

times to wander into superfluous apologies, disclaimers, qualifiers, and asides of various sorts, these faults seem slight when one enters the powerful central chapters on sin, guilt, justification, and sanctification. Here the author truly finds his voice, and his conviction and enthusiasm carry the reader firmly down the path of his argument. The destination is certainly crucial, yet beside the way lie many unexpected pleasures. Provonsha illuminates troubling concepts such as original sin ("I, frankly, had nothing to do with Adam's sin, nor did you. . . ." p. 71) and perfection (including a discussion of Ellen White's statement that "when the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own"). Salvation by works is further unveiled as villain: it assumes an unfriendly universe, where "God requires our goodness in order to respond in kind . . ." (p. 102). An interesting use of church standards is described (p. 101), and we even learn the potential value of penance (p. 102).

This book is recommended reading, then, for those "thoughtful, reasonably well-educated" Christians for whom it is intended. Like any good mystery, it makes a pleasant, instructive way to pass the afternoon, rainy or otherwise.

---

Nancy Hoyt Lecourt taught most recently in the English department at Pacific Union College. She writes now from Geneva, Switzerland.

## The Tie That Binds as Noose

*Visions of Glory*, by Barbara Grizzuti Harrison. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978. \$12.95.

by Carol L. Richardson

Take a sensitive, intelligent, religious nine-year old girl and introduce her to an American apocalyptic denomination, one

formed in the ferment of the social reforms of the 1840's, 50's and 60's; a religion whose earnest mission is to spread the gospel world-wide to hasten Christ's return; a religion that insists on a conservative, modest, family-centered life-style; introduce her to this religion and what do you get? A young woman, by age twenty-two, catatonic, unable to speak or walk down stairs, on the verge of breakdown, overcome by guilt and anxiety, estranged from her family, confused and friendless. What might seem to some like a sure-fire prescription for what ails a suffering humankind, in this case ended in disaster. What went wrong?

*Visions of Glory*, this passionate account of Barbara Grizzuti Harrison's thirteen years as a Jehovah's Witness, seethes with resentment at the psychic damage she suffered as a Witness, yet yearns to understand both the byzantine world of the Witnesses and her own attraction to this idiosyncratic sect. While the book contains a good deal of historical and contemporary accounts of the church's activities, Harrison's approach is frankly subjective, history and sociology merely providing the context in which she examines her own harrowing experiences.

For example, Harrison sketches a brief biography of the sect's charismatic founder, Charles Taze Russell, a man given to financial flimflamery; a man with an appetite for publicity, litigation, and women. After bitter scuffles in the courts with his wife Maria, Russell emerges as the church's chief articulator for the misogynist doctrine of Eve as the source of the world's evil. This is not mere history: its effect on the young Barbara is brutal:

But the offenses that made me most horribly guilty were those I had committed unconsciously; as an imperfect being descended from the wretched Eve, I was bound, so I had been taught, to offend Jehovah seventy-seven times a day without my even knowing what I was doing wrong. (p. 16)

Or again, Harrison's review of the Witness's historical objection to saluting the

flag as a form of idolatry contains more than the admission that this peculiar practice has, through its First Amendment challenges, benefitted all citizens by forcing a broad definition of freedom of worship. Harrison includes the personal cost as well with an excruciating look at how the resulting ostracism feels to a young schoolgirl:

Having to remain seated . . . during flag salute at school assembly was an act of defiance from which I inwardly recoiled. I wanted desperately to be liked—despite the fact that the Witnesses took pleasure in anything that could be construed as “persecution”, viewing any opposition as proof of their being God’s chosen. Not saluting the flag . . . did not endear me to my classmates. I wanted to please everybody—my teachers, my spiritual overseers, my mother (above all my mother); and of course, I could not.” (p. 20)

Step by step aspects of Jehovah’s Witness’s beliefs and history are explained: their narcissistic interpretations of final events, in which all world calamities somehow focus on themselves; their rabid anti-Catholicism; the often frightful persecution they have endured worldwide as a result of their intransigent definition of political neutrality. Marshalling so much information, down to demographic statistics, gives the book its tone of obsessiveness. But what we are witnessing is catharsis, a ritual cleansing, an exorcism.

Harrison is like the normal person who somehow got committed to the asylum, and she is confused and angry: confused at her own attraction to the vindictive, paranoid theology of the Witnesses, and angry over the guilt she was made to feel over her inability to adapt to the no-think behavioral conformism demanded by the group. She escaped, but she very nearly paid with her mental health.

*Visions of Glory* is an absorbing account, not without value to those of us whose own religion springs from similar roots. To be sure there are significant differences between Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists: Adventists have a wholly different conception of the deity, and take a more mainstream protestant approach generally. But what might to some seem outrageous beliefs of the Jehovah Witnesses often bear an uncanny resemblance to our own, only writ large. Where their misogyny is strident, ours takes a quieter, paternalistic turn; where their objection to worldly education is virulently anti-intellectual, our own lack of support for faculty with “unacceptable” methodology is only less explicit. Life in both communities might well be for some intolerable; the confines demanded of each sect might well suffocate an airier soul.

*Visions* is a plea for liberality, for “space.” The Christian church’s ostensible purpose is to provide a supportive community; its members aspiring to love each other as scripture commands. But a church can too easily become a provincial country club where admission demands not so much obedience as repression of human traits that, willy-nilly, will out, if not healthily, then pathologically. The church, according to Harrison, should be a place where sick souls become healthy, and not a place where the healthy are made ill.

---

Carol Richardson holds masters degrees in both English and Library Science. She is a reference librarian at the Loma Linda University Library.