

Aura et labora

In Robert Baird's debut novel, a religion scholar's young son starts emitting a holy glow that might or might not be real.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
Published on October 31, 2025

In Review



The Nimbus

A Novel

By Robert P. Baird

Henry Holt

[Buy from Bookshop.org](#) ›

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Late in the first half of *The Nimbus*, Robert P. Baird's debut novel, a professor of religion unloads a rant's worth of advice on the graduate student he's advising. The student needs a new dissertation topic, and the professor is waving him away from the topic he's proposed. It's too safe, too small, too unsexy, says the professor, for a world in which research and publishing take so long, the resulting jobs are so few, and the career ladders are so broken, especially for not otherwise distinguished White men like them. "Now there's no room for leisurely dawdling," the professor says. "This place, the University," he goes on, is "an apex fucking predator, and it feeds on grad students." To avoid becoming another victim, he says, the student needs to take a big risk. "Nothing worth doing is not risky. The whole history of religion"—fasting, celibacy, poverty, martyrdom—testifies to the risk-taking of people who "know the universe is not a cheap date."

It's a climactic moment in a novel about intellectual passion, the professional ambition that cannibalizes it, and the chaotic space in which explaining the world, justifying your own existence, and making a living all collide. The professor, Adrian Bennett, wants the student, Paul Harkin, to research the history of numinous glowing haloes around human bodies across religions and eras. The topic has been suggested to Bennett by his own toddler son, Luca, who has recently started emitting just such a mysterious halo.

The Nimbus is about that titular glow, and it's about the family of the boy experiencing it: religion scholar father Adrian, mother and nonprofit consultant Renata, older brother Max. It's also about the study of religion in an academic setting, here closely modeled on the University of Chicago Divinity School. Not necessarily in that order. One day, while Adrian has left Luca with Paul at the div school, the glow just appears. A panicked hospital visit and multiple follow-up appointments confirm that nothing harmful is happening to Luca or to anyone in the vicinity of the nimbus but offer no explanation. It turns out, in fact, that not everyone can see the effect, and photographs can't capture it. Luca's mother, Renata, on top of the other indignities and resentments of modern professional-class mothering, is alone in her family in not being able to see it.

The nimbus is also visible to a former graduate student named Warren, who was inspired by an unspecified riddle in his experience of time to study at the div school but ended up blackballed from the PhD program and now works at the university's library. Warren, in turn, is being pursued by a loan shark called the Weight, who is attempting to collect on Warren's late mother's gambling debts. The plot weaves through the ambitions, resentments, adulteries, and cruelties of these characters, until it pulls all five together around the glowing Luca in the div school chapel.

It is not much of a spoiler to say that the question of what the nimbus is never quite gets resolved. It is in that sense a useful synecdoche of all the phenomena with which the academic study of religion concerns itself, toward which the scholar may approach no closer than agnosticism. Adrian sees the most astonishing validation of his vocation in the halo, pursuing a massive grant from a Dallas billionaire to lend a scholarly sheen to the re-enchantment of a secular world and rashly heeding the appeals of people who claim Luca's glow is somehow helping them. This enthusiasm creates friction with Renata, who resents that "her whole life subject to the whims of something whose reality was attested only by hearsay," a lament that could be voiced by any non-believing person in a religiously defined community. She seeks to defend her son from the greedy fascination of those who can perceive the nimbus, resisting the larger interpretations that Adrian tries to make of the anomaly. Borrowing a note from Pascal's *Pensées*, Renata embraces the paradox that her children are both nothing in the scale of the universe and everything to her.

I found it tempting, if not irresistible, to hunt for such references. *Luca* echoes the gospel writer who is also traditionally, if fancifully, identified as the first iconographer. *Adrian* is the name of an ancient martyr and a medieval scholar, *Renata* means "reborn," and *Bennett* is the English version of St. Benedict or of "blessed." Paul the graduate student, of course, bears the name of the apostle who was instrumental in the spread of Christianity. But to ask whether these references are interpretive keys or arbitrary details is, in a way, to repeat

the question of which topic to research, of which set of claims to believe, or of the nimbus itself: Is it something, or is it nothing?

This is, in other words, a scholarly novel, possibly to a fault. I felt at times that Baird, whose PhD is from the University of Chicago Divinity School, was making room for the odds and ends of research he'd done and didn't want to waste. But even so, the result is entirely true to life.

Critics have, it seems to me, largely mischaracterized *The Nimbus* as a satire of its academic setting and the intellectualism of its characters. It has elements of satire—a campus novel can scarcely avoid it, and to satirize a place like the University of Chicago Divinity School, all one needs is verbatim transcripts of actual speech—but it is not primarily hostile to its characters. Their periodic unseriousness does not give the lie to the seriousness that drives them. People really do look up at carved angels and get lost in a reverie about human suffering while they're waiting to ambush a professor. The oft-maligned “life of the mind” is real; that it can be frustrated or buried by personal vanity, selfish supervisors, bigoted professors, poor job prospects, and lack of money is the stuff of tragedy rather than savage comedy. Adrian's pitch-perfect myopia and narcissism grate on everyone. But his love of Gilgamesh—and of his children—is real.

What we do with this love, and with the “wild facts” William James identifies as existing outside the categories of the critical mind, is, I think, the real subject of *The Nimbus*. There is death, survival, and departure by the end of the story, and while it can't be said that the nimbus has meant good luck to the people who encountered it, there has been a clarification of purpose. This extends back to the enigmatic “to the reader” note that opens the novel—signed with initials that could be Baird's or could be, as we learn before the end, the initials of a character with a writerly and poetic cast of mind. It occurred to me that the novel could be that character's creative appropriation of the events it depicts. Then again, perhaps I was just seeing things.