Culture

Book Reviews



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Sisters, School, and Something More: A St. Thérèse of Lisieux Story (Fiat Girls)
Claire Swinarski
64 pages; Ascension Press
$12.99

True Beauty and Being Yourself: A St. Rose of Lima Story (Fiat Girls)
Claire Swinarski
64 pages; Ascension Press
$12.99

Finding Her Voice and Leading With Love: A St. Teresa of Calcutta Story (Fiat Girls)
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When my youngest daughter declared her plans for dressing as "the lady with the sword" for our parish All Saints' Day parade this year, I wasn't surprised. From Joan of Arc to the Virgin Mary to St. Bernadette, the saints — especially the female ones — hold a special place in my girls' hearts. So when acclaimed middle grade author Claire Swinarski announced that her Catholic series would feature the brave young girls who became saints, I immediately preordered all three books.

The *Fiat Girls* series meets a gaping need in the Catholic market, where resources for children about the saints tend to jump from early childhood picture books to lengthy biographies. But there was another, more subtle need detected by the author as well.

"I noticed that in Catholic spaces, we often value books that teach our children more than books that delight them," Swinarski told the National Catholic Reporter. "But children often learn through joy! By telling stories that make children excited to spend time with the saints, they will learn about them, but they'll also fall in love with them, which is the real goal."



Graphic featuring book covers of The Fiat Girls series (Courtesy of Ascension)

I saw this joy firsthand on my 8-year-old's face when we read *Sisters, School, and Something More: A St. Thérèse of Lisieux Story*. The book quickly captured my daughter's interest, and she begged for "one more chapter" until we finished. I was surprised by how much information my daughter took in from the small book and its concluding biography of the saint, written by Amy Welborn.

Fiat Girls evoke comparison to the beloved *American Girl* series in its weaving of historical facts with compelling, imagined stories of the girls' lives at age 9. Swinarski spoke to this blending of fact and fiction, saying, "It's a delicate balance … I really took the issue to prayer and asked the saints to intercede for me, trying my hardest to represent them as accurately as possible. Yes, the stories are fiction, but I believe they really capture true aspects of the girls' beings." The stories navigate this balance well, interspersing imagined conversations with the values and passion demonstrated by the saints in their later lives.

Though the books are crafted to appeal to ages 7 through 10, I found myself interested in the framing of sainthood being a process we grow into, rather than a state we are, or aren't, born in. Swinarski's depictions aren't fully formed adults who have it all figured out; they are young and working through everyday problems to which my daughters can relate.

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When asked about how our experience of learning about a saint changes when we consider them as a child, Swinarski noted:

> When we remember that the saints aren't just fairy tale characters but are actual people, who had sins and struggles and suffering, it reminds us that we, too, can become saints. It isn't a special role carved out for only the holiest among us. I want girls to be able to relate to the saints when the saints were most like them: when they were young, caring about things like friendships and bedrooms and games. Because they were!

Along with Thérèse, Ascension Press released *Fiat Girls* books on St. Rose of Lima and St. Teresa of Calcutta this October. Each book situates the reader in the setting of the story, bringing the narratives to life with accurate details about the colonial history of Lima, Skopje during the pre-World War I era, and grade school in France. The cultural components of each saint are woven into their story, highlighting the differences in the girls' life experiences while emphasizing the similarities of their interior lives.

"I purposely chose three different saints, from three different time periods, with three different families, in three different cultures, with three different

temperaments because I wanted girls to understand that we are all called to sainthood," Swinarski said. "I hope that when girls read the *Fiat Girls* they're inspired to give their own yes to God, whatever that may look like in their lives today."