ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

Cecilia
Linda Ferri
Ann Goldstein, translator
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A secret diary, written on papyrus scrolls to a beloved deceased sister, re-imagines the life of Cecilia, a young Roman martyred for being a secret Christian. In Catholic tradition, Cecilia is renowned for her beautiful voice and the hymns she sang in God's praise. The patron saint of music and the blind, the real Cecilia was born Christian and swore to preserve her virginity, but was married to a pagan who respected her wishes, experienced an angelic visitation, and converted to Christianity as well.

The story of Cecilia's martyrdom is bloody. Sentenced to death by asphyxiation in the Roman baths, she was dragged, miraculously alive after three days, to the executioner's block for beheading. When three axe blows failed to decapitate her, she lingered for another three days, head partially attached, as aspiring converts flocked to her.

In this retelling of Cecilia's story, Italian writer Linda Ferri creates an introspective character who struggles with how fertility and children's deaths can weigh inordinately on women, especially in a society that ascribes them little other importance. Born in Rome to wealthy pagan parents, Cecilia writes often about the guilt she feels for a secret sin, the death of her childhood friend. The slave Quintus dies because she "broke their pact" by refusing to walk in a bed of stinging nettles, taking advantage of her superior status as his owner's daughter. Quintus stomps in and is bitten by a venomous snake Cecilia feels was waiting for her.

Cecilia's grief and guilt parallel her mother's, especially after Lucilla miscarries again. Lucilla turns for solace to the cult of Isis. She shaves off all of her hair, becomes anorexic, and frenetically immerses herself in the cult's daily reenactment of the Egyptian goddess' search for Osiris, reliving, as Cecilia sees it, "the pain of each premature death."

After her marriage, Cecilia becomes lonely and disconsolate and experiences a demonic possession from which she is cured when her nurse, a secret Christian, brings her to a brother-in-faith who "in the name of Jesus ordered the demon to leave me." Motivated first by gratitude and then by deeper emotions, Cecilia joins the small circle of Christians and eventually

converts. It is only here, through giving herself in prayer and service to the poor, that she feels able to properly pay penance for Quintus's death.

Linda Ferri is also the author of *Enchantments* and many children's stories. Ann Goldstein, an editor at the *New Yorker*, has translated numerous books for Europa Editions.

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