

Hollywood screenwriter returns home

James Carroll | Jan. 25, 2009

CROSSBEARER: A MEMOIR OF FAITH

By Joe Eszterhas

Published by St. Martin's Press, \$24.95

Awareness of death is what enabled *Homo erectus* to become *Homo sapiens*. Or so anthropologists speculate. When individual humans began to imagine their own physical demise, probably in reaction to the newly lifeless remains of dear companions, they experienced the future as palpably present. They experienced those already dead as somehow still with them. The ancestor took on a numinous character, which was an opening to the holy. Ancestors became gods, and gods became God. It is not too much to suggest that by reckoning with the harsh fact of death, the self-aware and contemplative creature, in the far mists of time, had its first intimations of the divine.

That is the move that Joe Eszterhas reports making in *Crossbearer: A Memoir of Faith*. Eszterhas is a famous American screenwriter. His movies - notably "Basic Instinct," "Flashdance" and "Showgirls" -- have helped to shape popular culture. By his own account, he has been a maestro of the elevation of sex over love, of the glorification of violence, of a trendy preference for slick surfaces over depth. An extremely gifted writer, he had put his talent at the service of much of what is wrong in America.

When the middle-aged Eszterhas was brought up short by a grave health crisis -- a throat cancer that nearly killed him -- he looked back on a life of hard drinking, womanizing, and drug and alcohol abuse, and saw it all as "self-destructive, self-abusive, dark, and sinful behavior." Trying to "out-walk death," he collapsed, and found himself sitting on a curb and saying over and over, "Please, God, help me."

God? Who was that? The primitive impulse, when the end of time has shown itself, to find some principle of being beyond time, led in Eszterhas' case to a lapse back into the Catholic faith of his childhood. His book tells the story of his reverse trip from Hollywood back to his hometown of Cleveland; his move from cynical disdain toward all things spiritual back into the innocence of life in a Catholic parish called Holy Angels. This story of penitent return is told simply and movingly. Eszterhas tries to pick up where he left off years before, as an altar boy. He even joins the servers at Mass by volunteering each week to be the liturgical "crossbearer," the one who leads the priest and acolytes into the sanctuary -- a function that gives his memoir its title, and his new identity as a recovering Catholic its core meaning.

To Eszterhas, Jesus is the saving figure to whom he was introduced in his youth, a savior who, through his terrible suffering, offers consolation to humans who themselves undergo terrible suffering. Eszterhas assumes he will again take up his childhood creed, even if it is faith in the brutal, damning God of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, a God whom Eszterhas understands has inflicted him with throat cancer as punishment for his wild living. It is no surprise, given this view, that Eszterhas is profoundly moved by the supreme Hollywood portrait of that damning God inflicting infinite punishment on a beloved Son, in Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ."

Though that film was pornographic in its violence and anti-Semitic in its scapegoating of Jews as Christ-killers, many viewers, like Eszterhas, were able to experience the callously showcased suffering of Jesus as a consolation for their own suffering. Such a portrait of the dying God was taken to assuage the dying person. Thus, the divine crossbearer helps the human crossbearers -- and the first and final cross, bringing us back to where we started, is death.

But however much Eszterhas wants to reclaim the innocence of his childhood faith, he cannot. He has changed, and so has the church. Eszterhas finds that the pastor of Holy Angels Parish and even the new bishop of Cleveland are personally implicated in the priestly sex-abuse scandal -- the former as an alleged perpetrator, the latter as an enabler. Eszterhas picks up signals of anti-Semitism in his newfound Christian friends and is repulsed by church assumptions about homosexuality and the place of women. There are acceptance and affirmation, yes, but there are also smug authoritarianism and shallow preaching and judgmental self-righteousness and ... and ... and ...

Having confronted the sinfulness in his own life, Eszterhas has to reckon with sinfulness in the life of the church to which he has returned. No wonder he feels at home. In that, this repentant man enters the greatest mystery of belief: How forgiveness is so gloriously available in a community that stands so palpably in need of forgiveness itself. Joe Eszterhas has given us a contemporary story of the Prodigal Son, only to discover that what has been so truly prodigal all along is the absolving love of the One who welcomes him.

James Carroll is the author of 10 novels and six works of nonfiction, including Practicing Catholic, an account of life in the American church, which will be published in April by Houghton Mifflin.

National Catholic Reporter February 6, 2009

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