

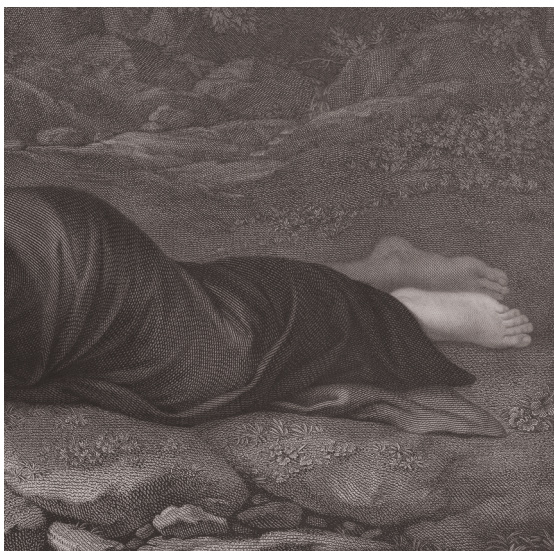
mystic Magdalene or “hairy Mary” – her body lifted to heaven by Angels to receive spiritual food and her nakedness hidden by flowing locks. The tradition is manifested exquisitely in Giovanni Birago’s illustration for the *Sforza Hours* book of hours (c.1490).

Conversely, the tradition of viewing Mary in terms of an active *vita apostolica* – apostolic life – originated in the 11th century in France, but gained popularity in the 13th century. The legend that she had been not only “apostle to the apostles” but also apostle to Provence helped establish more respectable pedigrees for relics of her body which found their way to France following the sack of Constantinople in 1204.

This is an impressive book, but some quirks frustrate. Almond carefully contrasts views of the Magdalene taken by Calvin and Luther, but skips the rich seam of developments stimulated by the Council of Trent’s teaching on penance. Likewise he offers illuminating juxtapositions of Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic Magdalenes, but ventures none between today’s west and the global south. Some comparison of Mary’s afterlives in post-Christian Europe and the vibrant Catholic cultures of South America might be instructive.

These points should not deter readers from enjoying this work. As Passiontide leads us into Holy Week, Almond’s book stimulates reflection on Tradition’s penitential saint par excellence. **CH**

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by Giuseppe Longhi, after Correggio

Lurking in the shadows

Georgia Gilholy

The Beast of Bethulia Park

Simon Caldwell

Gracewing, £20, 432 pages

Journalist Simon Caldwell’s debut novel *The Beast of Bethulia Park* might just be the most believable thriller on our shelves this year.

We first meet prematurely jaded young journalist Jenny Bradshaigh as she reports on the death of an elderly man, whose family suspect foul play by hospital staff. Readers will know that her opening complaints about trading Westminster for Wigan for matters of the heart have sounded the death knell for her impending marriage – even if she doesn’t yet. Her act of honesty in the book’s closing pages brings her story full circle where other authors would allow her the short-term luxury of deceit, or even glamorise her wrongdoing.

Her investigation into a series of deaths at the book’s eponymous hospital, which forms the basis of the plot, leads her into many quandaries. “The general public loved and trusted their doctors. They wanted to love them. News editors wanted to love them too,” she reflects as she probes medical records.

An equally complex character is Father Baines. The young hospital chaplain struggles to master his desire for something more than friendship with Emerald, the nurse aiding his crusade for truth alongside Jenny. It is a humanising portrait of a genuinely devout individual trying, and largely succeeding, in living up to his religious principles surrounding sex and relationships, a tale that few English novels published this side of the sexual revolution have told well.

In a speech that *Fleabag*’s vicar could only dream of, Father Baines tells Emerald: “We’d end up like Edward and Mrs Simpson, you and I. You might think you’d be getting a good man but you’d lament losing the man you once admired and were attracted to... You’d lose respect for me and you’d end up despising me, and I might resent you for taking me away from my priestly ministry.”

From fag-ends in flowerbeds to sticky pub

floors, every inch of the novel’s landscape feels grittily plausible. It has an obvious moral message without falling into the trap of presenting flimsy characters to force a point.

Where the text strays into the technicalities of theology, coroners courts and horse riding, it remains accessible. I found myself devouring the book in one sitting, whereas many modern crime novels would find me searching for excuses to boil the kettle or scroll Twitter.

Her deeply traumatic past and thirst for vigilante justice aside, Emerald is the closest thing the novel has to a stand-in character for a general audience. Like many Brits, she pokes fun at faith – especially Christianity – but is not openly hostile to it. Entering Father Baines’ parish church, she undergoes a sublime-like experience that she does not quite have the vocabulary to fringe. “She was not touched by a sense of history like she had been at the well in North Wales. There was something more than that. There was something alive within that church, something present but unseen, something too beautiful to put into words, something ineffable, something holy – something like a burning bush.”

Dr Klein is instantly discernible as a wrong ’un, with his snotty remarks to the hospital chaplain about the hospital “not being a religious playground”. Father Baines should have retorted that modern hospitals were invented by medieval monks.

The disdain Caldwell’s villains display for the disabled and elderly is all the more frightening with the knowledge that such people are currently being killed in Canada’s infamous medically assisted dying programme. At this moment, many nurses and doctors are surely feeling as helpless and complicit as Emerald.

Nor are these tragedies simply a matter of fiction in Britain, as one of Jenny’s sources explains: “A few years ago, hard-up trusts were being bribed with government cash to increase the percentage of patients dying on that dreadful Liverpool Care Pathway... what did Baroness Neuberger find out about that pathway when she reviewed it? That patients were being knocked out with chemical coshes, then left to die without food and aids.”

This novel aptly summarises the grisly reality of euthanasia beyond public debates about “compassion” and “dignity”. On this earth and Caldwell’s fictional one, the beasts are roaming far beyond Bethulia Park. **CH**

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