

Salvation, by Valerie Martin

reviewed by [Ellen L. Babinsky](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

Novelist Valerie Martin has written a great narrative about Francesco di Pietro Bernadone-- Francis of Assisi, the elusive figure who casts an enormous shadow across the terrain of Christian spirituality. Though she has done significant research (the bibliography is large, and the notes at the end of the text are detailed), she knows that it is impossible to write a factual biography of this man, despite numerous attempts across the centuries. But she tells his story with verve and erudition.

Martin immersed herself in Francis's lore and legend during the three years she lived in Italy. Assisi's shops, she writes, sell "atrocious trinkets and some of the worst food to be found in Italy" at exorbitant prices. "The spirit that pervades these streets is the same one that whistled down the stone staircases and across the Piazza del Commune in Francesco's lifetime, the same spirit that drove him straight into the outspread arms of Christ: the cold, relentless, insatiable, furious spirit of commerce."

These words set the tone for her narrative, which, with words for a palette, she paints like the panels of Italy's great frescoes. For Martin these frescoes "retain an astonishing freshness and a heady exuberance, as if the artists were excited about the story they were telling. Unconcerned with meaning, they throw their energy into a personal vision, concentrating on atmosphere." Martin takes her cues from them. Her account of Francis's life is drenched with atmosphere and filled with the energy of her imagination. She excels at evoking a milieu, an ethos of another time and place, and transporting the reader into it.

One such evocative moment comes in the account of Francesco's illness when he was convalescing in a hut near Clare's convent, a hut overpopulated with mice:

This hut was not to be a resting place, but a place of further trials. He heard one, then another dropping from the low ceiling, scurrying frantically, though there was certainly no danger from him. . . . He brushed away another burrowing in the folds of his tunic, which was a mistake, for the frightened creature rushed up his chest and into his beard. . . . There were more and more of them. . . . How

busy they were, swarming over him. One was still, perched atop his left knee, another was tearing at the mat between his feet. They would eat the mat out from under him. "God be merciful to me, a sinner," he said softly.

Of the naked corpse of Pope Innocent III displayed on a marble slab in the cathedral at Perugia, she writes: "He [the pope] is the realization of the truth they preach wherever they go, that the riches of this earth are as nothing, that the mighty approach the throne of God in the same condition as the poorest beggar, clothed in nothing but their sins. Leone steps back, covering his nose with his hand: Francesco reaches out and takes the dead hand in his own.

Martin begins her tale with Francis's death. She notes that "true liberation" is the quest for "an extraordinary course that will result in a coherent and meaningful confrontation with one's own death." To read Francis's story "backwards" is to read his life well. The book ends with Francis's beginning, an account of his conversion in his encounter with a leper.

[Francesco] understands that this world is gone from him now, that there is no turning back. It was only so much smoke, blinding and confusing him, but he has come through it somehow, he has found the source of it, and now, at last, he is standing in the fire. Tenderly he takes the leper's hand, tenderly he brings it to his lips. At once his mouth is flooded with an unearthly sweetness, which pours over his tongue, sweet and hot, burning his throat and bringing sudden tears to his eyes. . . . They hold on to each other for dear life.