Culture
Book Reviews



Woodcut depicting a beguine, taken from the book *Des Dodes Dantz*, printed by Matthäus Brandis in Lübeck in 1489 (Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0)



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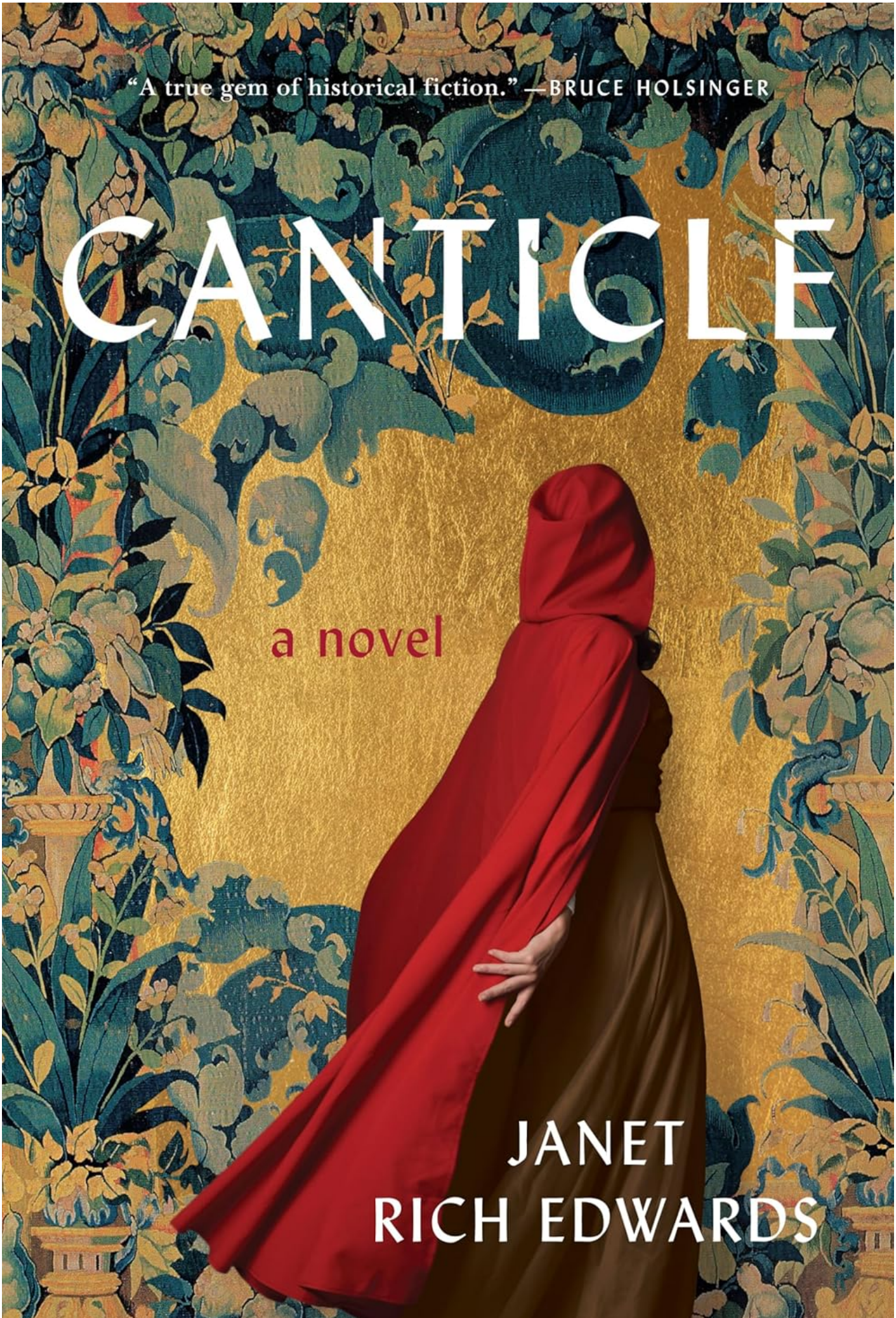
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Even as the church disappoints on the question of women's diaconate, contemporary women are producing serious work articulating female religious experience. Janet Rich Edwards, an epidemiologist at Harvard and Brigham and Women's Hospital, brings historical acuity and imaginative sensitivity to *Canticle*, a debut novel and work of historical fiction set in 13th-century Brugge.

Edwards, who is not Catholic, has said that the novel began with her fascination with Marguerite Porete, a beguine executed as a condemned heretic in 1310 who wrote a mystical treatise that was rediscovered in 1946. In the beguine movement — communities of women living together on the margins of the institutional church — Edwards found a compelling setting in which to explore aspects of religious experience outside ecclesial structures, sometimes in direct conflict with it.


