

THE WHITE RIBBON MAN

Mary Lou Dickinson
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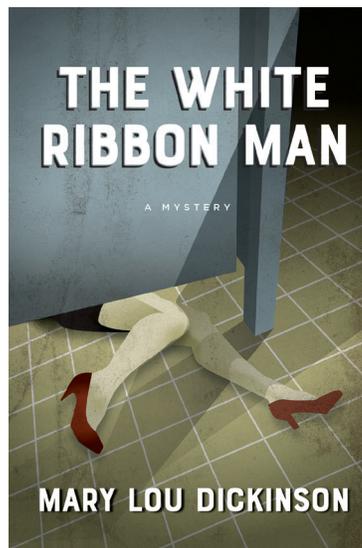
REVIEWED BY EDWARD
BROWN

Shoehorned in behind Toronto Eaton Centre—a modern glass and steel edifice where shoppers worship en masse at the altar of consumerism—sits The Church of the Holy Trinity, AD 1847. For more than a century and a half the Anglican Church, the fictional setting for Mary Lou Dickinson's (*One Day It Happens, Ile D'or, Would I Lie to You?*) murder mystery, *The White Ribbon Man*, has experienced more than its share of indignities.

The old grey church in the square has never had an easy go of it. The Gothic Revival structure was originally constructed on swampy land at the forested outskirts of a fledgling city with funds bequeathed to the Toronto diocese by an English heiress who wouldn't survive past her twenty-fifth birthday. Eventually situated in a slum neighborhood known as The Ward, Holy Trinity fast became a life raft for an impoverished community drowning in urban squalor.

Throughout its long history and up to the present, Holy Trinity has faced threats from fire, the wrecking ball, expropriation, and bankruptcy. A couple of years ago an arsonist tried, but mercifully failed, to torch the place of worship. If that wasn't bad enough, ongoing construction in the vicinity appears to have caused significant structural damage to sections of the church's limestone walls.

For 171 years Holy Trinity has taken these abuses in stride. Then along comes Dickinson's page-turner. The novel opens pleasantly enough



on a sunny, autumn Sunday morning as regular congregants and strangers alike greet one another in the welcoming, inclusive spirit that defines Holy Trinity. Pleasantries are quickly dashed when, minutes before the service is to commence, a congregant discovers the fashionably dressed corpse of Marni Atchison, an outcast from a religious organization known for sermonizing on porches and crowded sidewalks, her stylish, red heels jutting from under a bathroom stall in the basement.

Will the indignities ever end?

To solve the crime Dickinson adeptly plugs into the veins of activism that course through the congregation. Parishioners may be alarmed by the heinous crime that has occurred in their house of worship but they refuse to cower. While some make efforts to clear their name, with the assistance of kindly homicide detective Jack Cosser and partner Steve Reid whose sexual orientation is currently in flux, sleuthing members set out to solve the murder.

The White Ribbon Man disposes of predictable mystery novel devices and unlike some authors working in the genre today who revel in scripting pages of gory violence, Dickinson's approach falls closer to an old school Dashiell Hammett potboiler, minus

the hardboiled detective and foreboding mood. Instead of plucking characters straight out of central casting like a gruff, jaded homicide detective or the benevolent and wise clergyman, Dickinson turns these types on their head.

There is no getting around the fact that Detective Cosser is, well, a swell guy. Heck, he'd rather have a soothing spot of chamomile tea over black coffee any day. Cosser's marriage may have flat-lined, a casualty of the emotional toll his grisly occupation can have, but not once does he trash talk his ex to fellow officers or the couple's preteen daughter who Cosser loves to bits.

The author gives Father David, the collarless, blue-jean wearing priest a similar refreshing treatment. The man leading the flock is self-absorbed, insecure, and suffers from chronic somnambulism. Throughout, the sleepwalking priest struggles to fill sizable gaps in his memory, wide enough to navigate Noah's Ark through. Is he the culprit? Not even Father David can say for certain.

Rosemary the sleuthing librarian may be the best hope for solving the homicide but admittedly, her crime fighting knowhow is limited to skills gleaned from episodes of *Homicide: Life on the Street*. Did Rosemary encounter the killer after responding to a personal ad in the classifieds agreeing to a luncheon date with a redheaded stranger, a white ribbon pinned to his lapel? Was she the intended victim? Does the key to tracking the killer lie with Ardith, nonverbal and confined to a wheelchair vis-à-vis Jimmy Stewart's character in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*?

