

Church victims

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [July 5, 2000](#) issue

Altar Music, by Christin Lore Weber

I try to follow the old adage about not judging a book by its cover, but the blurbs on the back of this first novel by former nun Christin Lore Weber put me on guard. Mary Gordon, Karen Armstrong and Sheri Reynolds--concerned about how Christianity stifles women, especially when it comes to sexuality--offer their praise.

Reynolds's novel *Rapture of Canaan* tells the story of Ninah Huff, a 15-year-old fundamentalist who takes up medieval-sounding practices (like putting nettles in her bed and pecan shells in her shoes) to distract herself from her lustful feelings; of course, she winds up pregnant, and of course, the members of the Church of Fire and Brimstone react with anger, not love. In *The Battle for God*, Armstrong likens fundamentalists to deranged and paranoid therapy patients, and her memoir about her years as a nun dismisses the rigor of convent life as destructive and inhumane. Gordon's fictional forays into the lives of Catholic women suggest that the church dooms its female parishioners to screwed-up relationships with men. A novel that Armstrong, Reynolds and Gordon all loved, I surmised, might just be a novel that rather simplistically paints the church as oppressive, repressed and, above all, bad for women.

Altar Music traces the lives of three generations of women in a Catholic family in Minnesota. First there is Meghan, an auburn-haired beauty, whose friend Clara is beaten by her husband on her wedding night, has her unconsummated marriage annulled and enters a convent in 1916. The priests teach Meghan that married couples should have sex quickly, quietly and in the dark, thinking of procreation, not pleasure. After she's married, however, Meghan discovers the joys of sex and concludes that God wants married couples to enjoy it. But she learns her error soon enough: left unable to conceive after a traumatic labor, she realizes that "God had corrected [her] mistake regarding sex. For her unrestrained passion God had extracted sexual abstinence for the remainder of her life. The priest insisted that the church's law was clear. If there could be no possibility of conception, the conjugal act became a flagrant excess of fleshly desire, unworthy of a good Catholic woman."

The sins of the mother are visited upon the daughter. Despite Father Murphy's constant reminders to preserve her virginity until she is married, Kate, Meghan's elder child, has sex with her boyfriend, Michael. Horrified and overcome by guilt, Kate prays constantly for forgiveness and chastity. By the time she and Michael wed, "Kate had schooled herself in a virtue so strong that she felt nothing where her mystic rose once had flowered. Nothing. Nothing at all."

Kate's daughter, Elise, a gifted pianist, enters the convent at 18. Though they are distressed and perplexed by Elise's vocation, her parents take comfort in the knowledge that Clara, now called Mother Thomas Ann, is the director of novices at Elise's convent. Elise at first appears to flourish in the convent, becoming fast friends with another novitiate, Suzanne (who was--this is by now predictable--raped by her father before becoming a nun). But Thomas Ann does not prove to be a wise and caring guardian. She seduces both Elise and Suzanne. Suzanne is driven to suicide, while Elise has the presence of mind to leave the convent.

If Weber hoped to write a feminist novel in the tradition of Doris Lessing or Margaret Atwood, she has failed: the women in this book are victims, buffeted by overwhelming forces, helpless to do anything other than embrace their own oppression. If you want to be a Christian, this novel suggests, you'll have to accept the notion that sex is dirty and evil. Weber, who spent 14 years in a convent, turns with unreasoning zeal against the church she once served. Her book is reminiscent of nothing so much as Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*, the 1836 anti-Catholic screed that claimed to give Protestant readers a glimpse inside a convent.