

# H-Net Reviews

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**Jeana DelRosso.** *Writing Catholic Women: Contemporary International Catholic Girlhood Narratives.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. x + 203 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6757-2.

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## Expanding the Catholic Canon of Literature to Include Women and Girls

“Women’s stories have not been told,” said Carol Christ in one of the earlier and most pivotal works of feminist theology, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*.<sup>[1]</sup> Christ wrote this not long after her graduate work at Yale Divinity School during the seventies, when she (specifically as a woman) was left wondering whether gender made her approach to religion and spirituality somehow different from her male peers. Christ later argued further that “women need a literature that names their pain and allows them to use the emptiness in their lives as an occasion for insight rather than as one more indication of their worthlessness.”<sup>[2]</sup>

The claim that women’s stories have not been told, heard, or encouraged, that women’s voices have either been ignored or stifled, is now a common cry and especially so among feminist theorists over the last several decades. This call has never rung more clearly than among women theologians and religion scholars, however, since institutional religion often bears the brunt of societal responsibility for patriarchy and the systematic marginalization of women, and whether women’s voices are heard or silenced. The reason why there is an abundance of women’s voices, stories, and opinions available today—one might claim—is because western women, at least, began to refuse the part of the silent female. Feminist scholars pushed, prodded, retrieved, reworked, demanded, or simply decided what women had to say was smart, engaging, necessary and going to be heard, like it or not. Patriarchy would have to either step aside or make room.

Mostly, patriarchy has made room—often only tiny spaces. It is still the house in which we say our piece and it shows little signs of stepping aside to share the public stage in either a mutual or integrated manner. At least for now, that is.

Jeana DelRosso, a professor of English from the University of Connecticut, takes up this same maneuvering of patriarchal systems in *Writing Catholic Women: Contemporary International Catholic Girlhood Narratives*. DelRosso’s intent is to make space for women’s literature in the largely patriarchal canon of what counts as Catholic literature—effectively taking up Carol Christ’s call from over twenty-five years ago. Her project tasks itself with expanding the notion of Catholic literature beyond what has traditionally been defined by theorists such as Thomas Woodman and Theodore Fraser as including only authors who are practicing Catholics and/or stories centered on beliefs and themes that are “traditionally Catholic.” This sort of definition tends to restrict the genre to men like James Joyce, Graham Greene, and Walker Percy, and also generally limits the portrayal of women to either “seductress or spiritual mother—in other words, woman as Eve or Mary” (p. 13). According to DelRosso, this is not so if you begin to look at texts authored by women, and especially if you allow the genre’s definition a bit more breathing room. Thus, DelRosso proposes a revision, that “for a text to be viewed as Catholic, it need not center on Catholicism as the sole locus of experience” (p. 12), nor need it be written by white, male, intellectual and western men. She says that Catholic literature is

far more diverse than previously acknowledged by those critics generally charged with labeling it, as Catholicism is as much a religion of culture as is Judaism. It is through the categories of culture and background—gender, race, class, age, etc.—that the canon of Catholic literature becomes more inclusive and particularly so of women writers of a wide diversity of backgrounds. Girlhood narratives spark DelRosso’s specific interest because it is during the time of girlhood, she contends, that a Catholic girl becomes aware that she “*has no place* in the church hierarchy and must recognize her marginalization before she can either forge a place for herself or reject the church altogether” (p. 29). This experience of marginalization provides DelRosso’s most basic criteria for identifying the stories and writers she includes in her study.

Of course, this is not to say that the women writers DelRosso most commonly employs in her chapters—Francine Prose, Louise Erdrich, Laura Esquivel, Isabel Allende, Mary Gordon, and Gish Jen, to name just a few—are necessarily losing sleep over whether they have made the Catholic grade, so to speak. DelRosso explains from the outset that authors have not exactly clamored for space under the umbrella that is the Catholic literary genre, as fellow writers often regard “the structure, dogma, and authority imposed upon the individual by the Catholic church to prevent the freedom of expression and creativity necessary to writing truly great literature” (p. 2). This is especially the case for women, as feminist literary critics either do not take kindly to Catholicism because of its patriarchy or ignore religion altogether as a significant factor to consider in feminist theory. Yet, for DelRosso, discomfort with or dislike of religion by feminists are not valid excuses for ignoring the particularly Catholic religious dimensions among certain women writers. And fortunately for readers, DelRosso rightly chooses to briefly acknowledge this lack among feminist writers as unfortunate and misguided, after which she boldly charges forward, making her case for Catholicism as a telling dimension of literature among women with both tremendous depth and a wide breadth of analysis and research in the chapters following her introduction.

