

a e BOOKS

The Passion of Mary Magdalen: A Novel

from The Maeve Chronicles

A REVIEW BY CYNTHIA POTTS

I don't think I've ever used the word "blasphemy" in its intended manner. Sure, it's a word I've employed in a frivolous sense, to decry questionable fashion choices or particularly misguided use of ingredients

in cutting edge bakeries, but in literature? It hasn't come up.

Yet "blasphemy" is the concept I keep coming back to when considering Elizabeth Cunningham's *The Passion of Mary Magdalen*. I'm not a particularly religious

woman. I've done the Sunday school bit, but chances are I couldn't name all twelve apostles if I was in a life-or-death game of Jeopardy.

Yet Cunningham's book is challenging enough, disturbing

enough, that even my spiritual sensibilities, such as they are, were upset.

This is obviously Cunningham's intention. In this, volume three of the five-part Maeve Chronicles, she brings us into the first days of the church and turns everything we know on its head.

The first half of the book is amazing. Maeve - later Mary of Magdala through a twist of circumstances half-inspired by prophecy, half-dictated by a mad woman - is a proud Celt being sold

at a Roman slave market. With vivid descriptions and great use of language, Cunningham turns in a virtuoso performance, bringing us into the moment. Maeve is sold into a brothel, all the while longing for her lost love Yeshua - whom she'd apparently been separated from, with mystical overtones and the loss of a child, in volume two.

Lots of adventure follows. For the first half of this 600-page book, we're with Maeve as she lives life in the brothel, then escaping, only to be sold to a Roman matron who keeps the fiery redheads as her own personal bed toy. It's enticing, erotic in parts, and troubling in others. Maeve becomes a priestess of Isis, tapping once more back into her own mystical heritage.

And then Maeve reconnects with Yeshua, the early Jesus.

This is where a good book goes, if not bad, at least confusingly astray. Maeve loves Jesus with a passion that surpasses all human understanding - yet it's also a very real, very stormy relationship. The couple unites, separates, fights, makes up, even marries.

All of which is good, all of which is brilliant in parts. If Maeve would stop doing miracles, this could have been an awesome book.

In an effort to humanize Christ, Cunningham has deified

Mary. Not just a little bit, either. Remember that whole walking on the water bit? Not actually Christ. Just Mary, hundreds of miles distant, utilizing her weather witch

capabilities. Blasted fig trees are restored to life. You don't even want to know what happens at the crucifixion.

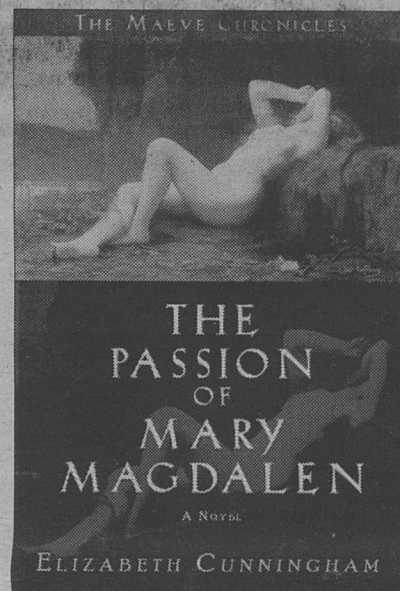
If one is wholly separated from the Christian mythos, this probably wouldn't matter. You could enjoy the text as a portrayal of two Gods, one of whom did all the work, another of whom got all the glory. It would stand

well in that tradition.

