



Niamh Ní Mhaioleoin, *Ordinary Saints* (London: Bonier Books; Manilla Press, 2025), pp. 368, ISBN 978-1786584250. £9.99

Niamh Ní Mhaioleoin is an Irish writer based in Edinburgh, and *Ordinary Saints* is her debut novel. Among other accolades, the book was shortlisted for the Waterstones Debut Fiction Prize (2025). One of the things I like about this contemporary novel is its nuance; the Church certainly takes a hit, so to speak, but the first-person protagonist is not up against an army of baddies; from her viewpoint they are misguided and absurd, but in the end, they are, as the title suggests, just ‘ordinary’ – ordinary members, we might say, of the Body of Christ – ordinary saints.

For the first few chapters, the narrative builds up a rather depressingly *ordinary* picture: an Irish lesbian who has come to contemporary London to escape an oppressively religious culture and found that life still throws up issues for her to wrestle with, in her work and personal life. She has reinvented herself even at the level of her name, changing from a saint’s name, Jacinta, to a secular name, Jay.

Things come to life with some refreshing abrasiveness in Chapter 5 when Jay meets the priest who is investigating her late brother’s cause for canonisation. Her first-person narrative starts to take on a poetic and psychological quality by Chapter 6: ‘But it’s the secret that creates the shame and, like an old potato in a drawer, gives it a cool, dark place to sprout’ (p. 82).

The book works well in a series of flashbacks, revealing her own past and that of her extraordinarily ‘saintly’ brother, Ferdia, and the book establishes its poetic tone in this rhythm. For example, there is a sudden, shocking ambiguity when the narrator Jay and Ferdia are visiting their grandmother; as the grandmother pulls an old suitcase out of the cupboard to give to Ferdia, she is seen ‘kicking away the small round thing that’s rolled under her feet. A baby’s head, one of its eyelids drooping’ (p. 143) – my first thought was that she must have meant a baby doll; my second thought was much darker.

There are some powerful passages critiquing the Catholic Church which work far more powerfully as fiction than they would as propositional narrative because as readers, we are beguiled into sympathy with the trials and tribulations faced by the narrator, her personal history and her frailty.

The first few chapters set up, in an efficient way, how as a lesbian ‘escapee’ from Irish Catholicism she has been ‘used to having a double



life, a neat guillotine slice separating childhood from adulthood, family from friends, Maynooth from London'; but things deepen as she begins to feel 'like the two halves have folded, pushing messily on top of each other' (p. 151). The twin griefs of Jay and her girlfriend Lindsay are both entwined in Catholicism – Jay, bitter for sure, at a childhood dominated by household piety yet nostalgic too for her much-loved brother (whose premature and sudden death sets up a pathos which adds to his claim to formal sainthood), while Lindsay has absorbed the inter-generational trauma of her mother's Catholic institutional physical abuse.

Part Two, after the story of Ferdia's death has been told in flashbacks, begins oddly and jarringly with the apparently true but improbable story of Larry Downey, the hijacker who was also a former Trappist monk. This reads shockingly and disjointedly; does the author want to jolt us out of any readerly complacency again, as with the baby's head? It then circles back to Jay's saint's-name origin story where Part One began, but this time with the demonic details of the saint's visions. We then move forward to the narrative present and a cross-dressing stag party at the airport, to further distort our perception of the probable and the possible, until the priest at the airport chapel blesses Jay and her mother, in further symbolic ambiguity. This is a heightened narrative passage: 'Though his cupped hands are full of burned-out candles he raises them towards us in approximate benediction' (p. 176). From there we are dropped straight into the painful and prosaic family dynamic as she arrives back in Ireland, to 'a house so saturated with morgueish chill that [...] I'd had to remind myself that in our family only one of us was dead' (p. 183).

In Part Two, the poetic tone and depth become more and more a delight to read as we encounter images that are both charged with meaning and economically drawn. So we have 'the hulking grey stone bully of a church blend[ing] with the clouds' (p. 211), and the ambiguity of claiming 'some of us are already dead' (p. 215). Catholicism is too much a deep and personal part of Jay's formative years for her response to be one of simple rejection: she still finds herself 'mumbling along' with the liturgy, and the complexity of her relationship to it finds voice in vignettes of her experience. In Gaudí's Sagrada Família basilica in Barcelona, she finds herself freed by the exhilarating architecture to think about her previous night's sexual encounter (p. 221). In a requiem Mass for her brother, she participates in a 'secular epiphany' of outpoured love for her brother in the sermon and the congregation's thunderous applause, only for this euphoria



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to be smashed by the priest's subsequent condemnation of sexualities such as her own. She tells us that 'the words I briefly found so comforting have turned rough and rigid' (p. 226).

In a way, this whole narrative and character puts bones on a 'progress report' of a church which is still a 'hulking bully', yet capable of also producing the *Sagrada Família*. It's impossible to miss the pain of Jay's struggle to relate to her devout family who 'celebrate every fibre of Ferdia's life when they're not willing to admit the most essential components of mine' (p. 243) – that they haven't told any of the extended family about Jay's sexuality. There is real rhetorical skill in Jay's conversation with her parents, as the truth at the heart of her family emerges:

'Let's keep this in perspective.' 'No, Dad, don't do that. This is my perspective' (p. 267) [...] 'Why does everything need to be a secret?' (p. 269).

Jesus might indeed have said of this novel that 'the truth shall set you free' as the secrets at the heart of Jay's family are laid bare. I found this an enjoyable and page-turning novel which raises issues about religion today in a way which touched my heart.

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