

Magda Revealed

Ursula Werner

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A message of love and equality is centered in Magda Revealed, a piquing alternative historical novel that reconstitutes a figure whose significance was buried in the Bible.

In Ursula Werner's illuminating novel *Magda Revealed*, Mary Magdalene narrates her own experience of Jesus, correcting the biblical account.

As a young woman, Magda is punished for reciting sacred texts in the synagogue, revealing the yield of her parents' tutelage. A traveling rabbi, Yeshua, heals Magda after years of ostracism by inviting her into his ministry. Magda travels with Yeshua and his other disciples, spreading his message of equality and love, anointing people, and learning. When Yeshua dies, he points the community of believers to Magda for leadership. But self-proclaimed leaders Peter and Paul destroy her written record of her own ministry.

Taking place after Yeshua invites Magda to return to earth to save humanity from the world's current perils, the novel replaces the lost manuscript and serves a new, vital purpose. More than once, Magda states that her intent is to set the record straight, not to convince anyone of Yeshua's miracles or divinity. She calls her account of Yeshua's death in particular a "murder investigation," implying a degree of objectivity. The self-confessed persuasive nature of the text invites the audience, addressed as "you," to take the tale seriously. To believe Magda is to believe that her story is worthy, that humanity needs saving, and that she can help. This is an effective hook, a dare to engage—with an instruction *not* to be objective, but to either be convinced or not.

Magda is a captivating narrator with a trustworthy voice. Beginning with her studious youth, she is characterized by her openness to new ideas and willingness to devote herself to education. And her new book is up to date, referring to popular-culture figures and concepts. Magda and her friends tease each other, gossip, and laugh. Their conversations buoy and soften the high-stakes tone, as does Magda and Yeshua's love. Their physical, spiritual, and intellectual affection embodies the book's focus on relationships.

Relationships and connections drive the book forward; it adopts an accelerating, deepening pace. Its naming of locations brings the story ever closer to Yeshua's death and resurrection, as well as to the site of Magda's final confrontation with Peter and Paul, who herein take a backseat as mere annoyances. Themes of devotion and integrity are the book's focus, not conflict, making Peter and Paul's accusations against Magda all the more jarring. Positioned as not in keeping with Yeshua's primary teachings of radical equality, Peter and Paul's intrusions at the end also prove the need for Magda's return, though.

Magda's anointing skills are also second to the central message of love and equality. Prophetic visions Magda has while anointing people sparkle, ornamenting the text's dominant record of the daily tasks of living in a community. Describing meals, work, sleeping arrangements, and childcare, Magda draws links between people's common concerns across time and space. The rustic setting in fishing and farming villages grounds the story too; simple pleasures pervade it, as people are required to be vigilant in their attention to survival, threatened by events beyond

their control.

A provocative novel, *Magda Revealed* is constructed as an alternative gospel that retells Jesus's message with added contemporary relevance.

MARI CARLSON (September 10, 2024)

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