

## Last of the Gnostics: The End of the Cathars

**Don Durrett**

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*Last of the Gnostics* is based upon the story of the Cathars, early Gnostics who believed in the “nous” or spiritual mind that connects all through consciousness. According to the author, who considers himself a fifth level Old Soul and Ancient Philosopher, “The Gnostics were the first people in the West to spiritualize the concept of a direct connection—through the soul—to God.”

The novel opens shortly after the crucifixion of Christ. Jesus reveals himself in spirit to Mary Magdalene, his wife, and bids her leave and take their children with her to France. It is no secret that Peter, the head of Jesus' disciples, does not like Mary Magdalene nor does he agree with the Gnostic beliefs that she and Jesus espouse. To protect his family from the anger and conflict that is sure to arise as Peter builds the Catholic Church, Jesus tells Mary Magdalene to live with the Essenes. She is to write a gospel and spread Jesus' message with the people of Languedoc. This is the genesis of the Cathar religion.

As time progresses, the disciples spread the Gospel of Jesus, and Peter's church grows. Believing that theirs is the one true religion, the church takes on the responsibility of stamping out other religions, especially the Gnostics. In addition to Mary Magdalene and two of her companions, the author introduces readers to Blanche and her daughter Joanna, Cathar followers during the 1200s, whose path leads directly to the brutal Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229) in Languedoc where thousands of Cathars were killed.

Combining a fictional storyline with historical reportage, complete with footnotes, this novel tells a much different history than that of the Catholic Church and traditional Christianity. Crusader and Cathar forces build up and clash. While the Crusaders focus on strength and weapons, the Cathars diligently train up a new generation of followers, teaching them the basics of their religion, which are reflected in today's New Age beliefs.

The voice, simple and innocent throughout, conveys the religious beliefs of this obscure group. “Every soul is a part of God and has the potential to evolve and become more like God,” Joanna says. “We literally have infinite potential.” But the writing is jerky and without sophistication, as if the novel were written for a child. For example, Durrett writes, “She entered the tall fortress gates, and found her way to the great hall. It was a very cold day, so she had decided to look for Joanna in the warmth of the fireplaces.”

Those seeking a traditional historical novel will find the fictionalization and scene building sparse and underdeveloped. The characters disappointingly never come to life; they remain tools to move the timeline forward and shoulders on which to build conflict. The book leans heavily toward explaining and promoting the religion rather than entertaining—yet the author uses a light touch and never preaches. Those who appreciate New Age values and beliefs with a bit of history will enjoy this novel.

DAWN GOLDSMITH (July 27, 2010)

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