Two-bit hustlers in the church and elsewhere

In Patrick Coleman’s novel, people hurt others with drugs, dollars, and/or Jesus.

by William H. Willimon in the September 11, 2019 issue

In Review

image of book cover

The Churchgoer: A Novel

By Patrick Coleman

Harper Perennial

Mark Haines was an evangelical youth pastor in the early 2000s until he abandoned his wife, his daughter, and his beliefs and left town. That’s a sad story that many of us have heard before. What of it?

Patrick Coleman’s novel takes us into the pastor’s sun-bleached postchurch world, a Southern California wasteland where Haines spends his days surfing and his nights working as a security guard.

Then Cindy, a 22-year-old drifter, hitchhikes into his life and hustles him for a meal and a place to crash. As these two cynics drift aimlessly together, we get the ominous feeling that something bad is about to happen. Ten pages later, it does. On a steamy night, Mark’s coworker is murdered in a robbery gone bad. Cindy disappears.

The detached, stoic Haines finally shows some interest in the world as he becomes inexplicably obsessed over what happened to Cindy. The cynical loner becomes the driven detective, connecting the murder with Cindy’s disappearance, chasing down leads, and circuitously looping back to the church where his old life had ended.

As it turns out, there’s not too much difference between Southern California’s drug trade and the razzmatazz of showbiz suburban evangelical megachurches. Everybody in the church or out of it is a two-bit hustler looking out for number one. Some hurt others with drugs and dollars, and others do it with Jesus and dollars. When the brutal So-Cal sun is high in the sky, it’s hard to tell the difference between the two.

I almost tossed the novel aside when I read, on the first page, “The sky was mottled gray like a well-used rag.” But I stayed with it and found that Coleman’s whodunit plot overcomes his lapses in style.

With an opening quote from Philip Larkin’s poem “Church Going,” Coleman raised my expectations: “What remains when disbelief has gone? / . . . weedy pavement, brambles . . . / A purpose more obscure.” I thought it would be a novel about the other side of disbelief. Coleman gets the weeds and brambles right with noir worthy of Raymond Chandler or Elmore Leonard. But if there’s a deeper, higher, or even moderately significant purpose to Haines or the novel, it’s so obscure that I missed it.

Perhaps it’s good enough to give us a page-turner with an amateur detective and a deep dive into evil in action. Coleman does an admirable job of showing us evil, whether it’s practiced by a grinning, prestigious pastor or by a violent, soft-spoken drug lord. Maybe the author means to show that the banality of evil can neither be explained nor better understood.

People are a mixture of some good and a lot bad. Sometimes the bad smothers the good, but occasionally good breaks loose from bad. There’s something to be said for an honest depiction of that view of the world. But—and here my believer’s prejudice is showing—if that’s the best that’s left “when disbelief has gone,” I’m not sure it’s worth a novel.

The cleric in me thought that maybe Haines’s church past, or perhaps some residual memories of God, might help explain him or at least give deeper insight into his motivations and desires. That wished-for insight never came. Read this novel as fun, pulp-fiction noir or not at all.