Culture
Book Reviews



A portion of "St. Christina the Astonishing," a painting by George Baltus in Sint-Truiden church, Belgium (Wikimedia Commons/CC Share Alike 4.0 International/Patrick3Lopez)



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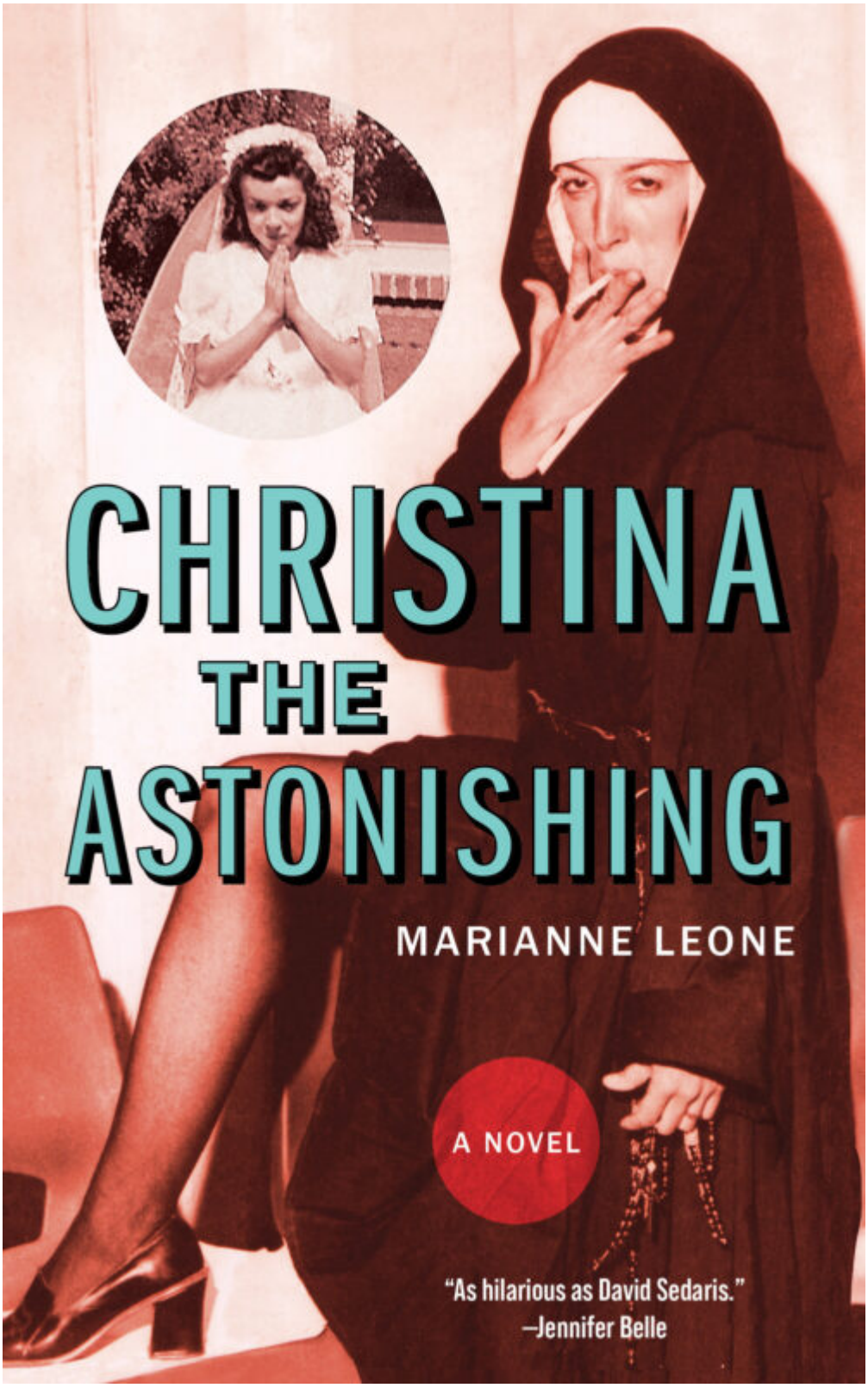
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In 23th-century Belgium, people were gathered for the funeral of a young woman named Christina. Suddenly, she burst from her coffin and floated up to the church rafters. When the priest commanded her to come down, she refused, saying she couldn't bear the stench of sin from the people below. Christina went on to live a life of mortification, wearing rags, residing in treetops and throwing herself into ovens yet remaining unscathed. After her death she was venerated as a popular saint, though never formally canonized.



