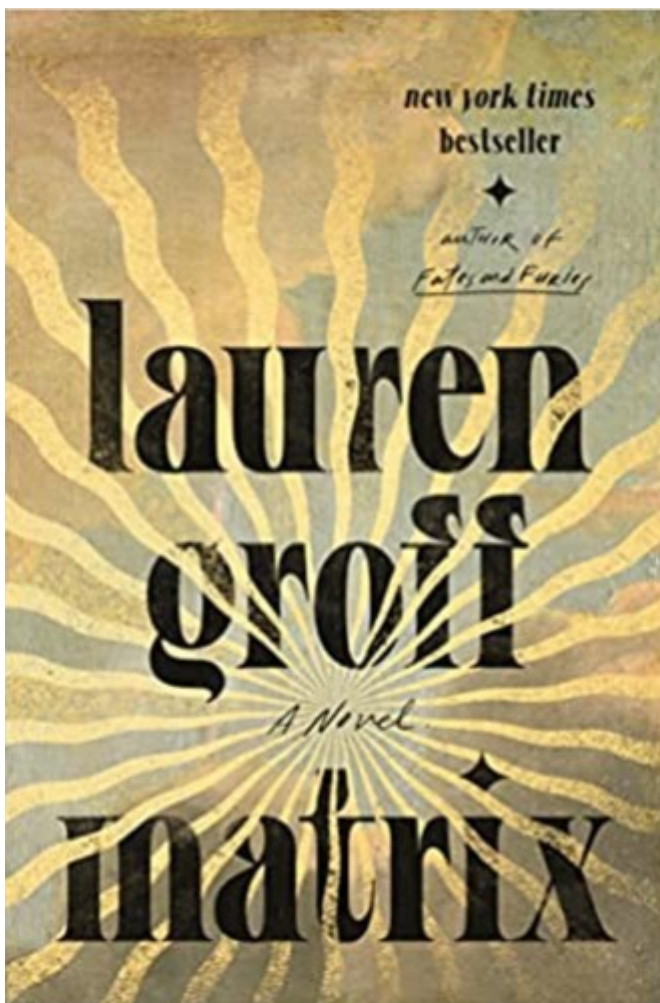


Lauren Groff builds a proto-feminist medieval world

But the enchantment of *Matrix* is ultimately broken by her language.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Matrix

A Novel

By Lauren Groff

Riverhead Books

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When I read the opening lines of Lauren Groff's *Matrix*, the challenge the book presented was clear. To make this part-historical, mostly imagined world convincing, the novel was going to have to absorb me in its language. I couldn't be thinking all the time, "How realistic is this? Would some woman in medieval Europe really have thought/said/done this?" The stretch into the mind and heart of a medieval woman was dramatic enough that ordinary contemporary language would not do.

Groff largely succeeds. The language of the novel holds its own, with startling cadences and vocabulary that make it clear that you are in another world and you like being there. "The new prioress Tilde, twitchy and scrupulous, with the sweet, startled face of a dormouse" reads one phrase, delightful in its specificity and strangeness, with a slight *Alice in Wonderland* feeling. By several pages in, I had given up on realism and was along for the ride.

The ride is the story of a 12th-century abbess named Marie, an unacknowledged child of a king, or in the language of the novel, a "bastardess." The story follows Marie from the failed Children's Crusade to the court in France of her half-sister Queen Eleanor to her exile in an English abbey. It examines her rise to power, her ambition, and the relationship between her physical and spiritual hungers. The novel keeps a brisk pace through the abbess's life, pausing for intimate and sensual details—a look inside the mind of the abbess or of those who admire or hate her—and then it takes off again, letting decades run through the reader's fingers.

This narrative is female-centered—all of its major characters, loves, and personalities are women. Marie takes little notice of popes or priests or bishops, kings or princes. They are abstract figures who play games far away or make threats at too close, but still impersonal, distances. She eventually exiles all men from the property of the abbey because they cause too much trouble.

One of the wonderful ways that Groff plays with the female-organized universe is with the feminine suffix *-trix*. Characters include a cantrix, an infirmatrix, and a scriptrix, among others. With each repetition of this suffix and the unfamiliar words it creates, we are reminded of the female utopia that we are imagining, this world where women make the rules and enforce them. The words stand like little bridges

between our world, what we think we know of the European Middle Ages, and the world that Groff is creating. It's playful and part of the effective defamiliarization of the novel.

But the proto-feminist gaze Groff uses to create Marie and her world also undermines her success. Groff's portrait of female sexuality, Marie's personality, her relationships to the other nuns at the convent, and the ambition that drives Marie to want more wealth, power, and autonomy are all convincing. But there came a moment in my reading when the world of imagination that Groff was portraying cracked. Somewhat late into Marie's career as an abbess, she has a vision of seven towers and all around them, attempting to penetrate them, the beasts of Revelation. In one of the towers, she sees the nuns of her abbey singing. The singing is so powerful, it seems to cause an earthquake, and beasts slip away from the tower, although their threat is ever present.

Combined with other factors, Marie decides that the meaning of the vision is that she should take on priestly functions: she should start offering confession and Eucharist to her sisters. Her decision creates a great deal of controversy in the abbey, and Marie overcomes this controversy with arguments about Mary Magdalene, *Apostola Apostolorum*, and the Virgin, through whom the Word became human.

Already I felt like Groff was on thin ice. My objection wasn't ideological, and it wasn't even practical. A female utopia, as this one, is fundamentally about challenging the powers that be. The abbey is a pretty isolated place that Marie, as abbess, has made even more isolated by creating an enormous underground labyrinth through which the abbey can be accessed. And I understood that we are in mythical territory, guided by dreams and visions. But something about the blithe way that Marie decides to take on this task felt off to me. The episode ends a few pages later with a scene that bothered me even more, along the same lines.

And when [the nuns'] sadnesses weigh so heavily upon her that she cannot sleep, Marie likes to go down to the scriptorium and change the Latin of the missals and psalters into the feminine, for why not when they are meant only to be heard and spoken by women? She laughs to herself as she does it. Slashing women into the texts feels wicked. It is fun.

To begin with, the question of whether women can say mass and change the wording of scripture feel like modern preoccupations, as if Marie has suddenly jumped out of Groff's world and is sitting in a divinity school class circa 1975. Even the word *fun* was jarring. The enchantment, for me, broke.

Then there is the relationship between this depiction and Marie's character. Marie is a lot of things, but fun and sneaky are not among them. Fun and sneaky would not have made her the woman she is. The individuality and secrecy expressed here are so unlike how Marie wields power: everyone does her bidding by public declaration, because they are afraid of her or because she makes their lives better with her choices on behalf of the community.

Perhaps most of all, the idea that Marie could remake the way that power works in medieval Catholicism by changing the endings of words to the feminine is too mechanical and rote an idea for a novel that evokes the power of words to make worlds. Ironically, Groff's world was unmade for me the same way it was made: through a question about language.