

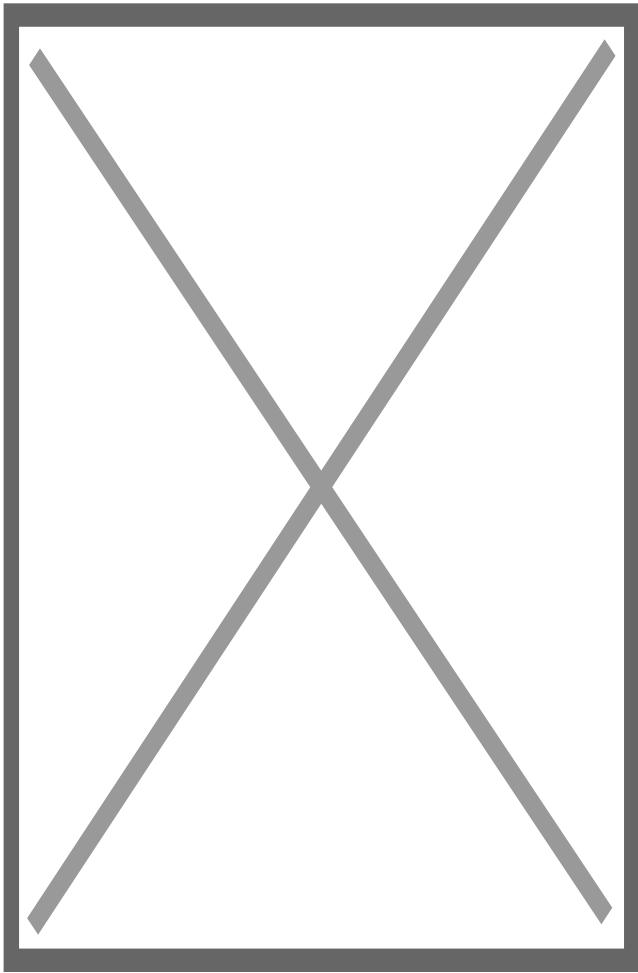
A novel about the *real* mother of Jesus

In Kaethe Schwehn's imaginative tale, the lives of Yeshua, his Greek birth mother Salome, and his adoptive parents Mari and Yosef drip with the brutal and the beautiful.

by [Simona Chitescu Weik](#)

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In Review



The Gospel of Salome

By Kaethe Schwehn

Wildhouse Publishing

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

As a recovering evangelical Christian who was born and raised on biblical texts written by male authors (and more devastatingly, the idea of a solely male God), I was thrilled by this novel's title. Structured in complex, Matryoska doll-style nesting narratives, the story follows Salome (also called Lyra), a Greek physician and the biological mother of the Christ Child, and the lives of Mari, Yosef, and Yeshua. The very notion of a fictional text, coupled with a genre that connects the biographical and theological, raises a provocative question about the nature of truth and how it might be most often found in stories.

Though Yeshua's life is a major and luminous thread running through *The Gospel of Salome*, it is not the epicenter of this weaving. Like Salome herself, Yeshua *is* and *is becoming*, constantly assembled, erased, reimagined and retold, a spiral folding and unfolding into and away from itself. "We say 'a mother gives a child life' as though it happens once," Salome says of her son. "But . . . a mother pushes her child into life again and again and again."

The scaffolding of the novel is as intricate as it is delicate: Salome, a brilliant physician in her 60s, is struggling with dementia, and her first-person narration unfurls at times in a fragmented and nonlinear manner, which not only suggests her state but also introduces a nondiscursive approach to meaning-making through the stacking of impressionistic reflections, intuitive leaps, and symbolic gestures. She orates her story in large part to John Mark, a disappointed and doubtful follower of Yeshua during the early days of the grassroots Christian movement. John Mark harbors intricate questions about the Messiah's life, death, and resurrection, which is one of the central mysteries of the novel.

Through his questions, two distinct and intertwining threads of Salome's personal history emerge: the enforced creation of Alexandria's New Jewish Quarter and the six harrowing days of torture and persecution of Jewish emigres in 38 CE.

In contrast to these confessional and intimate narratives, the later narrative arc unfolds in a third-person point of view and alternates between various characters: from Salome to her roommate Asha and the beggar Carabbas to John Mark. Though the prose style of these sections becomes increasingly fragmented as violence escalates, they tend to have a more linear feel and attest to the immaculate level of historical detail that permeates the novel. Events like the riots, life in the Greek isles, and ancient Roman methods of healing are seamlessly woven in from the writings of noted historians like Josephus and Philo of Alexandria, as well as contemporary scholars who have challenged and deepened earlier texts and firsthand accounts.

From both the imaginative and the historical realms, the lives of Salome, Yeshua, and his adoptive parents, Mari and Yosef, drip with the brutal and the beautiful. Yosef is a rare man of his time unafraid to embrace the domestic and create space for Mari to impart the words and songs of their people, while he sweeps, cooks porridge, and sometimes carves "graven images" on the back walls of their property, letting his inner artistry outweigh his devotion to YHWH's law. Mari mourns multiple miscarriages and stillbirths, while clinging to Yeshua with the grip of an archetypal mother who is nurturing more than a child—she is protecting the legacy of a scattered and persecuted people. For the sake of his mission, she prepares his burial clothes before any crucifixion is imminent.

There is genius in Schwehn's unromanticized rendering of Yeshua.

He is portrayed as a curious, passionate, flawed child and later man who moves through several cycles of near death into a kind of resurrection, each one more fantastical and heartbreaking than the last. His humanness and vulnerability undergird a striking architecture for the mission he feels at the core of who he is: overturning a system of domination deeper than its external manifestations of statehood or religious absolutes. Ultimately, it is through touch, gesture, and deep listening that he incarnates his message of an aliveness deeper than the body's

utility and animation. For Yeshua, aliveness is an expressive, feeling, meaning-making process with humans as participants—not masters—within an ecological web of being and becoming.

Schwehn's commitment to rooting this deeply imaginative, layered, story-tapestry in thorough research blurs the lines between fiction and history. This approach begs the inevitable question of how Salome's tale might play within categories such as gospel (interrogating the nature of truth, inerrancy, and memory) and *a* gospel (hinting at one of several extracanonical ones). It also dances with etymological implications: from the Old English *godspell* (how delicious to reflect on god + spell) and the Greek *evangelion*, as in *good news*. It is up to each reader to contend with the question of how a story like this, with its tellings and retellings, its subtle erasures and reinvention, might actually be the truest way to evoke a life. Or, perhaps, more than an evocation, this is an invocation: What could arise when we find the truest words—when we are ready, at last, to make a home inside ourselves for the stories that haunt us and do not let go?