Clarion Review

General

Critical Mass
Kathleen Henry
Kathleen M. Henry
iUniverse
978-0-595-52412-9
Four Stars (out of Five)

The form and structure of the Roman Catholic Mass is the outline for the short, interrelated stories in Kathleen M. Henry's *Critical Mass*. Henry's exploration of the effects of the Church's power on the lives of four Catholic women is not "a pious and orthodox piece on the Mass." Instead, it invites "gentle, angry people," to read about a darker side of the Catholic Church that is rarely admitted and more rarely seen—a side that silken vestments and clouds of incense cannot keep hidden forever.

"You had to be thrown off balance to get into this place," Henry writes in her description of a woman's attempt to open the door to the neighborhood cathedral. In the book's first pages, readers become aware that this is not a tribute to the Church; the door is "huge and massive; it looms. It holds them at bay. It warns, not warms. It is the door of a fortress, not the house of the spirit." The women, and their mothers before them, have come there hoping find a place of solace and comfort in which their highest aspirations can be realized; what they find instead is a world that accepts their servitude only as long as they are willing to serve in silence.

Molly Donoghue, Anne O'Brien, Christine Roy, and Michelle Joann O'Brien all tackled that door, in 1910, 1955, 1998, and 2000, respectively, and all were, to some degree, aware that they were entering an alien realm in which men would rule over them. They wished in vain for a place of their own design—a welcoming place with doors wide enough to admit all, old and young, even those needing wheelchairs and gurneys.

The author's use of stage directions in her text augments the feeling that all involved are playing parts that they have been given by the institution—a priest, a nun, a child who could become a priest or a nun, and lowliest of all, a woman who will never be either. Rules and regulations keep each person in their respective place, but there are small acts of rebellion:

Molly Donoghue will not rise from her pew at the entry of the priest, but only in honor of the Virgin. Michelle Joanne O'Brien's rebellion is larger: divorce and love for another woman. A 1998 union ceremony, performed by a female Unitarian minister, is a final slamming of the cathedral door and the opening of a new door behind which it is possible to hear the words, "All are welcome in this banquet of love."

Henry's book, though written in dark tones, is a bright poem of love to the living spirit that causes one to long for a place where all are welcomed and valued, and a call to take part in its creation.

Kathleen M. Henry was educated in the Catholic school system through graduate school. She is a fiction writer and an ordained community priest.