

*Amazing Grace*, by Kathleen Norris

reviewed by [Heidi Peterson](#) in the [June 3, 1998](#) issue

By Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. (Riverhead Books, 384 pp.)

An alert human infant, at about one month of age, begins to build a vocabulary." So begins Kathleen Norris's book. In the ensuing pages, she seeks to recover for herself and her readers the religious vocabulary of her childhood and reappropriate it for adult use. Moving easily between the annals of the daily news and the archives of church history, Norris applies her rich narrative to the exploration of the Christian lexicon--to both the words that draw her in and the words that put her off, words like "conversion," "perfection," "Antichrist," "grace."

Along the way she accepts help from those who have influenced her faith life: Karl Rahner, Groucho Marx and Emily Dickinson, and grandmothers, grade-school mates and monks. Replete with homiletic possibility, her imaginative and focused definitions might propel one full speed ahead through chapter after illuminating chapter. Yet the book has a devotional quality to it, each brief entry worthy of being savored and revisited over time.

In the last five years Norris has received high acclaim for her accessible and inspiring treatment of matters spiritual (recent works include *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* and *The Cloister Walk*). She nurtures her faith life with the hearty staples of rural Presbyterian worship and Benedictine monasticism. In *Amazing Grace*, Norris employs the experiences of her own life to breathe new life into the words on which the church has relied for centuries to speak of things ineffable.

At their most successful, her stories are the occasion for readers to recall and make theological sense of their own stories. If there are a few pages that disappoint, they are those that tell the reader more about Norris than about the chosen word or those in which the economy of language one expects from Norris as a poet is absent.

Norris writes with evocative power and purpose. She explores in detail and in depth the feelings and concepts summoned by theological language, while letting the

mystery be. In the “brittle and divisive climate” that so often characterizes the contemporary church, Amazing Grace is an unmerited gift