

Lions and Souls: The Story of St. Mary of Egypt

John Loranger

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One of Western religion's patron saints is vividly brought to life for a new audience.

John Loranger vividly reimagines St. Mary of Egypt, a prostitute in Alexandria who became a hermitess in the Jordanian desert. A tale of demonic possession, lust, and repentance—using modern dialogue—*Lions and Souls* examines the curse of great beauty.

The plot begins when twelve-year-old Mary flees home at the prompting of an eerie figure, whom she mistakes for her guardian angel. It resumes seventeen years later, after Mary has gained notoriety for her passion. Through a series of impulsive decisions, she embarks on a seaward journey to Palestine, where her conversion occurs. Foreshadowing creates intrigue, and thoughtful transitions between chapters drive the story into a deeper examination of a soul corrupted by excess.

At times, the emphasis on Mary's sexual nature turns her character more emblematic than rounded. The choice befits a legend, yet leaves less room for growth. Quiet moments that humanize Mary stand out, from her tenderness toward animals to the rapport she strikes with a teenage ward, Julitta, in the household of a wealthy customer, Nobilius. Julitta's personal convictions serve as a sharp contrast to Mary's. Conversations between the women also reveal an affectionate side to Mary that hints at what her life might have been like before her encounter with the otherworldly.

The book portrays spiritual struggle with a talent for dramatic tension, and avoids framing Mary's life as a cautionary tale. One apt scene parallels the temptation of Christ. Another, more emotionally evocative moment features Mary's inability to cross the threshold of a church. Additional noteworthy aspects include an eye for domestic environments, such as Mary's childhood home, the brothel, and Nobilius's mansion, as well as the depiction of the devil, who in this incarnation is captured as a slippery, ageless man.

Occasionally, words such as "swanky" and "croak" (used as a euphemism for death) set a too-casual, contemporary tone. History also seems less present than it might. While not strictly essential, a stronger sense for the culture and particulars of daily life—as well as how Mary's status as a prostitute would or would not have affected her in ways that reach beyond expected leers and public avoidance—would lend additional weight to her complete renouncement of not only the past, but life in a community.

Lions and Souls brings one of Western religion's patron saints to a new audience with a compact, focused, unsettling narration. The novel successfully highlights abandon and asceticism.

KAREN RIGBY (October 1, 2015)

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