

A Gathering of Larks: Letters to Saint Francis from a Modern-Day Pilgrim

Abigail Carroll

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Directed to Saint Francis, these sweet musings create a place of refuge in a wearying world.

Layered with quiet complexity, Abigail Carroll's *A Gathering of Larks* beautifully renders a journey of questions, all addressed to Saint Francis of Assisi.

In a series of poetic letters to the saint, Carroll explores his character well beyond the usual depictions. Delving deep into the historical accounts of Saint Francis, she wonders with an almost childlike innocence what Francis would have been thinking or feeling during significant portions of his life.

Acknowledging that some stories of Francis may have fanciful embellishments—for one, Francis is said to have conversed with a wolf to stop it from eating the inhabitants of Gubbio and their livestock—Carroll is nevertheless open to miraculous possibilities, and her work occupies that obscure area between blind, unquestioning belief and outright cynicism.

Before the collection of letters, the book includes a short, helpful introduction to the life of Saint Francis, enabling easier understanding of Carroll's lines. Unlike some of the saint's murkier biographical episodes, she adds little adornment to her letters, instead choosing to employ a tender, conversational tone, which enhances their effectiveness. Many letters are signed with a name related to the subject—"Encumbered by stuff," "A coming-around cynic," and "A theatre buff," to name a few.

Although the life of Francis is the primary vehicle, the more compelling aspects of these letters are their examinations of modern life and faith in the context of the medieval saint. Carroll wrestles with such things as our abandonment of nature in favor of television, computer, and phone screens; our obsession with materialism; living in an era of what seems near-constant war and terrorism; and the alien concept of complete devotion to God. She wonders, in her sweetly empathetic way, how St. Francis would have dealt with these obstacles and retained his brilliant hope in the mercy and justice of God.

A Gathering of Larks draws on the bountiful spiritual and historical picture of Saint Francis to cultivate a garden of respite for all world-weary sojourners.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (March/April 2017)

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