Christina the Astonishing: A Novel
Marianne Leone
268 pages; Akashic
$16.95

St. Christina the Astonishing, as she is known today, might not sound like a feminist icon. But for actor, screenwriter and essayist Marianne Leone, Christina is a figure of liberation. Leone's new novel — inspired in part by the author's experiences in an immigrant family in 1960s Boston — is called *Christina the Astonishing*, after the eccentric saint.

"When Christina levitated out of the coffin and the priests were screaming at her to come down, that was kind of a perfect metaphor for how I felt about the Catholic Church, that I would levitate out of my background and levitate into being my own true self," Leone told NCR in a recent Zoom interview.

At the beginning of the novel we meet the imaginative and sharp-witted Christina Falcone, a fourth grader who is determined to be a saint — not out of spiritual devotion, but because the nuns at her school have terrified her with stories about the virgin martyrs. She's afraid to eat a BLT on Friday and has nightmares that eyeless St. Lucy is hiding in her closet.

Much of *Christina the Astonishing* is set in a neighborhood of immigrants, all from the same village in Italy, much like Leone's own. It was a rich environment, she says, but also a closed one. Christina envisions herself following the path of the other women there, from school to wedding to funeral home, without venturing beyond her narrow world. She wants more.

A window into a larger world opens when the nuns take the students to St. Lucy's Home for the Aged Blind. There Christina meets Babe, a former showgirl, who teaches her to smoke and gives her risque stories to read. Unlike some characters in *Christina the Astonishing*, Babe is entirely fictional; but she's not a stereotype.

"Babe is a real person who gets bitchy sometimes," Leone said. "She's the amalgam of all the 'tough babes' from the movies in the 1940s. I picture her as a woman who's seen heartbreak and tough times and learned how to put a funny crust over things."

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> —Marianne Leone

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Initially Babe radiates glamor but over time her years begin to show. Unlike the virgin martyrs, she has survived into old age, and it's important for Christina to witness what this looks like. Christina "sees clearly the lipstick running in crazy tributaries along the descending wrinkles of her mouth, but Babe doesn't look clownish or grotesque or Baby-Jane-ish. She looks like an ancient icon, a sybil who can impart secrets."

Thanks in part to Babe's influence, Christina begins venturing beyond her narrow world, flirting with young bohemian men and reading forbidden books. When the monsignor catches her reading a collection of poems by Ferlinghetti, he lectures her about "blasphemous books" and tries to steer her toward approved Catholic poetry. Though she appreciates being introduced to John Donne, she also steals her Ferlinghetti back.

It's when the formidable Sister Coronada assigns students to write about their patron saints that Christina discovers her levitating namesake, and claims her for her own. "[O]utcasts need a patron saint too," she writes in her essay. Sister Coronada is not amused.

Though Christina is inundated with patriarchal Catholicism at school, her parents, especially her mother, are impatient with the church's demands. "My mother grew up under fascism," Leone said. "Women couldn't go to college; they had to march in processions carrying babydolls." Her mother fled that regime and came to the United States. It frustrates Leone to see young women embracing the far-right misogynistic ideas her mother took great pains to escape.

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Catholic women who are deconstructing from patriarchal religion will find a lot that resonates in Leone's novel, despite the difference in time periods. The vignettes from Christina's early years under the influence of the "Little Sisters of Sadism," as Leone calls them, are both funny and relatable. "I think I had PTSD from the experience," Leone said, about her childhood experiences. "But if you turn it into art, you can live with it."

Christina, Leone said, has "Stockholm syndrome from what she’s getting in school all day — she is identifying with her overseers." So, like Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, she has to discover her authentic self. Also like Joyce's character, Christina finds her path to self-possession through art, as she begins a career as an actor.

An actor herself as well as a writer, Leone has appeared in multiple movies and television shows, including "Goodfellas" and "The Sopranos." "Here's where writing dovetails with acting. They both come from a place of truth. And if it's not a place of truth, it doesn't work," Leone said.

Leone left Catholicism years ago, citing clerical sex abuse, Irish Magdalene laundries and other scandals as having done too much damage for her to want to return. But she's glad Pope Leo is speaking up for immigrants, and she admires the courageous women religious doing advocacy work. In a 2012 essay about the Nuns on the Bus, she wrote:

"I may not have learned about social activism from my parochial school teachers, but I recognize it when I see it. To each Catholic nun who is challenging the status quo, I say, you are bold, Sister. Keep challenging the false authority of those who diminish the lives of the marginalized. My now-unblinking, ex-Catholic eyes are wide with admiration for you and your cause."

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