

Amazing Grace

Christiane Banks

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Losses and dramas are nothing compared to the faith of the good family at the center of the historical novel Amazing Grace.

In Christiane Banks's charming multigenerational novel, *Amazing Grace*, a middle-class family endures transitions, miner strikes, the Falklands War, and the severe recessions of the 1970s.

Told from the perspectives of the family members, the novel concerns the disparate, dramatic lives of three generations of LaValles. Although the family is tight knit and faithful, circumstances scatter them to different corners of the world. After a six-year period apart, the family reunites for a Christmas dinner that sets their individual stories in motion.

Sebastian returns to his childhood home in France; Abby, long besotted by a handsome priest, finds a way to revive their connection by making a trip to Virginia; Sarah explores a new career in London. Some chapters are narrated by those outside of the family, including pregnant Colleen, the wife of a world famous magician, who struggles with her health just as her children need her most. Each perspective is given equal time; together, they result in a vibrant look at the tumult of modern history, showing how faith and family are a source of safety in difficult times.

This dense story is devoted to the intimate, domestic nuances of the past. Its scenes are rich with eye-catching details—of architecture, flowers, and furnishings. The characters' inner worlds are luscious, too. In the maternity ward, Colleen grapples with a sudden panic: "Deep inside her, at the bowels of her soul, she was terrified of what might be. The unknown—that mangled, insidious, distorted view of the fear of fear itself—had a deep hold on her." Some subplots, including of Abby's entanglement with Father Gabriel, are melodramatic, but even these avoid easy solutions.

Although the novel is set in an interesting time, the LaValles themselves prove to be ordinary people. Although life throws them challenges, they remain uncomplicated. Their flatness extends to the story itself, in which individual struggles most often reflect external circumstances, not inner conflicts. Beyond its gorgeous settings, lively dialogue, and compelling setup, the novel's drama, though it includes cancer to abortion, is easy to solve. In most cases, characters' issues wrap up within a chapter, and without serious consequences.

Bad things happen to the good family at the center of the historical novel *Amazing Grace*, but they hold onto their faith, and the world keeps on turning.

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