

Altered states

by [Gordon Houser](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

Lying Awake, by Mark Salzman

Art and religion, in their different ways, seek to find the center of things, the reality at the heart of the concrete. At times, they meet. Mark Salzman explores contemplative prayer in his brief, beautifully written third novel. It's the story of Sister John of the Cross, a member of a Carmelite monastery outside Los Angeles.

Salzman captures her visions and experiences in spare, glistening prose: "Pure awareness stripped her of everything. She became an ember carried upward by the heat of an invisible flame." She is also a published poet, an accomplishment that tempts her with pride and her sisters with envy.

Sister John's intense visions and her lucid writing are accompanied by powerful headaches. A doctor runs tests and tells her she has an epileptic disorder in the temporal-lobe area of the brain. One of the characteristics of the disorder, he explains, is "becoming so drawn into the altered world created by the disorder that one loses interest in everything else." Sister John, who says she tries to see the pain as "an opportunity, not an affliction," must decide whether to have surgery to remove the meningioma.

The deeper dilemma for her, though, is that the cure may end her visions and return her to being the dry, searching soul she was when she first entered the monastery 28 years earlier. Some have speculated whether Teresa of Ávila, the famed 16th-century Carmelite, suffered from a similar condition. Both cases raise a fundamental question about religious experience itself: Does it reflect a transcendent reality or merely the chemical functions of the brain?

To Salzman's credit, he offers no definitive answer. Instead he takes us inside Sister John's experience. He shows us her life before entering the monastery, and he deftly, sometimes humorously, portrays the relationships of the sisters. He carefully avoids trivializing either their experience or that of Sister John's family, including the mother who abandoned her as a child.

Salzman, who doesn't claim to be a believer, handles the religious setting amazingly well. His artistic intuition helps him avoid the sermonizing that might tempt a more religious (or antireligious) writer. He clearly loves his characters.

The tight writing, often poetic, rarely falters, though occasionally Salzman falls into cliché: "Every movement, every breath was poetry. She had passed through her dark night of the soul, and understood now how the light in one's heart--the light of faith--could shine brighter than the midday sun."

The working-out of Sister John's dilemma is an exquisite balance between art and religion, one that leads us to the depths of human experience. Sister John comes to a place of cautious awareness: "The sound cheered her, then vanished into the deep blue air, which seemed to go on forever." Transcending the title's double meaning, she stands, truthfully awake.