



The Passion of Mary Magdalen

Elizabeth Cunningham

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Janey says

I have always hated the fact that Mary Magdalene has been called a prostitute throughout history when she in fact was not one.

That being said, if you completely disconnect this book from the bible, Christianity and Judaism, its a great historical novel about women in ancient times. It is full of sex, passion, sorrow and drama.

The relationship between Jesus and Mary is beautiful. Elizabeth Cunningham manages to describe an infinite love that is grander than just two people.

You will love this book if you liked the Red Tent and the Mists of Avalon.

If you like irreverent tales of Jesus, check out Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal

Becky says

I started this book with mixed feelings, and I'm very glad I finished it.

Considering I loved Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal" by Christopher Moore, which many find blasphemous I was surprised that I found the book jolting, but in the end moving.

Maeve Rhuad, who becomes Mary Magdalen, is a Celt warrior goddess. I didn't read the first volume of the Chronicles, where she meets Jesus, and then is cast away, where she is captured, becomes a Roman slave. In this volume, she is sold to a woman who runs a whore-house, becomes a prostitute, then a slave to a spoiled Roman woman, a holy Priestess/prostitute of Isis, and finally the wife of Jesus. Maeve tells her story to us (meaning current audiences) in our language, holding nothing back, and with wit.

I felt unnerved by the raw sexuality and paganism at times, but at others (especially as it came to the story leading to Christ's crucifixion) incredibly moved in a way that surprised me. The author is descended from 9 generations of Episcopalian priests, and is an ordained interfaith minister. She has a wicked (and I mean that in many different contexts) imagination. The big thing that made me give this a higher rating - at the end of the book, she moved me, and made me curious to learn more about Mary of Magdala, and perhaps gave me another way to view what will eventually become more of my spiritual journey. Nice book to end the year with.

Jeff says

This novel truly took me by surprise. This is the second of a trilogy of books featuring the title character, who calls herself Maeve. The premise is this:

What if Mary Magdalen of the New Testament was actually of Gaelic decent -- a Celt with blazing red hair who was raised as a sort of Pagan priestess in a culture with more female than male deities? What if she and Jesus became friends as kids, and fell in love in young adulthood? And what if they were separated and went through enough travails in their attempts to reunite to fill the first half of a 600-page novel?

And what if Jesus had a pretty enchanted mom, yes, but also one who reflected less flattering stereotypes of the Jewish matron? And what if Jesus had many siblings? This is certainly a more plausible situation than the only child scenario depicted by the apostles in the King James Bible.

The novel "The Passion of Mary Magdalen" takes these and other speculations in logical and extremely moving directions. Throughout, Jesus is depicted as both human and an embodiment of his one god.

Mary, on the other hand, is painted vividly here as woman who is torn from her native land by the crimes of her sexually abusing father and a series of men and women who kidnap and enslave her. Sex is something she is quite good at, and she uses it as a means to winning the money, power and influence she needs to find her one true love, the man she called Esus as a child. That said, the sex scenes in the book are far from prurient. They are presented in the matter-of-fact language of a sex worker, which is what Mary freely admits she is.

Mary / Maeve is the sacred prostitute, (she calls her league that of "holy whoredom"). She ultimately opens a temple to Isis, the Egyptian goddess, where men come to be healed and serviced in equal measure. (If you guffaw at the notion, this book ain't for you. Even more about whom this was NOT written for in a moment.)

To justify her temple / brothel, she explains that "When I open myself to the goddess, he [i.e., her one true love, Jesus:] is restored to me in the stranger's embrace." (p. 342).

Jesus performs miracles; There is no doubt of his holiness. What would shake some readers up, however, is how, in this world, you don't have to worship Christ's God in order to channel the powers of a healer. In fact, a thread running through the book is that the bottled tears of a prostitute have powers to heal. Especially with the great highs and lows of this woman's life, that means there are ample opportunities for healing miracles beyond the standard issue New Testament tales. These familiar miracles are, incidentally, described thoroughly if not conventionally in this book.

At this point I should tell you that I was a good Catholic boy at St. Joseph's Grade School. I grew up steeped in the wonderful stories about Christ, told to me by Franciscan priests and nuns. I stepped away from the faith around puberty and have never looked back. (I'd like to think my powers of discernment improved around then, but knowing how boys develop in middle school I'd have to admit that my decision to become a Biblical doubter was more likely the result of other organs entering into the equation.)