The plot of Dickinson's thriller is not complex. She writes with intentionality leaving nothing to chance. The author's strength lies in fleshing out diverse characters who display the best, as well as the most deplorable, aspects of human nature. Although

events unfold primarily in the church, in respect to the institution, *The White Ribbon Man* is not reverential. However, there are moments when the reader is subjected to what feels like mini sermons on Dickinson's behalf. For example, upon arriving at the crime scene, Detective Cosser observes the crowd of homeless milling about and laments, "Soon winter will come and one of these men could die of the cold out there."

In the end, *The White Ribbon Man* provides a sobering parable reinforcing lessons on the destructive nature shame can wield over individuals obsessed with hiding past deeds and the blinding influence of hypocrisy.

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PRIESTESS OF MORPHINE: THE LOST WRITINGS OF MARIE-MADELEINE IN THE TIME OF NAZIS

Ronald K. Siegel, Ed.
Port Townsend: Process Media, 2015

**REVIEWED BY ANNA
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"No more seeing, no hearing, no feeling! — I want to tumble into the night, into the dark night," writes Marie-Madeleine in her 1914 prose poem *Morphium*, which laments her husband's death and praises morphine, her reprieve from agony. Paying homage to the feeling and darkness that characterize Marie-Madeleine's writings, Ronald K. Siegel's *Priestess of Morphine: The Lost Writings of Marie-Madeleine in the Time of Nazis* assembles selections

from many of Marie-Madeleine's collections of poems and prose narratives, particularly focusing on those works dealing with morphine. Translated from Fraktur by Eric A. Bye, most of these pieces appear in English for the first time in Siegel's text. As Amy Shapiro writes in her Afterword to *Priestess of Morphine*, "We owe a debt of gratitude to Siegel for gathering and assembling a compelling collection of writings of Marie-Madeleine."

In his introduction to the text, Siegel offers a meticulous biography of the text's heroine. Born in 1881 in East Prussia to a Jewish mother, Gertrud Günther (later pseudonym Marie-Madeleine) became a prolific writer who developed an addiction to and love for morphine. Although she married Baron Heinrich von Puttkamer in 1900 and remained married to him until his death in 1914, her poetry reveals her as a lesbian — "a modern Sappho in Berlin," terms Stephen J. Gertz in his foreword to the text. With the rise of Nazism, the erotic work of the Jewish-lesbian writer Marie-Madeleine was deemed "degenerate art." Admitted to a Nazi sanatorium for her morphine addiction in 1943, she died there under unclear circumstances in 1944.

The poems and prose in *Priestess of Morphine* brim with eroticism, intoxication, desire, pain, jealousy, loneliness, and passion. Siegel shrewdly partitions this collection into three main sections that reflect the time period before, during, and beyond Marie-Madeleine's addiction to morphine: (1) "Opus with Erotica," which takes up the period before morphine, includes poems from Marie-Madeleine's erotic collection *Auf Kypros (On Cyprus)*; (2) "Opus with Morphium," which takes up the period during morphine, includes novellas focused on both others' and Marie-Madeleine's personal morphine use, as well as poems

from the collection *Taumel (Frenzy)*; (3) "Requiem for a Modern Poet," which takes up the period beyond morphine, works to commemorate Marie-Madeleine both through her own poems and a number of poems and images by others.

In the text's preface, Siegel, a psychopharmacologist, explains that he sets out "to investigate the effects, if any, of her [Marie-Madeleine's] drug use on her behavior with particular reference to her words and actions." The editorial comments throughout the text, specifically the introductory and concluding material and the brief notes at the beginning of each of Marie-Madeleine's literary works, complement the works without invading them. In addition, Siegel enriches the text by frequently inserting extra-illustrations: photographs, posters, paintings, sketches that collectively and culturally speak to the time in which Marie-Madeleine writes. The cover illustration, for example, which reappears as the illustration for the poem "Morphium" in *Taumel*, is an 1896 painting by Eugène Grasset titled *La Morphinomane (The Morphine Addict)*. This image depicts a young woman — teeth clenched, hair dishevelled, dress lifted — who is injecting herself with a needle, a vial of morphine on the table beside her. Siegel's inclusion of other arts effectively and fascinatingly situates Marie-Madeleine's work in the historical and artistic consciousness of the time.

This inter-art gesture is particularly striking in the comparison between Marie-Madeleine and the roughly-contemporary Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (Siegel tells us that this comparison was first made by critic Willy Haas). Pairing Marie-Madeleine's prose poem "Morphium" with a number of Munch's paintings, including the renowned *The Scream*, Siegel captivatingly traces the connections underlying