



## Grace Period: My Ordination to the Ordinary

**Melinda Worth Popham**

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*This stunning spiritual autobiography is notable for the naked vulnerability of its prose, which balances good humor with a revelatory tone.*

Yale Divinity graduate Melinda Worth Popham delivers a vulnerable and reflective memoir with *Grace Period*, a story as much about the tribulations that led her to spiritual study as it is about her time as a divinity student.

Popham's journey to New Haven took a circuitous route, depositing her into motherhood and a troubled marriage first. Her husband was pure New England: a buttoned-up, Yale-graduate businessman who impressed her with the ferocity of his demeanor. Popham built a family with this man she loved, though his impermeable distance eventually forced her toward divorce—and sole financial care of their two children.

Their daughter, Ella, presented additional challenges. Her teen years found her deeply clinically depressed. Suicidal adolescence gave way to a more centered young adulthood, thanks in great part to medication, but also created a rift between mother and daughter. Via prayer and patience, both Ella and Melinda made it to Ella's graduation. Having two now-adult children freed Popham to pursue a sudden and glinting dream: to study at an Ivy League seminary.

The portion of Popham's memoir that leads up to her transition to Yale is notable for the naked vulnerability of its prose, which balances good humor with a revelatory tone. "My daughter's suffering brought me to my knees," she writes—both figuratively and literally, as the pain of watching her daughter drift is part of what led her to contemplative prayer. "I came to envision...a tiny flame—a sacred speck, a mote, a fiery freckle of God's DNA—buried deep at the core of my being."

This dance of painful and beautiful language carries Popham through to her moments of release, particularly that in which she declares "to hell with [it—] I want to go to Yale Divinity School!" to two surprised recruiters in the hall of her church. To Yale she goes: undone at first by the academic language of its classes, then tested by the fires of her intellectual pursuits.

Those who have attended rigorously academic divinity schools will be moved by the way that Popham explores the themes in the second half of her project: loneliness; spiritual unboundness; the thrill of studying among the greats; the sometimes fractured quality of the towns, and schools, built around seminary centers. The second half of the book is more about seeking than the first, and this is reflected in the less cohesive way she approaches her school years: via vignettes, rather than in one centered narrative.

If the second half of *Grace Period* seems more piecemeal than the first, if chapters like “Holy Spirit Mojo” feel somewhat untethered within the larger project, and if Popham does drop a rare cliché or two among her otherwise sterling prose, a few flaws are worth forgiving for the sake of the whole. This is a sincere, thoughtful, and humbling adventure in spiritual pursuits. Popham’s pages will serve to encourage those who feel sometimes religiously adrift, but who are still dependent on faith, and at all stages in life.

Popham’s frequent exquisite turns of phrase are a balm in even the darkest moments of her narrative; the encouragement she draws from biblical passages and sacred moments is inspirational. No one will envy her the most challenging moments in her life story, but all are certain to be moved by her articulate and contemplative approach to self-realization.

*Grace Period* is a stunning spiritual autobiography and a work of profound discernment.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (February 16, 2016)

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