Whatever was the cause, I remain a skeptic in religious matters. Yet as any ex-Catholic will tell you, the ritual-rich faith never completely leaves you either. So I found this fresh exploration of who Christ really was especially moving. It supported my love of this essential myth.

I am also pleased that I've read it time time of year, in December, a time of one of the two biggest Christian celebrations. This book has made me feel closer to these myths, and reminded me why they are so instructive and inspiring. But Cunningham pulls few punches in her speculations. This passage is indicative:

FRIEND: "Your sweetie had a bad reputation, Red."

MARY: "Tell me something I don't know," I shrugged ... "Got thrown out of shul after shul for always

having a smart remark. He also used to play at striking people dead by casting them into a trance. Supposedly he turned some children into goats because the wouldn't play with him. He was a terror." FRIEND: "Did you know about the drinking, gambling, and loose women in Sepphoris?" MARY: "He spared me nothing," I said grimly.

Many people would find this type of talk deeply offensive, as they would the notion that she and Jesus were married -- in fact, married in a whorehouse (a holy whorehouse notwithstanding).

Yes, many would hate what they would feel is the undignified humanization of Jesus and his followers. These people would be missing the point. I was inspired by the passion and ecstasy of Mary and her beloved. They loved each other as deeply as any people born in flesh and blood every could. The difference: They used this bond to express their love for the least of those around them (although at times Mary / Maeve becomes as whiny and exasperated as a military wife who's had way too much of her husband's many absences and sacrifices).

The Pagan earthiness and mystery of it this unconventional Mary of Magdalen reminded me of the works of Sufi poet Rumi. As in this passage:

"God has been called our father. God has been called our mother. God has been born and reborn as a child. I am asking you now to know god as your lover, the one who fills you and surrounds you, who gives and demands everything. Yield yourself to him, to her. Lose yourself. Remember." (pp. 445-6)

Silke says

Earlier this year I read the prequel to this novel and absolutely loved it. Something I can't say all together about this part of the series. Don't get me wrong, I still like the story and Maeve is still het witty, feisty, funny and dramatic. The writing is still amazing and the authors family background with 9 generations of Episcopal priests shows all through the writing.

So with didn't I like about this book? Well the first 60% of the book. It took forever before Jesus showed up and we really got going on the whole passion-story. And that was actually what I was looking for. Not that I did not care about Maeves adventures in Rome. But it could have been shorter. Now you have the main part of the book handling about her whoring days in Rome and then the last part about her being Jesus companion. The last part feels like it is rushed. We sweep through their time together at a dazzling rate. I actually love some of the ideas that are worked out in this novel. The similarities about Mary of Magdala and Jesus and the story of Isis and Osiris. (It is something a read about in the past and it is worth a further investigation.) I also like some of the explanations given about certain biblical events. And also the relationship development between Maeve and Peter, the rock of the church.

There were also few things I had trouble with comprehending. I just can't imagine a smart girl like Maeve who was brought up as a free woman, who follows her heart more than anything, would put up with so much crap as Jesus puts her thought. I just can't see Mary (the mother of Jesus) as a lack witted woman. Basically I loved that she stepped away from the classic tale, cause the biblical version just doesn't bring any justice to Mary Magdalene. But sometimes she (for me) went a step to far.

Mrs. The King says

I love this book! It is seriously controversial. It is a huge read. I actually have a copy signed by the author!

Michele says

epic. not christian.

Gregory says

I don't give a lot of five's but this is a book of truly extraordinary delight. It is the story of the Jesus mythos last days told through the eyes of his saucy, celtic/druid reared, Goddess Isis worshipping sacred whore/lover/wife Maeve also known as Mary of Magdala. The book is at times raucous laugh out loud funny and at other times it will break your heart. I loved the humanness as well as the divinity and the rendering of the disciples from thick as a block to plotters, schemers and all the other petty intrigue that goes along with the human condition. The depiction of the women was truly "divine". I read late and I read early and I was truly sorry to see this book end. Enjoy.

