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Feather Dusters: We made a mistake with your generation

Marea Hannah Whitley
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“We made a mistake with your generation,” a Catholic priest admitted to Marea Morgan’s sister in 1979. “We taught you the fear of God, not the love of God.”

Marea held the Morgan family record for canings in her parochial school in Sydney, Australia, during the Sixties. From the day screaming five-year-olds were “dragged alphabetically from the arms of their mothers,” until the triumphal celebration after the Primary Final, Marea lived in the shadow of the “feather duster”—a cane or stick that left welts on the palms, and occasionally the arms and legs, of those unfortunates who failed to be as holy, obedient, or clever as the Baby Jesus.

Marea was introduced to corporal punishment in grade one after throwing her eraser at the head of a junior ninja whose failed retaliatory kick ignited a class free-for-all. Afterwards, she stuck a ruler down the back of her dress, determined to avenge herself on the class monitor. In the years that followed, no amount of punishment could deter her from playing practical jokes, skipping mass, and risking life and limb to gain the admiration of the male members of the Hole in the Fence Gang.

Not all of Marea’s accomplishments were punishable. As a last-minute replacement for a politically active soloist who had been carted off to jail, she survived three days of merciless four-hour dance rehearsals to earn encores from a squirming audience in a hall with locked washrooms. This triumph led to the most horrifying experience of all: being affectionately clutched to the suffocating bosom of her arch-enemy Clancy, the iron nun.

This “candid, if somewhat exaggerated” tale of Catholic school life is based on fact, with the names changed to protect the innocent. Despite the disturbing details of sometimes undeserved punishment, and the anger that drove young Marea to inscribe “Mother Mary Manglem is a bitch” in wet cement, her adventures are peppered with good-humored commentary and memorable asides to God. (“I’m sorry, but unless you burn down the church immediately, I’ll make bad confessions for the rest of my life and it’ll be your fault if I go to hell!”)

The colorful characters and wild pranks in this schoolgirl autobiography will keep readers guessing what comes next.

CHRISTINE G. RICHARDSON (July / August 2000)

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