Glimpses of sainthood

by Gwenette Robertson in the November 18, 1998 issue

By Frederick Buechner, The Storm. *(HarperSanFrancisco, 199 pp.)*

Frederick Buechner loves sinful saints. In The Storm Buechner introduces Kenzie, a lovable sinner who, as he approaches his 70th birthday, recalls finding God during his midlife crisis. The sins that now plague him are not those of his youth but those born of his sainthood. His relationship with a girl named Kia is one of these sins.

Although Kia has been dead for 20 years when the novel begins, her personality grows in significance and depth throughout the book. She expands in the incubator of Kenzie's memory.

Kenzie meets Kia at a South Bronx rescue mission for youth, where he goes to work out his newly found religious zeal. He offers the 17-year-old graffiti artist a place to stay--her grandmother's cold-water flat has no toilet and inadequate heat--but the middle-aged Kenzie falls in love with his ward. They become lovers; she becomes pregnant, but disappears without telling him. She dies giving birth to Bree.

Kia's grandmother shows up at the rescue mission looking for Kenzie, but finds Kenzie's brother, Dalton. When Dalton breaks the news to him, Kenzie agrees to take care of the child, resigns from the mission and writes Dalton a letter explaining his affair with Kia. Dalton publishes Kenzie's confession in the rescue mission's newsletter, an act Kenzie cannot forgive.

At 70, Kenzie lives shamelessly off his rich third wife, writes long, journal-like letters to Kia, whose memory he cannot escape, and cares for Bree. He has not spoken to Dalton in 20 years.

Forgiveness--the possibility that even sinners can forgive other sinners--is the novel's driving theme. This theme crystalizes in the reconciliation between Kenzie and Dalton. But Buechner's characters don't seek out the forgiveness they attain. The redemptive moment happens, in many respects, despite the characters' actions and inactions. Perhaps these actions and inactions are what divide the sinners from saints. Or perhaps, Buechner might say, the division is fictitious.

Buechner makes much of Kenzie's love for saints who are a little bit crazy. Kenzie imagines watching these saints from a window, "a swarm of zanies running around the street below in a frenzy of excitement over something that they [are] all pointing at in the sky but that, because of the overhang of the roof, he himself [is] unable to see." The saints' "pointless acts of self-sacrifice" and "grisly martyrdoms" draw him to an unbidden search for the beauty that is driving them insane. Kenzie believes he has glimpses of it sometimes, but self-sacrifice is not his game. The one time he tries to act sacrificially--in trying to help Kia--he reaps only shame for himself and death for Kia.

Kia's death, however, has saving as well as damning power. Buechner twice describes the feel of Kia's body as that of a swimmer in the sea, a reference that seems to link her to the storm that brews throughout the novel and explodes toward the end. Like the task of forgiveness, the storm produces fears that prove to be far more dangerous than the thing itself. Kenzie's guilt over Kia's death threatens to swallow him completely, but even that storm blows over. By the time the physical storm breaks, the movement of the novel is winding down.

The emotional climax of the novel precedes the storm. Bree tells Nandy, Dalton's stepson, what she knows of Kia and Kenzie's relationship. Though the story she tells is by now well worn for the reader, it is hard not to be moved by Bree's apparent affection for both the mother she never knew and the father who raised her--for the graffiti artist who died before reaching the age of 20, and for the old man who lives off his wife's money and Kia's memory.

Bree recalls how Kenzie dragged her into Manhattan's "Smoky Mary's," where she prayed to the Blue Virgin for her mother. When Bree asked Kenzie what he had prayed for, he told her that "he also had prayed for her mother and had also prayed, as he did every day of his life, to be forgiven. He said that he prayed not only for God to forgive him but also for Kia to, and for Bree to. He said that he had never been able to forgive himself." Bree's unstrained and liberal forgiveness of her father stands in direct contrast to Dalton and Kenzie's unwillingness to forgive each other.

Early in the novel Kenzie's wife, Willow, refers to Kenzie's unique ability to control the weather: once he demanded that a storm subside and the heavens obeyed. She accuses him of brewing the storm on his 70th birthday. He cannot deny it. Perhaps his actions, if only through prayer, were efficacious after all. The brewing of a storm would certainly count as a miracle, and forgiving himself is an act of charity few

saints could claim. Maybe he sees more than he realizes of what the saints are pointing at.

Buechner's tone in this novel is chatty, and the plot is not strong. The characters seem somewhat simple, though whimsical. The novel's deficiencies as fiction, however, do not obscure Buechner's contributions as a theologian. Buechner is a preacher at heart, with a soft spot for sinners and a vision of saints. His treatment of forgiveness, sought and unsought, is worth seeking out.