Grace says

Elizabeth Cunningham's long-awaited sequel to *Daughter of the Shining Isles* (now sold under a different name), this book follows Maeve in her days as a slave in the Holy Land. Although it's a thick book, I read this in no time at all since I could never put it down. Maeve goes through so much in this story....from slavery to harlotry to sacred/spiritual harlotry...from the depths of despair to being the lover of the Christ (but never quite his unquestioning "follower").

Being of a Christian background, I don't find much fascination in the recent DaVinci Code/biblical questioning. If Cunningham's book series had started with Maeve as the Magdalen in the Holy Lands, I likely would have just passed it by. But this series is absolutely outstanding, and it's fascinating to follow Maeve and her spiritual beliefs, which never waver from a belief and love of the goddess, even as she acknowledges the truth of her lover's words as well.

Laura says

The whole Maeve Chronicles series is superlative, highly recommended, one of my favorites. I would recommend it for fans of strong women, Celtic fantasy, Biblical reinterpretation, myth and magic, Goddess fiction, the Mists of Avalon. In a nutshell, Mary Magdalen is re-visioned as a Celtic ex-pat and Jesus' wife, a magical and strong and sometimes foolish woman, and her tale spans the course of four well-researched and well-written books. Written with cheek and humor and glory and beauty, all at once.

In Book Two, *The Passion of Mary Magdalen*, Maeve journeys to Rome as a slave and whore, makes

friends, searches for Jesus, is claimed as a priestess of Isis, winds up in more myth and legend, finds a temple of sacred prostitution, and is reunited with her love. This book intersects with the stories of the Bible most closely - Jesus as he spreads his message and develops followers, his companions, his mother Miriam and the angels that speak to her, breaking bread with all kinds, the last supper, the cross, the morning after - but all from Maeve's perspective, how she sees it, where her version contradicts the version that was written down. Jesus is a man, a good one, but not perfect, which I think is a great way to think of him.

There is some sexual violence in this book, in part memory, in part not.

Jenny Yates says

I really liked this book. It's one of my favorite readings of the character of Mary Magdalen, aka Maeve, the goddess-worshipping Celt. She's feisty, tough, omnisexual, and just as magical as Jesus. She has serious reservations about Yahweh, but she's crazy about Jesus, so she manages to (mostly) go along with his agenda.

I'm not a huge fan of retellings of the Jesus story, but this is definitely one of the best of the genre. It's well-written, with every character distinct and interesting. It's a ripping good story, a great beach read but with some serious undertones. It's well-researched, & has a good grip on ancient history. It's pro-woman, pro-earth & pro-pleasure. I do recommend it.

Mary Helene says

Against my better judgement: 4 stars, because (a) she did her homework and (b) was wildly imaginative. The tone is romance-novel with tongue-in-cheek (or not) and her sentences are often clichés. I just finished Mary Karr's *Lit*, which is so beautifully written that I kept reading sentences aloud to anyone who would listen. In the first 200 pages of *The Passion of Mary Magdalen*, I read aloud sentences because they were so bad. And yet. Her imagined Mary Magdalene is at her best taking on well known Biblical episodes from a different perspective. Not one rang false, except perhaps the very last one. I had hoped for more, more of what this means to say that Jesus is Risen and alive in our lives.

PJ Who Once Was Peejay says

The title of this book doesn't do justice to just how astonishing it is. At turns reverent and irreverent, bawdy, earthy, spiritual, funny, moving, human *and* divine, it's an incredible journey with wonderfully dimensional characters. A massive book, and so involving, I had to put it down periodically and take a breather, but each time I picked it up again I fell right into the narrative, drawn away and drawn in so completely.

The narrator, Maeve, aka Mary Magdalen, is a voluptuous Celtic girl who goes from priestess, to Roman slave and common prostitute, to pagan priestess, to beloved wife of Jesus. Told in the first person, Maeve's voice is an instant and enduring hook—the prose as earthy-real and voluptuous as Maeve herself. And very modern, which bothered me on the first page, but by the second page I realized that Maeve is telling this two thousand year old story from the present—though the mechanism of how that is occurring is never revealed.

(There is a sequel.)