"A true gem of historical fiction." —BRUCE HOLSINGER
CANTICLE
a novel
JANET
RICH EDWARDS

Canticle
Janet Rich Edwards
368 pages; Spiegel & Grau
$30.00

From an early age, Aleys shows an affinity for the spiritual life. She is fascinated by the images in her mother's psalter and imagines it would be "marvelous to be a martyr." In time, she learns how to read and acquires enough Latin to translate portions of the psalter, along with a young male friend Finn. They keep this daring pursuit secret.

When Finn decides to become a monk, Aleys recommits herself to her spiritual life. Her father teaches her about three kinds of churchmen: the parish priests, the hierarchy extending to the pope and the "new" friars. Aleys wants to be one of them too, but they are men. By novel's end, she will experience churchmen of every kind, for better or worse. For the time being, she resolves to remain home, caring for her family, only to have that wish betrayed when her father promises her in marriage to a wealthy suitor.

Determined to pursue "a new beloved," Aleys runs away rather than marry. She joins Lukas, head of the Franciscan friars of Brugge. Lukas, whose brother Jann is the bishop, pins his hopes on Aleys to become the founder of a Franciscan order of women. But, unable to house her, he asks the beguine community to take her in until this new order can be established.

Aleys is reluctant to join the beguines, because she believes the local gossip that beguines are "wanton." Once there though, she develops friendships and respect for their work. Especially formative is the guidance of the magistra, Sophia. When Aleys is found despondent at the altar, asking her beloved, "Why do you hide?" Sophia offers her a candle, a practical, embodied, metaphorical light. She confesses that she once burned with the same passion, but now feels more like "his hausfrau than a lover." She warns Aleys that "it's not enough to be in love with love. You must be willing to suffer with him, too."

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Although the beguines inspire the novel and dominate many discussions of the book, they are only one part of the story. Along with Finn, Aleys has already translated passages of Scripture into the Dutch vernacular and understands the risks involved. When such translations begin appearing in the marketplace, Aleys rightly suspects that under the magistra's guidance, the beguines are secretly translating and circulating vernacular versions of the Bible. Because church authorities explicitly forbid these translations, the community places itself in grave danger by continuing this work.

As chaplain to the beguines, Lukas attempts to protect the women from authorities, even as he realizes they are likely responsible. This brings him into direct conflict with his brother, who hopes to negotiate a promotion by halting the spread of the texts. Edwards dramatizes the institutional struggle through their conversations, a several-hundred-year-old conversation that resonates with contemporary tensions, notably Pope Francis' call for synodality and the resistance it has encountered:

> "But the people yearn for their God."
>
> "Whose God? The people's God?" snaps Jann. "Or the Pope's God?"
>
> "Worshippers deserve the truth."
>
> "They have no idea what that is."
>
> To which the friar responds, "They do, Brother, better than you think."

Meanwhile, working alongside the beguines in the hospital, Aleys experiences an ability to heal the sick. With miracles to profit from, the clergy get involved. A papal delegation arrives, only to discover the miracles have disappeared. The next step in Aleys' harrowing spiritual-political journey comes after she fails to perform as desired and the clergy decide she should become an anchorite. This medieval custom involves enclosure within a church for life, devoted entirely to prayer, as Julian of Norwich once lived.

> Canticle has much to offer readers interested in discernment and spiritual formation.
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This path also ends disastrously for Aleys. Lukas, originally good but ineffective, becomes so enamored of his project, so jealous of the gifts she enjoys, that he ultimately becomes her predator. Confusing proximity to holiness with possession of it, he crosses a moral boundary, realizing that "he doesn't just want to be near her. He wants to be her." These passages are among the most difficult in the novel. Like Marguerite before her, Aleys finds herself condemned to a funeral pyre, with some people calling her a heretic; others, a saint.

Canticle has much to offer readers interested in discernment and spiritual formation. She had prayed, "Show me how to find you." He does. Drawing on the texts of known mystics, Aleys finds the words for ecstatic union, devastating dark nights. She matures as Sophia has. When the martyrdom she once romanticized is actually at hand, she meets it quietly. She "stops struggling, for what sense is the struggle against all that is? It simply *is*."

Over the course of a few years, Aleys becomes a daughter, sister, an almost bride, an itinerant mendicant, a beguine, an anchorite and a martyr. Her experiences will be authenticated not by ecclesial power, but recognized by her sisters in the beguine community. Discernment unfolds in dialogue with the church, but primarily through lived encounter with the divine. For readers attuned to these topics, *Canticle* holds nothing back.