler Arnaud Lizier, his mute wife, Grazida, and the concupiscent priest of Montailou, Pierre Clergue.

It would be unfortunate if this brief description suggested that the novel was merely an exploration of a sexual circus. It is a tribute to the skill of first-time novelist Charmaine Craig that her intense depictions of the myriad possibilities of sexual desire carry us through three generations of characters, culminating in Grazida's hymn to the earth as she travels to rejoin her infant daughter. Although some of the novel's characters function more as ideas than people, Arnaud, Grazida and Pierre emerge as fully rounded persons.

Wisely, Craig does not try to convince us that she has fully created the texture and feel of 14th-century France. There is enough physical detail to remind us of the realities of everyday life, but the essential action of the novel takes place in the bodies and souls of its characters, and those things--body and soul--achieve a heartening universality in Craig's hands.

The "good men" of the title are the ascetic leaders of the Cathari heresy, a populist belief system that had much in common with the Manichean heresy that so enthralled young Augustine. The Cathari represented a serious threat to the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church, which sent a series of Dominican inquisitors to root out the wrong beliefs. The heretics were dualists who believed that Christ and Satan were the two sons of God, that the visible world was the product of the evil son, and that the soul was imprisoned in corruptible flesh.

In particular, the Cathari believed that reproduction only compounded this pitiable condition, and that salvation was achieved by repentance and ascetic practices, including sexual abstinence and refraining from eating meat, milk or eggs, (the products of the sin of reproduction). Curiously, the majority of believers were

allowed to marry, hold property and participate in the rites of the Roman church, knowing they could repent at their deathbed and still be saved, leaving the select *bons hommes* to guide the way to salvation at the critical moment.

Clergue is attracted to these beliefs and yet unable to conquer his sexual longing. His predecessor advises him that "making love is not only the way of priests here. It is the way of humankind." Pierre wants to lead a life of physical purity, and in the good men he finds "kindred spirits. Men who distrusted the flesh as much as he had since he was a boy." But he is unable to satisfy either the doctrines of the good men or his own vows of abstinence, and in heart and deed he works his way through three generations of village women, including Marquise (his brother's wife, whom he regards as his own spiritual bride), her daughter Fabrisse and finally Fabrisse's daughter Grazida (nicknamed Echo), whom he impregnates.

Clergue is pursued by the Dominican inquisitor Bernard, who becomes obsessed with destroying the lecherous priest. Clergue, however, has so skillfully woven his comforting, sensual self into the psychological fabric of his victims that even when the villagers and his lovers suspect him of betraying them to the Inquisition, they are unable to protect themselves by turning him over to his pursuers.

Clergue is able to elude Bernard for many years by working both sides of the fence. He doles out the secrets of his confessional to the inquisitor or lies about the existence of the good men in the village. When gentle Arnaud Lizier takes up residence in Montailou, Clergue seizes the opportunity to marry Grazida to the homosexual man and thus provide respectable cover for himself and the child he has fathered on the young girl. He cannot foresee how Grazida and Arnaud will grow to love one another, even as they remain devoted to the priest, and how their love will finally bring him to his own long-deferred punishment.

The power of the novel is in its sensuous depiction of doctrinal struggle--the effort to get spirit and flesh in right relationship. Craig understands that the human hunger for a loving touch is one of the most basic of appetites, beyond food, sleep and sex. When Arnaud marries Grazida, he quickly comes to understand her devotion to Clergue and does not contest her loyalty.

Married to a mute woman he cannot touch physically, he finds another way to touch her. He reads to her from his volume of Ovid, beginning with the story of Echo and Narcissus. Slowly, Grazida/Echo is drawn into the world of spoken language, and as

Arnaud teaches her to read, words rejoin flesh. They "began to cluster in different parts of her body. . . . The I of lake, lac, was liquid cool and beaded across her back and shoulders like rain." Arnaud and Grazida become a family with the birth of her daughter, Merce, and Grazida begins to speak once more.

When she is called before the inquisitors, she echoes church doctrine, pretending to accept official beliefs in exchange for the freedom to rejoin her family. She is asked to write her testimony, but "she could not hope to invoke the optimism of respiring letters, the pleasure of their colors, sprouting like shoots in her once pleasure-loving body" until a letter from home reminds her of the little daughter she has left behind. She writes her testimony and then returns home.

She does not want to write for a time. She wants to think with her feet on the soil, and her fingers on the breeze, and her nose in the hair of her daughter. The sun peeps through the leaves of the tall trees and she pauses for a moment. . . . She hears the whispering breath of wind in the trees, the clean rush of river water by her feet, two birds calling, calling. . . . They do not know her, but they are of the earth just as she is. Inhaling, exhaling, hungry, yearning, they are of life, and so, she senses, everlasting.

The inspiration for *The Good Men* was the deposition of the real Grazida Lizier as well as Craig's readings in medieval mystical texts during her time as a Harvard undergraduate. In Lizier's testimony, Craig detected an unexpected mysticism that transcended both Catholic and Cathari doctrine. Craig subsequently entered an MFA program, and returned to these documents in writing her novel. She has found an eloquent and original way to explore our affinity for flesh. As William Gass has commented, "How simply is our fondness for it guaranteed."