I should add here that there is also a prequel and if you wish to read *Magdalen Rising* and remain unspoiled as to the major plot points, you should probably read that one first. I didn't, so I can't speak as to whether it's the tour de force the second book is, but even though I know the high points of what happened in that story, since finishing *Passion*, I want to read the first story. Which must be some kind of testament as to how much this book affected me.

Ms. Cunningham manages to honor both the pagan and Judeo-Christian traditions, to meld them so artfully that it seemed incredible that they'd ever been parted. If you are a biblical literalist, perhaps this won't work for you. But it moved me very deeply, left me thinking about it for days after, marveling in the passion play I had just taken part in.

Lee Ann says

I was raised a Catholic. I went to a Catholic middle school, and currently attend a Jesuit college. In high school, I went to religion class on Sundays and made my Confirmation.

But try as I might (prepare for some blasphemy here), I could not bring myself to care about Jesus.

Okay: "Not care" may not be the right way to describe it. I couldn't relate, is what I'm trying to say. I knew teachers who got teary-eyed during the Stations of the Cross every year, but to me that particular Mass was just another obligation. And reading the Bible just made Jesus seem even less approachable. He always seemed more divine than human to me (and, let's face it, his Father's rules always seemed a little sexist).

The Passion of Mary Magdalen changed all that for me. Cunningham creates a brilliant, imperfect Jesus who makes honest mistakes, who can be a bit of a jerk sometimes, but who seems more human than he does in any official Gospel. I genuinely cried in scenes that, otherwise, made me say "big deal" when we reenacted them at Mass in middle school.

But this book (and its predecessor, *Magdalen Rising: The Beginning*) also did one more thing for me, one thing for which I will be forever grateful: It made me love my body. It helped me discover divinity in women, in myself.

We Catholic girls are taught to bear Eve's shame. We're taught that our bodies are unclean and that our sexual agency is a sin. We're an "other." Maeve, Mary Magdalen, Priestess of Isis, whatever you choose to call her -- she teaches us not to feel ashamed or dirty when we have our periods, she teaches us to embrace every biological fact that comes with being a woman, she teaches us that men should be held accountable for their own mistakes and stop using women as scapegoats, she teaches us that there is a bit of the God(dess) in all of us. And most importantly, she teaches us sovereignty. She teaches us to make decisions about our own lives and our own bodies, not to let men dictate our lives for us.

I remember first reading *Magdalen Rising*, and reaching the scene in which Maeve uses her own menstrual blood to fingerpaint some rocks. My reaction was much like the reaction of Viviane, later in the book: Disgust. I almost put the book down, thinking it was a little too "absurd" and "savage" for my tastes. But something in me (the Goddess, perhaps?) said, "No, keep reading. This is great stuff." And soon I felt myself lightening up, and even loving that scene (I've reread *Magdalen Rising* three times already). Now, a few

months later, when I got to the scene in The Passion of Mary Magdalen where Jesus finally breaks his "geis" and touches Maeve when she's bleeding, and then asks her to anoint him with her blood, I found myself crying and laughing and cheering for good ol' Jesus. I feel as though I've come full circle and really embraced my femininity.

I would 100% recommend this book to everyone, but especially to women who always felt a little estranged by the Catholic Church. I know not everyone will love it as much as I do, indeed many will bristle at the challenges Maeve/Mary Magdalen poses; but it's certainly worth the read. It has earned a place beside my other favorites on my special bookshelf. I cannot wait to accompany Maeve on the next phase of her journey in Bright Dark Madonna, and I'm sure that book will be just as great as Cunningham's others.

Update, 2018: Just finished the audiobook edition on Audible, and I absolutely loved it. It's perhaps even more emotional listening to it acted out by the fantastic narrator, Heather O'Neill. 5/5 stars is not enough!

Ann Patricia says

I listened to the Audio book.

I am mourning the end of this book. The actress reading the book was Mary Magdalena. She was the accent that belongs with the character.

The story is told in first person and she is talking to the reader in modern time about life back then. So she uses phrases with comments saying "well what he really said doesn't translate well into modern English but it's equivalent is _____. "

It shows a possible back story for the woman who knew Jesus possibly in a more the biblical sense.

I would make a nun read this book.

Slightly racy in the sexuality sense. She describes herself as a whore priestess, so sex is talked about.

Lynda says

Not a biblical tale.