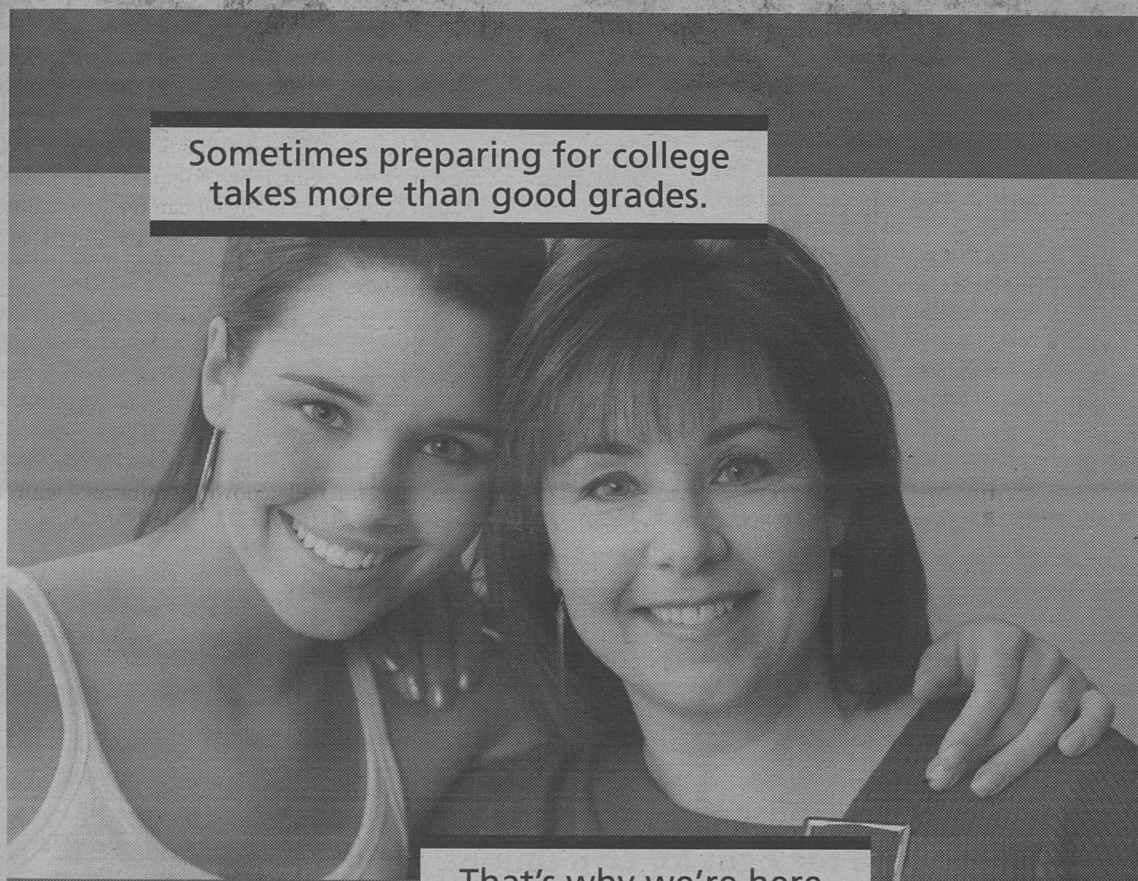
However, if you're attached to the Jesus presented in the Bible, it's a mind-bending, troubling experience to have everything done by him or in his name really performed by somebody else. It's the Gospels hijacked by a largely uninvolved party.

Wiser minds, probably more progressive minds than mine, might find this an empowering book that gives women a role in early Christianity denied them by history. We hear firsthand about the cadres of women who supported Christ's early ministry, and the devastating effects divine visitation had upon Mary, mother of Christ. It's fascinating stuff, a compulsive read.

Cunningham does have a disconcerting habit of having her narrator speak directly to the reader in modern parlance. It's well done - the anachronisms serve to reinforce Maeve's image as a wise-cracking, tough whore/smartass - but it does jar occasionally. Those with a passion for historical accuracy or traditionally presented scripture might do well to pass up *The Passion of Mary Magdalene*. Everyone else is likely to find it an engrossing, challenging read. ▼



by Elizabeth Cunningham
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➔ Cynthia Potts reads and writes in upstate New York.