El Evangelio según María Magdalena
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El Evangelio según María Magdalena (The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene)

This 236-page novel follows in a tradition of novels purporting to be apocryphal gospels recounted by the Virgin Mary (Colm Tóibín), Jesus (Jose Saramago), Judas (Jeffrey Archer), John the Baptist, Lazarus, etc. There is in fact an operatic Gospel according to Mary Magdalene by Mark Adamo and an oratorio by Peeter Vähi.

It' a very rich seam and Jesus's most famous woman-friend, lover and/or (putative) prostitute is at least as fascinating a subject as any of the others. That the author has a feminist purpose in the novel adds an edge, as it directly challenges the patriarchal and traditional Roman Catholic narratives about Mary Magdalene as the rescued, redeemed whore.

Fallarás's defence of the moral integrity of Mary Magdalene overlaps with a rejection of Church mytholoy and gospel narratives. This narrator rejects the dutiful silence of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She rejects the Pauline notion of inferior, dutiful womanhood. She challenges both the alleged virtues of the BVM and the presumed wickedness of Eve.

… the novel breathes life into the thinly drawn figure of Magdalene, adding flesh, blood, sex and tears. First century Judea is a violent, racially divided, murderous colony. The novel establishes a powerful opposition between women and healing and birth and men, violence and slaughter. The author is to be praised for weaving the story so tautly around the political/gender points she is making; we never feel a diatribe is sneaking out of the plot.

It's a bracing and engaging read. Fallarás is good on the wider social and political context and on the inter-personal relations. We gain a profound sense of the tumultuous character of life in Judea at the time, mirrored by the story of Jesus's arrest, trial and crucifixion. With Magdalene as our guide rather than one of the better-known male characters, we are both inside and outside the drama.

I'd certainly recommend a re-reading of this novel… given, the greater prominence of women's voices in literature and the church, this is a timely, relevant, exciting work of fiction.

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