

Damascus House

Corrina Wycoff

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Though it shows the disturbing sides of fundamentalism, this novel also compassionately portrays evangelical Christian life.

A rare, earnest portrayal of evangelical, fundamentalist Christians—who speak in tongues, cast out demons, and condemn sex before marriage—Corrina Wycoff's *Damascus House* provides an astounding, crisp, and un-ironic portrait of one religious community's unraveling.

Riverview, New Jersey, is a former farm community of the 1990s, now overrun with prefabricated houses and strip malls. Amy Rotolo, the “ever-prodigal daughter” of Vic and Linda, flies home from Oregon to announce to her family that she's finished with them: she's a lesbian now; she has a loving partner; she's happy. This announcement shakes the community. Pastor Lou gathers everyone together for “food and intercession.”

Amy's best childhood friend, twenty-six-year-old Rachel, feels loyal to Amy and contrives a lie to distract everyone: when she was sixteen, Rachel had an abortion. After much prayer and consideration, Rachel's newlywed husband, Alan, and Pastor Bianchi ship Rachel off to the Damascus House, a month-long ministry for women who've had abortions. When she arrives at the house, among “Indiana farms and flat brown grasses,” she's forced to wear a jumpsuit and attend repentance services and group treatment. She'll be welcomed back into the fold if and when she can “pledge compliance.”

Damascus House is a frightening iteration of cult mentalities. While girls fall “slain in the spirit” and the leader of the house shouts, “Vengeance is Mine, Sayeth the Lord!,” two images flash on a screen behind him—the first being an aborted fetus, and the second an image of the crucifixion. Still, the text manages to offer a compassionate portrayal of the often hysterical fanatics at its core, including Alan, who quotes Leviticus and can “discern spirits”; Linda, an apocalypse-obsessed, overbearing mother; and Lee, the orphaned outsider and young mother brimming with anger.

Damascus House is a knockout as a late-blooming bildungsroman, which follows one young woman's desire to return to an innocence she's never known, and to find a sober mind and a genuine faith that she can call her own.

JOSH COOK (Fall 2016)

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