Anyone interested in the religious identity of Catholic women and girls, who has yet to attend fiction as a possible resource, should add DelRosso’s book to their reading list. Throughout, DelRosso’s six chapters, the author uses novels and short stories as windows into a complex analysis of the ways in which Catholic women must grapple with paradox on behalf of their faith. (The second chapter, “Sin, Sexuality, Selfhood, Sainthood, Insanity:

Contemporary Catholic Girlhood Narratives,” not surprisingly given the topic, is the most substantial.) These conflicts include the experiences at once of sexual desire and guilt (and how conflicts about sex can lead to madness); the convent as both haven and prison; and the Church as thankfully colorblind, yet in its “blindness” a source of loss of culture and important particularities about race in personal experience, among other relevant subjects. DelRosso is at her best when she takes up a specific primary text at length, as in her exploration of *Household Saints* by Francine Prose (1981). Here she explores how Prose’s novel is an example that is both “Catholic” and falling within the genre of magical realism in a way that is significant to Catholic women’s literature on the whole (pp. 123-126). Lengthy analyses of other novels, including Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) and Mary Gordon’s *Final Payments* (1978) appear frequently throughout DelRosso’s chapters and provide the strongest handle for readers to see how her theories about Catholic women’s literature play out in the stories themselves. DelRosso’s *Writing Catholic Women* may remind readers of Toril Moi’s *Sexual Textual Politics* (1985), yet, rather than an in depth analysis of the Lacanian and Freudian theory that influences postmodern feminism, DelRosso offers a highly nuanced interpretation of women writers influenced by Catholicism at many different levels in their work.

While on the whole DelRosso offers a profound contribution to the dialogue about women and religion within literature, there are several serious critiques to be noted, the first of which will appear obvious to any informed scholar of feminist theology. Most evident is the limited breadth of her theological resources. DelRosso’s sources are generally, for lack of a better word, outdated and narrow—at least within the field. DelRosso most commonly resorts to older texts by Mary Daly (*Beyond God the Father* (1973)) and books and articles by Rosemary Radford Ruether from the 1970s and early 1980s, for help with her critique. DelRosso does draw from more contemporary sources, such as the work of Grace Jantzen on mysticism (pp. 66-67), but overall does not stray far from these early standards. This is not to say that texts by Daly and Radford Ruether are not important—they are some of the most foundational texts in the field of women’s studies in religion, especially within Catholicism. But more recent work—especially by *mujerista* theologians like Ada María Isasi-Díaz—might have proven helpful on the theological end of her evaluation of Catholic women’s literature.

Several additional problems to note relate to Del-

Rosso's limited choice of primary sources on two fronts: humor and intended audience. In the first area (humor), DelRosso does include an entire chapter devoted to the subject titled, "What's So Funny? Feminism, Catholicism, and Humor in Contemporary Women's Literature." Yet the humor of which DelRosso speaks (in most cases) is implicit, a humor that is comedic from a distance yes, but not explicitly written into the story as comedy. Her references often deal with the ridiculous, yet not the lighthearted. For example, DelRosso discusses a character who is able to *laugh at* religion, as in the case of Lulu in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) (pp. 152-153). Yet *laughing at* the rather tragic underside of religion is not the same as straight comedy, humor, or a moment intended *just for laughs* by an author. DelRosso begins this chapter by discussing how comedy and humor have long been the domain of men in American culture, yet she does little to show otherwise on behalf of women writers, who here mainly use sarcasm and black humor as their chosen comedic devices. While this type of humor is often very clever, it does not totally disarm the tragic or the angry in any of the stories. Most of DelRosso's chosen texts are examples of what she calls "laughter from the margins"—comedic moments that are indirect, under the surface but not overt, a kind of ridiculing that is darkly and subversively comic. Readers may be left wondering whether any narratives that fall within the genre of Catholic women's literature are wholly lighthearted in nature, or if they are all ultimately tragic or disturbing.

In the second area, the intended audience of DelRosso's chosen novels and stories, DelRosso stays safely in the world of adult literature, as opposed to expanding her sense of the "Catholic canon" to include young adult and/or middle-grade novels. Someone familiar with the world of children's literature (a world almost entirely populated by women authors, not the least of which include Isabel Allende, an author DelRosso favors greatly), might wonder: where is DelRosso's knowledge of and attention to children's literature and its Catholic authors? The recent, acclaimed *Saving Francesca* (2003) by Melina Marchetta, about the social struggles of one of the first girls to attend a Catholic high school that has just recently dropped its all-boys status, is just one obvious

example of many that may have added an additional layer of depth to DelRosso's sense of what counts as Catholic girlhood narratives.[3] There is a certain irony to the fact that DelRosso, in a book about girlhood narratives, pays no attention to the genre of young adult fiction, an area of literature devoted specifically to telling the stories of young people, more often than not, young girls.

A final stumbling block is stylistic, and involves the fact that DelRosso's text is clearly a revised dissertation. It is a monograph in the truest sense: a slow-going read with prose that is often stilted and filled with academic jargon, making it largely inaccessible to undergraduate students and, unfortunately therefore, not a choice text for general courses in women and religion, literature, and feminist theology.

Despite these contentions, after finishing *Writing Catholic Women*, readers (including myself) may feel enticed to build a graduate course around DelRosso's most popularly cited fiction—Allende, Prose, Erdrich, and Esquivel among others—using DelRosso's chapters as an evaluative backdrop for each novel. In the ever-more interdisciplinary world of academia, DelRosso's interweaving of fiction, literary criticism, gender studies, and theology provides a solid foundation in which to reflect on the relevant novels, since DelRosso frequently comes back to the same texts but from different angles. Overall, DelRosso has chosen a fascinating and important topic. Scholars across relevant disciplines will see it is a text that will inevitably reshape their thinking to include women's fiction as a "must read" in their understanding of the myriad ways Catholic women have explored, struggled with, and encountered the tradition at once as an empowering and oppressive force in their lives.

#### Notes

[1]. Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p. 1.

[2]. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[3]. Melina Marchetta, *Saving Francesca* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

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