

Iconography: A Writer's Meditation

Susan Neville

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After a particularly nasty tumble, a business card she'd been saving with the name and phone number of a nun who taught Russian Orthodox religious icon-writing fell from the author's pocket. Neville decided to call. "I started to say that I wasn't religious," she writes, "but I didn't, and she didn't ask. I did know that I wanted to paint an icon, and I said it was because I loved the word. She couldn't hear, I thought, the lower-case 'w.'"

Naively, Neville enters an icon-writing class. Expecting quick results, her infatuation with the word turns into the realization of the commitment and depth of the work. She falters, feeling she is there under false pretenses. The nun offers a suggestion. "So prepare yourself, she said, and I said how? Tomorrow is the first day of Lent, she said. Make a vow, she said, and try to keep it."

Neville, an award-winning author of creative non-fiction and fiction, stories, and essays for magazines, and a teacher of creative writing at Butler University in Indianapolis, makes a vow to keep a truthful record of her life for the forty-plus days of Lent. Her book becomes a chronicle of the struggles of an articulate and intelligent non-believer drawn to something for which she had little reference.

In the short first chapter Neville outlines a bit of the detailed, meditative, and symbolic process of making an icon. Preparing the wooden board—the hours of layering it with cheesecloth and rabbit hide glue, then the gessoing and sanding, mixing the elemental pigments with egg yolk and water, and applying delicate gold leaf.

The remaining chapters mirror the something deep inside of everyone that cries out for hearing, the something that people drug themselves, drink, overeat, and shop to avoid. Neville faithfully records it all: trips to the mall, a neighbor's young son killed, her guilt over her manic-depressive mother's death, and her own depression. Rising up out of what could be a boring, self-absorbed monologue, the author's wisdom and insight can be heard. She becomes the astute co-worker with whom to take an intimate coffee break or the thoughtful neighbor with whom to share backyard confidences in minutes harvested from the week.

It takes Neville three years to finish the icon. The title of her book is somewhat misleading. The first and last chapters describe iconography briefly, acting as parentheses. The core of the book is about Neville's life and struggles.

Readers might be disappointed that Neville did not record her feelings during the time spent making the icon. Despite this, Neville has written an insightful and intimate book. In writing it she takes readers along with her on another jolting tumble—this time, toward a deeper contact with the soul-self.

NANCY K. ALLEN (November / December 2003)

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